

## Towards more Liable Use of Internet Sources among University Students: Rethinking Teacher's Routine Evaluation Methods

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### Abstract

Within the flow of information of today's digital learning environment, university students' ill-informed use of external electronic sources negatively affects the quality of their academic writing. While sanctions represent but the final disciplinary measure, university teachers' pre-empting such academic misconduct before the final year project remains a necessity. This paper proposes a reconsideration of the teacher's routine evaluation methods to promote good study skills, and thus high quality teaching and learning. Drawing on a personal teaching experience (in the department of English of Saida University), the paper suggests simple methods through which students routinely practise sound referencing. Preliminary observational data that triggered the topic of the present paper consist of samples of students' internet-based assignments and project papers with missing references. Additional notes generated from classroom discussions with post-graduate Master students about (un)intentional plagiarism represent the insider student perspective of its causes. Initial findings reveal that student-submitted non-referenced work was not only due to poor time management, paraphrasing, or note taking skills but also to modelling poor citation habits (illustrated in the academic genres they were exposed to in their formal learning environment, such as PowerPoint presentations, class notes, hand-outs, and so on). The paper concludes with the necessity to raise teachers' awareness to the importance of providing a good model of well-referenced teaching materials and learning supports as the initial step. Other practical methods consist of constantly checking students' work for missing references, asking them to resubmit their work with requisite paraphrasing, as well as giving scores for correct referencing.

**Keywords:** Academic plagiarism, digital/cyber-plagiarism, referencing, teacher assessment, techniques

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## Introduction

The plethora of information and ideas that the internet offers today makes many university students – when assigned some homework, for instance – easily access website contents and directly copy to their writing without providing any end-of-text references that indicate the sources used. This instance of students' cyber-plagiarism which is now spread worldwide is a source of worry for many universities (Fialkoff *et al.*, 2002; Köse & Arıkan, 2011; Suerda, Comas & Urbina, 2005; Park, 2003), and the Algerian university is no exception. This is because such practice is synonymous to academic dishonesty, which negatively affects university aspiration to quality assurance.

Students' over-dependence on electronic sources not only signals a certain ignorance of sound research skills and a misuse of information and communication technologies (ICTs), but university academic code of ethics consider students who plagiarize as violators of the copyright conventions (Sutherland-Smith, 2005). Worse, from a Second Language Research (ESL) vantage point, this practice is likely to limit the students' analytical abilities restricting therefore their learning achievement. If not pedagogically remedied for, such effortless habits may be extended to the final graduation project, and, to the worst, extended to the outer professional world.

To downplay the general attitude (or false excuses among students) that the university teaching staff is doing little to reduce plagiarism, the author of this paper attempts to share her experience with student plagiarism in the teaching environment and how she critically and proactively dealt with this phenomenon. By drawing on additional teachers' and students' perspective on cheating in the academic environment, as well as on existing research on plagiarism, the paper attempts to reconsider the teacher's evaluation methods while sharing some practical assessment/teaching techniques already implemented in her classroom to pre-emptively reduce such academic misconduct.

To reach the above-mentioned aim, the paper will first consider the main concepts related to plagiarism. Then, it will stop at the observed academic context from which the author made her first-hand observations as regards students' instances of plagiarism as well as teacher-student perceptions of its causes. Finally, a discussion of the rough clues obtained from the teaching environment in line with similar studies will pave the way for the proposition of practical techniques that the author already tested onsite alongside additional suggestions deriving from other authors' teaching experience.

## Theoretical Background

To start with, the domain-specific plagiarism that is of interest to the present paper is *academic plagiarism* that mainly refers to university *students'* plagiarizing ideas and information into their writing when preparing any academic work. The literal meaning of the word plagiarism, whose Latin origin (i.e., *plagium*) is theft, considers the plagiarist as the "one who steals the thoughts or writings of another" (Mallon, 1989, p. 11, cited in Sutherland-Smith, 2005). From an institutional legislative standpoint, plagiarism is described as a 'wrongful' act of 'stealing', or 'misappropriating' the work of another (Sutherland-Smith, 2005). All of the above definitions stress out the connotation of academic misconduct that plagiarism committed by students carries.

