An Investigation of Academic Dishonesty among Undergraduates in Four Universities in Laos: Critical Analysis of Students' Final Reports

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ABSTRACT: The purposes of this study were to examine academic dishonesty, which focuses on plagiarism, in final reports written by English-majored students at four different faculties in four public universities and to study the in-text citations and references used in the final reports.

A survey research was adopted in the current study, in which 80 final reports written by English-major students between 2014 and 2020 at four faculties—the faculty of languages (Souphanouvong University), the faculty of linguistics and humanities (Savannakhet University), the faculty of education (National University of Laos), and the faculty of education (Champasak University)—were collected through simple random selection. The Plagiarism Checker X was used to analyse and detect plagiarism in the students' final reports, and the number of plagiarized words and improper in-text citations and referencing are presented in the frequency.

The results showed that 30,819 (67%) out of 45,999 words written by students at the faculty of languages (Souphanouvong University) were plagiarized, followed by 13,219 (63%) out of 20,982 words created by students at the faculty of education (Champasak University), and 27,735 (66%) out of 42,022 words were also cited as plagiarism at the faculty of linguistics and humanities (Savannakhet University). In contrast, only 9,674 (36%) out of 27,123 words written by students at the faculty of education (National University of Laos) were plagiarized. Another key finding of the current study is that 623 (76%) out of 926 references in the 80 manuscripts were checked and found to be inappropriately referenced, while 966 in-text citations were checked and showed that 45% (434 citations) were found to be incorrect.

KEYWORDS: Academic Dishonesty, Plagiarism, In-text citation, Referencing

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic dishonesty among university students is on the rise, posing a serious concern for professors and administrators. With today's fast technological advancements, academic dishonesty has become a growing trend among university students, which is a problem at all levels of education, especially higher education across the world (Eminoğlu & Nartgün, 2009; Simpson, 2016; Murdock & Anderman, 2006). Understanding the elements that influence academic dishonesty is necessary for the creation of creative strategies and treatments for reducing dishonest behavior (Megan et al., 2019; Maloshonok & Shmeleva, 2019).

In Laos, the Ministry of Education and Sports (2020) emphasizes the importance of preparing university students to be academically ethical. The MOE has included academic honesty in the education and sports sector development plan 2021–2025 to emphasize its importance. Furthermore, some universities incorporate the concept of academic integrity into their policies, missions, and slogans to encourage students to practice academic morality in their learning and research (National University of Laos, 2021). Despite the promotion of academic integrity, plagiarism has increased significantly among students at universities across the country. This has become a concern for teachers, lecturers, and universities. The data, however, concerning this issue is widely debatable and controversial among scholars and academics because of the shortage of research in this area.

In the past two decades, several researchers have sought to determine the factors influencing students' engagement in academic dishonesty. A study with 357 undergraduates by Megan et al. (2019) found that the chance of participating in academically dishonest behaviours was predicted by social rational orientation and perceived course value. Bozdağ (2021)

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demonstrated that students' academic dishonesty inclinations rise as their fear of bad assessments from instructors and professors grows. Subjective standards, which were found to be the largest predictor of academic dishonesty, and dishonesty were shown to be positively associated with perceived behavioural control (Maloshonok & Shmeleva, 2019; Zhang, Yin, & Zheng, 2018) were two major factors influencing students' engaging in academic dishonesty. Research by Costley (2019) stated that the sporadic nature of the activity as well as the students' perception that academic dishonesty was a normal part of their learning experience among Korean students

However, MacLeod and Eaton (2020) found that administrative considerations are two of the key elements highlighted by teachers as leading to academic dishonesty. Due to the significant difficulties of dealing with paperwork and producing proof, many faculty members feel backed by their administration and are hesitant to publicly report academic dishonesty. Furthermore, unprepared students and overseas students who struggle with language challenges and the Canadian academic framework are also important contributors to academic dishonesty. In comparison, in the context of the College of Basic Education in Kuwait, academic dishonesty is extremely likely to be quite widespread among CBE students since they may profit from it, while the likelihood of discovery and severity of punishment are thought to be quite low (Alsuwaileh, Russ-Eft, & Alshurai, 2016). Kam, Hue, and Cheung (2018) revealed that only the subjective norm against cheating was substantially associated with self-reported cheating behaviour. Attitudes toward cheating, perceived behavioural control, and moral duty were all positively connected to the intention to cheat. Individual, environmental, and ethical factors have been shown to influence academic dishonesty rationalization, and this rationalization determines actual academic dishonesty behaviour. Furthermore, in higher education, the lack of well-defined regulations on academic dishonesty is a key driver of academic dishonesty among students (Ellahi, Mushtaq, & Khan, 2013). A longitudinal study (2005–2013) by Molnar (2015) reported that an examination of the data reveals that student acceptability of various forms of academic dishonesty has declined over the last nine years. In a study in China, students' opinions on the acceptability of cheating and cheating behaviour in mathematics were linked to engagement and task orientation in the classroom (contextual aspects) as well as intrinsic and utilitarian value (personal elements) (Cheung, Wu, & Huang, 2016).

