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WHY DO STUDENTS PLAGIARIZE? EFL UNDERGRADUATES' VIEWS ON THE REASONS BEHIND PLAGIARISM

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Abstract: *Cheating and plagiarism spread like pandemics in many educational contexts and are difficult to detect, fight and also to understand. The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate what first-year students of English at a large Hungarian university believe to be the main reasons for plagiarism. Twenty-five students were asked to express their views in a free opinion essay. Perceived reasons were categorized into twelve main groups based on the literature and the reasons for plagiarism provided by faculty members at the same university. The most often mentioned reasons included saving time and effort and unintentional plagiarism.*

Keywords: *plagiarism, academic dishonesty, cheating, undergraduates, EFL context, English studies*

1. Introduction

Plagiarism is a highly debated and sensitive issue. Academic publishers and educational institutes all put great emphasis on academic honesty, have academic integrity policies, and threaten offenders with serious disciplinary actions; yet cases of plagiarism at all levels come to surface on a daily basis. Many researchers and instructors believe that the occurrences of plagiarized papers and assignments have multiplied as nowadays digital technology makes sources readily available and copy-pasting methods more tempting than in the pre-Internet age. Back in 1995 Blimling and Alschuler already talked about a *burbing plagiarism epidemic*. A few years later Anderson (1999) used the term *cyberplagiarism*, Auer and Krupar (2001) referred to *mouse click plagiarism*, McMurtry (2001) to *e-cheating*, and Szabo and Underwood (2004) discussed *cybercheats*. Nevertheless, plagiarism is not only an academic integrity issue that involves students, but also scholars and people outside of schools, such as politicians, novelists, or song writers. Every so often scandals come to the surface and the general public sees prominent public figures fall to the ground with plagiarism charges.

The question raised in the title may seem to be an easy one. Everyone involved or not directly involved in higher education has some general ideas about the motives of plagiarism done by students, such as finding the easy way out of an assignment, being under pressure to get good grades, facing time constraints, and receiving too demanding tasks. However, the picture may be more complex. Large scale survey studies also inform us about tendencies, especially those found in North-American academic settings (see e.g. McCabe [2005] for data from over 80,000 students and 12,000 faculty members and the Penn State Pulse surveys on academic integrity). However, local views, attitudes, cases of plagiarism, policies and actions are also important to be analyzed in order to handle the local cases both at individual and

institutional levels and assist students and faculty to adopt the best possible strategies to respond to the plagiarism epidemic.

The aim of the present study is to explore how first-year Hungarian undergraduates of English view the reasons behind plagiarism committed by students in their own educational context. These views reflect their ideas on the topic in general, while this study does not investigate whether the participants have engaged in some form of plagiarism or not or to what degree they find certain types of cheating acceptable. Based on the author's experience of reading plagiarized papers at all academic levels and for all types of assignments and the conclusion of most recent studies that plagiarism and cheating are thriving, it can be expected that plagiarism does happen even when students, often in fear of being caught or negatively judged, under-claim such practices. Participants in this study were asked to freely express their ideas in a short opinion essay entitled "Why do students plagiarize at the university?". This method is hoped to provide richer qualitative data than what large surveys can offer, but do not threaten students or give them the impression of the obligation to report on their own practices as interviews may do. The given reasons for plagiarism are then matched against the views of local instructors on the same topic who teach the same or similar student populations. The perceived reasons from both sides may serve to better understand the reasons behind and attitudes towards plagiarism in an EFL higher education context.

2. Background

2.1. What constitutes plagiarism?

While there seems to be some general agreement in the academic world and among the general public of what constitutes plagiarism (using someone else's ideas or texts as your own without appropriately crediting the source), plagiarism is far from being a black and white matter. Gray areas exist for many reasons, first of all because definitions of plagiarism vary. According to the online Merriam Webster dictionary, to plagiarize is "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own: use (another's production) without crediting the source" and also "to commit literary theft: present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source". The International Center for Academic Integrity refers to plagiarism as an act that happens when "someone uses words, ideas, or work products attributable to another identifiable person or source without attributing the work to the source from which it was obtained in a situation in which there is a legitimate expectation of original authorship, in order to obtain some benefit, credit, or gain which need not be monetary". The main points in these two definitions are claimed authorship and desired gain. These both presuppose that the committed plagiarism is an intentional act. Other definitions and views, however, make a distinction between intentional and unintentional or inadvertent plagiarism (for some recent discussions see e.g. Ballantine and McCourt Larres 2012, Teh and Paull 2013). Pecorari (2003, 2008) refers to the intention to deceive as *prototypical plagiarism* and marks unintentional textual borrowing as *patchwriting*. Although patchwriting by some experienced writers may be a conscious, deliberate choice of strategy use, Howard argues that it is a frequent, tolerable stage in the process of learning how to write from sources. Howard (1993:233) defines *patchwriting* as "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes". While the understanding and acceptance of patchwriting generate debates, plagiarism, being a much broader category, is even more unlikely to be viewed homogeneously. The picture is made complex also by the fact that there are various degrees of plagiarism, from leaving out quotation marks or references, patchwriting from various sources on the sentence or text level, lifting sections of texts into one's own paper, downloading full materials from paper

