

Attitudes of Plagiarism in Academic Writing among Postgraduate ELT Students at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia



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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes of plagiarism in academic writing among postgraduate ELT students. To achieve this purpose, a descriptive survey design was used. The study involved the gathering of data through Attitudes towards Plagiarism (ATP) questionnaire from thirty postgraduate students. Convenience sampling technique was used to select the participants of the study. Descriptive statistics were computed to analyze the collected data. The results of the study reveal that ELT postgraduate students had moderate positive attitudes towards plagiarism. The result also showed that the participants of this study had moderate negative attitude and moderate subjective norms towards plagiarism. Overall, this result suggested that ELT postgraduate students' attitude towards plagiarism was moderate. In other words, students had moderate attitudes towards the three attitudinal factors: positive attitude, negative attitude and subjective norms.

Keywords: Plagiarism, positive attitude, negative attitude, subjective norms, academic writing, postgraduate students

Introduction

Academic dishonesty can lower educational standards. It causes students to become dependent on the information, intelligence, aptitude, and academic success of others. Academic dishonesty, commonly referred to as academic misconduct or academic fraud, prevents students from moving further academically. Academic dishonesty is defined by the Centre for Academic

Integrity (CAI) as dishonest behavior in relation to academic achievement, including plagiarism, cheating, deception, lying, fraud, and any other sort of unfair advantage earned by one student over another (CAI, 1999).

Plagiarism is one form of academic dishonesty and affects academic integrity in several ways. According to Myers (1998), plagiarism refers to utilizing someone else's thoughts or words without giving them due credit and the inability to acknowledge ideas, research, or terminology used by someone else in a dissertation, essay, or other written exercise. In other words, the primary goal of academic writing is to advance knowledge on a particular subject that requires more explanation; however, plagiarism occurs when researchers or academic writers fail to recognize this and mistakenly claim someone else's idea as their own without citing the original author. Hence, plagiarism retards progress and reduces knowledge.

Plagiarism is a worm that ruins the results of rational thought and research and starves the seeds of originality that support them (Kolich, 1983). That is, plagiarism is a hazardous worm in academic writing that aims to further knowledge on a particular issue, and this is destroyed by plagiarism. Plagiarism is viewed as "an ever-increasing practice and problem" both inside the university and among the general public due to the quick development of modern technologies, which grant writers access to enormous textual resources (Chandrasoma et al., 2004: 172). Therefore, plagiarism is a complicated and multifaceted problem, particularly for the educational and training processes that seek to advance society as a whole.

Yang(2014)states that in academic writing, plagiarism has long been a problem and it is described in various ways, such as inappropriate paraphrasing, inappropriate textual borrowing, transgressive intertextuality and patchwriting. Furthermore, Fook et al. (2016) asserts that difficulties with personal voice, time management, language proficiency and academic writing abilities have all been linked to plagiarism.

McCullough and Holmberg (2005) found that 27 % of the master's theses they examined in their research showed plagiarism of internet sources. According to Fook et al. (2016), ESL postgraduate students who lack academic writing skills also commit plagiarism either intentionally or unintentionally. Academic writing skills are represented by the ability of summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting and citing.

Guthrie (2009) carried out a study at the University of Waikato in New Zealand and claimed that students plagiarized when they were engaged in conducting research papers and other self-reported works. The results of the study also revealed that plagiarism was highly popular with all participants.

Plagiarism has also become a problem in Ethiopian universities. Advisors and examiners usually question the originality of the research report of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Tefera and Kinde (2010) conducted a study at Jimma and Addis Ababa Universities focusing on the self-reported academic dishonesty of undergraduate students at Colleges of Education; and Business and Economics. The study revealed that students committed plagiarism and there were many reasons that led to this. These are as follows: lack of essential knowledge and skills of conducting and reporting research and lab works, lack of close supervision and frequent feedback, time pressure, free access to previously done graded lab and research reports, teachers' lenience and lack of ethical values etc.