Nevertheless, there is little study on academic dishonesty in the context of Laos, and the data associated with academic dishonesty is scarce. For this reason, this research is essential and a must to increase the understanding of the proposed problem within the Lao context. The current study aimed to analyze the final reports written by English-majored students to identify plagiarism and study the use of in-text citations and referencing to determine whether it was correct or not.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The purposes of this study were to examine academic dishonesty, which focuses on plagiarism, in final projects written by English-majored students at four different faculties in four public universities and to analyze the in-text citations and references used in the final reports. To achieve the objectives, a survey design was adopted, and secondary data were collected in the study. According to Johnston (2017), secondary data analysis is the examination of information gathered by someone else for a primary reason. For researchers with limited time and resources, using existing data is a feasible choice. In this study, the 80 final reports written by English-majored students between 2014 and 2020 at four different faculties—the faculty of languages (Souphanouvong University), the faculty of linguistics and humanities (University of Savannakhet), the faculty of education (National University of Laos), and the faculty of education (Champasak University)—were collected through simple random selection. The final projects, which were completely written by English-majored students at four different faculties and universities and stored at the central library, were randomly collected by scanning the whole texts of the final projects. Prior to data collection, ethical considerations were taken into consideration, and a consent form was signed by the authorized organizations at each university. The final projects were uploaded into Plagiarism Checker X to detect student plagiarism in the students' final projects; the number of plagiarized words was analyzed into a percentage and displayed in the figure, while the number of in-text citations and references were manually analyzed based on the APA 7th edition and the incorrect number of citations and references were shown in the figure.

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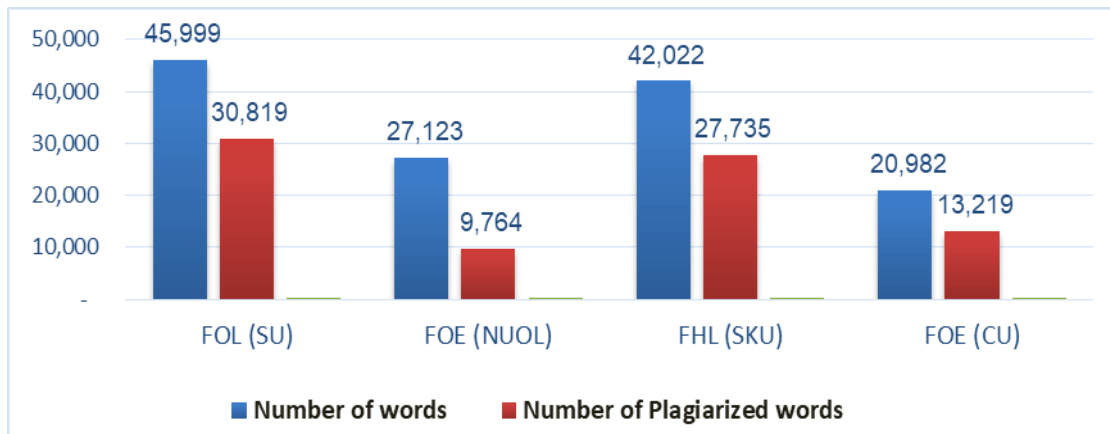**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Figure 1. The Number of Words and Plagiarized Words in Students' Final Reports

Note: FOL = Faculty of Languages; FOE = Faculty of Education; FHL = Faculty of Linguistics & Humanities; SU = Souphanouvong University; NUOL = National University of Laos; SKU = Savannakhet University; CU = Champasak University.

