

**Marina KARAPETYAN***Yerevan State University*

## **BUILDING THE CULTURE OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN AN ESP CLASSROOM**

*The culture of academic integrity is not strongly developed in the Armenian educational context, which has a direct impact on the quality of education in the country. This paper raises some important questions concerning academic environment in Armenian schools and universities and the factors leading to academic dishonesty. It considers specific cases of cheating, plagiarism and facilitation in an ESP classroom (namely, Political English) and proposes steps to potentially counter the issue.*

**Key words:** *academic integrity, academic dishonesty, plagiarism, EFL, ESP*

Being an educator has always been complex work as it involves not only teaching an academic subject to individuals of different age, background, ability and motivation, but also guiding them how to obtain and develop knowledge and skills. Additionally, in the view of recent information technology advancements it has become increasingly demanding to teach learners' ethics and help students assimilate the culture of academic honesty. It is especially true of school and university education in post-Soviet republics, where academic integrity has never been particularly highlighted by education authorities. In the meantime, although in Western countries the issue of cheating and plagiarism has been in the limelight for a long time, it has only been mitigated but not eradicated so far. Considerable research has been conducted on the nature, causes and prevention of academic dishonesty. In the real classroom, however, combating dishonesty seems easier said than done.

This paper aims to raise some important questions relating to academic environment in Armenia. Drawing from the first-hand experience, it considers some striking instances of academic dishonesty encountered in teaching English for Specific Purposes (namely, Political English) at the university level, as well as reflects on the underlying causes of this widespread phenomenon. The article also proposes skill- and task-based strategies that might reduce academic dishonesty in an EFL/ESP class and promote academic ethics on the whole.

### Defining academic dishonesty

What is academic dishonesty? In general and simple terms, it refers to any dishonest act in academic settings. What particular acts it comprises may vary among educational institutions depending on their policies /<https://bit.ly/39Zwh8z/>. In this paper, I will focus on three of the five most commonly acknowledged types of academic dishonesty /Correa, 2011: 66/, namely, *cheating*, *plagiarism* and *facilitation*, which occur most frequently during my experience of teaching political English to university students.

Each of these types is a complex phenomenon per se. For example, *cheating* refers to secretly using reference sources (cheat sheets, textbooks, dictionaries, online translators, internet sites, text messages, other people) and technology (mobiles, apps, ear-phones) to aid at the exams and with class/home assignments. Whether any other dishonest acts committed for academic benefit should be considered cheating is a matter of individual approach. What I mean here is students making handy excuses for their unpreparedness, bargaining for an undeserved grade by stirring the examiner's pity. Dictionary definitions of 'cheat' and 'cheating' clarify this point. According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, the verb *to cheat* means "to trick someone or make them believe something that is not true" and "to act in a dishonest way in order to gain an advantage, especially in a game, a competition, an exam, etc." /<https://bit.ly/3yN1qV6/>. Cambridge Dictionary formulates it as "to behave in a dishonest way in order to get what you want" /<https://bit.ly/3yI2Z6x/>. Vocabulary.com defines *cheating* as "a deception for profit to yourself" /<https://bit.ly/3aGa3bS/>. Thus, *cheating* involves a wide range of dishonest acts and is rightly used as a synonym for *academic dishonesty* by many scholars /Correa, 2011: 66/.

The other two types are equally multifaceted. *Plagiarism* is generally defined as using another person's works and ideas as one's own, partially or completely, but it involves far more than just copying them. In fact, in its elaborate forms plagiarism also means paraphrasing the original or translating it into another language without referencing /Idem: 66-67/. Copying from other students, generally with their permission, can be viewed as plagiarizing as well.

*Facilitation* in its broad sense refers to helping to cheat. It can involve other people's voluntary help, such as sharing ideas and knowledge, prompting correct answers, producing a piece of written work for other people on a paid or unpaid basis, as well as teachers' involuntary agreement to admit the falsified tests and plagiarized papers.

From the above definitions it follows that *cheating* can also be viewed as a broader term involving both *plagiarism* and *facilitation*, despite the distinct difference between the three terms.

