# What Are ESL Students' Academic Integrity Challenges and How Can Universities Help?

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**Abstract**
Plagiarism is becoming more widespread at Canadian universities, but what are English-as-a-second-language (ESL) student perspectives on their challenges to avoid plagiarism and university strategies to support students? This paper presents a study of English-for-academic-purpose (EAP) writing students at a Canadian university. The study employed semi-structured individual qualitative interviews with 20 students who had completed an advanced writing course. The course discussed plagiarism and APA 7th edition extensively. The participants represented ten countries and ten first languages. One 60-minute interview per participant was conducted online. The data were analyzed qualitatively for recurrent themes. Research findings indicate that the predominant cause of the participants' challenges was their lack of experience using citations before entering the university. Thus, the participants found APA 7th edition hard to observe initially and paraphrasing an enormous challenge. Based on the participant perspectives and related literature, the paper proposes a strategy to implement from the semester start comprising: (1) interactive training workshops with explanations, models, templates, resources, and student practice with citations and academic writing, (2) access to self-correction software like Turnitin and Grammarly Premium, and (3) simultaneous oral-written teacher feedback (Hu, 2019).

**Keywords**
Plagiarism causes, plagiarism prevention, ESL students, academic writing, APA style

## 1  Introduction

Many university students have no sound understanding of how to use sources properly in academic writing, especially English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students who come from cultural and educational backgrounds with little or no training in citation and who are learning English as a second language (Cumming et al., 2016; Selemani et al., 2018; Zimerman, 2012). When they use sources improperly, they may commit plagiarism. Plagiarism is "the act of presenting the words, ideas, or images [or work] of another as your own" (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020, p. 254) without
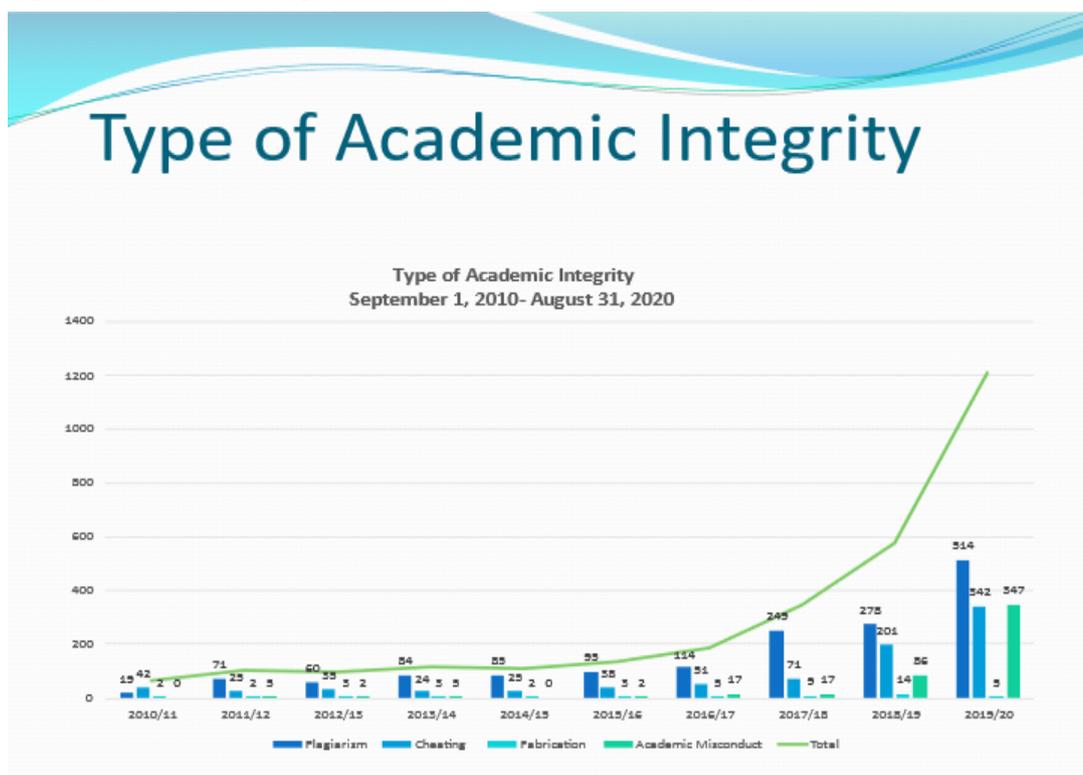
giving credit. On the other hand, when students reuse an assignment submitted to one course for another course in part or parcel without the current instructor's permission, they may commit self-plagiarism (APA, 2020, p. 256). If students who commit plagiarism have an intention to deceive or plagiarize knowingly, then it is intentional plagiarism. However, if students commit plagiarism unknowingly or without an intention to cheat, plagiarism may be considered unintentional. Regardless, plagiarism is viewed as unethical in Canada and other countries and may result in a warning along with a re-do, failing grade for the assignment or course, suspension, or even expulsion from a university, depending on the severity or repetitiveness of the offence.

