

## ANALYSING PLAGIARISM PATTERNS IN ESL WRITING AMONG MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES

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### ABSTRACT

Plagiarism in English as a Second Language (ESL) academic writing is a prevalent issue especially among Malaysian tertiary level students. This paper explores plagiarism patterns in ESL writing among Malaysian undergraduates. The study aims to provide insights into the occurrences, types, and underlying factors contributing to plagiarism attempts in this demographic. Employing Swales (1981) move analysis, this study analyses undergraduates' ESL written assignments that exhibit plagiarism elements. The analysis focuses on the types of plagiarism attempt, the structure of the plagiarised compositions, and the moves as well as functions of the plagiarism occurrences. The findings reveal manifold insights into plagiarism among Malaysian undergraduates. The analysis explicates various forms of plagiarism, such as verbatim copying, patchwriting, and paraphrasing without proper citation. Moreover, it discloses that linguistic factors such as lack of paraphrasing skills; lack of critical reading skills; and insufficient exposure regarding citation and referencing, influence plagiarism behaviours among Malaysian ESL learners. Implications of the study extend to pedagogical practices, curriculum development, and institutional policies aimed at plagiarism prevention and academic integrity promotion. This study recommends the implementation of targeted educational interventions to enhance students' academic reading skills, paraphrasing skills, and citation skills. This is to expose a better understanding of academic integrity principles and integration of plagiarism awareness among Malaysian undergraduates.

*Keywords: Plagiarism, ESL (English as a Second Language), academic writing.*

### 1. Introduction

Plagiarism remains a longstanding concern in academia, particularly noticeable among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in attempting to complete their written assignments in their target language. Most Malaysian tertiary institutions run English courses during early semesters to equip students for academic tasks predominantly conducted in English. With this background, it is also noted that most first year Malaysian undergraduates would have attempted plagiarism in their academic journey. Previous research on plagiarism among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) undergraduates has identified several contributing factors to plagiarism, including easy access to internet resources, assignments that encourage plagiarism, and insufficient academic writing skills (Hafsa, 2021; Merkel, 2020; Patak et al., 2021). Additionally, poor time management, personal issues, and a lack of awareness about the consequences of the act of plagiarism; contribute to academic dishonesty among tertiary level students (Li & Flowerdew, 2018; Rozar et al., 2020). Some students may also plagiarise because they believe they are emulating ideal work (James & Wyckoff, 2019). In the context of Malaysia, similar issues prevail because of students' lack of understanding of plagiarism and the necessity for improved academic writing skills (Singh & Ganapathy, 2018). Some Malaysian undergraduates may inadvertently plagiarise due to a lack of awareness (Mahmud & Mahmud, 2021), while foreign graduate students in Malaysia face challenges in interpreting and expressing ideas in English (Singh, 2019). Suggestions for addressing plagiarism in Malaysian institutions include the implementation of stricter penalties (Mohamed et al., 2018; Zain et al., 2021). While numerous studies have quantitatively examined the causes of plagiarism, especially in Asian contexts, fewer have explored potential solutions in overcoming this issue.

This paper aims to conduct a detailed analysis of plagiarised English academic essays written by Malaysian undergraduates. The objective is to uncover patterns of plagiarism evident in these essays, including types of plagiarism, sentence structures, vocabulary usage, and rewording methods. As educators, it is imperative to scaffold learners in avoiding plagiarism, not just merely warn them and make them aware of it per se. This analysis is crucial for implementing measures to support students in enhancing their writing skills and ultimately preventing plagiarism. Interventions targeting plagiarism have shown to enhance students' writing skills (Du, 2020; Farahian et al., 2022), with a particular need for improvement in paraphrasing and citation abilities (Liu & Wu, 2020). It is essential for educators and institutions to take a proactive role in plagiarism prevention, including the implementation of strict policies and setting positive examples (Sun & Hu, 2020; Bowen & Nanni, 2021; Farahian et al., 2020).

