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Malaysian Undergraduates' (In)ability to Identify the Correct Use of Sources

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ABSTRACT

Studies conducted in the West show that one of the reasons students plagiarize is because of their poor understanding of the correct use of sources. This paper reports on a small-scale study which assessed whether Malaysian law matriculation students could identify the correct use of sources. Findings show that 66% of the respondents did not know that quoting without using quotation marks was an example of the incorrect use of a source although the source was acknowledged. Similarly, 66% also felt that a source was correctly used although it was poorly paraphrased with only slight modification as long as the source was cited. The results indicate that these Malaysian undergraduates have a poor understanding about the proper use of sources and may inadvertently be committing plagiarism.

Keywords: Citation, Malaysian undergraduates, Paraphrasing, Plagiarism

1. Introduction

Plagiarism has received much attention in the West. It is a major problem that is on the increase in universities and colleges especially with the advent of the Internet (Park, 2003).

Liddell (2003) defines plagiarism as:
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. (p.49)

The above definition shows that plagiarism covers a wide scope and students may commit plagiarism if they are unaware of the various forms of plagiarism. One common mistake is not knowing that minor modifications to the original source are considered plagiarism (Roig, 1997, 1999).
Studies on plagiarism have been extensive in the West (Park, 2003). However, there is not much research on this issue in Asia, particularly in Malaysia. Therefore, this study aims to find out whether Malaysian pre-degree law students are able to identify the correct use of sources. The findings would be invaluable to lecturers, administrators as well as the students themselves so that appropriate action can be taken to overcome problems in documenting sources which may lead to the charge of plagiarism.

2. Literature Review

As plagiarism has been a perennial problem in the West, there is a wealth of literature on this issue. In a review of the literature, Park (2003) identified four common ways students plagiarize which include copying from sources with proper acknowledgement but without quotation marks, and paraphrasing without citing the source.

Students may plagiarize for several reasons. Students, for example, may plagiarize because they do not understand what constitutes plagiarism (Mahmood, 2009; Marshall & Garry, 2006; Roig, 1997). Plagiarism may

occur due to students' poor language skills especially when they attempt to paraphrase by merely making minor modifications (Devlin & Gray, 2007).

Research shows that students plagiarize from both printed and Internet sources. In a web-based survey of 80,000 respondents from 83 campuses in the US and Canada, McCabe (2005) found that 62% of undergraduates and 59% of graduate students admitted to plagiarizing from both traditional and online sources. Similarly, Underwood and Szabo (2003) reported that 90% of their respondents who plagiarized from printed sources also plagiarized from the Internet.

Students do not seem to view plagiarism as a serious problem. In a recent Canadian study involving 321 undergraduates, only one-third of the respondents felt that it was extremely dishonest to use quotes without acknowledging the sources while only 65% agreed that it was dishonest (Jurdi, Hage & Chow, 2012). However, in a study of 267 undergraduates from two Australian universities, Maxwell, Curtis and Vardanega (2008) found that plagiarism was considered 'moderately serious' to 'very serious' on average.

There are not many studies on plagiarism in Malaysia. In a study of 360 undergraduate students in a premier Malaysian university, 15% of the respondents did not consider it wrong to copy word-for-word without proper citation and 33% did not think copying from the Internet without attributing the source was wrong (Mohd Shariff & A.N. Zainab, 2004). In a 2008 study of 145 diploma students in a private Malaysian college, Cheng and Chandra reported that 71% of science and 61% of business students were not aware that copying without acknowledging the sources was plagiarism. These findings seem to suggest that Malaysian undergraduates may be committing plagiarism in their work.

3. Method

3.1 Participants
The respondents were in their third and final semester of a pre-degree law course at a branch university in Kedah, Malaysia. The 37 students were taking an academic writing course taught by the first author.
When these students enrolled in the university, they received the booklet, Academic Regulations (Amendment 2011). The term "plagiarism" is defined in the booklet as "reproducing the work and/or opinions of others

obtained through print or electronic materials without acknowledging or disclosing their source" (p. 11). It is clearly stated that if a student is found guilty of plagiarism, the Senate will award an F grade or fail with a FD status, meaning fail because of disciplinary action (p. 27). Unfortunately, no examples of plagiarism were provided such as quoting without citation or paraphrasing with only minor modifications.

3.2 Questionnaire
The questionnaire contained a short paragraph and six texts which contained material borrowed from the given paragraph. A sample of the questionnaire is found in Appendix A.

Text 1 was an example of the incorrect use of a source as the source was copied word-for-word without quotation marks and in-text citation. Text 2, on the other hand, was an example of the correct use of the source as the quotation was enclosed in quotation marks and a citation was included.

Text 3 was another example of the incorrect way of using a source as quotation marks were not used for the quoted words although the author was acknowledged. As for Text 4, it was another example of the correct way of incorporating a source. The source was adequately paraphrased and the author was cited.

Another example of the incorrect use of a source, Text 5, although properly cited, contained inadequate paraphrasing because the structure followed the original closely with only minor modifications in the wordings. Text 6, the last text, was another example of the wrong way of using a source. The paraphrase was adequate but there was no in-text citation.

