Investigating Academic Integrity Needs of English Language Learners in Higher Education

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Abstract

Academic integrity is fundamental to higher education, ensuring the authenticity of scholarly work and fostering ethical development among students. The prevailing availability of academic writing services and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools has amplified the challenges of maintaining integrity, particularly for English Language Learners (ELLs) moving into university settings. This study investigated the specific academic integrity needs of ELLs in a preparatory program of a School of Foreign Languages. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews with 80 undergraduate ELLs and individual interviews with four English language instructors. Thematic analysis revealed substantial knowledge gaps, misconceptions, and systemic obstacles that hinder the effective development of academic integrity. Results highlighted the necessity of comprehensive training in academic integrity principles, plagiarism prevention strategies, ethical citation and referencing techniques, and the responsible use of artificial intelligence (AI) -powered tools in academic writing. This study proposed context-specific, needs-driven interventions addressing the linguistic, technological, and institutional challenges faced by ELLs. It offers practical insights to promote academic integrity culture in higher educational contexts.

Keywords: Academic integrity; English language learners; GenAI; Higher education; Plagiarism

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Introduction

Academic integrity could be defined as the foundation of higher education. It encompasses values such as honesty, fairness, trust, respect and responsibility and protects the credibility of academic work (Bertram Gallant, 2017; Eaton, 2021). Upholding integrity ensures the authenticity of academic work and supports environments where ethical values are etched in students' intellectual and professional development. However, particularly English Language Learners (ELLs) in higher education institutions face linguistic, cultural and technological barriers due to evolving challenges to academic integrity. The prevalent accessibility of academic writing services, contract cheating platforms, and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools has further complicated the landscape (Ellis et al., 2018; Khan, 2024; Moya et al., 2023). In this context, understanding the needs of ELLs in terms of academic integrity has become a critical issue. These students often encounter challenges related to linguistic barriers, academic writing conventions, and the ethical use of technology in scholarly work. It is essential to engage with these needs to provide ELLs with greater understanding of academic integrity and equip them with the necessary skills to overcome the possible complexities of higher education without resorting to unethical practices.

GenAI tools can assist students with language and content generation, but they also raise ethical concerns about originality, accountability, and academic conventions (Dobrin, 2023). ELLs, in particular, are at higher risk of accidental plagiarism due to their limited experience with academic English. Many are unfamiliar with expectations around paraphrasing, citation, and source attribution (Bloch, 2012; Pecorari, 2015). As a result, students often struggle with issues like patchwriting, improper paraphrasing, and over-reliance on direct copying often because they have not received sufficient training in these areas (Evans & Youmans, 2000; Howard, 1993). Cultural background also plays a role with regard to this concern. In certain educational systems, memorization and collaborative learning are common practices. Students from these backgrounds often struggle to adapt to academic norms that emphasize independent work and strict citation standards (Hayes & Introna, 2005). The sudden shift in expectations can create uncertainty, especially when institutional support is lacking. As a result, some students look for easier ways to meet academic demands. Without clear guidance, many non-native English speakers rely on GenAI tools or direct copying, often without realizing they are involved in academic misconduct.

Although prior research has explored academic misconduct, especially plagiarism, broadly, there is still limited understanding of the specific knowledge and instructional needs of ELLs in relation to academic integrity. Addressing this gap is essential for guiding ELLs in complying with academic expectations. In this regard, context-specific and inclusive interventions that effectively target the challenges faced by ELLs are increasingly necessary. This study sought to address this gap by investigating the academic integrity needs of ELLs in preparatory programs. By identifying knowledge gaps and challenges, as well as institutional shortcomings, this research provided actionable insights to foster a culture of academic integrity that aligns with students' unique learning contexts. All in all, this study focused on the following research questions:

1) What do ELLs currently understand about academic integrity, and what misconceptions or gaps exist in their knowledge?

2) What challenges and barriers do ELLs face in adhering to ethical academic practices, and how do technological advancements influence these challenges?

3) How do instructors perceive their role in promoting academic integrity, and what institutional limitations hinder effective academic integrity education?