The findings of this study would be worthwhile to be integrated to previous studies which suggested the possible ways of combating plagiarism among second language learners. Efforts to prevent academic plagiarism often focus on enhancing academic writing skills through problem-solving tasks relevant to students' backgrounds and encouraging critical thinking (Arce Espinoza & Monge Nájera, 2015). Paraphrasing strategies and awareness of different types of plagiarism are crucial, alongside education on citation methods and quotation guidelines (Cavaliere et al., 2020; Fazilatfar et al., 2018; Shoyukhi et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). For ESL learners, techniques like patchwriting and translation to their native language before writing in English can help avoid direct plagiarism (Xu, 2022; Stander, 2020). The integration of online writing tools in blended learning environments has also been proven effective in improving students' writing and reducing plagiarism (Liu et al., 2018). Lastly, a focus on rhetorical goals rather than merely grades can deter plagiarism among university students (Cheung et al., 2018).

## 2. Methodology

This research conducted an inclusive examination of the structures and tactics employed in plagiarised content found within academic essays written by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. Specifically, the focus was on English academic compositions produced by Malaysian undergraduates in their first year of study. The essays selected for analysis specifically include those containing elements of plagiarism. The assigned topics covered in the essays purposely reflect current issues relevant to Malaysians, Muslim college students and the broader global context. [Students were instructed to write on issues related to using social media as e-marketing among Malaysians, and plagiarism in English writing tasks among Muslim college students.](#) Each essay analysed consists of approximately five paragraphs, ranging from 350 to 500 words. The essay assignment instructions include specific directions to not attempt plagiarism and the initial draft of the assignment was open to consultation for further editing. It is noted that the selected data excerpts of this study were those that have gone through consultation for intervention and editing; but remain to display plagiarism attempts.

The analysis of the corpus data incorporated Swales (1990) move analysis framework. However, instead of focusing on transitions aimed at creating research space, the analysis concentrated on identifying moves indicative of attempted plagiarism in the analysed writings. Additionally, the analysis examined the language used, sentence structures, and choice of vocabulary. Specific analysis was directed to the paraphrasing techniques employed by ESL learners, where applicable. Furthermore, based on the observed patterns of plagiarism displayed, the data were categorised according to identified types of plagiarism. Considering the various classifications of plagiarism established by the participants, this study adopted Turnitin's spectrum of plagiarism categories,

including Clone, Ctrl-c, Find-replace, Remix, Recycle, Hybrid, Mashup, 404 error, Aggregator, and Re-tweet (Turnitin - the Plagiarism Spectrum, n.d.).

**Table 1: Types of Plagiarism (Turnitin's Spectrum of Plagiarism)**

| TYPE         | DESCRIPTION   |
|--------------|---|
| Cloning      | Submitting someone else's writing exactly as written.   |
| Ctrl-c       | Including substantial passages from a single source that have not been altered.                       |
| Find-replace | Altering important words and phrases while keeping the source's main ideas intact.                    |
| Remix        | Paraphrasing from a variety of sources, made fit together.  |
| Recycle      | Freely appropriating ideas from the author's earlier work without credit.                             |
| Hybrid       | Combining perfectly cited sources with copied passages without citation.                              |
| Mashup       | Mixing copied material from multiple sources.   |
| 404 error    | Including citations to non-existent or inaccurate information about sources.                          |
| Aggregator   | Including proper citation to sources but the paper contains almost no original work.                  |
| Re-tweet     | Including proper citation, but relying too closely on the source's original wording and/or structure. |

