

Chapter 29

Awareness of Plagiarism: Omani English Foundation Students' and Teachers' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Evaluating students by giving them assignments and projects is essential for their learning. Yet the validity of this assessment can be threatened by the serious problem of plagiarism. Researchers have found that copying another's work is very common in schools (Decoo, 2002) and is caused by several factors. Curiously, most prominent among these is lack of awareness of what plagiarism is (Pritchett, 2010). Thus, this chapter tries to measure this awareness among English students in a Foundation Program at Oman's Sultan Qaboos University and determine how their teachers deal with it. The sample included 40 English Foundation students (20 males and 20 females) and 20 instructors (10 males and 10 females). A questionnaire revealed that these students lacked awareness of plagiarism because its meaning had not been explained at school. Participants thus suggested receiving more instruction about proper citation and quotation as one solution to the problem. Instructors dealt with plagiarism in different ways, with such penalties as deducting marks the most common. Moreover, a negative relationship was found between students' academic proficiency and their willingness to plagiarize. To help these Foundation students to avoid facing difficulties in higher education, the study suggested teaching them, while still in school, how to cite, quote, and use references without plagiarizing.

INTRODUCTION: PLAGIARISM: A PREVALENT PROBLEM IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS WORLDWIDE

It is indisputable that stealing others' possessions is a crime which deserves serious penalties. Yet, how about robbing others' words and thoughts to complete an assignment or to get a certificate? Are students and instructors aware that other people's academic work should be protected from the 'copy and paste

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philosophy' in the way money and jewelry should be kept safe from thieves' eyes? Over the last two decades, plagiarism has become a central topic for educators and administrators (Decoo, 2002). The problem has infected many institutions globally and brought shame to them, including top universities in Europe and America. To give an example, 77% of Balearic Islands University students (UIB), a famous Spanish University, "admitted committing cyberplagiarism at least once during their university studies" (Pupovac, Bilic, & Petroveck, 2008, p. 15). Yet, are students who plagiarize aware that they are exposing themselves to serious penalties?

Several studies have found that most plagiarizing cases result from a lack of students' understanding of the practice (Pre & Belter, 2009; Pritchett, 2010; Wang, 2008). They indulge in 'word-for word plagiarism', 'plagiarism of authorship', 'paraphrasing plagiarism', and 'plagiarism of secondary sources', without even knowing they are cheating (Martin, 1994, as cited in Pritchett, 2010). Since the meaning of plagiarism remains vague for many, writers and scholars have tried to establish clear definitions. According to Logue (2004), it can be defined as "...the intentional or unintentional use of others' work or ideas, published or unpublished, without clearly acknowledging the source of the work or idea" (p. 40). Plagiarism can also be viewed as a lack of 'academic discipline', which can occur at any educational stage (Wang, 2008). However, Pre & Belter (2009) believe that deciding if a paper is plagiarized is a process that can be affected easily by subjectivity. For instance, there are ideas that usually come together when discussing some common topics. That makes plagiarism a matter of degree, they suggest.

Regarding the reasons behind plagiarism, it has been reported that easy access to electronic materials has dramatically increased the number of plagiarists in schools and universities (Bugeja, 2004; Pritchett, 2012). And students tend to choose the easiest way to complete their assignments when they find themselves overloaded with term papers, projects and tests (Tommaso & Roig, 1995). Mostly, this is the case with college students, but school students recently have started to depend on the Internet as a main source of data for their assignments and tasks (Logue, 2004). What has led them to do this is a change in evaluation and assessment methods (Salgado & Bassendo wski, 2005). In Basic Education, which is now in place across Oman, students are widely exposed to technological literacy, independent learning and research (Issan & Gomaa, 2010), and hence need to cite previous literature and others' work to tackle their assignments. Yet they do not receive sufficient guidance from teachers while dealing with such material (Logue, 2004) and thus tend to practice different types of plagiarism, like copying, inappropriate paraphrasing, and referring to others' ideas as their own.

Another reason for the increase in plagiarized papers in Omani educational institutions is perhaps Omani people's sharing culture. To elaborate, in the Omani community, one has to share everything, even ideas, thoughts, and written work with relatives, neighbors and friends. This affects seriously Omanis' way of dealing with academic sources and their own work as well. For example, the society sees no harm at all in giving friends an essay or a term paper to copy from since that will make them happy! Indeed, the culture and educational system of a country have great influence on students' perception of plagiarism.

Today, a major effort is being made to reduce widespread plagiarism among students. According to researchers, increasing students' comprehension of plagiarism is a crucial step in solving the problem since misunderstanding it is so common in both schools and higher educational institutions (Pre & Belter, 2009; Pritchett, 2010; Wang, 2008). Also, plagiarism-detecting services (PDSs) are suggested as a way of tackling the problem (Logue, 2004; Wang, 2008; Howard, 2007).

While universities around the world are struggling to detect plagiarism, its reasons and solutions, the present research examined the same issue at Oman's Sultan Qaboos University. Since no previous studies conducted in Oman on this were extant, this one investigated the matter with regard to English

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