Approaches to Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is essential to quality education and reflects a commitment to ethical conduct in teaching, learning, and research. (Eaton, 2021; Guerrero-Dib et al., 2020). Bertram Gallant (2017) argues that integrity is more than following rules; it demands an environment where ethical values guide academic and professional conduct. Research shows that academic integrity underpins intellectual growth, self-control and social norms and it ensures that students engage in learning processes authentically (Curtis et al., 2018). However, the erosion of academic integrity has become more apparent with the rise of academic writing services and technological advancements. Ellis et al. (2018) state that contract cheating, where students pay for or delegate assignments, has increased due to online platforms that lead to unethical practices. At the same time, GenAI tools complicate the distinction between legitimate support and academic misconduct. These technologies introduce new ethical concerns for both students and institutions, making it harder to define clear boundaries (Khan, 2024; Moya et al., 2023). Despite these growing challenges, many existing interventions remain reactive.

Institutions often depend on punitive measures like text-matching software, which focuses on detection rather than prevention. As a result, deeper issues which cause academic misconduct are frequently overlooked. However, there has been a growing preference and need for more proactive and educational strategies in recent years (Curtis et al., 2018; Sefcik et al., 2020). Stephens et al. (2021) highlight the significance of contextual influences over individual traits in accounting for variations in academic misconduct, highlighting the role of institutional culture, peer behavior, and perceived norms.

Linguistic Barriers and ELLs' Susceptibility to Misconduct

ELLs face some challenges in adhering to academic integrity standards because of their limited proficiency in academic English. This hinders their ability to paraphrase, synthesize, and critically evaluate sources and possibly manipulates them into unintentional plagiarism (Pecorari, 2015; Storch, 2009). Abasi and Graves (2008) observe that nonnative English students often lack the linguistic flexibility to articulate complex ideas in their own words and this cause them to rely on direct copying or patchwriting. Bloch (2012) adds that making distinction between original and paraphrased content presents substantial difficulties for students who try to develop their academic language proficiency. Nonetheless, as Hu (2015) emphasizes, plagiarism in second language writing is often unintentional and the reasons behind these undeliberate actions are linguistic and cultural challenges rather than deliberate misconduct.

All things considered, addressing this complexity requires an educative approach that teaches strategies like paraphrasing, summarizing, and citation within supportive learning environments. Bretag (2007), similarly, emphasizes that inadequate academic writing skills are a key driver of unintentional misconduct among these students. Without targeted interventions, students remain susceptible to breaches of integrity, which undermines their confidence and academic progress.

Cultural differences, on the other hand, further complicate ELLs' understandings of academic integrity. Bista (2011) mentions that adversity in reconciling these distinct expectations causes uncertainty and anxiety about academic misconduct among international students. Fass-Holmes (2017) argues that when combined with inadequate institutional support, cultural misalignments drive ELLs toward academic integrity violations. These interconnected challenges make it clear that academic integrity violations among ELLs stem not from deliberate dishonesty but from structural and pedagogical gaps that remain

insufficiently handled. Linguistic barriers, cultural expectations, and the varying degrees of institutional guidance all contribute to an environment where students may unintentionally violate integrity standards. Therefore, rather than relying solely on punitive measures, institutions must prioritize targeted academic support. There is an urgent need for an environment where students develop the necessary skills to engage with sources ethically and confidently. Without such a shift, the risk of misinterpretation and unjust academic penalties will persist, ultimately hindering students' intellectual growth and their ability to meet the expectations of academic discourse.

Technological Influences on Academic Integrity

The thriving role of technology in education has reshaped how institutions approach academic integrity. Text-matching tools like Turnitin have become a mainstay in detecting plagiarism and serve as the first line of defense against academic misconduct. While effective in many cases, these tools alone cannot address underlying issues, such as students' struggles with understanding academic writing conventions or developing the skills needed to cite and paraphrase properly. Research designates that text-matching tools work best when combined with educational programs that help students build a genuine appreciation for the principles of academic integrity (Mphahlele & McKenna, 2019; Razı, 2016, 2017; Youmans, 2011).

Recently, the rise of generative AI tools has added new layers of complexity to this conversation. These technologies are sometimes misused by students who lack clear guidance on their ethical use. Khan (2024) points out that the absence of detailed policies leaves many students unsure about how to use AI responsibly. Similarly, Moya et al. (2023) stress the importance of integrating technology literacy into academic integrity education. Institutions can ensure that technology becomes a resource for learning rather than a shortcut to misconduct by teaching students how to employ these tools effectively and ethically.

At its core, this shift stresses a broader reality: academic integrity cannot be safeguarded solely through detection mechanisms or punitive responses. While technology continues to evolve, institutional policies and pedagogical approaches must evolve alongside it. A proactive approach, one that balances oversight with education, will be key to fostering a culture where students apprehend the ethical boundaries of GenAI.

