

Saudi University EFL Students' Understanding of Plagiarism: Perceived Knowledge, Recognition Patterns, and Conceptual Ambiguity in Academic Writing

Nawal I. Alhodithi*

English Department, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia

Abstract—This study examines Saudi university EFL students' understanding of plagiarism as a component of academic writing competence, with a focus on the relationship between perceived knowledge and actual recognition of plagiarism in common writing scenarios. Using a questionnaire adapted from Chu et al. (2020), 154 Saudi undergraduates enrolled in Research Writing at King Khalid University during the academic year 2024 responded to Likert-scale items measuring self-perceived understanding and scenario-based items assessing plagiarism recognition. Results revealed a notable discrepancy between confidence and competence. While a majority of students reported knowing how to avoid plagiarism ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.01$), their ability to identify plagiarism varied substantially across practices. High recognition rates were observed for explicit violations such as copying without citation (88.3%), but recognition declined sharply for practices requiring interpretive judgment, including paraphrasing without citation (53.2%) and AI-generated text submission (53.9%). Self-plagiarism (16.9%) and use of teacher-provided ideas without citation (18.2%) were largely unrecognized. These findings align with cross-cultural EFL research demonstrating that plagiarism understanding involves developmental and instructional dimensions beyond mere policy awareness. The study argues for integrating explicit, scenario-based plagiarism instruction into academic writing pedagogy to support EFL students in developing nuanced understandings of source use, attribution, and authorship in higher education contexts.

Index Terms—plagiarism, academic writing, EFL students, academic integrity, higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism is commonly treated as an issue of academic misconduct, framed in terms of rule violation and ethical breach. Universities typically address plagiarism through policies, detection software, and disciplinary procedures, operating on the assumption that students clearly understand what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it (Macfarlane et al., 2014; Park, 2003). However, research increasingly suggests that this assumption does not always hold, particularly for students writing in a second or foreign language (Pecorari & Petrić, 2014; Razi & Şahan, 2023). For many EFL students, plagiarism is not simply a matter of dishonest intent but is closely connected to challenges in academic writing, source integration, and understanding disciplinary expectations.

Academic writing requires writers to engage actively with sources, transform information, and position their own voices in relation to existing knowledge (Bazerman, 2013; Hyland, 2009). When students struggle to recognize what constitutes acceptable source use, their ability to contribute meaningfully to academic discourse is compromised. In this sense, understanding plagiarism is not only about avoiding academic penalties but about developing the skills necessary for legitimate knowledge construction. This perspective has gained increasing attention in applied linguistics research, which views plagiarism as a developmental issue embedded within academic literacy practices rather than a purely moral failing (Lea & Street, 2006; Pecorari, 2008).

These challenges are particularly salient in EFL contexts, where students often encounter English academic writing conventions for the first time at university (Mahmud & Mohd Tahir, 2024). Learning how to paraphrase, cite, and synthesize sources in a foreign language places additional cognitive and linguistic demands on students, making the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate source use less transparent (Liu & Wu, 2020; Muluk et al., 2021). Research across East and Southeast Asian EFL contexts has consistently documented a significant mismatch between students' self-reported understanding of plagiarism and their actual performance in paraphrasing and source integration tasks (Hu & Lei, 2015; Liao & Tseng, 2010). This pattern suggests that EFL students may overestimate their ability to avoid plagiarism while lacking the procedural knowledge to apply their understanding in practice.

In the Saudi context, recent studies have begun to explore plagiarism perceptions among university students, though research specifically focused on EFL academic writing remains limited. Alsaedi and Alhumsi (2024) investigated Saudi

* Corresponding Author. Email: Nalhdithi@kku.edu.sa

undergraduates' perceptions of plagiarism during e-learning sessions and found that most participants were aware of prevalent forms of plagiarism, though academic level, GPA, and gender did not significantly influence perceptions. Similarly, Alhadlaq et al. (2020) examined plagiarism attitudes among Saudi medical students and reported that attending ethics courses was associated with more negative attitudes toward plagiarism. Madkhali (2017) examined Saudi students studying in the United States and found that lack of knowledge about Western academic culture contributed to plagiarism challenges. More recently, Sheerah (2024) investigated digital academic dishonesty perceptions among Saudi EFL students at King Khalid University, highlighting issues including plagiarism, improper citation, and limited critical thinking skills. These studies indicate growing scholarly attention to academic integrity in Saudi higher education, yet gaps remain in understanding how Saudi EFL undergraduates perceive and recognize plagiarism within academic writing contexts.

