

**Pathways to Near-Zero Plagiarism Level in English Research  
Article Writing: A Photovoice Autophenomenographic Insight**

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**Article History:**

Received: 9 April 2025

Accepted: 21 June 2025

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**Keywords:**

Plagiarism Level, Research

Article, Photovoice,

Autophenomenography

Many academic authors expect plagiarism-free writing to contribute to developing academic integrity, but dishonest practices, such as plagiarism, in English research articles remain unavoidable. This study records the author's perennial challenges in combatting plagiarism to reach a near-zero level when writing an English research article. It also documents the author's emotional expressions through a visual image to represent the physical experiences. This study integrates two data collection methods, including autophenomenography and photovoice, respectively. The results reveal several challenges encountered in decreasing plagiarism levels, including in the search for credible sources, literature conceptualisation, utilisation of free vs paid plagiarism checkers, co-authorship empowerment, and preference for prestige. Emotional expressions reflected through selected images (i.e., bush, unfinished house, doll as a team, dollar symbol, and graduation cap) lead to academic solutions, such as careful literature selection, critical thinking, reliance on the premium version of plagiarism checker, co-authorship task division, and self-writing discipline. In addition, recommendations for university stakeholders and teachers are discussed, bridging the gap between near-zero plagiarism levels and research article writing.

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## INTRODUCTION

This study is based on my reflection on writing English research articles (henceforth RAs) for more than fifteen years, during which various efforts, attempts, sadness, enjoyment, and happiness were recognised as partners and collaborators. In fact, plagiarism in RA writing remains vital to be discussed in international contexts as such a dishonest practice occupies authors to benefit from online sources without any credit or attribution (Cortés-Vera, 2025; Karuppall, 2025; Alsaedi & Alhumsı, 2024; Alua, Asiedu, & Bumbie-Chi, 2022). Although many authors struggle to lower plagiarism throughout their writing, a near-zero level is considered laborious to achieve and control over most writing practices. In the meantime, a journal decides stricter rules for every author to submit an article with a plagiarism level between 10% and 15% without any bargain or request. Consequently, RA authors, whose expectation is to have their articles published in a reputable international journal, have to overcome some facts that online sources, such as AI-generated content, provide unlimited writing materials. Paraphrasing refers to a proper strategy to determine the lowest plagiarism level, but not all authors are proficient with it (Hassanipour et al., 2024).

Although there has been a myriad of recent studies concerning on plagiarism in academic research writing under the themes, including addressing plagiarism in a textbook (Li, Ge, & Chen, 2024), plagiarism understanding and awareness (Burris-Melville & Burris, 2024; Nketsiah et al., 2023; Khathayut & Walker-Gleaves, 2020), plagiarism in e-learning (Alsaedi & Alhumsı, 2024), prevention against plagiarism (Egan, 2025; Çelik & Razi, 2023; Giannakouli et al., 2023), attitude towards plagiarism (Özbek Güven et al., 2024), plagiarism-free writing (Zhang et al., 2022), plagiarism teaching and learning (Yeh, 2021), academic integrity establishment (Chokoraia, 2023), plagiarism detection tools (Alua et al., 2022), some research gaps are clearly identified. For instance, little research has been focused on the plagiarism challenges of an RA author as an individual. Moreover, combining such academic and physical challenges and emotional expressions through self-visual images regarding the reduction of plagiarism levels

in RAs remains unidentified. Fortunately, this study sheds light on exploring the author's perennial experiences and emotions in combatting plagiarism's negative impacts and reaching near-zero plagiarism levels in RA writing. The term "near-zero plagiarism" in this study refers to RA text, which consists of less than 1% plagiarism level, indicating that the academic text is almost free or completely free from any plagiarised content.

There are several reasons why this topic emerges as paramount in academic development. First, plagiarism remains the most impactful indicator, due to which an article is subjected to rejection. Acknowledging the author's experiences in reducing plagiarism levels leads to positive thoughts about its negative impact. Second, such academic dishonesty affects not only a novice author but also an expert author who suffers from the writing challenge (Mu, 2024). Self-regulated writing strategies are needed to help authors prevent themselves from every possibility of plagiarising a source. Third, a near-zero plagiarism level is not an impossibility when writing an acceptable RA. It requires intensive training, more significant efforts, continuous attempts, and linguistic competence to modify word by word and manipulate sentence structure without changing its main idea. Fourth, reducing the plagiarism level is not an academic task; instead, it influences the author's emotional insight. This study combines both academically experienced plagiarism and emotionally configured expressions to describe a complete understanding of what plagiarism really is. Therefore, the significance of this study refers to its comprehensive picture regarding strategies to be undertaken and challenges to be prevented as an author attempts to lower the plagiarism level in an RA.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Transformative Learning Theory (henceforth TLT) is an educational framework focusing on individuals' abilities to change their insights and develop effective thinking strategies regarding their learning and supporting environments (Mezirow, 2009; 2000; 1997). In the educational process, adult learners transform the meaning of their learning experiences by internalizing what they believe,