The term *cyber-* or *digital* plagiarism implicates the students' use of the *internet* to plagiarize others' work (Suerda, Comas & Urbina, 2005; Park, 2003). Granitz & Loewy (2007) employ the term *internet plagiarism* mentioning in this vein that *non-internet plagiarism* is still in vogue. That said, while involving -but not limited to- the academic context<sup>i</sup>, *cyber-* or *digital* plagiarism entails students' copying -from external internet sources, such as academic articles or essays-and pasting to their own writing. The forms that (academic) cyber-plagiarism take range from downloading whole essays or articles, to copying parts of texts from different internet sources, to translating a text found in another language before submitting it as their own (Suerda, Comas & Urbina, 2005).

From an ethical concept, *intentional* plagiarism denotes a deliberate intent to deceive by appropriating to oneself someone else's work. According to Granitz & Loewy (2007), students, who intentionally plagiarize, are aware of their '*wrongdoing*'. These transgressors do so either for the '*utilitarian*' outcome of obtaining better grades, or as a '*rational reaction*' to teacher's poor effort or boring/irrelevant assignment. According to the same authors (2007), students involved in plagiarism may even justify their misconduct with 'a situational element', like a sudden sickness or other family circumstances (pp. 297-298). From the other pole, *unintentional* plagiarism translates, from a deontological vantage point, the students' ignorance or unawareness that such an act is morally wrong (Granitz & Loewy, 2007).

From an ESL research stance, unintentional plagiarism signals the writer's ignorance of the importance of giving credit to someone else's ideas or work as a scholarly obligation (Howard, 1999). In this vein, Park (2003) further explains that students' not knowing how to insert reference lists forms part of their ignorance of referencing conventions of academic work. It is worth noting here that students'<sup>ii</sup> academic plagiarism avoidance is an important element of academic writing class and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support courses (Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Hyland, 2008; Nathan, 2007).

Unintentional plagiarism, henceforth, signals from one part students' limited knowledge of the different types of plagiarism. Regardless the well-known *verbatim* or word-for-word plagiarism, copying words or sentences from one source or more, without citing, or reformulating them in one's own words nor inserting quotes represents *mosaic plagiarism*, according to Harvard Guide to Using Sources (2015). Even when inserting a citation, solely replacing a few words here and there in the original text without using one's own language also constitutes plagiarism, that Harvard Guide to Using Sources (2015) terms as *Inadequate paraphrase*. Moreover, ending up with a piece of writing that is devoid of references, even when having properly paraphrased, is another form of plagiarism, called *uncited paraphrase* (2015).

Besides the afore-mentioned internal causes or student-provided justifications of plagiarism, other external causes from the existing ESL literature appear in Bartzis (2009, cited in Basturkmen, 2014) who considers -among other things- that rote learning habits, low language proficiency, non-efficient paraphrasing, as well as time constraints caused by work load or other family obligations to be the main reasons behind plagiarism. Particularly relevant to cyber-or digital plagiarism, a supplementary cause is the students' disregarding or misunderstanding of important concepts like *intellectual property* and *copyright*, considering any material found online as 'a found object'

(Park, 2003, p. 481). Not possessing website evaluation skills<sup>iii</sup> is an additional factor that leads to the increase of the phenomenon, as truly mentioned in university libraries (Alberta university, 2004, cited in Suerda, Comas & Urbina, 2005) and similarly evidenced in the author's teaching environment.

As to ways of detecting plagiarism without software, one of them is to rely on the teachers' experience and professional knowledge. University teachers (including the author of this paper) will unanimously agree with the hints that Suerda, Comas & Urbina, 2005 state, notably that noticing in their students' essays an incoherence of ideas or paragraphs, a mixture of good and poor writing style within the same text, *interalia*, helps teachers detect plagiarism. However, the author has uncovered other similarly pertinent hints in her students' essays. This will be elaborated on in the results section. However, the teacher's professional knowledge and instinct are not enough.