The Need for Tailored Interventions

There is flourishing recognition in research for taking a proactive, educational approach to promote academic integrity. Sefcik et al. (2020) emphasize that interventions work best when they are customized to meet the specific challenges students face. Programs and online academic integrity modules that offer step-by-step training on essential skills such as paraphrasing, citation, and ethical research practices have displayed great potential. They reduce instances of academic misconduct and enhance a stronger awareness of ethical values among students (Curtis et al., 2018; Sefcik et al., 2020).

Despite these advancements, a noticeable gap persists when it comes to addressing the specific needs of ELLs. These students often encounter unique barriers, from overcoming language proficiency issues to understanding cultural differences in how intellectual ownership is perceived. To address these gaps, institutions need to design learning environments that go beyond simply enforcing rules. Educational programs that combine practical, hands-on training with cultural awareness can help students internalize the principles of academic integrity. Such interventions empower all students, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background, to confidently and ethically engage with academic work. Moreover, integrating academic integrity education into the broader curriculum can ensure these values are reinforced throughout a student's learning journey (Bretag et al., 2011; Eaton et al., 2017). By integrating discussions about integrity into everyday coursework, institutions can normalize ethical scholarships, making it feel less like a separate task and more like a natural part of the learning process.

By combining cultural sensitivity with proactive strategies, institutions can create a supportive environment where students learn to value and practice academic integrity in meaningful ways. Comprehensive needs analysis should serve as the starting point to understand their current knowledge, skills, and challenges. By means of this execution, institutions can create more inclusive and effective interventions specified to the unique experiences and requirements of ELLs.

Ultimately, academic integrity education should not be an isolated effort but an integral part of students' academic development. Without a deliberate and structured approach that considers linguistic, cultural, and cognitive barriers, integrity policies risk becoming punitive rather than formative. A well-designed framework that integrates ethical values into everyday learning experiences not only mitigates the risk of misconduct but also cultivates a deeper

understanding of responsible academic engagement. When students are provided with the right tools and guided through an inclusive, skill-oriented approach, they are more likely to internalize integrity as a fundamental academic value rather than a mere compliance requirement.

Methodology

Needs Analysis Framework

Needs analysis (NA) is a systematic process for identifying and understanding the specific learning needs of a target group in a defined educational context (Brown, 1995). By adopting a Target Situation Analysis framework (Robinson, 1991), the study aimed to identify what students need to know and employ to comply with academic integrity principles. In the context of this study, NA played a crucial role in exploring the academic integrity knowledge, experiences, challenges, and support needs of ELLs. Additionally, interviews with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors offered complementary perspectives on their roles in encouraging academic integrity and the institutional practices influencing this process.

The rationale for conducting the NA was multifaceted. First, the study aimed to understand areas where students lacked knowledge or held misconceptions which are critical for identifying specific challenges that could impede their academic development. Second, the study sought to explore the challenges and uncertainties students face regarding academic integrity. Third, the NA revolved around uncovering the specific characteristics and preferences of preparatory class students, which could influence their approach to academic integrity. Finally, the study emphasized understanding academic integrity as a collective responsibility and a cultural norm within higher educational institutions, with NA providing insights into perceptions of both students and instructors.

Data Collection

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study, utilizing semi-structured focus group interviews with students and individual interviews with EAP instructors to gather detailed insights into the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of both groups. Focus group interviews accommodate an in-depth understanding of students' needs and expectations (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Swales & Feak, 2004). The interview protocols were designed to address predefined categories, incorporating awareness of academic integrity, understanding of plagiarism, and institutional challenges, ensuring a structured yet flexible approach to data

collection. To ensure validity, the interview questions were reviewed by experts, and a pilot study was conducted with a small group of students and one instructor. This process resulted in minor revisions in the student protocol (see Appendix A) and no modifications in the instructor protocol (see Appendix B). The final version of the interview protocols was implemented across the target population (see Appendix A & B).

