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Creating Awareness of Plagiarism Among Postgraduates in a Postgraduate Course Through a Talk

(Kesedaran Tentang Plagiat dalam Kalangan Pelajar Pascasiswazah Menerusi Sebuah Ceramah dalam Kursus Pascasiswazah)

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ABSTRACT

Submitting plagiarised works at the postgraduate level is not a manifestation of a positive researcher character; yet, such an academic crime appears to be common among students. Although the crime committed may either be intentional or unintentional, the need to prevent this from happening is necessary. Hence, to curb this problem, a minor change in the course structure was made to a postgraduate course in UKM. This change was in the form of introducing a talk on plagiarism in the course activities. The talk on plagiarism was presented to the students at the beginning of the semester to create awareness of the various forms of plagiarism, the implications of plagiarism, and ways of preventing it. This talk was followed by an investigation on the students' understanding of the subject matter through their reflective diary entries. Results show that the talk has succeeded in getting the students to understand the forms of plagiarism and ways of preventing plagiarism.

Keywords: Creating awareness; postgraduate; plagiarism

ABSTRAK

Penghantaran kerja kursus yang diplagiat di tahap pengajian pasca siswazah bukanlah satu manifestasi ciri penyelidik yang positif. Namun, jenayah plagiat ini terus menjadi perkara yang lazim dalam kalangan pelajar. Walaupun tidak diketahui sama ada jenayah plagiat ini dilakukan oleh pelajar secara mereka sedar atau tidak, masalah ini perlu ditangani. Untuk menangani masalah ini, satu bentuk perubahan kecil telah dilakukan ke atas struktur sebuah kursus pasca siswazah di UKM. Perubahan ini termasuklah mengadakan sebuah ceramah tentang plagiat dalam pembentukan aktiviti kursus. Ceramah tentang plagiat ini diberikan pada awal semester untuk memberi pencerahan kepada pelajar tentang pelbagai bentuk plagiat, implikasi plagiat dan cara-cara mengelak daripada melakukannya. Ceramah ini disusuli dengan mengkaji kesan ceramah ke atas pemahaman pelajar tentang plagiat menerusi entri diari refleksi mereka. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa ceramah yang diberikan telah berjaya membantu pelajar memahami bentuk-bentuk plagiat dan cara-cara mengatasi masalah plagiat ini.

Kata kunci: Kesedaran; pascasiswazah; plagiat

Introduction

Plagiarism is "a crime against academy" (Bouville 2008). It refers to the act of taking and using "another person's ideas, writing, or invention as their own" (Oxford English Dictionary 1995). Plagiarism originated from the Latin word "*plagiarius*" – a word that is used in the 1590s to refer to a "kidnapper, seducer, and plunderer, one who kidnaps the child or slave of another" (Harper 2014). Today, plagiarism is dominantly used to refer to one form of academic dishonesty (Hayes & Introna 2005). Among students, this form of academic dishonesty comes in the form of "including other people's words in a coursework assessment without marking them as being such" (Hayes & Introna 2005), and subsequently, "receiving credit for work that is not their own" (Ercegovac & Richardson 2004).

Plagiarism does not only take place within the same language. As a matter of fact, plagiarism does happen across languages, and this is known as "translation plagiarism" (Potthast et al. 2011). This takes place when texts from other languages are translated by a particular author and subsequently, the translated texts are integrated into the author's own writing (Potthast et al. 2011). Such a phenomenon commonly occurs particularly when non-native speakers of particular languages have to submit or publish their works in languages they are not fluent in.

Past studies on plagiarism (Barret & Malcolm 2006; Carroll 2004) indicate that students plagiarisme either intentionally or unintentionally. While intentional plagiarism is clearly a result of dishonesty on the part of the students, unintentional plagiarism is not totally because of students' undesirable character. They fall

into the "crime of plagiarism" because of their inability to cite properly, their incompetency to paraphrase and summarise in the right way, and their inappropriate way of making references in their works (Barret & Malcolm 2006). Hence, getting the students to be aware of plagiarism as early as possible is crucial because if plagiarism is not made known to students, they may develop a false conception about writing and think that their act of copying works of others may be permissible (Caroll 2002).