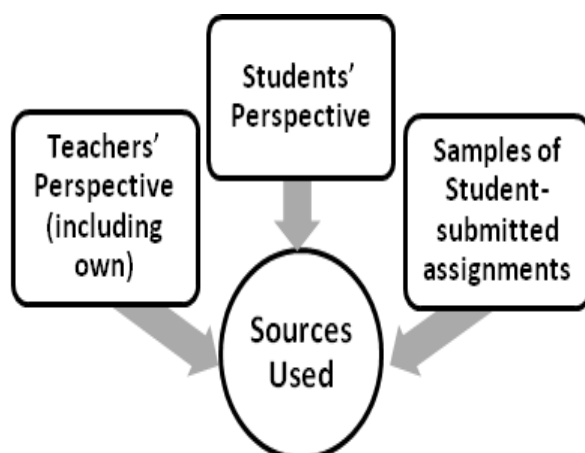
In addition to professional knowledge, search engines or anti-plagiarism software<sup>iv</sup> are also used among the academic staff to detect plagiarism. The software provides a report detailing the level of plagiarism from online resources after comparing the submitted text with the previously entered essays or texts to its database (see Köse & Arikan, 2011). In the results section, the author's experience of the first method will be elaborated on. Prior to this, a sketch of the procedures used to collect initial information about students' plagiarism in the author's teaching environment is proposed hereafter.

### Methodology

While addressing the issue of student's plagiarism, the present paper adopted the concept of reflective or critical teaching which involves the teachers' "critical reflection about their efforts in a language course" (Richards & Lochart, 1994, p. 1). Repeatedly noticing students submitting non-referenced written assignments and plagiarized essays triggered such critical thinking. Considering this issue amplified as a result of a recently proposed module for Master2 students, Ethics and Deontology<sup>v</sup> that the author was the first to be in charge of, during the same academic year 2017-2018. Obviously, the themes tackled in this module revolved around academic ethics.

What is interesting about critical teaching is its action-oriented phase in that constantly reflecting on and learning from one's teaching experiences enables the teacher to bring further innovations, alternatives, or modifications to his/her routine teaching practices for better learning results (Murphy, 2001, cited in Basturkmen, 2014). This is why, the primary aim was to share the author's experiences with and attempts to implement remedial actions, namely in terms of bringing some modifications in the routine assessment methods to pre-empting such academic misconduct.

The author adopted a qualitative stance *ab initio* to broadly understand student's plagiarism. Hence, a rush to quantification was premature. To this end, the author relied on three sources to ponder over the phenomenon of students' transgression of academic writing requirements. They are proposed in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: The sources used for qualitative data collection**

Initially, subsidiary notes generated from the English department's teachers discussing the causes of poor academic writing (that were noticeable within master students' final project mainly) allowed the author to stop at the teacher perspective. However, the main examination of the phenomenon took place with her respective (third year Licence and Master 2 Didactics, 2017-2018 Academic Session) students at the department of English of Dr. Tahar Moulay University- with field notes generated. Furthermore, a record of students' plagiarism occurrences together with saving some samples of their essays and submitted assignments was also possible. Classroom discussions with Master2 students allowed for an elucidation of the latter insider perspective as to the reasons that made students plagiarize. The author proposed to the students in question some of the internal and external causes of plagiarism identified in the literature about plagiarism. They had to choose which reasons closely reflected theirs. That said, students could propose other reasons than those provided by the author. The results obtained by means of such informal data gatherings will be discussed below.

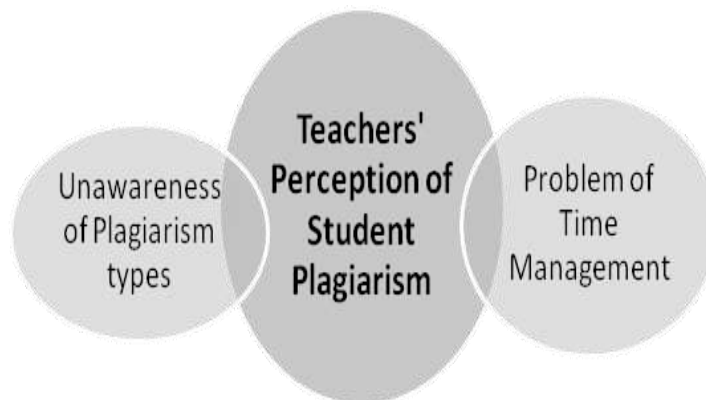
### **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the students' as well as teachers' perceptions of the real causes of plagiarism in the academic context along with the author's notes generated from her teaching environment, when dealing with students' plagiarism practices. The rough clues obtained will be discussed in line with existent research to pave the way for a subsequent proposition of practical teaching/assessment methods to be implemented by teachers.