Plagiarism has been rising, especially with online course delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic when courses were offered virtually, nullifying physical checking or supervision. For example, as shown in Figure 1, at Thompson Rivers University (TRU), Canada, plagiarism was the most widespread type of academic integrity (AI) offence, accounting for 43% of all the reported AI violation cases in 2019-2020 and reported plagiarism cases skyrocketed by 85% from 278 in 2018-19 to 514 in 2019-20 (Renee & Anderberg, 2020). Reported plagiarism cases rose even more dramatically from 19 in 2010-2011 to 514 in 2019-2020.

Figure 1

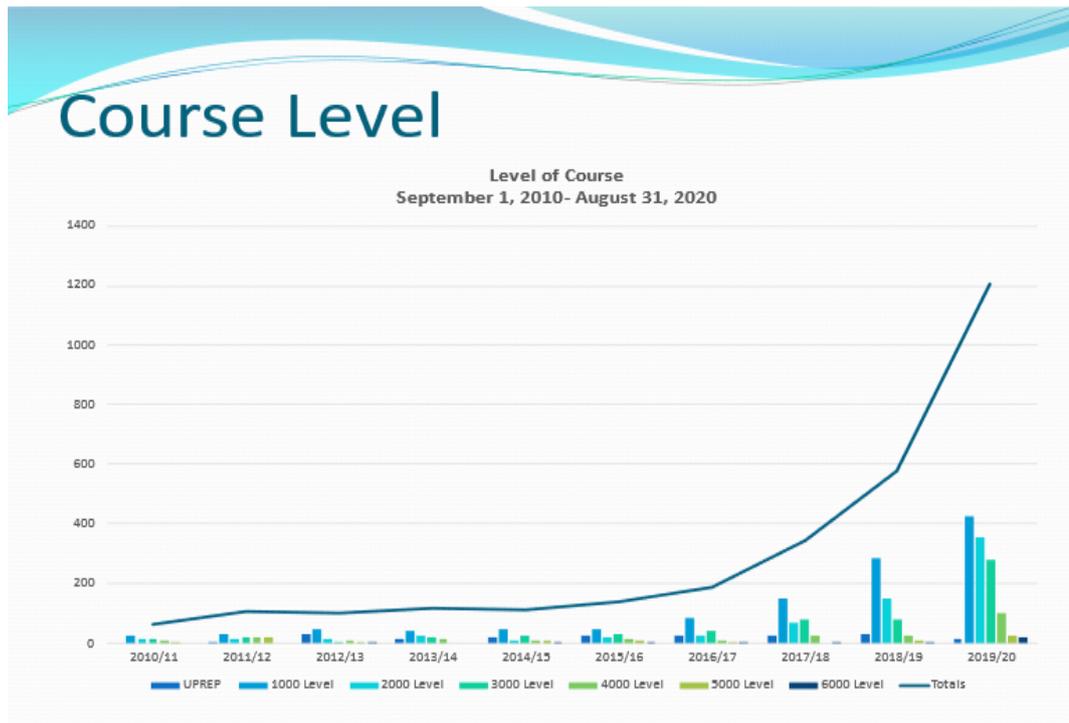*Types of Academic Integrity Violations (Renee & Anderberg, 2020)*



Even if we have resumed teaching in physical classrooms in a post-Covid era, many students still use the study techniques favored during the Covid. As one professor recently revealed, "Students rarely take notes [in class], read or prep before class, and many first [year students] seem to be coming with no preparation or study time. They seem to think they can just look it all up" (L. Daneliu, Personal Communication, November 19, 2022). When assignment time comes, they just read Internet sources, sometimes take notes by copying and pasting or taking cell phone photos, and transfer the notes to assignments directly without making changes, and sometimes do not even provide the sources (see also Patak et al. 2021; Peters & Cadieux, 2019; Zimmerman, 2012). Such practices usually result in plagiarism.

Furthermore, as Renee and Anderberg (2020) reported, TRU students, including ESL and English-speaking students, taking 1000-level or first-year courses, committed more academic integrity offences than students taking higher-level courses (see Figure 2). This finding suggests that many first-year students do not fully understand AI violations or how not to plagiarize. This group includes ESL students who scored high enough on IELTS, TOEFL, or another English placement test and do not have to take English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses that provide opportunities for upgrading writing and learning citation skills.

