

# Why Do Students Still Plagiarize? Perceptions of EFL and Non-EFL Students on Plagiarism

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**Abstract**— This paper is an investigation on the perception of Kurdish EFL and non-EFL students on plagiarism, as well as the causes that make students resort to it. A group of students participated in the research paper who were enrolled in different departments at one of the universities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The data was collected through a questionnaire followed by interviews to get a better understanding of the phenomenon in question. The findings of the current study show that there is a misconception about the idea of plagiarism and students mostly consider copying and pasting material as plagiarism. This led to the understanding that paraphrasing does not really constitute plagiarism, and that shows that the issue is limited to the stealing of words not ideas in most cases. The results also show that there are a number of other factors that lead students to resort to plagiarism, including lack of time, lack of understanding of the concept, language skills, high school education background, workload and lack of critical thinking skills.

**Index Terms**— EFL students, Plagiarism, Perceptions, Cultural Attitudes.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Oxford university website defines plagiarism as the incorporation of someone else's work and presenting it as your own, which is the most common and agreed upon definition by most dictionaries and academics. Plagiarism has become a problematic phenomenon in the higher education sector. Researchers agree that easy access to the internet and technology has made it possible for students to just copy and paste material and submit it for their assignments (Amua-Sekyi, 2015; Aasheim et al., 2012). As a result, lecturers who teach in English especially are becoming increasingly suspicious of students' work. Oftentimes, they find themselves confronted with students' work being partially or fully plagiarized. This can be a time consuming and tough challenge for those who work in higher education. Teachers need to check all the work they read in order to make sure the work belongs to the student in question. However, they may face challenges in doing so. The workload teachers have especially with big class size is a factor that might discourage teachers to check all of their students' papers and instead opt to turn a blind eye. This would not only jeopardize academic values and standards, as some

researchers claim (Carroll, 2004), it would also worsen the problem for academics and becomes a vicious circle.

The consequences of plagiarism can vary in different institutions depending on policies set to penalize the act. Policies might include failing the student in one particular assignment, the course or even expelling the student for an entire semester. Further, the consequences would also include taking away ideas and material from their rightful owners and deny credit to those who create and invent (Multon & Robinson, 2002; cited in Shahabuddin, 2009). Since the stealing of ideas is harmful to others, there is a consensus among academics that plagiarism is an unethical act (Shahabuddin, 2009; Wijaya & Gruber, 2018). Although, from an ethical standpoint, most people might agree that stealing is bad, whether it is a sentence, an idea or a term paper, yet many students opt to plagiarize texts and submit it as their own without acknowledging the authors. At the heart of the problem, plagiarism may have many motives. However, looking at the roots of this issue, one might find some other factors that might better explain the causes of it. On the one hand, a common view on the causes of plagiarism holds that students plagiarize due to certain reasons that ranges from poor time management, laziness, lack of understanding of academic requirements and lack of consequences (Buckley, et al., 2008; Kayaoglu, et al., 2015). This view, however, can be considered somewhat superficial if one wants to investigate the root causes of the problem. On the other hand, there is a less mainstream view that goes beyond the aforementioned causes of plagiarism, and holds that the way plagiarism is perceived according to western academic standards is not the same way different cultures perceive it. The literature review will attempt to expand on both views to help form a deeper understanding of the issue.

## II. DIFFERENT VIEWS ON THE CAUSES OF PLAGIARISM

As discussed earlier, there are different views on the causes of plagiarism in the literature. A type of investigation deals with causes that are directly linked to the way students manage their time, risk-reward considerations when plagiarizing, laziness and so on. Anney & Mosha (2015) investigated student plagiarism in two higher education institutions in Tanzania and found that causes of plagiarism include internet availability,

insufficient number of books, unwillingness to work and poor academic writing skills. In line with this, others have conducted research on the causes of plagiarism and reached similar conclusions. Mohammadkarimi & Amin (2019) also dedicated part of an investigation of their research paper to the causes of plagiarism and concluded that students plagiarize because they lack competence, time, difficulty in paraphrasing a text, or simply because it is easy to just plagiarize.