According to Barret and Malcolm (2007), plagiarism is more rampant among students who are academically weaker. Their inability to grasp what is presented in their literature results in their inability to present their understanding of the subject matter in their own words. This is particularly prevalent among those who have "fear of failure" and among those whose parents demands good grades from them (Ercegovac & Richardson 2004). Gu and Brooks (2008), on the other hand, suggest that plagiarism is widespread among those with "linguistic constraints", i.e., among those who have difficulty in writing in their own words, particularly among non-native speakers because they do not possess the ability to write notes properly when reading for information.

Ignorance has been identified as one factor that contributes to students' excessive plagiarism (Auer & Krupar 2001). In a study by Roig and DeTommaso (1995), students have been found to not being able to distinguish a correctly paraphrased text from a plagiarised text. Culture has also been identified as the reason for plagiarising (Gu & Brooks 2008; Hayes & Introna 2005). Hayes and Introna (2005), for example, found that text memorisation has been the focus of learning experience among Chinese students whereas among Asian and Greek students, teachers (or texts) are viewed as the authority and hence, they (the teachers or texts) are the only ones who are "authorized to have an interpretation" (p. 225). These have been identified as the reasons why in some higher learning institutions, students from these parts of the world appear to be plagiarising more frequently than the other parts of the world.

Although learning experience may not be a direct cause for plagiarism, Maclachlan (1999) claims that the increase in plagiarised term papers among students is attributed to the fact that materials on the internet are easily available for them to access. This is supported by Power (2009) who found that plagiarising is inevitable simply because it does not take a lot of effort to do. Power (2009) lists other factors for plagiarism and this includes the fact that students are confident they won't get caught; laziness (usually attributed to others); there is no victim; an assignment is deemed busywork; they don't like or don't understand the class or topic; they feel pressured for grades; they procrastinate; they don't know how to avoid it; they are unaware that they are plagiarizing; they have a sense that plagiarism in school is more acceptable than in the real world; they lack the ability to rephrase; and finally, they feel the professor didn't give enough time to complete the assignment.

Several methods have been identified as possible means that can be adopted to prevent students from committing plagiarism. Hinchliffe (1998) suggests that teachers talk to students about plagiarism. When doing this, teachers must clearly define what plagiarism is and let the students know the teacher's policy towards plagiarism. In addition to educating students about plagiarism, Born (2001), on the other hand, suggests ways that teachers can do when assigning students assignment so that plagiarism will not be committed. Among others, teachers are suggested to construct questions that come in the form of "discussion" and those that do not require answers from "rote memorisation". Teachers are also encouraged to give different questions to different individuals and conduct more in-class activities. In addition to suggesting teachers to get their students to summarise research papers related to their assigned topics, Barret and Malcolm (2007) encourage teachers to introduce the use of electronic plagiarism detection software (Turnitin & Ferret) in their classes.

While the suggestions mentioned above focus more on what the teachers can do to prevent plagiarism, Devlin (2006) reported important steps that several universities in Australia have taken in preventing this crime. This includes the formal teaching of anti-plagiarism related policies, the dissemination of student guide, the assignment of plagiarism descriptors by staff to the students, and the establishment of a central body that registers any incidents of plagiarism. Quoting his previous works (James et al. 2002) Devlin (2006) added that in Australian Universities, the following have taken place:

> 1) A collaborative effort to recognise and counter plagiarism at every level from policy, through faculty/division and school/department procedures, to individual staff practices; 2) Thoroughly educating students about the expected conventions for authorship and the appropriate use and acknowledgement of all forms of intellectual material; 3) Designing approaches to assessment that minimise the possibility for students to submit plagiarised material, while not reducing the quality and rigour of assessment requirements; 4) Installing highly visible procedures for monitoring and detecting cheating, including appropriate punishment and re-education measures (pp. 2-3).

