

Teaching appropriate text borrowing practices to law students in an Asian university

Ho Chui Chui

Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that undergraduates and graduates in institutions of higher learning plagiarise from both printed and Internet sources. Fortunately, studies have also found that students can be taught to recognise instances of plagiarism and to avoid plagiarising their sources. In teaching her students to incorporate sources appropriately, the author finds it effective to employ a questionnaire to gauge students' ability to recognise plagiarised and non-plagiarised texts and to use English Prime as a paraphrasing strategy.

KEYWORDS: *academic writing, conferencing, E-Prime, plagiarism*

Introduction

Submitting research essays as part of their course work is a fact of life for students in institutions of higher learning. Lecturers expect students to locate, evaluate and synthesise source materials in writing their term papers. Students are expected to quote, paraphrase, summarise as well as document their sources using a standard format such as the APA, MLA or CBE style. Those who are unsure how to write an academic paper may seek help from writing instructors. Alternatively, they can visit the writing centre (if there is one) or surf the Internet to obtain relevant information.

Although students will have no problem locating information on writing an academic paper from the Internet, understanding and using what they have found may prove to be problematic. This may lead to the perennial problem of students plagiarising their assignments. According to Roig (1997), students may inadvertently plagiarise their sources because they do not understand that there are various types of plagiarism which can range from blatant plagiarism (verbatim copying without citing the source) to subtle forms such as close paraphrasing but with due credit given to the original writer. Based on a survey of undergraduates from two private colleges, Roig (1997) reported that more than half of his respondents failed to recognise subtle forms of plagiarism. His results showed that as long as the original author is mentioned, a text which contained word-for-word copying or only minor modifications was deemed as not plagiarised.

From a study at a large college in the United States, Stearns (2001) found

that 27% of respondents copied a few sentences from a source without acknowledgement to its author. In a survey of over 80,000 students in the United States and Canada, McCabe (2005) found that 36% of his respondents paraphrased or copied a few sentences from a written source without proper documentation.

In a study of three educational institutions in Singapore, Lim & See (2001) revealed that 90% of their respondents admitted to paraphrasing from a printed source without attribution. Ho (2006a) found that 47% of Malaysian law matriculation students failed to identify as plagiarised paraphrases which had no attribution to the source. Furthermore, 61% thought that a summary which did not acknowledge the source is not an instance of plagiarism. She also reported that verbatim copying without using quotation marks even though the source was cited is not considered as a case of plagiarism for 26% of the respondents.

As students gain access to the Internet, they have also been found to plagiarise from web sources. In a survey conducted at nine universities, Scanlon & Neumann (2002) reported that 25% of respondents had copied and pasted texts from online sources without giving proper citations. McCabe (2001), on the other hand, found that 10% of students reported copying several sentences from online sources without proper documentation. Data from his surveys from fall 2002 to spring 2007, however, revealed that 36% of students in the United States and Canada admitted to plagiarising from Internet sources (D. McCabe, personal communication, May 18, 2008). Given this worrying trend, Howard (2007) warns that the issue of Internet plagiarism must be seen as a very serious problem because by plagiarising, students learn nothing from the given assignment. Even more worrying is the finding that 90% of students who had plagiarised from web sources also admitted to doing the same from printed materials (Underwood & Szabo, 2003).

Nevertheless, even though research has shown that students plagiarise from both traditional and electronic sources, it has also been found that they can also learn to recognise and avoid plagiarism. According to Landau, Druen, & Arcuri (2002), students can be taught to identify instances of plagiarism and learn to properly paraphrase a passage in just one class period. They suggest that instructors give students examples of plagiarism to study, then test their understanding of plagiarism and later provide feedback based on the test. In their study, students who studied examples of plagiarised texts and students who were given feedback or those who were exposed to both conditions were better able to detect plagiarism. Students who studied examples of plagiarised texts were also less likely to plagiarise when paraphrasing. However, the researchers cautioned that the positive effect of this exercise may not extend to graded assignments.