On the other side of the spectrum, research has demonstrated that the root causes of plagiarism might be the way different cultures look at the matter of creativity, academic integrity and understanding of the concept of plagiarism. In his paper, Eckstein (2013) lays out different factors that lead to student plagiarism namely, patchwriting, authorial identity and cultural differences. He explains cultural differences by citing Alistair Pennycook who claims that while rote learning is not preferred in America, the Chinese education system encourages the act as a “path to deep understanding”. Sherman (1992) shares her experience about working with Italian students and claims that students relied too much on quotes from sources that they failed to acknowledge. She explains that what is normally considered plagiarism in the American education standards is actually acceptable in the Italian education. She points out that Italian students rely too much on text when writing and answering exams without “deviation from the content” (p. 192). Similarly, Introna et al., (2003) carried out research on cultural attitudes towards plagiarism and interviewed some students from diverse cultural backgrounds and were accused of plagiarism. One of the incidents involved a Chinese student who claimed that out of respect the student included the text in their writing since the author was a respected writer. They mention that the Chinese culture values respecting those who have higher social and academic ranks. This has clearly resulted in having a different perspective on the definition of plagiarism. This next section will attempt to explain the view and understanding of Kurdish university students on the issue of plagiarism to get a deeper understanding on why the issue is so widespread within the higher education sector.

#### *Research questions*

This research paper aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the perception of EFL and non-EFL students of plagiarism?
2. What are the factors that lead students to plagiarize?
3. Are there any significant differences between the way EFL students and others who study in different fields perceive plagiarism?
4. Do differences in teaching methodology between high school and university affect the extent in which plagiarism is committed in the context of the Kurdish society?

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### *A. Participants*

The number of subjects participating in this research paper was 166 students. They were recruited from one of the universities in the city of Sulaimanyah, Iraq who were enrolled in different academic programs, including English language and literature, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, engineering, business administration, e-commerce, information management, medical laboratory science and computer science. 53% of them were female, and 45% male with a small proportion of 2% who preferred not to reveal their sex when responding to the questionnaire. After responding to the questionnaire, an additional 20 students, 10 EFL learners and 10 non-EFL majors, were recruited to be interviewed to get in depth understanding of the matter.

#### *B. Instruments*

For the purpose of data collection, a questionnaire was designed based on the literature containing 10 items. The items were grouped into different sets of questions aiming to elicit responses that will explain the phenomenon under question and also answer the research questions posed for this paper. Following the data collection through the questionnaire, retrospective interviews were conducted with the student participants aiming to get an in depth understanding of the issue of plagiarism. The interviews were semi-structured, each lasting for a duration of 10-15 minutes, to allow the researcher to ask follow up questions and also to avoid limitations during the interviews.

#### *C. Validity and reliability*

Prior to administering the questionnaire, three raters specialized in the field validated the questionnaires. Some minor changes were suggested to enhance the clarity of the questionnaire. As for reliability, the questionnaire was given to a small sample of ten students to respond to; the responses were tested for reliability using SPSS and the result was 0.265. This allows the researcher to ensure that the items included in the questionnaire are valid and reliable before administering it to the actual sample of the study (Annan, 2019).

#### *D. Data collection procedure*

The data was collected through online questionnaires given to students from all departments of the university. The online questionnaire enabled the researcher to collect the necessary data in a short amount of time. In addition, as Annan (2019) mentions, this type of sampling gave an opportunity to everyone to participate in the research. The questionnaire was emailed to the students through the Office for Student Affairs, who has access to all students' email addresses. After this, 20 other students were interviewed individually, each lasting around 10-15 minutes.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the current research paper are based on different themes being targeted through different questions in the questionnaire and the interviews. The themes include, students'

understanding and perception of plagiarism which are targeted by questions one, two, and three in the questionnaire. Another theme is willingness to work which is usually termed laziness in the literature. This theme is targeted by question four in the questionnaire. Further, lack of time, and skills to avoid plagiarism and students' awareness of the consequences of plagiarism are also aimed at by questions five, six and seven. Finally, lack of ideas when writing, teachers' expectation from students and worrying about grades are found in questions eight, nine and ten. As for the interviews, they also helped the researcher to get additional, if any, causes for the phenomenon. First, a general analysis will be given in this section, and then the data elicited from EFL students will be analyzed and compared separately. For the sake of saving space, the data will be divided over two tables of frequencies. One table showing questions 1-5 and the other will be presenting the rest of the questions. Following this, the results of the interviews will be analyzed in a separate section aiming to further the understanding of the questionnaire results.