Students' attitude towards plagiarism also determines their tendency to commit plagiarism. According to Christopher et al. (2016), students who exhibit more favorable attitudes toward academic dishonesty have a higher propensity to cheat. That is, plagiarism can occur among students who have a positive attitude towards it and may not happen among students who have a negative attitude towards it in writing. Even though attitudes towards plagiarism determine the presence or the absence of plagiarism, there is no such study conducted in the Ethiopian context as to the researcher's knowledge. This motivated the researcher to conduct the study that focuses on students attitudes towards plagiarism. Therefore, this study investigated the attitudes of plagiarism in academic writing among ELT postgraduate students of Addis Ababa University.

Methods

The Research Design

This study examined the attitudes of plagiarism in academic writing among postgraduate ELT students. Hence, a descriptive survey design was used. The major purpose of this design is to describe the state of affairs as it exists at present and it is appropriate for the purpose of this study. This study also used quantitative approach. According to Dawson (2007), quantitative

research generates statistics through the use of large-scale survey research, using methods such as questionnaires or structured interviews.

Participants of the Study

Thirty postgraduate students of Addis Ababa University participated in this study. The participants were from the department of Foreign Languages and Literature and they were specializing in English Language Teaching (ELT). Convenience sampling technique was used to select the participants of the study.

Instrument of Data Collection

Attitudes towards Plagiarism (ATP) questionnaire was used to gather data for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire was administered to postgraduate students who were studying English Language Teaching at Addis Ababa University to obtain information about their attitudes towards plagiarism. The instrument was adapted from Mavrinac et al. (2010) and includes three scales: positive attitude towards plagiarism, negative attitude towards plagiarism and subjective norms towards plagiarism which have 12, 7 and 10 items, respectively. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was utilized to respond to each item.

The validity and reliability of the ATP questionnaire was computed to provide confidence in the findings of the study, and it was found to be valid and reliable.

Internal Consistency Reliability

The data collected from 30 postgraduate students were used to check the internal consistency reliability for each ATP scale using Cronbach's alpha coefficient as a measure of scale internal consistency. Table 1 below presents the alpha reliability coefficients for the set of ATP scales and for each scale.

Table 1: Internal Consistency Reliability (Cronbach Alpha Coefficient) for Each ATP Scale

Scale	Number of Items	Alpha Reliability
ATP scales	29	0.89
Positive attitude towards plagiarism	12	0.90
Negative attitude towards plagiarism	7	0.81
Subjective norms towards plagiarism	10	0.76

N=30 students

As indicated in the Table above, the alpha coefficients of ATP scales were 0.90 for Positive attitude towards plagiarism, 0.81 for Negative attitude towards plagiarism and 0.76 for Subjective norms towards plagiarism. Also, the overall reliability of the ATP questionnaire was 0.89. Analysis of the alpha coefficients of the three ATP scales revealed that all the coefficients were considered to be acceptable for this study. The results were all above 0.70 which is the minimum value for reliability coefficients (Dörnyei, 2007).

Discriminant Validity

The mean correlation of a scale with other scales was used to determine the discriminant validity of each of the ATP scales. Discriminant validity analysis was undertaken to determine scale independence or the extent to which each scale measures a distinct dimension that is independent of the other scales in the questionnaire. Table 2 below indicates that the highest correlation was 0.69. This met the requirements of discriminant validity recommended by Brown's (2006) cut off point which is 0.80. Brown recommends that factor correlations above 0.80 imply overlap of concepts and point towards poor discriminant validity.