#### ***Teachers' Perceptions of Academic Plagiarism by Students***

Starting with the teachers' perspective as to the reasons that make students plagiarize, the notes recorded from the teachers' discussion seemed to implicate students' unawareness of the different types of plagiarism together with poor time management skills (Figure 2). Though not statistically proven, the author's similar observations seem to be in fine tune with the teachers-proposed poor time management skills. According to the author's field notes (when dealing with the different types of plagiarism with Master 2 students in the Ethics and Deontology Module), students showed no familiarity with some forms of plagiarism, like mosaic plagiarism, inadequate and uncited paraphrase.



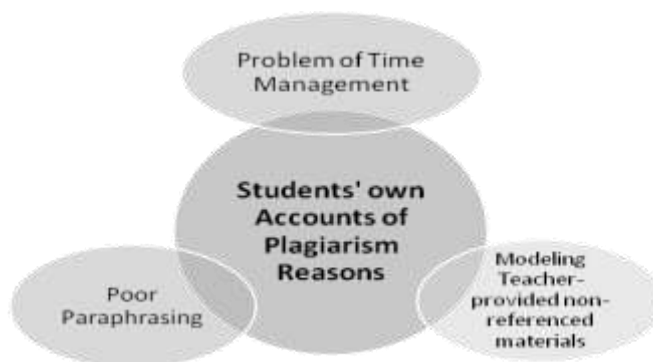


**Figure 2. Teachers' perception of student plagiarism**

To the author's knowledge, the only type of plagiarism that students think they should avoid is verbatim plagiarism. To some of them, citing sources is of secondary importance as long as they do not copy *verbatim* to their work, totally ignoring that other types of plagiarism exist - and are the most widespread. This claim finds echo in previous studies reporting on the ignorance of plagiarism forms as a major cause that were mentioned earlier (Park, 2003; Suerda, Comas & Urbina, 2005).

#### ***Students' Own Reasons of Plagiarism***

Preliminary insight from classroom discussions with Master2 students revealed that time pressure, modelling others' inadvertent academic practices, and to a lesser extent, poor paraphrasing skills were the main reasons that made them submit others' work as their own (see Figure3). Seemingly, these insider views replicate other university libraries' and studies' implicating poor paraphrasing and time management skills among students (see Suerda, Comas & Urbina, 2005). Surprisingly, in relation to the reported academic staff's inadvertent behaviour, some students presumed that they happened to exposed to, or given course materials lacking references, as well. To put it in the words of a students' delegate, from the moment that some '*academics do not care about documenting their reading materials, PowerPoint presentations and handouts, then, why should we (care about it in our own writing)?*'.



