

Improving Referencing Skills in Academic Writing to Avoid Plagiarism in International Student Groups

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Abstract

How can we improve referencing skills in academic writing in international and diverse student groups? Drawing upon half a decade of experiences from two courses in the field of International Conflict Resolution for Erasmus (international exchange) students with diverse academic backgrounds at the undergraduate level, this paper identifies a need to pay closer attention to the ways in which we teach basic referencing skills in academic writing to avoid cases of plagiarism. Usually, it is not sufficient to make students aware of existing rules and regulations in this area or to convey the minutiae of specific referencing styles. Based on three semi-structured interviews with experienced teachers at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, the paper identifies a number of structural and institutional hindrances, which might make it more difficult for certain student groups to master essential skills in the area of referencing and academic writing. Building upon these findings, the paper outlines a number of student-centred teaching and learning activities that can help students improve their academic writing and referencing skills. At the same time, the study illustrates the importance of placing a stronger emphasis on feedback to aid students in their learning processes in this regard.

Keywords: Academic writing; higher education; international students; plagiarism; referencing

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1. Introduction

Recognizing pedagogical challenges relating to referencing skills in academic writing and plagiarism encountered in the process of teaching a group of international exchange students with diverse disciplinary backgrounds at a Swedish university, this paper aims to gain a better understanding of the ways in which we can improve students' proficiency in these areas to avoid instance of (un-)intentional plagiarism.

Having taught two introductory-level courses for international exchange students in the field of Peace and Conflict Research at the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg for more than five years, both the benefits and challenges have become a staple of my daily teaching duties. Few students attending these courses have a disciplinary background in the field of Peace Research, but originate from fields such as political science, sociology, or media and communication studies. Additionally, a number of students have a background outside of the social sciences such as biology. Usually more than one third of the 25 to 30 students attending the courses coming from a non-European academic background. Given the different disciplinary and also geographical backgrounds, there is significant variation with regards to the degree in which students are used to writing term papers, essays or home examinations that require meticulous attention to detail in the ways in which sources are directly quoted, paraphrased and reported in a bibliography. In many cases, it is students who are –at their home universities– predominantly used to summative rather than formative (see e.g. Taras, 2005) sitting examinations with a set of multiple-choice questions that have problems completing such text-based examinations. Furthermore, it is this particular group of students that runs a higher risk of either intentionally or unintentionally plagiarizing the work of other scholars in their examinations. Lastly, and despite continuous efforts to help students master referencing skills and academic writing, many students continue to have problems in this area.

Having said that, it is worth noting that, even outside of freestanding courses for international exchange students, the student body in Swedish higher education institutions is becoming increasingly diverse and international. Fry, Ketteridge, and Marhsall (2014) made similar observations in relation to the situation in the United Kingdom. This diversity, conceived broadly, should be understood both in terms of an asset, potentially enriching students' learning processes with a different set of perspectives, as well as not insignificant challenges for teachers seeking to facilitate these processes. In the context of courses geared

towards international exchange students, these benefits and challenges are particularly pronounced. Here, many of the challenges can be found in areas relating to academic writing in general and insufficient referencing skills in particular, which create a not insignificant risk of both unintentional and also intentional plagiarism in written examinations (cf. Bretag, 2004).

1.1 Aim and Research Question

Considering the aforementioned challenges in the realm of referencing skills in academic writing confronting international exchange students in the context of the Swedish higher education system, this paper aspires to gain a better understanding of methods and teaching and learning activities that can help improve students' proficiency in terms of essential skills like correct referencing techniques in academic writing to avoid (un-) intentional cases of plagiarism in written examinations.

Thus, combining a review of recent and relevant literature on teaching and learning in higher education with a number of semi-structured interviews conducted with experienced teaching staff at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Gothenburg, this paper seeks to answer the following research question: *How can we improve referencing skills to avoid plagiarism in academic writing in international student groups?*

To answer this research question, the paper is structured as follows: A first section introduces some of the key concepts and reviews the relevant literature on plagiarism. A second section briefly discusses some of the methodological choices and gives a broad overview of the data underlying this inquiry. Subsequently, a third section presents the main results and is followed by a concluding section, in which these results are discussed. In this context, a number of teaching and learning activities are identified that can help students avoid cases of (un-) intentional plagiarism.