### 3. Findings

The analysis of plagiarised texts shows that most learners produced Find-replace, Remix, Recycle, Hybrid, and Mashup type of plagiarism. As the study focused specifically on the English expository essays of first year Malaysian undergraduates, there were no 404 error type of plagiarism instances detected. This is probably because usually it requires higher order cognition level of writing tasks, such as a final project research assignment, for a student to include citations to non-existent source or provide inaccurate information about sources. This is usually the case for problematic literature review writing or over-reliance on ChatGPT generated data. Most of the plagiarism content detected in the analysis were misinterpretation of paraphrasing techniques and inability to state referred resources. If citations were properly written, still the content is not original. The plagiarised written data show that the participants were not able to integrate their context as a Malaysian or as a student in their writing. Most of the lifted excerpts discuss widely known issues related to the topics assigned; such as general global context of plagiarism drawbacks and general norms of social media marketing. The content produced in the data analysed is quite general and could benefit from more original insight or specific examples related to the assigned topic – which are related to Malaysian and Islamic context. The ESL learners studied were probably too focused in making sure that their composition was abundant in content, but they overlooked the application of effective writing skills. Furthermore, the analysis of the data shows weak representations in terms of cohesion and coherence of the overall written outcomes. Failing to use the right punctuation marks may also be the proof of copy and pasting here and there throughout their essay. This is probably noticeable with the learners' use of artificial intelligence (AI) paraphrasing tools.

When a range of sources is synthesised and passages are adapted without proper citations, usually the outcomes composed by learners who attempted plagiarism are not representing their decisive original

critical thinking point of view. The learners were not able to direct their integration of the ideas borrowed from other sources to their own perspective and context. They were not able to do this because they have skipped the actual critical reading comprehension process which requires full understanding of the key ideas, making inferences and drawing conclusions from the textual resources. This form of Remix and Hybrid type of plagiarism is illustrated in Graphic 1, where the explanation of using social media as an e-marketing tool among Malaysians is too general. The writer neglected the aspect of mentioning anything related to the Malaysian context. Another arising oversights detected are errors in applying appropriate punctuations in the written texts produced. Punctuation errors such as no capitalisation of specific nouns, missing period, and missing or misused comas are seen in the learners' plagiarised work. Excerpts in Graphic 2, and Graphic 3 display instances of errors in capitalisation for proper nouns such as 'Muslim', 'TikTok', and 'YouTube'.

### Graphic 1: Data Excerpt

E-marketing on social media facilitates seller-customer affiliation and interactions between sellers and customers by saving time, money and space for both parties. Social media platforms provide instant messaging and commenting features that enable direct communication between sellers and customers. Compared to traditional advertising methods like print or TV ads, e-marketing on social media often requires less investment. Sellers can target specific demographics with precision, reducing advertising costs while reaching a more relevant audience. Most social media platforms offer analytics tools that provide insights into customer behaviour and preferences. Sellers can use this data to tailor their marketing strategies, ensuring that they are meeting the needs of their target audience effectively. Social media platforms are accessible 24 hours per day, providing customers with round-the-clock access to product information and support. This availability enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty while saving time for both parties by eliminating the constraints of traditional business hours.

### Graphic 2: Data Excerpt

Next, effect tiktok culture among muslim can also increasing social interaction and community. Today's technology, audiences or contacts are very easy to find with the help of the internet through several applications such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and others. But not all of our friend's requests need to be accepted because the internet age is also dangerous if you are not careful. Instead of posting your own content, it's better to inspire followers by listening and engaging with them. This is one they will appreciate and it will help build a stronger foundation of relationship between the content creator and the audience. The content or entertainment that is intended to be performed or broadcast must be suitable for their target audience because it will affect or receive criticism if the content performed is not suitable for viewing by certain groups. In this way, it will make us closer to the audience through a good relationship. Our job as creators is to create content that entertains our audience. To guarantee their loyalty to us, we need to make them trust us by posting something good. This is because it involves a social community where there are a few who are sensitive to some things. Therefore, the content created needs to be something that people can trust.