Despite the fact that plagiarism is a crime, Hayes and Introna (2005) suggest that educators should respond to issues of plagiarism, particularly among international students, in a more reasonable manner. This is due to the fact that the act of plagiarism may be the result of "many complex and culturally situated influences." Because of this, Hayes and Introna (2005) suggest teachers to introduce "patchwriting" (with citation of the sources) to students as a "legitimate step towards independence of thought" (p. 239). By doing this, students will be able to learn the

correct way to write their thoughts without committing plagiarism.

While a lot of studies on plagiarism have been conducted on undergraduate students, a relatively smaller number of studies on plagiarism among postgraduate students have been conducted (Gilmore et al. 2010). Hence, this study adds to existing studies on plagiarism among postgraduate students.

At the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is taught at the postgraduate level for the Masters of Arts in English Language Studies (MA ELS) programme. For many semesters, the course required the students to submit a 30% mini project at the end of the semester as a part of the course assessment. Throughout those semesters, none of the students have failed to submit their mini projects; nonetheless, many have not succeeded in submitting un-plagiarised works. Submitting un-plagiarised works is not a positive researcher character, and to curb this problem, a change in the postgraduate course structure was made in the course structure of SLA, an elective course that was run in the second semester of the 2012-2013 Session. Among the changes introduced in this course included the presentation of a talk on plagiarism. Hence, this paper focuses on the change made to the course activities to create awareness of plagiarism among postgraduates students and the results of the change from the students' perspectives.

Methodology

A talk on plagiarism to educate the students with what plagiarism is and the institution's policy towards plagiarism (following Hinchliffe (1998) in the development of the course activities was one of the changes made to SLA. The talk was presented to the eighteen students (10 female, 8 male) at the beginning of the semester to create awareness of the various forms of plagiarism, the implications of plagiarism, and ways of preventing it. The talk was presented with visuals using Microsoft Power Point (Figure 1).

The talk was divided into several sections and they were presented as follows in the following order, namely etymology, will you ever be caught, plagiarising scenarios and take-home messages.

Etymology

The talk began with the presentation of the etymology of the word 'plagiarism' to the students. The students were informed that the word "*plagiarism*" originated from the