Figure 1 above illustrates the variations of plagiarism at four faculties in four public universities in Lao PDR. As can be seen from the figure (above), the number of manuscripts (which equals 45,999 words) was scanned at FOL (SU), and it was found that 30,819 (67%) of the manuscripts were plagiarized, while students at FOE (NUOL) found only 9,764 (36% out of 27,123 words) of the manuscripts to be plagiarized, followed by FHL (SKU), where 66% (equals 27,735 out of 42,022 words) were also cited as plagiarism and 13,219 (63%) out of 20,982 were plagiarized, respectively.
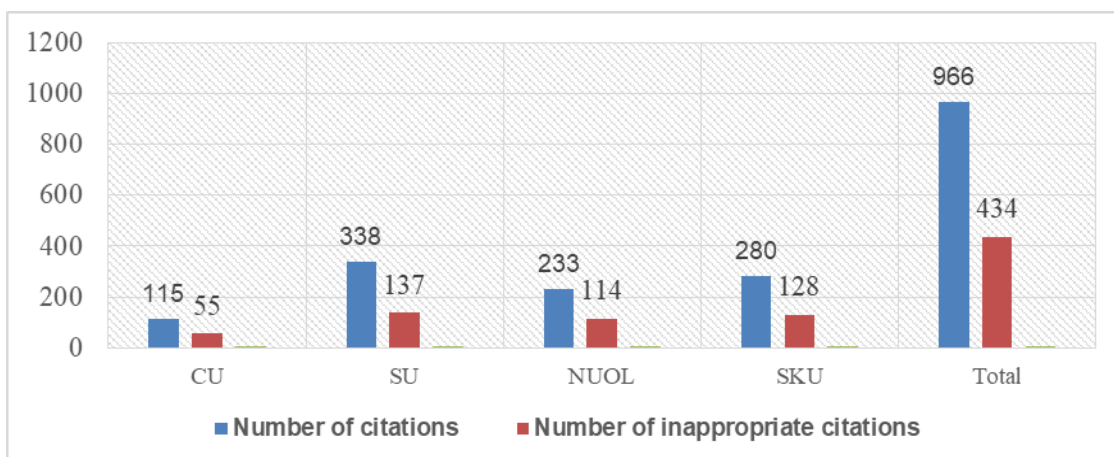

Figure 2. The Number of Inappropriate Citations Used in Students' Final Reports

As shown in Figure 3, students from the National University of Laos (NUOL) are found to be dominant in citing inappropriately (49%), followed by Champasack University students, which account for 48%. In comparison, 46% of Savannakhet University students were found to have inappropriate citations, while 41% of Souphanouvong University students were unable to cite appropriately. Overall, 966 citations were checked for correctness, and it was found that 434 citations (45%) made by students at four faculties were found to be cited inappropriately.

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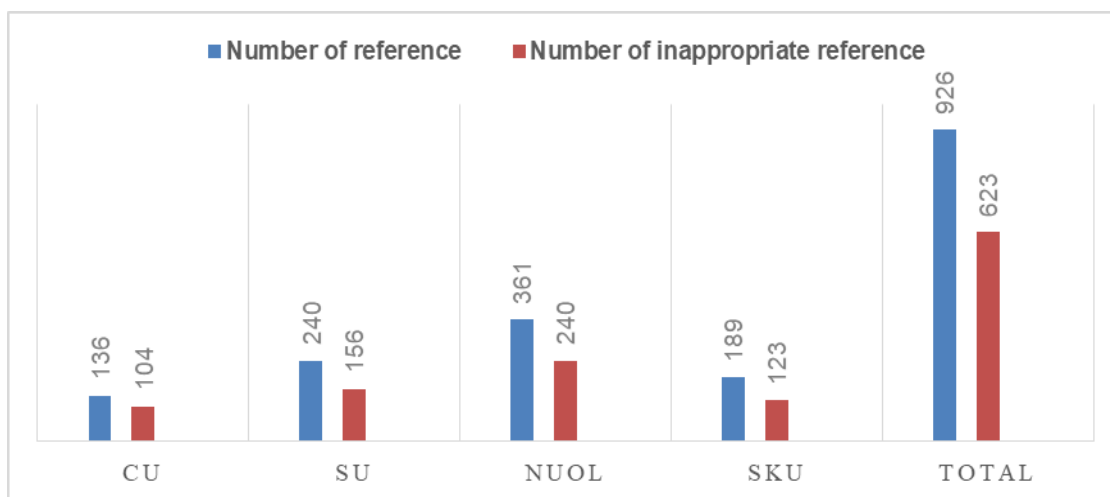

Figure 3. The Number of Inappropriate References Used in Students' Final Reports

Note: FOL = Faculty of Languages; FOE = Faculty of Education; FHL = Faculty of Linguistics & Humanities; SU = Souphanouvong University; NUOL = National University of Laos; SKU = Savannakhet University; CU = Champasak University.