A. Questionnaire responses of EFL students

(Table 1)  
frequencies of EFL students' responses to questions 1-5

Students understanding of plagiarism	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree or disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P
	1. copying texts from sources on the internet and from books is acceptable if it is not too long.	5	11.4	9	20.5	5	11.4	19	43.2	6
2. Paraphrasing texts and using it in your own writing without citation would be considered my own work	7	15.9	12	27.3	7	15.9	12	27.3	6	13.6
3. Taking ideas without taking words is considered plagiarism without citation	3	6.8	13	29.5	10	22.7	14	31.8	4	9.1

4. It is easy to copy something from the internet rather than doing the actual work	8	18.2	3	6.8	11	25	16	36.4	6	13.6
5. Lack of time makes me commit plagiarism	5	11.4	9	20.5	7	15.9	17	38.6	6	13.6

Table 1 above summarizes the EFL responses of questions 1 to 5. Regarding question 1, the results show that 31.9% of the respondents disagree with the statement, while 11.4 showed neither agreement nor disagreement. However, 56.8 of the respondents agreed that copying texts from sources on the internet, and books is acceptable if it is not too long. With regard to the question 2 about paraphrasing texts and using it as your own without citation, 43.2% of the respondents disagreed while 15.9% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Further, 41.9% of the respondents agreed that it would not constitute plagiarism. As for the third question concerning taking ideas, 36.3% disagreed, 22.7% showed uncertainty regarding this item, and 40.9% agreed with the statement.

Regarding willingness to work, the results of question 4 showed that a big percentage of the subjects comprising 50% agreed that it is easy to copy something from the internet rather than doing the actual work. 25% showed neither agreement nor disagreement while 25% showed disagreement. Regarding question 5, 52.2% agreed that lack of time is major factor for plagiarism. 31.9% of the respondents disagreed, and 15.9% of them showed neither agreement nor disagreement.

(Table 2)  
frequencies of EFL students' responses to questions 6-10

Students understanding of plagiarism	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree or disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P
	6. I am unaware of the consequences of plagiarism	13	29.5	15	34.1	12	27.3	4	9.1	0
7. I do not know how to avoid plagiarism	10	22.7	18	40.9	8	18.2	7	15.9	1	2.3
8. It is hard to come up with ideas for my writings, therefore, I seek help from other sources only for ideas	3	6.8	7	15.9	12	27.3	19	43.2	3	6.8
9. When writing, I am expected to produce a well-written text similar to what can be found in textbooks and	4	9.1	7	15.9	20	45.5	11	25	2	4.5

online. Therefore, I think it is better to copy something from a good source

10. I will get poor marks if I write my own ideas and it will badly affect my GPA  
 9 20.5 14 31.8 8 18.2 11 25 2 4.5

Table 2 above summarizes EFL students' responses to questions 1-6 targeting to elicit data on awareness of plagiarism, avoidance skills, being able to come up with ideas, teacher's expectations and GPA concerns. Regarding question 6, a big proportion of students comprising 63.6% disagreed with the statement while only 9.1% agreed that they are not aware of the consequences of plagiarism. Further, a percentage of 27.3 neither agreed nor disagreed. As for having skills to avoid plagiarism, the results of question 7 show that only 18.2% agreed that they do not know how to avoid plagiarism while 67.6% disagreed with the statement and 18.2% showed uncertainty regarding this item.

The results of question 8, which deals with lack of ideas when writing, show that 50% of the subjects agreed that it is hard to come up with ideas, therefore they seek help from other sources. Only 22.7% showed disagreement while 27.3% showed neither agreement nor disagreement.