Responding to this concern with grading, Schuetze (2004) evaluated two brief homework assignments which were graded and designed to reduce plagiarism due to citation problems. Students were given a text with all citations removed and asked to identify which sentence needed a citation. They attempted the first assignment, received feedback and then brainstormed about ways to avoid their errors. Their grades for the second piece of homework were much better compared to the first. Schuetze concluded that this low-intensity intervention is an effective strategy to educate students on avoiding plagiarism because she

found that there were significantly fewer problems with citations in a subsequent term paper among the students who had completed their homework. More recently, Barry (2006) found that students who had completed a series of six graded assignments on paraphrasing and citing original sources increased their understanding and knowledge of plagiarism. She pointed out that rather than just teaching students the definitions of plagiarism, it is more important to give students practice on paraphrasing and citing techniques. Granitz & Loewy (2007) recommend that instructors teach students proper citation and documentation so that they cannot justify their plagiarising by blaming the teacher for not teaching them what plagiarism was.

Teaching Malaysian students to avoid plagiarism

Much has been written about plagiarism and the ways of avoiding this problem in the West. However, there is little literature on plagiarism from Asia, specifically from Malaysia. Can writing instructors in Asian universities use the same strategies suggested in the literature? As an instructor teaching academic writing to Malaysian law foundation students, I have tried many of the strategies suggested by Western practitioners. The following are a few of the teaching strategies which I have found to be effective.

Surveying students' knowledge of plagiarism

The idea of using a plagiarism knowledge questionnaire was adapted from Roig (1997). After briefing my students on the course, I distribute a questionnaire to gauge their understanding of plagiarism (see Appendix A). The questionnaire contains a short paragraph with five texts which incorporate quotes or paraphrases from the original text. Students are asked to read the source text and then decide which of the five versions are plagiarised. By analysing the students' responses, I learn how much my students understand about plagiarism. Armed with this knowledge, I can tailor my future lessons to meet their needs.

Feedback (as recommended by Landau, Druen, & Arcuri, 2002) is given as regards the questionnaire when I meet my students in the next class. I point out that three out of the five versions are considered plagiarised. Version 1 is a case of blatant plagiarism as it contains verbatim copying with no quotation marks and no citation. Version 3 is another example of plagiarism. Although the source has been cited, copying word-for-word without quotation marks is not acceptable. Version 4 is also considered plagiarised even though the source is credited. This is because it includes a paraphrase which contains only minor modifications and is too close to the original. The discussion that follows is usually very lively as students will claim that their other lecturers have never admonished them for plagiarising when they produced work similar to versions 1, 3 and 4.

Willmott & Harrison (2003) also used a similar worksheet which contained a paragraph and seven paraphrased versions of the original source. After the students had filled in the worksheet, the tutorial session was followed by feedback and discussion. They found such an exercise very effective in teaching first-year

bioscience undergraduates about plagiarism. I have not been as lucky as them. Although the incidence of plagiarism has been greatly reduced, I still find a handful of students who inadvertently plagiarise their sources in their subsequent term papers.

Paraphrasing using English Prime

Students are warned that to properly paraphrase a text, they must do more than just substitute a few words with synonyms or change an active sentence into the passive form. This is because in his study, Roig (1997) found that students consider a text as properly paraphrased as long as minor modifications have been made. Roig also found that students do not consider a text as plagiarised as long as the source is cited. My students, on the other hand, think that as long as they have paraphrased a text properly, they do not have to cite the original author. I need to remind them that although they have used their own words and sentence structure, the idea still belonged to the source.

After teaching my students the various ways of paraphrasing texts, I introduce the use of English Prime (E-Prime) as a paraphrasing strategy. This idea comes from Maas (2002) who “had huge success” in his composition courses after using E-Prime as a major paraphrasing strategy. Other language practitioners who also use E-Prime in their composition classes are Zimmerman (2001) who found it useful as a revision strategy and Ho (2006b) who concluded that E-Prime is beneficial as a pedagogical tool in teaching writing.