Figure 2

*Academic Integrity Violations by Course Level (Renee & Anderberg, 2020)*



Besides, rather than simply punishing students for breaching academic integrity policies, a new trend has commenced to educate students about academic integrity and prevent plagiarism (Liang & Maddison, 2021; Pecorari, 2015, 2016; 2022; Tilley et al., 2021), but exactly what support students need remains unknown. As Packalen and Rowbotham (2022) point out, there is a lack of student-generated advice on improving the school AI culture. To contribute to needed research in academic integrity and plagiarism prevention, this paper reports on a study that examines ESL student perspectives on (1) academic integrity challenges, and (2) effective pedagogical and institutional strategies to help students avoid plagiarism.

The text below first clarifies key terms, then reviews relevant research, describes the study methodology, and presents findings and discussions. Finally, it draws conclusions and offers recommendations for practice and future research.

## 2  Clarifying Key Terms

This paper follows the academic integrity policy of Thompson Rivers University, Canada in distinguishing four types of AI violations: cheating, academic misconduct, fabrication, and plagiarism (TRU, 2020).

## 2.1 Academic integrity violations

**Cheating** is "an act of deception by which a student misrepresents (or assists another student in misrepresenting) that he or she has mastered information on an assignment, test, project or other academic exercises that the student has not mastered" (TRU, 2020, p. 5). Examples include copying other students' tests or assignments or allowing others to copy one's assessment work, and using materials, resorting to electronic devices, or communicating with others to obtain answers without authorization during an examination (TRU, 2020).

**Academic misconduct** is "gaining or attempting to gain, or helping others to gain or attempt to gain, an unfair academic advantage in formal University assessment, or any activity likely to undermine the integrity essential to scholarship and research" (University of Cambridge, 2019, para. 2). Instances can involve stealing, buying/selling, or obtaining/providing a test, exam, or another assessment tool in part or parcel, and/or the related answer key, changing the grade on an assessment without authorization, and impersonating someone else in an assessment (Ryerson University, 2019; TRU, 2020).

**Fabrication** is "the intentional use of invented information or the falsification of research or other findings" (TRU, 2020, p. 6). Examples include the information cited that is not from the specified source; artificially creating data, documents, images, or other works in academic research; and submitting the work completed by others as one's own (TRU, 2020). The last example includes contract cheating, which means "students hire another person to write a paper for them" (APA, 2020, p. 256) or involves "customized essay buying from freelance writers and essay sweatshops" (Christensen Hughes & Eaton, 2022, p. 74).

**Plagiarism**, as mentioned earlier, is "the act of presenting the words, ideas, or images of another as your own" (APA, 2020, p. 256) without giving credit. There are other definitions but the essence remains the same. Depending on whether the AI offender plagiarizes knowingly or has an intention to deceive, plagiarism can be intentional or unintentional. Based on Kramer (2022), this paper distinguishes five types of plagiarism.

1. *Complete plagiarism*: Submitting someone else's work in whole in one's own name, e.g., a course assignment from a classmate or a journal article. This type is the most blatant and severe.

2. *Direct plagiarism*: Also called copy and paste, meaning "specific sections or paragraphs are included [word for word from a source] without crediting (or even acknowledging) the author" (Kramer, 2022, para. 11) or using quotation marks or a block quote in case of 40 or more words. It differs from the above type in scale and can be one or two lines from a source. In order for us to avoid such plagiarism, the source text must be put in quotation marks or a block quote *and* have citation information, such as (Kramer, 2022, para. 1).

3. *Indirect plagiarism*: Sometimes called paraphrasing plagiarism (Kramer, 2022), involving A) light paraphrasing by reusing another's work but deleting or changing a few words without using quotation marks for exact quotes, producing a text that is too close to the original, whether the source is cited or not; or B) strong paraphrasing by representing the ideas of a source in one's own words but not citing the source. Compare the following.

Original: A study by psychiatrists William Beardslee and John Mack has shown that American children become aware of nuclear war before age 12. Among older children, one half say this awareness affects their plans for marriage and the future. The Beardslee and Mack study, based on questionnaires given to hundreds of school-age children, shows that in the group examined, a significant number were "deeply disturbed" about the nuclear threat, profoundly pessimistic, and often just plain scared (Barash, 1986; cited in Leki, 1998, pp. 204-205).

