c of Academic Literacy Skills to Second Language Postgraduate Students: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The study examined the effect of e-conferencing method in the teaching of academic literacy skills to combat the problem of plagiarism in research writing among second language postgraduate students. A research question and one hypothesis were used. No variables were studied. A quasi-experimental research design involving a control and experimental groups of ten postgraduate students each were used for the study. The result showed that there was a significant difference between the post-writing scores of experimental and control groups at 0.05 level of significance. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. Mentoring made the difference between the experimental and control groups post-writing scores.

1.1 Introduction

Simply put, *academic literacy* is the acquisition of reading and writing skills in schools. However, the term assumes wider dimension at the level of scholarship. Scholarly writing requires multiple literacies. Green (1999) has identified the following literacies as mandatory for scholarly communication: *operational literacy* (the acquisition of the skill of linguistic competence that makes it possible for a scholar to write like an educated person, using acceptable grammatical forms of the English language, punctuating sentences appropriately and spelling words correctly); *cultural literacy* (the acquisition of the skill to communicate in one's discipline, using the conventions acceptable in the discipline as each discipline has its own unique discourse pattern. These unique discourse patterns are referred to as the *culture* of the discipline) and *critical literacy* (the skill to analyse, criticise, and synthesize knowledge). These various *literacies* combine to constitute what this study refers to as *academic literacy and its skills*. For other views on *academic literacy*, see Lea and Street (1998); Neeley (2005), and Murdock University (2007). Although academic literacy is culture-bound, there is a common ground in all academic discourse. A common denominator in all academic discourse is what the researcher terms *bivocality*. It refers to the two "voices" in all academic discourse- the scholar's voice and the "other voices" used to support or defend the scholar's point of view. The demand for *bivocality* in academic discourse has wide ranging implications. First, the scholar has to source information from "other voices." This is referred to as *textual borrowing* (Barks & Watts, 2001; Casanave, 2004). Second, textual borrowing has to be integrated into the scholar's work to form a unified whole. Finally, the scholar has to write like an expert (Tardy, 2010) by conforming to the conventions of his /her discipline. These implications translate into another demand in academic discourse- originality. Originality means refine-tuning existing knowledge to make it appear new.

Originality requires that all textual borrowings--words, phrases, sentences, and ideas either quoted or paraphrased are not only duly acknowledged, using appropriate referencing style, but also adequately synthesized into the scholar's work to produce a discourse which could be described as different from similar discourse in the discipline. Originality, in this context, demands *integrity* on the part of the scholar. Integrity requires that all textual borrowings, in whatever form, should be properly and duly attributed (Casanave, 2004). Failure in this regard results in an academic crime termed *plagiarism*, which has become a major global academic issue. This issue is of the greatest concern in second language context where both undergraduate and postgraduate students use it as a survival strategy (Spack,1997) because of their lack of basic academic literacy skills (Keck, 2006), the complexity of task demand especially referencing (Currie, 1998), and sociocultural background (Pennycook, 1996, Pecorari, 2003). Because it is a global academic issue especially in second language situation, plagiarism and its pedagogy in second language (L2) context is the focus of this study. Postgraduate students are targeted because of the demand on originality in their academic training. Research reveals that L2 students plagiarise either inadvertently as a result of ignorance or deliberately as a result of lack of skill (Campbell, 1990; Buranen, 1999; Dryden, 1999; Barks, & Watts, 2001, Block, 2001, and Pecorari, 2001). Plagiarism is an academic crime (Pennycook,1996, & Halbert, 1999) that requires a pedagogical treatment to control hence the emphasis on pedagogy in this study.

