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Student authorship in applied linguistics: a case of ghost authors

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Scientific paper authorship has been considered as a form of academic currency that can be regarded as evidence of an individual's intellectual efforts that accordingly can result in professional reputation, academic appointment and rewards, and other tenure decisions. However, pressure to publish within academia has led to various unethical authorship practices including ghost authorship. Ghost authors refer to the individuals who have made substantial contribution to a research project while their names are not added as authors or acknowledged. This study involving 20 Iranian MA students of TEFL who were exploited as ghost authors aimed to explore the reasons that accounted for the students' vulnerability to being exploited as ghost authors. Individual semi-structured interviews with the participants were used to gather the data. Three major themes including a) power relation inherent in student-faculty collaboration, b) lack of knowledge about authorship, and c) lack of rules and regulations emerged that, according to the participants, precipitated their vulnerability to being exploited as ghost authors.

Key words: authorship, ghost authorship, applied linguistics, TEFL

1. Introduction

1.1. Authorship

Authorship is seen as the coin of the realm in academia (Louis et al., 2008). Scientific paper authorship has been considered as a form of academic currency that can be regarded as evidence of an individual's intellectual efforts that accordingly can lead to professional reputation, academic appointment, and promotion (Bennett & Taylor, 2003). In fact, publications are indication of research and academic productivity of an individual and seen as objective benchmarks for tenure decisions such as entering to professional bodies and offering academic appointment (Rennie & Flanagin, 1994). However, pressure to publish within academia has increased various unethical authorship practices (Bennett & Taylor,

2003). Lawrence (2002) argued that the current culture of scientific reward, based on the number of papers, impact factors of the journals, the position in the author list, and the number of citations the papers receive, has precipitated authorship misuse.

As Bosch (2011) and Flanagin et al. (1998) pointed out, misappropriation of authorship such as changing, omitting or adding names to bylines, which is incongruous with ethical responsibilities in scientific publication, can diminish the integrity of authorship system. Consequentially, under such circumstances, offering academic promotions or grants can be on the basis of false authorship (Lacasse & Leo, 2010) and has led to two main abuses of authorship including honorary authorship and ghost authorship (Bennett & Taylor, 2003). As a matter of fact, problematic practices including honorary authorship and ghost authorship have challenged the concept of authorship in a wide range of fields (e.g., Claxton, 2005; Manton & English, 2008).

1.2. Honorary authorship

According to Flanagin et al. (1998), honorary authors are those who have not met authorship criteria. This inappropriate assignment of authorship is bestowed to the individuals who are engaged in "trading" authorship rights or providing funding or lab space. Huth (1986) held that honorary authors are not capable of defending the content because they are not engaged in the doing research, writing and editing the paper.

There are a number of reasons that account for the occurrence of honorary authorship. The common reasons uncovered by Bhopal et al. (1997) include a) pressure to publish, b) enhancing chances of publication, c) repaying favours, d) motivating a team and encouraging collaboration, and e) maintaining good relationships. The most common reason is pressure to publish. That is to say, junior researchers include senior colleagues of national or international stature as the author in the hope of enhancing the likelihood of their paper being published. Bennett and Taylor (2003) argued that the practice of honorary authorship is an unwarranted credit and seen as an ethical transgression because it diminishes credit for those who substantially contributed to the project.

1.3. Ghost authorship

Ghost authorship, another unacceptable and unethical research practice that violates the integrity and ethical principles of scientific research (Bosch, 2011; Gasparyan et al, 2013; Liesegang et al., 2008; Liesegang et al., 2010), is almost the reverse of honorary authorship and refers to the individuals who have made substantive contribution to the manuscript while their names are omitted and not credited as authors (Castillo, 2009; Flanagin et al., 1998; Hwang et al., 2003). Some consider ghost authorship almost equivalent to the act of plagiarism, as there is a practice of authorship misappropriation (Anekwe, 2010). According to Castillo (2009), ghost authorship is a phenomenon commonly occurring in large-scale projects in which some individuals are paid to carry out data collection and data analysis without being acknowledged in the main manuscript. Investigating 809 articles published in peer-reviewed medical journals, Flanagin et al (1998) found that 11% of the papers indicated the evidence of ghost authorship. In another study, Gøtzsche et al. (2007) found the evidence of ghost authorship in reports of industry-initiated clinical trials approved by Danish ethics committees between 1994 and 1995.