2. Concepts and Theoretical Background

Bearing in mind the aim of this study, this section helps to lay the foundation necessary to identify methods, and teaching and learning activities that can help avoid instances of (un-) intentional plagiarism in written examinations in the context of rather diverse student groups. For this purpose, this section is structured as follows. While a first section introduces the concept of *plagiarism* in the context of higher education, a second section takes stock of

relevant debates on the topic in the fields of pedagogy and linguistics. Throughout this discussion, an emphasis will be placed on international student groups and how they might represent a particularly challenging group in this context.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2000) defines plagiarism as ‘the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own’. Discussing the historical roots of this perspective on practices of textual appropriation, Pecorari and Petric (2014) and Scollon (1995) note that ‘in the English-speaking world [it is] historically linked with the issues of authorship, originality, ownership of texts and copyright’. Not only, but especially in academia, plagiarism is often regarded as ‘an act of wrongdoing’ or cheating (Pecorari & Petric, 2014, p. 270). Sharing this perception of the practice, most universities have instituted policies to deal with and sanction instances of suspected plagiarism. In its plagiarism policy, the University of Gothenburg (GU) conceptualizes plagiarism as a violation of academic integrity and honesty, and defines it as ‘the presentation of someone else’s work as your own, or presenting your own previous work as if it was new’ (University of Gothenburg, 2015).² An analysis of plagiarism policies at 54 higher education institutions in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States conducted by Pecorari (2001)³ revealed a very similar understanding of the issue at hand.

While ‘plagiarism as transgression’ remains one of the dominant perspectives on the subject matter, researchers have – over the last two to three decades – increasingly started to tackle the issue from a variety of different perspectives. As noted earlier, plagiarism – as a subject of scholarly inquiry – has been discussed not only in the field of academic and research ethics, but it is also increasingly thematized in fields like pedagogy or linguistics.

2.1 Pedagogical and Linguistic Research on Plagiarism

Pedagogical research on the topic of plagiarism has, as Pecorari and Petric (2014, p. 289) note, increasingly come to realize that additional training rather than punishment is the best way to avoid instances of (un-)intentional plagiarism (cf. Bloch, 2012). Furthermore, research has shown that it is – in most cases – not sufficient to simply notify students about existing

² Aside from including instances of self-plagiarism in its central policy document, the University of Gothenburg has invested significant resources into helping students avoid plagiarism. The Unit for Pedagogical Development and Interactive Learning (PIL) has, for instance, developed an online course on academic integrity (University of Gothenburg, 2017), and also provides extensive information on the topic for both teachers and students on its web presence (PIL, 2018).

³ This study was also discussed to some extent by Pecorari and Petric (2014).

plagiarism policies and/or specific referencing styles (DeVoss & Rosati, 2002). To help students master the required skillset, it is necessary to contextualize and apply existing regulations in a practical context (DeVoss & Rosati, 2002; Pecorari & Petric, 2014). It is, as Petric (2007) as well as Harwood (2010) stress, necessary give students numerous opportunities –through practiced writing – to properly learn these skills, rather than restricting teaching and learning activities to the more technical aspects, which would include the minutiae of different referencing styles.⁴

On a similar note, Pecorari (2003, p. 342) strongly emphasized the importance of feedback as a means of helping students improve their writing processes, to help them avoid plagiarism and to ‘come into closer conformity with the norms of the academic community’.

Similar observations have been made in the field of linguistics, where plagiarism is commonly approached within the context of non-native speakers and the process of learning English as a second (L2) language (Pecorari & Petric, 2014, p. 273). It is in this context that scholars, recognizing different linguistic backgrounds (Matalene, 1985) and the complex process of acquiring new languages, started to problematize and question the predominantly negative perception of forms of textual appropriation that are commonly considered acts of plagiarism. Bretag (2004) and others sought to establish a link between learning cultures – broadly conceived– and textual practices that might be construed as plagiarism in a different academic context. Thus, ‘experience of and facility with memorisation, because of an educational background which has placed emphasis on memorisation and rote learning’ (Pecorari & Petric, 2014, p. 285) could make writing strategies of textual appropriation which might be considered transgressive acts of plagiarism more likely to occur. Drawing upon and staying close to original sources in what students might perceive to be a ‘language repository’ to be drawn upon in their writing (cf. Plakans & Gebril, 2012, p. 30), could – in other academic contexts – very well be regarded as insufficient originality and potentially an inadequate attribution to the original source.

Other studies, like that of Shaw (1991), note how textual appropriation (i.e. plagiarism) among non-native speakers might be partly a result of an imperfect proficiency in the L2 language. For instance, L2 writers might simply not possess the vocabulary required to independently compose a text in their own words. Shaw (1991, p. 195) pointed out that

⁴ See also Pecorari and Petric (2014).