As for teachers' expectations of students work, 29.5% of the respondents agreed that teachers expect from them very highly. Therefore, they think it is better to copy something from the internet. However, 25% showed disagreement while 45.5% showed neither agreement nor disagreement.

Finally, regarding students' concerns about their GPAs, 52.3% of the respondents disagreed with question 10. 18.2% showed neither agreement nor disagreement while 29.5% agreed that they are concerned about their GPAs, thus they resort to plagiarism.

*B. Questionnaire responses of non-EFL students*

(Table 3)  
 Frequencies of subjects' responses to questions 1-5

Students understanding of plagiarism	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree or disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P
1. copying texts from sources on the internet and from books is acceptable if it is not too long.	9	5.9	12	7.8	31	20.3	63	41.2	38	24.8

2. Paraphrasing texts and using it in your own writing without citation would be considered my own work	8	5.2	40	26.1	36	23.5	46	30.1	23	15
3. Taking ideas without taking words is considered plagiarism without citation	26	17	37	24.2	39	25.5	39	25.5	12	7.8
4. It is easy to copy something from the internet rather than doing the actual work	7	4.6	21	13.7	28	18.3	66	43.1	31	20.3
5. Lack of time makes me commit plagiarism	7	4.6	29	19	31	20.3	54	35.3	32	20.9

Table 3 above summarizes the frequencies of responses by students aiming to elicit data on students understanding and perception of plagiarism, willingness to work and lack of time. The results show that a big proportion of the respondents comprising 62.8% agree that copying texts from sources on the internet and from books is acceptable if it is not too long. While only 13.7% disagreed, and 20.3% showed uncertainty whether the statement constitutes plagiarism. The second question showed that 45.1% of respondents agreed that paraphrasing texts and using it in your own writing without citation would be considered their own work. Meanwhile, 31.3% showed disagreement and 23.5% neither agreed nor disagreed. As for the third question related to students understanding and perception, 41.2% of respondents believe that taking only ideas would not constitute plagiarism. 33.3% of respondents expressed disagreement believing that taking ideas also constitute plagiarism. In the meantime, 25.5 showed uncertainty toward the statement.

Question 4 on respondents' willingness to work and putting effort into writing their assignments. This item is usually referred to as "laziness" in the literature as a contributing factor to student plagiarism. The majority of subjects comprising 63.4% showed agreement with this item believing that it is easier to copy their assignments from the internet rather than spending time and doing the actual work. Only 18.3% showed disagreement, with 18.3% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

As for the subjects' perception on lack of time as a factor that pushes students to plagiarize, 56.2% of the respondents believed that lack of time is a factor that leads students to plagiarize. A percentage comprising 23.6% expressed

disagreement, and 20.3% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

(Table 4)  
Frequencies of subjects' responses to questions 6-10

Students understanding of plagiarism	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree or disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P
	6. I am unaware of the consequences of plagiarism	28	18.3	40	26.1	44	28.8	34	22.2	7
7. I do not know how to avoid plagiarism	27	17.6	44	28.8	41	26.8	29	19	12	7.8
8. It is hard to come up with ideas for my writings, therefore, I seek help from other sources only for ideas	2	1.3	16	10.5	29	19	77	50.3	29	19
9. When writing, I am expected to produce a well-written text similar to what can be found in textbooks and online. Therefore, I think it is better to copy something from a good source	5	3.3	31	20.3	50	32.7	50	30.7	17	11.1
10. I will get poor marks if I write my own ideas and it will badly affect my GPA	11	7.2	36	23.5	35	22.9	35	22.9	36	23.5

As for students' awareness of the consequences of plagiarism, only 26.8% of the respondents showed agreement as they are not aware of the consequences of plagiarism. However, 44.4% of the respondents disagreed with the statement and 28.8% showed neither agreement nor disagreement.

For having skills to avoid plagiarism, a big percentage of respondents comprising 46.4% disagreed with the item while 26.8% agreed that they do not know how to avoid it. In addition, 26.8% showed neither agreement nor disagreement.