**Figure 3: Students' justification of plagiarism**

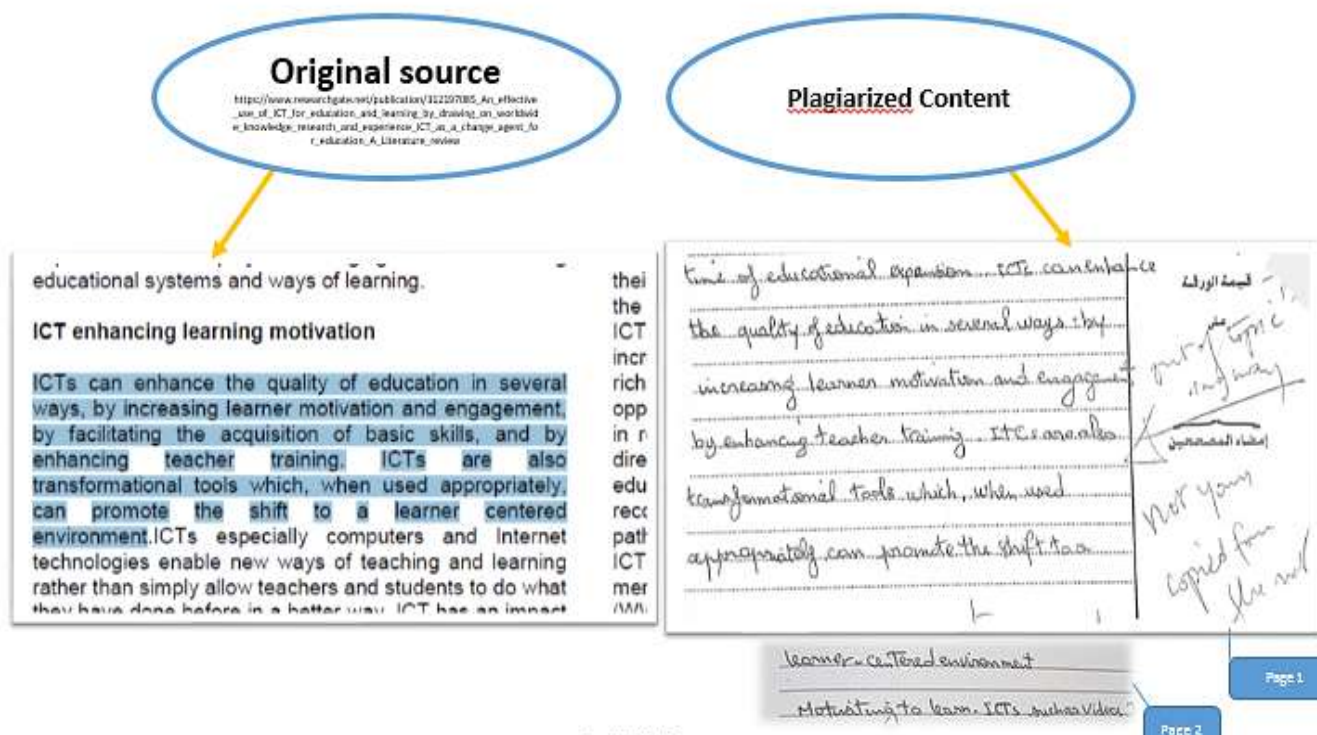
The afore-mentioned perception resonates with previous studies reporting on similar students' justification of their intentional plagiarism. These students similarly presumed that university academic staff were seemingly not doing big efforts to reduce the phenomenon (Park, 2003). This reason literally finds resonance in Granitz & Loewy's (2007) citing an almost same expression employed by a student attempting to justify this *malpractice*, notably that the '*teacher doesn't put much effort into this, so why should I?*'. It seems that students here attempt to justify their wrongdoing through a process of 'fair exchange', as Granitz & Loewy (2007) termed it, that renders their resorting to - after all, intentional- plagiarism a legitimate reaction to the presumed teachers' or other academic staff's little effort (p. 297).

It is believed that the above reason remains but one of the many reasons, thus far discussed in the theoretical section (like time constraints, workload, family obligations, etc.) that students reverted to justify their *intentional* plagiarism. Nevertheless, it is safe to mention here that academic staff/teachers' (including the author herself) proactive involvement in the process of reducing plagiarism among students will undoubtedly be helpful. This involvement may range from simply showing a model of good practice and academic integrity to adopting more stringent measures (like giving low grades to students in question).

#### ***Authors' Own Experiences with Plagiarism Detection***

Having thus far reported on the students' reasons for plagiarism, this sub-section reports on the author's own measures to detect plagiarized content. Before reverting to search engines, the detection of students' suspicious essays revealed similar hints of plagiarized content already suggested in the literature (Suerda, Comas & Urbina, 2005). However, the author could disclose others, like an almost perfect essay from students whose low level was known to the teacher<sup>vi</sup>. This suggested that a whole article was totally plagiarized. Though time and effort consuming, reverting to online search engines was the second measure to definitely discern plagiarized content.

In this second step, doing an Internet search by entering one sentence or two in a search engine often led the author to the original article being copied, a mere instance of academic cyber-plagiarism that other authors like Suerda, Comas & Urbina (2005) and Park (2003) described.



**Figure 3 .Instance of author's internet-assisted detection of student plagiarism**

As illustrated in Figure 4, the author simply indicated the plagiarized text with –here- an arrow or square brackets along with providing the electronic address of the original website or article. In the case of the above figure, the original source was Noor-Ul-Amin’s (2013) article, “An effective use of ICT for education and learning by drawing on worldwide knowledge, research and experience: ICT as a change agent for education (A Literature review)”, that one can easily download from the internet<sup>vii</sup>. Likewise, this was a way to tell the students in question that ICTs they used to deceive also helped the teacher to assess the quality of their academic writing and detect any forms of cheating. In the following section, the author attempts to share some action-oriented solutions that have been implemented with students to sensitize, then, involve them in the process of avoiding plagiarism.