Rather than focusing on instances of detected plagiarism, recent scholarship has begun to explore students' perceptions and understanding of plagiarism through scenario-based instruments that reveal conceptual ambiguity and gaps in academic literacy (Chu et al., 2020; Waltzer & Dahl, 2023). Building on this work, the present study examines Saudi EFL university students' understanding of plagiarism as part of their broader development as academic writers. By investigating both students' perceived knowledge and their ability to identify plagiarism across common writing scenarios, the study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions about academic writing instruction and integrity in Saudi EFL higher education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Plagiarism as an Issue of Academic Literacy*

Early discussions of plagiarism in higher education largely framed the issue within an ethics-based perspective, emphasizing misconduct, cheating, and institutional regulation (Park, 2003). From this viewpoint, plagiarism is primarily understood as a violation of academic norms that warrant detection and sanction. Subsequent reviews of academic integrity have reinforced this policy-oriented approach, highlighting the role of universities in maintaining standards and protecting scholarly credibility (Macfarlane et al., 2014).

While such perspectives are important for institutional governance, they offer limited insight into how students learn to write academically, particularly in a second language. Several scholars have argued that treating plagiarism solely as misconduct risks overlooking the complex learning processes involved in academic writing, especially for novice writers. Lea and Street (2006) proposed an academic literacies model that situates writing practices within broader social and disciplinary contexts, suggesting that students' source-use behaviors reflect their developing understanding of academic conventions rather than simple compliance or non-compliance with rules. Maharajh (2020), through focus-group data, demonstrated that students' perceptions of plagiarism are often shaped by uncertainty, contextual interpretation, and prior educational experiences rather than deliberate intent to deceive. More recently, Razi and Şahan (2023) demonstrated that integrating academic integrity instruction into EFL writing courses effectively reduced plagiarism and improved writing quality among secondary school students. These findings support a shift toward understanding plagiarism as part of academic literacy development.

B. *Plagiarism and Academic Writing in EFL Contexts*

Within applied linguistics, plagiarism has increasingly been examined in relation to second-language academic writing. Research on EFL writing consistently shows that students face significant challenges when integrating sources, paraphrasing complex texts, and maintaining authorial voice (Pecorari & Petrić, 2014). For EFL students, limited linguistic resources and unfamiliar rhetorical conventions can make it difficult to transform source material appropriately, increasing the likelihood of textual borrowing (Pecorari, 2003). Keck (2006) compared L1 and L2 writers' paraphrasing strategies and found that second-language writers relied more heavily on near-copy and minimal revision strategies, suggesting that linguistic constraints directly influence source transformation practices.

Liu and Wu (2020), studying Chinese EFL undergraduates, found that students often struggled to distinguish between acceptable paraphrasing and plagiarism, particularly when working with dense academic sources. Their study revealed that while students claimed awareness of the importance of paraphrasing and reported using summary, paraphrase, and quotation strategies when citing sources, their actual citation practices often fell short of academic expectations. Similarly, Muluk et al. (2021) reported that EFL students' plagiarism practices were frequently triggered by difficulties in understanding academic texts, time pressure, and insufficient instruction on source use. Li et al. (2024) examined how English academic writing textbooks in China address plagiarism and found limited text-based instruction, with paraphrasing strategies receiving emphasis through the concept of "indirect quotation." These studies highlight how plagiarism in EFL settings is closely tied to instructional practices and writing development rather than solely to ethical dispositions.

Research within diverse Asian EFL contexts has revealed consistent patterns in students' plagiarism understanding. For instance, Silfiani (2018) studied Indonesian undergraduates and concluded that students could distinguish between more and less serious forms of plagiarism. The students recognized that using another author's entire document represents a more severe violation than borrowing phrases. Students also identified acts such as copying statements without quotation marks, combining or changing statements without attribution, and submitting purchased assignments as plagiarism.

However, they did not consistently recognize that copying with quotation marks but improper citation, or translating sentences while acknowledging authors, could still constitute problematic source use. In the same vein, Hu and Lei (2015) examined Chinese university students and reported that cultural practices emphasizing imitation and memorization influenced students' conceptions of legitimate textual borrowing, with some students believing that plagiarism requires high textual similarity or complete duplication.

