STUDENT PLAGIARISM – CAUSES AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

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Abstract - This paper describes the phenomenon of plagiarism among students at the English Department, University of Foreign Language Studies, the University of Danang. This phenomenon can be chiefly attributed to the availability and the easy access to the internet and other digital information sources, students' low English proficiency, improper learning strategies and lack of academic skills including quoting, referencing and paraphrasing. It is also due to the tolerant attitude of the university and the teachers as well as plagiarism acceptance among the student community. In order to prevent plagiarism, it is suggested that the university and the English Department should have transparent policies, reliable plagiarism detection tools and severe penalty systems. Besides, some courses should be modified to enhance students' language and academic skills; also, the staff should set good examples in performing their professional skills. All of these measures are expected to be taken thoroughly and consistently.

Key words - plagiarism; academic integrity; English Department; causes; solutions.

1. Rationnales

One of the major objectives of university education is to build up scientific research capacity as well as academic ethics and integrity among students (Law on University Education, 2012). However, academic misconducts have been a big concern for the society and the education community. Plagiarism is one of the relatively popular and increasing acts of academic research ethical violation. Despite a variety of anti-plagiarism measures being applied, this type of misconduct has not yet shown a sight of decrease in level and scope but increased to the extent that was so-called "epidemic cheating" (East, 2010; Park, 2003). Studies have shown that plagiarism at various levels can be seen among students from Europe, America, Asia and Africa, whose majors spread from natural sciences to social sciences. In other words, the misconduct is prevalent irrespective of disciplines, nationalities and cultures, and tends to multiply together with the rapid, deep and strong advances in Information Technology (Park, 2003).

In our country, the year 2010 witnessed a heated discussion on plagiarism among the academic community, starting from the event where three articles by a group of Vietnamese authors were withdrawn from the Euro Physics Letters (a tear-one European physics journal) due to serious plagiarism while their act of misconduct was widely announced in the world's scientific community. The event had negative effects on domestic scientists and damaged the image of Vietnam in the eye of the international academic world (Vũ Phương Anh, 2013; Trần Nam Dũng, 2013). On forums, Vietnamese social scientists and educators expressed various viewpoints on plagiarism, then its different aspects were mentioned in a series of articles, such as "What is plagiarism? What does a plagiarist violate?" and "Preventing plagiarism from a cultural perspective" by Dr. Vu Thi Phuong Anh, "The cultural source of plagiarism" by Prof. Ngo Tu Lap, "Plagiarism and scientific ethics" by Dr. Tran Nam Dung. According to a study by Tran Thi Tuyet (from Hanoi National University) on the causes of plagiarism among students at La Trobe and Melbourne Universities released in December 2012, plagiarism is "the result of the mutual interaction between a variety of personal and contextual causes" such as writing styles, learning styles, learning motivation, academic skills, etc. The concerns of academic community relating to the misconduct for years prove that plagiarism is a big challenge for the country's education and science development.

Most universities across the world have anti-plagiarism supporting tools for students and apply strict punishments for plagiarism violators. Nevertheless, universities in Vietnam, especially the University of Danang (UD), have not yet paid due attention to this problem. Very few studies on honesty and integrity in academic research have been conducted; moreover, UD's member universities have not imposed specific regulations on plagiarism prevention. In that context, we conducted an investigation into the current situation of plagiarism among students at the English Department (ED), University of Foreign Language Studies (UFLS), the University of Danang. This paper provides a summary of the study results, suggests causes of plagiarism and puts forward some fixing measures.

2. What is plagiarism? Why shouldn't we plagiarize?

According to Oxford Dictionary (2012), plagiarism is "the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and pasing them off as one's own". Standler (2000) (cited from Vũ Phương Anh, 2013, p.2) "in mild cases, plagiarism may mean the quoting of several sentences without the quotation marks and citation of the authors. In worst cases, the majority of the writing piece or work belongs to others, the plagiarist eliminated the author's name, replaced it with his/her name and adjusted the document format".

At universities in developed countries, the concept of plagiarism is clearly defined and explained in regulations on students' academic research and testing and assessment, which are maintained in libraries and course syllabi. Always accessible to students, these documents help them avoid violations warned by the universities. After looking into materials from various universities, colleges and research institutes, we would like to present here the main types of plagiarism:

- Students copy partially or entirely an essay or work of others and submit it under their name (with or without permission of the original authors).

- Students quote a part of an essay or work of others without attribution.

- Students copy some content from different sources and rearrange it into their assignment.

- Students paraphrase others' ideas with their own words without attribution.

- Students translate entirely others' ideas or essays without attribution.

- Students investigate and synthesize information from newspapers, magazines and online media on the Interner into their assignments without attribution.

The above-mentioned behaviours, regardless of being intentional or accidental, are considered as violations of plagiarism.

