

Vietnamese Students' View on Plagiarism in the Australian Context

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Abstract

This article explores the issue of plagiarism from the perspective of Vietnamese students studying in an Australia university. The study was designed to investigate understanding of Vietnamese students on the concept of plagiarism as well as their views on the reasons accounting for this problem. The findings were gained from the interviews and group discussions with ten participants studying in different faculties of the university. To some extent, findings from the study indicate that how long students immerse in Australia has a considerable influence on their degree of understanding towards plagiarism. Furthermore, from those Vietnamese students' point of views and experience, it is concluded that students commit plagiarism for a range of reasons which should not include cultural factor. Among those suggested reasons, educational upbringing seems to be an important one that explains for any accidental plagiarism among Vietnamese students.

Key words: *Plagiarism, Vietnamese students, cultural factor, educational upbringing, reasons*

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing awareness of the incidence of plagiarism. Post 2000, there was increasing literature on plagiarism which touching the multi-aspects of plagiarism (Macdonalda & Carroll, 2006). Plagiarism is an immoral behavior which can considered as a crime against academy. "It deceives readers, hurts plagiarized authors', and gets the plagiarist undeserved benefits" (Bouville, 2008). For example, the widespread of Internet as a powerful source for searching in academe simultaneously appeals students to commit plagiarism due to its extreme convenience (Underwood & Szabo, 2003). Many students has used the method 'cut and paste' plagiarism by coping one or two sentences from variety of sources on journals or websites without appropriate citation and then compile them to produce their own essays (Jensen, 1998). Although, plagiarism is viewed as an academic offence with heavy punishment, a vast number of students are still committing this offence accidentally or unintentionally (Mahmood, 2009). There is a belief that students from non-western culture are accused of committing plagiarism more often and more extensively than whom are raised within the Western cultures (Leask, 2006). As a focus in this study, Vietnam is also one of those non-western cultures. Every year there is a considerable number of Vietnamese students enrolling into different courses in different levels of Australian universities. More specifically, recently Vietnam is included in the Top five nationalities contributed 55.5% of Australian enrolments in all sectors (AEI, 2011). Their contribution to the cultural diversity of Australian universities' campuses deserves appropriate attention from the authorities. Therefore, this study aims to explore Vietnamese students' perspective on the definition of plagiarism as well as the other issues related to this issue.

Literature Review

What is plagiarism?

How to define plagiarism is not an easy task to take. It is a simple term but a very complex concept that easily raises the confusion for those who try to understand its complexity. The following definition could be a summary which is generalized from many ways of defining this concept:

Plagiarism is the act of using someone else's words, ideas, organization, drawings, designs, illustrations, statistical data, computer programs, inventions or any creative work as if it were new and original to you; this includes real and intellectual property and public domain material.

It is the buying or procuring of papers, cutting and pasting from works on the Internet, not

using quotation marks around direct quotes, paraphrasing and not citing original works, and it is having someone else write your paper or a substantial part of your paper and turning it in as if it were new and original to you. (Liddell, 2003, p.49)

According to McNaughton (as cited in Stefani & Carroll, 2001) plagiarism is sometimes considered as literary theft. By definition, plagiarism can be defined as the attempt to use the other's work to gain advantage for yourself. For example, you try to deceive someone such as a teacher or an editor to make him or her believe that you wrote something or created something which in reality, someone else wrote or created. However, Johnston (2003) holds the view that there is an inconsistency among the definitions of plagiarism which totally conclude that this is an act of cheating. It is explained that an action which is called cheating must come from an intention to cheat, while students may commit plagiarism without knowing what it is.

Therefore, plagiarism could be seen as an ambiguous issue which is far more complicated within the relationship between text, memory and learning (Pennycook, 1996). Similarly, Scollon (1995) concludes that the concept of plagiarism could not be separated with the network of society, politics and culture. In other words, in order to fully interpret the meaning of plagiarism, a number of contextual factors should be taken into consideration (Leask 2006). Basing mostly on the roots of the action, plagiarism could be categorized as:

- Accidental: resulting from unawareness of plagiarism or understanding the requirement of exact referencing.
- Unintentional: not recognizing that work written could be seen as a product of plagiarism
- Intentional: an attempt to deceive with the hope that no one will notice that
- Self- plagiarism: plagiarizing from one's own work that is published previously. (Maurer, Kappe, & Zaka, 2006)

Why do international students plagiarize?