Participants in the study included 80 undergraduate ELLs who had completed their compulsory English preparatory year and four EAP instructors. The English preparatory program is mandatory for students in specific departments, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical and Electronics Engineering, English Language Teaching, and English Translation and Interpretation. Sampling ensured representation across these departments, with voluntary participation. The distribution of participants embraced 20 students and one instructor from each discipline, providing a balanced perspective across the institution.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. To begin, all interview transcripts were read multiple times to foster familiarity and capture initial impressions. A set of a priori codes, drawn from both the interview prompts and key literature, was then created. When participants discussed the meaning of academic integrity and their definitions of plagiarism, codes addressing conceptual understanding and plagiarism awareness emerged, informed by Bretag's (2007) insights into language competence and integrity as well as Eaton's (2021) examination of plagiarism in higher education. Questions about other forms of misconduct yielded codes related to awareness of additional violations, grounded in McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield's (2001) typology. Descriptions of why integrity is important and how to prevent violations generated codes on perceived significance and preventive practices, aligning with Bertram Gallant's (2017) framing of integrity as a teaching and learning issue. When participants described referencing behaviors and collaborative experiences, codes captured citation practices and group-work dynamics, again reflecting Bertram Gallant's (2017) pedagogical perspective. Finally, discussions of prior instruction and institutional support needs prompted codes on existing training and desired resources, informed by Bretag et al.'s (2011) core elements of exemplary integrity policies. Throughout this process, *MAXQDA* (version 24.6.0) facilitated systematic organization, hierarchical coding, and frequency counts.

To establish credibility, the study employed systematic coding procedures, maintained consistency in data interpretation, and engaged in reflexive analysis to minimize researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was enhanced by providing rich, contextualized descriptions of participants' experiences, allowing insights to be applicable to similar educational settings. Additionally, trustworthiness was reinforced through an iterative coding process, researcher reflexivity, and a transparent audit trail, ensuring methodological rigor and reliability (Shenton, 2004). To preserve participants' anonymity, researchers assigned coded names during transcription. For example, "1ELT2" referred to the second speaker in a focus group of first-year English Language Teaching department students, while "EAPI3" identified the third EAP instructor interviewed.

Results

The analysis was generated by including both groups' responses in parallel, uncovering overlapping concerns and complementary insights. Table 1 shows details of the coding system.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of the Need Analysis

Theme	Category	Code (Frequency)
Academic integrity understanding and awareness	Definition of academic integrity	No definition ($f = 8$) Basic ($f = 41$) Moderate ($f = 21$) Advanced ($f = 10$)
	Definition of plagiarism	Inaccurate ($f = 4$) No definition ($f = 7$) Basic ($f = 32$) Moderate ($f = 31$) Comprehensive ($f = 4$)
	Awareness of other academic misconduct types	Limited ($f = 42$) Moderate ($f = 31$) Full ($f = 7$)
Importance of academic integrity	Perspectives on academic integrity	Superficial acknowledgment ($f = 22$) Personal growth and academic success ($f = 45$) Professional and ethical perspectives ($f = 13$)
Academic integrity practices and strategies	Strategies to prevent misconduct	Basic ($f = 42$) General ($f = 27$) Specific ($f = 6$)
	Citation and referencing	Effective tool use ($f = 4$) Limited tool use ($f = 6$) Manual/basic approach ($f = 48$) No knowledge ($f = 19$)
	Collaboration	Negative experiences ($f = 12$)

		Positive experiences ($f = 16$)
		Moderate group participation ($f = 23$)
		No experience ($f = 28$)
Academic integrity training and institutional support	Prior training	Formal training ($f = 1$)
		Basic informal training ($f = 2$)
		No formal training/minimal informal guidance ($f = 71$)
	Desired training topics	Ai tools ($f = 5$)
		Clear guidelines ($f = 7$)
		General training ($f = 32$)
		Specific training ($f = 22$)
		Comprehensive training ($f = 8$)
	Preferred timing of training	No training need ($f = 2$)
		Prep year ($f = 54$)
		Departmental-specific ($f = 8$)
		Prep/departmental ($f = 16$)
	Institutional and lecturer support needs	Dedicated support ($f = 22$)
		Specific guidance ($f = 53$)
		Basic assistance ($f = 5$)

The theme of understanding and awareness of academic integrity revealed varying levels of conceptualization among students and perspectives from instructors. In defining academic integrity, students demonstrated a range of understanding, from *no definition* ($f = 8$) to basic understanding ($f = 41$), which mostly emphasized honesty and originality. For example, one student participant disclosed, *"I know it's important, but I'm not sure exactly why"* (4ELT2) while another student had an imprecise expression "*Academic integrity is fulfilling the learner's needs and checking their progress."* Conversely, a smaller number of interviewees reflected a *moderate understanding* ($f = 21$), often referencing citation practices, while only some participants demonstrated an *advanced understanding* ($f = 10$) that connected academic integrity to broader ethical principles. As one student noted, *"Academic honesty is crucial if we want our work to be respected or if we want to progress in our field"* (3EEE1). Instructors, on the other hand, emphasized layers of academic integrity such as honesty, responsibility, and respect in their definitions. They highlighted academic integrity as foundational to credibility and trust in educational and professional contexts. One instructor stated, "*Academic integrity is not just about avoiding plagiarism; it is about fostering a culture of genuine learning and respect for intellectual contributions"* (EAPI1). These insights reflect the broader perspective of instructors, who view academic integrity as integral to ethical academic and professional environments.

