

An investigation of Iranian EFL Masters students' perceptions of plagiarism

Amir Mahdavi Zafarghandi
University of Guilan
mahdavi1339@gmail.com

Fatemeh Khoshroo
University of Guilan
ftmhkhoshroo@gmail.com

Behzad Barkat
University of Guilan
behzadbarekat@yahoo.com

Keywords: education, Iranian students, plagiarism, prevalence rates, EFL

Abstract

This study examined the understanding, perceived seriousness, and prevalence rates of different forms of plagiarism among Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Masters students studying at universities in Iran where their courses were taught in English. A survey questionnaire was used. The results indicated that plagiarism was pervasive among the students, and that they had an inadequate understanding of different forms of plagiarism. Second, prevalence rates of plagiarism were negatively correlated with both perceived seriousness and understanding of plagiarism at significant levels. Third, perceived seriousness of plagiarism was a predictor of prevalence rates of plagiarism among Iranian EFL Masters students. Finally, no significant relationship was found between the understanding of plagiarism and the respondents' years of study implying that the recognition of various forms of plagiarism remains a challenging task for the students during their whole academic lives. These findings highlighted the need for instructing students in the issues related to plagiarism in order to minimise its prevalence rates.

Introduction

Issues related to plagiarism have fascinated the attention of numerous researchers for a variety of reasons. Plagiarism is in distinct conflict with the goals sought by higher education (Lim & See, 2001). It attacks the goals of academic integrity (Loutzenhiser, Pita, & Reed, 2006; Walker, 1998), undermines the "moral fiber" of those committing it (Bennett 2005, p. 137), and the process of evaluation (Alam, 2004; Lim & See, 2001). According to Howard (2007), "plagiarism in the academy matters so dearly because writing assignments are undermined through plagiarism, none of that learning takes place, and academic enterprise is itself endangered" (p. 11). In addition, students engaged in dishonest behaviour during their studies are more likely to perpetuate their dishonesty in post-university work settings as well (Lim & See, 2001; Whitely, 1988). Therefore, it is necessary for educators to gain a comprehensive understanding of the status of plagiarism and its related issues within educational systems and amongst students.

In line with this need, a vast review of the related literature indicated a lack of proper

understanding of plagiarism among students. Based on the findings of the literature, the researchers conducted a pilot study in order to investigate whether Iranian EFL Masters students were in the same situation. According to the results, in many cases they did not have proper understanding of the concept and its seriousness. The severity of the problem highlighted the need to expand the scope of the study in order to investigate the issues in a larger sample representative of the whole Iranian EFL Masters students.

Based on the findings of the pilot study, this inevitable assumption was made that Iranian EFL Masters students might have poor understanding of plagiarism and its various forms leading to poor practices in their coursework owing to the fact that students' perceptions play major roles in plagiarism (Wood, 2004). Since no study had addressed such issues facing EFL Masters students in Iran, the current study investigated the prevalence rates of different forms of plagiarism among the students, their understanding and perceived seriousness of the forms, and the relationship between their perceptions and the prevalence rates of plagiarism. The current study provided Iranian academics with clear and up-to-date information regarding the status of the problem and its probable origins among the students. Understanding what influences the incidence of plagiarism, instructors can take more appropriate measures to address it (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997; Barry, 2006; Devlin & Gray, 2007; Harris, 2004; Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2002; Lim & See, 2001; Pecorari, 2003; Yeo, 2007).

Perceptions of plagiarism

A review of the literature on students' perceptions of plagiarism reveals the existence of indecisiveness among them over the constituents of plagiarism (McCabe & Trevino, 1996). Unawareness and inadequate familiarity with the concept of plagiarism (Bamford & Sergiou, 2005; Briggs, 2009; Devlin & Gray, 2007; DeVoss & Rosati, 2002; Erkaya, 2009; Lahur, 2004; McDonnell, 2004; Park, 2003), proper citation techniques (Landau, Druen, & Arcuri, 2002; Larkham & Manns, 2002; Park, 2003), and lack of understanding of academic conventions (Joyce, 2007) have consistently been presented to account for the occurrence of plagiarism among students, particularly non-native ones. It is believed that they mostly hold lenient attitudes towards minor forms of cheating (Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995; McCabe & Trevino, 1996). Some researchers have reported that students do not perceive plagiarism as being serious (Park, 2003). Rather, students believe it to be a violation of academic etiquette (Ashworth & Bannister, 1997) and they think plagiarism will not harm others (Lim & See, 2001).

