

Plagiarism in EFL Students' Assignments A Case Study

Hanan Mohammed Al-Dirwish

Department of English, Faculty of Education and Sciences, Albaydha University, Yemen

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56807/buj.v2i2.70>

Abstract

The aim of the current study is to investigate plagiarism in EFL students' essay assignments. It throws light on the importance of writing for individuals, particularly for university students without plagiarism. It took place at the Faculty of Education and Sciences, Rada'a, Al-Baydha University. The sample consisted of thirty-four students of the second and third levels. The findings of this case study indicate that 11 out of 34 (32.35%) of those students' assignments are plagiarized. The findings are thoroughly discussed based on previous studies and the researcher's perspective. It states some beneficial and reasonable solutions and recommendations directed to students, teaching staff and to further research.

Key Terms: : Plagiarism, Students' Assignment, Writing Skills, and Written Works.

1.0 Introduction

In broad terms, the wide spread of plagiarism phenomenon among many university students causes wide anger and a sense of unfairness since it does not distinguish between the real writers and literary pirates. Plagiarism is, however, the piracy that steals one's individuality and freedom to articulate what they should write, create, or even solve small problems pertaining to their community; it is an unreasonable process of copying and pasting others' written work without acknowledgement. In past, the word plagiarism was used as a plagiarist in the sense of kidnapper by ancient Roman. (Park, 2003, p. 473) states, "copying from other writers is probably as old as writing itself." Nowadays, it is, nevertheless, widespread due to the easy availability of internet. Writing, on the other hand, is a kind of technical art of literary form that has its own artists to obviously prove their individuality and to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings. Reasonably, even intellectual people such as academics, teachers, doctors, philosophers, journalists, students, and many others may admittedly quote others' works. Indeed, they gradually commence writing from the simplest topic to the most complicated one. Therefore, one can find them racing and competing to diversify their styles of writing to write essays, reports, books or to conduct researches

creatively and reflectively so as to set their own goals and to greatly improve the different aspects of a satisfying life.

Consequently, it is vitally important for each university student to know what plagiarism is and avoid it in their own writing so as to prove their intelligence, ingeniousness, and diligence in articulating what they are really required to write. Equally, writing their own work can highlight their distinctive personalities as academic students since the art of writing is a result of creativity.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Either deliberately or inadvertently EFL Yemeni students, without acknowledgement, copy and paste text directly from published sources on websites, books or copy their mates' words, ideas or the whole assignment by passing them off as their own. Therefore, plagiarism negatively affects the vital part based on honesty, credibility, and reliability of their written works.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The aims of this study are basically to:

Investigate plagiarism in students' essay assignments.

Come up with suitable and reasonable solutions.

1.3 Importance of the Study

The importance of the study is virtually regarded as the importance of writing for individuals since writing is generally provided in most universities as an obligatory subject to be studied. This study and its findings attempt to make students aware of plagiarism and come up with reasonable solutions to eliminate this phenomenon so as to enable students to write more effectively. This case study, moreover, attempts to turn the spotlight on keeping the scientific and literary honesty, and respecting others' intellectual rights.

1.4 Literature Review

The term plagiarism is usually used to refer the theft of words or ideas, beyond what would normally be regarded as general knowledge. This is the spirit of definition of plagiarism adopted by the Association of American Historian, who describe it as the misuse of the writings of another author... including the limited borrowing, without attribution of author's distinctive and significant research findings, hypotheses, theories...or interpretations (Fialkoff, 1993, p. 56 cited in Park, 2003, p. 472). According to (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2010, p. 140), "plagiarism is as a form of intellectual dishonesty or theft. When a person plagiarizes, s/he steals someone else's words or ideas by passing them off as their own." (Stout, 2013, p. 187) states in her study that plagiarism occurs when three or more words are copied and used from another source without acknowledgement. She equally indicates that a paraphrase is used with only a few words changed or synonyms are substituted without referencing to the citation while the sentence structure remains identical to the original.

