English Language Development and Academic Integrity - Making the Connection

Beena Giridharan, Curtin University, Malaysia

Abstract

Cultural differences and language barriers have been attributed to plagiarism incidents among ESL students at university. It is a known fact that misinterpretation can occur among university students for whom English is a second language, particularly when it comes to understanding the norms of referencing and academic writing requirements. Language differences have been identified as potential barriers to academic writing which in turn is related to academic integrity (LaRay Barna 1994; Correa, 2011). Non familiarity with source use and inadequate skills to summarize and paraphrase effectively, and inability to quote sources to strengthen arguments in assignments, have been cited as reasons for poor referencing practices and plagiarism among ESL students.

This paper focusses on a teaching excellence and developmental project that investigated student understanding of academic integrity and advancing student skills in paraphrasing and referencing. The project involved conduct of workshops for students on integrating source use, and synthesis skills training and seminars for staff for increasing awareness of academic integrity among students. The project findings point to improved student learning outcomes and development of English language proficiency.

Keywords: Academic writing, plagiarism, paraphrasing and referencing, ESL students, raising awareness among staff and students

Introduction

The OECD report on the review of quality teaching in higher education highlights the role of institutions in improving the quality of teaching and consequently, the quality of the graduates (Learning our Lesson 2008). The global demand for higher education has seen an increase in international student mobility and movement of students across continents and institutions. International students constitute a large portion of the diverse student community in many western higher education sectors. For many international students, English is a second language or a foreign language. Although, there is a reasonably high English language requirement set by most institutions that students fulfil, there is a need for institutions to have quality learning support systems in place for continued student academic growth and development.

Background

Evaluating student understanding of academic integrity and ethical scholarship enable institutions to structure effective developmental programs. This paper discusses a project that sought to advance student awareness and understanding of integrating source use, and develop academic facilitator skills. The project focussed on achieving the values underpinning principles of academic integrity that guide the academic community in its work so that students practiced responsible behaviour with reference to citing and acknowledging the work of others in their own work (Centre for Academic Integrity,2005). The project aim was to instil better understanding of the principles of academic integrity and develop academic writing proficiency so as to minimise plagiarism incidents.

Researchers have examined plagiarism occurrences among student in higher education over a long period of time (Hart & Friesner,2004). What construes plagiarism need to be made explicit to students right at the onset of their university experience. Building understanding in students about the concept of plagiarism is not easily achieved as it is a complex notion.

Plagiarism constitutes the act of presenting the work of others as one's own or not referencing or paraphrasing source clearly. In some cases, students may present sections of their own previously submitted work or assignments in its entirety without acknowledging their previous work and not being cognisant that it is an act of plagiarism. Once students are better trained and knowledgeable about integrating source use, instances of plagiarism could be considerably reduced.

The research objectives of the project are as follows:

1. To improve understanding of academic integrity among students.
2. To enhance academic writing practices among students with better paraphrasing, synthesis of information, and referencing.
3. To increase awareness among academic staff regarding integrating source use and synthesis skills training for pedagogical practice.
4. To help identify the resource requirements and support needed for raising academic integrity awareness in students and training for staff practices.

Academic Writing in an ESL Context

Academic writing could be seen as demanding by both native and non-native speakers of English as it conforms to certain norms, standards and expectations. However, academic writing is a real challenge for non-native speakers of English, or for learners from English as a Second Language (ESL) background. The challenges faced by ESL learners in an academic context has been well documented and researched. A study carried out by the author in 2012 (Giridharan, 2012) identified critical gaps in academic writing standards in ESL students in a pre-tertiary year at university. The study ascertained that students grappled with the writing standards expected of them and were inclined to cause grammatical, structural and syntactic errors in their writing tasks. An error analysis review carried out in the study revealed that these deficiencies occurred mainly because the students had not engaged in academic discourses in writing courses in their high schools and were introduced to academic writing standards only after entry to university (Giridharan, 2012).