As can be seen from the figure above, the largest number of inaccurate references (76%) is found to be committed by students at FOE (CU), whereas 66% of references are found to be referenced inappropriately by students at FOE (NUOL). At the same time, 65% of the references made by students at FOL (SU) and FLH (SKU) are inaccurate. Overall, 623 out of 926 references appearing in students' manuscripts were found to be referenced inappropriately, which accounts for 67%.

DISCUSSION

According to current data, the majority of words in final reports written by students at Lao universities were found to be plagiarized. These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work by Tran, Huynh, and Nguyen (2018) from 2013 to 2015, in which 977 samples were taken from 1434 compulsory graduation reports produced by senior undergraduates in the economics and management fields, which found that 91.7 percent of the graduation reports were found to be plagiarized at the university, with 61.7 percent of the reports copied using the program. The major source of this problem was the use of material from the internet without crediting the original authors. In addition, an investigation with university graduate students in Pakistan found that many respondents did not know what plagiarism was, and a large percentage of students have openly admitted to plagiarizing written works on purpose (Ramzan, Munir, Siddique, & Asif, 2012).

Furthermore, the current study shows that almost 50% of the citations in the final reports were cited inappropriately. In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that students often make mistakes when doing citations, such as not including the year of publication, not including page numbers, journal names, volumes, and issue numbers, quoting too much, and not manually inserting reference lists (Nkateng & Makoko, 2021). In a similar study by Lee, Hitchcock, and Casal (2018), the results indicate that L2 students are prone to demonstrate deference to the perceived authority of published sources because they mostly take a non-committal attitude by just acknowledging or excluding themselves from references. Citation analysis was used in this work to monitor the quality and current state of the reference list. These results are in accord with recent studies indicating that the most significant mistakes in citations were shown to be those made while writing secondary citations and author names. The most important inaccuracies in the reference list were those that were italicized. According to the survey results, seventh semester students were knowledgeable, but the majority of them still struggle with article writing, which is thought to be a major factor in the percentage of errors made by seventh-semester students, the majority of which were significant in poor criteria (37.5%) (Tridianti & Eryansyah, 2023).

Moreover, the study also found that a significant number of references in the final reports were wrong based on the APA manual. A study by Yap (2020) also examined twenty master's theses uploaded to an open institutional repository, which were examined in the article. Findings revealed that the 2019 theses submitted exhibited more errors than those submitted in 2018. The reference list's information retrieval section had the most frequent problems, such as missing publication dates and/or volume and issue numbers. In addition, references in publications published in respected peer-reviewed journals must be accurate, fair, balanced, and impartial. Studies on the reliability of references in diverse scientific fields, however, show a

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25%–54% mistake rate. These mistakes can range from simple inaccuracies in the citation information to serious ones that change the original meaning and content of the source material (Rivkin, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The main goal of the current study was to determine the amount of plagiarism in students' final reports from four public universities in Lao PDR. The present study has shown that the largest numbers of texts used in students' final reports are found to be plagiarized. This means that plagiarism is widespread among undergraduate students, except for final reports written by students at the National University of Laos. Furthermore, most in-text citations and references made by students are found to be cited and referenced improperly based on the APA style. Based on current findings, it is recommended that educators incorporate research skills, which include summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, citing, and referencing sources, in the classroom. In addition, it is also suggested that an APA manual be developed and provided to students to utilize as a key reference when citing and referencing the sources. Furthermore, educators should teach students how to use reference management software such as Mendeley, RefWorks, and Zotero. Another suggestion is that educators should recommend students deploy the state-of-the-art AI, for instance, Quill Bot, to summarize and paraphrase the texts when conducting research and write a final report in the future.

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