In terms of being aware of plagiarism and misconduct, most students described plagiarism as *using someone else's work without proper attribution* (*f* = 32). However, few responses were entirely inaccurate (*f* = 4), while a high number of participants demonstrated a *moderate understanding* (*f* = 31) that included ethical implications. Only few participants provided *comprehensive definitions* (*f* = 4) addressing subtler aspects, such as self-plagiarism or improper paraphrasing. Instructors endorsed these concerns, with one stating, *"Many students know plagiarism is wrong but struggle with understanding proper citation practices"* (EAPI2). Students' *awareness of other misconduct types* (*f* = 42), on the other hand, such as collusion, data fabrication, and contract cheating, was predominantly limited with high numbers of moderate awareness (*f* = 31) and only few participants demonstrating *full awareness* (*f* = 7). However, there were two emerging concerns in terms of other misconduct types. First, the ethical use of artificial intelligence emerged as a contemporary challenge. While some students mentioned using AI tools like ChatGPT for research inspiration, they expressed concerns related to ethical boundaries and potential misuse. The second emerging concern was unequal contributions in group projects. One student explained, *"I think about students working on group projects or assignments where some don't contribute, yet they receive the same credit as those who do the work"* (4EEE1). To address this, another participant proposed strategies such as working with trusted peers and ensuring fair task distribution, stating, *"I've always worked with friends I know well, and we divided the tasks equally. Everyone contributed fairly"* (4EEE1).

Although students and instructors emphasized discrete aspects of the issue, they collectively acknowledged the importance of academic integrity. Students primarily associated it with personal, academic, and professional success, identifying its connection *to personal growth and academic success* (*f* = 45). One participant remarked, *"Regular cheaters won't be able to complete their graduation theses independently, as it requires original work and effort"* (3IMT1). A smaller subset of interviewees associated it with *ethical career development and institutional reputation* (*f* = 13), as noted by one student: *"If any plagiarism or misconduct is discovered, it undermines both our personal credibility and that of the institution we represent"* (3EEE1). However, a subset of responses reflected a *superficial acknowledgment of academic integrity* (*f* = 22), focusing on compliance with technicalities like citation rather than embracing its intrinsic layers. Instructors added depth to this discussion by emphasizing that academic integrity is essential for fostering genuine learning and respect for intellectual work. One instructor, on the other hand, remarked, *"Academic integrity is foundational to credibility and*

trust, not only in academia but also in professional environments" (EAPI1). Another instructor participant highlighted its prominence for promoting ethical career development and institutional trustworthiness.

Students' academic integrity practices and strategies varied widely. Many students expressed that they rely on *basic strategies* (f = 42), such as paraphrasing and consulting lecturers, while fewer employed more *comprehensive strategies* (f = 27) like cross-checking sources. Citation and referencing were significant challenges, with the majority relying on error-prone *manual methods* (f = 48). Only a small number used *tools* (f = 6) like Zotero or Mendeley effectively. Students expressed frustration with finding reliable sources, particularly due to language barriers, as one participant noted, *"Since most academic materials are in English, it's difficult to find reliable sources"* (4EEE2). Instructors advocated for proactive teaching practices to address these challenges. All four instructors emphasized the value of defining expectations and establishing class norms early in the academic term. Personalized assignments that demand creativity or personal reflection were also highlighted as effective strategies to discourage dishonesty. One instructor explained, *"Assignments that require genuine engagement reduce opportunities for plagiarism"* (EAPI3). The instructors also identified several challenges in fostering academic integrity, particularly concerning students' awareness and technological influences. All four instructors noted that students often lack a deep understanding of integrity principles, especially around proper citation and avoiding inadvertent misconduct. Two participants highlighted the challenges posed by artificial intelligence tools, emphasizing the need for clear guidelines to manage their ethical use. One instructor shared, *"The widespread use of AI for assignments creates a new layer of complexity in promoting academic integrity"* (EAPI1). Institutional challenges, such as the absence of standardized training and inconsistent enforcement of policies, were also flagged by three instructors as barriers to cultivating a culture of integrity.