Research conducted in ESL writing pedagogy affirms that writing is a form of learning and that pedagogical choices made by teachers and instructors must take into account the multicultural background of students, as learning contexts are not culturally homogenous (Reid, Chapter 3, pedagogical issues in ESL writing). Therefore, facilitators in ESL writing are duty bound to be cognisant of language learning issues that originate from the cultural backgrounds of the students in addition to the linguistic backgrounds and provide instructional guidance about the target culture as well as the academic culture expectations.

Studies conducted by He & Shi (2012) show that teaching academic writing to students from ESL backgrounds may be hampered due to cultural and linguistic barriers. Other researcher maintain that instructors and facilitators play an important role in developing students' academic writing skills through continuous feedback that is both specific and encouraging (Nurmukhamedov & Kim, 2010). There are also issues of students from an ESL context being viewed through a stereotypical lens in that they are seen as the group that tended to plagiarise due to their English language inadequacies. In summary, it is a known fact that misinterpretation can occur at multiple levels with regards to university students for whom English is a second or is a foreign language, when it comes to understanding the norms of referencing and academic writing requirements.

Research Methodology

To achieve the research objectives outlined earlier in the paper, a case study approach was taken to understand the topic being investigated. A case study offers researchers an opportunity to conduct a comprehensive investigation of issues at specific junctures and locales. In a case study design, one is able to identify the attitudes and beliefs of groups involved as well as study the interactions among the groups. Case studies are widely used in organisational studies and is regarded as a "rigorous research strategy in its own right" (Hartley, 2004, p.208). The overall focus of the project was to improve students' understanding about what constitutes acts of plagiarism and to identify and develop programs required for students and staff to enhance academic integrity, by and large.

In line with the case study strategies, which allows for the gathering of both qualitative and quantitative evidence, firstly a survey was conducted among students in a first year undergraduate program at the beginning of a twelve week semester to examine students' awareness of plagiarism, and what constitutes plagiarism. Following the survey, a series of dedicated workshops and seminars were offered to students at various stages in the semester, to develop student understanding of referencing, synthesis of information, and citing form external sources accurately. In these seminars, information and guidance was provided to students about working in groups and teams, but also being able to present information individually for assignments and assessments that require individual reports, as there is a focus at the university about developing team dynamics in students. Following the seminars, a subsequent survey was administered to respondents at the end of the semester. The project also included academic training and development to academic staff for increasing awareness of academic integrity among students. Data collection and analysis were developed together in an "iterative process" (Hartley 2004, p.220) as it permits conceptual understanding that is underpinned by evidence. Complementary strategies provided the opportunity to triangulate the data (Creswell, 2003) and improve validity and reliability.

Findings and Discussion

The survey was structured in two parts: the first set of questions were in a five point Likert scale format with degrees of agreement ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree and the second part comprised of 10 multiple choice questions . The survey was administered to 300 students in a first year undergraduate program and 202 completions were achieved (67.3%; n= 202). The first section of the survey attempted to gain students' perception of their own English language skills and how the skills were linked to their ability to paraphrase and reference accurately. The second section of the survey focussed on measuring their understanding of what plagiarism represented, defining paraphrasing, why should students be cautious while paraphrasing and citing sources. The survey also measured their understanding of the consequences of plagiarism.

Among the students that responded to the survey, 79% agreed that having a high proficiency in English language enabled them to paraphrase better. 60% of the respondents agreed that the better a students' English language skills, the less he/she was likely to plagiarise. This finding indicate that students believed in advancing and developing their English language skills to distance themselves from plagiarism. Only 47% of the respondents agreed perceived their English language skills were sufficient for better paraphrasing as shown in table 1 below:

Table 1- English Skills Assist in Paraphrasing
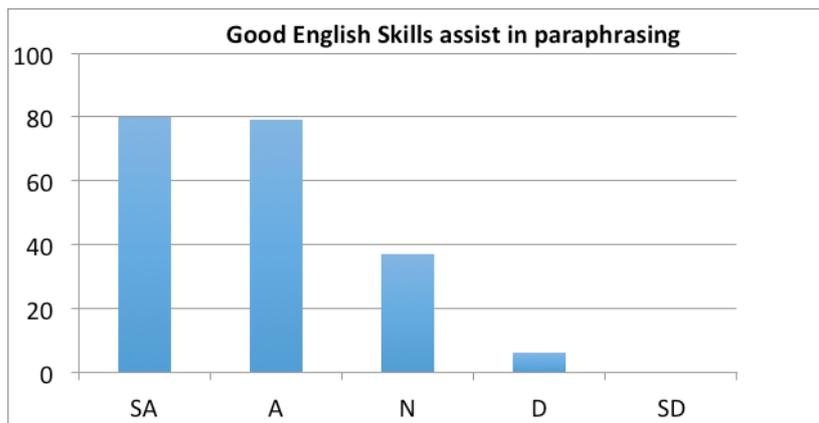
60% of the respondents believed that paraphrasing was rather challenging. An overwhelming 83% of respondents agreed that learning how to paraphrase was integral to improving their academic writing capabilities. Nevertheless, only 48% expressed confidence in their own referencing skills, and synthesis of external sources within their own work.

Table 2- Paraphrasing skills integral to improving academic writing
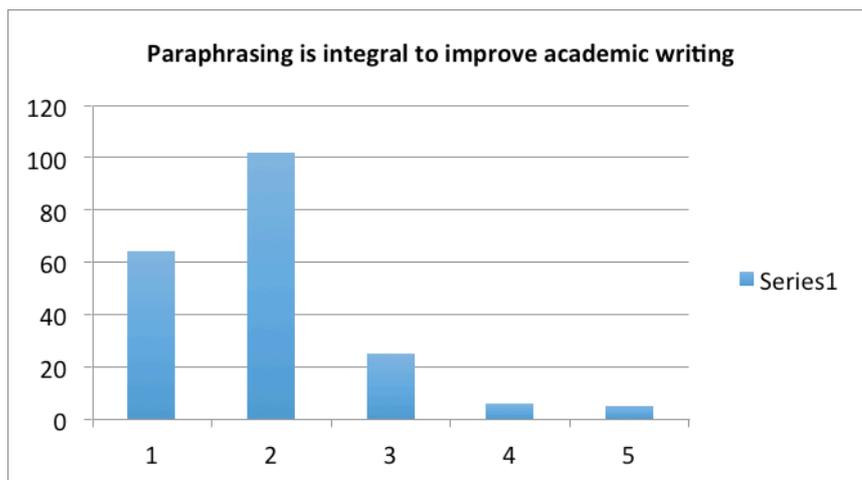
In the follow up survey administered to 300 students with a response rate of 210 (70% response rate, n=210) after the conduct of seminars in a twelve week semester, the seminars the following findings were ascertained.

88% of the respondents were able to define plagiarism accurately, indicating that the awareness of academic integrity was relatively high among first year undergraduates. 78% of the respondents agreed that it was important to acknowledge all authors and external sources so that authors could receive the credit for their work and readers could check the original sources. When respondents were asked about their chances of getting caught for plagiarising; the respondents acknowledged that there was a 10% chance to 60% chance of getting caught with 38% agreeing to a 60% chance of being identified as plagiarising.

There are strong procedures institutionally for building awareness among students regarding academic integrity through a series of developmental programs and support systems that assisted students to gain ethical scholarship through an educative process in the first year at university. Remedial workshops and resubmission of work was permitted if a student was found to have inept referencing or had inadequate in-text citations etc. in their work during their first year in the course. Stronger penalties were applied if student academic misconduct was found to be a deliberate action.

In summary, ideals of academic integrity must be upheld and communicated to students throughout the duration of their course. It is important to provide continuous training and support for students to transition from diverse backgrounds and pathways to university and to inculcate a culture of honesty and fairness among students. It is equally significant to train academic staff to provide a supportive environment and advise students at the onset of their studies at university to encourage academic integrity.

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