Graduate students are among the population within research community who are likely to be treated and exploited as ghost authors (Gasparyan et al., 2013). They may provide

contributions in the form of doing observations, collecting data, and analyzing data while they may easily be under-acknowledged by their professors or the principal investigators. The situation is aggravated for the graduate students whose disadvantaged power position in research process enhances their vulnerability to exploitation (Oberlander & Spencer, 2006). In the academic world, professional and financial rewards amassed through the number of publications can give rise to unethical authorship assignments within faculty-student collaborations (Sandler & Russell 2005). As a matter of fact, the power difference rooted in the student-faculty relationship, and students' relative inexperience in the research facilitates misappropriation of authorship and the possibility for exploitation (Costa & Gatz, 1992; Oberlander & Spencer, 2006). As long as this unequal power relationship is exercised and the students are dependent on faculty for mentoring and supervising, as pointed out by Rose and Fischer (1998), the graduate students may not be able to assert themselves when assigning authorship to a manuscript.

Fine and Kurdek (1993) held that the assignment of authorship should be based on relative scholarly contributions of the collaborators and both the faculty and the students should be involved in authorship decision-making process. In the same vein, Arthur et al. (2004) arguing against student exploitation by the faculty members underlined that the faculty members and the students should be informed about ethical issues as well as they should openly negotiate contributions and the assignment of authorship credit.

In the light of these considerations, it appears that graduate students are likely to be relegated to labors including, but not limited to, data collection, observation, calculation, and data analysis with no academic rewards. They are vulnerable to exploitation as ghost authors at the mercy of other privileged authors. The present study was an attempt to explore the reasons accounted for the Iranian MA students of TEFL being exploited as ghost authors within their faculty-student research collaboration.

2. Method

A sample of 20 MA graduate students of TEFL actively involved in research and publication activities and reported themselves being exploited as ghosts were chosen to take part in the study. All of the students were doing their last semester of MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and had at least one published paper at the time of the study.

Before completing a thesis as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art, the Iranian students of TEFL are involved in research activities required for the course completion during their MA program. Such activities must result in research papers submitted to the professors as a part of the course completion requirements. As a rule of thumb, the area of investigation is specified by the professors and the students are involved in the procedures including studying and collecting relevant stuff, doing observation or recording, conducting interviews, developing checklists or questionnaires, carrying out pilot-testing, gathering and analyzing data, and writing the drafts of the research paper.

2.1. Data collection and analysis

The data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews. The participants were interviewed individually lasting from 30 to 40 minutes in length. All interviews were conducted in English, audio taped and transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were analysed by means of pattern coding to reduce the "large amounts of data into a smaller number of analytic units" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). As a matter of fact, the

data analysis started by examining and coding all the participants' responses to the interview questions. The transcripts were carefully read and key ideas or topics from the texts that seemed to encompass key thoughts or concepts were highlighted and labelled by marginal notes. Once all transcripts were read and coded, the researchers examined all data within codes across the texts in order to group them into themes.

3. Findings

Three central themes emerged in the process of reading and rereading the data that accounted for the reasons the Iranian MA students of TEFL were exploited as ghost authors by their professors. The reasons encompass a) power relation, b) the students' lack of knowledge about authorship, and c) lack of rules and regulations addressing the authorship issue in the departments. Before explicating the above-mentioned reasons, it is worth noting that the students' involvement in research papers, as revealed in the interviews, included collecting data, designing instruments, conducting interviews and observations, recording and videotaping, analysing the data and interpreting the results, and writing the drafts of the research paper submitted as the course requirements.

3.1. Power relation

The inadvertent use of power by the professors in the realm of authorship was the dominant reason most of the MA students pointed out in the interviews. As a matter of fact, authorship credit and assignment was not based on the contribution; rather there was an automatic assignment imposed by the professors that was an indication of power difference inherent in study-faculty relationship. One of the students stated that

[w]e MA students are powerless and have to obey the professors and meet their expectations. Professors think that it is only they who must decide about the authorship and they believe that the students' job is only to do the job of collecting and analysing the data and finally to write the research paper for them. We do not know what is happening to the research papers we give as the course requirement. We cannot pursue the paper when we pass the course and later when the professors want to send the paper to a journal for publication, they will not include our names as the author.

It is apparent that the students' intellectual contribution to the research papers, when it is submitted for publication, is simply overlooked and not considered by their professors. This brings about on the part of the students "feelings of powerlessness, bitterness, and disenchantment with the scientific process" (Oberlander & Spencer, 2006, p. 218). Also, the students believed that power granted to the professors and their freedom in making decisions from one hand and the perception that the students lack competence and expertise in research from the other hand have made the students consider themselves to be in positions of lesser power and conversely made the professors autonomous in authorship awarding process. One of the students asserted that "the communication is dictatorial because they are professors and we are labelled as students who have to listen and obey". Believing that an atmosphere of openness in regard to authorship was not facilitated by the professors, another student stated that "the atmosphere is not open enough to discuss things and this is because of power". In fact, the students pointed out that the boundaries within the area of authorship were arbitrarily established by the professors and the students' power and influence was limited. As one of the students stated, "bringing up these issues needs courage and power that we do not have for the time being".

