

## Talking about Plagiarism as an Ethical Dilemma among Algerian Students of English

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### **Abstract:**

Albeit plagiarism has received increased attention, literature provides little practical strategies on how to approach this topic with students. The purpose of this study stems from the necessity to address the students' awareness of what constitutes plagiarism, their attitudes towards the way their teachers cope with it, and the reasons behind committing this ethical dilemma. To this end, the present study relied on 36 undergraduate students studying at the department of English, Ain-Temouchent University. Data were gathered via a likert scale questionnaire. The findings disclosed a general agreement among the respondents about what constitutes plagiarism. The findings also indicated that the majority respondents opined that they would be accused of plagiarism if they copy someone else's work. Additionally, the findings stipulated that the students plagiarize because they lack proficiency in the language. Finally, the respondents mostly agreed that **Abstract:** University instructors often guess about who might have committed plagiarism, but do not care about detecting this act.

**Keywords:** attitudes; ethical dilemma; reasons; students; plagiarism

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Academic integrity is defined as honesty in the ways in which knowledge is acquired and transmitted. However, academic dishonesty can be defined as an act of dishonesty in the academic setting. In other words, this act means committing or contributing to dishonest acts by those engaged in teaching, learning, research and related academic activities, and it applies not only to students, but to everyone in the academic environment (Cizek, 2003; Whitley, Jr. & Keith-Spiegel, 2002). Academic dishonesty can take many forms, which can be broadly classified as: 1) Cheating 2) Plagiarism 3) Fabrication 4) falsification 5) Sabotage (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002). Various studies in diverse fields conducted on assessing the pervasiveness of the act, found a considerably worrisome amount of academic

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dishonesty. One of the largest studies conducted in the USA and Canada found 47% to 84% of academic dishonesty (McCabe, 1997 & McCabe, 2005). One of the explorative studies in Midwestern, private liberal-arts college, indicated 89% of academic dishonesty (Kisamore et al., 2007). There may be different factors triggering academic dishonesty like parental pressure, peer pressure, high academic achievement, low morality, poor time management, value issues, lack of proficiency in the language, fear of failure, emotional issues, laziness or lack of effort in teaching methods and curriculum issues and the problem in understanding issues (Henning et al., 2013).

The flaw of academic dishonesty is experiencing a shocking increase (Hogan, & Barton, 2003; Ahmadi, 2012). Today, with the growth of academic dishonesty in higher educational institutions, various scholars have recently become more interested in studying students' academic dishonesty (Nazir & Aslam, 2009). A good illustration of corrupted academic integrity framework is copying and pasting another's writings or thoughts as one's own without relevant citation and referencing, a fact known as plagiarism. The purpose of this study stems from the necessity to address the students' awareness of what constitutes plagiarism and the reasons behind committing this unethical act followed by their attitudes on the way their instructors cope with this dilemma. As such, the main objectives of this study are to detect:

1. Students' perceptions on what constitutes plagiarism.
2. The reasons why students plagiarise.
3. Students' attitudes towards the way their instructors cope with this dilemma.

### **2. Literature review**

Academic dishonesty has long been a thoughtful flaw for educators. Drake (1941) reported over sixty years ago that: "Students in general have no strong sentiments against classroom cheating and will not cooperate to control it" (p.420). Academic dishonesty can be viewed as a form of deviant behaviour (Blankenship & Whitley, 2000). Research on academic dishonesty unveils that if a person involves in one form of deviant behaviour, he/she would involve in other forms of this kind of behaviour. Scholars show great interest in miscellaneous unethical means of gaining benefits in academic settings, and detect that dishonesty behaviours altered widely and emerged from traditional methods to use advanced technology including techniques like cheat sheets, unauthorized discussion, forged data or statics, unauthorized use of electronics in the examination, unsanctioned group work, use of someone else paper in exams without permission (Bjorklund & Wenestam, 1999), use of false excuses when

deadlines are missed and using information from other students without their permission in exams, quizzes and assignments (Nelson et al., 2013). Academic dishonesty can be broadly classified as plagiarism, falsification, cheating behaviour, manipulation, taking outside help, and cheating in exams. (Bashir & Bala, 2018). This study considers plagiarism as an unethical act among university students and tries to gauge the students' perceptions of what plagiarism is, and the reasons behind committing this act.

There are theories that provide a detailed explanation of what causes academic dishonesty. Most of the factors that were pressurized as crucial, are external factors that focused on gaining the desired output which was explained in Agnew's general strain theory (1992). This theory has tackled how decisions were taken based on strains obtained from conflict between socially desirable, approved, and most focused purpose, with an appropriate opportunity to the person to achieve this purpose with legitimate institutional means. More recently, the theory got more attention in the educational sector.

A study conducted by Smith et al., (2012) about the effect of college stressors on deviant reactions of undergraduate students, supplied partial support to the Agnew's strain theory (1992). The researchers tested the effect of frustration caused by:

a) Blocked goals and cumulative stress like academic shortcomings and perceived injustice where an individual believes that the others may have an unfair advantage in the job market or get into post baccalaureate like engineering, medical and law colleges;

b) Measures of negatively valued stimuli like having uninteresting or meaningless classes and

c) Removal of positive stimuli on academic dishonesty.