The concept of patchwriting further illustrates this developmental perspective. Howard (1995) introduced patchwriting to describe the process by which novice writers borrow and adapt language from source texts as they attempt to enter unfamiliar academic discourse. Later work by Pecorari (2008) emphasized that such practices should be understood as part of learning to write rather than automatic evidence of misconduct. Pecorari and Shaw (2012) showed that even advanced students struggle with intertextuality, further supporting the interpretation of source-use difficulties as developmental challenges. This distinction is crucial for interpreting EFL students' plagiarism judgments and practices within realistic educational contexts.

C. Students' Perceptions and Understanding of Plagiarism

Because plagiarism involves interpretation as well as rule knowledge, several researchers have focused on students' perceptions and self-reported understanding. Chu et al. (2020) demonstrated that students often overestimate their knowledge of plagiarism when compared with their actual ability to identify plagiaristic practices in specific scenarios. Their findings highlight a gap between confidence and competence, suggesting that self-perception alone is an unreliable indicator of plagiarism understanding.

A critical finding across EFL studies is this significant mismatch between students' self-reported understanding and their actual performance. Liao and Tseng (2010), examining Taiwanese postgraduate and undergraduate EFL students, found that despite participants denying having committed plagiarism and claiming awareness of the importance of paraphrasing, both groups failed to produce acceptable texts in paraphrasing tasks. Notably, undergraduates plagiarized more strings of words than graduate students, suggesting that cognitive development and metacognitive maturation contribute to improved performance over time. This gap indicates a lack of recognition of their own plagiarism or a fundamental misunderstanding of what constitutes proper paraphrasing.

Similar patterns have been observed in other higher-education populations. Shen and Hu (2021), in a mixed-methods study of Chinese graduate students, found that participants expressed strong awareness of plagiarism policies but demonstrated inconsistent judgments when evaluating real academic scenarios. Tran et al. (2022) likewise reported that postgraduate students' understanding of plagiarism varied widely depending on educational background and prior instruction, reinforcing the importance of academic socialization. Scenario-based approaches have proven particularly effective in revealing these conceptual ambiguities. Waltzer and Dahl (2023) showed that students' evaluations of plagiarism varied significantly depending on text type, authorship context, and instructional cues, suggesting that understanding plagiarism is not static but highly context-dependent.

D. Factors Influencing Plagiarism Understanding

Research has identified multiple factors influencing EFL students' plagiarism understanding and behaviors. Educational factors include lack of explicit instruction in paraphrasing, unsuccessful transfer of paraphrasing knowledge due to limited practice, lack of training in academic writing and source attribution, and unclear expectations about plagiarism (Hu & Lei, 2015; Liao & Tseng, 2010; Silfiani, 2018). Practical factors encompass time pressure, language difficulties, and limited English proficiency, leading to reliance on copying. Cultural factors play a significant role, particularly the influence of citation practices that differ from Western academic norms and historical traditions that may encourage imitation without attribution (Farahat, 2022). Institutional factors include a lack of deterrence policies and punitive rather than educative approaches to plagiarism (Hu & Lei, 2015).

The increasing use of text-matching software has further shaped how students understand plagiarism. While tools such as Turnitin are intended to support academic integrity, research suggests that students often interpret similarity scores as definitive indicators of ethical writing rather than as aids for learning (Alua et al., 2023; Nketsiah et al., 2024). This instrumental view may obscure deeper issues of source integration and paraphrasing competence. More recently, the emergence of generative AI tools has added new complexity to plagiarism recognition, underscoring the urgency of helping students develop principled understandings of originality, attribution, and responsible source use (AbdAlgane et al., 2025; Cotton et al., 2023). In the Saudi context, Alsofyani and Barzanji (2025) found that while ChatGPT-generated feedback improved EFL learners' writing skills, concerns about plagiarism and over-reliance on AI persist among students and educators.

E. Plagiarism Research in the Saudi EFL Context

Research on plagiarism perceptions among Saudi students has grown in recent years, though studies specifically focusing on EFL academic writing contexts remain limited. Madkhali (2017) examined Saudi students studying in the United States and found that unfamiliarity with Western academic conventions contributed to plagiarism challenges. Alhadlaq et al. (2020) investigated attitudes toward plagiarism among Saudi medical students and found that attending ethics courses was associated with more negative attitudes toward plagiarism, while students with higher GPAs also demonstrated greater awareness. Issrani et al. (2021) similarly found that Saudi students displayed adequate knowledge

of plagiarism, though awareness increased with academic level.