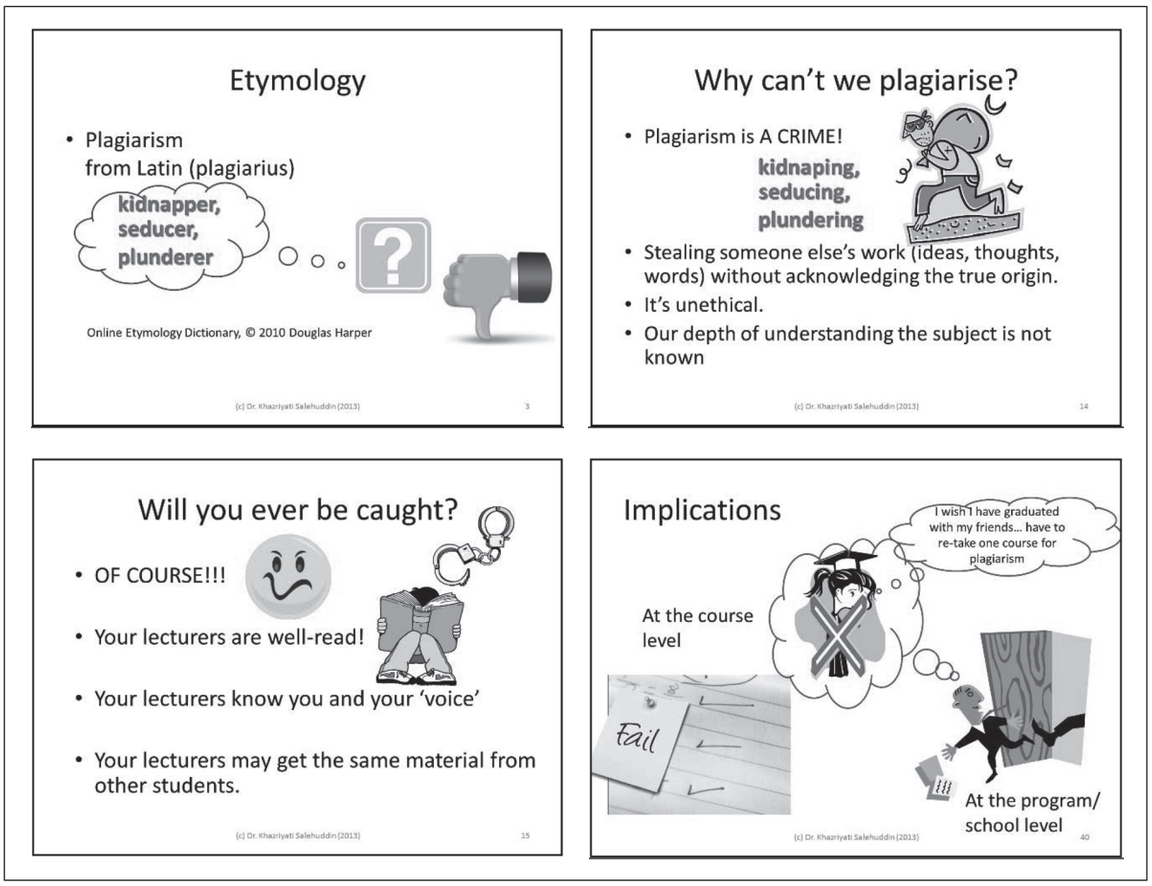

FIGURE 1. A snapshot of some of the slides from the Talk

Latin word "*plagiarius*" and they were told that the word refers to a "*kidnapper, seducer* and *plunderer*". Once this was done, the students were asked the kind of associative images that were triggered when the words "*kidnapper, seducer* and *plunderer*" were mentioned – whether the words triggered positive images or negative images. They unanimously agreed that all the four English words triggered negative images in their thoughts. At the end of this discussion, it was concluded that by knowing the etymology of "Plagiarism", the students were aware of the fact that a person who plagiarises is indeed a person with a negative character. Once this was done, Stepchyshyn and Nelson (2007) definition of plagiarism (the unauthorized "use or close imitation of the language (ideas) and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work") was used as the working definition for the session.

WILL YOU EVER BE CAUGHT?

In the second section of the talk, the students were asked whether or not they will ever be caught if they plagiarised the works of others. They were not only informed that their act will be caught, but also, they were further explained on how their lecturers would be able to detect their act of plagiarising – if they were to commit such a crime. They were told that their lecturers are well read and naturally, a lot of sentences, ideas, and opinions, will be familiar to the lecturers. They were also told that their lecturers know them (the students) well and the students' "voices"; hence, the students' ability to come out with expressions that do not reflect their in-class performance will definitely lead to suspicion to the lecturers. This is true due to the fact that lecturers do interact with the students a lot, particularly in classes; hence, the possibility that the lecturers know what forms of sentences that the students are capable to produce is huge. Finally, students were also informed that there are cases where plagiarism was detected simply because the same plagiarised materials were also produced by other students who plagiarise from the same authors!

PLAGIARISING SCENARIOS

In the subsequent section of the talk, the students were presented with seven (7) questions that require a "Yes" or a "No" answer. For each question, the students were presented with a scenario each to illustrate what the questions meant. For example, for question 1 that reads "*If we use the idea of another author (but we present the ideas in our own words) without providing a reference, are we plagiarising?*", students were presented in Figure 2.

Based on the examples given, the students were later asked to ponder (and not disclose their answers) whether or not the scenario given was an example of a plagiarised work. The same procedure was repeated for the other 6 questions. Six different scenarios were presented to the students for a better illustration of the 'crimes' committed post in the questions. Once all the seven questions with their respective scenarios were presented to the students, the students discussed their answers with the class by revealing their answers and their justification to their answers. Although all the 7 questions were "Yes" and "No" questions, the answers given to the students by the lecturer were not only inform of a "Yes" or a "No"; as a matter of fact, justifications were given to the students as to why the answers to the questions were either a "Yes" or a "No". To illustrate, for question 1, despite the fact that the words used in the "You write" section were words that are different from the "original", student was informed that scenario 1 was still an act of plagiarism because the ideas belonged to the original author (s) and the new author was only reproducing the ideas of the original author (s) using his own words.

