

## Textual Plagiarism and Source Misuse in Iraqi EFL

### Postgraduates Academic Writing

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### **Abstract**

Academic writing is quite distinctive and producing it requires language dexterity and control. What makes the matter more challenging is writing academically in a second/foreign language. Novice academic writers writing in a foreign language, thus, must have high levels of language proficiency that could help them comprehend their sources and write about them instead of writing from them. However, little has been known on how Iraqi MA EFL postgraduates write from their sources, especially when the problem of textual plagiarism has recently reached epidemic levels within the Iraqi academic community in general not to mention in the writings of novice academic writers in particular. It is hypothesized in this study that Iraqi EFL MA students in most English departments throughout the Iraqi Universities tend to misuse their sources, and thus produce texts that contain high levels of textual plagiarism. In order to verify the above hypothesis, extracts from 10 MA EFL thesis written by Iraqi postgraduates were selected for analysis. The analysis was based on a comparative reading approach where students texts were compared to their retrievable sources. Findings show that all the writing samples contained varying levels of textual plagiarism, a thing that reflects how reliant those writers were on their sources.

*Keywords: Textual Plagiarism, Patchwriting, Paraphrasing, Summarizing*



## الانتحال النصي وإساءة استخدام المصدر في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

الكتابة الأكاديمية لطلاب الدراسات العليا

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### خلاصة

تعد الكتابة الأكاديمية ناتجاً مميزاً تماماً ويتطلب إنتاجها براعة وتحكماً في اللغة من قبل الكاتب. مما يجعل الأمر أكثر صعوبة هو الكتابة الأكاديمية بلغة ثانية أو لغة أجنبية. وبالتالي ، يجب أن يتمتع الكتاب الأكاديميون المبتدئون الذين يكتبون بلغة أجنبية بمستويات عالية من الكفاءة اللغوية التي يمكن أن تساعدهم على فهم مصادرهم والكتابة عنها بدلاً من الكتابة منها. ومع ذلك ، لم يُعرف سوى القليل عن كيفية كتابة من المصادر لدى طلبة الماجستير في اللغة الإنجليزية بصفتها لغة أجنبية في العراق، خاصةً عندما وصلت مشكلة الانتحال النصي مؤخرًا إلى مستويات وبائية داخل المجتمع الأكاديمي العراقي بشكل عام ومستويات عالية في كتابات الأكاديميين المبتدئين على وجه الخصوص. يفترض في هذه الدراسة أن طلاب ماجستير اللغة الإنجليزية بصفتها لغة أجنبية في معظم أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية في جميع أنحاء الجامعات العراقية يميلون إلى إساءة استخدام مصادرهم ، وبالتالي إنتاج نصوص تحتوي على مستويات عالية من الانتحال النصي. من أجل التحقق من الفرضية المذكورة أعلاه ، تم اختيار مقتطفات من ١٠ رسائل ماجستير مكتوبة في اللغة الإنجليزية بصفتها لغة أجنبية كتبها خريجون عراقيون للتحليل. اعتمد التحليل على نهج القراءة المقارنة حيث تمت مقارنة نصوص الطلاب بأكبر عدد ممكن من المصادر المشار إليها في النصوص. تظهر النتائج أن جميع عينات الكتابة تحتوي على مستويات مختلفة من الانتحال النصي ، وهو الشيء الذي يعكس مدى اعتماد هؤلاء الكتاب على مصادرهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الانتحال النصي، الكتابة الترفيحية، إعادة الصياغة، الخلاصة

## 1. Introduction

Academic writing is a cumulative skill that develops gradually from the early stages of education till the quite advanced ones. It is a skill that builds on a quite essential feature of academic writing which is writing from sources. Being able to write from sources requires high levels of language proficiency, not to mention advanced knowledge in academic writing techniques, such as paraphrasing and summarizing. Both of these two requirements are believed to assist academic writers to write from their sources instead of copying directly from them (Liu, 2005; Shi,2004; Flowerdew,2007).

However, not being able to write from sources in an academic way can lead some writers to commit what is called "*textual plagiarism*". Textual plagiarism is, thus, a type of source use which involves copying someone else's words or ideas and passing them off as one's own (Pecorari,2008). While dealing with sources is an unavoidable step in any academic writing, the direct copying and false documentation are two types of academic misbehavior that should be avoided by any academic writer (Howard, 1993; Pecorari, 2003; Coulthard, 2004).

