Navigating Between Scylla and Charybdis: Research on the Perception of Graduate Students at UCASS on Intentional and Unintentional Plagiarism

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Abstract

Given the reported plagiarism of some Chinese overseas students in their academic writings, it is urgent to investigate the perception of Chinese graduate students on plagiarism. To get their perception on intentional and unintentional plagiarism, a questionnaire is designed and conducted among graduate students at University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This research finds that most of the respondents have a good understanding of plagiarism. Chinese graduate students still need to learn more about plagiarism, especially unintentional plagiarism, for writing research papers is just like navigating between Scylla and Charybdis. This research also points out that the study of plagiarism can be done from different perspectives, like from the perspective of university teachers, middle or high school students, and the management of journal publication.

Key words: Academic writing; Intentional plagiarism; Unintentional plagiarism; Attitudes of Chinese graduate students towards plagiarism

INTRODUCTION

With the reform of Chinese higher education, there are more and more institutes, colleges, and universities that enroll graduate students in increasing numbers. It seems that Chinese higher education has come to a new stage. But the fact is that Chinese graduates are not so creative as those in developed countries, like U.S., Britain, and Canada. Some Chinese students enrolled in their Master or Ph.D. programs in U.S. are expelled for their poor academic work in their course papers or dissertations. According to a report on *Newsweek* on May 29, 2015, U.S. colleges have expelled as many as 8,000 Chinese students in 2014. Most of those Chinese students are expelled mainly for "academic dishonesty or low academic performances." (Kutner, 2015) According to another research, international students from developing countries in English speaking countries, especially in North America, desperately need detailed advice in the areas, like "plagiarism, copyright and appropriate citation strategies". (Morissey and Given, 2006) From the research reports above, we can see that some Chinese students abroad are poor at academic writing and it is possible for them to be expelled for plagiarism. Then, what is plagiarism?

According to the research by Diane Pecorari, the word *plagiarism* can be traced back to the Latin word meaning "kidnap" or "plunder". (Pecorari, p.11) Today, plagiarism has something to do with copyright or intellectual property. When it comes to academic writing, plagiarism has its much more concrete meanings. Now the convention of academic writing is to credit the work of others. Thus, plagiarism can be defined as "the act of claiming the words or ideas of another person as your own". (Lester, p.4) This action is usually taken as a serious violation of ethical principles. And most universities and colleges in U.S. have strict penalties for any student who is guilty of plagiarism. As the facts above show, plagiarism is indeed a big thing in the academic pursuit of college or university

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students in U.S., especially of those international students, including Chinese students there. Obviously, it is a requirement for anyone, who would like to study for a degree, to understand plagiarism completely.

Actually, there are two kinds of plagiarism: intentional plagiarism and unintentional plagiarism. Intentional plagiarism means that someone in his or her writing shows no respect for and gives no credit to the work of others. For example, someone knowingly copies whole passages from sources of others in his or her writing without any documentation. In addition, someone buys research papers from other people. These actions of dishonest behaviors in academic writing are intentional plagiarism. The other kind of plagiarism is unintentional plagiarism. Although titled "unintentional", it is still dishonesty and a violation of academic rules. Any action of not crediting others' sentences, terminologies, ideas, or even approach is unintentional plagiarism. (Lester, p.5)

At the very beginning of this paper, we learned that many Chinese students violated the academic regulations in U.S. and were expelled. How about the situation in China? According to some reports, there are also some big cases of plagiarism in universities or colleges, like the plagiarism scandals in Nanjing University and Communication University of China. It seems urgent for Chinese graduate students to be aware of the importance of avoiding plagiarism while they are writing their course papers, theses, and dissertations. Thus, here comes the question—how do Chinese graduate students understand plagiarism? Graduate students at University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (UCASS) are chosen for the research. What understanding do those graduate students have of intentional and unintentional plagiarism? To find the answer, a questionnaire is conducted among them to collect the data for further analysis.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Plagiarism is such an important topic that there are numerous researches about it. You will get a lot of results by putting "plagiarism" as the entry in the search engines of Project Muse and JSTOR. Many scholars defined "plagiarism".