Plagiarism should be avoided for the following reasons:

From the social perspectives, plagiarism is an act of stealing, dishonesty and cheating; therefore, it is always criticized by the community. Plagiarism is not only an ethical issue but a legal one. It is a form of intellectual property infringement, which is still a minor violation in Vietnam, yet an intolerable illegal act in many nations worldwide.

From the education and training perspectives, plagiarism leads to the formation of academics who are lazy and dependent on others' ideas and available information sources while losing their own independent and creative thinking. The lack of academic skills results in plagiarism, which in turn cause students to lose their confidence; in the long run, when integrating into regional or international academic environment, students will face many difficulties, barriers and surprises. Moreover, honesty in learning and science shows one's self-respect, self-esteem and pride of their hard-earned achievements and genuine individual capacity.

From the scientific and advanced education development perspectives, compromising plagiarism helps form an uncivilized, unjust and unprofessional education environment, where hard work and intellectual property are underated. In testing and assessment, plagiarism causes the unfairness in evaluating learners' efforts. Many plagiarism cases are undetected and well applauded, while genuine assignments completed with serious efforts are not highly evaluated. Besides, plagiarism prevention offers a way to ensure reliability for students' testing and assessment, which is a significant component in any curricula.

3. The current situation of plagiarism among students at the English Department, University of Foreign Language Studies, the University of Danang.

3.1. Research method

We conducted a survey on 200 junior and senior students at the English Department (ED), UFLS in schoolyear 2012-2013 and interviewed 20 lecturers of the department, who are leading academic writing courses and other courses with big assignments or graduation papersas assessment tools. The means of data collection included questionnaires for students, interviews for teachers, and students' assignment analysis. Questions were simple and clear; researchers were ready to provide clarification if needed. The authors committed to utilize the collected data for research purposes only and emphasized the necessity of honest responses to ensure the study's reliability.

3.2. Research results

3.2.1. Popularity

Plagiarism was common among students at the ED. 100% of students admitted this fact, 100% of lecturers acknowledged that they usually recognized plagiarism violations in assessing students' big assignments, essays and graduation papers.

86% of students' assignment samples showed plagiarism violations under different forms; the most common one was the copying a part of someone else's assignment and citing information from books, newspapers and other sources without attribution.

3.2.2. Students' knowledge

Most students did not understand what plagiarism was and misunderstood that plagiarism only meant copying the whole assignment of others without the authors' permission. There was a correlation between students' awareness of plagiarism and their violation rates. For example, supposing that paraphrasing others' ideas with their own words without attribution was not registered as plagiarism, students committed this act on a regular basis. Similarly, they usually translated or made reference to information and failed to make attribution without knowing that it was a violation of academic ethics.

Therefore, it can be seen that plagiarism behaviours among students can be intentional (intentionally copying or paraphrasing others' work), or unintentional (due to the lack of referencing skills) or failing to understand the seriousness of their deed.

3.2.3. Students' attitude

In general, students failed to acknowledge the severity of plagiarism behaviours. A small portion (3%) even supposed that plagiarism was allowed by the university and teachers; 42% stated that the act was accepted widely by their friend circle and the student community. Only 27% considered it as a violation that needed preventing. Overall, plagiarism was not only common but also registered as a natural and accepted deed among students.

3.2.4. Causes

Causes for students' violation of plagiarism are presented as follows.

The first cause: the easier internet-enabled information and reference searching. The increasing availability and accessibility of informarion regardless of time and place allows one to google out a series of relevant data and articles with just a few words typed in and a click. The temptation of this information supporting source makes students subjective, dependent and refrain from working hard for their school tasks.

The second cause: the lack of confidence in one's ability to express himself in English and difficulties in

choosing appropriate words, structures and writing styles. Consequently, students choose to borrow someone else's words to replace their ideas.

The third cause: the lack of students' time and efforts invested in big assignments or graduation papers. When it comes to due time for submission, students grow to be baffled and confused. The only way for them to hand in assignments in time is to take risks and copy others' work or paraphrase contents from online sources or materials, books and newspapers.

The fourth cause: failure to apprehend the concept of plagiarism. The misconception and misunderstanding of plagiarism lead to students' higher frequency of violation and no chances to correct their wrongdoings.

The fifth cause: poor academic skills, especially quoting, citation and referencing ones. On the other hand, a popular cause is the failure in distinguishing between applying common knowledge and rephrasing others' ideas. Students also lack skills to analyze, evaluate and synthesize various information sources and opinions then putting forwards their personal viewpoints.

The sixth cause: the unavailability of appropriate regulations on plagiarism prevention, detection and punishments. The unstrict attitude and the loosening of academic research regulations set foundation for students to think that plagiarism is natural, popular and widely acceptable.

