True Motives behind Algerian EFL Students' Plagiarism: A Retrospective Analysis of the Researcher's Supervised Dissertations

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Abstract:
Over the past few years, there has been a dramatic increase in the practice of plagiarism among Djilali Liabes University EFL Master Students. Though, students are accountable for such misconducts, the current study assumes that the week academic writing skills of most of these students are the major cause behind their resort to plagiarism. To check such assumption, the researcher relied on a retrospective analysis of her supervised Master dissertations. Six dissertations were analysed, all of which involved cases of plagiarism. The findings revealed that the subjects held varying conceptions of plagiarism and thus they approached it for different reasons. Yet, the findings confirmed that all the subjects faced difficulties to express their own thoughts in writing let alone to report, paraphrase and summarize other authors' thoughts hence the importance to reconsider the teaching of writing across the academic levels.
Keywords: academic misconduct; EFL Master dissertations; plagiarism; writing skills.

1. Introduction

Plagiarism and cheating are academic misconducts that continue to haunt schools, colleges and universities (Gerdeman, 2000; Hayes & Introna, 2005). Higher education is specifically concerned with these scourges given that it is the final stage in formal instruction and students are required to exhibit their academic qualification through producing long pieces of academic writing as regular assignments and as part of their final projects; a PhD or a master's degree. Although, sanctions against plagiarism are strongly stressed in the universities' codes of conduct, students do not hesitate to violate these codes worldwide. Researchers refer to a number of interrelated factors favouring the spread and persistence of this phenomenon at the university level. Jereb et al. (2018) point out to plagiarism as a: "*a multi-layer phenomenon of dishonesty that occurs in higher education*" (p. 1). This means that plagiarism is a shared responsibility as students, teachers and institutions, and even the society; all play a role in the alarming spread of this negative academic behaviour.

So, the contributing factors vary from students' ignorance, or misunderstanding of the practice, limited academic level and lack of

academic study skills, lack of motivation, laziness, peers' and families' pressure, and even their willingness to achieve academic success regardless of the means employed (Gerdeman, 2000; Park, 2003; Šprajc, Urh, Jerebic, Trivan, & Jereb, 2017), to teachers' evaluation approach, limited time and lack of automated plagiarism software checkers in their institutions (Barnas, 2000, Doró, 2014), to laissez-faire attitudes in some communities and dissimilar conceptions of plagiarism across cultures, (Introna, Hayes, Blair & Wood, 2003; Horváth, 2012; Simon, 2019).

Researchers also point at the advent of internet and the development of ICTs as significant contributing factors to plagiarism. The quantitative and qualitative development of ICTs has definitely contributed to the availability and dissemination of information and knowledge, but it has at the same time amplified the phenomenon by making "*sources readily available and copy-pasting methods more tempting than in the pre-Internet age*" (Doró, 2014, p. 1). While, this is completely true, the problem for Algerian EFL learners; may be more complex and deeply rooted in their learning process and academic journey.

2. Plagiarism and the Writing Skill

The term plagiarism has been attributed different definitions. The root for the divergence in the conception of plagiarism is often cultural (Simon, 2019). In the context of this study, the meaning targeted is restricted to students making use of ideas and work achieved by other authors/scholars, in their own writing without appropriate acknowledgement of the incorporated work.

Avoiding plagiarism requires from the student to master the writing skills. While, the difficulty of writing is recognized in one's own language, writing in English as a foreign language is considered much more complex, and can lead to unpremeditated or even intentional plagiarism. Both Farhang (2014) and Zigunovas (2017) stress the role of the limited writing skills of EFL/ESL learners; the case of the overseas or international students, in committing plagiarism. The researchers explain that because on one hand these students do not master the skills to write effectively and on the other hand English writing in academic contexts requires the ability to write in one's own words, these EFL/ESL students often fail to meet the writing requirements of their assignments. As a result, and to bridge the gap in their limited writing skill, students resort to: "*taking a bit here and there* [to help] *with getting meaning across*" because as non-native speakers of English, they found paraphrasing a difficult task (Hayes & Introna, 2005, p. 221)

Paraphrasing, summarizing and quoting are key academic writing skills deemed important for university studies. Proper use of these skills enables students to exhibit their critical thinking and deep understanding of the literature as well as to avoid plagiarism. In Other words, students need to know how to report other authors' ideas by using their own words/styles, while keeping the original meaning clearer, simpler and shorter. But, the mastery of these skills requires a lot of practice and practice is what usually lacks from such courses in the Algerian EFL context. Much of the lectures on how to avoid plagiarism are theoretical. Students are taught that plagiarism is a serious misconduct and to avoid it they are informed that

they have to paraphrase and summarize their sources and acknowledge them, whereas, the practice on how to paraphrase and summarize is very limited and not systematic.