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*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 15 No. 1 2025*

assume, and encounter into reflective learning. Learners' development is promoted through a series of learning processes. When education has transformed learners, it seems impossible for them to change perspectives and return to the first place where they begin to transform (Mezirow, 2000; 1991). This theory enables learners to attribute themselves to challenging a new mission, skill, or knowledge. TLT comprises five concepts, including experience as a stimulus, engagement in discourse, transformative insight, reflective and critical thoughts, and strategic integration of the learning process, allowing an individual to deal with integrated skills in learning a foreign language (Dewi & Muslim, 2024).

The implementation of TLT has to follow ten phases respectively. As for the start, learners experience disorienting dilemmas that influence them to perceive how knowledge works differently. The learners examine guilty feelings when encountering such a dilemma, both negatively and emotionally (Mezirow, 2009; 1995). They critically assess some assumptions (e.g., sociocultural, physical) by terminating thoughts about the dilemma and the impacts of the dilemma on learning beliefs. It needs to recognize the lack of contentment and transformation stage to change similar knowledge. The learners have to be aware that others are experiencing identical conceptions about feelings or events as well. The next phase refers to the learners' experience in commencing to engage with new rules due to their earlier attitudes and reactions towards the dilemma (Mezirow, 1997). It is important for each learner to be responsible for a new action that shares future advantages for their learning. Learners' new plans have to develop the existing competence or knowledge as a pathway to learning success. They manage a new role that leads to a new identity within new facts. This role contributes to the implementation of learners' new skills through competence building, relationship encouragement, and learning self-confidence. Lastly, the learners accomplish learning missions under a new role, commitment, challenge, and perspective about transformation.

The main goal of TLT refers to critical reflection, where learners need to comprehensively recognize what they experience as it leads to the basic principle

of transformative learning. Another goal is to promote both learning beliefs and practices regarding new knowledge that has to be managed either logically or systematically and prevent learners from any ambiguity, inconsistency, or desperation during learning stages (Mezirow, 1991). The centrality of learners' experiences requires readiness, quick response, willingness, and dynamic perceptions about learning new knowledge. On the other side, TLT is beneficial for learners as it acts as a practical problem-solving concept to develop new competencies. It may significantly change conventional learning habits to a more radical development. Similarly, learners are challenged with both developmental and transitional learning challenges. It also helps learners adapt to new rules, roles, or considerations as paramount aspects of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1995; 1991).

### **How to Decrease Plagiarism Level in English RA Writing?**

It is always important for an author to decrease plagiarism level when writing an English research article to encourage academic integrity and avoid any possibility of dishonest practices (Alsaedi & Alhums, 2024; Çelik & Razi, 2023; Yeh, 2021). The first strategy is to determine what constitutes plagiarism, such as self-plagiarism, accidental plagiarism, mosaic plagiarism, and direct plagiarism. Second, an author should internalise proper citation styles, including *APA*, *MLA*, or *Chicago*, into their RA. Every source, be it paraphrased or external, needs to be cited appropriately. In line with that, citing strategies can be strongly useful. A direct quote, for instance, is used to cite a statement that is considered more essential. Modifying an idea in a statement without changing its original meaning refers to an effective paraphrasing technique, stating that a paraphrase does not allow an author to replace words with similar meanings (Nketsiah et al., 2023; Alua et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

The citation source must be different from both the structure and content of paraphrased statements. In doing this, the author's voice should be added when paraphrasing the source. One way to maintain originality is to develop analysis, perception, or explanation but exclude any original content from reviewed

literature. Originality in academic texts requires balanced referencing systems that direct an author to utilise various sources to construct self-argumentation (Li et al., 2024). Writing academic text with new, modified structure or ideas is more promising than relying heavily on existing materials or sources. This is because today's plagiarism detector is equipped with an innovative system to determine all types of dishonest practices, even when they are simple phrases (Khathayut & Walker-Gleaves, 2020). Similarly, relying on online plagiarism apps, such as *Turnitin*, *iThenticate*, or *Grammarly*, has the potential to identify plagiarised content (Chokoraia, 2023).