mills or asking someone else to writing the paper. Moreover, some authors use these strategies consistently and systematically, while others have only a few sections or sentences in their paper that can be considered illegitimate borrowing. The Harvard Guide to Using Sources distinguishes, by providing explanations and clear examples, between the following six forms of plagiarism: *verbatim plagiarism*, *mosaic plagiarism*, *inadequate paraphrase*, *uncited paraphrase*, *uncited quotation* and *using materials from other students*. It advises students to use clear note-taking techniques, carefully compare their final paper with the source texts, give credit to the main ideas even if the text itself is paraphrased and indicate sources so that the reader can trace the original work if needed. Park (2003: 475) discusses the following main ways students commit plagiarism:

- a) Stealing or presenting a work of others as your own, such as submitting another student's paper, buying the paper from paper mills and essay banks, asking someone else to write your paper, copying the whole text without acknowledging the source;
- b) Providing references but leaving out quotation marks from the lifted chunks, using very close reuse of text, thus giving the impression of the appropriacy of referencing;
- c) Patchwriting, excessive paraphrasing from various texts, usually on a sentence level, without the indication of the sources.

Furthermore, while e-cheating is getting more widespread, detection devices are also gaining ground in academic institutions. Yet, playing detective may be costly, time-consuming and energy-burning from the part of academic institutions, professor, editor and reviewers. General search engines, as well as plagiarism detection devices are used to screen papers for academic dishonesty. McCullough and Holmberg (2005) analyzed 210 MA theses using Google and concluded that this globally available search engine is an effective and quick alternative to plagiarism detection devices. Nevertheless, many universities subscribe for some kind of detection software (such as Turnitin), and there is continuous exploration by researchers and computer specialists to build newer, quicker and more reliable tools.

Most of the time, however, in the lack of an automated plagiarism check, whether the reader (instructor, editor, reviewer) suspects of plagiarism depends on various factors. The perception of what counts as plagiarism and other forms of cheating and how serious the offence is vary among both students and instructors. Roig (2001) gave texts to a group of professors and asked them to read and decide whether they were plagiarized or not. He found some variation among the participants, concluding that even expert readers may disagree on the degree of acceptability of a paraphrased text. In a parallel investigation, the author focused on the writing behavior of another group of professors, 30% of whom used sections of the original text themselves when asked to paraphrase. Since its publication this study has been cited many times when referring to the fact that instructors often judge students on negative behaviors they themselves commit or disagree on. Halupa and Bolliger (2013) surveyed 89 US private university instructors about their perception of students' self-plagiarism, namely the reusing of sections of their own papers or resubmitting their assignments in order to gain credit in other courses. What they found is that these instructors did not clearly understand the concepts of self-plagiarism (partly due to the lack of institutional guidelines) and believed their students also lacked information. McCabe (2005) analyzed data from various thousands of students and reported substantial differences between undergraduate, graduate and faculty groups in terms of their views on the degree of seriousness and acceptability of certain forms of cheating. For example, 14% of undergraduates considered acceptable to submit someone else's work as their own, while this ration was down to 7% among graduates and 2% among faculty members. A similar ratio was seen for buying papers from a paper mill (11%, 8% and 2%, respectively). In contrast, copying and pasting small chunks of texts from the Internet was considered a serious form of misconduct by 57% of undergraduates, 68% of graduates and 82% of instructors.