The seventh cause: students' perspectives and attitude toward the course. A large number of students take certain courses for granted and refrained from working hard for big assignments. A number of students even suppose that the completion of tasks is necessary in principle only since the teachers cannot afford time to read and score each assignment submitted and will just skim through for scoring, therefore, there is no need to invest a lot of time and efforts for the exercise.

3.2.5. Attitude of the University, Department and lecturers

Up to now, there have been no official documents on punishing plagiarism behaviours from the Ministry of Education and Training, the University of Danang, UFLS, the English Department or the lecturers. The typical punishment forms decided by lecturers include warning, task redoing, or deducing 25% or 50% of the total task scores.

The plagiarism detection process in students is not consistent, unified and frequent. Most detected plagiarism cases are attributed to experiences of lecturers through illogical essay structures, abrupt changes in writing styles from silly to very coherent with solid arguments, careful and precise word choices or comparison with completed assignments of previous students.

Some teachers spot plagiarism by typing a suspected paragraph and searching on Google to trace its origins from huge online databases. As for students, 89% admitted that they had never identified as committing plagiarism; a small number confessed they were caught with the act but the punishments were mild warnings and insignificant score deduction.

The university and the department have not issued specific students' guidelines on plagiarism prevention. The course on university learning methodology comprises no orientations for the issue as well as the fundamental regulations on assignment implementation and submission at university level. The course on Scientific Research Methods incorporates one additional reading on plagiarism but often neglected while instructions on citing, quoting, referencing and other research skills account for only a small amount of course time, which is inadequate for proper skill development and practice.

The University of Danang requires all master graduation papers to include a statement of authorship in the very first page of the book. However, the ED has not yet requested students to commit to no plagiarism in graduation papers as well as in big assignments, essays and other writing tasks.

To sum up, the university and lecturers still underestimate the consequences of plagiarism and fail to apply appropriate policies and measures to strictly prevent, detect and punish violations of plagiarism.

3.3. Some suggested measures

3.3.1. The first measure

It is necessary that the university, departments and lecturers build common regulations on preventing, detecting and strictly punishing violations of plagiarism. For instance, copying a paragraph is equivalent to 25% of the total score deduction, entire work duplication to score zero, etc. Then, these regulations should be announced publicly and repeated in each course where students are supposed to submit assignments. All students should be required to write "the commitment of no plagiarism" on each of their big assignments, theses or research works. "No plagiarism" should be a criterion to assess students' work. On the other hand, it is advisable that electronic plagiarism detection systems (e.g. Turnitin) be utilized so as to save lecturers' time and effort.

A resolute attitude toward eliminating plagiarism together with the unity and consensus among levels or among lecturers of various courses is the prerequisite condition to improve the current disturbing situation.

3.3.2. The second measure

It is important to educate students about honesty and integrity in academic work, pointing out the positive reasons for plagiarism prevention right from the start when students are fresh at the university. These contents should be embraced in both courses of university learning methodology and scientific research methods. Specifically, different types of plagiarism behaviours should be clearly defined, explained and illustrated by examples so that students can have a sharper understanding of plagiarism to avoid it.

3.3.3. The third measure

The training of academic and research skills for students should be intensified, particularly, (1) quoting, (2) referencing, (3) distinguishing between common knowledge (no need for citation) and others (that need

citation) and (4) paraphrasing skills.

It is recommended that more time and more practical tasks be designed to diligently train students of those practical skills. This was also the wish of most students under the survey. Websites should be provided for students for reference, for example, "the how to avoid plagiarism" by Sue Thompson, posted on Plagiarism Prevention for Students Website – in which, academic research skills are clearly explained with examples, citation and comparison, very convenient for study. Besides, available online is a convenient APA-style citation tool at http://citationmachine.net/index2.php This tool can help save time and avoid mistakes in referencing.

3.3.4. The fourth measure

Another way to address the problem is to help students develop language skills, idea expressions, vocabulary and structures typical in academic writing. Currently, the ED has a team of native volunteer teachers, who can be a great help for students in building up their language and proofreading their big assignments or graduation paper. We believe this supporting system can significantly decrease plagiarism among students.

3.3.5. The fifth measure

Lecturers should set good examples in academic research, strictly upholding the professional academic spirit in teaching. Lecturers are to form a habit to integrate references into their presentations in class or at conferences, give feedback to students on the strong and weak points of their assignments, strictly punish plagiarism if any, creating a perception among students that their assignments are strictly monitored and their hard work is highly appreciated.

4. Conclusion

In order to fulfill the mission of education in training well-rounded intellectuals, the goals of strengthening the academic ethics teaching as well as eliminating all forms of cheating should be implemented thoroughly.

The current situation of plagiarism worldwide and nationwide has shown that this is not an easy task, but with patience, determined attitude, together with effective measures, plagiarism will step by step be pushed back.

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