Another term that needs to be defined is assignment. (Thomas, 2018, pp. 1-9) defines it as a part of the internal evaluation process, which would be of immense value as an additional learning instrument. Moreover, he divides, as a part of undergraduate and post graduate teaching, the types of assignments into

essay, literature review, case study, project report, and so forth. He points that each assignment has its own structures and features with unique writing styles depending on the learning situations and training need of any one of those assignments.

Essay is a piece of writing written usually from writers' perspectives, experience, imagination, and knowledge. It sometimes answers a question, composed of three paragraphs at least. (Thomas, 2018, p. 1) considers it as the most ubiquitous among the other kinds of assignments.

Plagiarism occurs in all different kind of assignments, particularly in essay assignments as discussed in this study. Writing is regarded as one of the most prevalent pillars of language learning and teaching. Furthermore, (Shadfan, 2014, p. 20) states that it is an important and essential skill that has gained a considerable attention in the field of English language teaching and ESP. Hence, it can be said that writing helps students/learners to be independent, and creative in articulating what they want to express, draw and build their future. The related literature includes a study conducted by (Gómez, et al, 2013). The purposes of this exploratory study are to empirically examine the issue of plagiarism by university students of La Rioja, where a new degree has been adopted to European Higher Education Framework, to additionally investigate the frequency in the use of the practice and the most usual source used so as to prove the importance of regulating plagiarism at this university. The authors used Blackboard Platform that provided them with a tool, called Safe Assign which checked for plagiarism to make comparison between many internet sources and students' written works. For example, they checked, out of seven documents delivered by students, for plagiarism in three of the exercises and the final essays. This way was done for each of the twenty-four working groups in the class. The analysis of sources used by students indicates that more than 60% of the cases are not official or academic. This magnitude of this percentage and the

characteristics of students' behavior described in this study open opportunity for further work on the detection and the elimination of plagiarism at the University of La Rioja.

In addition to the study mentioned above, another study conducted by the two lecturers (Anney & Mosha, 2015) to investigate plagiarism practices in Tanzania Higher Learning Institutions by involving two universities: a public and a private. As a case study, the authors tried exploring students' plagiarism in their assignments, dissertations and research proposals. Due to the lack of plagiarism software in the university, they used manual approach to detect plagiarism. This study indicated that although some students had basic understanding about plagiarism and its impact in academia, they had not stopped doing the act of plagiarism. That implies some students were knowingly committing plagiarism practice which could be attributed to moral problems. The findings of this study, moreover, indicated that some lecturers did not seriously take the act of plagiarism.

2.0 Methodology

This case study is qualitatively conducted to evaluate and interpret the phenomenon of plagiarism in students' essay assignment for the sake of accounting for it and discussing the findings based on observational and analytical method.

2.1 Sample of the Study

The sample of this study consists of thirty-four of sophomore and junior students of the English Department, Faculty of Education and Sciences Rada'a, at Al-Baydha University, Yemen.

2.2 Instrument of the Study

According to the researcher's expertise to this phenomenon and students' assignments, this case study arises. Through conducting this study for the first three months of 2020, the researcher systematically and repeatedly observed plagiarism in students' different kinds of essay home assignments. The second level

students were asked to write an essay on "The Environmental Pollution" and third level students were asked to write an essay on whether they agree or disagree that social media made communication between students and their teachers/doctors less formal.

This instrument is used so as to study this phenomenon explicitly.

3.0 Findings & Discussion

This part represents the body of this study designed essentially for displaying, analyzing, and discussing the findings through examining of plagiarism in students' essay assignments.

3.1 Findings Analysis

During checking the students' essay assignments on the given topics, the researcher observed and analyzed plagiarism in some of those students' assignments by comparing them to their mates' and to the published sources on the internet. Due to the weakness of internet and the difficulty of using plagiarism checker platform, the researcher inserted the first five or six words of plagiarized assignments in the Google Search so as to detect whether they were indeed plagiarized or not. The analysis The analysis indicates that 11 out of 34 (32.35%) of their assignments were plagiarized.