‘[v]ocabulary, especially semitechnical, and finding the right word for the context presented the biggest problem.’ In study on writing processes, Parkhurst (1990, p. 175) described how many non-native speakers would ‘read [...] extensively and then imitat[e] the style of what they had read.’ Similar observations were also made in situations where L2 writers were unfamiliar with a particular text genre, like a dissertation (Shaw, 1991).

Thus, mimicry or imitation of original sources might have an important role in students’ learning processes to become better and proficient writers in a non-native language. Pecorari and Petric (2014, p. 275) emphasize this particular point, and note how imitation and textual appropriation potentially play an important role in language learning processes. Acknowledging the potential conflict between textual appropriation as learning, and imitation as a transgressive act of plagiarism, Pecorari and Petric (2014, p. 275) stress the importance of not only refining and potentially broadening our understanding of plagiarism, but also of providing non-native speakers with the required pedagogical support necessary to master the skill of writing academic texts that uphold requirements of originality and scholarly honesty.

In sum, and as noted by Pecorari and Petric (2014), it is important bear in mind that proficiency in academic writing and referencing, which are of paramount importance to avoid (un-)intentional plagiarism are the result of a learning process. Students, regardless of their academic backgrounds, have to practice these skills. At the same time, teachers in higher education institutions have to help students in their learning processes by designing adequate teaching and learning activities.

3. Methods and Data

In terms of its empirical foundations, this study builds on three semi-structured interviews⁵ with university teachers based at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Unlike quantitative studies, which seek to generate a sample that is representative of a larger population and therefore require random sampling (Bryman, 2008, p. 171), the sampling procedure adopted in this study followed a logic of purposive sampling. This technique entails selecting ‘cases/participants in a strategic way, so that the sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 415). In short, it is the aim to

⁵ See Blee and Taylor (2002) for an in-depth discussion of interviews as a data collection method in the social sciences.

recruit interviewees that possess ‘special information’ (Zelditch Jr, 1962, p. 574). In the context of this study, *special information* implied professional and *proven experience*⁶ in terms of teaching rather diverse student groups, whereby a particular focus was placed on teachers with extensive experience of teaching courses that have a relatively high number of international students.

4. Results

This section discusses the data obtained through the semi-structured interviews. It is structured along the lines of three key themes that were discussed during the interviews. These themes are, 1) diversity of the student body, 2) plagiarism, 3) academic writing skills and strategies to help students avoid plagiarism.

Internationalization and Diversity

Generally speaking, teachers interviewed in the context of this study agreed to the assertion that the student body has become increasingly international and diverse throughout the last few decades, and that this diversity – at least in some respects and potentially – represents a challenge to teaching and learning in Swedish higher education institutions.⁷

When discussing an increasing internationalization of the student body at Swedish higher education institutions, a number of interviewees working at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Gothenburg noted that this aspect was mostly relevant in the context of freestanding courses – i.e. those that are not embedded in a larger degree program. Here, they predominantly referred to those courses that are specifically designed for international exchange students in the Erasmus Mundus program. Each year dozens of students from European – but also non-European – universities spend one or two terms at the University of Gothenburg through this exchange program. While virtually all interviewees stressed the numerous benefits of creating an environment in which students from a) different nationalities, b) different disciplinary backgrounds, and c) different ‘*academic cultures*’ learn together and

⁶ See Dimenäs et al. (2012) for an in-depth discussion of the relevance and importance of *beprövad erfarenhet* (proven experience) in the context of teaching and learning in higher education.

⁷ While the focus of this study is squarely placed on an increasing internationalization of the student body, it is important to note that diversity – more generally – also increases along other axes as well. Peter Johansson – excellent teacher at the School of Global Studies – noted how students, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate level, have become increasingly diverse in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds ever since Swedish higher education institutions transformed into what could be called ‘mass universities.’

learn from each other, they also agreed on a number of challenges or pedagogical problems that this diversity might produce or exacerbate.

Especially with regards to ‘academic cultures’, a number of interviewees noted how higher education in different contexts might put more or less emphasis on academic writing and referencing skills in the context of an undergraduate education. This is, of course, not to say that other ‘academic cultures’ actively endorse or promote forms of textual appropriation, but rather that teaching and learning activities as well as examination forms might have less of an emphasis on free writing, which requires careful attention to the proper attribution of sources in order to avoid (un-)intentional plagiarism.

