# Back-Translation in Academic Writing: Malay EFL Students' Engagement with Cross-Language Plagiarism in Islamic Higher Education

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## Abstract

Plagiarism remains a persistent issue among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, particularly when they rely on translation strategies to navigate academic writing. This study explores Malay EFL students' understanding and practices of back-translation—a process of translating texts from English to Malay and back to English—which often leads to cross-language plagiarism. Using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, data were collected from 30 students at an Islamic university in Indonesia through written tasks, questionnaires, and online interviews. Content analysis, descriptive statistics, and thematic analysis were employed to analyse the data. Findings reveal that most students are unaware that back-translation constitutes plagiarism and lack sufficient knowledge of proper paraphrasing and citation practices when working with multilingual sources. Students frequently depend on translation tools such as Google Translate and Quillbot, which increases the risk of unintentional plagiarism. The study concludes that limited awareness of academic writing conventions in multilingual contexts contributes to cross-language plagiarism, highlighting the need for targeted instruction on translation ethics and academic integrity in Islamic higher education.

*Keywords: back-translation, cross-language plagiarism, Malay EFL students, academic writing, Islamic higher education*

## Introduction

Plagiarism remains a serious challenge in students' academic writing in higher education, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. They often face challenges in understanding English sources and articulating them in the correct academic form. Many EFL students find that it is not easy to produce academically acceptable writing. Linguistic barriers, cognitive and cultural difficulties especially when related to the sources are some reasons in creating academically piece of writing. Restricted vocabularies, inadequate academic reading comprehension, and lack of linguistic awareness often obstruct their ability to restate ideas accurately in English. As a consequence, many EFL students have difficulty to articulate information from English text into acceptable academic prose. This problem leads them to rely on coping strategies.

One of the strategies that students frequently use to overcome these challenges is back-translation, which involves translating a text from English to their native language, then translating it back to English. Back-translation is one of the forms of plagiarism that is relatively recent and increasingly recognised in higher education (Jones, 2009; Pirtheepal & Mahabeer, 2019). This type of plagiarism is also referred to as cross-language plagiarism (Barron-Cedeno, 2010; Danilova, 2013), or round-trip translation (Tedesco, Bernardini, & Garcea, 2024). Back-translation involves translating a text from one language to another and then translating it back to the original language, without paraphrasing or attributing sources (Jones, 2009; Barron-Cedeno, 2010). This practice is often applied with the assistance of Google Translate by disguising verbatim copying of original text, for example, from English (first version) to a foreign language, and back to English (new version) (Bautu & Bautu, 2021; Jones & Sheridan, 2014; Pirtheepal & Mahabeer, 2019). This practice is difficult to detect (Mozgovoy et al., 2010) because the sentence structure changes twice due to the transfer of meaning between languages, but the original idea remains intact. This practice constitutes plagiarism when someone claims the translated quotes as their own work without attributing the authors of the sources.

However, students often miss paraphrasing or attribution in this kind of translation, resulting in cross-language plagiarism. This is happening when the students reproduce original meanings too closely, omit proper paraphrasing, or fail to provide correct attribution. The risk of cross language plagiarism is significantly increased when students depend on machine or hybrid translation techniques. Consequently, the widespread of translation technologies has accelerated the prevalence of cross language plagiarism among EFL students, regardless of the students' intent. Moreover, many consider this strategy a "safe route" for avoiding detection by similarity index tools (Akbari, 2021; Epundu, 2022; Jones, 2009; Jones & Sheridan, 2014; Yankova, 2020). Whether students are aware or unaware that such translation constitutes cross-language plagiarism, this form of plagiarism has silently spread among EFL students in higher education, particularly along with the development of translation-assisting technologies.