According to Dan Harms (2006), plagiarism is "the gravest sin in the academy" (Harms, p.1). It seems that "electronic texts" and "copying and scanning technology" have made it much easier to be caught in plagiarism, intentionally or unintentionally (Harms, pp.1-2). As to Linda Adler-Kassner (2008), plagiarism is a "hot" topic and there is a notion that "plagiarism is widespread and uncontrollable" (Adler-Kassner, p.231). The above two researches define plagiarism in a broad sense. From the academic perspective, plagiarism means the "appropriation of the writings or ideas of another" or "literary theft". And the academic plagiarism

in practice means "paraphrasing with only minor alterations", "collusion", "inaccurate citation", "failure to acknowledge all assistance", "recourse to professional agencies", and "self-plagiarism"(Bennett, 2017). This definition is much more practical. The present research adopts this definition while raising the questions on plagiarism in the questionnaire.

Compared with western scholars, Chinese scholars seldom give definitions on plagiarism by themselves in their research and usually follow the discussion on plagiarism in western academia. However, many Chinese scholars take a further step to examine the topic of plagiarism in Chinese universities of both mainland China and Taiwan area. Jun Lei (2015) conducted a research on Chinese university EFL teachers' perceptions of plagiarism based on a survey among 112 Chinese university English teachers. Lei's study found that "the teachers reported varying knowledge of different types of transgressed textual practices, variegated perceptions of the different causes of plagiarism, but clearly punitive attitudes towards plagiarism" (Lei, p.551). Lei found that those Chinese teachers with overseas academic experience had different knowledge of and attitudes toward plagiarism. His research emphasized the "complexity of plagiarism" and pointed out that "cultural practices and academic socialization" were important in shaping perceptions of plagiarism. (Lei, p.551) In Taiwan area, there is a typical research about the plagiarism in student writing and the attitudes of teachers towards it. Given the fact that the previous research mostly focused on the native English-speaking teachers' perceptions of plagiarism, Shih-Chieh Chien (2014) conducted a research on nonnative English-speaking teachers' "practices of defining, detecting, and preventing plagiarism in student writing" and examined those teachers' "perceptions and cultural constructions of plagiarism" in Taiwan (Chien, p.120). Based on a survey and interviews with 23 teachers from Taiwan area, the research revealed that there were many cultural factors influencing student plagiarism, like "social relationships", "reciprocity in writing", and "lack of experience in citing sources appropriately" (Chien, p.120). The research pointed out that the Confucian educational tradition of emphasizing "memorization and repetition" might contribute to the plagiarism in the student writing. It also suggested that "inexperience" is another factor behind student plagiarism in Taiwan (Chien, p.131). Admittedly, Chien's research has examined the nonnative English-speaking teachers' perception of student plagiarism and shed light on the importance of cultural contexts in constructing plagiarism in academic English writing. However, these two researches by Chinese scholars are lack of the perception of students themselves. What understanding do Chinese students have of plagiarism? Yao Guo (2014), in her thesis for a M.A. degree in

English, completed a research by investigating the perception of plagiarism among English majors in mainland China. According to Guo's study, there were two factors behind the plagiarism of Chinese English majors—"lack of knowledge of plagiarism and poor awareness of authorship" (Guo, p.42). Guo's research focuses on the undergraduates of Chinese English majors. How about Chinese graduates? The present research will examine the perception of Chinese graduate students on plagiarism.

DESIGN

To investigate the perception of Chinese graduate students on plagiarism, a questionnaire is performed on WJX. cn through WeChat. The questionnaire consists of 25 questions. To save the time of the respondents and collect concrete data for the research, there are 20 questions of multiple choices and five open questions in the questionnaire. There are four basic questions about the respondents' gender, age, educational background, and occupation, for the purpose of examining the different perceptions of respondents on plagiarism. The last five questions are open questions designed to get some concrete data about their perception of plagiarism. The rest 16 questions are all about the understanding of plagiarism from different aspects. To get the more specific data and conduct the research in a more scientific way, some questions are designed with Likert scales. For example, Question 8 "Do you know the difference between intentional plagiarism and unintentional plagiarism?" and Question 15 "How do you know the academic ways of avoiding plagiarism?" have respectively five scales from "Not at All" to "To a Great Extent". In this way, more objective data is expected to be collected. Moreover, the open questions serve as supplementary ways to get much more data from respondents.