We cannot expect from students to write in their own words and styles while they do not actually possess the necessary words and styles to do so! Unfortunately, no one can deny the fact that many EFL students in our university reach advanced academic levels with limited writing skills. So, these students may plagiarize because as stated by Jereb et al (2018) citing Park (2003): "*they are not familiar with proper ways of quoting, paraphrasing, citing and referencing and/or when they are unclear about the meaning of `common knowledge' and the expression `in their own words'*" (p. 3). The lack of the writing skills also generates a lack of confidence to express one's own thought and opinion and the result is once more students' resort to plagiarism for fear of distorting the original ideas (Hayes &Introna, 2005).

3. Research Problem

In spite of our limited experience in supervision, the frequency of plagiarism among our Master students urged us to question the true motives behind their misconduct. Since 2016, we have taught different academic levels, namely first and third year Bachelor's students and Second year Master students. This brief experience provided us with some qualitative insights into the writing skill of our students. We noticed that many students faced difficulties with the writing skill in their first year and they continued to struggle with this skill as they progressed in their studies. These same students were usually those who committed plagiarism. So, given that final-year projects involve the mastery of basic and advanced academic writing skills, the aim of the present study is to verify whether Djilali Liabes University English Department (DLUED) Master students' writing skills play any role in their resort to this misconduct. Thus, this study tries to answer the following questions:

1. Are DLUED Master students aware of the true meaning of plagiarism?
2. Do they have the necessary writing skills to effectively express their thoughts and others' to avoid plagiarism?

4. Methodology

The current research is a diachronic qualitative study based on document analysis. This document analysis is used as "*a stand-alone study*" (Frey, 2018) in order to: "*uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem*" (Merriam, 1988, p. 118). Bowen (2009) claims that this research method is generally suitable to "*qualitative case studies*" (p. 29). He further explains that document analysis can be employed with the objective to: "*verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources*" (ibid, p. 30). This is the case for the study at hand. It uses documents analysis as a stand-alone methodology for data collection and aims at verifying the existing findings at the level of DLUED. The methodology consists of re-analysing the candidates' drafts through: 1) - sorting and classifying their writing mistakes, 2) – re-identifying the cases of plagiarism and 3) – examining the candidates'

reactions to her comments on their academic dishonesty.

It is worth noting that there is no plagiarism software checkers at the level of our university. To detect plagiarism, we usually rely on our familiarity with our students' academic language proficiency as well as our intuition. We type the suspicious passages in the search box on the Google website or any other search engine, and look for possible matches. As such, the candidates were required to send their drafts in word format via email to facilitate plagiarism detection. These drafts are still stored on the researchers' personal computer.

Concerning students' excuses for committing plagiarism, the data was extracted from students' emails for the candidates who were informed through their electronic mails. Yet, some students were informed and warned in face-to-face meeting; during the supervision sessions. So, in these cases, the data collected relied on the researcher's memory which is assumed to be valid data as the number of the candidates was limited and the supervision took place only recently.

3. Participants

As stated above, the subjects involved in the study were only six DLUED Master students as the researcher is a novice university teacher and a novice supervisor too. So, the six dissertations analysed consisted of one dissertation in linguistics achieved during the academic year 2017-2018 and five in didactics with one dissertation in 2018-2019, one in 2019-2020 and three in the current academic year; 2020-2021. Thus, students' drafts were reviewed and their writing mistakes were analysed and grouped into categories based on the type of the identified mistakes.

4. Results and Discussion

It is worth noting that the researcher focused on the analysis of the Literature Review chapter for the three disciplines given that the chapter shares common characteristics in the different master dissertations across disciplines, while the research methodology chapter in Didactics Master dissertation differs from that in Linguistics and Literature. The chapters collected varied from 11 to 17 pages with a mean score of 3,759 words. The findings of the analysis are illustrated in the following table.