Such misperceptions may simply stem from the vast array of types of plagiarism in an academic context which ranges from copying a few sentences without attribution to the copying of an entire work (Bennett, 2005). Alam (2004) has found that even the academic staff are uncertain with regard to the "grey area" of plagiarism and that it is difficult, even for them, to determine what plagiarism is in academic writing and when and where it starts (p. 55). Ironically, staff members mostly assume that students hold the same understanding and attitudes as themselves towards plagiarism (Devoss & Rosati, 2002). However, Ashworth and Bannister (1997), and Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) have reported that students regard plagiarism as less serious than do faculty members. Another reason for students' misunderstanding of plagiarism has been attributed to the current practices of attribution and source use having basically been developed in the Western culture (Howard, 1995; Leask, 2006; Pennycook, 1996) that is often imbued with conflicting complications. DeVoss and Rosati (2002) have elaborated on the most obvious one, i.e. "expecting students to come up with and develop an original idea, while requiring them to find plenty of material to back up their supposedly new and original idea or perspective on a subject" (p. 195). Leask (2006) has drawn on the metaphor of "the same game with new rules" to further highlight that students are not the source of the problem, rather the problem stems from the change of values and students' unfamiliarity with the new rules of the

academic culture to which they are assumed to be already familiar (p. 190). This problem is further intensified by instructors' failure to explain new rules to students. Under such circumstances, students have to work the rules out by themselves. Nevertheless, some students fail to grasp these rules. Therefore, they have to resort to cheating in order to respond to their desires for success, winning, and feeling good about themselves. Leask has further highlighted that neither the mere explanation of the rules nor punitive warnings lead to full understanding of the concept.

Cultural differences

A growing body of the literature has indicated different cultures hold very different perceptions and beliefs regarding plagiarism stemming from different sources. First, Hall (1976, as cited in Koul, Clariana, Jitgarun, & Songsriwittaya, 2009) has compared Eastern cultures with Western cultures. Western societies are described to be "low context" in the sense that people exhibit strong emphasis on external rules and make decisions based on directness, fact, and logic. However, Eastern societies are typically "high context" societies where people care for relational concerns and make decisions based on personal relationships. Based on Hall's descriptions, Koul and colleagues have drawn this deduction that close personal relationship is a factor that is likely to influence plagiarism among Eastern cultures where people greatly value personal relationships. Indeed, if the author is a close friend, copying is not considered plagiarism, but borrowing from a friend. Second, different perceptions of plagiarism held by Asian cultures may stem from their adherence to memorisation. In his study, McDonnell (2004) has found that memorising and copying are well-developed writing skills among many international (including Asian) students.

According to Gu and Brooks (2008) and Pennycook (1996), Asian societies favor memorisation as a valuable and effective way of learning. Hayes and Introna (2005) have further elaborated on this point that reality exists in the language rather than the world for Asian societies; therefore, modifying the precise expression of something through paraphrasing changes the reality of the world. Third, in Asian countries a "textbook based" teaching approach is followed and students are typically assessed based on the content of a textbook they have recalled and written word for word (Hayes & Introna, 2005, p. 225).

Fourth, these societies have hierarchical structures where repeating the words of scholars is a sign of reverence (Hafernik, Messerschmitt, & Vandrick, 2002). On the contrary, treating sources critically is a sign of disrespect (Pecorari, 2003). Fifth, people in these societies believe that knowledge belongs to all. What an author says is accepted as a fact and does not need to be attributed, as Sowden (2005) states, "the author's insights, having achieved the status of common sense, had thereby entered the field of common knowledge and no longer belonged to him exclusively" (p. 227). The sixth issue pertains to the belief that only one single correct answer exists to every question the teacher is supposed to provide and students are supposed to learn in return without challenging their teachers (Sowden, 2005). In this case, as Sowden says, plagiarism is a "virtue" producing what is known to be the correct answer (p. 227). Seventh, Chanock (2008) explains that international students are mostly from cultural contexts characterised by the dominance of "monologic discourse" which is a "single-voiced, authoritative utterance of facts" (p. 8). Whatever mentioned by a scripture or an author in those cultures is regarded as an absolute, unproblematic truth, and the scientific theories are considered facts explaining definitely how things work.

However, it is the dialogic discourse which is the fundamental feature of the academic community where knowledge is constructed collectively through the interplay of ideas and it is not regarded as an absolute fact, but the most satisfactory possible explanation and interpretation currently constructed by the experts in the discipline community to explain how something works. Next, grades and results are the things

which receive more values and emphases than the learning process per se in Asian countries (Lahur, 2004). Under such circumstances, students are more likely to surrender learning produced as the consequence of doing coursework in return for the easy gain of good grades through plagiarising. Finally, since these countries exclusively rely on exams rather than essay writing to assess students, students mostly lack experience in essay writing that makes them more prone to unintentional plagiarism (Carroll & Appleton, 2001).

It should be noted that since the notions related to plagiarism such as intellectual property, ownership, and authorship have originated from the Western context, and thus influenced by its distinctive social and cultural specificities (Pennycook, 1996), a cultural reorientation is needed to help students from other cultures gain mastery over the proper rhetorics of Western academic writing (Bamford & Sergiou, 2005). Attributing postgraduates' engagement in plagiarism to inexperience and intercultural misunderstanding of Western academic scholarship and the concept of plagiarism, Duff, Rogers, and Harris (2006) conducted a research the results of which highlighted the need to foster students' understanding of scholarship in the Western academic context rather than punishment in order to improve academic integrity among students.

Although the issues of cultural differences can, in part, account for plagiarism practiced by students from other cultures, it has failed to unveil all of the underlying factors playing significant roles in plagiarism incidences. Moreover, over-sensitivity to cultural differences prohibits educators from instructing students in necessary skills for avoiding plagiarism (Hyland, 2001; Yamanda, 2003), or may lead to stereotyping students from other cultures irrespective of their individual differences (Sowden, 2005).