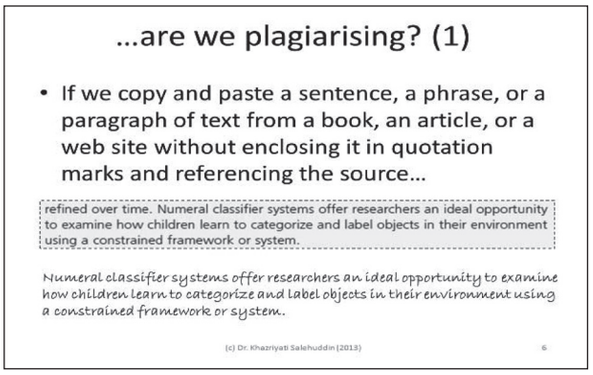

FIGURE 2. Scenario 1 following Question 1

The presentation of each of the scenarios was then followed by the mechanisms that could be adopted to avoid plagiarism. For scenario 1, for example, the students were told that apart from paraphrasing the words of the authors and presenting the original authors' ideas in their own words, they should also include the citation (the source) where the idea was taken. Following this, the paraphrased sentence was copied from the scenario presented earlier and this was followed by the names of the author. Example of the correct version is as presented in Figure 3.

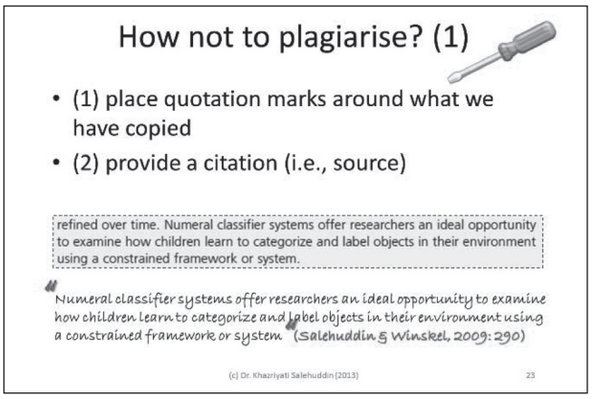

FIGURE 3. The correct way to cite to avoid plagiarism for Question 1

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

The talk on plagiarism ended with a summary of the do's that students should remember when working on their project paper so as to avoid committing plagiarism.

1. Word-for-word: When an author's exact words are directly copied, students should include "double quotation marks", followed by the name of the author, the year the work was published, and the page number.
2. Paraphrase: When an author's words are paraphrased, students should include the name of the author, and the year the work was published. Information on the page number is not required.
3. Figures and tables: When Figures and Tables are taken from an author's work, students should include the name of the author, followed by the year the work was published, and the page number. In some cases, permission from the publishers is required, particularly when the published works are copyrighted.
4. Synonyms: When the words used by the original authors are replaced with their synonyms, students should include the name of the author, and the year the work was published.
5. Ideas: When the ideas of a particular author were used, students should include the name of the author, and the year the work was published.
6. Author's name in text: When the author's name is mentioned in the text, students should include the year the work was published in bracket.

In order to gauge the effectiveness of the effort to develop a positive researcher character through the talk on plagiarism, students' reflection on their understanding of the subject matter is necessary. Hence, the reflective diary writing method was used as one of the ways to measure the effect of the talk.

Results

Students' reflective diary entries were read and reread to investigate the effectiveness of the talk on plagiarism. Based on their diary entries, it was found that out of the eighteen students, (1) three indicated that they had never heard of plagiarism, (2) eight indicated that they had heard of plagiarism, but had no idea what plagiarism is and (3) seven indicated that they had heard of plagiarism and know what it is. However, no one claimed that they knew what plagiarism is very well.

Students' responses in their diary entries indicated that after the talk, eight students' knowledge of plagiarism was now better than before they had listened to the talk whereas ten of them indicated that they could now, after the talk, explain what plagiarism is to anyone. The following figure illustrates students' improvement of knowledge on plagiarism.