Academic integrity training and institutional support was the other critical theme for both groups. The need for academic integrity was evident with most participants reporting *no formal training on academic integrity* (f = 71) and only minimal informal guidance (f = 2). Students expressed strong support for early educational interventions, with many advocating preparatory-year training due to its less demanding academic workload. One student participant explained, *"it would be better to start early, as the prep year is less intense compared to the department courses. Starting early would be much more effective than learning it from scratch later"* (1EEE1). Another student participant clarified, *"I think such training is essential,*

especially since many of us are hearing these concepts for the first time. It would help us be better prepared for projects and research" (4EEE4). Additionally, some participants suggested ongoing reinforcement following the preparatory year to ensure retention, with one noting, *"Having it from the start of university to the end would be valuable"* (4ELT4). Students also emphasized the substantiality of clear guidelines and mentorship, with one suggesting, *"Each department should have a designated lecturer for students to consult about research and academic integrity"* (3EEE5). Another participant highlighted the value of applied learning, proposing, *"Having academic integrity training as a course, particularly in translation studies, would be beneficial. It could be a module within academic writing"* (4IMT3). In line with that, proposed solutions from the instructors focused on structured training and institutional support. All four instructors strongly advocated for introducing academic integrity training during the preparatory year, with ongoing reinforcement as students advance through their studies. One instructor participant observed, *"Training should start early and evolve as students encounter more complex academic challenges"* (EAPI4).

Training needs on academic integrity was also a key focus for students, with the majority emphasizing *general training to build foundational knowledge* ($f = 32$) and ethical practices essential for academic and professional success One student noted, *"Knowing the principles and definitions would help guide behavior in real life, and everything else would follow naturally"* (3IMT2). Several students expressed *the need for specific interventions* ($f = 22$) on topics like paraphrasing and citation techniques, particularly in the early stages of their education to ensure good practices from the start. As stated by one student, *"Training on how to integrate sources properly into our work would be beneficial. A foundational session on ethics and citation practices early on would be beneficial"* (3ELT4). Another student group highlighted the importance of *clear guidelines* ($f = 7$), advocating for standardized expectations and detailed instructions to eliminate confusion in their academic work Some students also stressed *the need for ethical training on AI tools* ($f = 5$), pointing out risks like unintentional plagiarism when using technologies such as ChatGPT). Finally, a notable minority called for *comprehensive training or mandatory training* ($f = 8$) that would address complex issues, including the types of plagiarism and advanced ethical scenarios, to provide a thorough understanding of academic integrity. One student participant remarked, *"Making academic integrity a mandatory class would help immensely. As someone with ADHD, I'd appreciate a structured pace that accommodates all students, making it part of the academic curriculum"* (3IMT5). On the other hand, two instructors recommended faculty-wide workshops and

resources to ensure consistency in understanding and implementing integrity principles among educators. Clear and enforceable institutional policies were also emphasized, with one instructor asserting, "*Institutions need standardized policies and consistent application to uphold academic standards*" (EAPI4).

Discussion

Results of this study indicate noteworthy gaps in students' understanding, awareness, and application of academic integrity principles. Some participants demonstrated only a superficial grasp of plagiarism, primarily defining it as copying without attribution. On the other hand, others represented a more comprehensive understanding, linking it to broader concepts such as honesty, originality, and ethical responsibility. These results resonate with existing research (e.g., Howard, 1995; McGowan, 2008; Pecorari, 2015; Sefcik et al., 2020) suggesting that plagiarism among ELLs is not always an intentional violation. It is rather a consequence of insufficient guidance and a lack of familiarity with academic writing conventions. Moreover, instructors in this study framed academic integrity as fundamental to credibility and scholarly ethics while students often viewed it through a narrower lens, primarily as a matter of compliance. This contrast features the need for customized educational interventions that both clarify integrity principles and enhance a deeper understanding of their broader implications within academic and professional contexts.

Students' limited awareness of broader forms of misconduct, such as collusion, contract cheating, and self-plagiarism, further emphasize the need for comprehensive academic integrity education. Although most participants could define plagiarism as copying without proper attribution, few demonstrated an awareness of subtler forms of academic misconduct. This observation is parallel with Pecorari's (2015) argument that unintentional plagiarism frequently arises from students' difficulties in paraphrasing and reinterpreting complex ideas. Many first-year students struggle with academic conventions due to limited prior exposure. These challenges are often compounded by academic pressures such as tight deadlines and high expectations. In the end, these complexities may inadvertently push students toward copying as a coping mechanism (Meyers et al., 2023). Closing these gaps requires moving beyond a rule-focused approach to academic integrity and instead providing students with the skills and strategies needed to engage with sources responsibly, develop their own academic voice.