2.2. Plagiarism angles – causes, ways and the EFL context

A growing interest in the topic of plagiarism is seen from all participants in question. Numerous websites provide detailed information about the definitions, causes of plagiarism and advice on the ways how academic misconduct can be avoided. Some of these are independent (such as plagiarism.com), but most of them are tied to academic institutions, associations (e.g. plagiarismadvice.org run by the International Association for Academic Integrity) or research groups (e.g. The Citation Project). A boom in the discussion among scholars and researchers is also clearly reflected by the number of publications available on plagiarism-related topics. Google Scholar provides 232,000 hits for the word *plagiarism* (as of the end of August, 2013). As many as 18,300 are classified as “published since 2012”, and of these 10,999 have appeared since the beginning of 2013. This growing rate makes any attempt of a systematic review close to impossible. However, it can be concluded that an overwhelming proportion of the published research and discussion forums have a negative attitude towards plagiarism and have found that students have mixed views and insufficient knowledge about the topic and would need more guidance from instructors to avoid at least the inadvertent forms of plagiarism. The nature and complexity of the ongoing debate is nicely illustrated by the 2002 TESL-EJ forum discussion of researchers and professors entitled “Perspectives on plagiarism in the ESL/EFL classroom”.

The majority of studies published on cheating and plagiarism report data from US universities. Fortunately, a growing number of studies discuss educational settings outside of the Anglo-Saxon world. Rezanejad and Rezaei (2013), for example, found the easiness to plagiarize to be the main reason for cheating for their Iranian university student participants. Razera (2011) investigated the attitudes towards and understanding of plagiarism of Swedish and international graduate students at Stockholm University. The three most common causes of plagiarism were laziness, lack of interest in the subject and the difficulty of the assignments. The study stresses the instructors’ role in decreasing the prevalence rate of cheating by frequently redesigning their course and tasks so that they themselves remain attentive and motivated and with new assignments force students not to hand in work done by previous groups. Publications that emerge from contexts other than the North-American one underline the need to explore local scenarios as culture and the immediate educational setting may change the way plagiarism is viewed and practiced. Studies also point out that the mere knowledge of the plagiarism policies does not help student in avoiding pitfalls of intentional or unintentional plagiarism, often due to paraphrasing problems that need time and practice to improve (Pecorari 2003, Howard et al. 2010, Liao and Tseng 2010, Li and Casanave 2012).

When the Hungarian education context is scanned, an alarming tradition prevails. For decades cheating and plagiarism have been part of learning, teaching and research. Horváth (2012) reports on the views of eight of his Hungarian colleagues he interviewed. The participants drew a disappointing picture of a society and a system in which cheating is tolerated, overlooked and in some cases encouraged. This permissiveness may have also an important role in the way students view plagiarism. Participants also called for not only clearer policies at all levels (especially postgraduate), but a change in attitudes as well as immediate and more efficient responses to cheating. The anti-plagiarism policies introduced at all higher education institutes in the last few years will need time to reach public consensus.

Education in a foreign language may present students with additional factors of difficulty, including general language proficiency difficulties, academic writing challenges, the extra time needed to study the assigned learning materials, and possible differences in writing traditions. Understanding and following academic honesty rules may be more difficult under these circumstances (Li 2013, Zafarghandi et al. 2012). Insufficient language and

general study skills have been observed in the student populations that enter foreign language and culture studies programs at Hungarian universities. Apart from the everyday observation of instructors, studies also document that many BA level students of English have insufficient knowledge of general and academic English, have difficulty following classes, struggle with the study load and overall underestimate their levels of difficulties to complete the program (see e.g. Doró 2011, 2013). These factors may push students further to circumvent plagiarism policies and turn to cheating methods.

3. Methodology

This exploratory investigation involved 25 first-year undergraduate students of English at a large Hungarian university. In this introductory year of their study program they have a number of language skills seminars, and a few introductory lectures in English. Most of the writing they have to do is produced for their language seminars in the form of short opinion essays, expositions, summaries, short answers on the study sheets and the note-taking during classes. They are not yet required to write academic texts longer than a page. They have debriefings on academic honesty rules in their classes and are expected not to engage in intentional plagiarism. For this study the participants were asked to write a short opinion essay at the end of their first academic year on the following topic: Why do students plagiarize at the university? The essays were written as part of regular class work in two language skills seminars which discussed issues of education, cheating and plagiarism in higher education. This naturalistic setting was chosen over well-controlled, large-scale, quantitative data collection because it was expected that in this setting students would freely express their ideas and this preliminary inquiry would sign the road for further investigation. The texts were screened for the occurrences of main categories of reasons defined as a result of a parallel inquiry in which eight local faculty members who teach first-year students filled out a questionnaire about plagiarism. One item in this questionnaire was used here which addressed the same question as the one students received: Why do students plagiarize? General categories could have been defined based on the literature reviewed in the previous section, but it was believed that local instructors may put emphasis on aspects that other studies carried out in different educational contexts may marginalize, or, on the contrary, leave out factors that are more relevant elsewhere. The perceived reasons for plagiarizing indicated by the eight Hungarian instructors could be grouped under the following 12 categories:

- a) Demanding schedules, lack of time
- b) Economy of effort, perceived easiness of cheating
- c) Lack of information about what constitutes plagiarism
- d) Lack of citing and paraphrasing skills
- e) Lack of self-confidence: unable to state/paraphrase the source as well as the original
- f) Good grades, pressure to perform well
- g) Task too demanding
- h) Inadequate language and general writing skills
- i) Lack of ideas
- j) Getting away with it (beating the system, tricking the instructor, circumventing policies)
- k) Permissive plagiarism practice
- l) Desire to look smarter

The actual wording of the reasons indicated in the questionnaires could be different. The order of the categories in the above list is random and does not show their importance or perceived frequency. Not surprisingly, these categories largely overlap with the ones found in the literature. Interestingly, however, a lack of interest in the subject or uninteresting tasks

reported on in the Swedish study (Razera 2012) or the lack of clear rules discussed in many other studies were not mentioned by the Hungarian instructors, probably because these would constitute as self-criticism.

4. Results

The screening of the twenty-five essays indicates that the majority of essays mention multiple causes, often within the same sentences, as in the following examples:

- (1) Everyone likes getting good marks. There are people who are hard-working and there are [those] who are not. Hard-working people make an effort at least while lazy ones do not, they rather chose the easier way. That's why they cheat or plagiarize.
- (2) Copy-pasting doesn't take too much time and doesn't require any serious brainstorming.
- (3) Writing someone else's idea as your own makes you look very smart and intelligent and every student thinks that (s)he will be the one to get away with it.

The frequency of occurrences of the main categories is shown in Figure 1 below. *Economy of effort*, translated as the perceived *easiness of cheating* or the *laziness* of students was most often mentioned (in 13 of the 25 essays), followed by the indication of *time* in the form of lack of time or time-saving strategies (in 10 texts). See e.g. sample (4) below.

(4) ...they just realize that the deadline is so close and they don't have time to do proper job, so they choose to steal the works of others instead.

Categories c and d, namely *lack of information on plagiarism* and *lack of citing and paraphrasing skills* both refer to unintentional plagiarism. If merged into one main category of inadvertent plagiarism, they share second and third places on the list with ten occurrences. See samples (5) and (6) below.

(5) I think that the reason for plagiarism amongst students in most of the cases is that they're not aware of doing it. I didn't know much about this topic before I came to university and I think many students are like that.

(6) One can plagiarize in many ways without even noticing that what she or he is doing is a fraud that is forbidden. In most cases it is the misuse of sources that leads to plagiarism. Intentionally or unintentionally either way it is unacceptable.

Seven essays also mentioned that students plagiarize because they want to or hope to *get away with it*, hope not to get caught or even for the thrill of seeing if they can beat the system. See samples (7) and (8) below.

(7) There could be students who just think teachers won't find out. But they always do.

(8) Maybe because they think nobody will notice and they will manage to hand in a perfect work full of strangers' thoughts, which, in my opinion, is not reasonable.

The hope for *good grades* was indicated five times (e.g. sample 9), *lack of ideas* (e.g. sample 10) and *permissive plagiarism practices* three times (e.g. sample 11).

(9) Students think they get good marks and they will be successful in school life if they cheat. Although this success is only a short-term success.

(10) I think the most common excuse for plagiarising is that they don't know what to write but that's just stupid.

(11) It's of no importance in primary school and high school, but at university it is crime.

The remaining categories appeared only once, with the exception of the *insufficient language and general writing skills* that were not explicitly stated, which, in reality, could be a leading underlying factor.