More recently, Alsaedi and Alhumsy (2024) examined Saudi undergraduate students' perceptions of plagiarism during e-learning sessions and found that most participants were aware of prevalent forms of plagiarism in EFL research writing, though academic variables did not significantly influence perceptions. Sheerah (2024) investigated perceptions of digital academic dishonesty among Saudi EFL students at King Khalid University and found that students engaged in various forms of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, copy-paste behaviors, and inadequate citation practices, often due to limited proficiency with digital tools and academic writing conventions. AbdAlgane et al. (2025) compared AI-generated and human-written academic texts among Saudi EFL learners at Qassim University, finding significant implications for academic integrity and writing instruction.

These studies indicate growing attention to academic integrity in Saudi higher education, yet important gaps remain. Most existing research has focused on medical or general student populations rather than specifically on EFL learners developing academic writing competence. Furthermore, few studies have employed scenario-based approaches to examine not only what students report knowing about plagiarism but also how they actually recognize plagiarism across different types of academic writing practices.

F. Identified Gap

Taken together, the literature points to a need for research that examines plagiarism understanding as part of academic writing development, particularly in Saudi EFL university contexts. Although previous studies have explored students' perceptions of plagiarism in Chinese, Indonesian, and Taiwanese settings, there remains limited empirical evidence extending scenario-based approaches, such as the instrument developed by Chu et al. (2020), to Saudi EFL higher-education writing contexts. Moreover, existing research has paid relatively little attention to how different academic writing practices vary in their conceptual transparency to learners.

While many studies document EFL students' general awareness of plagiarism and reliance on self-reported understanding, plagiarism recognition is often treated as a unified construct. This approach risks obscuring important distinctions between practices that involve clear rule violations (e.g., copying without citation) and those that require interpretive judgment and academic literacy skills (e.g., paraphrasing, reuse of prior work, or AI-assisted writing). As a result, specific areas of conceptual ambiguity that have direct implications for academic writing instruction remain underexamined.

The present study addresses this gap by examining patterns of plagiarism recognition among Saudi EFL undergraduates across different categories of academic writing practices. By examining EFL students' responses to a validated, scenario-based questionnaire adapted from Chu et al. (2020), this study provides empirical insight into how Saudi EFL undergraduates understand plagiarism as an aspect of academic writing competence. Specifically, the study explores students' perceived knowledge of plagiarism, their reported ability to avoid plagiarizing behaviors, and their capacity to identify plagiarism across common academic writing scenarios involving source use, paraphrasing, authorship, and the use of external tools. By identifying which practices are consistently recognized, contested, or largely unrecognized, the study offers a nuanced account of plagiarism understanding that can inform differentiated instruction in academic writing pedagogy and support for Saudi EFL learners in higher-education writing contexts.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do Saudi EFL undergraduates perceive their understanding of plagiarism and their ability to avoid plagiarizing behaviors in academic writing?
- RQ2. How do Saudi EFL undergraduates identify plagiarism across common academic writing scenarios involving source use, paraphrasing, authorship, and the use of external tools?
- RQ3. Which academic writing practices show the greatest level of conceptual ambiguity in Saudi EFL undergraduates' identification of plagiarism?

B. Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, survey-based research design to examine EFL university students' understanding of plagiarism within academic writing contexts. Rather than focusing on reported instances of misconduct, the study emphasized students' recognition and conceptual understanding of plagiarism, treating it as an aspect of academic writing competence. A scenario-based questionnaire was used to capture both students' perceived knowledge of plagiarism and their ability to identify plagiarism across common academic writing situations.

C. Participants

The participants were 154 female EFL undergraduate students enrolled in a research writing course at a public university in Saudi Arabia. The course focused on developing students' academic writing skills, including source use, paraphrasing, citation, and the ethical integration of references. English was used as the primary language of instruction for academic writing tasks. The all-female sample reflects the institutional structure of the university, where male and

female students are taught in separate sections. Participants represented different academic levels within the undergraduate program and were enrolled across more than one academic term. Participants were selected through convenience sampling and represented different academic levels within the undergraduate program. Participation in the study was voluntary, and students were informed that their responses would be used for research purposes only and would not affect their course grades. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics committee, and all participants provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire.