Beyond these traditional concerns, the emergence of GenAI tools has introduced new ethical challenges. It further complicated students' engagement with academic integrity.

Participants expressed both optimism and apprehension about tools such as ChatGPT. They obviously recognize their potential to enhance academic writing, but they also have concerns with regard to ethical boundaries. These results support the findings of recent studies emphasizing the necessity of clear institutional policies and structured training to guide students in the responsible use of AI tools (Moya et al., 2023). Similarly, Khan (2024) highlights the complexities that AI tools introduce, she notes that students often misuse them due to inadequate training and a lack of explicit guidelines. While institutions have begun to address these concerns, a more structured and proactive approach is requisite to ensure students use AI tools effectively while maintaining ethical academic practices. Without clear guidance, students risk engaging with these technologies in ways that blur the distinction between legitimate academic support and misconduct.

The prestige of early interventions emerged as a central theme in this study. The preparatory year presents a critical opportunity to introduce structured and scaffolded training on academic integrity. It has the potential of enabling students to build foundational skills before encountering more complex academic challenges. Many participants supported the notion of implementing such training early because their academic workloads are comparatively lighter in this period. This result reinforces arguments that proactive, needs-based interventions reduce unintentional misconduct and foster ethical academic practices (Sefcik et al., 2020). To strengthen these efforts, institutions can integrate structured academic integrity training into preparatory-year curricula, incorporating interactive and guided exercises on ethical source use, and discipline-specific discussions. Incorporated formative assessments, such as plagiarism self-check activities, citation practices, and peer-reviewed paraphrasing tasks, can further reinforce ethical writing habits.

Furthermore, students emphasized the eminence of continuous reinforcement, most of them advocated for academic integrity support to be implemented across multiple years rather than treated as a one-time requirement. Instructors echoed this perspective, noting that sustained engagement with integrity principles is essential for long-term retention and application. Rather than approaching academic integrity as a set of isolated rules, embedding it within coursework through discipline-specific integrity discussions and real-world case analyses can encourage students to engage with ethical scholarship in a meaningful and sustained manner. To accomplish this, instructor engagement plays a critical role. Without their active involvement, even the most comprehensive policies have a risk of being ineffective. Instructors in this study highlighted proactive strategies such as setting clear expectations early

in the term and designing personalized assignments that minimize opportunities for plagiarism. These approaches align with Turnitin's (2020) recommendations, which emphasize the importance of combining institutional policies with accessible resources and mentorship to cultivate a culture of integrity beyond mere compliance. To enhance academic integrity beyond policy enforcement, instructors emphasized the need for assessment designs that discourage misconduct while fostering independent academic work. Strategies such as staged writing assignments with iterative feedback and process-based evaluations can help students develop ethical writing habits while reducing cases of last-minute academic dishonesty. Additionally, integrating discipline-specific integrity discussions within coursework rather than treating academic integrity as a separate administrative concern allows students to engage with ethical decision-making in a meaningful and applied context.

Institutional support emerged as another critical factor in fostering academic integrity. The majority of student participants reported receiving no formal training on academic integrity. This exhibits the immediate need for standardized, institution-wide programs. They advocated for applied learning opportunities, suggesting that academic integrity training should take part in academic writing courses or included as modules in discipline-specific programs. These results correspond with Bretag et al. (2011), emphasizing that comprehensive academic integrity policies must be accompanied by accessible resources, consistent enforcement, and clear guidelines. Many students also highlighted the role of mentorship, proposing the creation of department-specific roles to provide guidance on research ethics and integrity-related concerns. Instructors shared similar perspectives, stressing the importance of faculty-wide workshops to ensure a shared understanding and consistent application of integrity principles across departments.

Although culture was not a dominant theme in this study, its influence remains relevant in shaping students' engagement with academic integrity. Some participants mentioned cultural discrepancies as a factor influencing their perceptions of plagiarism and academic conventions. This observation aligns with Sowden (2005) and Liu (2005), who punctuate the role of cultural conditioning in shaping students' understanding of intellectual property and academic misconduct. While acknowledging these diversities is important, the broader focus should remain on developing inclusive interventions that respect students' diverse backgrounds while reinforcing universal academic principles. The Council of Europe (n.d.) and ENQA (2020) similarly highlight the value of cross-cultural support in fostering ethical academic practices and ensuring student success in diverse educational settings.