Students indulging in academic dishonesty due to parental and societal expectations can be explained by this theory. However, this is not all, as academic dishonesty does not take place solely on unjust tensions, but also other aspects like, personality, diverse motives, individuals' attitude and various intentions play a crucial role in deciding one's act.

Within the same line of thought, and to embellish the literary framework on academic dishonesty among students of different fields of studies, Rezanejad & Rezaei (2013) conducted a study on Iranian language students. They investigated their perceptions, attitudes and reasons for plagiarism in addition to the respondents' opinions about the way their teachers consider plagiarism. They concluded that the students mostly view plagiarism as copying and pasting without acknowledging the original source. Additionally, the majority respondents

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opined that their teachers guess about who might have committed plagiarism. As far as the reasons for plagiarism are concerned, it was detected that the students plagiarize because they lack proficiency in the use of language and the easiness of committing plagiarism.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Sample population and site of research**

A purposive sampling consisting of 36 EFL undergraduate students studying at the Department of English, Belhadj Bouchaib University were selected to take part in this study with a minimum age of 18 and a maximum age of 30 including males and females.

#### **3.2 Research tools**

In order to investigate the reasons behind committing plagiarism and the participants' perception of the issue, a questionnaire including sections based on a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = slightly disagree, 3 = disagree, 4 = slightly agree, 5 = agree, 6 = strongly agree) was administered. The choice of the questions relates to the three already-cited objectives of the study (see Introduction).

#### **3.3 Data collection procedures**

To collect relevant data for this study, the printed form of the questionnaire was administered to 36 EFL students. The participants were selected based on the availability of the classes and students. In addition, the researcher attempted to have a balanced number of participants from different levels (3rd year licence; Master 1 and Master 2 students). The analysis of data was based on a mixed-methods approach.

#### **3.4 Presentation of the findings**

The data gathered are presented in tables and are analysed following a mixed-methods approach that consists of quantitative and qualitative data. Three questions were posed in accordance with the main objectives of the present study. Table 1 stipulates the results obtained from the first question:

Q1: How do EFL students perceive plagiarism, and what do they consider practically as plagiarism in their academic career?

**Table 1. Students’ perception on what constitutes plagiarism**

*I practically believe that plagiarism is*

	Strongly agree	slightly	Slightly disagree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
1. Copying someone else’s work as if it is your own	45%	33%	15%	3%	2%	2%
2. Getting ideas from another piece of work	35%	21%	20%	5%	13%	4%
3. Getting ideas from a source and paraphrasing them but without acknowledging the original source	32%	25%	19%	9%	12%	3%
4. Copying and pasting without acknowledging the original source	35%	30%	20%	7%	6%	2%
5. Having somebody rewrite sections of your paper or the whole thing	25%	25%	18%	11%	8%	7%
6. Using old work you previously wrote as “repurposed” content	10%	11%	8%	24%	30%	17%

In order to detect how the respondents outline plagiarism, they were provided with six items, each emphasizing on one constituent of their perception of what plagiarism means. The respondents were asked to yield their agreement level towards the proposed items based on the six point Likert scale. Table 1 clearly shows that from the 36 respondents under scrutiny, 93% believed that “Plagiarism is copying someone else’s work as if it is your own”; 76% revealed that “Plagiarism is getting ideas from another piece of work”; 73% of the students selected the third item as a definition for plagiarism, i.e., “Plagiarism is getting ideas from a source and paraphrasing them without acknowledging the original source”. Nearly, the same rate is attributed to those who selected the fourth item stating that “plagiarism is having somebody rewrite sections of your paper or the whole thing”. The least probable definition of plagiarism in the participants’ idea was the one attributed to item six including 29% of the respondents who viewed plagiarism as “using old work you previously wrote as ‘repurposed’ content”.

The second question was meant to figure out the main reasons that push the students commit the unethical act of plagiarism. It is as follows:

Q2: What are the major reasons behind the students’ plagiarism act following their personal views?

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Table 2. Reasons for committing plagiarism

*Reasons why students commit plagiarism*

	Strongly agree	slightly	Slightly disagree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
1. Desire to get a good grade	27%	15%	15%	20%	10%	13%
2. Fear of failing	29%	21%	20%	12%	9%	9%
3. Lack of proficiency in the language	45%	25%	10%	6%	10%	6%
4. Procrastination or poor time management	45%	21%	10%	11%	7%	2%
5. Lack of attention from instructors to detect plagiarism	24%	12%	26%	24%	12%	2%
6. No training in universities on the issue of plagiarism	17%	36%	10%	13%	15%	9%
7. Lack of awareness on the severity of plagiarism and its outcomes	33%	24%	7%	17%	12%	7%
8. Disinterest in the assignment	10%	8%	9%	20%	38%	15%
9. Belief they will not get caught	7%	12%	9%	33%	30%	9%

As Table 2 above highlights, nine different motives were suggested to the respondents in the questionnaire. In fact, the most frequent reason for plagiarism was “lack of proficiency in the language”. It was mentioned by 80% of the participants. A slight smaller percentage rating 76% was attributed to those who claimed that they plagiarise because of “procrastination of poor time management”. A total rate of 70% of the participants agreed that the reason for plagiarism is “fear of failing”. Other common reasons encompassed “desire to get a good grade” and “lack of instructors to detect plagiarism”. Nearly the same rates including 62% and 63% were assigned to those who stated “no training in universities on the issue of plagiarism” and “lack of awareness on the severity of plagiarism and its outcomes”. However, reasons manifested in ‘disinterest in the assignment’ and “belief they will not get caught which were stated by 27% and 28% of the respondents respectively.