D. Instrument

Data were collected using a questionnaire adapted from Chu et al. (2020), originally developed to examine students' self-perception and actual understanding of plagiarism among secondary school students in Hong Kong. The instrument was selected because of its focus on plagiarism recognition through realistic academic scenarios, which aligns with the present study's emphasis on academic writing competence rather than policy awareness alone. To ensure appropriateness for Saudi EFL undergraduates, minor wording adaptations were made to ensure clarity and contextual appropriateness. These adaptations primarily involved simplifying lexical items and replacing culturally specific references with academically equivalent examples familiar to the participants. No changes were made to the core constructs, structure, or intent of the original instrument.

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first section, addressing perceived understanding of plagiarism, included two Likert-scale items designed to measure students' self-reported confidence in their ability to recognize plagiarism and avoid plagiarizing behaviors in academic writing. Students indicated their level of agreement with each statement using a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The second section presented students with seven academic writing scenarios reflecting common practices in university-level writing. These scenarios addressed issues such as paraphrasing source material, reusing previous work, authorship boundaries, and the use of external tools. Students were asked to judge whether each scenario constituted plagiarism using the same five-point Likert scale. This section was intended to assess students' conceptual understanding and recognition, rather than their knowledge of institutional rules.

The questionnaire was piloted with 20 students before the main administration to check for clarity and comprehension. Based on pilot feedback, minor adjustments were made to the wording. The scenario-based items retained their original focus on recognition of plagiarism across common academic writing practices, allowing for meaningful comparison with findings reported in previous studies using the same instrument.

E. Procedures

The questionnaire was administered during the academic term in which participants were enrolled in Research Writing. Data were collected either during class time or through an online survey platform, depending on course scheduling. All students received the same instructions and completed the questionnaire individually. Before participating, students were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Completing the questionnaire indicated informed consent. No identifying information was collected.

F. Data Analysis

Data analysis focused on providing a clear and descriptive account of students' understanding of plagiarism, aligned with the study's research questions. Given that the research questions were descriptive in nature (examining how students perceive and identify plagiarism rather than testing hypotheses about relationships between variables), descriptive statistics were deemed appropriate. Responses to the Likert-scale items were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to summarize students' perceived knowledge and confidence regarding plagiarism. For the scenario-based items, response patterns were examined to identify areas of agreement and disagreement among participants. Following Chu et al. (2020), responses of "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" were coded as recognition of plagiarism, while "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree" responses were coded as non-recognition. Particular attention was given to scenarios that produced inconsistent or divided responses (i.e., recognition rates near 50%), as these were interpreted as indicators of conceptual ambiguity in students' understanding of plagiarism practices. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28.

Because the scenario-based items represented independent academic writing practices rather than indicators of a single latent construct, internal consistency reliability analysis was not applied to this section of the instrument. Each scenario assessed a distinct type of plagiarism-related practice (e.g., copying without citation, paraphrasing without attribution, self-plagiarism), and students' recognition of one practice would not necessarily predict their recognition of another. Instead, responses were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns of agreement and conceptual ambiguity across scenarios, in line with the analytical approach adopted by Chu et al. (2020).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Students' Perceived Understanding of Plagiarism

Analysis of the Likert-scale items indicated moderate to high variation in students' self-reported understanding of plagiarism. For the item "I am good at identifying acts of plagiarism," students reported a moderate level of confidence

(M = 3.08, SD = 0.89, N = 154). Nearly half of the respondents (47.6%) selected the neutral option, while fewer than one-third (27.9%) agreed that they were good at identifying plagiarism. Only 4.1% strongly disagreed, and no students selected “strongly agree.” Despite the moderate mean score, the relatively large standard deviation and high proportion of neutral responses suggest that students’ confidence in identifying plagiarism was tentative rather than assured.

In contrast, responses to the item “I know how to avoid plagiarizing behaviors” reflected a higher level of perceived confidence (M = 3.75, SD = 1.01, N = 154). More than two-thirds of the participants (71.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how to avoid plagiarism, with 50.6% agreeing and 20.8% strongly agreeing. Relatively few students expressed disagreement (11.0% disagree; 3.2% strongly disagree), while 14.3% remained neutral. These results suggest that students felt more confident in their ability to avoid plagiarism than in their ability to clearly identify it, a pattern consistent with findings from Chu et al. (2020).