Table 2: Component Correlation Matrix for Each ATP scale

	PATP	NATP	SNTP
Positive attitude towards plagiarism(PATP)	-		
Negative attitude towards plagiarism(NATP)	0.12	-	
Subjective norms towards plagiarism (SNTP)	0.44	0.69	-

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviations. Frequencies and percentages were employed to analyze the participants' responses to each statement of the three scales of the ATP questionnaire. Average item mean and standard deviation were also calculated for each of the three attitudinal factors. The average item mean was employed to describe the participants' attitudes towards plagiarism in their academic writing.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussion of data collected through ATP questionnaire. The data were gathered to investigate the attitudes of plagiarism in academic writing among ELT post graduate students. The questionnaire involves 29 items and has three categories: positive attitudes towards plagiarism, negative attitudes towards plagiarism and subjective norms towards plagiarism. To address the purpose of the study, the participants' responses to each item of the three scales of the questionnaire were analyzed using percentage and frequency. The results are presented and discussed next.

Positive Attitudes towards Plagiarism

The data were gathered using the twelve items of the ATP questionnaire (Q1-Q12) to assess ELT postgraduate students' positive attitudes towards plagiarism in academic writing. The participants responded to each statement and their responses to each statement were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages. The results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage of the items that assess positive attitudes towards plagiarism

No.	Items	Responses					
		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree	
		F	P	F	P	F	P
1	Sometimes one cannot avoid using other people's words without citing the source, because there are only so many ways to describe something.	9	30	8	26.7	13	43.3
2	It is justified to use previous descriptions of a method because the method itself remains the same.	15	50	3	10	12	40
3	Self-plagiarism is not punishable because it is not harmful (one cannot steal from oneself).	19	63.3	8	26.7	3	10
4	Plagiarized parts of a paper may be ignored if the paper is of great scientific value.	13	43.3	8	26.7	9	30
5	Self-plagiarism should not be punishable in the same way as plagiarism is.	22	73.3	3	10	5	19.6
6	Young researchers who are just learning the ropes should receive milder punishment for plagiarism.	17	56.7	4	13.3	9	30
7	If one cannot write well in a foreign language (e.g., English), it is justified to copy parts of a similar paper already published in that language.	16	53.3	3	10	11	36.7
8	I could not write a scientific paper without plagiarizing.	15	50	4	13.3	11	36.6
9	Short deadlines give me the right to plagiarize a bit.	15	50	9	30	6	20
10	When I do not know what to write, I translate a part of a paper from a foreign language.	14	46.7	11	36.7	5	16.7
11	It is justified to use one's own previously published work without providing citation in order to complete the current work.	8	26.6	7	23.3	15	50

12	If a colleague of mine allows me to copy from her/his paper, I'm NOT doing anything bad, because I have his/her permission.	12	40	10	33.3	8	26.6
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N= 30; 'Disagree' = ('Strongly disagree'- 1 and 'Disagree' - 2); 'Agree' = ('Agree'- 4 and 'Strongly agree'- 5); NB: F and P stand for Frequency and Percent respectively.

As indicated in Table 3 above, ELT postgraduate students were asked to provide data on various issues related to their positive attitudes towards plagiarism in academic writing. This scale has 12 items. For item1, 43.3 percent of the respondents thought that using other people's words without citing the source was sometimes unavoidable because of the presence of various ways of describing something although 30% of the participants had the opposite views. For item 2, 40 percent of the participants agreed that it was justified to use previous descriptions of a method because the method itself remained the same. Moreover, 50 percent of them disagreed with the point. As for item 4, 30 percent of the respondents believed that if the paper was of great scientific value, it was possibly necessary to ignore its plagiarized parts. However, 43.3 percent of them disagreed with the perception.

Items 3, 5 and 11 asked the participants to provide data in connection with self-plagiarism. For item 3, 10 percent of the students agreed that self-plagiarism was not punishable because it was not harmful. On the other hand, 63.3 percent of them showed disagreement on this point, and 26.7 percent of the respondents were found to be uncertain regarding this point. As for item 5, only 19.6 respondents agreed that self-plagiarism should not be punishable in the same way as plagiarism was whereas 73.3 percent of them thought that the punishment level of self-plagiarism and plagiarism should be the same. Nonetheless, 10 percent of the students showed uncertainty on this issue. For item 11, 50 percent of the participants agreed as it was justified to use one's own previously published work without providing citation in order to complete the current work. However, 26.6 percent of them opposed this perception and 23.3 percent were uncertain about this point. Thus, most respondents thought that self-plagiarism was punishable and it was harmful.

