

English Learning Achievement and EFL Learners' Cheating Attitudes and Cheating Behaviors

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Abstract

The aim of the current study was investigating the role of achievement in learning English as a foreign language in EFL learners' cheating attitudes and cheating behaviors. Eight hundred junior high-school students were selected based on random cluster sampling and participated in the study. Their attitudes towards academic dishonesty and their cheating behaviors in language classes were examined by two questionnaires. The result of data analysis revealed significant correlations between achievement in learning English and cheating attitudes and behaviors. Further, the result of regression revealed that achievement in learning English had weak power to predict cheating attitudes (.7%). However, the power of achievement in learning English to predict cheating behaviors of language learners in language classes was five times stronger (3.5%).

Keywords: cheating; attitudes; behaviors; achievement; English

1. Introduction

Academic dishonesty has become a major issue in education over the past decades and is obviously overspreading among different groups of students with an increasing rate. To cheat or not to cheat is now considered as one of the most basic ethical decisions students face (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). Academic dishonesty is what students do to present academic work of others as their own (Jensen et al., 2002). Due to their epidemic nature in the educational settings, dishonest behaviors are changing academic ethics and culture and have become an acceptable means to an end especially when students face circumstances like intense competition for scholarships or job offers.

Cheating on exams and assignments are reported to be among the most common types of academic dishonesty. In spite of being regarded as "a chronic problem" (Maramark & Maline, 1993, p. 4, as cited in Jensen et al., 2002, p. 210), cheating is not taken as a serious social problem since its consequences cannot be seen promptly or in the near future. While many scholars talk about how to detect and deter cheating, instances of cheating are not reported by many teachers or faculty members due to professional and personal reasons (Allen et al., 1998).

Cheating is generally defined as behaving "in a dishonest way in order to win or to get an advantage, especially in a competition, game, or examination" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2010). In the academic context it is

students' conscious involvement or participation in deception (i.e., lying, falsifying, misrepresenting, corruption, plagiarism, copying, or the unlawful assistance provided to someone else), typically for the purpose of performing well or giving the perception of performing well on an academic task (Athanasou & Olasehinde, 2002, as cited in Brown-Wright et al., 2012, p. 316).

Students who cheat explain their wrong behavior by giving justifications or making excuses (Topalli, 2005). Justifications allow cheaters to accept the responsibility of what they have done while they deny its gravity. Some types of justifications include denial of the injury (cheating does not hurt anyone); denial of the victim (everybody does it); condemnation of the condemners (teachers give unfair tests); and appeal to higher loyalty (helping others) (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 666). However, cheaters may make excuses to deny responsibility for their wrong action while they accept its gravity by stating that it was not their fault or other people push them to do that (Alt, 2015).

Because of the importance of academic integrity in education and the pervasiveness of cheating behaviors among students of all ages and levels, recent researchers have shown interest in investigating the reasons behind the tendency of students to cheat (Ahmadi, 2012; Murdock & Anderman, 2006). It is believed that preventive techniques cannot be fruitful if real reasons of cheating are not examined and follow up actions are not appropriately taken. Cheating has been found to be associated with individual characteristics such as age, gender, school grade; and psychological attributes such as motivation, intelligence, and efficacy (Ahmadi, 2012; Anderman et al., 1998; Diekhoff et al., 1996; Dweck, 1988; Finn & Frone, 2004; Haines et al., 1986; Klein et al., 2007; Satterlee, 2002). These characteristics are reported to be related to strong motives of cheating that is low learning and poor study habits. Obviously while the achievement is low, learners may use cheating as a means to increase their academic success instead of trying more or making effort (Barnett & Dalton, 1981). Being in a formal education that “stresses performance or ability above deep cognitive processing and comprehension” increases students’ likelihood of cheating (Brown-Wright et al., 2012, p. 315). In line with this, some studies have probed into the relationship between students’ cheating experiences and their grades in main stream education (Crown & Spiller, 1998; Jordan, 2001; Newstead et al., 1996) and reported learning issues as one major reason of cheating among students of different grades.

Research on the characteristics of students show that individual factors may also have strong effect on learners to cheat. This includes laziness, stress, time management, poor ethical decision-making ability, insufficient study skill and personal problems (Bertram, Van Den Einde, Ouellette, & Lee, 2013). It is also suggested that when students cannot compete with their successful peers, they cheat. The tendency to cheat is associated with variables that correlate with goal orientation towards learning and accomplishment. Low self-efficacy beliefs, for instance, have been reported to increase the probability of cheating among students. While students doubt their capabilities to reach their desired goals, they may use other strategies such as cheating to compensate for their lack of power and/or knowledge. Some studies have linked cheating to other emotional arousals such as fear of failure, test anxiety (Anderman & Murdock, 2007) and self-control, all of which being related to self-efficacy. On the other hand, highly self-efficacious students undertake difficult and challenging tasks (Murdock et al., 2001) and are willing to take risks. As a result, cheating behaviors are not observed among this group of students.