### Recommendations and Conclusion

This section concretizes the main aim of the present paper, namely, by proposing practical teaching and assessment techniques through which teachers may proactively pre-empt plagiarism among students: recommendations mainly drawing on the author’s humble teaching experience with the phenomenon, then, on additional awareness-raising measures suggested by other authors. First and foremost, one of the routine teaching practices that the author adopted with her students was to reference all her teacher-provided materials and documents. This is shown in figure 5.



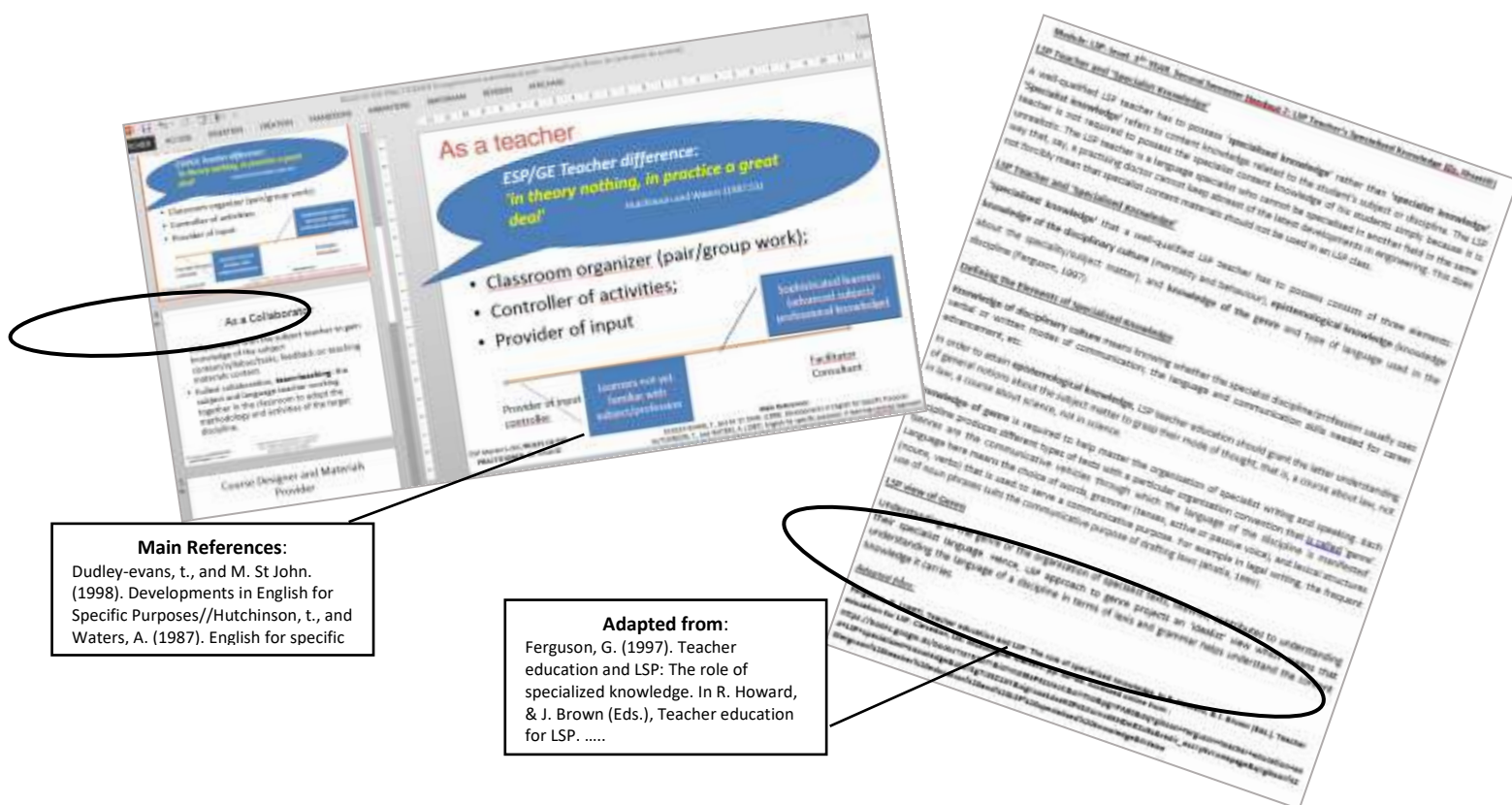


Figure 4: Samples of author's referenced materials (right image, class-notes and left image, a power point presentation)

