

Plagiarism and its Effects on Students' Written Communication Skills in Universities in Anambra State

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Abstract

The study examined the effects of plagiarism on university students' written communication skills. Four basic research questions were raised to guide the study. A cross-sectional survey was adopted for the study. The population was all final year students of the three universities in Anambra State. A sample of 272 was selected and used for the study. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire designed by the researchers and validated by two senior lecturers from Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam campus. The Cronbach-Alpha reliability of the questionnaire was 0.81. Percentage and frequency count were used for data analysis. Results indicated that students have wrong perception about plagiarism and that some of the effects of plagiarism on students' written communication skills include poor paraphrasing skills and low scores in written tasks. The study recommended, among other things, that students should be properly taught the dangers of plagiarism and how to avoid incidence. Also, the authorities of tertiary institutions should install plagiarism test software to run plagiarism tests on students' written tasks, especially projects and theses. The study concluded that plagiarism is detrimental to students' optimal performance in written communication.

Keywords: academic resources, plagiarism, tertiary institutions, written communication skills

Introduction

Writing is an integral and critical part of the education process. Students at all levels of education globally write. For example, students copy notes and write tests, assignments, examinations, projects, and theses. In all of these kinds of writing, some distinct skills are demanded. In academic writings like term papers and projects, students are allowed to borrow ideas from other scholars either to support or buttress their points or arguments. However, the student writer is expected (by the ethics of academic writing) to duly acknowledge the original source of such borrowed ideas through in-text citation and subsequently compile a list of all the cited sources in the references. It is a gross academic misconduct not to acknowledge the source of information in any written document. The act of adopting or adapting another person's idea or work without acknowledging the original owner is tagged plagiarism or intellectual theft. In other words, plagiarism is the failure of a writer to give due recognition to the originator of the idea incorporated into a work.

Plagiarism is a serious crime in the academia. However, many students do not perceive it as unethical or criminal; hence, plagiarism is on the increase among students of tertiary institutions. As students write term papers, assignments and projects, many of them default by failing to acknowledge the original sources of the borrowed ideas. A lot of students do copy and paste whereby they wholesomely lift a portion of a text and add to their own work as if it were their own idea. Oftentimes, a direct quotation accompanied by an in-text citation is presented as though it were paraphrased, thus making it impossible for readers to distinguish between what is cited verbatim and what is reworded.

Obinna (2012) describes plagiarism as deplorable, and avers that plagiarism and poor writing skills are the bane of Nigeria's educational system. The high prevalence of plagiarism has become a cause for concern due to the recognition of the dangers it poses to core values in the academia. This has also increased interest in it (Macfarlane, Zhang & Pun, 2014). Plagiarism affects students, the institution and the entire society. Power (2009, p.643) corroborates this view noting that when students engage in plagiarism, they 'present a problem for all educators'

in several ways. Saeed et al. (2011) also note that plagiarism in tertiary institutions is a threat to academic standards. This is exemplified in the situation where students study for mere paper qualifications rather than for knowledge. They are assessed in a number of competencies and are awarded grades or marks accordingly. When they commit plagiarism in the process of assessment, the result will be distorted since the submissions are not a true reflection of the student's knowledge. The result will, therefore, not provide useful feedback to the teachers for the improvement of the course design; neither will it help the teacher to appropriately measure what the assessment claims to determine.

Gullifer and Graham (2010) explain that apart from impact on students' learning, assessment and the regard for the intellectual property rights of the author, student plagiarism ends up producing improperly bred graduates whose incompetence remains a challenge to society.

Student plagiarism, according to Marsden et al. (2005), could tarnish the image of the institution and attract media attention which could lead to negative publicity and reputational damage. It should be realised that failure to eliminate plagiarism is not the student's problem alone but that of the institution that supports the incidence by providing the enabling environment (Olasehinde-Williams, 2006).