### **Prerequisites to cheating**

Let us now consider some manifestations of academic dishonesty in primary and secondary education, as well as factors contributing to it. The primitive form of cheating at junior levels includes copying homework and test answers from a classmate, whispering/prompting the right answers to each other and using cheat sheets. Both the pupil ‘offering help’ (facilitator) and the one using it are considered to be cheating. In addition, parents sometimes do the homework for their children for the best of motives, or they may hire a private tutor who, instead of enhancing the kid’s knowledge in the subject he or she is struggling through, unscrupulously ‘dictates’ the ready-made homework to him/her. Moreover, some school teachers have recently adopted a ‘novel assignment’ for young learners – to write about popular heroes, scientists, actors, and so on from the internet (without instilling the ethic of using information resources correctly). All these instances testify that the culture of academic integrity is undeveloped and unpopular in this country. Some parents, let alone their children, cheat unconsciously not realizing what irreparable harm this can do; others cheat because ‘everybody else does’, it is a common phenomenon and no one gets penalized for it. In turn, tutors often promote, or facilitate, cheating because it takes less effort than to explain to lazy or hard-to-teach pupils.

Apart from ignorance, ‘unintentional’ cheating /Idem: 77/ in academic settings in Armenia may be the direct result of our cultural heritage. For instance, the tendency to plagiarize instead of creating authentic pieces of writing arises from suppression of individuality and discouragement of initiative in the Soviet period. In post-Soviet countries today “pressure and over control at educational institutions deprives the students of the necessary self-confidence” /Mekhakyan, 2018: 4/. Many teachers require at the exams that the theories should be presented exactly as they are formulated in the textbooks; any improvisation or deviation results in a lower grade. In many cases students are still discouraged from challenging conventional thinking.

Alternatively, the habit of prompting at the lessons, exchanging cheat sheets and sharing ideas during tests may originate from our collectivistic trait of helping each other. This characteristic is surprisingly blended with the individualistic desire to outdo each other – students strive to score high at the exams (as well as stand out in class) in order to qualify for a discounted tuition fee. This creates unhealthy competition, especially among mediocre students who fall short of the highest grades and, therefore, have to resort to exerting moral pressure on examiners or cheat otherwise.

Today, the availability of smart phones, various apps and the free Internet connection enable cheating at unprecedented levels. Schoolchildren and university

students alike not only duplicate test answers secretly exchanging text messages with their classmates but also copy ready-made model essays, project works and course papers from the Internet claiming the work as their own. Thence appear identical essays, comments, translations, summaries since the sources used happen to be the same. It is more than evident to the teacher or examiner that plagiarism has taken place. Still, no punitive or remedial measures are enacted.

Recent studies and surveys on academic dishonesty in Armenia, as well as in other post-Soviet republics /Milovanovitch et al., 2015; HERB, 2018/, have revealed a broad range of additional factors contributing to development of various forms of “educational corruption”. Among them are insufficient institutional control, dependence of university budget on the students’ fees, poor student and teacher motivation /Hovhannisyan, 2018: 8; Milovanovitch et al., 2015: 81-86, 100-102/, parental pressure on children for high marks /Milovanovitch et al., 2015: 13/, outdated study programmes and excessive loading /Idem: 91/. In this context, it is hardly feasible to eliminate academic dishonesty unless its primary contributing factors are eliminated first.

### **Peculiarities of cheating in an ESP classroom**

In addition to the aforesaid prerequisites to violating academic integrity, cheating in a foreign language classroom is triggered by very specific conditions, such as the necessity to produce and receive ideas in a language other than the mother tongue. The requirements for English proficiency in Armenia are more stringent than ever, but increasingly more university entrants fall short of mastering the language at the required level.

At the Faculty of International Relations, Yerevan State University, and the Faculty of World Politics, Moscow State University Yerevan Branch, one of the major subjects taught is English for Specific Purposes, namely, English for Politics. This intermediate to upper-intermediate/low advanced course covers such activities as summarizing and commenting on professional reading passages, speech and essay writing, reporting on, discussing and analyzing political phenomena and events, designing leaflets and party manifestos, interpreting/translating/rendering sentences and news articles from Armenian/Russian into English and vice versa, listening/video-viewing and further discussion of topic-related content, reinforcing grammar and vocabulary, to name just a few. For effective learning and acquisition to take place through the aforesaid assignments, students need a good command of the language, creativity, time management skills and willingness to develop one’s knowledge and abilities through independent efforts. However, professional texts are preferably crammed, translation practice is done through online machine translators, presentations are completely read from the slides, model essays are

copied and pasted from the Internet or, at best, produced in the native language and then translated with the help of parents, siblings, tutors, who know the language well. As a result, most students can hardly develop a deep knowledge of political English. After all, most of these resources are readily available on the World Wide Web, and it is only natural for the students to be tempted to make use of them.