Plagiarism is becoming an important academic issue that places educational institutions in trouble. Although, not every student involves in plagiarism, instances of plagiarism are increasing with time (Mahmood, 2009). In order to adequately prevent and address plagiarism, the factors that influence its occurrence must be better understood. Thus, the reasons why students plagiarize need opportunities to be discussed. The current literature offers fertile information on this issue. The first reason is that international students may have inadequate English capacity that limits their understanding on these English texts. In other words, due to their lack of vocabulary or confidence in writing skills, it is very difficult for them to paraphrase the original text, thus they just make little change that easily leads to plagiarism (Howard, 1995; Devlin & Gray, 2007; Mahmood, 2009). Students' inadequate knowledge and understanding the requirements of proper citation or accurate referencing could be considered as a cause of some forms of plagiarism among international students (Roig, 1997; Mahmood, 2009). Some students may not even know the act of plagiarism is a serious offence, therefore, they find it quite normal to use exactly some sentences from others' work (Mahmood, 2009). The pressure from assignments' due dates or from the desire to have high grade is also a quite popular motivation of cheating (James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002; Devlin & Gray 2007; Mahmood, 2009). When they run out of time, it must be easier if they just find relevant materials and use them as their own work with little change or even exactly like the original text. Finally, the literature also shows that laziness can result into plagiarism (James, et al., 2002; Devlin & Gray, 2007). This is to say, the convenience of internet that provides abundant information in any academic field could be a very big temptation for lazy students to commit plagiarism. Besides, it is much easier to cut and paste than paraphrase from the others' works.

Research aim and objectives

The aim of this study is to examine Vietnamese students' awareness on the concept of plagiarism as well as its potential factors. The following research objectives were figured out to fulfill the above aim:

- Research objective 1: to investigate the Vietnamese students' views on the concept of plagiarism.
- Research objective 2: to explore the motivations that leads to plagiarism from the Vietnamese students' perspective.
- Research objective 3: to provide some recommendations for dealing with plagiarism among international students.

Participants and activities

This study involved the participant of ten international students who come from Vietnam. At the time the research was conducting, those students were studying in different faculties of the University of Tasmania. The data was drawn from semi-constructed interviews as well as focus group discussions. The length they have been in Australia varies from three months to four years. The semi-interview is designed with ten questions which help to explore the interviewees' views. Nine of those participants were willing to be involved in the group discussions that were led by a given topic. Participants were encouraged to share their ideas and experiences frankly in a friendly environment. Data analysis was undertaken using content analysis based on the formulation of categories and themes from the data. Significant statements were synthesized within these themes and analyzed to reveal common, supportive statements.

Findings

The views of Vietnamese students on plagiarism in the data were refined and condensed into three themes in the last step of analyzing process.

Theme 1: definition of plagiarism

The findings achieved from the group discussions and interviews provide significant information in terms of investigating Vietnamese students' awareness on the concept of plagiarism. The term 'plagiarism' appeared to be very familiar to those students; however, the definitions received from them varies considerably. Some participants' responses with the length of time living in Australia were chosen as examples below:

Student 1(3 months): *"Plagiarism means someone copies the other's works"*

Student 2 (1 year): *"Plagiarism means you paraphrase a text without enough changes"*

Student 3 (6 months): *"It means you copy from the book without writing authors' names"*

Student 4 (1 year): *"If I get material from books or journals, I must provide the sources"*

Student 5(1.5 years): *"If you use ideas or thoughts of any author, you should indicate that"*

Student 6 (2 years): *"When using words or ideas from someone, you must show where did you get them and put into the reference list. You also need to do the references correctly otherwise you will be accused of plagiarism."*

Students 7(3 years): *"It means you copy exactly words from others' text without put into quotation marks or you paraphrase anyone' ideas without acknowledging the writer. Sometimes, students commit plagiarism unintentionally due to referencing incorrectly."*

These answers reveal the degree of students' understanding on the concept of plagiarism. There is a significant agreement on the answers which emphasized the importance of noting the sources of material used. However, only one student mentioned the requirement of doing correct references. Additionally, to some extent, it can be deduced from the data that the longer time students spend in Australia, the more correct answer they give.