Table 1: Subjects' most Frequent Mistakes

Type of mistake	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	M.S.
1. word choice/ wrong word	23	17	10	10	13	08	13.5
2. Wordiness/ redundancy	06	16	07	11	10	09	9.83
3. Poorly Integrated Quotation (poor referencing techniques)	18	07	08	08	09	09	9.83
4. Run-on sentence	09	08	10	12	06	10	9.17
5. bad syntax	09	10	02	11	13	09	09
6. Verb Tense/form	12	10	03	08	06	10	8.17
7. unclear ideas	06	15	04	10	04	06	7.5
8. Sentence fragments	03	06	07	07	02	05	05
9. punctuation	06	01	07	05	06	04	4.83
10. Comma Splice	10	04	05	02	01	03	4.17
11. Subject-verb agreement	03	03	02	04	04	03	3.17

12. Incorrect article usage	04	03	02	04	04	01	03
13. Misuse of Capitalization	03	01	04	04	00	05	2.83
14. Unclear pronoun reference	02	02	02	04	01	05	2.67
15. preposition	05	05	01	01	02	01	2.5
16. Misspellings	02	02	02	03	02	03	2.33
17. Faulty parallelism	00	01	03	05	02	07	1.79
18. Missing Word	01	02	03	01	02	00	1.5
19. Apostrophe Errors	03	01	00	00	02	02	1.33
20. British vs. American spelling	02	00	00	02	01	01	01
21. singular/plural	01	01	02	01	00	01	01

So, the findings revealed that almost all types of writing mistakes were identified in the collected drafts as shown in the table above which displays the mistakes in a descending order of frequency. Mistakes from 11 to 21 are the least frequent in the analysed chapters. They are mainly related to subject-verb agreement with a frequency of 3.17, capitalization (2.83), spelling mistakes (2.33), apostrophe errors (1.33), etc. These mistakes are limited in frequency and are relatively simple and can be corrected through students' simple systematic proofreading of their drafts.

But, the most frequent mistakes are those related to sentence construction and meaning. At the top of these mistakes is the use of wrong words with a frequency mean score of 13.5. This type of mistake can obstruct readers' comprehension by conveying different meanings or a completely wrong meaning. The following sentence is a wrong word example extracted from a dissertation in Didactics:

➢ *language learning should not involve only around acquisition of linguistic items but also around methodological and cultural objectives.*

The intended meaning is obviously 'revolve around' instead of 'involve around' which does not exist. The second most frequent mistake is wordiness, also known as redundancy (9.83). It can result from the repetition of words; sentences or ideas as the case in the following example:

➢ *furthermore, grammatical competence will help learners to understand and make correct written and spoken language. It will also enable them to express themselves accurately and fluently in the course of using language and to improve their writing competence.*

The three underlined parts in the above example express almost the same idea. Poorly Integrated Quotation (poor referencing techniques) (9.83) is another important mistake that characterizes our subjects' dissertations. Students either do not use introducing verbs to appropriately integrate the selected quotations or do not use the inverted commas. The following example illustrates the first case.

➢ *we can say, language also is a system of communication based on words and the combination of words into sentences. "Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech sounds combined into words, words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts" Henry Sweet .*

The above example combines actually two errors, the first error

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consists of a plagiarized sentence (*we can ... sentences*) and the second error is the lack of reporting verb. The quotation is inserted in the text without the necessary introducing phrase, besides the reference is incomplete (*Henry Sweet*). Another noted mistake in the above example is that the student moved on discussing another point without commenting on the quotation or providing his opinion or clarification to the author's ideas to help the reader understand the significance of the quotation to the writer.

Run-on sentences (9.17), bad syntax (9), unclear ideas (7.5), sentence fragment (5), punctuation (4.83) and comma splice (4.17) are all serious mistakes affecting sentence-level accuracy and compromising the overall meaning of the written passages. These mistakes occurred frequently in the analysed chapters which constituted a handicap to our subjects and prevented them from expressing effectively their own opinions let alone quoting, reporting, summarizing, criticizing and paraphrasing the ideas of other authors.