The combined mean of perceived understanding items was 3.42 (SD = 0.95), indicating moderate overall confidence in plagiarism knowledge among participants. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for students' perceived understanding of plagiarism.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR PERCEIVED UNDERSTANDING OF PLAGIARISM

Item	n	Mean	SD
I am good at identifying acts of plagiarism	154	3.08	0.89
I know how to avoid plagiarizing behaviors	154	3.75	1.01
Combined mean		3.42	0.95

B. Identification of Plagiarism Across Academic Writing Scenarios

Students’ responses to the scenario-based items revealed notable variation in their ability to recognize plagiarism across different academic writing practices. High levels of agreement were observed for scenarios involving explicit forms of plagiarism. Copying others’ work without citation was recognized as plagiarism by 88.3% of participants, while submitting another person’s work as one’s own was identified by 76.0%. These findings suggest that participants were generally able to identify clear violations of academic integrity.

In contrast, scenarios representing less explicit writing practices produced substantially lower recognition rates. Only 53.2% of students identified paraphrasing without citation as plagiarism, while recognition of submitting AI-generated work as one’s own was similarly divided (53.9%). Even lower recognition rates were observed for using uncited internet ideas (29.2%), using teacher-provided ideas without citation (18.2%), and reusing one’s own previous work without citation (16.9%). These patterns indicate that while students demonstrated awareness of plagiarism in principle, translating that awareness into accurate recognition within real academic writing contexts presented substantial difficulty. Table 2 summarizes the recognition rates across all seven scenarios.

TABLE 2
RECOGNITION OF PLAGIARISM ACROSS ACADEMIC WRITING SCENARIOS (N = 154)

Scenario	Recognition (%)
Copying others' work without citation	88.3
Submitting another person's work as one's own	76.0
Submitting AI-generated work as one's own	53.9
Paraphrasing without citation	53.2
Using uncited internet ideas	29.2
Using teacher-provided ideas without citation	18.2
Self-plagiarism (reusing own work)	16.9
Total/Mean recognition rate	47.9

C. Areas of Conceptual Ambiguity

The greatest conceptual ambiguity was observed in scenarios involving paraphrasing and AI-assisted writing, both of which generated near-equal agreement and disagreement among participants. With recognition rates of 53.2% and 53.9% respectively, these practices produced responses closest to a 50-50 split, indicating substantial uncertainty in students’ judgments. This suggests difficulty in applying plagiarism concepts to complex writing situations that require interpretation rather than rule recall.

Practices such as self-plagiarism and the use of instructional materials without citation were largely not recognized as plagiarism, with recognition rates below 20%. Rather than representing ambiguity, these low rates indicate persistent gaps in understanding of authorship and attribution norms in academic writing contexts. Students appeared not to view the reuse of their own work or teacher-provided ideas as requiring attribution, reflecting limited awareness of academic conventions regarding originality and intellectual ownership.

D. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a notable discrepancy between Saudi EFL undergraduates’ perceived understanding of plagiarism and their actual ability to recognize plagiarism in academic writing scenarios. While students reported relatively high confidence in their ability to avoid plagiarizing behaviors (M = 3.75), their scenario-based judgments

revealed substantial uncertainty, particularly for practices requiring interpretive judgment. This mismatch mirrors the pattern observed by Chu et al. (2020), who similarly found that students' self-perceptions do not consistently align with their applied understanding of plagiarism. The findings also align with cross-cultural EFL research demonstrating that students tend to overestimate their paraphrasing abilities while failing to recognize their own problematic textual borrowing practices (Liao & Tseng, 2010; Liu & Wu, 2020).

The contrast between confidence and recognition is particularly evident in the scenario results. Although a large majority of participants correctly identified explicit cases such as copying others' work without citation, recognition rates declined sharply when students were asked to evaluate practices that required interpretive judgment. Only approximately half of the participants identified paraphrasing without citation and submitting AI-generated text as one's own work as plagiarism. These findings suggest that students' understanding of plagiarism is strongest when violations are overt but weakens substantially in situations that involve transforming or mediating sources. This pattern echoes Silfiani's (2018) finding that Indonesian EFL students could recognize serious plagiarism involving whole documents but showed uncertainty about less explicit forms of textual borrowing.