Theme 2: Cultural background

The students' responses revealed the fact that Vietnamese culture does not allow people to plagiarize. The practice of plagiarism in any field of society will be criticized seriously. When they were children, the teachers were very strict to make sure their students not cheating. To prove this point, some

students provide some examples which are available in Vietnamese literature as well as in some current affairs of their society. For example, Student 1 shared,

"In my country, there are some singers who often plagiarize the other song. For example, they copy the melody of some Korean or Chinese songs and create their own Vietnamese lyrics and then those become their songs. Although, for some reasons, they have not been punished by the authorities, they have to face strong opposition from the youth who are the target- listeners of those illegal songs".

Besides, some students indicated that all of the teachers in Vietnam especially in primary school are very strict to their students about this issue. Students who copy from the others' students will be punished heavily. Student 4 said:

"I still remember when I was ten. A very lazy boy in my class always copied the answers from the girl sitting next him. When my teacher recognized that, that boy had to stand in front of class to be criticized heavily and then his parents was also informed about that. This is a serious punishment as Vietnamese people are very afraid of losing their faces in front of others."

Theme 3: reasons of plagiarism

Subtheme 1: Educational upbringing

The differences in education between Vietnam and Australia may become a root of growing instances of plagiarism. The data shows that most students in the group seemingly tried to explain for their accidental plagiarism with the reason of difference in learning writing essays. It is said that in Vietnam, when students use any statement of anyone in their writing, they just need to write the name of the author. Furthermore, in Vietnamese education, students are not taught to paraphrase. They are just taught to remember exactly the same words from the original text as a way to show their broad knowledge on literature. For example, students 5: *"When I was at high school, I was encouraged to learn by heart as many pieces of writing as possible in order to integrate them into my writing. It is a very hard work to me; however, if you can do that, you will have very high marks for literature".*

Those students also expressed that doing references does consume a great amount of time, as they are not familiar with too many rules that need to follow. Evidently, the unfamiliarity can easily lead to mistakes and those mistakes on referencing will make students be accused of plagiarizing. One of them confided, *"I have never felt confident with my knowledge on doing references, even when I use Endnote, a helpful software to deal with that, I still make mistakes sometimes."*(Student 8)

Another student said, *"It is too complicated. They have many styles of references. I have submitted one article for one journal for publication; they declined my paper very quickly with asking for many revisions on styles of references. Each journal has its own style and that is an obstacle to me."*(Student 6)

Subtheme 2: Pressures

This theme emerges from the findings as one of the reasons why students plagiarize from the view of Vietnamese students. The information from the data provides different kinds of pressures that result into students' plagiarism. Firstly, as some respondents have experienced on that, the pressure coming from due dates sometimes pushes the students to submit plagiarized assignments. For example, Students 7 said:

"Some students have part-time jobs; they just have time at weekends. As a result, they do not save enough time to do assignments, and then they just cut and copy from some journals or websites. And normally, when no one recognizes their cheating, they have a tendency to repeat that for the next assignment."

Another pressure may come from the desire to have good grades. Some students agreed that the task given sometimes is too difficult to do, especially for some students with moderate English ability. Thus, plagiarism may become one of their solutions to have good marks. However, Student 9 argued: *I don't care about good grade. I just need to pass because if I fail, I need to pay a lot. If you want to have good marks, you need to read a lot. It is very difficult to do that if you have two or three assignments at the same period. I don't have time to read that much; I just choose some suitable articles and compile them. Believe me, teachers do not have time to check all your resources. Of course, with that way, I have more chances to pass all the units rather than just have good grade for one unit and then fail the others.*

From this point of view, it is found that the pressure also comes from the financial problem. In other words, students do not have enough money to pay more if they fail any unit. In this case, the punishment, which is applied to encourage students to study hard, unexpectedly may become one of the reasons for their plagiarism.