In this respect, Howard (1993) explains that: "*writers often turn to patchwriting when they are unsure of their understanding of the material or lack confidence in the use of a particular language (such as academic language and phraseology)*". (p. 233). Algerian EFL students' difficulty in writing is an undeniable fact. They bring the writing deficiency with them from middle and secondary school and the deficiency widens as they progress at the university. Students who are unable to write simple meaningful sentences would definitely find it challenging to construct more sophisticated sentences as the compound, the complex and the compound-complex sentences needed in dissertation writing. They would also struggle to distinguish or produce the different types of sentences based on their function. Furthermore, combining sentences into paragraphs of different types and the paragraphs into an acceptable essay would be almost an impossible task to achieve. Appendix 1 illustrates includes extracts from three different dissertations that illustrate the above mentioned situation.

Thus, we can conclude that our subjects' resort to plagiarism was a means to remedy their poor academic writing skills. But data collected from students' explanations to their misconduct showed that was only half the story. The following table summarizes these explanations.

Table 2: Subjects' Explanations of their Academic Misconduct

Subjects	Explanations provided for plagiarism
1.	a. What do you mean by plagiarism? I didn't use my own work or i did not use the reference. Or both. b. Sorry I did not see your message till now, i think may be i understand you. Concerning to the methodology I find it so difficult Because we have already studied it just 4 hours per week this is not enough to understand everything about methodology with its details
2.	Sorry, but i'm not going to use this passages in my dissertation, i wanted only to give you an idea about my topic of research.
3.	I don't understand what you mean. i have paraphrased all the sources.
4.	Sorry Madam, we disappointed you, we won't repeat it
5.	Our teacher of methodology told us that we can use the work of

	other authors but we must paraphrase it and this is what I did.
6.	I don't need the dissertation after I finish studies, it's only for this degree, and I am not interested in the PhD degree. Besides all students do it and their supervisors don't check plagiarism. I used to work seriously but I was disappointed by my classmates' and teachers' negative behaviour, they don't encourage people who work seriously. I want only to finish and look for a job.

The three first explanations were extracted from the subjects' emails while the three last were provided during face-to-face meetings. This is to say that all the six subjects committed plagiarism at the beginning of their research projects and their reactions were varied when confronted with evidences of their misconduct. Actually, we have identified four different reactions. Regarding the first subject, her questions/expressions reflect clearly her ambiguity concerning the true meaning of the term plagiarism. But, she seemed well aware of the cause behind her ambiguity. She attributed her misunderstnaing to the limited teaching sessions devoted to research methodology module wherein they are expected to study, among other things, plagiarism and the strategies to avoid it.

It is worth noting that because of the spread of the Corona-virus pandemic in Algeria, the academic year was reduced to 2 months; one month for each semester. Students studied only four teaching sessions per semester in each module; eight sessions total over the course of the academic year. This is actually a very limited time for students to acquire the necessary writing and research methodology skills to conduct their final-year research project and write and produce quality Master dissertations.

And what is more, before the advent and spread of the pandemic to Algeria, studies were interrupted by another important event, the Hirak, a socio-political movement that started on February 22nd, 2019 in opposition to the candidacy of the then President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for a fifth presidential term. The Hirak lasted for months and caused the closure of the Algerian schools and universities which negatively impacted education at all levels. So, we can understand the justification advanced by the first subject, yet it is by no means an excuse for plagiarism.

The third and fifth subjects shared the same understanding of plagiarism; for them it sufficed to paraphrase the work of other authors to avoid plagiarism. But, what they did not know is that, even though, they had to cite their sources and even twice. They had to provide their in-text short reference along with the complete reference in the reference list or bibliography, and that was actually missing in their work. We confess that we faced difficulties to make these students comprehend this process and apply it all through their work.

Concerning the second and fourth students, their reactions were similar and both recognized committing plagiarism. They did not try to defend themselves, but they expressed their readiness to avoid it. This entails that they had got a clear idea about the concept and that they were aware of their misconduct.

The last reaction was represented by subject nᵒ 6 who also recognized committing plagiarism, but what is interesting about this student is the reasons he mentioned to justify his misconduct. We had taught this student in the first year of his Bachelor studies, in the Culture and Civilisation module. We were not expecting him to commit plagiarism first because of his satisfactory proficiency level in English and we do remember his passion and concern for his studies.