To clarify the ratio of plagiarized assignments, the following table categorizes it into three groups:

Groups	First	Second	Third
Plagiarized Assignment	Only part of student's work plagiarized .	The whole assignment was copied from their mates .	The whole assignment was copied from published sources on the internet
Ratios	2 out of 34 (5.88%) Approximately (6%)	6 out of 34 (17.64%) Approximately (18%)	3 out of 34 (8.82%) Approximately (9%)

Here is a sample of the original work copied by one of those students from published source on the internet. This text is mainly written by (Bradford, 2018):

Pollution is the process of making land, water, air or other parts of environment dirty and not safe or suitable to use. This can be done through the introduction of contaminant into a natural environment, but the contaminant does not need to be tangible. Things as simple as light, sound, and temperature can be considered pollutants when introduced artificially into an environment.

3.2 Findings Discussion

Having analyzed the responses of the participants, the students' plagiarized assignments were divided into the following three categories:

I Part of their work is plagiarized (6%)

The ratio of students, whose only piece of their assignment is plagiarized, is approximately 6%. They copied a piece of other's works or ideas without acknowledgement as it is not permissible for university students to use others' words and pass them off as their own. This surely indicates that those students did not apply in practice what they learned based on writing skills since they were previously taught.

It can easily be solved by using quotation marks mentioning and acknowledging the writer. As (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 87) state that one should always give credit where credit is due. Consequently, when students know and get used to quoting a piece of others' work correctly as the rules of writing quotation marks are easy to apply in practice, they will spontaneously quote, paraphrase or sum up others' work well with acknowledging the writer when doing their own assignments. Truthfully, this way adds a fantastic color for their writings so as to clarify or interpret for supporting their own ideas as any writer does.

II The whole assignment is copied from their mates (18%)

Approximately 18% of those students copied their mates' whole written works pretending them as their own. Axiomatically, the original assignments, however, were not included; they were well-known by knowing the levels of all those students. Copying from their mates indicates that either those students worked and wrote very closely or they were indifferent and lazy in writing their own assignments.

Working closely might cause those students deliberately or inadvertently copy their mates' works as they used to work closely or together. Therefore, some of them knowingly depended upon their mates' ideas. They neither applied what they learned nor tried to organize their ideas as their mates did. Those students did not care about anything since they did not get failed or deprived from writing course in committing such a fraud. As (Anney & Mosha, 2015, p. 214) indicate in their study that students copied others' words, for some lecturers did not take seriously the act of plagiarism. One can find those students running for getting marks or passing the stage of being asked to do assignments. This way negatively affected their way of writing and their individuality as university students in which they did not know how to write even the simplest topic. On the other hand, the other students accidentally used their mates' ideas and words due to getting used to working together and sharing their information. This way might positively affect their way of writing which they acquired knowledge by collaborating and helping each other in organizing their ideas and formulating their sentences and paragraphs as any collaborative writers do. It, however, is not permissible for university students to use identical words and ideas since they are asked to do assignments individually.

They, as previously stated, copied their friends' ideas which indicates their indifference and laziness. Likewise, (Louw, 2017, p. 131) points in his study asking students through a questionnaire, "Why do students knowingly

commit plagiarism?’’ For the most part, their responses included their laziness.

Analytically solving, it is of a great importance that teachers/lecturers should guide their students through developing their skills and encouraging them to apply what they have learned to write correctly and effectively. With following their students constantly, those students will have no space to copy others' ideas. In this case, they will apply what they have been taught, otherwise they will get failed or deprived from writing course.

It is, furthermore, of a great importance that teacher's task toward university students is to teach and train them to apply in practice what he has taught them, giving them the key of getting information that leads them to open its door to get their own knowledge by themselves. As the task of a swimming trainer when he trains his trainees how to swim well then gives them chances to deeply swim by themselves. Likewise, any university students should depend on themselves after being taught and guided by their teachers. They can rely on themselves in developing their writing skills to do, for example, the structures of writing a paragraph with focusing on its elements and basics or to write an essay starting creating an effective and attractive title that draws the readers' attention, then writing the paragraphs of introduction, body, and conclusion with distinguishing how to write each paragraph. This is just an example to demonstrate that nothing is difficult since they are conscious and aware of applying what they learn.