Recently the problem of textual plagiarism has reached an epidemic level within the Iraqi academic community in general, reaching quite high levels in the writings of EFL novice academic writers in particular (See, Al-Khafaji, 2018; Hussein, 2014; Hussein & Ali, 2015, Ali, 2020; Abdul-Hassan & Ali,2022). What makes the matter worse is the basic fact that within the Iraqi educational context, Iraqi students in all the EFL departments throughout Iraqi universities receive a sufficient amount of lectures in academic writing and research methods both in their graduate and postgraduate studies, but still most postgraduates seem to find difficulty in documenting their sources and not to mention writing from them (Hussein & Ali, 2015; Zboon, 2020). Most students

face difficulty in using certain techniques like summarizing and paraphrasing when writing. Most of them tend to copy directly from their sources (plagiarism) rather than using quotation marks or block quotations. Others try to "patchwrite" (stitching one sentence together with another in order to piece together a paragraph) rather than to summarize or paraphrase using their own words (ibid). The question that must be asked then is, *what are the reasons behind this paradoxical state of affairs?*

The answer might lie, the researcher believes, in the basic fact that academic language is distinctive and producing it requires both high levels of language dexterity and a good control over the basic requirements of one's own disciplinary writing terminology and conventions. This means that even if academic writers write using their first language, still the language used in their writings would contain terms, expressions and phraseology that are not used in daily life speech. In this respect, Boudrou and Passeron (1994: 18) notably state that "academic language is no one's mother tongue."

If writing academically is considered a demanding task to those writing in their first language what about those who, literally write in a foreign one?

The challenges faced by Iraqi EFL students in academic writing, thus is doubled, they are not only required to produce text that are academic, containing phraseology relevant to their disciplinary discourse, but they should do so in a foreign language too. Other challenges faced by Iraqi EFL students, could also be due to some serious issues we are facing within the Iraqi academic community. The first, the researcher believes, is the Iraqi educational system that values imitation and memorization from the very first steps of schooling till the last levels of education, leaving no room for critical and innovative thinking. The second, which the researcher finds most important, is the lack of attention the subject of EFL writing receives when compared to other content

subjects in both school levels and university ones (Ali, 2020). Finally, it is important to mention that considerable amount of research has been conducted on investigating textual plagiarism and source use in the writings of L2 international postgraduates, especially those who hold the opportunity of studying English in an Anglophone academic context. As for those EFL postgraduates who lack this opportunity, no research for the best of the researcher's knowledge, has been carried out yet. Hence, the current study will try to bridge this gap and to seek authentic answer to the quite paradoxical question posed above.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Textual Plagiarism vs. Patchwriting

The Mariam Webster online dictionary defines *plagiarism* as an act of "stealing and passing off the ideas or words of another as one's own: use another's production without crediting the source". Similarly, the Oxford online dictionary also defines the word as "the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own." Like most traditional definitions on *plagiarism*, the above definitions cast the act in terms of wrongdoing and fraud.

Recently, there has been a shift in the way plagiarism is perceived, especially within the global academic community. This shift has been a result of extensive work in the field of applied linguistics, where the focus was on the academic writing practices of international non-native speakers of English studying abroad ( Howard 1999; Roig, 2001; Pecorari 2003; Chandrasoma, Thompson & Pennycook, 2004; Flowerdew and Li, 2007). Based on these extensive studies, the view of plagiarism in academic writing has been shifted from being an act of theft and stealing to being a matter of language failure.

Plagiarism, according to this view, is treated as an undesirable textual feature of writing and which like any other undesirable textual feature such as poor paragraphing, poor organization, and lack of coherence is a matter of language failure that could be pedagogically cured (Bloch,2007; Pecorari,2008; Howard, et al, 2010; Flowerdew,2007).

Based on this understanding, Pecorari (2008:4) classifies textual plagiarism into two types: the first which she terms "*Prototypical Plagiarism*", is defined as "the use of words and/ or ideas from another source, without appropriate attribution, and with the intention to deceive"; while the second type is based on Howard's (1993, 1995 ,1999) influential term "*Patchwriting*", and which is defined by Howard (1993: 233) as "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one synonym for another." Examples of the first type can be seen when students buy or download a previously written paper and submit it as their own or when students have their papers written by ghost writers. As for the second type "pachwriting", it is best seen when students try to write from a source and due to the lack of language proficiency they copy with mild changes instead of paraphrasing.