The low recognition rates observed for self-plagiarism (16.9%) and the use of teacher-provided ideas without citation (18.2%) further underscore conceptual gaps in students' understanding. Many students appeared not to view the reuse of their own work or instructional materials as requiring attribution, reflecting limited awareness of authorship and ownership conventions in academic discourse. Similar patterns have been reported in EFL contexts across Asia, where students' prior educational experiences may not emphasize citation as a rhetorical practice linked to knowledge construction (Hu & Lei, 2015; Muluk et al., 2021; Pecorari, 2008). These findings align with recent Saudi research; Alsaedi and Alhumsi (2024) similarly found that while Saudi undergraduates demonstrated awareness of explicit plagiarism forms, recognition of more nuanced practices varied. The findings also correspond with Sheerah's (2024) observation that Saudi EFL students at King Khalid University engaged in various forms of academic dishonesty partly due to limited understanding of proper citation practices.

The discrepancy between perceived and actual abilities can be attributed to multiple interacting factors identified in the literature. Educational factors, including lack of explicit instruction in paraphrasing and unsuccessful transfer of knowledge due to limited practice, appear particularly relevant to the present findings. As Liao and Tseng (2010) noted, students may understand plagiarism conceptually but lack the procedural skills to apply this knowledge, a pattern reflected in the present participants' high confidence in avoidance coupled with inconsistent recognition. Mahmud and Mohd Tahir (2024) demonstrated that educational interventions focusing explicitly on referencing skills can effectively improve ESL students' academic writing while reducing plagiarism. The institutional environment may also play a role; when institutions adopt punitive rather than educative approaches to plagiarism, students may lack opportunities to receive clear feedback about their actual performance and develop more accurate self-assessments.

Taken together, these findings support a view of plagiarism as an academic literacy issue rather than solely a question of ethical intent. The areas of uncertainty identified in this study correspond closely to linguistic and rhetorical challenges documented in research on EFL academic writing, particularly difficulties with paraphrasing, synthesis, and source integration (Keck, 2006; Liu & Wu, 2020). In this sense, students' misrecognition of plagiarism reflects gaps in writing instruction rather than deliberate wrongdoing. The developmental dimension is also apparent: just as Liao and Tseng (2010) found that undergraduates plagiarized more than graduate students, the present findings suggest that students at different stages of academic socialization may demonstrate varying levels of competence in recognizing and avoiding plagiarism.

The emerging ambiguity surrounding AI-generated text further highlights the evolving nature of academic authorship. The near-equal division in students' judgments suggests that institutional guidelines alone may not be sufficient to clarify expectations in technologically mediated writing contexts. AbdAlgane et al. (2025) found that while AI tools can improve linguistic features in Saudi EFL students' writing, concerns about over-reliance and diminished authentic writing ability persist. Without explicit instruction on how AI tools intersect with academic integrity, students may continue to struggle to apply plagiarism concepts consistently. This finding underscores the urgency of addressing new forms of textual production within academic writing pedagogy.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined Saudi EFL undergraduates' understanding of plagiarism through a combination of self-reported perceptions and scenario-based judgments of academic writing practices. The findings demonstrate that although students expressed relatively high confidence in their ability to avoid plagiarism, their actual recognition of plagiarism varied systematically across different types of writing practices. Clear and explicit violations, such as copying others' work without citation, were consistently identified, whereas practices requiring interpretive judgment, particularly paraphrasing, self-plagiarism, the use of teacher-provided material, and AI-assisted writing, were characterized by substantial uncertainty or misrecognition.

By disaggregating plagiarism recognition across distinct categories of academic writing practices, the study moves beyond a binary conception of plagiarism understanding and highlights patterned zones of conceptual difficulty among Saudi EFL learners. These patterns suggest that plagiarism understanding develops unevenly and is closely tied to students' academic literacy development rather than merely to policy awareness or ethical intent. In this respect, the findings

support applied-linguistics perspectives that view plagiarism as a pedagogical issue embedded within academic writing instruction, especially for students writing in a second or foreign language.

The study also underscores the evolving nature of plagiarism in contemporary academic contexts. The divided judgments surrounding AI-generated writing indicate that emerging technologies have further blurred traditional notions of authorship and originality. Without explicit instructional guidance, students may struggle to integrate new tools into their academic practices in ways that align with institutional expectations. Addressing such challenges requires pedagogically informed approaches that situate plagiarism within broader discussions of responsible source use, attribution, and knowledge construction.

Overall, the findings reinforce the need for academic writing instruction that engages students with realistic writing scenarios and differentiates between types of plagiarism-related practices according to their cognitive and rhetorical demands. Rather than relying solely on policy dissemination or punitive measures, Saudi EFL higher-education contexts may benefit from instructional approaches that explicitly address areas of conceptual ambiguity and support students in developing nuanced, transferable understandings of academic integrity. Such approaches are essential not only for reducing unintentional plagiarism but also for fostering students' participation in academic discourse as competent and responsible writers.