Teachers' likewise demonstrating a good model of information provision that abides by academic requirements seems to be a *sine qua non* to ensure students' exposure to such models of good practice. As regards monitoring students' work, this took effect through asking the latter to submit *handwritten*<sup>viii</sup> instead of typed assignments, while explaining to them that they should paraphrase and insert the references. Instances of handwritten, referenced assignments as illustrated in figure 6.

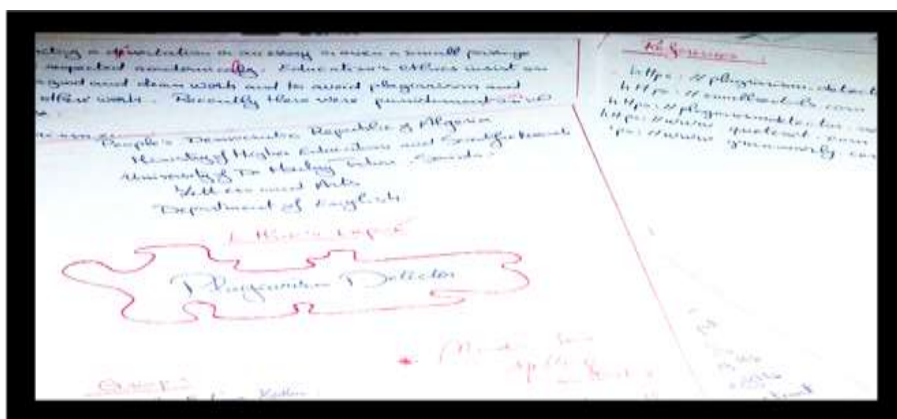


Figure 5: A sample of students' hand-written referenced assignment

Even though the main objective of the task was content-focused, this technique was a way to have students routinely practise paraphrasing. Besides the above-mentioned teacher-demanded handwritten assignments, another preventive measure that the author implemented with her students aimed to familiarize them with sound research practices. To this end, the teacher emphasized on the importance of acknowledging the electronic sources used by inserting a references list in the student-submitted written homework assignment when using external internet sources. Here, the teacher clearly explained that correct end-of-text references would be scored along with a personal style and relevance of the content<sup>ix</sup>.

At times, the teacher pre-selected the research materials/electronic sources by simply providing some links that students had to follow, or else, by sending articles under PDF format via email correspondence. The aim was manifold. This mainly assisted students in their time management efforts, making them spend less time in searching for relevant information. Such author-experienced strategy interestingly finds resonance in ESL research about academic writing (for e.g., Johns, 2006). Additionally, pre-selecting electronic reading materials intended to discourage students from copying-pasting to their document besides having them to be fully engaged with these sources by practising paraphrasing and note taking. Knowing that the teacher's provision of the research material presupposes familiarity with its content, students will certainly double their efforts to summarize the main points and reformulate what they read in their own style before submitting their work for final assessment.

The module of Deontology and Ethics was an opportunity for the author of this paper to encourage some student-animating presentations on topics like good paraphrasing, citing electronic sources, note-taking from reading materials and so on, all of which promote a plagiarism-free writing (see figure 6). Presentations resembled workshops where animating students distributed visuals and handouts for practice. Actively engaged in the process of avoiding some causes of plagiarism, the students in question even shared with their classmates some practical tips and step-by-step techniques on the above teacher-proposed topics. Similar sessions enhancing good paraphrase could be organized by teachers of Academic writing, for instance.

Besides the above-mentioned classroom-experienced techniques, equipping students with sound website evaluation skills is also believed to help them use trustworthy sources, save time, and avoid to accidentally be involved in plagiarism. Evaluating the accuracy, coverage, and authority of websites is of particular importance here. Students searching online will forcibly encounter information that is not well-documented and sometimes missing references, which tells a lot about the website's authority. Comparing internet sources also enables students to know more about the accuracy of information and coverage of the topic.