In addition, extensive research has been well-documented on plagiarism among students in one language, including verbatim copying (Gelfand, 2018; Mustafa, 2019; Muluk, Habiburrahim, and Safrul, 2021; Nundy et al., 2022; Roka, 2017; Velmurugan, 2024), inappropriate paraphrasing (Alvi et al., 2021; Mustafa, 2019; Roe et al., 2024; Ruslan et al., 2020; Sánchez-Vega et al., 2019; Vasconcelos et al., 2022), self-plagiarism (Clarke et al., 2022; Corner et al., 2024; Khathayut, 2020; Lin, 2020; Roka, 2017; Vieyra & Weaver, 2023), and ghostwriting (Khan et al., 2020; Khathayut, 2020; Newton, 2018; Rahimi et al., 2024; Tang, 2024). However, limited studies have explored cross-language plagiarism among students (Akbari, 2021; Epundu, 2022; Jones, 2009; Jones & Sheridan, 2014; Yankova, 2020). To date, no studies have explored back-translation within the context of Malay EFL students.

Malay Muslim EFL students in Islamic higher education, where academic integrity, cultural values, and Islamic principles are highly upheld, also face vulnerability to dishonest behaviour. This settings place a strong emphasis on academic integrity, moral ethical conduct and Islamic values like (*Amanah)* trustworthiness, (S*iddiq)* truthfulness and avoidance of deception *(Ghisy)*. All these Islamic values theoretically should guide students toward academic practices. But, it is an act that creates conflict with both institutional rules and religious duty. Students consider back-translation as a strategy to achieve better results in translation and gain a comprehensive understanding of the sources. However, their lack of academic writing skills, particularly in paraphrasing and citation, often leads to cross-

language plagiarism. This indicates a gap between students' understanding and their practice in academic writing, particularly when working with multilingual sources.

This study examines how Malay EFL students comprehend and apply academic writing principles when working with multilingual sources, with a particular focus on back-translation.

**Method**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory research design. This approach, which involves collecting and analysing data quantitatively and qualitatively (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2021), is considered more effective than separate analysis because it can generate a better understanding (Bowen et al., 2017). By integrating both types of data, researchers can identify students' plagiarism behaviour from various perspectives. In addition, a sequential explanatory research design was chosen because this research began with initial quantitative data collection and continued with qualitative data collection, allowing for a deeper exploration of the data, particularly to explain the reasons and factors underlying students' plagiarism behaviour. Furthermore, this study collected data purposively from 30 Malay EFL students at an Islamic university in Indonesia. Participants were selected because they had completed an academic writing course and were familiar with the institution's plagiarism policy. Data were collected, including students' written final assessment tasks (a total of 47,420 words), responses to an online closed-ended questionnaire, and online interviews. Quantitative data, in the form of text analysis, was collected first to identify plagiarism practices, particularly back-translation, in students' written final assessment tasks and analysed using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2022). Specifically, to identify back-translation in students' work, this study used ChatGPT as an assistive tool to provide preliminary insights into linguistic patterns indicating back-translation by analysing writing style, sentence structure, and diction. The results were then cross-checked through manual analysis for further verification to ensure reliability and accuracy. Next, quantitative data in the form of a closed-ended online questionnaire were collected, aimed at identifying students' general views on back-translation practices, and analysed by descriptive statistics (Dornyei & Taguchi, 2009). Qualitative data, in the form of semi-structured online interviews, were then collected to gain deeper insight into students' perceptions and reasoning regarding plagiarism, particularly back-translation and analysed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). These data were triangulated by integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), to generate higher-quality inferences (Ivankova et al., 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), enhance credibility (Miles et al., 2014), and ensure consistency across data sources.

**Results and Discussion**

Most students are unfamiliar with back-translation practice. After several explanations, only student DI08 referred to this practice:

For example, I once wrote a paper, and even though I paraphrased everything myself, it still got flagged for plagiarism, perhaps because those phrases have been used repeatedly. So, I am confused about how to avoid plagiarism. Then, a friend of mine checked their plagiarism, and it was 3%. I was like, "How is that possible?" and they said, "I did not follow the exact sentences from the book." It is tiring to hear him talk, not to mention his method of translating from English to Indonesian and rewriting it in English. So, that is how to avoid plagiarism, according to him. However, I am not sure how to avoid plagiarism. Perhaps

some of my friends try to avoid it, but they still get flagged, even though they claim they did not copy from anywhere.