The fact that textual practices can vary from copying large chunks of language and averring it to one's self to inappropriate paraphrasing and summarizing can definitely bring to the conclusion that not all acts of plagiarism are intentional deception.

Accordingly, patchwritng can be viewed as an unintentional act of wrongdoing that most novice writers commit while trying to find their own authorial and academic voice. In this respect, Pecorari (2008) notes that any human skill is never learnt in "a straight line from input to mastery" but there always seems to be an in-between stage that can help us master that skill. For novice academic writers patchwriting is this in-between stage that they go through for developing their academic literacies.

Consequently, *Patchwriting*, as viewed by Howard, is as an essential transitional stage by which most novice academic writers go through to help them move from a low level of academic writing proficiency to a more advanced one, see figure (1).

What can be concluded is that patchwriting is not plagiarism. It is viewed as a developmental stage in the process of learning how to write academically that needs both support and understanding instead of punishment. It is a stage where novice academic writers learn the phraseology, technical terms, expressions, and writing conventions of their academic discourse communities.

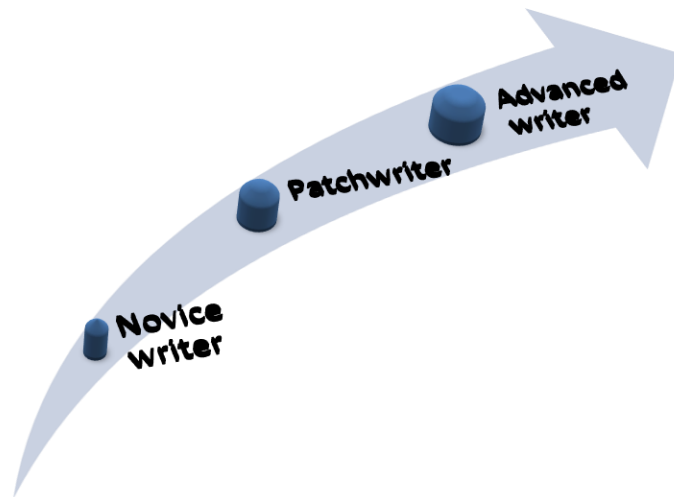


Figure (1) Patchwriting as a developmental stage in academic writing proficiency

## ***2.2 Academic Writing: Techniques and Principles***

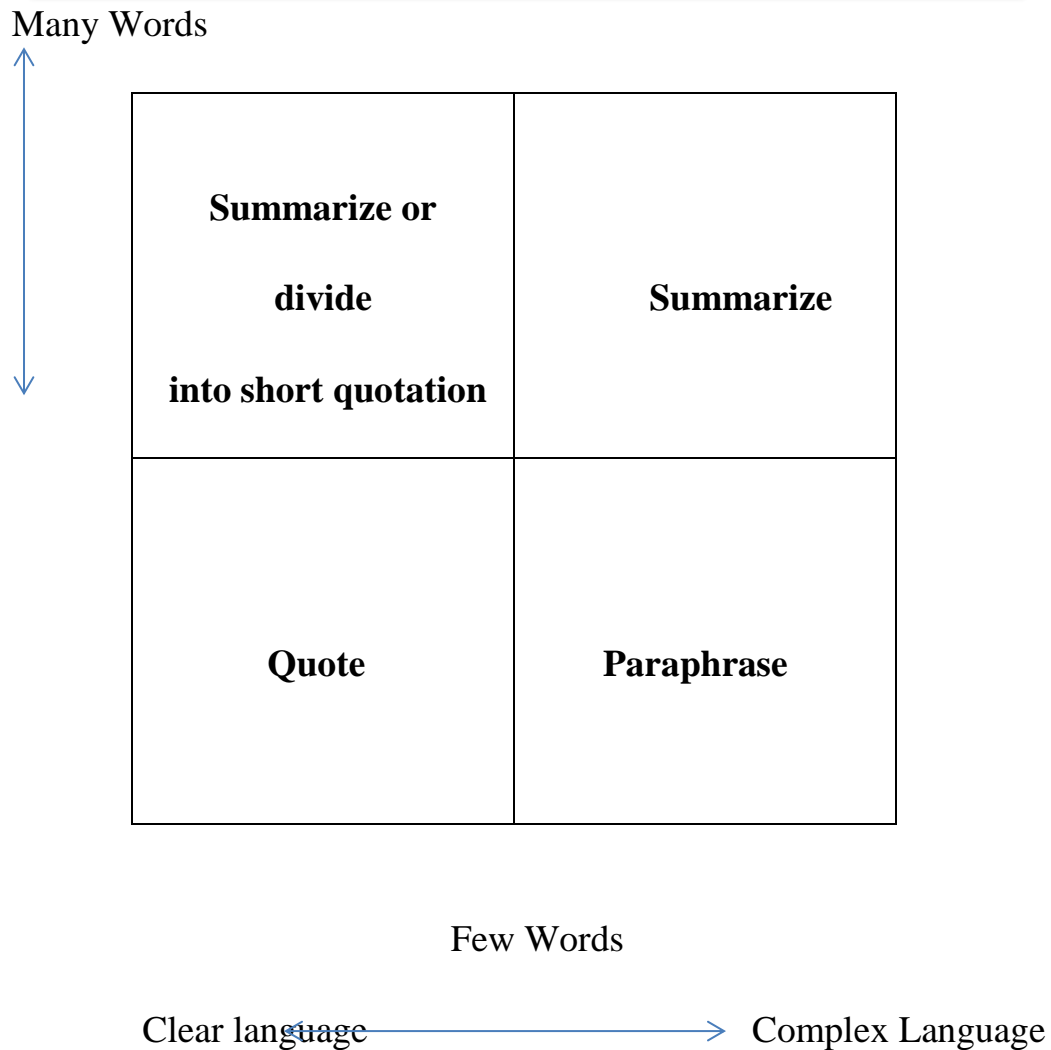
Quoting, summarizing and paraphrasing are highly recommended academic writing techniques that every academic writer can apply when wanting to incorporate source material into her/his writing. Harris (2014: 41) defines quoting as the verbatim copying of words from a source, which can be of two types either direct (incorporated within a