Research methods

Design of the study

This study employed the tools of quantitative inquiry and followed an ex-post facto research design since the researchers had no control over the manipulation or modification of the variables. In fact, this study used correlational design to discover how prevalence rates of plagiarism related to understanding and perceived seriousness of it among Iranian EFL Masters students.

Participants

Iranian EFL Masters students (467) from 28 universities in Iran participated in the study. Cluster-sampling method was used to select universities and the participants. The participants came from a range of courses such as Teaching English as a Foreign Language, English Literature, English Translation, and Studies of North America/Great Britain. Usable responses from 327 (207 female and 120 male) respondents were obtained.

Survey instrument

This study made use of a self-report questionnaire in Persian as a survey instrument. Students' self reporting has provided reasonably accurate estimates regarding the frequency of academic dishonesty (Cizek, 1999, p. 10). Although a number of researchers have criticised the method for the possibility of tempting respondents into choosing socially desirable answers and under-reporting the cases of their own academic dishonesty despite the assurance of anonymity (Jensen et al., 2002; Caruana, Ramaseshan, & Ewing, 2000), under-reporting is not likely to have posed main problems for previous researchers (see Caruana et al., 2000; Curtis & Popal, 2011; Franklyn-Stokes & Neawstead, 1995; Jensen et al., 2002; Lim & See, 2001; Lin & Wen, 2007; Marsden, Carroll, & Neill, 2005; Marshall & Garry, 2006; Maxwell, Curtis, & Vardanega, 2006; McCabe & Trevino, 1993) as their participants admitted to their rather frequent engagement in acts of academic dishonesty.

The questionnaire was based on a reliable and valid questionnaire developed and

used by Maxwell et al. (2006), and Curtis and Popal (2011). Maxwell and colleagues presented seven different scenarios covering the seven different types of plagiarism outlined by Walker (1998) in order to measure students' understanding, perceived seriousness, and the frequency of being engaged in each form of plagiarism (see Table 1). The researchers of the current study added three extra scenarios representing plagiarism of the form of a source, plagiarism of secondary sources, and paraphrasing plagiarism included in the following table for two reasons. First of all, a comprehensive review of the related literature revealed the necessity of their addition so that all types of plagiarism could be covered and studied among the students. Second, the results of the pilot study at the outset of the study indicated that participants did not hold proper understanding of these forms. Moreover, they asserted a high perceived frequency of them. These findings reinforced the need to examine the understanding and prevalence rates of these forms in a greater scope as well.

Table 1.
Types of plagiarism

Type	Definition
Sham Paraphrasing	Presenting verbatim material from a source text and acknowledging it as paraphrased.
Illicit Paraphrasing	Paraphrasing materials from a source text without acknowledgement.
Other Plagiarism	Copying materials from another person's work with his/her own knowledge and permission.
Verbatim Copying	Copying word for word from a source text without acknowledgement.
Recycling	Resubmitting the same work for different courses.
Ghost Writing	Having someone else write an assignment and then presenting it as one's own work.
Purloining	Copying another person's work without his/her knowledge and permission.
Plagiarism of Secondary Sources	Referencing to the original sources cited or quoted in a secondary source without either looking original sources up or acknowledging the secondary source itself.
Paraphrasing Plagiarism	Copying from a source text, changing it slightly but not enough; for example, substituting synonyms for only a few number of words, and acknowledging it as a paraphrased text.
Plagiarism of the Form of a Source	Looking up primary sources cited in a secondary source and organising them in the same arrangement as the secondary source without acknowledging a system dependence on it.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections (see Appendix A). The first section of the questionnaire required demographic information. The second section of the questionnaire was scenario-based since scenarios provide more contexts for the

respondents to visualise situations in which they might find themselves (Barrett & Cox, 2005; Emerson & Conroy, 2002). This section inquired about students' understanding and perceived seriousness of 10 forms of plagiarism, and the frequency with which the respondents had been engaged in each form within higher education at the Masters level. Then, the whole questionnaire was piloted in a test-retest procedure to ensure its reliability. Moreover, seven experts in the field corroborated that the instrument validly measured the students' understanding, and perceived seriousness of plagiarism.

Procedure

All the questionnaires were distributed either by the researchers or some EFL Masters students who had been clearly taught about the purpose of each section by the researchers. It was assumed that face-to-face distribution of the questionnaires would increase students' honesty (Pickard, 2006). It also provided the distributor with the ample opportunities to explain the aim of the study, to assure respondents of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, and to clarify the probable ambiguities raised by the respondents. All the questionnaires were distributed after the class time to assure the consistency in their administration. In fact, the third-year Masters students had already passed all their credits except their theses, and they had no more classes.

Results and discussion

Prevalence rates of plagiarism

The results indicated high prevalence rates of plagiarism amongst the students (see Table 2) and supported Finn and Frone's claim (2004) that plagiarism is highly prevalent at all grade levels. Also such findings were consistent with the results of previous studies conducted mostly in the West showing high prevalence of plagiarism amongst students (Alam, 2004; Bennett, 2005; Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; Franklyn-Stokes & Newstesad, 1995; Lim & See, 2001; Marshall & Garry, 2005; Maxwell et al., 2006; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009; Whitely, Nelson, & Jones, 1999). Also, the percentage of the respondents who reported being engaged in some form of plagiarism at least once was calculated. The results showed that all the respondents had engaged in some form of plagiarism at least once which is higher than the reported percentages by foregoing researchers. A significant reason for this may be the fact that those studies did not cover the forms of plagiarism as comprehensively as this study did, otherwise higher percentages might have been reported.