However, she is unaware that such practice is considered cross-language plagiarism. This statement reflects students' lack of metalinguistic awareness regarding how language transfer across two linguistic systems affects meaning construction and textual ownership, as well as the misconception that students consider translation-based rewriting to be their own original work. As noted by Bloch (2012) and Pecorari (2015), such misconceptions are common among EFL students who equate linguistic transformation with textual ownership. Bloch (2012) explains that students tend not to cite authorship for information that is widely known to the public (common knowledge) or that is freely available in the public domain. At the same time, Pecorari (2015) explains that EFL students have a belief that, as writers, they are tasked with repeating information from sources. These students' beliefs reflect the misunderstandings that occur in students' back-translation practices.

When working with multilingual sources, most students understand that they need to paraphrase the translated quotes. They understand that they need to adjust the language structure of translated results to sound natural in English. They are aware that the results of literal translation often do not match the sentence structure in English.

However, half of the students do not understand that they need to paraphrase or provide citations for translated quotes, whether from Indonesian to English or vice versa. McNaught and Kennedy (2009) argue that paraphrasing between two languages is highly susceptible to plagiarism because it intentionally disguises copying one work and then translating it into another language without attribution. As a result, students perceive translated texts as their own constructions, rather than borrowed ideas that require citation. This also demonstrates students' tendency to rely on translation as a means of avoiding direct copying. However, they fail to realise that such linguistic transformations do not necessarily guarantee the conceptual originality of their work.

This confusion may stem from the tradition of translation-based learning in EFL contexts, where translating and imitating texts are considered effective learning strategies that can enhance reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Murtisari, 2021), particularly in L2 language learning (Humairah & Agustina, 2020). Additionally, students often lack an understanding of the academic conventions used when incorporating various sources (Permana, 2020).

Similarly, half of the students also consider back-translation, for example, translating a text from English to Indonesian and then back to English without citations or paraphrasing, as acceptable. This indicates that these students demonstrate an incomplete understanding of how to translate quotes academically. Students admit that they face challenges in restructuring sentences after translation to sound natural in English. Most of them rely on assistance tools such as Google Translate and Quillbot to produce correct sentences in English, although they realise that these tools sometimes produce incorrect results. These tools can allow students to blur the line between translation and authorship, as they can modify texts so that the source of information cannot be detected. As a result, students tend to become dependent on these tools, which can reduce their ability to paraphrase and ensure the originality of the sources they paraphrase. In line with this, Dinneen (2021) notes that students were prone to cross-lingual plagiarism, particularly when they use digital translation and paraphrasing tools without further revision or understanding.

Additionally, students often struggle to grasp the distinction between intralingual and interlingual translation. According to Whyatt et al. (2016), intralingual translation involves restating or rewording the text within the same language, whereas interlingual translation involves transferring meaning between different languages. Therefore, students mistakenly

believe that translated results (interlingual translation) are equivalent to paraphrasing (intralingual translation). As a result, they tend to use the translated quotes without paraphrasing. This practice can lead students to plagiarism if they do not use quotation marks and in-text citations.

It is hard to identify back-translation in students' work. Although an AI tool can analyse non-idiomatic or awkward sentence structure, too literal word choices, phrase order that reflects the structure of the source language (e.g., Indonesian language), or pragmatic infelicity, in which a sentence structure is accurate linguistically, but it sounds unnatural to native speakers, this tool cannot determine whether the sentence constitutes back-translation. In students' works, problems such as literal translations, awkward sentence structures, and incorrect collocations were frequently identified. However, it cannot be inferred that the sentences with these problems are the result of back-translation.

This highlights the methodological limitations of identifying cross-language plagiarism, even when using AI tools. While such systems can detect linguistic irregularities, they cannot evaluate intertextual or conceptual equivalence, particularly in students' back-translation practices. Therefore, human interpretation remains crucial for assessing whether linguistic similarities result from translation, paraphrasing, or original construction.

**Conclusion**

Generally, Malay EFL students attempt to understand how to use multilingual sources correctly. However, students' lack of understanding of how to write with multilingual sources leads to their heavy reliance on translation assistance tools. Back-translation is a strategy that students often use when writing with multilingual sources. This strategy has the potential to lead to unintentional plagiarism when students are unaware of the importance of citations. This indicates the need to provide specific knowledge related to writing with multilingual sources, particularly in translation and attribution.

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