According to Blum (2009), plagiarism among students is very common because it is a breach of ethics which is also considered contagious. Traniello and Bakker (2016) contend that the behaviour is possibly modelled by other colleagues which waters down institutional standards. In a survey by Walker (2010), where he applied a plagiarism detector "Turnitin", of the 1,098 papers from 569 students in a New Zealand university, 26% of the papers were found to have been fairly plagiarized while 10% were extensively plagiarized. However, research evidence by Silver and Shaw (2018) shows that people construe plagiarism as wrong even when it has little or no impact on the original owner of the work which implies that negative attitude towards plagiarism is a matter of human nature. In situations where students cannot plagiarize, one finds that their quality of writing is very poor. It is against this backdrop that this study examines how plagiarism affects students' written communication skills in tertiary institutions in Anambra State.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the theory of Planned Behaviour or Reasoned Action. The theory was initially developed by Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen in 1967 and further developed in 1975 and then used to test human behaviour in 1980. The theory posits that human behaviour is under the voluntary control of the individual. It is hinged on the premise that the most immediate determinant of a person's behaviour is his/her behavioural intention. It also contends that intention, in turn, is a joint function of one's positive or negative feeling, leading to either performing or not performing the particular action. This theory highlights intentions by focusing on attitudes towards risk reduction, response to social norms and behavioural intentions as it relates to risky behaviour (UNAIDS, 1999, cited in Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017). Thus, Parminter and Wilson (2003), cited in Botha and Atkins (2005), observe that the theory addresses the internal (psychological) determinants of peoples' behaviour in relation to a number of physical and social situations. The theory of reasoned action is hinged on peoples' behaviour being strongly related to their attitudes towards that behaviour.

The relevance of this theory to the study is that it establishes a nexus between attitude and performance. As long as students do not change their carefree and lazy attitude to writing, they will remain prone to plagiarism. Conversely, if the students are effectively motivated to acquire a positive attitude towards academic writing, they will be open to learning ways of avoiding the academic cankerworm – plagiarism.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism as a concept is seen in different aspects of life's endeavours. Thus, the definitions of the term "plagiarism" by scholars, institutions and organisations abound though they vary in terms of scope, clarity, intention and even scope. Plagiarism is depriving authors of the profit that is rightfully theirs, which is theft; depriving authors of credit might also be a form of theft (Moulton & Robinson, 2002). Plagiarism, as we stated earlier, is the act of adopting another person's ideas or work and using them as one's own without according credit to the original owner. Similarly, Stanford University (2012) defines plagiarism as the use, without giving reasonable and appropriate credit

to or acknowledging the author or source, of another person's original work, whether such work is made up of codes, formulas, ideas, language, research, strategies, writing or other form(s). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines plagiarism as "to take and use another person's thoughts, writing, invention, etc. as one's own". From the foregoing, plagiarism is a form of stealing since it is done without the permission of the owner of the work and covers both the intentional and unintentional use of another's work without acknowledgement. Plagiarism can also be defined in terms of the psychological disposition as well as the cognitive processes of the individual involved. This touches on the intention of the act. According to Hollins, Lange, Berry, and Dennis (2016), in many cases, writers may consciously plan to deceive readers regarding the origin of the borrowed material. However, there may be unconscious errors emanating from faulty source recall (Perfect & Stark, 2012). This is worsened by poor tracking of sources in the course of research. On a more general note, the 2015 definition of plagiarism by Concordia University seems most suitable. The Concordia University sees plagiarism as the presentation of the work of another person in whatever form as one's own or without proper acknowledgement. In essence plagiarism can simply be seen as refusal of acknowledgement or recognition of an author whose idea was borrowed in writing.

In the educational sector, mostly plagiarized materials are essays, reports, presentations, dissertations and projects. Although it is becoming rampant these days, it is not an overstatement to declare that plagiarism is ignoble, dishonorable, immoral and of course sinful. This problem which poses a great threat to academic excellence has been described by Park (2003) as persistently growing in spite of several interventions.