3.3 Procedures
The questionnaires were distributed during the first lecture. Although 37 questionnaires were distributed, only 35 provided useful data as two were incomplete.

Respondents were instructed to read the given paragraph carefully and indicate which texts contained the correct use of the source. The questionnaire took about 10 minutes to complete. The respondents were guaranteed anonymity as demographic information was not required.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents student responses for each item in the questionnaire. It was found that although Text 1 was a clear cut example of the incorrect use of the source (source is not cited as well as no quotation marks to indicate verbatim copying), only 74% of the respondents were able to recognize this version as an example of the improper way to use the source material. This finding is in line with a Malaysian study which reported 74% of respondents knew plagiarism was "stealing someone else's words and passing them off as their own" (Ho, 2006, p. 57).

Table 1: Summary of Survey Results (%)

	Incorrect use of source	Correct use of source	Not sure
Text 1	74.3	11.4	14.3
Text 2*	25.7	57.1	17.1
Text 3	22.9	65.7	11.4
Text 4*	20.0	60.0	20.0
Text 5	28.6	65.7	5.7
Text 6	57.1	25.7	17.1

*Example of correct use of source

The results for Text 2, an example of the correct way of incorporating the source, were not reassuring. Even though quotation marks were used to indicate the quoted words and a citation was given, a quarter of the respondents (25.7%) thought that this version showed the inappropriate use of the source. Those who knew that this text demonstrated an acceptable way to use the source material comprised 57% of the total respondents. This means that almost half of the sample is not familiar with the conventions of documenting sources in academic writing. Although these students had received the academic regulations booklet which stressed the consequences of plagiarism, they are unclear about how to avoid this academic crime. This indicates that there is a need to teach these students the conventions of academic writing right from their first semester of study.

Text 3 was an example of subtle plagiarism where quoted words were not put between quotation marks but a citation was provided. It is worrying to

find that only 22.9% knew that this text showed the incorrect use of the source material while 65.7% of the sample indicated that the source was used appropriately. This means that students consider a source is properly used as long as the source is cited. This result is not surprising because other studies have also reported similar findings (Park, 2003).

Six out of ten respondents could recognize Text 4 as showing the correct use of the source material since it was properly paraphrased and the author was credited. However, it was disturbing to find that 20% of the sample indicated that Text 4 was an example of the inappropriate use of the source and an equal number could not make up their mind. This is indication that many students do not know how to use a source correctly. This finding is in line with a study of 186 ESL students in Australia which reported that 70% were unclear about attribution practices (Sutherland-Smith, 2005).

For 65.7% of the respondents, Text 5 showed the correct use of the source material. Only 28.6% knew that Text 5 was an example of the incorrect use of the source because although the author was acknowledged, the para-phrase was unacceptable. This finding is similar to Roig's (1997)) study that found more than 50% of 316 undergraduates considered a source is used correctly as long as it is cited even though borrowed words were not put between quotation marks. Again, this indicates that the students feel that if a source is cited, then it has been correctly used.

The last text, Text 6 also showed the wrong use of the source but only 57% of the respondents correctly identified the text as such. A quarter of the sample (25.7%) actually thought the version was an example of the correct use of the source material. Although the paraphrase in Text 6 was accept-able, no in-text citation was provided. This finding supports Lim and See's (2001) study that found 90% of Singaporean students paraphrased from a source without giving credit where it is due. Clearly, these confused respon-dents require guidance from their instructors who should stress that a para-phrase also requires an in-text citation.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study found that the majority of students knew that sources should be cited. However, many failed to note that quotations require the use of quota-tion marks and paraphrasing a source by making minor modifications is an

unacceptable use of the source.

These findings indicate that a majority of students were unclear about the appropriate ways to incorporate sources and the correct ways to paraphrase. These Malaysian undergraduates seem to have a poor understanding about the proper use of sources and may inadvertently be committing plagiarism.

Although these students have received the booklet, Academic Regulations (Amendment 2011) where the term "plagiarism" is defined and the disciplinary actions clearly stated, these students still did not seem take the issue of plagiarism seriously. Many are still unsure about what constitutes plagiarism and they are still confused about the correct use of sources.
Due to the rather small sample of this study, the findings should not be used to make a definitive claim about Malaysian students' (in)ability to use sources correctly. However, the data gathered should not be ignored.

As the results of this study show that students are still unclear about incorporating sources correctly, steps should be taken by writing instructors to overcome this problem. In a study, Wette (2010) found that eight hours of instructions helped students to use sources appropriately. Research has also found that subject lecturers can include academic writing instructions while teaching (Wingate, Andon & Cogo, 2011). Students should be continuously exposed to repeat plagiarism education throughout their programme of study (McGowan & Lightbody, 2008; Yeo, 2007).
Besides writing instructions, lecturers should also adopt the process writing approach which requires students to submit an outline, drafts and copies of sources used. If plagiarism is detected, then students should be penalized according to the rules and regulations laid down by the university or college.

With preventive measures as well as detection and penalty in place, hopefully students will learn to incorporate sources correctly and thus avoid plagiarism in their work. Anderson and Poole (2001) remind us that "the ability to cite the work of others appropriately is a major indicator of scholarly writing" (p.107).

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