Table 2.
Prevalence rates for different forms of plagiarism

Types of Plagiarism	Never %	Once %	2-3 times %	4-7 times %	>7 times %
Sham Paraphrasing	42.8	13.5	21.4	11.9	10.4
Other Plagiarism	77.1	13.5	8	0.9	0.6
Ghost Writing	92	3.1	2.1	2.1	0.6
Verbatim Copying	70.3	11.9	10.4	3.4	4
Recycling	52	32.4	11.3	1.5	2.8
Illicit Paraphrasing	42.2	11.6	26.6	8.9	10.7
Purloining	93.3	2.4	4	0	0.3
Plagiarism of Secondary Sources	42.8	11	23.5	15	7.6
Paraphrasing Plagiarism	48	14.7	21.4	8.6	7.3
Plagiarism of the Form of a Source	52	16.5	22.6	4	4.9

According to Table 2, illicit paraphrasing was the most prevalent form of plagiarism ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.37$). Other studies in the literature have also indicated that this form of plagiarism has been the most pervasive one (Curtis & Popal, 2011; Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995; Lim & See, 2001; Maxwell et al., 2006). Other prevalent forms of plagiarism were respectively: sham paraphrasing, plagiarism of secondary sources, paraphrasing plagiarism, and plagiarism of the form of a source. Purloining and ghost writing were the least prevalent forms of plagiarism respectively ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 0.46$; $M = 1.16$, $SD = 0.61$) which were consistent with the findings of Maxwell and colleagues (2006) and Curtis and Popal (2011).

Understanding of plagiarism

The survey questionnaire presented 10 different vignettes representing 10 different forms of plagiarism. According to Maxwell, Curtis, and Vardanega (2008), students' familiarity with the concept is associated with their recognition of diverse forms of plagiarism in the sense that if students display recognition of more forms of plagiarism, they have better understanding of plagiarism. Therefore, if a respondent said that s/he regarded the vignette as a form of plagiarism, this was scored as indicating the respondent's proper understanding of the form. Table 3 illustrates the percentages of respondents who understood each form of plagiarism.

Table 3.
Percentages of students who understood each form of plagiarism.

Types of plagiarism	Absolutely yes %	Perhaps yes %	Undecided %	Perhaps no %	Absolutely no %
Sham Paraphrasing	24.2	21.7	21.4	22.3	10.4
Other Plagiarism	59	16.2	10.7	7.3	6.7
Ghost Writing	72.2	15	4.6	5.2	3.1
Verbatim Copying	71.6	11.9	7	4.6	4.9
Recycling	13.5	11.9	23.9	21.1	29.7
Illicit Paraphrasing	36.5	26.6	16.2	12.5	8
Purloining	91.1	4.6	2.8	1.2	0.3
Plagiarism of Secondary Sources	19.6	23.9	32.4	15.6	8.6
Paraphrasing Plagiarism	45	29.1	15.9	7	3.1
Plagiarism of the Form of a Source	22.9	23.5	25.1	18.7	9.8

According to Table 3, purloining, ghost writing, and verbatim copying were readily identified as forms of plagiarism by respectively 95.7%, 87%, and 83.5% of the respondents. However, recycling and plagiarism of the secondary sources were the least recognised of all (25.4% and 43.5%). Also examining the nature of plagiarism incidences in terms of intentionality showed that at least 52.6% of all reported plagiarism cases had occurred unintentionally since the students lacked understanding of their behaviours' plagiaristic nature.

Inadequate familiarity with the concept of plagiarism consistently has been presented in the literature to account for the occurrence of plagiarism among students (Bamford & Sergiou, 2005; Briggs, 2009; Devlin & Gray, 2007; Devoss & Rosati, 2002; Erkaya, 2009; Lahur, 2004; McDonnell, 2004; Park, 2003). Using Spearman rho correlation, this study indicated that the relationship between understanding scores and scores of plagiarism prevalence was negative, moderate in strength, and statistically significant ($r_s = -0.354$, $p < 0.01$) which was in line with the literature showing an inverse relationship between the two (Maxwell et al., 2008).

Contrary to expectations, the examination of the relationship between understanding of plagiarism and the respondents' years of study through using a series of chi-square tests revealed no significant relationship between the two implying that the recognition of various forms of plagiarism remains a challenging task for students during their whole academic lives.

The lack of enhancement in students' understanding of the concept during their years of study implies the absence of any educational instruction on the part of educators to raise students' awareness and understanding of plagiarism. Although further studies are needed to investigate the academics' perceptions of plagiarism and the reasons for the absence of the adequate instructions on their parts, it is apt to note that according to McDonnell (2004) the concept of plagiarism is embedded in the academic culture.

