Investigating plagiarism in the academic context

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Throughout her experience as a student and tutor at UFSC (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina), the author observed the absence of institutional norms and support when dealing with cases of plagiarism. Such a gap triggered further research on plagiarism in her PhD research, whilst finding out how to detect and prevent it in academic contexts.

The thesis, organised into seven chapters, presents different perspectives to define plagiarism, an investigation of its origin, and specifics in academia. Regarding a definition to this complex phenomenon, a number of scholars were introduced in order to present some explanations, such as Coulthard and Johnson (2007), who emphasise that linguists are able to deal with linguistic plagiarism. Pecorari (2010) mentions the need to distinguish between intentional and unintentional plagiarism: while the former occurs with an intention to deceive, the latest is done due to lack of knowledge about academic writing conventions to avoid plagiarism, or as consequence of poor linguistic or academic writing skills. However, finding out whether plagiarism is intentional or not demands some investigation from the educator or the forensic linguist. An important key, presented by Sousa-Silva (2013), has to do with the complexity in the extract traced. For instance, the use of synonyms, alterations in text structure, translation, among other strategies that help conceal copy, are strong indications that there might be some intention.

In the thesis, two different scenarios about how plagiarism has been treated are presented: 1) at UFSC, in which several problems had been identified; and 2) at the UoB (University of Birmingham), as a series of consistent efforts have been made in the UK since 2002 to deal with plagiarism. Interviews were done with professionals besides observation of policies, courses, and institutional documents. Questionnaires were also introduced so as to understand students' perceptions of plagiarism and the institutional approach. These investigations helped trace the panoramas in both institutions.

The objective of the thesis was to analyse the approach adopted at the UoB in order to support the development of suggestions to improve the situation at UFSC. Therefore, it was possible to produce a proposal to UFSC in order to work on detection and prevention through the creation and adoption of anti-plagiarism policies. These policies include the establishment of specific institutional rules and of an institutional structure to deal with cases of plagiarism, the offer of courses on academic writing, and the oriented employment of detection software. It was considered necessary to adopt some of the measures observed at the UoB to UFSC, as they are inserted in different contexts, which requires specific adjustments. The entire proposal can be accessed in the thesis.

The thesis also intended to emphasise other aspects related to plagiarism besides the usually focused ethical concerns, which are relevant, but they are out of the reach of teachers and linguists. Therefore, the study carried out by Krokoscz (2014) was also reported, as the author mentions the existence of a third participant in plagiarism cases in the educational context (besides the one that is plagiarised and the one who plagiarises a given text), which is the teacher (or the educational institution). Such facts demonstrate that in academic contexts plagiarism gets even more complex, as it does not have to do simply with authorship rights, but mainly with educational issues.

Results pointed to the need of shorter-term measures, such as the implementation of policies to better approach plagiarism in universities as well as the proper use of detection software. However, such changes alone would not be enough to efficiently resolve this phenomenon, as long-term changes in education are also necessary, such as the teaching of academic writing skills earlier in schools. In addition, fostering students to write using their own words as a means of exercising freedom in delivering opinions, and to appropriately acknowledge external sources in order to give more reliability to their work could be efficient ways to prevent future cases of plagiarism. Furthermore, telling them that this way they would be acting as honest and valued citizens; a good way of giving them positive motivation to want to learn and to behave accordingly to what is scientifically and morally useful to human development.

References

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