Plagiarism takes the following forms (Barnbaum, 2006.): copy and paste (textual borrowing not duly attributed); word shift (sentence-type textual borrowing in which some of the words are rearranged); style (imitating the organizational structure of a source material); metaphor (using borrowed metaphor without attribution); and idea (using the idea or suggestion from sourced material without attribution). Consequently, underlying plagiarism as unethical practice is appropriation without due attribution (acknowledgment). To escape from this unethical practice, postgraduate students and, indeed, all students should be versed in such academic literacy skills as summarising/paraphrasing, and synthesizing of textual borrowing. In addition, they should be skilled in in-text citations and referencing styles appropriate to the culture of their various disciplines. Another form of plagiarism has been identified. Although it is outside the scope of this study, it requires a cursory mention. It is *self-plagiarism* (Roig, 2006; American Psychological Association, 2010). *Self-plagiarism* is the act of re-publishing one's published work without the knowledge of either the publisher or the reader. Roig (2006) has identified three forms of self-plagiarism. These are: re-publishing one's published work without the knowledge of a previous publisher; publishing in parts a major work to increase the number of one's publication; and "re-using portions of a previously written (published or unpublished) text" (p.16). Plagiarism is predicated on the postmodern concept of intellectual property and copyright (Buranen & Roy, 1999; Casanave, 2004). Because of its global spread especially in L2 context, plagiarism has acquired a research culture since 1990's (Casanave, 2004). The pre-occupation of its research culture are: student/staff perception of plagiarism, empirical evidence of its spread, its causes, and solution.

Typical studies on student/staff perception of plagiarism are: Kroll (1988), Campbell (1990), Deckert (1993), Ashworth, Bannister, Thorne (1997), Pecorari (2001), Spigelman (2001), Bacha, Bahous, and Nabhani (2012), Ramzan, Munir, Siddique, and Asif (2012), Gourlay and Deane (2012), Voelker, Love, and Penteria (2012), Polio and Shi (2012). These studies, in various ways, reveal the following: First, plagiarism is recognised as unacceptable academic practice. Second, it is perceived as constituting the copy and paste type. Third, most students do not regard as plagiarism unattributed paraphrased textual borrowing. Finally, imitation of style of writing of other scholars is not recognised as plagiarism. These studies underscore the need for a pedagogical approach to plagiarism especially at the postgraduate level where originality in scholarship is stressed. A course different from Research Methodology is required for this purpose. The new course should follow sequentially a course in Research Methodology. The course should be a writing course designed to teach not only the writing of scholarly papers, but also address the issue of plagiarism. The course should be department-specific to reflect the writing culture of the department. Its content should be based on the multi-literacies which constitute academic literacy. It should have a mode of course delivery which is adequate enough to achieve the terminal objective of the course. This study attempts to explore such a mode of course delivery.

Some studies have been done on the global nature of plagiarism. Typical are: Detenber, Cenite, Malik, Shi, and Neo (2012); McAllister and Watkins (2012); Shi (2012) and Thomas, and Sassi (2012). These studies reveal that plagiarism among L2 students is as real as AIDS is in the society. Consequently, the need for a pedagogical approach to the problem is reinforced.

The causes of plagiarism, as a global educational threat, have generated research interest. Among L2 students, the studies of Currie (1998) and Keck (2006) blame the cause on lack of linguistic ability of L2 students to understand borrowed texts, summarise, paraphrase, and synthesize the texts into their work, using appropriate referencing style. This cause translates into lack of basic academic literacy skill. Pennycook (1996) and Pecorari (2003) examine the influence of sociocultural background of L2 students which could make them prone to plagiarism. Spack (1997) sees it as a ploy among L2 students to survive academically. On the other hand, native speakers (L1) students have other reasons for plagiarising. The reasons range from educational policies such as the use of continuous assessment instead of examinations to determine success in a course to what Park (2003) terms *psychosocial reasons* such as poor time management, negative attitude to assignments and teachers (Fox,Booth, & O'Rourke, 2008). Other studies that play around these central causes are: Bloch and Chi (1995); Jurdi, Hage, and Chow (2012); Howard (1995); Pennycook (1996); Stearns (1999); and Pearson (2011). From these studies, it is noted that L2 students have more serious reasons for plagiarising than their L1 counterparts. Such differences underpin the need to focus pedagogical treatment on L2 students to address the problem. In this regard, this study addresses L2 students especially postgraduate students.