When the plagiarism case is all about not according due credit to the owner of the work used, it may be viewed as flagrant especially if both words and ideas were borrowed. However, if the intention of the borrowing was to mislead the reader, it becomes an ethical issue which is serious. Thus, plagiarism is very risky though perpetrators could consider it gainful when someone indulges in it without being caught.

Initially, the concept of plagiarism simply entailed stealing of another person's work or idea but it was later expanded to include:

copyright, legal, ethical, academic and technological dimensions. As explained by Stout (2013) earlier, text reused freely with growing complexity metamorphosed into what is known as "plagiarism" today. This may be credited to the 1450 invention of the printing press by Gutenberg which gave a boost to publication as well as encouraged reading. This, according to Sutherland-smith (2008), raised the demand for literature causing the literate ones to claim rights over their works paving way for legal protection of the intellectual property. Sutherland-smith continues that this gave birth to the copyright laws of England which could not actually protect the authors as they desired, but legally recognized the idea of the written word as personal property. As time progressed, the act of indiscriminate borrowing of text, words, ideas or the works of others became viewed as seriously inappropriate (Pennycook, 1996) leading to a need for academic caution.

Forms of Plagiarism

The forms of plagiarism differ as the definitions do. The views about classification differ in terms of appropriation, acknowledgement or concealment of the source of a material. Harris (2012) identifies inappropriate use of text in writing in form of copying, translating, cutting and pasting, false citation, paraphrasing and summarizing without attribution. Park (2004) focused on inappropriate copying or paraphrasing and carved out source use in the areas of "online" or "paper mill." Harris (2001) adds "use of false citations" which is not really considered an aspect of plagiarism.

Walker (2010) distinguishes student plagiarism by the following components: sham (presenting quoted material as if it were paraphrased); verbatim (copying material from a source) and purloining (submitting a substantial part or all of another's work as one's own). While these views subsist, the term "patch-writing" was introduced by Howard (1999) to explain unintentional plagiarism which involves copying from a source text, deleting some words, altering grammatical structure or plugging in one synonym for another. This idea is often employed to cover plagiarism.

Factors that Contribute to Plagiarism

There are situational and personal factors that aid plagiarism.

Though plagiarism is viewed as a universal plague, Okeke (2001) avers that the high incidence of plagiarism can be blamed on an educational system that seems to produce fake intellectuals, who merely uphold education while stealing the work of others as cover up. A major situational factor is technology. Jereb et al. (2018) contend that the Internet provides ready sources that could be downloaded with ease; also, the rise in paper mills and websites that produce papers for students for a certain cost is a contributory factor (Dickerson, 2007).

Cultural milieu with cross cultural diversity could impact on a student's concept of plagiarism as some generalizations may seem like stigmatization. On this, Bikowski and Gui (2018) found differences in Chinese students studying in China and those studying in the US based on their reactions to videos showing off textual borrowing.

Personal factors also have some roles to play in plagiarism. The 2018 study by Moss, White and Lee indicates that factors that engender plagiarism include: over emphasis on competition and success, impaired resilience, lack of confidence, impulsiveness and biased cognitions. Also, Curtis et al. (2018) found that plagiarism is caused by lack of self-control coupled with pressure for good grades, laziness, poor writing skills and negative attitude towards the class content or the instructor. In relation to writing skills, the study by Perkins, Gezgin and Roe (2018) shows that students who plagiarized had significant lower English ability than their counterparts who did not.

The Incidence of Students' Plagiarism in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Available research records indicate that the common form of misconduct identified among students in Nigeria is examination malpractice and cheating (Adebayo, 2011). If formal examination is considered the best form of evaluation, the students will hardly develop the needed writing skills for their final research. However, in the views of Onuoha and Ikonke (2013, p.102), 'incidents of plagiarism are becoming increasingly popular in Nigerian higher institutions as evident in students' employment of 'cut and paste' while doing assignments or carrying out research projects'. Similarly, Adebayo (2011) carried out a study in a Nigerian university in Ado-Ekiti to ascertain 'common cheating behaviour among Nigerian students'. The

study investigated the frequency of occurrence of 21 types of cheating behaviours and reasons for engaging in these behaviours. He applied survey design and used the questionnaire for data collection. He established that Nigerian students get involved in academic cheating for altruistic reasons.