The other questions asked in items 6, 7, 9 and 10 were related to lack of experience, language incompetence, time scarcity and lack of knowledge, respectively. Item 6 asked about young researchers and 30 percent of the participants agreed that young researchers should receive mild

punishment for plagiarism as compared with experienced researchers. On the contrary, 56.7 percent of them thought that young researchers should also be punished severely. With regard to item 7, 36.7 percent of the students believed that it was reasonable to copy parts of a similar paper already published in English if a researcher faced difficulty in writing in the language even though 53.3 percent of them showed disagreement on this thinking. As for item 9, 30 percent of the students indicated that short deadlines made them plagiarize a bit and 50 percent of them did not agree with it. For item 10, 36.7 percent of the respondents reported that they translated a part of a paper from a foreign language when they did not know what to write, and 46.7 of them reported that they did not do so. Thus, most respondents did not agree with the issues mentioned in each item.

In items 8 and 12, students were requested to give information on other issues. For item 8, 36.6 percent of the respondents indicated that they could not write a scientific paper without plagiarizing. However, 50 percent noted that they could write such a paper without committing plagiarism, and the remaining 13.3 percent of them were uncertain whether they could or could not do so. In connection with item 12, only 26.6 percent of the students agreed that they were not doing anything bad if they were permitted to copy from their colleagues' papers. On the other hand, 40 percent of them indicated that copying from colleagues' papers with permission was part of plagiarism, and the other 33.3 percent of participants were not sure about this point. On the whole, the majority of students showed as they plagiarize and considered taking some parts from colleagues work with permission as plagiarism.

According to Mavrinc (2010), a positive attitude toward plagiarism, reflects approval and justification of such behavior. Items listed in this category describe various situations in which plagiarism is considered to be an acceptable act of minor importance. Based on this, the majority of the respondents showed approval and justification of the plagiarism act.

Negative Attitudes towards Plagiarism

Seven items were used to measure ELT postgraduate students' negative attitudes towards plagiarism in academic writing. The participants' responses to each statement were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages. Table 4 below presents the results of the study.

Table 4: Frequency and Percentage of the items that assess negative attitudes towards plagiarism

No.	Items	Responses					
		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree	
		F	P	F	P	F	P
1	Plagiarists do not belong to the scientific community.	10	33.3	13	43.3	7	23.4
2	The names of the authors who plagiarize should be disclosed to the scientific community.	5	16.7	3	10	22	73.3
3	In times of moral and ethical decline, it is important to discuss issues like plagiarism and self-plagiarism.	4	13.4	3	10	23	76.7
4	Plagiarizing is as bad as cheating in an exam.	8	26.7	6	20	16	53.3
5	Plagiarism impoverishes the investigative spirit.	9	30	7	23.3	14	46.7
6	A plagiarized paper does no harm science.	13	43.3	11	36.7	6	20
7	Since plagiarism is taking other people's words rather than tangible assets; it should NOT be considered as a serious offense.	18	60	3	10	9	30

N= 30; 'Disagree' = ('Strongly disagree'- 1 and 'Disagree' - 2); 'Agree' = ('Agree'- 4 and 'Strongly agree'- 5); NB: F and P stand for Frequency and Percent respectively.

As table 4 above indicated, the participants response to item 1 revealed that 23.4 percent of the students thought that plagiarists did not belong to the scientific community whereas 33.3 percent

of them showed disagreement regarding this idea. Nevertheless, 43.3 percent of the respondents were not sure whether plagiarists belonged to the scientific community. For item 2, 73.3 percent of the students believed that the names of the authors who plagiarized should be disclosed to the scientific community, and only 16.7 percent of them expressed their disagreement to this point. Regarding item 3, 76.7 percent of the respondents agreed that it was essential to discuss issues like plagiarism and self-plagiarism in times of moral and ethical decline, and 13.4 percent of them disagreed with this issue.