A. Implications for Academic Writing Instruction

The findings of this study carry important implications for academic writing instruction in Saudi EFL higher education. First, the discrepancy between students' perceived confidence and their actual recognition of plagiarism suggests that instruction should move beyond general warnings and definitions. Instead, writing courses should prioritize explicit, scenario-based discussion of plagiarism, particularly in relation to paraphrasing, reuse of prior work, and AI-assisted writing. This approach aligns with research advocating the embedding of writing instruction within disciplinary contexts through genre-based and academic literacies approaches (Lea & Street, 2006; Wingate, 2012).

Second, the low recognition of self-plagiarism and teacher-provided material indicates a need for clearer instructional emphasis on authorship, ownership, and attribution as rhetorical choices rather than merely formal requirements. Incorporating targeted activities that require students to evaluate and revise borderline source-use cases may help bridge the gap between abstract knowledge and applied understanding. Such activities could provide the practice opportunities that research suggests are essential for successful transfer of paraphrasing knowledge (Liao & Tseng, 2010; Mahmud & Mohd Tahir, 2024).

Third, the findings support integrating plagiarism instruction into broader academic literacy development. Teaching citation and source use alongside paraphrasing and synthesis skills helps students understand plagiarism as part of effective academic communication. When students recognize that proper attribution is not merely about avoiding detection but about participating in scholarly conversation and knowledge construction, they are better positioned to engage responsibly with sources (Bazerman, 2013; Hyland, 2009).

Finally, given the emerging uncertainty surrounding AI-generated writing, instructors should proactively address how such tools can and cannot be used within academic contexts. Explicit guidance on ethical AI use may reduce confusion and support students in navigating evolving authorship norms. These recommendations collectively point toward educative rather than punitive institutional approaches, which research suggests are more effective in supporting students' development as responsible academic writers (Hu & Lei, 2015; Razi & Şahan, 2023).

B. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the data were collected from a single institution within a Saudi higher-education context and involved female undergraduates enrolled in Research Writing at King Khalid University. The all-female sample reflects the gender-segregated structure of the institution rather than a deliberate focus on gender differences in plagiarism understanding. While the findings are relevant to similar EFL academic writing contexts, they should not be generalized beyond comparable institutional and instructional settings. Future research could examine whether similar patterns of plagiarism recognition emerge among male Saudi EFL students.

Second, the study relied on self-reported questionnaire data and scenario-based judgments rather than direct analysis of students' written texts. Although scenario-based instruments are effective in revealing conceptual understanding, future research could triangulate these findings with textual analysis to examine how plagiarism understanding is enacted in actual writing practices, as demonstrated in the paraphrasing tasks used by Liao and Tseng (2010).

Third, while the questionnaire captured key areas of plagiarism recognition, the limited number of items (two for perceived understanding) constrains the depth of analysis possible for Research Question 1. Future studies should consider using more comprehensive measures of perceived plagiarism knowledge. Additionally, the study did not explore the instructional histories or prior educational experiences that may have shaped students' perceptions. Including qualitative data, such as interviews or reflective responses, could provide deeper insight into the reasoning behind students' judgments and the cultural or educational factors influencing their understanding.

Finally, the analysis focused on descriptive patterns rather than causal explanations. Future studies could investigate how targeted instructional interventions influence students' recognition of plagiarism over time, particularly in relation to paraphrasing and emerging forms of technology-assisted writing.

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Nawal I. Alhodithi received her PhD in Applied Linguistics and Composition from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA, in 2020. She earned her MA in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) from the University of Central Oklahoma in 2014 and her BA in English from King Khalid University in 2002.

She is currently an Assistant Professor and Vice-Chair of the English Department at the College of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. She previously served as Head of the English Enhancement Unit and Supervisor of the Counseling and Advising Unit at the college. Her previous publications include work on native and non-native English speaker dichotomies and the significance of L2 teachers' cultural and linguistic backgrounds in composition classes. Her current research interests include EFL pedagogy, academic writing, sociolinguistics, learner identity, sense of belonging in higher education, and undergraduate research experiences.

Dr. Alhodithi can be contacted at nalhdithi@kku.edu.sa; ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7602-6336>