Attempts to control the problem of plagiarism are bi-directional. A technological based approach in this direction is the use of plagiarism detecting software called *Turnitin.* In addition to Turnitin, Google Scholar can also provide similar services

(Culwin & Lancaster, 2001). However, Turnitin is the most popularly used software. Typical studies on the use of the software are: O'Connor (2003); Scaife (2007); Fox, Booth, and O'Rourke (2008); Whittle and Murdoch-Eaton (2008); Butakov and Barber (2012); Kinder and Elander (2012); Rolf (2012); and Stapleton (2012). These studies either discuss the nature of the training and use of Turnitin or the defects of the software in detecting plagiarism. One of such defects is the possibility of detecting plagiarism where it does not exist and not detecting it where it exists (Fox, et al, 2008). In using Turnitin, students' writings are pre-tested for plagiarism. A cut-off point of 24% is acceptable level of plagiarism allowable for margin of error due to technical problem characteristic of the software. The pretested students' writing is re-written and re-tested until a cut-off point of 24% or less is attained. For details, see Fox et al (2008). The other direction in the control of plagiarism is through pedagogy for universities that do not have access to Turnitin. A course popularly referred to as *Academic Writing* is designed to teach L2 postgraduate students how to write original, scholarly articles with a view to controlling the incidence of plagiarism. Typical studies in this direction are Ramani (1988), Lea and Street (1998); Keck (2006); Boscolo, Arfe, and Quarisa (2007); Hyland (2007), Tardy and Courtney (2008); and Tardy (2010). These studies focus on teaching the writing of scholarly articles as appropriate to given academic genres. For instance, Ramani (1988) focuses on scientific articles; Tardy (2010) addresses scholarly articles for Wikipedia. In addition to teaching academic writing, other approaches to the teaching are the use of activities and exercises to practice academic writing (Tardy & Courtney, 2008); genre pedagogy (Hyland, 2007), concentrates on the analysis of the features, content, and style of the discourse of given discipline to enable the student to write appropriately, through imitation, in the discipline. A major weakness of the literature on academic writing, in the view of this study, is that they all, except Ramani (1988), dwell on what-to-do (content) and not on how-to- do (method). Method is the concern of this study. This study, therefore, addresses the question: Which method is adequate enough to achieve the terminal objective of a second language postgraduate writing course designed to combat the menace of plagiarism among the target students?

Two popular modes of course delivery dominate postgraduate teaching in Nigerian universities – a typical example of L2 country and, therefore, the focus of this study. These are the lecture and the seminar methods. In the lecture method, the lecturer is the custodian of knowledge which he/she imparts to the students, who listen, take notes, and ask questions where necessary. There is provision for written assignments which he/she grades by making comments and awarding grades. The comments are designed to make the students aware of the weaknesses/strengths of their submission to enable them to act appropriately in subsequent assignments. The lecture method provides for individual mentoring. Unfortunately, many students do not avail themselves of this opportunity, but prefer to depend on their course mates instead of meeting their lecturer during his/her office hours to discuss whatever problem encountered in the course. On the other hand, the seminar method makes the lecturer a moderator of academic discourse in a seminar presentation. When properly conducted, the seminar method promotes independent research and critical perception of students. Unfortunately, students' seminar presentations represent the copy and paste type of plagiarism. Thus, such papers are

neither critical nor analytical in content. Students' participation in the academic discussion during seminars is shallow. Some students do not have anything to offer during the discussion. From the brief summary of the two methods, it is clear that the seminar method is inadequate for a course in academic writing because it does not provide the mentoring essential in writing lesson. On the other hand, the lecture method has potentials for adequacy. It could, therefore, be used if there is no alternative method. An alternative method is the ICT mediated instruction method in the form of e-conferencing (Ng,1999) now in vogue in the United States of America and Great Britain—the countries which the researcher has first hand information. There are two types of e-conferencing – synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous e-conferencing is characterised by face-to-face communication while there is no face-to-face communication in asynchronous e-conferencing (Ng,1999). Synchronous e-conferencing is popularly used for interviews as during telecasts. Asynchronous e-conferencing is epitomised in e-mail services. It has educational value as it has become a popular method of course delivery in the United States and Great Britain because of its convenience. Lecturers mail assignments to students and give them deadline for submission. The lecturer grades and comments on the submitted assignments and mail his/her reactions to the students, who may interact with the lecturer by asking questions or seeking clarifications. There is a face-to-face contact periods during the course. The face-to-face contacts provide room for brainstorming, discussion of common problems which students have experienced in doing their assignments. The benefits of e-mail conferencing are immense. For the lecturer, it provides him/her the time to reflect on students questions and give seasoned response (Hedge, 1999). On the part of the students, it uncloaks the inhibition that prevents them from either participating actively in class discussion or asking questions in class. The e-mail conferencing has been described as most suited to writing courses. Through student/lecturer interaction, the lecturer can perceive the students' writing problems and provide needed mentoring through suggesting ideas, organization patterns, and word choice (Hedge, 1999). From the foregoing discussion, the writing lecturer is left with two options to choose from—lecture method and e-mail conferencing. This study, therefore, attempts to compare the two options to find out the method with greater effectiveness.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