As this study has indicated, the students have not generally been acculturated into the academic culture; otherwise, they would have developed a proper understanding of plagiarism. What academics have to accept is that understanding plagiarism and its related issues is a "process of acculturation" which should unfold in the classroom by the instructors who are members of the academic culture and already familiar with the disciplines and their specific characteristics (Ashworth, Freewood, & Ranald, 2003, p. 257).

Perceived seriousness of plagiarism

According to the results of Table 4, purloining, ghost writing, verbatim copying, and other plagiarism were respectively the most seriously perceived forms by the respondents (93%, 82.9%, 81.7%, and 75.2%), and recycling as well as plagiarism of secondary sources were respectively perceived to be the least serious ones (33% and 38.8%). The existing heterogeneity in perceived seriousness of the various types of plagiarism by the respondents is indicative of inadequate academics' instructions on equal unacceptability of all types of plagiarism. According to Ashworth and Bannister (1997), regarding plagiarism simply as violating academic etiquette rather than failure to contribute to the broader conversations prevailing in the disciplinary community, while at the same time acknowledging the contributions of others, may be another reason that plagiarism ranks rather low in some students' value systems.

Table 4.
Percentages of students who rated the severity of each form of plagiarism.

Types of plagiarism	Absolutely serious %	Moderately serious %	Undecided %	Not too serious %	Not serious at all %
Sham Paraphrasing	23.2	23.5	25.4	22	5.8
Other Plagiarism	54.4	20.8	13.8	8.9	2.1
Ghost Writing	68.2	14.7	8.9	5.2	3.1
Verbatim Copying	66.7	15	10.4	4	4
Recycling	20.2	12.8	27.5	17.4	22
Illicit Paraphrasing	31.8	23.5	23.5	11	10.1
Purloining	89.9	3.1	5.2	1.8	0
Plagiarism of Secondary Sources	16.2	22.6	36.7	15.3	9.2
Paraphrasing Plagiarism	39.8	28.1	22.3	7	2.8
Plagiarism of the Form of a Source	22	20.2	31.2	15.6	11

Using Spearman rho correlation, the results demonstrated that the relationship between the scores of perceived seriousness and plagiarism prevalence was negative, moderate in strength, and statistically significant ($r_s = -0.381$, $p < 0.01$). This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies in the literature showing a negative correlation between perceived seriousness and the rates of academic dishonesty including plagiarism (Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; Brown & Howell, 2001; Curtis & Popal, 2011; Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995; Jensen et al., 2002; Lim & See, 2001; Marshall & Garry, 2005; Maxwell et al., 2008; McLaughlin & Ross, 1989). In other words, if a student considers a form of plagiarism serious, s/he is more likely not to commit it; if s/he does not regard a form of plagiarism as severe, s/he is more probable to commit it. These deductions seem logically justifiable. The reverse is also true in the sense that a person committing some form of plagiarism deliberately tends to consider it less serious.

The literature has drawn on the cognitive dissonance theory in order to account for the inverse relationship (see Jensen et al. 2002; Maxwell et al., 2008). According to Festinger (1957), normally there exists some kind of consistency between one's beliefs and behaviour. The existence of inconsistency, or rather dissonance between one's beliefs and behaviour is psychologically inconvenient and motivates one to attempt to minimise dissonance and reach consistency. Students committing plagiarism deliberately know that stealing the words or ideas of others is seriously unacceptable. In line with this theory, when they plagiarise despite their belief

systems with regard to the unacceptability of plagiarism, they will alter their beliefs about its severity in order to ease bad and inconvenient feelings. Therefore, those committing cases of plagiarism tend to perceive it as being less severe so that their beliefs correspond with their behaviour.

Predictor of plagiarism incidence

One linear regression model (stepwise method) was undertaken with the total sample to investigate whether any of the correlates would predict plagiarism prevalence. In addition to understanding and perceived seriousness of plagiarism found to be the correlates of plagiarism prevalence, the relationships between the prevalence rates of plagiarism and the variables pertaining to individual students such as age, gender, academic grade point average, working hours for paid employment per week, and self-imposed pressure to gain good grades were examined. None of them were significantly correlated with plagiarism. Therefore, the linear regression was only performed with understanding and perceived seriousness of plagiarism. According to the following table, perceived seriousness of plagiarism significantly predicts plagiarism prevalence scores, $\beta = -0.439$, $t(324) = -8.817$, $p < 0.001$. Perceived seriousness also accounts for a significant proportion of variance in plagiarism prevalence scores, $R^2 = 0.193$, $F(2, 324) = 77.739$, $p < 0.001$. One significant model has been presented in the regression analysis, $F(2, 324) = 77.739$, $p < 0.001$, $Adj. R^2 = 0.19$, and perceived seriousness is the only significant predictor of the prevalence rates of plagiarism, $b = -0.42$, $t = -8.817$, $p < 0.001$. The regression equation drawn from the analysis is: Prevalence rates of plagiarism = $33.93 - 0.439 \times$ (Perceived seriousness of plagiarism)

Table 5.
Coefficients in the model of regression analysis for the perceived seriousness of plagiarism predicting plagiarism prevalence

	B	SE B	β	t	Sig.
Constant	33.937	1.831		18.539	0.001
Perceived seriousness of plagiarism	- 0.420	0.048	- 0.439***	- 8.817	0.001