A careful author relies on a specific referencing management app, such as *Mendeley* or *EndNote*, to systematically organise and track every cited reference throughout the article body. When writing a draft, the author divides between the source and self-thinking contents (Cortés-Vera, 2025; Özbek Güven et al., 2024; Triantafyllou, 2023). It is noted that the author is not recommended to overtly copy and paste the original content into an article draft. However, paraphrased sentences have to be revised deliberately to overcome misinterpretation of the modified contents.

## **METHOD**

This study integrates both autophenomenography and photovoice as the methods. The rationale for applying autophenomenography refers to its primary goal to help the researcher explore, structure, and investigate lived experiences regarding a particular phenomenon (Allen-Collinson et al., 2018; Allen-Collinson, 2011). The topic of challenges encountered in decreasing plagiarism levels remains considerable to be reflected through this method, confirming how such a phenomenon is experienced, challenged, and interpreted by the researcher himself. It seeks to explain reflective experiences that are rooted in the researcher's unique insights (Drummond, 2007). Fortunately, although the method refers to personal phenomena in nature, it can have the potential to correlate its insight into larger frameworks, such as theoretical, cultural, or social. However, autophenomenography remains critical in terms of its ethical use as, according to

Allen-Collinson (2011), it allows the researcher to promote his/her own experiences and self-perceptions, disclosing the issues of research trustworthiness and data ambiguity. In dealing with the issue, the first idea was to complete every research guideline in both autoethnography and phenomenology. Another idea was to determine boundaries regarding emotionally challenging data. I ensured how and when such boundaries should be revealed. Lastly, the data were not universalised due to research subjectivity and marginalised context. Such ideas are prominent in engaging with epoché, which increases research authenticity and rigor (Allen-Collinson, 2011; Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2005).

Meanwhile, the results of the autophenomenographic method were accomplished by providing a visual image to express the researcher's emotions regarding the earlier challenges. Photovoice is an innovative qualitative approach that helps promote participants' personal feelings about the issue being studied (Budig et al., 2018). Photovoice is concerned with the researcher's psychological insight, describing how verbal data are interrelated with emotional expression respectively (Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997). The integration of photovoice throughout this study is paramount as it focuses on both barriers and strategies that lead to emotional expression. In this case, five emotional images follow each theme in the result section. The combination of both verbal and visual methods contributes to a comprehensive investigation of experiences in decreasing the near-zero level of plagiarism during RA writing for years.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The results are organised by revealing challenges, emotional images, and some strategies addressed to the earlier barriers.

### **In search of credible sources**

Credible sources contain trusted literature that supports the author's available ideas in English RA. The importance of a credible source is unquestionable, as it provides proper content or dynamic writing materials. However, based on my previous experience, it was somewhat laborious to

determine whether the content referred to a credible source or others. It is because the internet offers millions of references, such as journals, books, news, blogs, or AI-generated content, to be cited in a text. This is in line with Dahlen, Nordstrom-Sanchez, and Graff's (2024) findings, confirming that millions of writing sources online have sometimes led to negative understandings as writers are challenged with communicative purposes. Interestingly, most online sources on the internet were believed to be credible just because they were registered and published online. In this case, I wrote:

My first literature search was pathetic because every piece of literature I surfed and downloaded seemed trusted and qualified. I even used content from a blog, *Wikipedia*, or website with no date. I loved copying and pasting various online content as the internet has all I requested.

An opposing strategy to avoid a higher plagiarism level is to copy and paste a source that has not been archived on any online website. The tendency to rely heavily on print sources in writing has not been totally ignored by most writers due to their availability, free access, and trustworthiness (Cabfilan, 2024). The author may not extensively burden the impact due to its unavailability in online content, but such an attitude interrupts academic integrity development among researchers.

Sometimes, I feel guilty about relying on unpublished materials to complete my articles. I recognised their impact, but I kept using the contents in some articles. When it was published in a national journal, I smiled, but I felt terrible about the weird personal achievement. I did not notice how many sentences I copied and used as if they were mine. If the contents were disseminated online, the articles reached about 50% to 90% similarities.