One research question and one hypothesis are posed for this study as follows respectively:
To what extent do the mean achievement scores of students taught research writing, using e-conferencing differ from those taught with lecture method?

Ho_1 There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of students taught research writing, using e- conferencing and those taught with lecture method.

1.3 METHOD

The subjects of this study were 20 postgraduate students who registered for a course in research writing in their discipline for the 2010/2011 academic year. The

course, as taught during the past sessions, is a 3-credit course of one semester duration. Two lecturers taught the course. Four contact periods are devoted to lecture the students on the rudiments of research writing appropriate to the students' discipline from the perspective of quantitative and qualitative research paradigm. Each lecturer uses two contact periods to lecture on her chosen research paradigm. At the end of the lecture sessions, students choose research topics approved by the two lecturers to write a 15-page research paper for seminar presentation after five weeks from the day the topics are approved by the lecturers. A schedule for seminar presentation is prepared by the Course Coordinator. During each seminar presentation, the two lecturers individually commented on the presentation. Students submit two hard copies of their presentation to the Course Coordinator. The two lecturers individually grade the papers, using a marking guide that made provision for class presentation. The lecturers meet to reconcile their individual grades to get a mean score for the students' course grade.

In the 2010/2011 academic session when the researcher became the Course Coordinator, the focus of the course was changed as a result of her exposure to the literature on academic literacy and plagiarism. She re-organised the course contents into five units. The first unit focused on the concept of academic literacy and plagiarism—its types, recognition, and avoidance. Exercises on plagiarism were worked out based on adapted form of Barnbaum's (n.d) model which was meant for Physics students. The second unit dealt with operational literacy. Exercises on basic grammar, punctuation, and spelling were provided. The third unit emphasized critical literacy with exercises on note-taking and summarising and paraphrasing notes taken, abstract writing, and article reviews. The fourth unit concentrated on cultural literacy with emphasis on in-text citation and referencing, using the documentation style appropriate to the discipline, formatting and language also appropriate to the discipline. Finally, the fifth unit involved the writing of a 15-page research paper based on the orientation of the course. To avoid student collusion in writing, a list of 20 researchable topics in the students' discipline was prepared for distribution to students by ballot.

During the first contact, the students chose by ballot a topic from the list prepared for the course to write a 15-page research paper. Three weeks was given for this assignment. They were to submit two hard copies of their papers to the Course Coordinator. During the second contact, the class was divided into two by ballot, following mutual agreement between the two lecturers assigned the course. By mutual agreement also, each lecturer adopted a method deemed convenient. As the researcher suspected, her colleague adopted the lecture method. Unknown to the researcher's colleague and to the students, the purpose for re-organising the course and grouping the class into two independent groups was to enable the researcher to experiment with e-mail conferencing in teaching the course. In the hidden spirit of the course, the researcher's colleague group constituted the control group while the researcher's group served as the experimental group. Formal instruction for the course lasted for 12 weeks. Three weeks was given for the students to re-write their 15-page research paper, which they wrote at the beginning of the course. They were to re-write their research paper based on the new knowledge which they had acquired during the course.