What are the unique contributors to these fraudulent acts in an ESP classroom? Here are the most frequent reasons I have encountered in my work: 1) poor background knowledge of general English on which to build professional lingo; 2) inadequate understanding of the subject matter; 3) insufficient grammar and vocabulary; 4) inability to express independent thoughts orally or put ideas on paper (mostly due to language difficulties); 5) existence of tempting online translators; 6) laziness and reluctance to demonstrate honest endeavour; 7) lack of time.

Sadly, the biggest challenge is that today too many students get admitted to universities without proper prior EFL preparation. Here is a typical subsequent scenario. In order to handle an ESP reading assignment, freshmen have to cope with a triple task – to comprehend the unfamiliar professional topic written in an insufficiently mastered language loaded with professional terms. Further, the reading passage is to be summarized and discussed in class (rather than learnt by rote without getting to the bottom of the topic). In turn, poor grammar and vocabulary (including professional terms and collocations) hinder the ability to talk or write independently on a professional issue. Few students choose to overcome this deficiency by making proper use of dictionaries; instead, the majority opts for handy online translators, which can do the whole work in seconds. In case of essay writing, at best, machine translation comes as an ‘honest’ alternative to plagiarizing sample essays from the internet. The uniqueness of such essays cannot even be checked by Antiplagiarism software. Armenian students frankly admit they have composed their work in Armenian first and then translated it through the google translator or with relatives’ help. They do believe they have produced their own piece of writing and there is no element of cheating.

### **How to tackle the issue?**

Regrettably, some professors often turn a blind eye to students’ dishonesty thus becoming facilitators of acts of cheating and plagiarism themselves. Many of us warn our students that dishonesty will result in a failing grade but eventually we do not resort to that ‘tough’ measure. We may claim to use Antiplagiarism software to check the authenticity of students’ written works but then we find it more comforting to make no reckoning of their ‘little deceit’. We choose to bluff and our students realize this, which makes it practically impossible to combat the issue. In

the words of Hovhannisyan, “one of the main factors that make cheating and plagiarism possible is lack of control and detection means, as well as the atmosphere of impunity” /Hovhannisyan, 2018: 8/.

However, let us be realistic. In Armenia most (EFL/ESP) teachers, including myself, will refuse to assume the role of a ‘hangman’ single-handedly. Contrasted with their all-permissive colleagues, they will be at a disadvantage. Only education authorities or the administration of particular schools and universities are in power to introduce and enforce official policies and regulations on academic conduct, which will be observed by all professors and, subsequently, by students. It should be made clear that the use of any unauthorized aid and the seemingly innocent, kind, ‘motherly’, or even ‘philanthropic’ acts of facilitation constitute an offence and will be punished; otherwise, the cheating habits are certain to develop in the future into more serious ‘thefts’, such as stealing someone’s intellectual property for financial gains.

While this standard seems to be a long-term perspective in this country, ESP teachers have to adopt the tried-and-tested methods from Western practices as well as elaborate novel ways to deal with each particular case on an individual basis, considering the specificity of the Armenian culture. For example, depriving adult learners of their smart phones in the classroom day by day may sound like a violation of human rights to a Western student, but in Armenia this tough measure would most probably produce a remarkable effect.

Nonetheless, the Western academic experience shows that even harsh institutional punishment methods are not a panacea and do not work miracles. Giving one cheater a failing grade or dismissing him/her from school may deter other students from temptation to cheat; yet the problem will not be eliminated altogether. In view of the ignorance of Armenian students as to academic integrity, such measures will hardly teach them an important moral lesson. Therefore, the first and vital step on part of an EFL/ESP teacher should be to introduce and clarify to university freshmen the concept of academic dishonesty with its most manifest types and harmful impacts, raise the awareness of cheating and plagiarism not only as acts of stealing other people’s ideas but also as self-deception. Generating students’ motivation to avoid dishonest behaviour and maintain it throughout their studies and future career paths should be the teacher’s main goal.

One strategy to familiarize students with the concept of academic dishonesty that I have developed over the last few years is to give them a brief questionnaire or a quiz including questions about their preliminary idea of academic integrity, why they should be academically honest, how honest they were at school, etc. The multiple answer format of the questionnaire (including an independent answer choice) allows expanding the scope of answers beyond the suggested ones. Here are example questions to demonstrate the point:

What does academic dishonesty mean to you?