A variant of English, E-Prime does not use any of the eight forms of the verb *to be*, i.e., *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *been*, and *being*. Examples of sentences written in ordinary English are given and I show my students how to paraphrase the same sentences using E-Prime, such as:

- 1a. The Internal Security Act (ISA) should **be** abolished. (Original version)
- 1b. We should not retain the Internal Security Act (ISA). (E-Prime)
- 2a. The death penalty has not **been** shown to reduce the number of murders committed.
- 2b. The death sentence has failed to decrease the murder rate.
- 3a. Rape victims **are** demanding the right to abort the product of rape.
- 3b. Pregnant rape victims should have the right to undergo abortion.

Initially, students may produce ungrammatical sentences. This gives me an opportunity to carry out some remedial work:

- 4a. It **is** also important to ensure women are treated equally in the workplace. (Original version)
- 4b. Ensuring gender equality at work also important. (Ungrammatical English)
- 4c. Ensuring gender equality at work **is** also important. (Ordinary English)
- 4d. We should remember the importance of ensuring gender equality at work. (E-Prime)

Students practise paraphrasing at sentence level using E-Prime before attempting to paraphrase at paragraph level. The following is an example of what we have done in class:

Source text: *Amnesty International (2005), The death penalty. Retrieved on September 15, 2007, from <http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGACT500082005?open&of=ENG-2AS>*

The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. It violates the right to life. It is irrevocable and can be inflicted on the innocent. It has never been shown to deter crime more effectively than other punishments [emphasis mine].

Paraphrased text:

Amnesty International (2005) describes the death penalty as “the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment” as it deprives us of a basic human right—the right to life. An irreversible act, the death sentence can claim innocent lives. Furthermore, research has not shown that executions serve as a more effective deterrent compared to alternative sentences.

Students are then given an assignment which requires them to paraphrase a minimum of five sources. All the source materials have to be submitted as well. This assignment is graded and counted as part of the overall course grade. The usefulness of giving graded assignments on paraphrasing and citing sources is supported by Schutze (2004) and Barry (2006). Students can then include these graded paraphrases in their subsequent term paper.

Showing examples of plagiarised and non-plagiarised texts

As suggested by Landau, Druen, & Arcuri (2002), students are shown plagiarised and non-plagiarised texts. We study examples from writing handbooks, for example, Lester & Lester (2005) and from writing websites such as the Online Writing Lab at Purdue University (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>). We also find the handouts from the Writing Tutorial Services at Indiana University (<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets.shtml>) and the Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/index.html>) very useful.

A worksheet is subsequently used to test students’ understanding of what constitutes plagiarism (see Appendix B). A feedback/discussion session is held right after they have filled in the questionnaire. This follows the suggestion by Landau, Druen, & Arcuri (2002) who found that students can detect and avoid plagiarism if instructors provide examples of plagiarism, then test their understanding of plagiarism and later provide feedback. Students themselves attest to having a clearer understanding of what constitutes plagiarism after studying the examples, filling in the worksheet and receiving immediate feedback.

Requiring submission of drafts and source materials

As recommended by Wilhoit (1994), I required my students to submit the first draft of their term paper together with all the source materials they have used. Their first draft is graded and counted as part of the overall course grade. As I go through the drafts, I can easily check for plagiarism. I also notice that with a heightened awareness of plagiarism, my students are more careful in quoting, summarising, paraphrasing and documenting source materials. Although most

students have no problem using and citing their sources properly, I do find a few who are still confused. For example, I have students who put quotation marks around paraphrases. A few paraphrase but fail to cite the original author while others copy verbatim and give attribution but leave out the quotation marks.

I sometimes find students plagiarising a few sentences from Internet sources. They, of course, do not submit the original materials with their draft. To be sure, I use a search engine like Google (www.google.com) to look for the plagiarised text and very often, I am successful in proving that the students have intentionally plagiarised their source.

After going through the first draft, the next step is to schedule time for a conference with each student. This may be time consuming but I find that giving individual face-to-face feedback is effective as I can better address specific concerns and needs.