A research on students' awareness of plagiarism by Babalola (2012) investigated the impact of awareness on the incidence of plagiarism among undergraduates in a Nigerian private university using a structured questionnaire. The study found a significant positive relationship between awareness and incidence of plagiarism levels and explained that awareness of the behaviour that constitutes plagiarism may not deter students from engaging in it. The research however recommends the discouragement of unintentional plagiarism by teaching students the techniques for proper source use, embarking on value reorientation (to encourage honesty, diligence, fairness and academic integrity among students) and adopting strict policies and sanctions against intentional plagiarism. This research did not take into cognizance the difficulty in determining intentional and unintentional plagiarism as suggested by Babalola (2012). Therefore, there might be contentions with the application of sanctions in a fair manner since the procedure and guidelines for the application of these policies that would ensure consistency were not specified.

The 2018 study in Malawi by Selemani, Chawinga, and Dube investigated postgraduate students' knowledge of plagiarism, forms of plagiarism they commit, the reasons they commit plagiarism and actions taken against postgraduate students who indulge in plagiarism. The study adopted mixed methods approach and used the questionnaire to collect the quantitative data while qualitative data were collected by means of interviews. Respondents were postgraduate students, some academic staff, registrar and assistant librarian. The study found that though students understand the concept of plagiarism, a majority of them reported that they had intentionally and unintentionally committed plagiarism mainly due to pressure for good grades (86.7%), laziness and poor time management (84.9%), and lack of good academic writing skills (84.9%). The study established that prevalent forms of plagiarism admitted (by students) and reported (by academic staff) to have been committed included lack of proper acknowledgement after

paraphrasing (69.8%), summarising (64.1%) and using quotation marks (56.6%). It also found that the common sanctions applied by academics include giving a warning and asking the student to re-write the plagiarised work. The study recommended that Mzuzu University, Malawi, should carry out awareness campaigns on the negative effects of plagiarism, targeting postgraduate students; and should introduce advanced academic writing skills training for postgraduate students.

This study is similar to the present one since they both focus on tertiary institution students. However, while the work under review took place in a particular university in Malawi with postgraduate students, the current research is on undergraduates of tertiary institutions in Anambra State Nigeria. The methods adopted for both studies are similar - survey, employing questionnaire and interview.

Jereb et al. (2018) carried out a study that examined the factors that are still effective and if there are any differences between German and Slovene students' factors influencing plagiarism. A quantitative paper-and-pencil survey was carried out in Germany and Slovenia in the 2017/2018 academic year with a sample of 485 students from tertiary institutions. Findings revealed that easy access to information-communication technologies and the Web is the main reason driving plagiarism, adding that there are no significant differences between German and Slovene students in terms of personal factors such as gender, motivation for study, and socialization. This implies that digitalization and the Web are key factors driving plagiarism, and not national borders.

That research is also similar to the ongoing one since tertiary institutions students form the sample. But, while the present study is on a state in Nigeria, the work under review is a comparison of two countries.

Newstead et al. (1996) conducted a similar study in the UK using 150 students at their second and third years of undergraduate studies. The study found that three out of four types of cheating behaviours that had the highest frequency of occurrence were (in order of the most occurring): premeditated collusion during examinations, doing another student's coursework for them, allowing another student to copy their coursework, and agreeing to peer mark each other generously. The findings show that the most preponderant reason adduced for indulging in these unethical practices was "to assist a friend". On the objective of

the study that focuses on how fear of failure would motivate a student to permit that his work be copied by another, the answers were unclear, which suggests that there are unselfish reasons why they cheat.

