



Developing sociocultural plagiarism questionnaire: From awareness to actual commitment of Iranian academia in English writing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since plagiarism as an act of intellectual fraud has recently received a global inquiry in different fields of science, especially in second/foreign language (L2) academic writing, developing a valid and domesticized instrument to meticulously assess the awareness and professional integrity of the Iranian academic community to avoid plagiarism seemed indisputable. As plagiarism has been defined differently in various sociocultural and academic contexts, its legal and ethical issues in such scientific fields as L2 academic writing are worth noting (Oghabi, Pourdana & Ghaemi, 2020). Accordingly, two major causes, mostly condemned as contributing factors to committing plagiarism, are the torment the L2 learners usually experience in writing academic texts, and the divisive cultural differences.

Not surprisingly, the majority of studies on the causes and consequences of plagiarism were conducted in English-speaking countries (such as Australia) to represent the Western cultural values or social concerns and ethical code of conduct. In Asian or Middle Eastern countries, such as Iran wherein the copyright infringement or unlawful reproduction of original works are rarely subject to serious legal consequences, the absence of vigorous studies on this grave matter is underscored. This is while, majority of scarce studies on this topic generally investigated the contributing factors to plagiarism in the Iranian academic context (cf. Riasati & Rahimi, 2013) and overlooked the potentials of determining factors such as attitude or socio-cultural beliefs of L2 writers. At the same time, in the absence of a domesticized plagiarism questionnaire in the academic context of Iran, Iranian researchers generally make use of accessible questionnaires which often represented the Western culture and ethical values (e.g. Curtis & Popal, 2011; Harris, 2001; Idiegbeyan-Ose et al., 2016; Maxwell et al., 2006).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

After a comprehensive review of research literature and conducting semi-structured

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interviews with graduate students of English language studies (n = 24), the researchers adapted a general conceptual framework for developing a prototype plagiarism questionnaire. The non-randomly selected participants partaking in the semi-structured interviews, the pilot and final research participants were all MA graduates and graduate students of English language teaching, English literature, English translation, and linguistics in three State and Islamic Azad University branches in Iran (n = 288). Initially, 39 out of 47 items in the questionnaire were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from (a) strongly disagree, (b) disagree, (c) I don't know, (d) agree (e) strongly agree, which represented the components of participants' *awareness* and *attitude* towards plagiarism. Eight more triple-choice items were constructed in terms of short authentic paragraphs and their corresponding paraphrased texts, each followed by three choices of (a) plagiarism found, (b) no plagiarism, and (c) I don't know, to represent the component of *perception*. After carrying out the pilot administration of the questionnaire (with 224 participants), item revision and deletion (11 items excluded), exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM) with SPSS 21 and AMOS statistical software, the researchers developed the final draft of the sociocultural plagiarism questionnaire with 36 items.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To explore the first objective in this study, the statistical results in this study supported four components of *awareness*, *attitude*, *sociocultural beliefs*, and *perception* as responsible factors for determining sensitivity to plagiarism in Iranian academia. Data analysis also indicated the participants' adequate awareness of the plagiarism policies and their accurate perception, but relatively neutral and irresponsible attitude towards plagiarism downsides, and non-scientific sociocultural beliefs which ultimately provoked them to commit plagiarism. It was concluded that concepts, such as 'intellectual property' and 'ownership of words' which are deeply rooted in Western culture have not been adequately incorporated into the Iranian academic culture yet. Moreover, Iranian scholars prioritized personal relations or vocational gains over following rules of copyright are proved as widespread in the Iranian academic context.

The second objective of this study was examined through frequency analysis of the instances of plagiarism in the Literature Review sections (Chapter II) of the 18 selected MA theses written in English. Relied upon the reports of plagiarism incidence conducted by iThenticate plagiarism detection service at www.Lingaline.com, a widespread and growing number of committed plagiarism by Iranian MA graduates of English language studies during 2013 - 2017 were echoed. In the reports, the rate of plagiarism was higher in men (67.16%) than in women (63.91%); higher in Islamic Azad University branches (78%) than in state universities (56%); and committed more by the MA graduates of English literature (71.66%) than English translation (62.66%) and English language teaching (61.66%). The researchers' justifications on the obtained results were the absence of clear-cut instructions to rules of plagiarism, strict anti-plagiarism policies as well as adequate institutional attention to this unethical and unprofessional behavior in the Iranian academic community which eventually degraded the gravity of plagiarism to such a large extent.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study invoked the fact that not only the Iranian academic community requires upheaving awareness and acute perception by every member towards plagiarism unfortunate consequences, but also the non-scientific and desensitizing nature of Iranian sociocultural beliefs towards plagiarism need reconsideration and national policy making. Moreover, in line with Ayoubi (2017), the findings in this study encourage the educators and university professors to implement further tutorial courses to accentuate the severity of plagiarism misconduct and to rip off every chance of committing plagiarism by the university students in their academic writing. Despite promoting this newly-designed sociocultural plagiarism questionnaire as a more reliable assessment instrument for evaluating the Iranian academic community, the current researchers are reasonably skeptical of yielding similar results with Iranian university students at lower educational levels where the curricular demands of writing courses are more into the accuracy of the content over form and mechanics of writing; neither with Iranian university students of non-English majors due to their intended audience who are mostly Persian-speaking readers with similar insensitivity towards plagiarism infringement acts. Last but not least, the current researchers deployed a non-random convenience sampling procedure to have access to a large number of participants which inevitably lowers the generalizability of the findings to different demographic contexts.

Keywords: Attitude; Awareness; Perception; Plagiarism; Sociocultural beliefs