From my own years-long experience as course coordinator for two undergraduate courses that are primarily directed towards international exchange students, it could be noted that several students who have their home institutions in France, Vietnam, or Japan pointed out how they had never encountered a ‘term paper’ or ‘take home examination’ as an examination form at their home universities. They were much more used to written sitting examinations consisting of a number of multiple-choice questions, which usually require little to no attention to the proper attribution of sources. This means that these students usually have little to no experience as far as academic writing and referencing techniques are concerned.

Plagiarism

With regards to the issue of plagiarism, respondents generally expressed views that were in line with what Pecorari and Petric (2014) described as the dominant perception and conceptualization of textual appropriation in the higher education sector. This is to say that plagiarism was first and foremost seen as a transgression, or a violation of academic ethics that has to be avoided and possibly sanctioned.

However, while plagiarism was predominantly seen as a transgression, most interviewees, occasionally citing the existing plagiarism policy at the University of Gothenburg, stressed the importance of the student’s intent to determine adequate reactions to suspected cases of plagiarism. Thus, they clearly differentiated between suspected cases of plagiarism where it was the students’ intent to deceive the teacher in their writing as opposed to cases of ‘un-intentional plagiarism’, which can often be traced back to sloppy referencing, insufficient knowledge about referencing techniques, or how to quote or paraphrase sources in a correct manner.

This means that the first and intentional type of plagiarism was clearly seen as a disciplinary problem, while the second and unintentional type was predominantly seen as a pedagogical problem or challenge.

Academic Writing and Referencing Skills: Helping Students Avoid Plagiarism

Most respondents mentioned existing and systematic teaching and learning activities relating to essential academic writing and referencing skills in the undergraduate and also postgraduate education. Especially the introductory courses in the degree programs contain a number of seminars and exercises designed to help students internalize and learn these skills. Generally, after discussing basic requirements regarding academic writing and reference management, students are expected to apply this knowledge in the context of different written assignments like seminar or reflection papers as the introductory courses progress.

In areas like International Relations, where students are able to take several courses and eventually work towards receiving a Bachelor's degree, teachers' feedback during the early stages of the introductory courses puts a special emphasis on providing students with feedback regarding these essential skills. Here, deficiencies in terms of reference management, quoting or paraphrasing of sources are pointed out to the students, but not necessarily used as a criterion to either pass or fail students in these examinations. However, as the courses progress, and especially in the context of final written examinations, academic writing and referencing become a part of the examination and grading principles, which might then result in students failing the examination if their submitted examinations do not fulfil minimum standards in these regards. Similarly, there is a clear progression between the different courses of degree programs in the sense of the requirements being higher in the more advanced courses. However, it seems as if not all teachers in the more advanced courses take this particular skillset as seriously as those in the introductory courses.

However, while progression in this area, which takes into account the fact that a *good* referencing technique and academic writing is the result of a learning process that occurs over time, is built into degree programs, this is not necessarily the case as far as *freestanding courses* are concerned. Freestanding courses – like the Erasmus courses for international exchange students that were mentioned earlier or Regional Studies courses – are not embedded into any degree program and are usually attended by a rather diverse student group. Some of the students are 'program students', which take these courses as *elective courses* within the same or a very similar disciplinary background. Others are not embedded in such a structured degree program.

It is especially this latter group of students, which stems from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, that is diverse in terms of prior knowledge with regards to academic writing and referencing skills. While some of these students are very experienced in these matters and are well on their way towards completing a degree, others are less experienced or might just have started studying at a higher education institution.

This disciplinary diversity within the student body coupled with the relatively limited resources and time available for freestanding courses⁸ creates a situation in which it is difficult to a) level the playing field and convey key skills in the areas of correct referencing and academic writing, and b) to build a systematic progression into the courses, which helps students to acquire these skills and to become proficient writers.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this small-scale study has shown that the assessment of the state-of-the-art in the area of plagiarism by Pecorari and Petric (2014) holds true in the context of higher education at a Swedish university. While plagiarism –or deficient academic writing and referencing skills– are to some extent recognized as a pedagogical problem, the view of plagiarism as a transgression is, without doubt, the dominating perspective on the issue. Involuntary plagiarism is either seen as shortcoming on the side of the student, who failed to properly internalize the norm of and technique for correct quotations and paraphrases in pieces of academic writing, or as a failure of the teacher(s) to properly communicate the necessity for adhering to these standards.