Taking a picture has become an appropriate option to represent some feelings. A bush was selected as an emotional expression for the barrier to determining a proper, credible theory. The image implies an overwhelming feeling as the bush is tangled and dense (Gerstenberg & Hofmann, 2016), indicating that it is difficult to select the most pertinent literature due to the obstruction of unreliable sources. A thorny bush also symbolises the author's frustration or confusion about selecting both truly credible sources and fake information.





**Figure 1. Emotional photo: Bush**

My feeling is like a bush with various stems, leaves, and colours, which reveals that many types of sources or literature, both online and offline, can be confusing.

In fact, although it remains problematic to find a credible source, I began to read many articles in reputable international journals through which a submitted article is carefully and systematically evaluated. Reading academic texts leads to a comprehensive understanding of the overall parts, including coherence, cohesion, ideas, and sources. Similarly, Phyo, Nikolov, and Hódi (2024) admit that academic reading has a prominent role in preparing for writing an academic text even though writers are engaged with thematic analysis and linguistic complexity during both academic reading and writing (Petersen et al., 2024; Eriksson, 2023; Inie, Barkhuus, & Brabrand, 2021). Most articles published in international trusted indexes, such as *Scopus* and *Web of Science*, cite references from other trusted sources to maintain credible information. I noted:

Eventually, I followed what reputable journal authors proved when citing trusted literature. Now, I always select a credible source and avoid using any untrusted source for my article. Such sources are accessible and manageable, stating that both my cited references and written contents can be easily assessed regarding their plagiarism level.

The strategy has motivated me to selectively consult on writing materials before and during the drafting stage. Credible sources strengthen academic integrity through anonymous reviews in a journal and proofreading. The use of standardised language helps to encourage clear communication skills, leading writers to an inclusive engagement of English as the primary academic language (McKinley,

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2024). Consequently, it leads me to struggle to constantly decrease plagiarism to lower or near-zero levels. This awareness did not emerge when I experienced relying heavily on printed sources that cannot be openly evaluated or proved.

### **Literature conceptualisation and critical thinking**

One of the most intriguing challenges is that an author employs literature in every article section, including the introduction, literature review, method, and discussion sections. The article section needs specific and related theories to determine coherence throughout the article content and enrich available ideas. In harmony, Neupane (2020) states that literature adapted from previous studies is advantageous to increase dynamic capacity in writing research-based papers. Literature conceptualisation has become the main reason why plagiarism issue never ends in RA writing. Engaging with journal article writing has led me to think deeply about upcoming sentences or ideas to be added based on the journal's author guidelines. Such a problem emerges when an author does not have sufficient cognitive skills as a compulsory principle in writing an academic text (Zhao, Dang, & Finlayson, 2025; Yang, 2023). The "copy and paste" technique seems more popular for an inexperienced, non-native author. As a result, my article received a higher percentage of plagiarism level.

When I had to write more than 200 sentences in RA, I could not afford to complete all the content using my own words without copying ideas from available sources.

Conceptualising literature resembles the model of an unfinished house with linear and parallel frame that strengthens each pillar. This image was essential to help me understand literature conceptualisation in RA based on my deep feelings. I chose the unfinished house image as it reflects how different references are divided according to utility, category, and function. Every frame of the window, door, roof, stair, or floor has to be completed with a particular material and shape (Mergel, Menrad, & Decker, 2023). Similarly, every part of scientific writing requires specific references to help explain the author's available ideas (Khusniyah & Ismiatun, 2024).



**Figure 2. Emotional photo: Unfinished house**

Looking at an unfinished house reminds me of a drafting stage in RA writing. Although it is not finished, its frame is substantial. However, providing ideas to all texts has to follow academic rules or conventions because, if not, I may commit to a dishonest practice, such as plagiarism.

Furthermore, critical thinking is considered an effective strategy that leads me to comprehensively evaluate every piece of literature before it is integrated into my RA. I followed several critical thinking steps, including questioning, interpreting, and synthesising literature from various sources. The effectiveness of critical thinking is revealed through its ability to judge information logically. Compliant with that, several studies (Cananau, Edling, & Haglund, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023; Zou'bi, 2021) prove that critical thinking prepares individuals not only to analyse an object critically but also systematically promotes comparison between various information in academic contexts. This implies that by applying critical thinking, an author can analyse a source through careful examination, which may decrease the plagiarism level. As I experienced,

After engaging with a critical thinking strategy, I never receive information and integrate it directly into my RA. What I experienced is to compare the information with other sources online. I also reviewed its linguistic aspects, such as syntactic structure and word choices. So far, it is adequate to decrease plagiarism to a near-zero level.