III The whole assignment is copied from published sources on the internet (9%)

The ratio of students, whose whole plagiarized assignments from published sources on the internet, is 8.8% i.e. approximately 9%. Copying from website was a little bit similar to copying from their mates. It was, however, known by the high level of vocabularies and structures; it did not contain mistakes as copying from their mates did. Since the levels of those students were known by their own way of writing.

Problematically, they copied and pasted the whole work from published sources on the internet pretending them as their own. Copying directly from websites was utterly ineffective for university students to prove their presences as academic students, for they copied without being aware or even taking the advantage of internet in learning how to write. They copied from website which indicates that they had no motivation; they did not run after their own goals. It, furthermore, indicates the lack of students' confidence and the lack of teachers' seriousness in stopping spreading this phenomenon among their students.

It is of primary importance that highly qualified and expert teachers/lecturers, particularly in writing should teach writing course as it is, of all other courses, considered to be fairly complicated due to the learners and EFL students less experience in organizing their ideas and articulating their own words and expressions. That does not mean all teachers are not well qualified. It, nevertheless, depends on the inclination of their specializations and interests towards specific courses that lead them to create in what they indeed want to teach. Therefore, those expert teachers in writing try their best in devoting their attention and experience to helping their students to get improved and to be independent and creative in their own writing. They are who neither give their students space to use others' ideas nor give them space to be lazy and indifferent. By their great experience in teaching and conducting information to students, they effectively cause their students imitate their excellent way of thinking and organizing their ideas easily and explicitly. It can easily be noticed that by this way, those students automatically take the key of knowledge given by their teachers to depend on themselves to prove their individuality and presences. For example, they will write whatever they are required or want either easy or difficult topics according to their levels and intelligence as academic and effective students.

4.1 Recommendations

In addition to the given solutions in the discussion of findings, here are some reasonable

suggested recommendations directed to students, teaching staff who face plagiarism in their students' assignments, and to the future further researchers who are interested in undertaking such topics so as to keep the scientific and literary honesty, respect others' written works, and to come up with suitable solutions for reducing this phenomenon among university students. Thus, they should take them into considerations.

4.1.1 Students should

- i. Read as much as they can, to master how to write well since reading is the key that opens the gate of their own knowledge in guiding them to write and in organizing their own ideas. As they read correctly, they can directly change the information they get from reading into their prosperous knowledge. It, furthermore, makes them acquainted and skillful in using different kinds of vocabulary and in building their grammatical structures correctly. To sum up, reading a lot reinforces their memories and the positive sides inside them. It also makes their other basic skills get improved automatically.
- ii. Create and discover an outstanding way using transitional phrases or words to support and cohere their topics, and varying the part of speech correctly to decorate their own writing. This way increasingly prompts them to write their own works not to depend on others'.
- iii. Try to rewrite, for example their written topic as possible as they can, more than twice or three times to edit correctly. By editing they learn and discover their own mistakes. The more they edit, the more they write effectively and creatively.
- iv. Build their self-confidence and make everything possible by doing their best since nothing is impossible. The more they feel confident, the more they create in their writing, for the art of writing is

broadly considered as a result of confidence, and creativity.

- v. Attend lectures regularly and listen carefully to everything during their lecturers deliver. This way will increase their understanding specifically when they write down and fix everything they learn in their minds coherently.
- vi. Not depend on others' ideas since they have the same minds of philosophers, scholars, or any ordinary person. For, their own abilities can lead them to write much better than anyone else by trying their best to set their goals as university students and to prove their reflective individuality and freedom in articulating what they want to write.