Note. $R^2 = 0.193$. *** $p < 0.001$

As per the results, perceived seriousness of plagiarism is the predictor of plagiarism prevalence among Iranian EFL Masters students corresponding with the findings of Curtis and Popal (2011) who reported perceived seriousness of plagiarism as the predictor of plagiarism incidences in their study. Although perceived seriousness of plagiarism merely accounts for 19% of variance in plagiarism prevalence scores, and thus is not a sufficiently strong predictor, it is necessary to report it in view of the fact that it can both highlight the relative significance of perceived seriousness of plagiarism for predicting some proportion of its prevalence among Iranian EFL Masters students and suggest some future avenues of exploration. In other words, these findings reinforced the need to conduct further studies in order to probe and discover the more influential predictors of plagiarism.

Conclusion and implications

The results demonstrated that plagiarism was pervasive among Iranian EFL Masters students, and that understanding of plagiarism and perceived seriousness of it mainly associated with pedagogical issues were negatively correlated with plagiarism incidences at significant levels. Given the inverse relationship of perceived seriousness of plagiarism with plagiarism prevalence as well as its role as the predictor of some percentage of plagiarism occurrences, early educational intervention is critical to enhance students' perceived seriousness of plagiarism. Notwithstanding, it should be noted that understanding of plagiarism strongly and positively correlated with perceived seriousness of plagiarism ($r = 0.86, p < 0.01$) logically takes place prior to perceived seriousness in the sense that a student should initially understand a form of plagiarism prior to deciding about its severity. Considering the logical priority of understanding, its strong correlation with perceived seriousness of plagiarism, the unintentional nature of over half of the reported plagiarism cases by the respondents, and the absence of any relationship between the students' understanding and their years of study, it is apt that educators direct their efforts to enhance students' understanding of plagiarism at the first available opportunity as well as throughout the student's program of study. Following a thorough introduction to the topic at Orientation and in each semester, measures should then be taken to detect and respond to students' breaches of integrity in order to prevent plagiarism.

Appendix A: Questionnaire

All information is completely confidential.

Section 1. General

1. Age:

20-25 26-30 over 30

2. Gender:

male female

3. Field of study:

EFL English literature English translation Studies on North America/ Britain

4. Year of the study:

First second Third

5. Academic grade point average:

17-20 14-17 10-14

6. How many hours do you work in paid employment per week?

Less than 6 hours 7-10 11-14 15-20 more than 20 hours

7. How much pressure do you put on yourself to achieve high grades?

None little moderate much very much

Section 2. Perception of plagiarism

Please answer the following questions for each scenario in your answer sheet.

Do you consider this to be plagiarism? (Circle a number on the scale)

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Absolutely yes Almost yes Undecided Perhaps no Absolutely no

How ethically serious do you think this is? (Circle a number on the scale)

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Absolutely serious Moderately serious Undecided Not too serious Not Serious
at all

Have you ever done a similar thing? (Circle a number on the scale)

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Never Once Only 2-3 times 4-7 times More than 7
times

8. A student copies a sentence directly from a journal article into his assignment. The student writes the name of the author and the date of publication in brackets after the sentence, but he does not include quotation marks and a page number.

9. Student A has to write an essay. He knows that student B did the exact same essay last year. Student A asks student B if he can use his essay. He agrees, so student A copies student B's assignment and hands it in as his own.

10. A student has to write an essay. She finds someone whom she can pay to write it for her. She pays the money and buys the essay. She hands the essay in as her own.

11. A student copies word for word information from a book. He does not put the information in quotation marks. He also does not write the author, date of publication, or page number at the end of the copied material.

12. Student A submits unchanged his own originally created work which he has previously used for some other course for assessment in yet another course.

13. Student A reads some information from a book. Then, she paraphrases the information and puts it into her assignment without acknowledging where the information has come from.

14. Student A is working on an assignment for a course. While studying in the library he discovers a final draft of another student's work for that assignment. He copies the material into his own assignment directly and submits the work as entirely his own without any mentioning of the other student's name.

15. Student A has to write an essay. She reads an article within which she identifies useful citations. She mentions those citations directly in her own work without reading the cited materials.

16. Student A copies some sentences from an article into his own. He changes the structures slightly, or substitutes a few of words with their synonyms. He writes the name of the author and date of publication, but he does not include page number and quotation marks for the unchanged parts of the sentences.

17. Student A copies the organization or the structure of another piece of work and represents it as his own.

(The questionnaire was adapted from a questionnaire developed and used by Maxwell, Curtis, and Vardanega (2006), and Curtis and Popal (2011)).