text and signaled out by quotations), or indirect quotations (indented from the text and without the use of quotations).

As for summarizing it is defined as the act of "restating and compressing the main points of a paragraph or more of text in fresh language and reducing the summarized passage by at least 50%" (Howard, et al, 2010:181). Not like summarizing, paraphrasing does not reduce nor condense source material; on the contrary, the writer through this technique should be able to restate all the main points and details by using her/his words. However, it is important to bear in mind that all these three techniques require an in-text citation reference of the original source.

Deciding when to summarize, paraphrase, or quote can be quite challenging for most academic novice writers. Factors including, the high technical language of the cited source, the need for a direct support from a source, the length of the source language whether to short which needs elaboration via paraphrasing or too long which needs to be shortened via summarizing, and so on, are all important when deciding to use sources effectively. In this respect, Harris (2014: 75) provides general outlines that could help in deciding when to summarize paraphrase or quote. He presents what he calls a "decision grid" which functions according to how a source expresses a certain idea that writers might need to incorporate in their writing" (ibid), see figure (2).





*Figure(2)The "Decision Grid" Adopted From Harris (2014)*

Apart from being able to use sources effectively, every novice academic writer needs to uphold to the basic principles of academic writing. Each one of these principles reflects an ethical commitment that needs to be fulfilled. One of the fundamental principles that writers need to follow in their process of writing is transparency. Violating this principle may lead to the accusation of textual plagiarism,.

Transparency in academic writing simply means the appropriate use of sources in such a way that any academic reader when reading any academic text can be able to signal out the words of the writer from those of a source. In order to produce transparent academic text two basic aspects need to be covered:

(1) transparency of source identity, i.e. the writer must fully document the source s/he is writing from in order for the reader to accurately identify it. (2) transparency of language, i.e. whether the boundaries between the source language and the writer's own language are clearly set apart in such a way that any academic reader can easily identify the source language from that of the writer's.

However, not being able to uphold to these two basic aspects of transparency does not necessarily mean that writers are deliberately violating academic writing rules and conventions. On the contrary, writers may not feel confident with their own language and thus tend to rely heavily on their sources resulting in what was discussed earlier in the previous section as an unintentional type of plagiarism called patchwriting (Howard,2004,2010; Flowerdew & Lie 2007, Hyland, 2012). Others, on the other hand, might not be competent in how and when to use certain meta-textual devices such as referencing, quotation marks, etc. which may also result in the unintentional type of plagiarism (Pecorari,2006,2008).