Methodology

The study design is cross-sectional survey. All final year students in all the three universities in Anambra State make up the population as follows: Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (Federal), Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam (State) and Madonna University, Okija (Private). A sample of 272 students was selected from the final students of each of these universities. Data were elicited from the respondents via a structured questionnaire designed by the researchers. The questionnaire is tagged “Plagiarism and Students Written Communication Skills Questionnaire (PLASWCSQ)”. The questionnaire was validated by two senior lecturers from Odumegwu Ojukwu University. The Cronbach – alpha reliability of the questionnaire was 0.81 indicative of high reliability which equally lends credence to its validity. Simple percentages and frequency tables were used for data analysis and presentation.

Results

Research Question 1

How do students in tertiary institutions perceive plagiarism?

Table 1: Perceptions of Students about Plagiarism

| S/No | Statement | Agreed | | Disagreed | |
|------|---|--------|------|-----------|-----|
| | | Freq | % | Freq | % |
| 1. | I do not see anything wrong in copying old work | 260 | 95.6 | 12 | 4.4 |
| 2. | Borrowing one’s idea is part of learning | 270 | 99.3 | 02 | 0.7 |
| 3. | Using another person’s idea to do my work should not be a problem | 250 | 91.9 | 22 | 8.1 |
| 4. | Lifting work directly online is a plus to students | 265 | 97.4 | 07 | 2.6 |
| 5. | Acknowledging the source or not should not affect my scores | 268 | 98.5 | 04 | 1.5 |

Result in table 1 shows that 99.3% (270 out of 272 students) see borrowing ideas as part of learning, 98.5% are of the view that acknowledging the source or not should not affect their scores and the least observed perception is that using another person's idea to do work should not be a problem (91.9%). From the above, it could be concluded that students have wrong perception about plagiarism.

Research Question 2

Why do students in tertiary institutions plagiarize?

Table 2: Reasons for Plagiarism among Tertiary Institution Students

| S/No | Statement | Agreed | | Disagreed | |
|------|-------------------------------------|--------|------|-----------|------|
| | | Freq | % | Freq | % |
| 1. | Poor training in writing skills | 198 | 72.8 | 74 | 27.2 |
| 2. | Negative effect of technology (ICT) | 253 | 93.0 | 19 | 7.0 |
| 3. | Laziness on the part of students | 260 | 95.6 | 12 | 4.4 |
| 4. | Wrong perception about plagiarism | 270 | 99.3 | 02 | 0.7 |
| 5. | Lack of punishment for plagiarism | 267 | 98.2 | 05 | 1.8 |

Going by data in Table 2, the lead causes of plagiarism are wrong perceptions about plagiarism (99.3%) and lack of punishment for plagiarism (98.2%). The least accepted cause of plagiarism among students is poor training in writing skills with 72.8% affirmative response.

Research Question 3

In what ways does plagiarism affect student's written communications skills in tertiary institutions in Anambra State?

Table 3: Influence of Plagiarism on Students Written Communications

| S/No | Statement | Agreed | | Disagreed | |
|------|---|--------|------|-----------|-----|
| | | Freq | % | Freq | % |
| 1. | It prevents students from learning to paraphrase texts accurately | 249 | 91.5 | 23 | 8.5 |
| 2. | It hampers students' summary writing skills | 261 | 96.0 | 11 | 4.0 |
| 3. | Plagiarism causes disjointed or incoherent writing/ ideas | 265 | 97.4 | 07 | 2.6 |
| 4. | It makes many students score low marks in written tasks | 268 | 98.5 | 504 | 1.5 |

From table 3, it could be seen that the greatest effect of plagiarism are disjointed or incoherent writing/ideas (97.4%) and scoring of low marks in written tasks (98.5%). However the least observed effect is poor paraphrasing of texts (91.5%).

Research Question 4

How can plagiarism among tertiary institutions students be curbed?