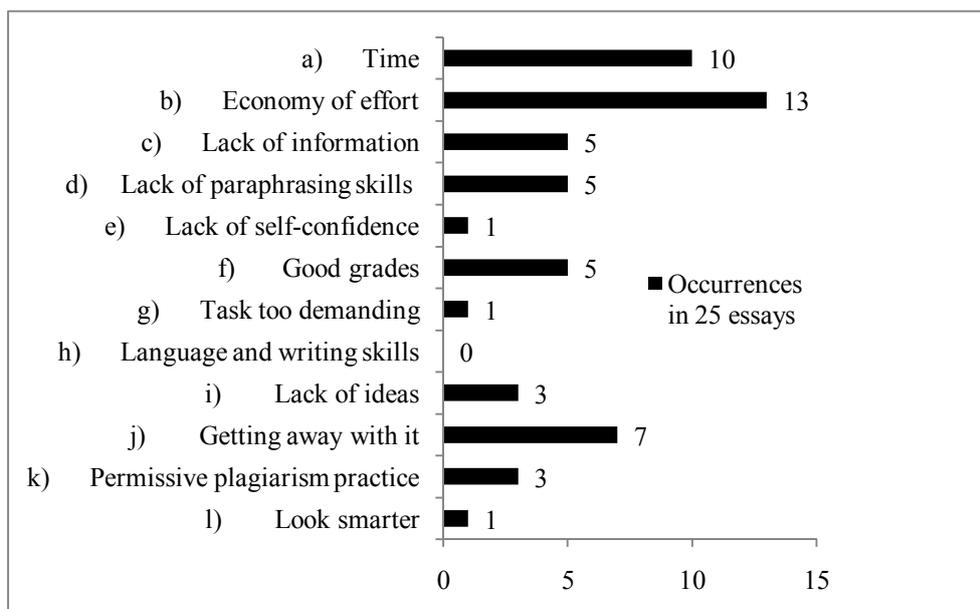


Figure 1. Reasons

for plagiarism indicated by first-year undergraduates

5. Discussion

Apart from the number of occurrences discussed above, some main tendencies can be seen. The most frequent reasons mentioned in the essays are connected to saving time and effort, suggesting that the participants either think that students are overwhelmed with tasks or that they are bad time managers. When minimized effort is paired up with the hope of slipping through, we get a picture of a student population that, as a whole, cares very little about knowledge and skills obtainable only through practice. Some students also recognize the need for clearer guidance, which echoes the findings of Razera (2011), although there is less direct criticism of instructors or (lack of) policies. One exception is found in the following essay:

(12) ...I guess at the first half year teachers try to make their students get used to university life, how things work, since it's very different from high school, so they don't really care if you hand something in without referrals or bibliography. In my opinion this is a big mistake because students can easily be careless, get used to something that is not right, maybe some even think: I didn't have to do this before and it was still fine, so why do it now? I remember at first I also thought that it's just a waste of time ...

Some students gave the impression that in theory students know about what constitutes plagiarism, but may feel that this knowledge is not sufficient or is difficult to turn into anti-plagiarism practice. This is in line with the findings of research done in other EFL/ESL contexts (e.g. Howard et al. 2010, Li and Casanave 2012, Liao and Tseng 2010, Pecorari 2003). Excellent plagiarism definitions were provided, such as the following:

(13) In most cases it is the misuse of sources that leads to plagiarism. Intentionally or unintentionally either way it is unacceptable. When one uses someone else's ideas or words but fails to credit that person, then the writer is committing plagiarism.

Some students embedded their discussion in the broader question of cheating and draw a picture similar to the one found by Horváth (2012), namely that cheating is deeply rooted in the Hungarian education system (see sample 14).

(14) Plagiarism is a serious kind of cheating, however, in my opinion there can be occasions when a little cheating that would cause no harm might be acceptable. Important tests, exams and the[s]es should reflect [on] one's knowledge and competence on a given subject, still, quizzes and tests with less importance can be backed up by the use of helping materials occasionally...

(15) Preparing a good cheat sheet can be even the sign of resourcefulness, which is very important in everyday life. I don't say it should be allowed, but shouldn't be forbidden either... Talking during exams is also more like a proof of teamwork and cooperation than an offence.

While in the large-scale American study reported by McCabe (2005) a certain proportion of both students and instructors accepted some basic forms of cheating, sample (15) gives credit to cheating as an indication of “resourcefulness” and “talent for innovation”, and not misconduct that warrants immediate disciplinary action.

6. Conclusion

This exploratory inquiry investigated students’ views on possible reasons behind plagiarism in a Hungarian EFL higher education context, about which very little has been published. The generalizability of the results is limited due to the exploratory nature of the study. Clearly, more research into the reasons behind plagiarism, students’ attitudes about their studies in general and their writing practices in particular is needed in order to see which approach to writing instruction best fits the needs of various student populations. Nevertheless, what is echoed in other research is also evident here: a) hearing about policies and rules will not sufficiently assist students in avoiding plagiarism pitfalls even when they try, b) teaching writing skills, but also study and time management skills are important, and c) the survival of the fittest rule is interpreted by many students in higher education as the most gain by the least possible effort, which attitude is very difficult, but not impossible to fight.

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