'Use your own words': Exploring the boundaries of plagiarism

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University guidelines

- “Plagiarism is presenting the ideas, work or words of other people without proper, clear and unambiguous acknowledgement”. Manchester University (2010) *Guidance to Students on Plagiarism*

- “Plagiarism - taking or using another person's thoughts, writings or inventions as your own...” Oxford Brookes University (2009) *Student Regulations*
The reality

- all of the words and phrases we employ in speech and writing belong to the speech community of which we are part (Bakhtin, 1981)

- academic writing appears to be particularly rich in recurrent phraseological constructions (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992, Hyland, 2004)
“….. borrowing the words and phrases of others can be a useful language learning strategy. Certainly, you would not be plagiarizing if you borrowed items that are commonly or frequently used in academic English” (Swales and Feak, 2004: 172)

The results from this experiment seem to suggest that ….. (p.172).
Disciplines represented

Figure 1. Disciplines represented in the survey

Social Sciences and Education
Maths, Engineering and Physical Sciences
Life Sciences
Health Care and Medical Sciences
Arts and Humanities
Business, Management and Finance
Figure 2. "...... borrowing words and phrases can be a useful language learning strategy"
And for native-speakers

Figure 3. "Do you think the advice given by Swales and Feak can be helpful for native speakers?"
“Most academic disciplines have their own vocabulary and even style of expression, and students need to be able to use these facets of specialist language appropriately.”

“The advice is obviously useful to students but perhaps needs to be more widely considered by academics who may not understand such learning strategies.”
Insight into what plagiarism is …..

- “Plagiarism does not arise from 'using the same words' but from using the same words to say the same thing.”
Insight into what plagiarism is …..

“If you 'borrow' a common phrase such as 'have a profound impact on' from a writer whose sentence you are paraphrasing at the time, then you are plagiarising, because your sentence will resemble the writer's too closely.”
95% of respondents felt these phrases could be reused

- within the field
- to account for this
- it has been demonstrated that
- the findings of this study
- In this paper I argue that
- Recent evidence suggests that
- This discrepancy may be due to
- The results of this investigation show that
- A possible explanation for this might be that
- systematically review
- contrary to expectations
- the majority of respondents
- several possible explanations
Between 80% to 94% of respondents felt these phrases could be reused

- The findings of the current study are consistent with
- the main weakness of this study was the lack of
- An issue that was not addressed in this study was whether
- a significant difference between the two conditions
- Taken together, these findings suggest a role for
- These results therefore need to be interpreted with caution
- The single most striking observation
Between 50% to 80% of respondents felt these phrases could be reused

- much of the research up to now has been descriptive in nature
- The research to date has tended to focus on X rather than Y
- a set of stable energy levels
- However, there are limits to how far the idea of X can be taken
- While a variety of definitions of the term X have been suggested, this paper will use the definition first suggested by
- The relationship between a diet high in fats and poor health has been widely investigated
More than 75% of respondents felt these could not be recycled without plagiarism being committed

- deliberately and incisively debunks such myths

- It has become a catchword used to label and delegitimize political movements

- In their insularity and absolutism, both groups scare each other into existence and are reflections of the enemies they create

- Dawkins is deaf to theology
Respondents drew attention to the originality of the phrase:

- “a way of expressing something that has some individuality”
- “less standardized and idiosyncratic”
- “phrases which seem to me to be 'original'. That is, it would be unlikely that another writer would produce these same sentences by chance.”
Respondents distinguished between the generic and specific nature of the phrase:

“Whether the phrase is just a standard way of expressing some generic notion, or whether it has itself some intellectual content which has been taken over.”
Respondents drew attention to the evaluative quality of a phrase:

- “The cases I feel are dodgy are those in which an opinion is strongly expressed.”
- “For me the boundary is crossed when the phrase clearly expresses a judgment of some sort.”
Advice given

Consensus - boundaries are established by the disciplines and tutors:

- “Students should take guidance from the school/discipline/lecturer involved I think to understand the boundaries.”
Advice given

Good practice for language development

• “The most important point here is that students should collect and reuse such phrases.”
Main findings

- the advice given to non-native writer students by Swales and Feak on ‘borrowing phrases’ could be helpful;

- advice would also be useful for native –speaker students;

- understanding how to collect and re-use common phrases is a useful learning strategy;

- phrases should not be borrowed from the same text the author is consulting as a source for ideas.
Main findings

- Boundaries - acceptable practice to recycle phrases with the following characteristics:
  
  i) between 5 and 9 words in length;
  ii) containing up to four generic content words;
  iii) not containing content words bound to a specific domain;
  iv) being ‘value’ neutral/shouldn’t contain a view;
  v) shouldn’t contain an original expression.
References