Not seeing themselves in the position to raise the issues associated with authorship and discuss them with their professor was transparent in the interviews. The students asserted that there was lack of communication about authorship with the professors and they were afraid of the aftermath because if they asserted themselves, as Schneider (1987) pointed out, they were likely to undergo the unpleasant experiences of isolation and distress. One of the students asserted that "when I predict the outcome of talk about authorship matters I am afraid to talk because I am still a student and may return to this professor later on when I am doing my thesis and I may get isolated then". The unfair and inequitable distribution of the power in student-faculty relationship increases the likelihood of exploitation and makes the students less courageous to assert themselves (Costa & Gatz, 1992; Rose & Fischer, 1998). As one of the students, who was involved in writing three research papers without his name being added as the author, stated, "we cannot talk and communicate with professors about authorship. I am afraid to talk because it may have a bad result". As explicitly asserted because of the uneven power relationship, the students were afraid to enter into open discussions with the professors about the issue of authorship because the talks might leave them with adverse aftermath.

However, from the point of view of a few numbers of students, discussing the case of authorship was not morally worthwhile. In fact they refrained from bringing the authorship issues because they were in the belief that they morally owed the professors for the support and encouragement they offered to the students. As one of the students asserted, "personally I gained a lot since I have started working and taking courses with my professors. They are inspiring me and helping me with valuable advice and I feel myself responsible to work for them". In fact, they believed that their academic development mainly initiated and promoted by their professors is irreplaceable and cannot be compared to what they are doing, such as writing research paper, collecting and analysing the data. One of the students believed that "collecting and analysing data, reporting the results and things like that are what I pay for the encouragement and support I get from my professors and if they add or do not add my name, it is not too much important for me". That is to say, although the students' names might not be mentioned or acknowledged by their professors as authors in the research papers or projects, some students viewed their job as a moral response to their professors.

3.2. Lack of knowledge about authorship

Students' unfamiliarity with the culture of authorship was believed to precipitate the vulnerability of the students to exploitation and being treated as ghost authors. Due to their lack of experience and knowledge in issues associated with authorship, the students were treated as labourers doing work for their professors without getting academic rewards. As one of the students stated:

We are neither familiar with nor educated for the matters related to authorship. Our professors never explain to us. This way we don't know about our rights and cannot claim anything if our names are omitted from the research papers. I think the professors want this lack of awareness to continue because they benefit from it.

It is obvious that the students were not educated about the process of publication. In consequence, hardly ever did they know about the correct rights and responsibilities rest on them and their professors in regard with authorship. This makes the students unsure about their own rights to claim authorship of the research papers and, as Branstetter and

Handelsman (2000) held, lack of knowledge in this area paved the way for unethical behaviours.

The students were unknowingly overestimating professors' authorship rights and conversely underestimating their own authorship credit. In this vein, one of the students asserted that:

the professors have more knowledge about research and authorship than we have. What we are doing like writing, searching for literature, and collecting data is not as important as what the professors are doing, like giving us information about research stages and academic comments.

The students unknowingly attached authorship credits to their professors and underestimated the importance of their own practical or intellectual contributions including, but not limited to, data collection, analyses, interpretation and reporting. This may be due to the fact that they were not informed by their professors about the issues pertaining to authorship and this further made them not consider themselves as authors in the research papers submitted to their professors as the course requirement. As some of the students asserted in the interviews, the professors were in the belief that if students have ample knowledge and awareness related to authorship rights, they might feel autonomous and accordingly refrain from participating in research in which all decisions are for the most part made by the professors. One of the students stated,

You know the professors are comfortable with this way and they do not bother themselves to tell the students what the rights of the students are in doing research. They would rather hide it because it may be against their wishes if they let the students be aware of their rights.

Although some of the students revealed that they were rather aware of the authorship rights and believed that authorship must be awarded on the basis of contribution, they still continued to be treated as ghost authors because they thought that bringing up the case of authorship and discussing it could be a serious risk. Being dependent on the professors in the process of doing thesis and the fear of experiencing isolation were the main concern that prevented the students from defending their authorship rights in research papers or projects that were independent of their thesis. One of the students asserted that

I did huge amounts of studying, collecting and analysing only as the course requirement and although I know that what I did had the potential for publishing with my name as the author, I did not bring it up because I may be dependent on this professor when doing my thesis.