In items 4 and 5, students were inquired about the negative aspects of plagiarism and whether it made the investigative spirit worse or not. In this regard, 53.3 and 46.7 percent of the students indicated that plagiarizing was as bad as cheating in an exam and it impoverished the investigative spirit, respectively. On the other hand, 26.7 and 30 percent of the participants expressed their disagreement with the two issues. Moreover, in item 6, 20 percent of them indicated their agreement to the statement which emphasized that a plagiarized paper did not affect the science of research, and 43.3 percent agreed that plagiarism was harmful to the science of research. The other students did not express their agreement or disagreement with this issue. In connection with item 7, 30 percent of the students thought that plagiarism should not be considered as a serious offense because it was taking other people's words rather than tangible assets. On the contrary, 60 percent of them showed their disagreement to this point.

As stated by Mavrinac (2010), a negative attitude toward plagiarism, expresses condemnation and disapproval of plagiarism. Items included in this factor reflect deprecation of plagiarists and emphasize the importance of the negative influence of plagiarism in the academic and scientific communities.

Subjective Norms towards Plagiarism

Ten items were used to measure ELT postgraduate students' subjective norms towards plagiarism in academic writing. The participants' responses to each statement were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages. Table 5 below presents the results of the study.

Table 5: Frequency and Percentage of the items that measure subjective norms towards plagiarism

No.	Items	Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree	
		F	P	F	P	F	P
1	Authors say they do NOT plagiarize, when in fact they do.	8	26.7	1	3.3	21	70
2	Those who say they have never plagiarized are lying.	10	33.3	7	23.3	13	43.3
3	Sometimes I'm tempted to plagiarize, because everyone else is doing it (students, researchers, physicians).	10	33.3	9	30	11	36.7
4	I keep plagiarizing because I haven't been caught yet.	21	70	5	16.7	4	13.3
5	I work (study) in a plagiarism-free environment.	18	60	7	23.3	5	16.6
6	Plagiarism is not a big deal.	19	63.3	5	16.7	6	20
7	Sometimes I copy a sentence or two just to become inspired for further writing.	22	73.4	1	3.3	7	23.3
8	I don't feel guilty for copying verbatim a sentence or two from my previous papers.	4	13.4	6	20	20	66.7
9	Plagiarism is justified if I currently have more important obligations or tasks to do.	21	70	4	13.3	5	16.6
10	Sometimes, it is necessary to plagiarize.	11	36.6	7	23.3	12	40

N= 30; 'Disagree' = ('Strongly disagree'- 1 and 'Disagree' - 2); 'Agree' = ('Agree'- 4 and 'Strongly agree'- 5); NB: F and P stand for Frequency and Percent respectively.

As indicated in Table 5 above, for item 1, while 70 percent of the respondents thought that researchers said that they had not plagiarized when it came to practice, 26.7 percent of them said the opposite. Item 2 presents that though 43.3 percent of the students believed that those who said they had never engaged in plagiarism were lying, 33.3 of them had opposite views and 23.3 percent neither agreed nor disagreed with this point. For item 3, 36.7 percent of the participants agreed that they were sometimes tempted to plagiarize because of the involvement of others,

such as students, researchers, physicians and 33.3 percent of them said the opposite. Nevertheless, 30 percent of them were not sure about this issue.

Item 4 revealed that 70 percent of the participants disagreed with the statement that says, “I keep plagiarizing because I haven’t been caught yet” while 13.3 percent of them expressed their agreement in response to this statement, and the remaining students (16.7%) were uncertain whether they did it or not. As for item 5, while 60 percent of the students disagreed that they studied in a plagiarism-free environment, 16.6 percent of them noted that they worked in a plagiarism-free environment and 23.3 percent of the participants were not sure about this point. In item 6, the participants were asked whether plagiarism was a big deal or not, and 20 percent of them said it was not a big deal while 63.3 percent of them said the opposite.