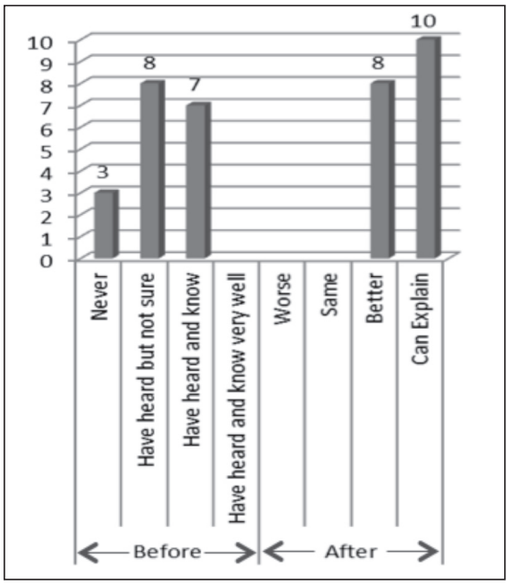

FIGURE 4. Students' knowledge on plagiarism before and after the talk

Their reflective diary entries was also analysed qualitatively to investigate the effectiveness of the talk on plagiarism. The following are excerpts taken from their diary entries. (The ungrammatical structures have not been amended so as to maintain the originality of the students' reflection).

> "I am more aware of this issue after this lesson. And now I am much clear about what plagiarism is as well as how to avoid this problem" (Student 3)
>
> "It is an exciting lecture because it reinforcement with many examples and use a simple words to explain the main object. We thanks your efforts to make an interesting lecture." (Student 13)
>
> "Yes, I think it is very important thing to explain this term in the first semester to all postgraduate students to avoid plagiarism for the first time" (Student 15).

All the students wrote that the talk on plagiarism was a good idea and that it should be replicated and presented to other students. Using the students' words, the following illustrates how two of the students expressed how they feel about the talk.

> "Yes because most postgraduate students especially international students don't have a clear idea about plagiarism" (Student 4).
>
> "Yes, because it is important for all students before they embark on their thesis writing" (Student 7).

Discussions and Conclusion

As mentioned earlier in this paper, several ways can be adopted to prevent plagiarism, particularly among postgraduate students, from taking place. Despite the

various ways mentioned, a talk on plagiarism was conducted as the one and only step to curb this problem. This method was adopted as it was not known to what extent the students are aware of what plagiarism is. In this talk, as proposed by Hinchliffe (1998) the definition of plagiarism was clearly spelled out together with its etymology and relevant examples. The institutions policy towards plagiarism, particularly implications to those who were found to have committed plagiarism was also made known to the students.

Although Bond's (2001) suggestion to construct different questions for different students is necessary to avoid plagiarism, this method was not adopted in this study. This is because, through past experience, students doing SLA were rarely caught plagiarising works of their course mates; instead, what is more common is their act of plagiarising works that are published either online or in prints. Hence, for future research, what would be a more important method to be added to the course is the use of electronic plagiarism detection software like *Turnitin & Ferret* in class activities. Another activity that could be added is the introduction of "patchwriting" with accurate citation of the sources to the students. However, these two class activities may take a lot of the course's contact hours and may not be suitable for SLA, which should be more focused on the content. Thus, the introduction of *Turnitin & Ferret* to students as well as the teaching of "patchwriting" with accurate citation of the sources could be added to the programme module, rather than the course module. Hence, for now, the talk on plagiarism may be the most pracitical method to prevent plagiarism for SLA.

This study has shown that the talk on plagiarism has been successful in getting postgraduate students to be aware of what plagiarism is and be aware of the fact that avoiding plagiarism is a key feature of a positive researcher character. Although it cannot be claimed that the students will definitely not commit plagiarism after the talk on plagiarism, it can safely be claimed that if this group of students were to be caught plagiarising after this, their act of plagiarising is not because they are not aware of the crime they commit, but it is because they choose not to develop a positive researcher character within themselves.

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