The aim behind the third question was to gauge the respondents’ attitudes on how their instructors cope with plagiarism.

Q3: How do students perceive the way their instructors cope with plagiarism?

**Table3. Students’ attitudes towards the way their instructors cope with plagiarism**

*I think my instructors*

	Strongly agree	slightly	Slightly disagree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
1. Raise our awareness about plagiarism	10%	8%	9%	20%	38%	15%
2. Extensively warn us about plagiarism	12%	9%	12%	19%	35%	13%
3. Guess about who might commit plagiarism	40%	20%	11%	9%	7%	13%
4. Read the whole term paper to detect similar sentences from scholars	12%	13%	7%	34%	32%	2%
5. Are careless about detecting plagiarism	32%	35%	8%	12%	9%	4%
6. Do not have the capacity and necessary tools to detect plagiarism	31%	27%	14%	9%	11%	8%
7. Detect plagiarism but do not care to chastise us	25%	36%	17%	8%	13%	1%

As illustrated in Table 3 above, a small percentage of the respondents rating 33% declared that their instructors “extensively warn us about plagiarism”. However, 71% declared that they ‘guess about who might commit plagiarism’. Other respondents opined that their instructors “read the whole term paper to detect similar sentences from scholars”. Nevertheless, the majority respondents rating 75%, 72% and 78% respectively, thought that their instructors do not care about punishing them even if they gauge plagiarism and that “they do not have the capacity and the necessary tools to detect plagiarism”.

#### 4. Discussion

The current study has been a trial to examine in-depth an unethical dilemma represented in plagiarism. The focus was on the students’ perceptions about what constitutes plagiarism, the reasons that push them to commit this act, along with their attitudes towards the way their instructors cope with this dilemma. The participants of the study were 36 EFL undergraduate students. The findings of our study indicated that more than 90% of the respondents believed that plagiarism is copying someone else’s work as if it is one’s own. That was, in fact, an interesting finding as in many previous studies, most of the students did not admit that getting ideas from other sources is an act of plagiarism. This study has also been concerned with the reasons why the students plagiarise, and the most frequent reason for plagiarism has been ‘lack of proficiency in the language’. This is an interesting result which is, in fact, in line with (Henning et al., 2013; Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013).

The flaw of academic dishonesty is experiencing a shocking increase (Hogan, & Barton, 2003; Ahmadi, 2012) and the students are quite conscious of what plagiarism means; this is clearly stated in their responses, but despite this,

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different reasons for committing plagiarism have been clearly highlighted within this study. It seems that the students lack awareness about the bad effects plagiarism might engender as the majority believed that the teachers themselves do not extensively raise their awareness about the consequences plagiarism may trigger; they also do not highly warn them about the bad consequences of plagiarism; though, they guess about who might commit plagiarism . This can relate to the fact that the teachers do not possess the necessary tools to detect plagiarism, and that raising the teachers' awareness about plagiarism becomes a priority here since they are the principal agents supposed to combat this unethical act at University level.

Following these talks, none of the instances highlighted, in this study, are acceptable reasons to plagiarize or commit other acts of academic dishonesty. Students who choose to plagiarize give themselves an unfair advantage on assignments and they disrespect the hard work of others in an academic context like the classroom. It is important for the students to understand that despite there are several reasons to plagiarize, their instructors are interested in evaluating each student's own original work and not in evaluating the work accomplished by others.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study has investigated the ethical dilemma of plagiarism among 36 EFL students studying at Belhadj Bouchaib University. The results have yielded valuable information on the definition the students attribute to plagiarism, the reasons behind committing this act and their perceptions towards how their teachers cope with this dilemma. The results have revealed that the students viewed plagiarism mostly as copying someone else's work as if it is their own, getting ideas from another piece of work, or as getting ideas from a source and paraphrasing them without acknowledging the original source.

The results also indicated that the students commit plagiarism because of the lack of proficiency in the targeted language, easiness of plagiarism and lack of time to meet the deadlines. Finally, regarding the respondents' perceptions towards the way their instructors deal with plagiarism, they mostly agreed that, despite University instructors detect plagiarism; they generally do not care about chastising them. This will certainly have negative repercussions on the students' academic progress. It is, therefore, highly recommended to provide University teachers with the necessary tools to facilitate the task of detecting plagiarism and to increase both teachers' and students' awareness about its negative effects. This



might certainly help in fighting or at least mitigating this widespread unethical act at tertiary level.

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