Interestingly, critical thinking can be integrated into the paraphrasing technique. This combination is more radical in decreasing plagiarism levels. For

example, the information generated from a GenAI tool may be correct or incorrect as it does not clearly refer to the author's context. Critical thinking directs the author to identify main ideas which are different from supporting statements. Pan, Lai, and Guo (2025) also clarify that learning self-regulation allows learners to engage with critical thinking as AI-driven texts remain questionable. Having paraphrased the content, the author uses the strategy to examine both the tone and intent of the original text. It is noticed that the author may modify contents in different insights, ensuring that the paraphrase results in new expressions while retaining the actual meaning.

I always check the main ideas of the contents before paraphrasing them thoroughly. Rewriting a statement in a totally new form is more advancing to help avoid any higher similarity level. Fortunately, such a strategy has helped me a lot to reach a less-than-one-percent level. It is not an impossibility for an EFL author like me. I succeeded in reaching the lowest similarity level by applying the strategy in writing several articles that were eventually published in Scopus-indexed journals.

Although critical thinking has successfully decreased plagiarism levels, it is not easy to apply the strategy to a high-impact journal as its articles contain a variety of complex structures, specific or technical topics, and linguistic complexity. My concern with such a journal article is reading the whole text both comprehensively and repeatedly (Phyo et al., 2024), overcoming some misinterpretation of each main point to be paraphrased or directly cited. In addition, modifying a text requires deep thought and insight, which can be developed through writing practice.

### **Utilisation of free vs paid plagiarism checkers**

The plagiarism checker is paramount in decreasing similarity to near-zero or, perhaps, zero level. It is challenging for an author to decide on similarity level manually. When it is possible, it takes much time to have one article examined. Meanwhile, an online plagiarism checker serves as an advanced tool that generates automatic content within seconds and with unimagined responses based on a particular initial prompt. The automatic text checker uses artificial intelligence resources that empower its textual analysis (Hz, 2024). Similarly, Alua et al. (2022)

state that plagiarism checkers have positive impacts on academic writing and its process. There are many kinds of plagiarism checkers, such as *Turnitin*, *iThenticate*, *Grammarly*, *Plagiarism Checker X*, *GPTZero*, *Quillbot*, or *Duplichecker*. The apps can be both in free and premium versions. Although they are primarily designed to check similarity levels, they do not share similar application procedures. Unfortunately, my experience reveals that the free version consists of limited features and access, while the paid, premium version has all the features that it basically offers. Accordingly, Anil et al. (2023) convinced that writers cannot fully benefit from a low-cost plagiarism detector due to a policy that limits its full access or features. Utilising the free versions of *Turnitin*, *Quillbot*, and *Grammarly* has led me to adapt to the limitations and receive such a situation. As a consequence, the tool cannot help prove what has been written. I admitted:

The free version only receives 100-500 words for the first, second, and third trials. When I checked my research abstract, introduction, method, result, discussion, and conclusion sections in an online checker, I could not really calculate a total similarity level as the app proceeds the section separately. When a friendly, polite colleague helped to check my article using a premium version, it detected a higher plagiarism level of up to 57%.

In reality, a financial issue emerges as an author aims to purchase a premium account of an internationally recognised checker. It is too expensive for an individual to afford one of the plagiarism apps unless the institution purchases a premium account to be offered to university members. In this case, as I am to reveal emotions through an image regarding the barrier, the dollar symbol was an appropriate choice to be promoted. It is because, according to Roberts, MacLeod, and Fernandes (2023), the dollar symbol refers to superiority, expensive aspects, and economic power, stating that it remains challenging to earn a dollar if compared to other currencies. Choosing the image implies that it expresses my emotion about my inability to buy such an expensive plagiarism app.



**Figure 3. Emotional photo: Dollar symbol**

It is a dollar, not rupiah, stating that the apps are developed for international users who use dollars to purchase the apps. However, I was burdened with the price due to my financial problems. In the future, I hope the university can provide the premium version freely.