References

- Alam, L. S. (2004). *Is plagiarism more prevalent in some form of assessment than others?* Retrieved November 15, 2010, from www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/perth04/procs/pdf/alam.pdf
- Ashworth, P., & Bannister, P. (1997). Guilty in whose eyes? University students' perceptions of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment. *Studies in Higher Education, 22*, 187–204.
- Ashworth, P., Freewood, M., & Ranald, M. (2003). The student lifeworld and the meanings of plagiarism. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 34*(2), 257–277.
- Bamford, J., & Sergiou, K. (2005). International students and plagiarism: An analysis of the reasons for plagiarism among international foundation students. *Investigations in University Teaching and Learning, 2*(2), 17–22.
- Barrett, R., & Cox, A. L. (2005). 'At least they're learning': The hazy line between collaboration and collusion. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 30*(2), 107–122.
- Barry, E. S. (2006). Can paraphrasing practice help students define plagiarism? *College Student Journal, 40*(2), 377–384.
- Bennett, R. (2005). Factors associated with student plagiarism in a post-1992 university. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 30*(2), 137–162.
- Briggs, R. (2009). Shameless! Reconceiving the problem of student plagiarism. *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities, 14*(1), 65–75.
- Brimble, M., & Stevenson-Clarke, P. (2005). Perceptions of the prevalence and seriousness of academic dishonesty in Australian universities. *Australian Educational Researcher, 32*(3), 19–44.
- Brown, V. J., & Howell, M. E. (2001). The efficacy of policy statement on plagiarism: Do they change student's views? *Research in Higher Education, 42*(1), 103–118.
- Carroll, J., & Appleton, J. (2001). *Plagiarism: A good practice guide*. Learning and Teaching Briefing Papers Series, Oxford Brookes University.
- Caruana, A., Ramaseshan, B., & Ewing, M. T. (2000). The effect of anomie on academic dishonesty among university students. *International Journal of Educational Management, 14*(1), 23–30.
- Chanock, K. (2008). When students reference plagiarized material – what can we learn (and what can we do) about their understanding of attribution? *International Journal for Educational Integrity, 4*(1), 3–16.
- Cizek, G. J. (1999). *Cheating on tests: How to do it, detect it, and prevent it*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Curtis, G. J., & Popal, R. (2011). An examination of factors related to plagiarism and a five-year follow-up of plagiarism at an Australian university. *International Journal for Educational Integrity, 7*(1), 30–42.
- Devlin, M., & Gray, K. (2007). In their own words: A qualitative study of the reasons Australian university students plagiarize. *Higher Education Research & Development, 26*(2), 181–198.
- DeVoss, D., & Rosati, C. (2002). "It wasn't me, was it?" Plagiarism and the web. *Computers and Composition, 19*, 191–203.
- Duff, A. H., Rogers, D. P., & Harris, M. B. (2006). International engineering students — avoiding plagiarism through understanding the Western academic context of scholarship. *European Journal of Engineering Education, 31*, 673–681.
- Emerson, T. L. N., & Conroy, S. J. (2002). Have ethical attitudes changed? An intertemporal comparison of the ethical perceptions of college students in 1985 and 2001. *Journal of Business Ethics, 50*, 167–176.
- Erkaya, O. R. (2009). Plagiarism by Turkish Students: Causes and Solutions. *Asian EFL Journal, 11*(2), 86–103.

- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Finn, K. V., & Frone, M. R. (2004). Academic performance and cheating: Moderating role of school identification and self-efficacy. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 97(3), 115-162.
- Franklyn-Stokes, A., & Newstead, S. (1995). Undergraduate cheating: Who does what and why? *Studies in Higher Education*, 20(2), 159–172.
- Gu, Q., & Brooks, J. (2008). Beyond the accusation of plagiarism. *System*, 36, 337–352.
- Hafernik, J., Messerschmitt, D., & Vandrick, S. (2002). *Ethical issues for ESL faculty: Social justice in practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Harris, R. (2004). *Anti-plagiarism strategies for research papers*. Retrieved November 23, 2010, from <http://www.temple.edu/ih/Help/DetectingPlagiarism/index.htm>
- Hayes, N., & Introna, L. D. (2005). Cultural values, plagiarism and fairness: When plagiarism gets in the way of learning. *Ethics and Behaviour*, 15(3), 213–231.
- Howard, R. M. (1995). Plagiarism, authorships and the academic death penalty. *College English*, 57(7), 788–806.
- Howard, R. M. (2007). Understanding “Internet plagiarism”. *Computers and Composition*, 24, 3–15.
- Hyland, F. (2001). Dealing with plagiarism when giving feedback. *ELT Journal*, 55(4), 375–381.
- Jensen, L. A., Arnett, J. J., Feldman, S., & Cauffman, E. (2002). It’s wrong, but everybody does it: Academic dishonesty among high school and college students. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 27, 209–228.
- Joyce, D. (2007). Academic integrity and plagiarism: Australasian perspectives. *Computer Science Education*, 17(3), 187–200.
- Koul, R., Clariana, R. B., Jitgarun, K., & Songsriwittaya, A. (2009). The influence of achievement goal orientation on plagiarism. *Learning and Individual Differences*. 19 (4), 506–512.
- Lahur, A. M. (2004). *Plagiarism among Asian students at an Australian university offshore campus: Is it a cultural issue? A pilot study*. Retrieved November 25, 2010, from <http://www.herdsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/conference/2004/PDF/A033-jt.pdf>
- Landau, J. D., Druen, P. B., & Arcuri, J. A. (2002). Methods for helping students avoid plagiarism. *Teaching of Psychology*, 29(2), 112–115.
- Larkham, P. J., & Manns, S. (2002). Plagiarism and its treatment in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 26(4), 339–349.
- Leask, B. (2006). Plagiarism, cultural diversity and metaphor: Implications for academic staff development. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(2), 183–199.
- Lim, V. K., & See, S. K. (2001). Attitudes toward, and intentions to report academic cheating among students in Singapore. *Ethics & Behavior*, 11(3), 261–274.
- Lin, C. S., & Wen, L. M. (2007). Academic dishonesty in higher education: A nationwide study in Taiwan. *Higher Education*, 54(1), 85–97.
- Loutzenhiser, K., Pita, A., & Reed, J. M. (2006). Revisiting plagiarism in an Internet era: How modern technology contributes to the problem and solutions. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 3(8), 55–62.
- Marsden, H., Carroll, M., & Neill, J. (2005). Who cheats at university? A self-report study of dishonest academic behaviours in a sample of Australian university students. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 57(1), 1–10.
- Marshall, S., & Garry, M. (2005). *How well do students really understand plagiarism?* Retrieved May 1, 2011, from http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/brisbane05/blogs/proceedings/52_Marshall.pdf
- Marshall, S., & Garry, M. (2006). NESB and ESB students’ attitudes and perceptions of plagiarism. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 2, 26–37.