For the experimental group, two face-to-face contact periods were allotted to Units 1-4 of the course content. The first contact period served as brain- storming session for the content of each unit. The second contact period was devoted to the discussion of common problems which students encountered in the course of doing the assignments for each unit. For the e-mail conferencing, each student wrote his/her e-mail address in the class list. With the e-mail addresses, the researcher mailed the assignments of each unit one at a time and gave deadline for the return of the assignments. The researcher graded each assignment, making appropriate comments. The graded assignments were returned to the students, who were free to react to the comments. Because reliance on one service provider for the experiment was risky, the researcher made use of alternative service providers. It worked. In unit five that involved re-writing the research paper already submitted at the beginning of the course, the brain-storming session was designed to reinforce the exercises on plagiarism in Unit one. As the students rewrote the research paper, the students were free to interact with the researcher on problem relating to organization, formatting, in-text citations, and referencing.

At the end of the course, all the students in both the experimental and control groups submitted their re-written research papers in two hard copies to the Coordinator of the Course. All the papers (pre/post lecture) were secretly marked to separate the control from the experimental groups. The two lecturers independently graded both the pre/post lecture papers, using a marking guide that penalized for plagiarism. Twenty marks were subtracted from the mean score of each student's paper for plagiarism. The researcher/coordinator used the raw mean scores of each students' grade to compare the effectiveness of the two methods—lecture and e-mail conferencing. The scores were analysed, using mean and standard deviation to answer the research question and t-test to test the hypothesis.

1.4 RESULTS

The results are presented according to he research questions and hypothesis. The research question states:

> To what extent does the mean achievement scores of the students taught research writing, using e- conferencing method differ form those taught with the lecture method.

Table 1: Students' Pre/Post Achievement Mean ($(\overline{x})$) Sores and Standard Deviation (SD) for both the Experimental/ Control Groups

Groups Mean Gain	N	$\overline{x}$	SD
Experimental: pre-writing	10	26.7	6.95
post-writing	10	63.1	2.96
36.4			
Control: pre-writing	10	27.7	6.8
post-writing	10	48.1	5.8
20.4			

Ho$_1$ There is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of those taught research writing,   using e-conferencing method and those taught with the lecture method.

Table 2: Mean, Standard Deviation and t-test of Pre-/Post-test Scores of both the Experimental and Control Groups

Groups Decision	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	t-cal	P
Experimental : post-writing significant	10	63.1	2.96	0.00	0.05
Control : post-writing	10	48.1	5.8		

1.5 DISCUSSION

According to Table 1, the pre-writing mean score for the experimental group taught with e-conferencing is 26.7 with a standard deviation of 6.95 while the post-writing mean records 63.1 with a standard deviation of 2.96. A mean gain of 36.4 is realized. On the other hand, the pre-writing mean score for the control group taught with lecture method is 27.7 with 6.8 as the standard deviation while the post-writing mean is 48.1 and a standard deviation of 5.8. A mean gain of 20.4 is recorded. The statistics reveals that a mean gain is recorded for the two groups. However, the mean gain for the experimental group far exceeds that of the control group with a margin of 16.0.

Table 2 reveals that t-value as calculated is 0.00 at 0.05 alpha level of significance. Since the t-value is less than 0.05 alpha level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. There is, therefore, a significant difference between the mean achievement scores of those taught research writing with e-conferencing method and those taught, using lecture method. Although the two methods recorded mean gain, the mean gain of the experimental group outweighs that of the control group. This is because e-conferencing provides more robust mentoring than the lecture method. This view corroborates with Hedge (1999) who maintains that e-conferencing is a better instructional mode for the teaching of writing because it provides the mentoring which may be lacking in other modes of instruction.

1.6 RECOMMENDATION

For those departments which have recognised the need to teach research writing in addition to research methods to their postgraduate students, there is need to change the orientation of the course to embrace the concept of academic literacy skills and the problem of plagiarism that inheres in it. Postgraduate students should be trained to write academic papers which are plagiarism proof. For departments which have not recognised the need for such a course, this study sensitizes them on the need for the course advocated in this study. The current global academic concern about plagiarism especially

in second language situation makes the offering of a postgraduate course in research writing mandatory.

1.7 CONCLUSION

Based on the above, the researcher concludes that mentoring is essential for the teaching of research writing as it provides the opportunity to check plagiarism in students' research writing—a major problem in research writing among second language postgraduate students.

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