On the whole, it is apparent that lack of knowledge on the part of the students about authorship together with the professors' disinclination toward informing the students about their authorship rights in research papers or projects was the second major factor that increased the likelihood of student exploitation as ghost authors.

3.3. Lack of rules and regulations

The last theme that emerged and was, according to the students, among the factors that accounted for the vulnerability of the students to exploitation was the fact that there remained a paucity of explicit and detailed guidelines addressing authorship in the departments. The students asserted that no clear-cut rules and regulations were set by the

departments about the publication of the research papers. One of the students acknowledged that

[t]he English department at my university has no rules regulated and determined for the authorship. The criteria for excluding and including names in the research papers are totally personal. I did a lot of things such as collecting data, data analysis, finding literature review, and writing the drafts. I did all these only as the course requirements and not as the author. This is too sad.

This shows that the professors continue to apply their own personal criteria when assigning authorship to the students who made contributions to the research papers. The students agreed that written documents were not available in their departments to identify their roles in the research papers and warrant their authorship. The absence of clear guidelines related to authorship credit on faculty-student collaborative research papers or projects resulted in disagreements and exploitation and because the power relation between faculty and their students was inherently unequal, the students were not awarded appropriate authorship credit. One of the students asserted that "the department should develop guidelines that can protect our authorship rights and of course there are some guidelines available". While lack of authorship rules and regulations in the departments can give rise to arbitrary practices and decisions by the professors, formulating guidelines can inform the students about the authorship rights and responsibilities they and their professors are supposed to have in research papers or projects. In this regard, Universities can formulate regulations regarding authorship credit and further include them in faculty handbooks and student orientation manuals (Arthur et al., 2004; Oberlander & Spencer, 2006). One of the students stated:

if a part of our research course in the first semester of MA program was allocated to the rules about students' authorship and their responsibilities, the professors at least would have to add the students' name to the research papers or mention them in acknowledgment.

The students were not usually listed as the authors because, as revealed in the interviews, the research paper ideas were owned by their professors and the job of the students was to submit the paper as the course requirement and not claim authorship credit. In fact, many of the students believed that more they did including gathering data, developing checklists, conducting interviews, analysing the data, and reporting than they were assumed to do for course requirements and their rights to claim authorship was silent in the university regulations.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The study indicated that, although, the MA students made substantial contributions to the research papers written as the course requirements, they were not acknowledged or mentioned in the byline. It is doubtless that publishing these papers without adding the students' names as authors or acknowledging their contribution is equivalent to treating the them as "cheap labour" (Conn, 1995). Owing to the power disparity inherent in the faculty-student research context and because of the fear of possible damage to this relationship or retribution (Murray, 2002), the students refrain from discussing authorship issues with their professors. As asserted by Oberlander and Spencer (2006, p. 226), "students are forever linked professionally to advisors and may be fearful of real or imagined consequences of questioning authorship practices". This calls for open discussion between the students and

the professors about the issues germane to the student-faculty research collaborations including authorship credit (Oddi & Oddi, 2000).

Lack of knowledge about authorship as well as lack of guidelines that can inform the students about the issues, rights, and responsibilities related to authorship is another cause of the ghost authorship phenomenon. Fine and Kurdek (1993) argued that when students lack experience and sufficient knowledge in research, they are vulnerable to exploitation by their professors. In the same vein, helping the student to gain knowledge by means of introducing clear rules and guidelines about authorship is argued to be essential to avert the exploitation of the students (Arthur et al., 2004; Bartle et al., 2000).

As far as the results of the present study are concerned, there appears to be a nexus of authorship credit, power relation, lack of knowledge about authorship, and lack of guidelines that needs to be explored to fully understand how to deconstruct power relation and enhance the students' knowledge in the realm of authorship. The justification for exercising power in the area of authorship need to be provided by the professors and as Chomsky (2002, p. 201) pointed out "the burden of proof for any exercise of authority is always on the person exercising it". In the case that the exercise of power is not legitimate, it has no reason to perpetuate and should be eliminated. Exploiting the students and treating them as the ghost authors is the act of research misconduct and deserves more attention. Since the academic rewards, promotion and other tenure decisions are largely dependent on the number of publications and from the other hand the act of ghost authorship encompasses fabrication and falsification of credentials, it is vital that more studies in different contexts need carrying out to investigate ghost authorship.

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