Finally, awareness-raising to the long-term and short-term dangers of plagiarism (through lectures, study days or training workshops to be organized to the benefit of students) is highly recommended. In parallel, actively engaging the latter in the process of reducing academic misconduct is noteworthy. Following Park's (2003) suggestion, students' delegates should play the role of informing the other students about the importance of avoiding academic misconduct and the risks they run if they are ever caught. To the author's knowledge, students-initiated information dissemination (be it face-to-face or social-network-mediated<sup>x</sup>) is more efficient than

teacher's initiative. Last but not least, students will certainly be more alert when they sign an *honour pledge* in which they engage state that they will not plagiarize or cheat in their final year dissertation, exams, assignments, or in any other academic work (Park, 2003).

Because the present paper was based on rough clues obtained from unsystematic data gatherings, a more rigorous investigation of the phenomenon, with a larger population (including both undergraduate and post-graduating students from the department of English and teachers), and more systematic data collection, is required<sup>xi</sup>. For instance, quantifying the students' self-reported instances of plagiarism will be revealing. By assuring that anonymity will be preserved, the potential investigator can even conduct an interview with both students and teachers for more qualitative data on the areas in which students are likely to cheat the most (i.e., assignments and exams...etc.).

To sum up, this paper proposed a bottom-up preliminary insight into student electronic plagiarism through the author's shared experiences with this phenomenon. Most importantly, it projected the idea that the academic staff, namely teachers, should responsibly and proactively cope with the large incidence of plagiarism among students so as to contribute to the Algerian university quality assurance. Even though students are the first responsible for this apparently worldwide phenomenon, the paper has nevertheless put forth practical ways of reducing such incidence through teachers' implementing simple, routine assessment measures that make students practise sound referencing and paraphrasing on a regular basis as early as their under-graduation years.

### Notes

1. Plagiarism is not only confined to the academic setting but also involves music, literature, software, journalism, politics, and so on (Suerda, Comas, & Urbina, 2006).
2. Awareness of academic plagiarism issues is also an EAP skill that not only students are concerned with but even teachers in academia (see for e.g., Mohammed, Sabahand & Nur, 2018).
3. There are several website evaluation checklists on the internet that detail the criteria followed to evaluate websites. They are easily accessible via the simple query "website evaluation checklist" on google.com search engine.
4. Students can also use Anti-plagiarism software as a language-learning tool to assess the adequacy of their paraphrase.
5. Deontology encompasses respecting others' right and adhering to duties as dictated by morality. Understanding the deontology of plagiarism is to view such act as morally wrong (Granitz & Loewy, 2007).
6. This was due to the prolonged classroom contact with the students in question.
7. See the references below for more details about the URL address of the article.
8. The author of this paper continues to implement this technique of handwritten assignment until the present time to discourage the passive copy-paste practice among students, especially when it comes to doing an internet-based homework. This being said, the author is herself a fervent advocator of the use of ICTs as language learning tools, notably the word processor as early as the first draft- owing to the language learning opportunities the

latter affords to students, like spell check, synonyms, the possibility to edit and save the document, among other things.

9. The main focus of the class was not necessarily on the form (like that of an Academic writing class) but on the content. However, this did not prevent the teacher from drawing her students' attention to the importance of considering academic writing requirements even in their content-focused assignments.
10. Internet-mediated communication is now a habitual practice among the students. The students' delegates are in charge of sharing class-notes, homework assignments, teachers' notes/messages to students (mostly via a common group in a social network).
11. The author of this paper is currently (AY: 2018-2019) supervising a Master student who chose to deploy a variety of tools to investigate student plagiarism within the English Department of Saida University.

### About the author:

Dr. Nadia Khiati has been teaching at the Department of Letters and English language of Saida University, Algeria, since 2012. She got her Doctorate degree (in English for Specific Purposes) in 2017 from Djillali Liabes University of Sidi Belabes, Algeria. She currently teaches ESP and Introduction to languages for specific purposes. Her research and teaching interests are mainly related to her fields of specialisation, that is ESP, Academic speaking, academic writing, etc. Other fields of interests are related to Second Language learning, ICT and ELT, language and translation. <https://orcid.org/0000-002-1107-692X>

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