- a) *Lying to parents about your grades*
- b) *Copying homework from a course mate*
- c) *Having other people write your essay*
- d) *Asking your teacher for more detailed explanation about the subject*
- e) *Other:* \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think you should be academically honest?

- a) *To get good knowledge*
- b) *To get high grades*
- c) *To impress your course mates and teachers*
- d) *To succeed in life*
- e) *Other:* \_\_\_\_\_

The questions and answers should be formulated in simple English for easy comprehension. In case some of the freshmen still experience difficulty understanding the language, a similar survey can be offered in Armenian/Russian. The goal at this point is to set the stage for productive (honest) work ahead rather than teach a foreign language. Then the students' answers are analyzed and discussed together, followed by a more detailed dialogue about academic ethics and integrity.

After the students have got some insights into the issue at question, it is time for the teacher to establish a general policy on cheating. The policy should detail the rules of fair competition and honest behaviour in the classroom and the assessment strategies in case of violations. At the freshmen level we can afford to be relatively mild, but not too tolerant, because, as my experience demonstrates, most students tend to take advantage of the teacher's high tolerance in the future. In other words, we should use soft or even smart power to have a lasting impact on our students' attitude to studies.

An interesting experiment which I tried last year was designing a policy in collaboration with senior students (who are relatively mature). The students, as the policy makers, appeared to submit to their own rules more willingly than in case the rules were imposed on them.

Admittedly, however, having an unofficial (a single teacher's) policy is not enough to foster an honest academic culture. Enthusiastic at first, later students start comparing their 'difficult' conditions with a 'more favourable' situation in other groups, combined with the increased workload and shortage of time, and their initial willingness to avoid cheating is replaced with the temptation to take a shortcut to their goals. Therefore, ESP teachers should also work out general as

well as skill- and assignment-based strategies to help improve students' morale and promote honest behaviour in class.

Some helpful general methods are as follows:

- Adapt the task to the learners' ability and interests. For instance, allow weak students to prepare a smaller portion of the task.
- Avoid reproaching or giving a failing grade to students who cheated (in case of freshmen). Instead, explain the problem and give them a chance to replay the scenario next time. They will have to redo the task until the desired outcome is reached without cheating.
- Encourage fair competition by avoiding grading on a daily basis. Students often cheat because high grades at finals will lower their tuition fee. Have them learn for the sake of learning, not for grades.
- Teach how to work with dictionaries. Whether printed or online, dictionaries can be of long-term benefit if used correctly.
- Create conditions for pair, team and group work but make sure the weak students do not 'free ride'.

An alternative approach to conventional pair work is to channel the learners' collectivist characteristic of helping each other in the right course by encouraging knowledgeable students to help their struggling fellows with out-of-class preparation rather than be their cheat pals in class. For example, in many Western countries, despite their individualist culture, talented students are engaged in peer tutoring, i.e. providing free academic help to fellow students. They get paid for their activity, so the students who need help cannot make an excuse about their inability to afford a tutor. While this approach can only be applied at an institutional level, I propose using another popular type of peer mediation. Grouping a strong and a weak student from the same class will enable the strong one not only to help a peer but also enhance his/her own knowledge and skills through teaching; in turn, the weak student will get a personalized aid and will not lose face before the teacher and other peers. The teacher can choose to award incentives for the strong students who effectively assume responsibility for their 'beneficiaries'. This is not about the pair work where each participant has their independent share of work to do, but about specific results that one can induce the other to achieve. A potential drawback of this method is that the 'tutors' might have to rob themselves of extra time, which could be invested in their own extracurricular development if they were freed from this duty; moreover, the weaker ones may turn out to be an unmanageable task for the former, and hence neither of them will be at advantage.

As for task- and skill-based methods, I recommend taking the following approaches.