How effectively Iraqi EFL MA postgraduates used their sources? How pervasive is textual plagiarism in their writings? And, most importantly, were they transparent in their source use? The next section reports the answers to these questions.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data Collection

The data consisted of (10) electronic MA theses written by Iraqi postgraduates during the years 2016 to 2021. They were all available online as electronic copies and, the researcher also made sure that they were all available as hard copies in the students' university libraries. Because the MA samples were final drafts that have been academically approved and certificated by their universities, protecting both the students and their supervisors identity was a priority. Thus, for the ease of reference and for anonymity each sample was given a code (Eng1 to Eng10).

The extracts chosen for analysis came from chapter two of each theses, which is the *literature review*. The reason behind this choice was due to the fact that this chapter contains intensive use of sources and various citation forms. Accordingly, this chapter is expected to provide a considerable amount of insights regarding the way researchers use and employ source material. The length of each written sample is ranged between 12,000-18,000 words. The total number of words for the ten EFL portions was 147,045 with average of 14,704 words for each extract. As for the total number of sources in the ten EFL writing samples, 743 sources were used whereby 530 sources were retrieved. Details regarding the textual samples taken from the ten EFL MA theses are shown in Table (1).

Table.(1):EFL writing samples according to Source number, Word Number, and Date of Writing.

Writing Sample	Sources Used	Sources Found	Word Number	Writing Date
Eng 1	92	63	13, 728	2019
Eng 2	81	54	16, 742	2016
Eng 3	66	50	12, 888	2020
Eng 4	102	62	15, 247	2017
Eng 5	64	51	12, 400	2021
Eng 6	72	46	14, 044	2019
Eng 7	68	42	15, 850	2021
Eng 8	78	57	14, 128	2018
Eng 9	59	34	15, 501	2021
Eng 10	61	43	16, 517	2019
<b>Total</b>	<b>743</b>	<b>502</b>	<b>147,045</b>	
<b>Average</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>14,704</b>	

### 3.2 Data Analysis

#### 3.2.1 The Comparative Reading Approach

Analyzing the textual data was based on a comparison reading approach that required not only reading but also comparing the texts written by students to the sources they had wrote from. Thus, the basic requirement for carrying out such a comparison was source identification. The identification of sources depended solely on the way they were listed in the theses reference list and referred to within the text. Therefore, missed source attribution and ill documentation of sources were excluded from investigation.

After reading and comparing the text samples to their sources, overlaps in language between the two texts were quite evident. The overlaps were all language taken from a source without attribution. Extracts which contained verbatim copying from a source without attribution were labeled as textual plagiarism. In accounting for how pervasive these language overlaps were, Pecorari's (2008) textual plagiarism model was adopted. In this model Pecorari provides a quite practical text-analytical framework which can help express unattributed language similarity in quantitative terms. The percentages of language similarity can be calculated by dividing the number of words which are in common between the referred passage of a source and the cited passages in a sample by the total number of words in the sample's cited passage. For example, if a passage in one of the textual samples consists of (88) words whereby (68) of them are taken verbatim without quotation from a matching passage in a given source, then the percentage of unattributed repetition will be:  $68/88 \times 100 = 88\%$ . Figures (3), (4), and (5) show passages from three EFL writing samples containing 100%, 60%, and 25% unattributed language similarity. Similarities between the two texts are underlined.

<p><b>Eng. 10/ Passage (3)</b></p> <p><u>It has been widely shown through a range of studies that factive and non-factive predicates behave differently with respect to how they embed their complements</u> (Kiparsky &amp; Kiparsky 1970)</p>	<p>Kiparsky &amp; Kiparsky (1970:366)</p> <p><u>It has been widely shown through a range of studies that factive and non-factive predicates behave differently with respect to how they embed their complements.</u></p>
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Figure (3) 100% similarity with the source language.

<p><b>Eng. 5/ Passage (9)</b></p> <p>Among the studies in the last and the third shift studies, Perloff (2003 p.66) argued that <u>persuasion is a two-pronged process that is of two sides: the persuader and the receiver, the so-called "persuade".</u> He defined persuasion as <u>a symbolic representation in which persuaders try to convince receivers to change their attitudes or behavior regarding an issue through the transmission of a message, in an atmosphere of free choice.</u></p>	<p><b>Perloff (2003:8)</b></p> <p><u>persuasion is a two-pronged process which includes both sides: the persuader and the receiver, the so-called persuadee.</u> It is <u>a symbolic process by which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behavior regarding an issue through the transmission of a message, in an atmosphere of free choice.</u></p>
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Figure (4) 60% similarity with the source language.