In order to avoid such unintentional instances of plagiarism, it is necessary – as already partially implemented in structured programs at the School of Global Studies – to account for the fact that academic writing and proper referencing essentially represent skills that have to be mastered through a learning process (cf. Harwood, 2010). This demands not only an effort on the side of the students, but also on the side of teachers. Students have to actively engage with this particular skillset, while teachers should assist them in this endeavour by designing and implementing teaching and learning activities that account for the processual nature of mastering such a skill.

⁸ Courses that are worth 7,5 ECTS usually run over a period of five weeks, which has to include all kind of examinations. Courses that are worth 15 ECTS usually run over a period of eight to a maximum of ten weeks.

In this context, it might be worth considering to implement examination forms that are more representative of *formative* rather than *summative* assessment (cf. Norton, 2014) to further students' learning processes. It would be one possibility to implement such more formative forms of assessment by making the final assignment available to the students already in the beginning of the course, and to define a set of milestones on the way to the final submission of the assignment. Students would submit drafts of the assignment as the course progresses and receive feedback – which would include systematic feedback on their referencing technique – during the various stages. Since this would be rather labour-intensive, it might be one option to include elements of peer-assessment (cf. Mulder, Baik, Naylor, & Pearce, 2014), in which students would be required to provide critical commentary and feedback on the work of their peers. Aside from conserving valuable teaching hours, such forms of peer-assessment might encourage students to learn from each other and their mistakes (see e.g. Topping, 2009).

This particular point touched upon the critical importance of *feedback* (cf. Hattie & Timperley, 2007) in any endeavour to help students master academic writing and referencing skills. Aside from providing informed commentary and critical feedback on the subject matter thematized in examinations, teachers should place a stronger emphasis on giving students critical but constructive *feedback* with regards to academic writing and referencing skills. While this would – quite naturally – require more resources in an environment that is already marked by resource scarcity, such an investment seems well-worth the cost, since it should a) help students to improve their academic writing and referencing skills, and b) significantly reduce the likelihood of (un-)intentional cases of plagiarism.⁹

In short, teaching and learning activities designed to help students master academic writing and referencing skills should become a continuous part of courses at the undergraduate level rather than being implemented as one-off activities in the beginning of courses. However, such measures might be easier to implement in the context of structured degree programs, where it is possible to work with largely the same student group over a period of two to three years. In freestanding courses, which are – comparatively speaking – diverse in terms of their student group and operate in a much shorter time frame, such long-term measures are more difficult – if not impossible – to implement. However, parts of the aforementioned suggestions to improve

⁹ Such an investment in feedback on academic writing and referencing skills might actually be cost-neutral in the long run, when considering the substantial amount of time that is required for plagiarism-related investigations.

students' academic writing and referencing skills could even be implemented in the context of such freestanding courses.

It would, for example, be possible to implement examination forms that are more in line with the notion of formative assessment and to combine these with a stronger emphasis on constructive feedback that takes into account academic writing and referencing skills. Assuming, for instance, a 7,5 ECTS course, which runs over a total of five weeks, it would be an option to have the students two or three seminar papers in the first half of the course. After receiving an initial training with regards to the aforementioned skills, the students would then receive feedback on their first two papers and conduct a peer-assessment exercise for the third seminar paper. Building on these first papers, and incorporating the feedback they have received, the students would then develop them into a final and somewhat longer version, which could then be presented in a student-led mini-conference.¹⁰

In sum, if teachers want to improve their students' proficiency in essential academic writing and referencing skills to avoid instances of (un-)intentional plagiarism, and if the underlying student body is increasingly diverse and international, it is necessary to acknowledge that these skills can only be mastered by continuously practicing them through appropriately designed teaching and learning activities.

Having said that, it might be worth reemphasizing that these suggestions are largely based on my own experiences from teaching two courses in International Conflict Resolution for international exchange students as well as three semi-structured interviews at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Gothenburg. Whilst being able to identify a set of suggestions that might help to ameliorate or at least lessen the central pedagogical challenge identified in this paper, one should be aware of the study's limitations, which are two-fold. First, the data underlying this study is limited, which raises a number of questions regarding its generalizability. Secondly, and more importantly, context matters. The suggestions and solutions proposed in this paper might work in the specific context of rather short freestanding courses in the field of social sciences designed for international exchange students. They might, however, be less applicable in other contexts. They might, for instance, be less applicable or

¹⁰ For a discussion of 'mini-conferences' as a useful teaching and learning activity see for example Worsley (2003) who discusses such student-led mini-conferences as a tool enhance learning.

relevant in other fields and disciplines where long-form academic writing is less common as an examination form.

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