Similarly, learning motivation plays a key role in predicting students’ cheating behaviors in the academic context. Students’ motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, can be related to cheating in a way that those students who are intrinsically motivated and study just to gain knowledge and are learning-oriented have less tendency to cheat in comparison to those students who are extrinsically motivated, more performance- and grade-oriented (Anderman et al., 1998; Dweck, 1988). Extrinsically motivated learners who are concerned about grades and academic success frequently cheat more than intrinsically motivated learners who desire to learn and understand (Jordan, 2001). There is also evidence that students in early elementary school can be distinguished by their learning motivation (Anderman et al., 1998; Murdock et al., 2001) and this motivation can be related to cheating behaviors (Rettinger et al., 2004). Students who are motivated and interested in getting good grades without deepening their knowledge of the subject matter or concepts are more likely to cheat, while learning-motivated students who follow rules and regularities, are more willing to attain knowledge, and are less likely to cheat (Jordan, 2001).

Apart from individual forces, cultural differences such as law; respect for individuality; nature of power and authority; rights of property; concept of deity; relation of individual to state; national identity and loyalty; and values, customs and mores (Bartels, 1967 as cited in Jones, 2007) can influence students cheating behavior. In this respect the type of educational setting highly influences ethical decision-making or doing honestly in the academic environment (Swidan et al., 2004). In smaller college campuses, for instance, students’ rate of cheating behaviors is lower because they regard themselves as a part of the college community and academic honesty (McCabe & Trevino, 1996). Further, due to the fear of being caught while cheating, the students refuse to do any academic dishonesty in small academic contexts (McCabe et al., 2001). In contrary, in large academic contexts learners find it easier to cheat through utilizing lots of strategies and tools such as using cell phones and bringing crib notes to examination halls (Houston, 1976).

Students have diverse attitudes towards cheating. Students perceive cheating behaviors as not to be absolute but continuous and relative, meaning that cheating ranges from less severe actions that are not harmful to others to severe actions that are harmful and deserve serious punishment (Megehee & Spake, 2008). There is an inverse relationship between the perceived frequency of cheating and seriousness of cheating behaviors meaning that the more serious the behavior is perceived to be, the less students report performing that behavior (Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995).

Cheating attitudes have been reported to be related to learners' achievement, indicating that students with higher average have more negative attitudes towards cheating and cheat less than students with lower average (Hrabak et al., 2004). Students with favorable attitudes towards cheating have been found to cheat more than those with unfavorable attitudes (Diekhoff et al., 1996; LaBeff et al., 1990; McCabe, 1992). When students perceive cheating as not being so serious they engage in cheating more frequently (McLaughlin & Ross, 1989; Tom & Borin, 1988) because they are not worried about the consequences of cheating and being caught (Ahmadi, 2012). Literature on academic dishonesty concludes that students' cheating attitudes strongly predict their cheating behaviors in the academic environment. Some researchers have assessed students' general beliefs about the extent to which cheating behaviors are acceptable (Anderman et al., 1998; Gardner & Melvin, 1988) but most studies have taken into account the context of cheating and how students perceive cheating as being dishonest behaviors based on the learning context and its variables (Murdock & Anderman, 2006).

In spite of the fact that cheating has been the topic of research in some disciplines such as business (Klein et al., 2007) and engineering (Bertram et al., 2013) the issue of academic integrity and cheating behaviors is open to research in language classes. At the theoretical stand it is suggested that cheating "is a special disciplinary matter" (Brown, 2002, p. 200) that needs careful attention and treatment through changing students' perceptions and adopting appropriate disciplinary strategies (ibid) in language classes. However, in practice the variables that play a key role in students' cheating attitudes and behaviors in language classes are in need of further empirical examination. As a result, the current study examines the relationship between EFL students' achievement and their cheating attitudes towards cheating as well as their cheating behaviors in language class. The study seeks answers to the following questions:

- 1) Is there any relationship between EFL learners' English scores and their cheating attitudes?
- 2) Is there any relationship between EFL learners' English scores and their cheating behaviors?
- 3) Does achievement in learning English function as a predictor of cheating attitudes and behaviors?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample of this study was selected from female junior high-school students of a suburban area in Tehran in the academic year 2013-2014. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's table (1970)—which suggests the optimal sample size—given a population size, a specific margin of error, and a desired confidence interval—800 students were selected using cluster random sampling from different public schools of the district. They were studying in the third grade of junior high-school. As secondary schooling is not coeducational in Iran and girls and boys attend separate high schools, the data were just gathered from female students.