When we confronted him, we were surprised by his response. As indicated in the table above, this subject claimed that he did not have any intention to pursue advanced studies; accordingly he felt no need to put much effort in writing his master dissertation. What was even worse was his feeling that cheating was permitted since it was a common practice among his classmates and even some teachers. He seemed disappointed by their wrongdoings which negatively impacted his beliefs and behaviour. So, he ended up by imitating the plagiarists instead of resisting the temptation. There is a sad side in this story, but as pointed by Bailey (2011): "*students are responsible for plagiarism because it is their action and their choice. No one is forcing them to cheat and there are always other options*". The soundest option would be to do one's duty instead of blaming others for misconduct and then imitating them.
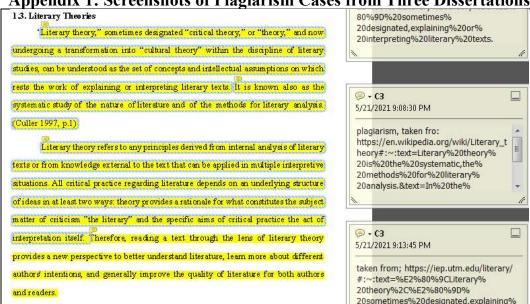
5. Conclusion

The spread of plagiarism among DLUED Master students is an undeniable fact. Though none of the explanations provided by the research subjects can be valid excuses for their academic misconduct, these explanations can help understand the challenges that students face with their academic writing in general and dissertations' writing in particular. Our findings corroborated the existing findings as the study revealed that some students were aware of the true meaning of plagiarism and deliberately plagiarized may be with the hope of not being caught. Others misunderstood this concept. Yet, the study demonstrated that in both cases students did not possess the necessary writing skills to avoid it. Practice is therefore the solution to remedy these situations. The focus should be on the reinforcement of students' basic writing skills as well as on the development of their research skills including strategies that enable them to express themselves effectively, gain confidence in their voice and thus avoid plagiarism. Besides, fairness in education would certainly help students like subject nᵒ 6 not lose their way.

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Appendix 1: Screenshots of Plagiarism Cases from Three Dissertations

1.3. Literary Theories

'Literary theory," sometimes designated "critical theory," or "theory," and now undergoing a transformation into "cultural theory" within the discipline of literary studies, can be understood as the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining or interpreting literary texts. It is known also as the systematic study of the nature of literature and of the methods for literary analysis. (Culler 1997, p.1)

Literary theory refers to any principles derived from internal analysis of literary texts or from knowledge external to the text that can be applied in multiple interpretive situations. All critical practice regarding literature depends on an underlying structure of ideas in at least two ways: theory provides a rationale for what constitutes the subject matter of criticism "the literary" and the specific aims of critical practice the act of interpretation itself. Therefore, reading a text through the lens of literary theory provides a new perspective to better understand literature, learn more about different authors' intentions, and generally improve the quality of literature for both authors and readers.

80%9D%20sometimes%20designated,explaining%20or%20interpreting%20literary%20texts.

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The History of Blended Learning:

~~In order to investigate any branch of study the researcher should know more about the historical background of this branch.~~[1] Blended learning as a part of the learning branch has a rich historical background of development. It emerged in 1840 when Sir Isaac Pitman created the first distance course, he started to evaluate his students by sending them shorthand texts via mailed postcards and he required from them to send it back for correction and evaluation. (plagiarism, taken from: mention your source: Papas (2015) https://elearningindustry.com/history-of-blended-learning)

The development of Blended Learning continued from 1960 till 1970. Training was in high level as workers were able to follow computer instructions (Mainframe computer-based training). Employees had the chance to train through computers without relying on printed materials and face-to-face guidance (ibid).

2. Language concept definition:

Language is a system of symbols used by humans to communicate or express ideas and thoughts to others, we are able to exchange knowledge, beliefs, opinions, wishes, thanks, promises, feelings and so on only our imagination sets limits. We can say, language also is a system of communication based on words and the combination of words into sentences. (taken from: [1] https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/ikos/EXFAC03AAS/h05/larestoff/linguistics/Chapter%201.(H05).pdf

"Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech sounds combined into words, words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts" Henry Sweet. Or Henry Sweet defined language as:" language is the expression...............into thoughts"