Conducting personal consultation

Writing instructors will agree that conferencing with students provides valuable feedback to help improve their writing. As different students have different needs, one-on-one consultation helps to address each student's specific concerns (Bishop & Reichert, n.d.). In a survey of 1,800 students, Carnicelli (1980) reported that respondents found conferences more useful than traditional classes. Moreover, the respondents preferred conferencing compared with written comments (as cited in Brender, 1998).

Conferencing with students is done in class or in my room. I often open the session by highlighting the good points before addressing specific concerns, such as inability to cite a secondary source correctly. I find that my students are more willing to ask for clarification in such individual meetings rather than during lectures. Many students have personally indicated that they find these sessions constructive in helping to solve their writing problems. Conferencing helps boost their confidence and provides a venue for seeking further assistance on using proper academic conventions.

Conclusion

Teaching students to recognise plagiarism and to avoid it are part and parcel of teaching academic writing. As a writing instructor, I find that it does not take long to teach students to identify instances of plagiarism and to avoid plagiarism. I utilize various teaching strategies such as conducting a survey to gauge students' knowledge of plagiarism, using E-Prime as a paraphrasing strategy and having personal consultations. These strategies have been found to be effective in teaching my students to recognise and avoid plagiarism.

The practice of using a variety of strategies in teaching students to avoid plagiarism has been found effective, reducing the incidence of plagiarism among students (Soto, Anand, & McGee, 2004). It is highly likely that if lecturers adopt the use of multiple strategies in teaching appropriate text borrowing practices, the perennial problem of plagiarism may be effectively addressed.

CORRESPONDENCE

Any correspondence should be directed to Ho Chui Chui, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah (chuichui@kedah.uitm.edu.my)

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Appendix A: Sample questionnaire on plagiarism knowledge

The following is taken from the article, "Gift of Life" by Dr Milton Lum, which appeared in *The Star*, March 9, 2003, page 6.

The gift of an organ is a gift of life. How else could you describe a procedure where a failed organ can be replaced with a spanking "new" one that takes over the function of the defective one?

Imagine that you have decided to use the above in your assignment entitled "Organ Donation Should Be Made Compulsory in Malaysia". Which versions below would you consider as plagiarised? Please tick (✓) the appropriate columns.

	Yes	No	Unsure
1. We should pledge our organs as the gift of an organ is a gift of life.			
2. We should pledge our organs as, "the gift of an organ is a gift of life" (Lum, 2003, p. 6).			
3. We should pledge our organs. According to Dr Milton Lum (2003, p.6), the gift of an organ is a gift of life.			
4. We should pledge our organs. An eminent doctor says that our present of an organ is a present of life to someone else (Lum, 2003, p.6).			
5. We should pledge our organs. Donating our organ is giving a new lease of life to someone else (Lum, 2003, p.6).			

Appendix B: Sample worksheet on plagiarism

The following passage is taken from page 248 of the book, *The American Way of Life* by Professor Ashley Montagu, a distinguished anthropologist.

To be human is to *weep. The human species is the only one in the whole of animated nature that sheds tears. The trained inability of any human being to weep is a lessening of his capacity to be human—a defect which usually goes deeper than the mere inability to cry.

*weep = cry

Read the following carefully. Which versions do you think are plagiarised? Please tick (✓) the appropriate columns.

	Yes	No	Unsure
1. Whether we are males or females, we should be allowed to cry because to be human is to weep.			
2. Whether we are males or females, we should be allowed to cry. According to Professor Montagu, "To be human is to weep" (248).			
3. Whether we are males or females, we should be allowed to cry. Anthropologist Ashley Montagu (248) believes that to be human is to weep.			
4. Whether we are males or females, we should be allowed to cry. An eminent anthropologist argues that crying is a distinctively human activity (Montagu 248).			
5. Whether we are males or females, we should be allowed to cry. In his book, <i>The American Way of Life</i> , Montagu observed that to be a human being is to cry (248).			
6. Whether we are males or females, we should be allowed to cry. Only humans have the ability to cry.			