RESULTS

The questionnaire is uploaded to WJX.cn and the link is published on a WeChat group of the graduate students at the graduate school of UCASS, who are potential respondents to the questionnaire. As a result, there are 22 respondents.

Among the 22 respondents, there are 13 respondents aged 40 or above, 18 Ph. D. candidates, 15 teachers. And 13 respondents have advanced professional titles. That means most respondents are expected to have a better understanding of plagiarism. It has been proved by the feedback of Question 7 "How much do you do know about plagiarism?". There are 17 respondents (about 77%) who know a lot about plagiarism and 3 respondents (about 14%) very well.

And more than half of the respondents (15 respondents) think they know well about the difference between intentional plagiarism and unintentional plagiarism. But there are only 7 respondents choosing "Instructors" as one of the ways for them to get to know plagiarism.

In answering Question 12 (Do you think it is plagiarism if someone includes passages of someone else without any citation?), there are 2 respondents choosing "Uncertain" and 2 respondents choosing "No". It shows that a few of the respondents who do not understand the real meaning of plagiarism.

Almost 91% respondents took great pressure from their studies or research as one of the reasons for plagiarism. At the same time, about 82% respondents agree to lower the requirement for academic assessment reasonably as one of the ways of avoiding plagiarism.

In answering the open questions, most respondents put down one or two sentences. Five respondents hold the view that plagiarism in China is widespread. One respondent tolerates the unintentional plagiarism in China. Seven respondents agree that academic plagiarism abroad is also common. Sixteen respondents think online duplicate checking is a good way of avoiding plagiarism before handing in course papers, theses, dissertations, even book drafts.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the results of the questionnaire, we may draw a conclusion that those respondents have a good understanding of intentional and unintentional plagiarism in general. We already find the answer to the research question—what understanding do Chinese graduate students at UCASS have of intentional and unintentional plagiarism? And the answer is a positive one. From the educational background and working experience of all the 22 respondents, we see that most of them have conducted researches in their work or studies. Most of the respondents know the difference between intentional and unintentional plagiarism. And most of them know one or two ways of avoiding intentional or unintentional plagiarism. All of them mentioned that increasing penalties for plagiarism could be one way of reducing plagiarism and some academic training will improve researchers' awareness of plagiarism, especially unintentional plagiarism. Most of them think plagiarism is common both in China and abroad. Although they all say no to academic plagiarism, their feedback still prove that writing an academic paper is like navigating between Scylla and Charybdis. It is cautious for them to put down every single word since it is possible to be caught by intentional plagiarism or unintentional plagiarism.

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Discussion

Since this research is based on a small-scale survey, there are some limitations in this study. First, the questionnaire was just performed online. It is possible for some respondents to answer the questions without paying so much attention to as those off line. Second, the respondents are all freshmen from the graduate school of UCASS. It is not convincible that all the graduate students share the same view as those respondents, let alone the rest universities and colleges in China. Third, since this research is conducted for a minimum requirement for the course paper, the questions in the questionnaire need to be improved in terms of topics that cover much more aspects of intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Four, the data collected from WJX.cn is just processed roughly. The data could be processed with the help of some software, like SPSS, for a more accurate analysis of the data.

Recommendations

Given the above limitations of the present research, there are several recommendations for further research on this topic. First, a large-scale survey or questionnaire among universities and colleges in Beijing, even in some local universities and colleges, should be performed for the purpose of collecting much more data to investigate Chinese graduates' perception of plagiarism. Second, a research aiming at Chinese middle school or high school students may be conducted for the purpose of comparison. It can be done by interviews with students in some typical middle schools or high schools. Besides, some similar topics may be investigated in this way, like the perception of Chinese teachers in middle schools or high schools on plagiarism, the perception of editors of academic journals or newspapers on the plagiarism in their contributors. The data should be collected from various schools or areas for the purpose of improving reliability in the conduct of research.

Now we are in an information age. It is urgent to examine the relationship between the internet and plagiarism. To be more professional, a research on the construction of the data for online duplicate checking is also important since it will play a major role in setting criteria for plagiarism. It is reported that there is a kind of on-line service of reducing duplication in graduation papers, like theses and dissertations. Some research could be done to investigate the real procedures of reducing duplication by some online agencies.

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