2.2 Instruments

In order to collect data for this study the following instruments were used:

- Cheating Attitude Questionnaire (CAQ)
- Cheating Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)

To assess students' attitudes towards cheating and dishonest behavior, Cheating Attitudes Questionnaire (CAQ) was used. CAQ was developed based on Carpenter et al.'s (2006) cheating attitudes questionnaire whose items were modified to assess students' cheating attitudes in one specific class, that is, English. The students were asked to express their perceptions of the situations described by each item as being 'cheating' on a 5-point Likert scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Item examples include: 'Letting my friends look at my English test and copy the answers' or 'asking English exam questions from another student who has just taken that test'. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was found to be .76.

CAQ contains 22 items categorized into six factors including exam cheating strategies, cheating with mediators, searching/finding exam questions, copying assignments, finding answers of the assignments, and cooperating in cheating. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was found to be 0.94.

To measure students' frequency of cheating experiences and behaviors in their English class, Cheating Experiences Questionnaire (CEQ) was used. The same items of the CAQ were used in the CEQ with a different point of view to assess participants' cheating experiences/behaviors in language classes. Students identified their cheating experiences using a 4-point Likert scale including 1 'never', 2 'sometimes', 3 'usually', and 4 'always'. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was found to be 0.80.

Students' English scores on final exams were considered as the indication of their achievement in the course.

3. Results

3.1. English Scores and Cheating Attitudes

In order to answer research question 1 and find the relationship between EFL learners' English scores and their cheating attitudes, correlation coefficient method was used. The result of correlation is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation between English achievement and cheating attitudes

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 English achievement	1	.094**	.089**	.125**	.022	.069	.073*	.031
2 Cheating attitudes		1	.926**	.886**	.636**	.873**	.850**	.589**
3 Exam cheating strategies			1	.794**	.494**	.773**	.743**	.463**
4 Cheating with mediators				1	.393**	.735**	.756**	.399**
5 Finding exam questions					1	.479**	.498**	.444**
6 Copying assignments						1	.647**	.503**
7 Finding answers of assignments							1	.410**
8 Cooperating in cheating								1

As Table 1 shows, there is a positive and significant relationship between students' English scores and their cheating attitudes in general ($r=.094$, $p<.01$). Significant and positive correlations were also found between English scores and two components of CAQ, exam cheating strategies ($r=.089$, $p<.01$) and cheating with mediators ($r=.125$, $p<.01$). This result indicates that those students who get higher scores in English, agree with the fact that the instances mentioned in the scale are dishonest behaviors or cheating.

3.2 English Scores and Cheating Behaviors

In order to answer research question 2 and find the relationship between EFL learners' English scores and their cheating behaviors, correlation coefficient method was used. The result of correlation is reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation between English achievement and cheating behaviors

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 English achievement	1	-.189**	-.103**	-.194**	-.104**	-.171**	-.180**	-.130**
2 Cheating experiences		1	.835**	.721**	.679**	.773**	.707**	.572**
3 Exam cheating strategies			1	.463**	.427**	.581**	.439**	.364**
4 Cheating with mediators				1	.341**	.549**	.610**	.293**
5 Finding exam questions					1	.397**	.379**	.381**
6 Copying assignments						1	.475**	.362**
7 Finding answers of assignments							1	.306**
8 Cooperating in cheating								1

As Table 2 shows, there is an inverse and significant correlation between students' English score and their cheating behaviors in general ($r=-.189$, $p<.01$). Further, significant and inverse correlations were found between English achievement and all types of cheating experiences. This result indicates that those students who get lower scores in English, cheat more in language classes and the instances of their cheating vary from cheating in exams, to finding answers of assignments, to cooperating in cheating with the help of peers.

3.3 English Achievement as the Predictor of Cheating Attitudes and Cheating Behaviors

To answer research question 3 and examine the power of English achievement to predict cheating attitudes and behaviors, multiple regressions method was used.

The result of regression (Tables 3 and 4) showed that English scores are a significant predictor of cheating

attitudes. However, the power of this variable to predict cheating attitudes was very weak (.7%). The positive value of beta (.094) indicates that success in learning English as a foreign language contributes to academic integrity in language classes.