### Graphic 3: Data Excerpt

Using video which any platform especially tiktok,facebook and instagram facilitate buying and selling because there is no need to leave the house but it's certainly proving to be a powerful effective part of marketing strategy now more than ever and can buy a good product from overseas marketing. Video content creation allows you to preserve memories more. We also can create videos such as funny videos, education videos, promoting products and others. If a video is good then the people who see it can take benefits from the shared video like some vlog in youtube. Video is the perfect way to create a personality for your company and your brand, enabling you to connect with your viewer and earn their trust. 90% of users say that product videos are helpful in the decision process. When creating content, we can try goods or brand products that have been promoted. An influencer can earn a lot of money from the value of the contract offered by the brand owner. At the same time, the attraction of many people to buy and use a product is an indicator of the success of influencer marketing.

In Graphic 2, a display of Mashup and Find-replace type of plagiarism is detected whereby the writer combined copied materials from multiple sources and altered certain main points while keeping the sources' main ideas intact. Find-replace type of plagiarism instances is usually done with the help of translation apps such as Google Translate from learner's first language (L1) to the target language. However, the supporting details of the content paragraph are not the details that elaborate on the effects of e-marketing in improving customer service and customer-seller interactions among Muslim

entrepreneurs. The elaboration of the controlling idea of the body paragraph requires detailed information on how e-marketing helps Muslim business owners understand consumer behaviour and preferences, as it produces more individualised brand communication. More explanation should be focused on how e-marketing can boost business efficacy by persuading consumers and engaging them as long-term clients. Relating to insufficient strong supporting ideas for body paragraphs, it is also noted that this may also be contributed by the use of AI paraphrasing tools that have been a popular choice among Malaysian ESL learners in this study. The participants paraphrased ideas borrowed from online sources, but proper citations and referencing were not included in their writing. The paraphrased content was generated with the assistance of AI tools such as QuillBot and SpinBot. They did not alter and modify grammatically inaccurate and unnatural sentences generated by these AI tools. This also implies that the participants failed to integrate the right context and pragmatic considerations within their paraphrased content. This is also a form of not being able to relate external resources in making inferences and expand ideas independently in writing. Students differ in their abilities to identify errors (unnatural sentences) and revise their work based on their proficiency with grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, when they directly copy and paste the results generated from the AI tools, they were not able to make relevant adjustments to ensure that their work does not fall in the plagiarism attempt category.

#### Graphic 4: Data Excerpt

Next, plagiarism will give negative impact to the students' personal and professional life. Plagiarism can result in severe academic penalties such as failing grades, suspension, or even expulsion from educational institutions, which can hinder students' academic progress and future opportunities. When we submit a paper or assignment that contains significant portions of copied content without proper citation. This not only hampers the student's academic progress but also negatively impacts their future opportunities for education and career advancement. Engaging in plagiarism violates ethical principles of honesty, integrity, and intellectual property rights, which can tarnish students' reputation and credibility among peers, professors, and potential employers. Students may face lawsuits or damage claims for infringing on copyrights or patents, jeopardizing their professional standing and future career prospects. When we create a project using patented technology without obtaining proper permission or licensing. A history of plagiarism can damage students' chances of securing employment or advancing in their careers, as it raises concerns about their trustworthiness and ability to perform tasks with integrity.

Furthermore, their emotions and psychological well-being will get affected. They will fail or bad result because of plagiarism and they will be terminated from collage. It is because plagiarism is not a small issue to be tolerate. If the task by grouping their groupmate might get angry towards you because their marks also effected and your surrounding might be negative afterwards. For example, your friend will refuse to let you in their group for other subject and it will affect your mental health or emotion because you feel lonely and feel left out. Anyone who caught committing plagiarism they have to redo the task and might affect their emotion because they need to spend their time all over again to do the same task twice and you will feel giving up in studies because you have to redo all over again just for marks and to pass the subject. Either than that, you will get anxious everyday when you want to go to the class because you will think that your lecturer will attack you, mad at you. Because of that, you will skip classes and might affect your attendance and lead to fail and terminate from collage too.