The problem is that the premium app is more powerful than the free version in terms of its advanced features. Interestingly, there is a lack of practical choice to be promoted when evaluating written texts. Engaging with such a paid version is a prominent strategy to get the article content updated with a proper plagiarism checker. Alternatively, Hassanipour et al. (2024) suggest that authors utilise ChatGPT to reduce plagiarism levels, as the GenAI tool can paraphrase a text. The author may check a text whenever needed, overcoming an increase in similarity level while typing sentences in RA.

After saving some money for months, I decided to buy a premium app for daily use. In fact, the premium version keeps my article updated since I can request the app to check syntactic structure. Although I am to spend millions on the app, I am satisfied as I can always modify the text whenever it contains a higher similarity level.

This theme is considered static, indicating that the decision to utilise a premium app can no longer be interrupted. The app is said to be the most effective tool to control plagiarism development during RA writing. Practically, I have learned from several similarity checkers how to restructure a sentence, modify an idea with a similar meaning, and construct a new form. A plagiarism checker not only reviews the similarity level but also offers guidelines to reconstruct literature to avoid higher plagiarism.

### **Co-authorship empowerment**

Ideally, co-authors contribute indirectly to lower plagiarism levels in RA writing. However, some cases prove that not all co-authors give their profound, promising contributions during either the research or writing process. The findings of Tucker, Parker, and Merchant (2016) proved that co-authorship in academic writing collaboration causes many challenges or risks despite its benefits, including writing productivity barriers and financial issues. The first author is usually responsible for the whole part of RA, while the co-authors only attach their names without any tangible contribution. One of the reasons is that they are superior in academic position to the first author. In my earlier experiences during RA writing, co-authors were free from any task, indicating that they did not work with any stage of the writing process. Consequently, I completed every writing stage, including paraphrasing content from various sources. This caused burnout or desperation to read, analyse, interpret, or reconstruct new sentence forms to avoid any higher similarity.

I admit that, in the actual context, both the first and co-authors undertake some different tasks to ensure RA quality before submission, during reviews, or the revision process. As every journal stresses stricter rules of plagiarism in article submission, I may not be the one responsible for it due to paraphrasing complexity. My co-authors did not help to check and review the literature before writing it in our RA. Therefore, a journal rejected RA due to an issue of a higher similarity level. I did not report to them because they did not want to help either. When I struggled to lower the plagiarism level, I felt totally stressed.

Revealing emotions for such a high plagiarism level, I took a picture of several dolls as a team. Dolls are funny and colourful, but they are of different shapes, looks, prices, or utilities. The doll's picture helps to express my deep feelings about teamwork in the RA writing process. It is in harmony with Gang's (2015) study, which found that dolls reflect autonomy and social-emotional skills in the learning process. While the first doll is smaller than the second and third ones, it is the most valuable and convincing of all, conveying that superiority does not

determine high participation or responsibility. The cute small doll is red, stating that it is brave and enthusiastic.



**Figure 4. Emotional photo: Dolls as a team**

I worked alone to ensure the similarity level was lower and zero. Finally, I could decrease the level radically, but it was not easy for me as a novice author. I just worked hard to read literature, take notes, reconstruct a statement, and rewrite a sentence with a new, fresh structure or idea.

A decisive strategy is required to determine the role of each author in RA. This strategy has to be informed earlier or before the writing stage commences, overcoming any unexpected argument among the team. Through communicative interaction, I informed each co-author both politely and carefully that they should participate based on earlier commitment. This is based on the suggestion of Olan and Edge (2019), stating that interactive dialogue with co-authors is beneficial to increase engagement from the outlining to the reporting stage. Each co-author reviewed the literature and paraphrased the source. As a result, our RA reached a level of similarity of less than 1%. Moreover, it does not take much time to deal with either writing ideas or paraphrased content.

We [the team] divided specific tasks. The first co-author surfed and collected related literature. I paraphrased half of the literature, while

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the third co-author did another half part. The third co-author checked the similarity level via online apps. If the similarity level remained higher, we then did a similar stage. It took just less than three days to ensure the RA contained zero or near-zero plagiarism.

The effectiveness of co-authorship in determining lower plagiarism levels relies on all teams' earlier decisions. A strong, hardworking team struggles to avoid any higher similarity in their RA, but a weak team entitles all work to one author only. In this case, I sometimes prefer to work alone in doing research, writing a draft, paraphrasing literature, and revising corrective feedback rather than being overwhelmed with many co-authors without any contribution to the plagiarism issue. In this case, I followed the ideas stated in the studies of Jakab, Kittl, and Kiesslich (2024) and Barlow et al. (2018), which promote the strengths of becoming a single author but criticize multiple authors without clear task division and contribution over RA accomplishment.