Ultimately, promoting academic integrity requires a holistic approach that prioritizes education, empowerment, and inclusion. Structured training programs, transparent policies, and sustained institutional support are essential for equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet academic expectations with confidence. These results contribute to the broader academic integrity discourse by offering insights into the specific challenges faced by ELLs, a group often overlooked in mainstream integrity discussions. By centering their perspectives, this study underscores the need for targeted, responsive interventions that extend beyond policy enforcement. Embedding integrity education within disciplinary contexts, ensuring ongoing instructor engagement, and providing institution-wide support can create a more inclusive academic environment. In such an environment academic integrity will not merely be a requirement but a deep imprint on the heart and mind.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the critical academic integrity challenges faced by ELLs in preparatory programs. The results reveal a fragmented understanding of plagiarism, limited awareness of various forms of academic misconduct, and systemic gaps in institutional training and support. Additionally, emerging concerns such as the ethical use of GenAI and issues of fairness in group work add complexity to the academic integrity landscape. Engaging with these issues requires higher education institutions to create a well-designed and need-based response that suits the linguistic, cultural, and technological realities of ELLs. Specifically, the following strategies are essential:

1. Foundational training: To introduce scaffolded modules during the preparatory year to manage key topics such as plagiarism, paraphrasing, citation practices, and AI ethics.
2. Practical support: To provide hands-on training for citation tools, plagiarism prevention strategies, and the ethical use of AI in academic work.
3. Institutional consistency: To establish clear guidelines, standardized policies, and ongoing training to reinforce integrity principles.

By implementing these strategies, institutions can foster a culture of academic integrity that equips ELLs with the skills and confidence to navigate academic challenges ethically and successfully. This approach not only enhances their academic preparedness but also contributes to their professional growth by internalizing integrity as a core value in their educational journey.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This study offers constructive insights into the academic integrity challenges faced by ELLs, but several limitations should be considered. The research was conducted within the context of a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Another limitation lies in the reliance on self-reported data from both students and instructors. While participants were encouraged to share their experiences openly, self-reported data can be influenced by biases. Additionally, while the results highlighted emerging concerns such as the ethical use of GenAI and fairness in group work, these topics were not explored in depth. Both areas require further investigation to develop strategies that address these specific challenges within the broader academic integrity framework. Future research should explore the long-term impact of inclusive interventions on ELLs' academic success and their ability to adapt to evolving academic demands. Understanding how these interventions influence students' development will further inform strategies to cultivate academic integrity in diverse and dynamic educational contexts.

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Contribution Rate of the Researchers

The first and second authors collaboratively designed the study and jointly developed the data collection tools. The first author executed the data collection process, while data analysis was conducted together. The manuscript was drafted by the first author and revised by the second author before the final version was submitted.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University Ethics Committee. The date of this ethical approval is 05.05.2023 and the issue number is E-84026528-050.01.04-2300101077.

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APPENDIX

Student Interview

1. What is your definition of academic integrity?

2. Can you explain plagiarism?

3. What do you know about other academic misconduct types?

4. How important do you think academic integrity is necessary for your academic success?

5. Regarding academic works in English language, such as tasks, papers, presentations, and end-of-term projects, what strategies do you employ to prevent academic integrity violations?

6. When you blend external resources such as academic publications in your academic life, how do you ensure that these sources were properly cited and referenced?

7. Have you ever collaborated with other students on an academic work? If yes, please describe the collaboration process.

8. Have you ever received (in)formal training or instruction on academic integrity? If yes, please describe the training or instruction. If no, do you think it is useful to have training?

a. What would you like to learn about academic integrity (e,g. definition and principles of academic integrity; avoiding plagiarism; proper paraphrasing, quoting, outsourcing and referencing; learning prevailing citation style for your field (APA, Chicago, MLA))

b. Do you think there should be academic integrity training in English preparation year before you move to your department?

9. How can your instructors and institution support you in upholding academic integrity principles in your academic work?

APPENDIX B

Instructor Interview

1. How do you define academic integrity and its importance?

2. What strategies do you employ to encourage your students to act with integrity?

(How do you ensure that syllabus design, assessments and assignments are designed to promote academic integrity?)

3. What are your opinions about your students' academic integrity knowledge and awareness?

4. How do you communicate with students about the consequences of academic misconduct, and what resources are available to support students who may be struggling with academic integrity?

5. Are there any forms of academic integrity training for your students in your faculty? If yes, please describe them. If no, do you think it is necessary to train students

   a. before they start their education in their departments?

   b. throughout their education in their departments?

   c. both

6. How would you work with other faculty members or administrators to address issues related to academic integrity in your institution?