When analyzing item 7, while 23.3 percent of the students agreed that they sometimes copied a sentence or two just to become inspired for further writing, 73.4 percent of them opposed this view. Item 8 also illustrated that while 66.7 percent of the respondents claimed that they did not feel guilty for copying verbatim a sentence or two from their previous papers, 13.4 percent of them disagreed with this point, and 20 percent of them were not sure whether they felt guilty or not for doing so. Item 9 revealed that while 16.6 percent of the students claimed that plagiarism was justified if they currently had more important obligations or tasks to do, 70 percent of them thought the opposite and 13.3 percent were uncertain about it. Regarding item 10, 40 percent of the participants thought that it was sometimes necessary to plagiarize and 36.6 percent disagreed that it was not necessary to do it, while others (23.3%) did not express their agreement or disagreement in regard to this issue.

According to Mavrinac (2010), subjective norms; express common thinking about the prevalence of plagiarism and the acceptance of such behavior in the academic and scientific communities. Subjective norms reflect the perceived social pressure to be involved or not in a certain behavior.

Attitudes towards Plagiarism

The twenty-nine items of the questionnaire were categorized into three attitudinal factors: positive attitude, negative attitude and subjective norms towards plagiarism. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were calculated for each of the three attitudinal factors. The

average item mean was employed to describe the participants' attitudes towards plagiarism in their academic writing. Table 6 below presents the mean score and standard deviation (SD) for each ATP scale.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics for the three attitudinal factors of plagiarism.

Attitudinal factor	Mean	SD
Positive attitude	32.5	11.8
Negative attitude	24.2	6.0
Subjective norms	36.2	6.9

N=30

According to Pupovac et al. (2010), the mean scores for the positive attitudinal factor that ranges from 12-28, 29-45 and 46-60 were low, moderate and high, respectively. In addition, the mean scores for the negative attitudinal factor that ranges from 7-16, 17-26 and 27-35 were considered as low, moderate and high, respectively and the mean values for subjective norms that range from 10-23, 24-37 and 38-50 were regarded as low, moderate and high, respectively. Based on this, as reported in Table 6 above, the findings of this study indicated that the mean score for positive attitude was 32.5; this revealed that ELT postgraduate students had moderate positive attitudes towards plagiarism. Similarly, the mean values for negative attitude and subjective norms were 24.2 and 36.2, respectively. The result showed that the participants of this study had moderate negative attitude and moderate subjective norms towards plagiarism. Overall, this result suggested that ELT postgraduate students' attitude towards plagiarism was moderate. In other words, students had moderate attitudes towards the three attitudinal factors: positive attitude, negative attitude and subjective norms.

According to Pupovac V. et al. (2010), moderate scores revealed confusion, lack of clear attitude, lack of knowledge and awareness of academic integrity importance among students. ELT postgraduate students' attitude towards plagiarism was also moderate. This means, their attitude toward plagiarism is neither low nor high, but between high and low. Depending on the situation, they may make their attitude low or high toward plagiarism. According to Christopher, *et al.* (2016), students who exhibit more favorable attitude toward academic

dishonesty have a higher propensity to cheat. That is, if we have positive attitude towards it, plagiarism will occur and if we have negative attitude towards it, plagiarism will not occur in writing. This moderate attitude approaches positive attitude towards plagiarism.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicated that the mean score for positive attitude was 32.5; this revealed that ELT postgraduate students had moderately positive attitudes towards plagiarism. Similarly, the mean values for a negative attitude and subjective norms were 24.2 and 36.2, respectively. The results showed that the participants of this study had moderately negative attitude and moderate subjective norms towards plagiarism. Overall, this result suggested that ELT postgraduate students' attitude towards plagiarism was moderate. Hence, it can be concluded that students supported and justified the act of plagiarism. This implies that there is confusion, lack of clear attitude, lack of knowledge and awareness among postgraduate students regarding the importance of academic integrity.

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