- 1) To promote integrity in both speaking and writing assignments:
  - let students practise finishing sentences (both orally and in written form),
  - guide the talk/discussion and the essay with a list of key phrases and/or questions,
    - assess the initiative and originality without focusing on grammatical or vocabulary inaccuracies,
    - give students freedom to choose and create, encourage them to be different producing their own peculiar stories, observations, sharing their own experiences and fantasies.
- 2) To promote essay and comment writing:
  - initially teach the rules of essay/comment writing as well as the methods of avoiding plagiarism (referencing, quoting, paraphrasing),
    - temporarily reduce the task to drawing up a plan during the lesson. Save the plan for future reference. The students can finish writing at home, but they should follow the initial plan (at least broadly).
    - guide the writing with a gap completion task,
    - let students finish an essay rather than produce a whole new one,
    - try to specify the task to prevent copying from online sources,
    - let students express their ideas on the issue orally before writing. Take notes of each student's ideas. If the lesson is in the online format, it can be recorded so all the students' ideas will be documented. At this stage it is purposeful to discourage any change of ideas/plans when putting the essay on paper.
      - encourage joint writing in class (through process writing or peer work). In process writing, grammar mistakes can be corrected and explained as they occur. Provide no assessment, as the main goal is to boost the writers' self-confidence and determination to write on their own.
- 3) To promote effective talks, reports, presentations and speeches:
  - assign simple independent talks on the topics of genuine interest and encourage students to have their own say rather than borrow others' opinions /Karapetyan, 2020: 78/,
    - get all the students in the class to ask the speaker follow-up questions. Break the stereotype of harming their peers by eliciting additional answers from them. Explain that in this way they contribute to the advancement of their knowledge and skills.
- 4) To promote classroom discussion of a reading passage and prevent cramming:
  - let students ask each other questions on the passage and answer them in their own words,
    - encourage students to summarize the passage using their own words, instead of cutting 'unnecessary sentences' and learning the rest of the passage by

rote, as a result of which students develop a bad habit of repeating (stealing) the content from previously memorized texts. Initially, allow summarizing in written form; further require oral summaries.

5) To promote independent listening/video-viewing:

- listen in class to prevent reading from the audio scripts/subtitles,
- for listening as a home assignment, teach how to use audio scripts/subtitles

for the betterment of the listening skill,

- let students summarize the passage.

6) To promote independent translation or rendering:

- let paired students simulate interpreting to their partner,
- watch rather than read news stories in Armenian/Russian and render the content into English,

• in the sentence translation task, have students provide at least two variants of translation for each sentence,

• let students do translation/rendering tasks in class providing they have submitted their phones beforehand. Otherwise, the phones are literally at students' fingertips ready to help them out and show them 'to the best advantage'.

Needless to say, both general and specific methods will be optimal in small classes up to 15 students at most. To address these challenges by doing most activities in class and demonstrating individual approach to students is unviable in a larger classroom.

To sum up, it will be most expedient if primary and secondary schools take the responsibility for laying the foundations for academic honesty, which will assist students in their further studies in higher educational institutions. Otherwise, university freshmen and even sophomores do not realize which actions in the academic settings can be referred to as cheating, and getting them to display integrity at this level may become a daunting task. Admittedly, we cannot expect all our learners to eventually adopt an honest approach to studies, but we can at least target a few conscientious ones who do care about quality education and their own successful future.

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**Մ. ԿԱՐԱՊԵՏՅԱՆ – Ակադեմիական ազնվության մշակույթի ձևավորումը «Անգլերենը հարուկ նպատակներով» դասավանդելու ընթացքում.**  
 – Ակադեմիական ազնվության մշակույթը հայկական դպրոցներում և բուհերում բավականաչափ զարգացած չէ, ինչն ուղղակիորեն ազդում է երկրի կրթության որակի վրա: Հոդվածում դիտարկվում են հայկական կրթական ոլորտում առկա մշակույթին վերաբերող որոշ հիմնահարցեր և ակադեմիական անազնվությանը դրդող գործոններ: Ներկայացվում են անգլերենը հատուկ նպատակների համար դասընթացին հանդիպող ակադեմիական անազնվության որոշակի դեպքեր և դրանց հաղթահարման եղանակներ:

**Բանալի բառեր.** ակադեմիական ազնվություն, ակադեմիական անազնվություն, գրագողություն, անգլերենը որպես օտար լեզու, անգլերենը հատուկ նպատակների համար

**М. КАРАПЕТЯН – *Формирование культуры академической добросовестности на уроках английского языка для специальных целей.*** – Культура академической честности далеко не развита в армянских школах и вузах, что напрямую влияет на качество образования в стране. В данной статье рассматриваются некоторые важнейшие вопросы относительно культуры в образовательной сфере и факторы, ведущие к академической недобросовестности. В статье представлены конкретные случаи академической недобросовестности на уроках английского языка для специальных целей и предлагаются действия по ее предотвращению.

**Ключевые слова:** академическая добросовестность, академическая недобросовестность, плагиат, английский язык как иностранный, английский язык для специальных целей

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