- Maxwell, A. J., Curtis, G. J., & Vardanega, L. (2006). Plagiarism among local and Asian students in Australia. *Guidance & Counselling, 21*(4), 210–215.
- Maxwell, A. J., Curtis, G. J., & Vardanega, L. (2008). Does culture influence understanding and perceived seriousness of plagiarism? *International Journal for Educational Integrity, 4*(2), 25–40.
- McCabe, D. L., & Trevino, L. K. (1993). Academic dishonesty: Honor codes and other contextual influences. *The Journal of Higher Education, 64*, 522–538.
- McCabe, D. L., & Trevino, L. K. (1996, January/February). What we know about cheating in college. *Change, 28*(1), 28–33.
- McDonnell, K. E. (2004). *Academic plagiarism rules and ESL learning-mutually exclusive concepts?* Retrieved November 21, 2010, from <http://www.american.edu/cas/tesol/resources/working-paper-2.cfm>
- McLaughlin, R. D., & Ross, S. M. (1989). Student cheating in high school: A case of moral reasoning vs. “fuzzy logic”. *The High School Journal, 72*, 97–104.
- Park, C. (2003). In other (people’s) words: Plagiarism by university students: Literature and lessons. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 28*(5), 471–488.
- Pecorari, D. (2003). Good and original: Plagiarism and patchwriting in academic second language writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 12*(4), 317–345.
- Pennycook, A. (1996). Borrowing others’ words: Text, ownership, memory, and plagiarism. *TESOL Quarterly, 30*, 201–230.
- Pickard, J. (2006). Staff and student attitudes to plagiarism at University College Northampton. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 31*(2), 215–232.
- Rettinger, D. A., & Kramer, Y. (2009). Situational and personal causes of student cheating. *Research in Higher Education, 50*(3), 293–313.
- Sowden, C. (2005). Plagiarism and the culture of multilingual students in higher education abroad. *ELT Journal, 59*(3), 226–233.
- Walker, J. (1998). Student plagiarism in universities: What are we doing about it? *Higher Education Research and Development, 17*(1), 89–106.
- Whitely, B. E. (1998). Factors associated with cheating among college students: A review. *Research in Higher Education, 39*(3), 235–274.
- Whitely, B. E. Jr., Nelson, A. B., & Jones, C. J. (1999). Gender differences in cheating attitudes and classroom cheating behavior: A meta-analysis. *Sex Roles, 41*(9/10), 657–680.
- Wood, G. (2004). Academic original sin: Plagiarism, the Internet, and librarians. *Academic Librarianship, 30*(3), 237–242.
- Yamanda, K. (2003). What prevents ESL/ EFL writers from avoiding plagiarism? Analyses of 10 North-America college websites. *System, 31*, 247–258.
- Yeo, S. (2007). First-year university science and engineering students’ understanding of plagiarism. *Higher Education Research & Development, 26*(2), 199–216.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Dr. Guy Curtis for allowing us to access and use the questionnaire, the students who took part in this study, and also the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on the draft of the manuscript.

About the Authors

Amir Mahdavi-Zafarghandi is an Assistant Professor in the English Department, University of Guilan, Iran. He did his PhD in SLA at Essex University, Britain in 2001. He has been teaching undergraduate and graduate courses including Research Methods in TEFL, ESP, and Teaching English as a Foreign Language. He has supervised and/or advised numerous Masters dissertations on TEFL, and published numerous professional papers on SLA, language learning, ESP and translation studies both nationally and internationally.

Fatemeh Khoshroo completed a Master of Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at the University of Guilan, Iran in 2011. This study draws on some of the data collected for her Master of TEFL research thesis. Her research interests are primarily in ethics of higher education.

Behzad Barkat is an Associate Professor in the English Department, University of Guilan, Iran. He has a PhD in Comparative Literature from University of Sorbonne, France. He is the writer of articles on Literature, Linguistics, and Translation in authorised academic periodicals, the author of some books and the translator of more than 20 books in different fields of Human Science. For years he has been researching how works of literature can be a determination of the socio-cultural identity.