As displayed in the excerpt in Graphic 4, it is indicated that there is lacking in the unity of the writing style and the overall content. An obvious difference in sentence structure is detected in the excerpt that shows Hybrid, Mashup, and Find-replace type of plagiarism. Plagiarised outputs in Graphic 4 display complex-compound type of English sentence structure, whereas the student's own inputs show mostly simple and compound sentences. The student's own input also displays the use of complex sentence structure, but with errors, unlike the style written for the plagiarised input. This is shown in this sentence: "If the task by grouping their groupmate might get angry towards you because their marks also effected and your surrounding might be negative afterwards." The conditional sentence is problematic in its missing punctuation, its subject-predicate, and pronouns. The incohesive use of the reference words is also a display of contrast in plagiarised input and student's

own efforts. The plagiarised inputs display use of general point of view expressions such as ‘students,’ ‘we,’ and ‘their;’ while the student’s own input display use of reference words such as ‘you,’ ‘they,’ ‘your,’ and ‘their.’ The student’s own input also displays errors in use of discourse markers and sentence connectors, unlike the plagiarised input. This is reflected for example in the excerpt “*Either than that, you will get anxious everyday when...*,” the use of ‘Either than that’ is not appropriate in the context of the sentence. Another obvious element to highlight in the analysis of the plagiarised excerpt is that there is a difference of vocabulary expressions used to deliver writing content. The plagiarised content displays such good expressions with familiarity and colloquialisms. Such examples displayed in the excerpt are “...*face lawsuits or damage claims for infringing on copyrights or patents, jeopardizing their professional standing and future career prospects.*” and “...*patented technology without obtaining proper permission or licensing.*” The student’s own input on the other hand shows simple basic usage of written English and certain patterns of error, especially in the use of auxiliary verb ‘be.’ An example of this error of the missing verb ‘be’ found in this excerpt is “*Anyone who caught committing plagiarism they have...*,” the auxiliary verb ‘is’ is missing before the past participle ‘caught’ for the passive verb ‘is caught.’

#### 4. Conclusion

The current qualitative study has a small-scale, exploratory design. Even though the study's generalisability is limited, it is hoped that it will offer preliminary understanding of approaches in combatting plagiarism in ESL writing and spark ideas for future, larger-scale project exploration. The findings suggest that a deeper emphasis on plagiarism prevention should be included in the Malaysian ESL academic writing curricula. Malaysian ESL students should be provided with comprehensive exposure to various instances of academic plagiarism to increase their awareness and reduce the likelihood of similar occurrences. Undergraduates should be initially given a clear explanation of what plagiarism includes, such as self-plagiarism, paraphrasing without citing sources, and straight copying. Educators should discuss about the ramifications of plagiarism for their academic standing and future career. Additionally, learners should receive detailed instruction on citation techniques, paraphrasing methods, summarisation strategies, and critical evaluation skills. Thorough instructions on the various citation formats (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.) for sources should also be included as part of ESL students’ academic writing syllabus. Enforcing critical reading skills and techniques is important so that the learner will be able to comprehend their resources effectively, be able to extract relevant ideas and summarise them in their own words, and employ their critical reading skills based on their inferences and conclusions drawn. Students with strong research skills are better in finding reliable sources and incorporating them into their academic writing.

Educators are also encouraged to integrate the use of artificial intelligence technology in ESL classrooms. Instructors as well as learners should familiarise themselves with software or AI tools for detecting plagiarism. Including training and tutorials on using tools such as Turnitin, Grammarly, Plagscan, Scribbr or Copyscape in ESL writing classes would possibly assist both instructors and learners. Besides that, ESL educators should construct English writing assignments that demand creative thought and critical thinking to make it more challenging to locate already published material for plagiarism. This includes writing stages: drafts, peer reviews, and revisions to track students’ writing development and creativity. It is important that during this process, instructors provide constructive feedback by pointing out instances of plagiarism in learners’ work and providing advice on how to make it better. The writing assessments should focus on the learning process rather than only the finalised written assignment.

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