<p><b>Eng. 1/ Passage (13)</b></p> <p>According to Van Dijk (2009: 1-3), context is <u>defined as the relevant environment of language use and discourse.</u> It <u>represents the social situation that is annexed to language users as social actors</u> when trying to appropriate their social action and discourse to fit <u>each environment.</u></p>	<p><b>Van Dijk (2009: 1-3)</b></p> <p>Contexts are the controlling structures of social phenomena in general, and <u>of language use and discourse</u> in particular. They represent what is relevant in the environment of social action and discourse so that <u>language users as social actors are able to adapt their text and talk to each environment.</u></p>
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Figure (5) 25% similarity with the source language

In all the (394) compared passages in the EFL samples, a total of 64 had 100% similarity with the language of their sources. Eighty-nine of the passages reached the 50% level and 91 were under the 50% level. The rest of the remaining passages (149) all ranged above the 50% level.

However, whether above or under the 50% level, all the passages shown in the figures contained unattributed language that can be traced back to sources. It is quite clear that, how the EFL students, in these examples, incorporate source language within their own, reflect the lack of independency to write autonomously.

To show how pervasive this source-dependent writing practice was throughout the writing samples a resulting scores of textual plagiarism for each writing sample is needed. The next section presents these resulting scores.

### **3.2.2 Results and Findings**

To provide a resulting percentage of unattributed repetition for every writing sample, the sum of percentages of all the compared passages in a given writing sample was divided by the number of passages in that writing sample multiplied by 100. For example the writing sample (Eng.1) had 43 passages compared to their cited sources each of which contained unattributed repeated words that were expressed by percentages. The sum of percentages for the 43 compared passages was (15,222). So, the percentage of unattributed repetition in the whole writing sample writing sample (Eng.1) can be calculated like this:  $15,222/43 \times 100 = 35\%$ . The findings of the analysis show:

1. Across all the EFL writing samples, 49% of the language in the compared passages are, to some extent, repeated verbatim without attribution from their sources (see table 2).
2. As shown in table (2), the percentages of unattributed repetition varied considerably across the writing samples ranging from 31% in sample (Eng.3), to 70% in sample (Eng.10).
3. The variation of the percentages of unattributed means that students not only copied verbatim from their sources but altered the source's language while incorporating it with their own writings.
4. The way students introduced changes to the language of their sources also varied from only adding or deleting words (figure 4), to using synonyms and altering the grammatical structure (figure 5). These linguistic processes resulted in what was called in the previous section "Patchwriting."

Table (2): Percentages of unattributed repetition in each EFL writing sample

Writing Sample	Passages Compared	Unattributed Repetition (%)
Eng 1	43	35%
Eng 2	42	36%
<b>Eng 3</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>31%</b>
Eng 4	52	43%
Eng 5	31	61%
Eng 6	42	49%
Eng 7	34	60%
Eng 8	49	52%
Eng 9	32	59%
<b>Eng 10</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>49%</b>



#### 4. Conclusion

The paper reported the results of a *Textual Plagiarism* analysis carried out on 10 EFL MA theses written by Iraqi postgraduates. The results showed that the ten writing samples contained high levels of unattributed language repetition from sources. In fact, it was quite evident from the initial reading comparison that student's texts held overlaps with the language of their sources and that these overlaps varied considerably from one text to another. Some students tended to repeat large chunks of language from their sources while others introduced some kind of changes to the language of their sources before incorporating it with their writings.

Although the comparison did not account for all the passages of the writing samples, they did, to some extent, help in providing a clear picture on how dependent the EFL students were on the language of the sources they were writing from.

To solve the conundrum of plagiarism that we are facing within the Iraqi academic community, we need to shift our perspectives on how we view plagiarism in students' academic writings. Plagiarism can not only be a result of deliberate cheating but it could be a result of students suffering from low language proficiency. Being able to write from sources is a cumulative process that needs intensive education and learning. So, instead of informing, warning, detecting and punishing, teaching and developing academic writing courses would help solve this conundrum. The paradox that we are facing within the Iraqi academic community is a result of inadequate teaching curriculums that lack the focus on writing in general and academic writing in particular.

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