Subtheme 3: ineffective plagiarism detection

This theme emerges from the findings as a very important reason for the increasing phenomenon among international students. Some participants hold the idea that it is not always students' fault for plagiarism. Sometimes, the teachers' laziness and carelessness create that habit for students. Besides, the university sometimes just warned students about plagiarism but in reality, the duty of detecting it is not satisfactory. Thus, once student recognize that they can cheat without being noticed, they will continue and the incidence then will be widespread across the students. Student 7 shared : *"Some students in my class commit plagiarism; they just find it safe to do that because the teacher won't check. She is too lazy to check. Moreover, the students have their own ways to cheat her. Therefore, they plagiarize time by time, and then they shared that with some of their close friends and encourage them to do that also."*

Another student indicated, *"You know. I am sure that everyone does that. Although, they announced that heavy punishments will be applied if students plagiarize more than 13%. They also have the electronic software that helps us to assess our level of plagiarism ourselves. Sometimes, my one is more than 50%, I do not have much time to fix it, and then I just submit it. You know, it is still ok. No one knows that."*

However, four other students who are studying in different faculty of the above respondents stated that plagiarism is tested very strictly in their faculty. Every assignment must be checked for plagiarism percentage. Interestingly, Student 8 confessed:

"All of the assignments are checked very carefully in my faculty to make sure none of plagiarized essays can pass. However, there is a secret across us to deal with that electronic software. If you copy from some old books, they cannot detect you. They just can find out if you copy from the internet or e-books."

Discussion

Students' understanding of the concept 'plagiarism'

Basing on the literature discussing the definition of plagiarism, it can be concluded that those Vietnamese students' awareness on the concept of plagiarism is not sufficient. Although, definitions given from those students, to some extent, can illustrate their understanding at least on the main description of plagiarism such as coping without indicating the sources or paraphrasing appropriately, they are not enough to address this behavior. For example, they did not mention the act of self-plagiarism that may occur commonly among students. Besides, it appears from the data that the length of studying in Australia may affect students' knowledge on this issue. Thus, according to Song-Turner (2008), it is suggested that the attempt of plagiarism deterrence in the Australian education system may help these students to develop a clearer and more appropriate understanding of plagiarism.

Cultural background

The finding on this study provides Vietnamese students' view on the idea that culture may contribute to the act of plagiarism. With clear description on how people view plagiarism in Vietnam, the data received reveals a strong argument against the stereotype towards Asian students in terms of cross-cultural influence on plagiarism. Similarly, Ha (2006) holds the view that "Western academics may rush to accuse overseas students" (p.76). It is pointed out from the interviews as well as group discussions that plagiarism are not allowed or made legitimate by Vietnamese culture. Thus, culture should not be included as one of the causes resulting plagiarism among Vietnamese students.

Reasons of plagiarism

Educational upbringing appears to be a very important cause that leads to plagiarism among Vietnamese students. It is the differences in education that account for their lack of referencing skill which belongs to Western educational environment. Thus, their behaviors in this case could be seen as accidental plagiarism resulting from unawareness of plagiarism or understanding the requirement of exact referencing (Maurer, et al., 2006). The other reasons from those Vietnamese students' perspective such as pressures from due dates, desire to have good grade as well as financial issue has proven the previous literature on the motivations of plagiarism. To some degree, plagiarism is used as a means of fulfilling a task or to get through the tension of stuffy work rather than a deliberate and planned act of deception and poor behavior.

The loose detecting plagiarism could be another important finding from this study. Information provided from the real academic life of students in the university through the eyes of those participants may help to shed a light on the inefficiency of plagiarism detection that unexpectedly allowed students to commit plagiarism. It is concluded that university's staffs need to have responsibility for the growth of this phenomenon.

Recommendations

From the findings above as well as the previous related literature, some suggestions emerged from the paper are condensed as following statements:

- Judgment on plagiarism needs the consideration on the factor of educational background to have a fair assessment.
- International students should be well-equipped with sufficient knowledge on plagiarism and how to avoid it.
- The detection should be improved and implemented responsibly to hinder lazy students from temptation of plagiarism.

Conclusion

The findings collected from the interviews as well as group discussions indicated Vietnamese understanding on the concept of plagiarism as well as their views on motivations that lead to plagiarism among students. It is concluded from the study that the very definition of plagiarism was actually not very clear for the students due to their initial educational environment that is far different from the Western style. Thus, findings from this study could be a useful source for authorities in the section, which help to eliminate the stereotype against international students who are believed to have high level potential of committing plagiarism. In other words, a more sympathetic approach should be applied to ease the problem by underlying causes rather just the symptoms. In the case of those Vietnamese students as participants for this study, a fresh thinking about assessment should be considered within the factor of educational background. It is suggested from this study that institutions need to be more proactive in informing the students and using the detection mechanisms to deter students from committing this academic misconduct.

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