Regarding coming up with original ideas, 69.3% indicated that it is hard to come up with ideas in writing. Therefore, they seek help from outside sources, like the internet. On the other hand, 11.8% showed disagreement and 19% neither agreed nor disagreed.

The respondents' perception on what teachers expect from

them when producing a piece of writing showed that 43.8% of respondents believe that teachers' expectation is high while 32.7% of the respondents showed uncertainty towards this item. On the other hand, 23.6% showed disagreement with the statement.

As for the last item regarding GPA concerns, the responses indicate that 46.4% of the respondents agreed that they are worried about getting poor marks on their assignments which will negatively affect their GPAs in the future. 22.9% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the item. In addition, 30.7% indicated disagreement regarding this item.

## V. RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

The interviews were conducted to get an in depth understanding on students' perception and the causes of plagiarism. The questions were asked in a semi-structured manner with structured questions followed by follow up questions at times. The results revealed diverse responses from students which helps the researcher understand the issue more in depth.

First of all, on the perception of EFL students on plagiarism is that, generally, almost all of the interviewees stated that plagiarism is some kind of copying and pasting of words. This indicates that the understanding is only limited to the theft of words only, while plagiarism is "... It is the theft of someone's creativity, ideas or language" (Williams, 2002). However, when it comes to paraphrasing words and taking only ideas from a source, there is a confusion or misconception among the participants. Some of the participants claimed that if you paraphrase a text and use it without citation, it would not constitute plagiarism. For example, one of the participants said "paraphrase is still plagiarism if you only change words, like making happy to excited. If you take only ideas, it would not be plagiarism. For example, when someone says life is beautiful and you agree with it, that is not plagiarism". This confusion might be due to the fact that students are not studying plagiarism as a structured and separate course until their later years in their academic journey which is close to their graduation. Further, almost all the participants claimed that they became aware of the issue of plagiarism when they first joined university. They also claimed that in university the teaching methodology is very different from high school. In high school, their assessments were more based on memory and lacked creative thinking, and copying someone else's ideas was not a serious issue. During the interview, one of the participants said that "in high school, the teacher often said, bring it from the internet if we had an assignment". This could be one of the major factors that push students to plagiarize. Most, if not all, of these university students were part of an education system where memorization is the main level of thinking until they get to university. They only became aware of the issue when they joined university. This will only worsen the problem when students join university. Not only they lack creativity in thinking, as they claim when asked about factors pushing students to plagiarize, they also lack self-confidence to form their own arguments and comment on their subjects. To back up this claim, one of the participants responses will be stated here:

“Creativity is a problem! when you talk about Plato and Aristotle, what is your idea about them? they were student and teacher against each other even if you say your own opinion, they might say this is only your opinion and it's silly”

As for the consequences of plagiarism, it seems like most students know the consequences of plagiarism, yet it might still be one of the most widespread issues in the higher education sector. This is possibly due to the fact that different teachers treat cases of plagiarism differently. Most of the participants stressed this point and claimed that some of the teachers penalize the act by giving zero to students, some others give a second chance and some overlook the act. This discrepancy among lecturers treating the same issue in different ways could be one major factor that could result in plagiarism. This is argued as students might think if a teacher can overlook a plagiarism instance, then the others will, as well. Moreover, the reasons stated by the participants for committing plagiarism varies. They include, lack of time, difficulty coming up with ideas, lack of awareness on the issue, lack of creativity, not being able to express their opinions, load of work, unwillingness to work, worrying about grades and language skills. One of the participants disagreed with the idea of lack of time as he stated “I don't think that is a problem, I think we are students and we need to do our job”. Some others referred to this issue as a result of time mismanagement.

#### CONCLUSION

The current research paper attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the perception of EFL and non-EFL students of plagiarism?
2. What are the factors that lead students to plagiarize?
3. Are there any significant differences between the way EFL students and others who study in different fields perceive plagiarism?
4. Do differences in teaching methodology between high school and university affect the extent in which plagiarism is committed in the context of the Kurdish society?