Table 4: Remedies to Plagiarism among Tertiary Institution Students

| S/No | Statement | Agreed | | Disagreed | |
|------|--|--------|------|-----------|-----|
| | | Freq | % | Freq | % |
| 1. | Institutions should adopt plagiarism test software to check plagiarism in students' written works. | 259 | 95.2 | 13 | 4.8 |
| 2. | Students should be groomed on the mechanics and techniques of academic writing | 270 | 99.3 | 02 | 0.7 |
| 3. | How to avoid plagiarism should be clearly explained to all students | 248 | 91.2 | 24 | 8.8 |
| 4. | Incidences of plagiarism should be punished to serve as a deterrent to others | 262 | 96.3 | 10 | 3.7 |
| 5. | Dangers of plagiarism should be clearly explained to students | 250 | 91.9 | 22 | 8.1 |

Table 4 shows that 99.3% of the respondents agreed that students should be groomed on the mechanics and techniques of academic writing. 96.3% opined that incidents of plagiarism should be punished to serve as a deterrent to others; however, the least observed measure against plagiarism is that plagiarism should be clearly explained to students (91.2%).

Discussion

The study was on plagiarism and its effects on students' written communication skills. Results of research question one revealed that a great number of students have wrong perceptions about plagiarism. Some do not see it as a serious offence. This is in line with Babalola (2012) who noted that there is lack of awareness of plagiarism among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. In the same vein, the wrong perception was seen as a major contributor to the wide spread incidents of plagiarism among students. Another reason is laziness on the part of students. Many students are lazy, hence, they do not like to take the stress of proper academic research; thus, many of them stick to copying old works and plagiarizing.

Research question two shows that the lead causes of plagiarism are wrong perceptions about plagiarism and lack of punishment for plagiarism offenders. Similarly, research question three showed that plagiarism has negative effects on students. Some of the effects are poor performance in written tasks. This result agrees with Bakker (2016) who stated that plagiarism waters down institutional standards.

Analysis of research question four shows the remedies to plagiarism. It was suggested that punishment be meted to offenders to serve as a deterrent to others and that plagiarism software be used by all tertiary institutions to check plagiarism among students.

Conclusion

This research has examined plagiarism, explaining its effect on the written communication competence of tertiary education students in Anambra State. The study shows that plagiarism of academic resources negatively affects the written communication prowess of university students and called for measures to be taken to deter students from the act to protect the reputation of the universities.

Plagiarism has constituted a pain in the neck of excellence which Blum (2009, p.177) summarises thus: "So our policy of inclusion, quotation and so on is a very special kind of law. It is particularly unnatural. We do our students disfavoured if we claim that this law is eternal and obvious because it is neither". This therefore confers the gatekeeper role on university teachers. It is expected that plagiarism has the potential to occur in tertiary institutions but it can be curbed with designed programmes, courses, and assignments that engender the right attitude for them to develop good research skills. It is obvious that a host of factors such as gender, socialization, efficiency, gain, motivation for study, methodological uncertainties or easy access to electronic information via the Internet and new technologies are the factors driving plagiarism (Jereb et al. 2018).

Recommendations

Sequel to the findings from the study, it is recommended that:

1. Lecturers should adopt and apply adequate measures to guide students properly. This is necessary following the findings by Adeniyi and Taiwo (2011) which reveal that students often blame lecturers for playing little role in guiding them against plagiarism.
2. Students should be taught properly on the concept of plagiarism and proper citation as Insley (2011) agrees that instructing students on plagiarism and teaching them to cite properly is key to preventing plagiarism.
3. Universities should make policies against plagiarism and provide guidelines for plagiarism prevention.
4. Lecturers are mentors and should live above the board by showing good examples to their mentees and students.
5. Lecturers should apply plagiarism detection software since they are the direct supervisors of students.
6. Students should develop confidence in themselves and engage in purposeful research so as to guide against unintentional plagiarism.

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