Table 3. Regression of English achievement on cheating attitudes

Sources	Sum of squares	DF	Mean square	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	<i>p</i>
Model	66.578	1	66.578	6.831	.009	0.007	0.009
Error	7514.335	771	9.746				
Total	7580.913	772					

Table 4. Coefficients of English achievement for cheating attitudes

Variables	Unstandardized b	Standardized b	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
English achievement	.018	.094	2.614	.009

Further, the result of regression (Tables 5 and 6) showed that English achievement is a significant predictor of cheating behaviors. Although the power of this variable to predict cheating behaviors is weak (3.5%), it is still stronger than the power of English scores to predict students' cheating attitudes. Further, the negative value of beta (-.189) shows that success in learning English as a foreign language is a deterrent of cheating experiences and behaviors in language classes.

Table 5. Regression of English achievement on cheating behavior

Sources	Sum of squares	DF	Mean square	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	<i>p</i>
Model	271.300	1	271.300	28.616	.036	0.035	0.000
Error	7309.613	771	9.481				
Total	7580.913	772					

Table 6. Coefficients of English achievement for cheating behavior

Variables	Unstandardized b	Standardized b	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
English achievement	-.066	-.189	-5.349	.000

4. Discussion

The main aim of this study was investigating the relationship between EFL learners' achievement in learning English and their cheating attitudes and behaviors.

The findings of the study showed a weak but positive correlation between achievement in English and cheating attitudes in general indicating that learners who are more successful in learning perceive cheating instances as dishonest behavior. As they are more studious learners, they perceive cheating behaviors as wrongdoing and unacceptable. This is in agreement with the findings of other studies that students with higher scores and achievement have more negative attitudes towards cheating meaning that they believe in ethics and honesty; however, students with lower scores have more positive attitudes towards cheating and endorse cheating behaviors (Hrabak et al., 2004).

Most successful learners and those who desire getting high scores try to be responsible for their own learning and apply effective skills like setting goals and applying strategies that help them achieve their goals (Pintrich, 2000). Therefore, the learners who see themselves as responsible for their learning have unfavorable attitudes towards cheating behaviors unlike those with lower achievement (Whitley, 1998).

Learners with high achievement try to be more in line with ethical standards of their educational center as they believe in their talent and ability to become successful learners and see no convincing reason to become involved

in cheating behaviors. This encourages them to have unfavorable attitudes towards academic dishonesty and cheating. Mostly, students have more positive attitudes towards academic honesty before entering higher education and if they see higher level students' cheating, their idealistic view will degenerate (McCabe et al., 2001). As a result, helping learners to become more autonomous will guarantee more academic honesty that leads to more unfavorable attitudes towards cheating.

It was also found that achievement in English is inversely and significantly related to cheating behaviors meaning that high achievers rarely experience cheating behaviors in their academic career. Obviously, the higher students' scores are, the lower their cheating and dishonest behavior rates are. This finding corroborates a few studies done on the issue implying that when learners are skillful and successful in controlling their actions to reach their goals, they do not use dishonest behaviors in order to achieve their goals since their awareness and their control power over contextual difficulties help them to become successful (e.g., Tobias, 1985). Mostly, learners with low scores have strong desire to cheat because in this way they can compensate for their weaknesses (McCabe et al., 2002). They may have lots of reasons to cheat including lack of motivation which can be an influential factor in behaving dishonestly (Linnerbrink & Pitrinch, 2002). These learners have problems to accomplish what they want and may cheat to achieve success since they have experienced failure instead of accomplishment before. Therefore, they may cheat to get better grades as they may lack study skills and do not have enough interest or time to study English as a school subject.

The result of regression showed that English scores were weak predictors of cheating attitudes and behaviors. However, this power was a little bit stronger when cheating attitudes and experiences were compared. Considering that attitudes are much enduring traits in human beings, they rarely change through a short period of time. Moreover, they can predict learners' behaviors and affect the reactions of those involved in the interaction with the holder of the attitudes as well (McConnell, 1986). Thus, English scores weakly predict cheating attitudes of learners; in contrast, they can better predict cheating experiences of learners which are somehow contextualized and not steady in all the times and situations.

5. Conclusion

The current study attempted to investigate the relationship between EFL learners' achievement, cheating attitudes and cheating behaviors. The findings of the study revealed that learners with high English scores had more unfavorable and unpleasant attitudes towards academic dishonesty and regarded cheating as committing wrongdoing in language classes. High achievement in English was also found to have a significant role in reducing chances of committing cheating and dishonest behaviors in the academic environment. In other words, learners with high English scores were more cautious about their behaviors and were reluctant to cheat in language classes. Achievement in English was found to be a stronger predictor of EFL learners' cheating behaviors than their cheating attitudes.

The findings of this study are not generalizable to other educational settings and/or EFL learners as the current study was conducted with female junior high-school students in one teaching/learning context.

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