With regard to the first question, the results of the questionnaire and the interviews revealed that there is misunderstanding about what constitutes plagiarism. The majority of the participants, both EFL and other majors, responding to the questionnaire agreed that taking texts from a source does not constitute plagiarism if it is not too long. When asked, during the interviews, about a percentage of plagiarism that is accepted in an assignment, most of them replied somewhere between 10-20%. This is an indication that there is also a misunderstanding about why a small percentage is accepted by different academic institutions. Moreover, most of the interviewees claimed that paraphrasing is not plagiarism since they are rewriting the text using their own words. This leads us to the conclusion that plagiarism is understood as copying and pasting only words, not ideas. However, this misconception is possibly one of the major factors leading to student plagiarism as they would not know how to avoid it if

they do not understand it. Moreover, this understanding is not in line with the definition of plagiarism provided in the literature by different researchers and scholars (Williams, 2002; Roka, 2017; Masic, 2014).

As for the factors that push students to resort to plagiarism, the results show that lack of time, unwillingness to work, teachers' expectation, worrying about grades could all be factors. However, the interviews showed that misunderstanding of the concept, discrepancy in the way teachers treat plagiarism cases, creativity in thinking, lack of self-confidence in forming their own arguments, school education background might possibly be major factors that result in plagiarism (Doro, 2014). These factors, the researcher argues, all result from other underlying factors that are discussed here and are all interconnected. For instance, high school and university differences in teaching methods and unawareness of the phenomena all lead to other causes.

With regard to the third research question posed here, the results show that in some of the statements made in the questionnaire, as well as the interview results, the differences were statistically insignificant. However, with regard to unawareness of the consequences of plagiarism, avoidance skills, teachers' expectation, and worrying about their GPA, statistically, there were some differences between the EFL students and the other participants enrolled in other majors. According to the responses elicited from the questionnaire, EFL students showed that they were more aware of the consequences while other majors scored lower on this item. This was the same for avoidance skills. More students enrolled in other majors stated that they do not know how to avoid plagiarism. As for teachers' expectation of students' work and GPA concerns, unlike EFL students, a big proportion of other major students claimed that they were worried about their GPAs, therefore, they are resorting to plagiarism to get higher marks. More non-EFL students also claimed that teachers expect very highly from them. Nevertheless, the interview results show that these differences in the data are minor when students are given a chance to explain themselves regarding such issue.

Concerning the final question on whether different teaching methods between high school and university affects student plagiarism, the results show that these differences in terms of teaching methods and education philosophy could well be a major factor leading to student plagiarism in university. Most of the students did not know about plagiarism before university. in high school, as they claimed, they never discussed issues related to plagiarism and intellectual property, which could be a great factor that has made students unaware of the issue, therefore, unable to avoid it or accept it. Another issue that comes from the discrepancy between high school and university is that all their life in middle school and high school, students have not been encouraged to think and form their own arguments about the subjects they studied. Instead, they have often been assessed using tools that rely too much on memorization and too little on creative thinking and having their own voice. This is in line with what Chan et al. (2014) asserts that high schoolers depend too much on memorization, due to the many subjects they study, rather than their own

ability to use critical thinking. This leads to another dangerous issue on the side of the students which is distrust in students' own abilities in their own opinions, thoughts and arguments. As one of the interviewees asserted "if you say your own opinion, they might say this is only your opinion and it's silly". This issue in the Kurdistan region might not fall into one of the categories of Western and Asian educational cultures where plagiarism is perceived differently, nevertheless, it can well be counted as lack of cultural awareness on the issue of plagiarism.

### *Pedagogical implications*

In light of the findings of this study, the following should be considered by the ministry of education, those involved in teaching in both schools and universities:

1. The ministry of education should tailor programs that enable educators shed light on matters of originality and academic dishonesty. They must also redesign the education philosophy to encourage critical thinking and minimize memorization-based assessment tools in schools prior to university.
2. The universities must raise student awareness on plagiarism by designing courses that would train students to avoid it early in their academic journey.

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