### **Prestige vs academic integrity**

An author is challenged with two indispensable aspects of writing RAs or being published in reputable international journals. Prestige, for instance, emerges when the author's article is finally published in a *Scopus* or *WoS-indexed* journal and cited by global authors as references in international journal submissions (Vandagriff, 2023; Kumar, 2020). The author's name is becoming scientifically popular among researchers in a particular expertise. In regard to job positions, an author at the university level may receive some automatic or fast promotion, such as becoming a professor. However, prestige in RA writing may have some negative impacts on an author's academic integrity. For example, an author is subjected to plagiarising others' work or having an article written by another person, but the paper is admitted as the author's self-work. As I experienced an issue in RA writing prestige, I could not resist using previous article content as my writing source due to the pressure to quickly publish in an international journal. In fact, such a source contains credible and trusted references to be included in an article (Neupane, 2020). Although I was aware that the similarity level of my article reached 47%, I did not surrender. The article was submitted to an international journal. I noted,

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*LET: Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching Journal Vol. 15 No. 1 2025*

Prestige makes me purge the academic integrity that I learned at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels. The promising offer to publish quickly from several journals via emails or social networks has disturbed my self-writing skills to always paraphrase literature before using it as a reference. I know my RA consists of plagiarised content, but when I received an email saying that my article had been accepted for publication, it was like living in heaven.

If it is possible to choose between prestige and academic integrity, becoming an author with higher integrity is preferable. However, it remains laborious for many foreign language authors to adapt to academic English use and usage even though it has been studied for years, ranging from primary school to higher education level. Similarly, disclosing an emotional picture of the graduation cap implies that the author is challenged with either becoming a prestigious individual with a lack of academic integrity or strengthening academic integrity without lower prestige. The graduation cap photograph represents my more profound feeling about failure and success in avoiding dishonest practices to decrease plagiarism levels in RA. As I reflected,



**Figure 5. Emotional photo: Graduation gap**

...even after I graduated from the English Education doctoral program, which intensively promoted character building for researchers, it remains complicated to escape from academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism. The knowledge of academic integrity that I have been learning cannot be really maintained.

Several strategies may be helpful to overcome this challenge, including the promotion of an integrity culture, self-discipline empowerment, transparent collaboration, comprehensive writing skill development, and engagement with

stricter rules. My experiences prove that it was almost impossible to engage with all strategies simultaneously as many online contents, such as AI-driven texts, contain valuable materials for RA writing (Pan et al., 2025). Fortunately, self-writing awareness and self-commitment to academic writing conventions support me in promoting academic integrity rather than mere prestige with its tentative benefit, but it may lead to academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is abstract, but authors are responsible for applying it to practice.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

An academic author has to face some unpredictable barriers during pathways when attempting to decrease similarity levels in English RA writing. It is noticed that a near-zero similarity level does not imply that the author is free from any plagiarism impact, stating that reaching such a level must have been challenged with both internal and external barriers. The internal barriers refer to the author's preference towards notorious achievement rather than maintaining academic integrity development. Complexities of literature require the author to deal with critical thinking strategies. The author is challenged with external barriers, leading to searches for less credible literature, untrusted collaboration, and engagement with free or trial tools. Fortunately, various academic and personal strategies are appropriate for decreasing similarity levels, which mostly hide under the barriers. Moreover, psychological expressions seem to dramatically influence the author to manage both barriers and strategies regarding the near-zero level.

Nevertheless, this study was not undertaken without any limitations. For instance, it involved only one participant, implying that ambiguity, trustworthiness, and generalisability issues remain questionable and unnoticeable. It is recommended that future researchers are interested in inviting several participants to describe their plagiarism stories narratively. Another option is using a survey instrument to both quantitatively and qualitatively record authors' barriers or strategies in decreasing their similarity levels within RAs. Many RA authors experience plagiarism issues at the university level for a variety of reasons. Accordingly, for stakeholders or teachers, it is highly recommended that

universities should have premium or unlimited plagiarism checkers to help learner-authors quickly access and evaluate their RAs. In addition, additional rewards for those who reach near-zero or zero similarity levels can be promising options for learners who struggle with such academic integrity development.

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