4.1.2 Teaching staff should

- i. Facilitate the way of teaching writing so as to give chances to all students to understand the structures of writing paragraphs, essays, reports or research papers well based on their levels.
- ii. Not set difficult or scientific topics that lead their students to copy others' ideas.
- iii. Set assignments asking them to expressively use their experience, thoughts, ideas and feelings according to the types of essay assignment.
- iv. Set directly an assignment requiring their students to apply what they have learned or what they have already been taught based on writing skills. By this way, those students will be under their control and will have no space to overstep the bounds of using others' ideas.
- v. Check students' assignments daily and comment on their way of writing whether they are plagiaristic, correct or incorrect to warn their students about what they write, will be checked. This way, moreover, makes students' writing

get improved and be away from plagiarism.

- vi. Inform them about plagiarism, its consequences and how to avoid it in their writing. Those are the most important things that any teachers/lecturers should do.

4.1.3 Future further researchers should

- i. Tackle plagiarism in students' research papers and theses using plagiarism checker to check and detect the ratio of plagiarism in their topics.

ii. 4.2 Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that over 32% of EFL students at Al-Baydha University's assignments were plagiarized. Their plagiarism is divided into three groups: only part of their assignments is plagiarized (6%), whole assignments are copied from their close mates (18%) and whole assignments have been found as the same works of advanced writers published on the internet (9%). Each group is clearly analyzed and discussed demonstrating how lazy, indifferent, and less motivated dependent students tend to use the phenomenon. This study additionally demonstrates that some teachers lack seriousness in stopping their students committing plagiarism. Therefore, it attempts to work this phenomenon out by pointing to writing and its importance and how they should be taken into an account by teachers, particularly expert teachers and students. For example, they could send and impart information effectively during teaching writing. Students, on the one hand, receive and change the information they get from their teachers or from any other sources into fruitful knowledge so as to keep their standards as university students and to be good students in writing instead of committing plagiarism. For, they have to be good typical examples for their future students.

Acknowledgements

A very deep gratitude and respect go to Dr. Mohammed Al-Anisi, the associate professor at Faculty of Education, Al-Baydha University whose guidance and comments on the draft of this research paper have been great assistance for the author.

References

- Anney, Vicent & Mosha, Mary. (2015). Students Plagiarism in Higher Learning Institutions in the Era of Improved Internet Access: Case Study of Developing Countries. *Journal of Education and Practice*, vol. 6(13), 203-216.
- Bradford, Alina. (2018, 28 February). *Pollution Facts & Types of Pollution*, 28.2.2018, <http://www.livesciene.com/22728>.
- Fialkoff, Francine. (1993). There's No Excuse for Plagiarism, *Library Journal*, vol.118(17), 56.
- Gómez, Jaime, et al. (2013). *Dishonest Behavior and Plagiarism by University Students: An Application to Management Studies*, 2nd World Conference on Educational Technology Researches. Turkey, Dr. Hafiz Keser Ankara University.
- Hamp-Lyons, Liz & Heasley, Ben. (2010). *Study Writing: A Course in Writing Skills for Academic Purposes* (2nd Edition). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Leedy, Paul & Ormrod, Jeanne. (2015). *Practical Research: Planning and Design* (11th Edition). England: Pearson Education.
- Louw, Henk. (2017). Defining Plagiarism Students and Staff Perceptions of a Grey Concept. *South Africa Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 31(5), 116-135.
- Park, Chris. (2003). In Other (People's) Words: Plagiarism by University Students-Literatures and Lesson. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 28(5), 471-488.
- Shadfan, Samar. (2014). *Analyzing the English Language Needs of Law Students at Hebron University: A Case Study*. Thesis. Hebron University, Palestine.
- Stout, Diana. (2013). *Teaching Students about Plagiarism: What It Looks like and How It Is Measured*. Dissertations. Western Michigan University, Michigan.
- Thomas, C George. (2018,10 August). *Assignments as a Part of Learning*, 10.8.2018, <http://www.researchgate.net/puplication/32205637>