Plagiarism A: The Beardslee and Mack *study* through *questionnaires with hundreds of school-age children* found *that in the group examined, a significant number were profoundly pessimistic and often just plain scared* (Barash, 1986).

Plagiarism subtype A can be considered light paraphrasing or patchwriting as the text is too close to the language of the source even though the source information is given (Howard, 1999; Jamieson, 2016; Sweetland Center for Writing, 2014). This type often involves an element of direct plagiarism. While keywords such as names, dates, and statistics can remain unchanged, most non-keywords should be changed (English Current, n.d.; Kessler et al., 2022). However, using idiomatic, formulaic, or common academic writing phrases from a source, such as those listed in Academic Phrasebank (The University of Manchester, n.d.) and APA Style Discussion Phrase Guide (APA Style, n.d.), is not plagiarism. An example from the phrasebank is: *This case reveals the need for further investigation in patients with….*

Plagiarism B: According to research by Beardslee and Mack, many young *children* in this country are quite frightened about the real possibility of a *nuclear* war. This fear has made many of these *children pessimistic* about the future.

Plagiarism subtype B is a strong paraphrase but, unfortunately, has the citation missing.

4. *Self-plagiarism*: Submitting one's own work from one assignment in part or parcel as that for another in the same course or a different course without the current instructor's permission; submitting the same work in part or parcel to a different publishing venue without proper acknowledgment or permission.

5. *Translation*: Translating another person's work in one language to another to use in an assignment or publication without crediting the source. The translation may be conducted by software or a human. Self-plagiarism is also possible involving one's work already published in one language. However, one's ideas in unpublished or unassessed writing in one language can be safe for use in another language. As ideas are borrowed from a source without attribution, translation can be considered indirect plagiarism. Nevertheless, as the process involves another language, it is regarded as a separate type in this paper for pedagogical reasons. Although the teacher may not know the original language, it is still possible that the translation can be detected, resulting in a plagiarism accusation.

### 2.2 Other key terms

**Cite** means to borrow words or ideas from others or self. The noun is *citation*.

**Quote** is similar to cite; *quotation* is similar to citation.

**Reference** is either the act of citing or the source of a citation. In APA, references typically appear at the end of a paper.

*Citation*, *quotation*, and *reference* are often used interchangeably.

**Direct citation** means citing a source word for word without any change, using quotation marks, and providing the source with the author's last name, publication year, and page or paragraph number, for example, (Hu, 2019, p. 6).

**Indirect citation** includes a summary, paraphrase, or reference to ideas but not word-for-word quotes with quotation marks. Indirect citation is flexible and can be as little as one idea or as much as several ideas. Sources are usually required while page or paragraph numbers are optional, for example, (Kramer, 2022).

Generally, direct or indirect, citations need to be introduced with *reporting verbs* such as *claim, report, state, say, argue, describe, indicate,* and *show*. See the Academic Phrasebank for more examples.

## 3  Literature Review

Research has found student plagiarism to arise for various reasons (Cleary, 2017; Ma et al., 2008; Selemani et al., 2018; Shi, 2006). For example, Cleary (2017) cites ten reasons such as poor time

management, lack of confidence, target language incompetence, and sloppy notetaking. Ma et el. (2008) point out peer culture, pressure for achievement, lack of punishment, and the convenience of copying and pasting from the Internet as factors contributing to plagiarism. In addition, ESL students' first culture and developing English writing skills provide further causes (Selemani et al., 2018; Shi, 2006). Their understanding of plagiarism is different from that of many students growing up in western cultures, and they come from different education systems and learn academic writing skills in different ways and extents (Pecorari, 2015, 2016, 2022). However, research has largely failed to identify which causes are more prominent or influential than others and, therefore, more deserve targeting by the university and instructional resources. Furthermore, there might be other challenges ESL students encounter that we do not yet know.

Recently, a shift has started among researchers and university instructors and administrators, moving from a punitive or reactive approach that punishes plagiarism, to an educative or preventative approach that helps students understand academic integrity and provides them tools to use sources properly (e.g., Khoo, 2021; Liang & Maddison, 2021; Pecorari, 2022; Rossi, 2022). One of the most impressive intervention programs is offered by Douglas College, Canada; it follows a wrap-around (or multi-touchpoint) model that engages students in academic integrity education from orientation and throughout the student's program with assistance from student services, faculty, learning centers, the library, and administration (Tilley et al., 2021). The model proved especially successful with international students (Tilley et al., 2021). As suggested, AI education of international students is not just the duty of ESL instructors, librarians, and writing center tutors; academic faculty also have the responsibility. In fact, in a recent conference presentation, Pecorari (2022) pointed out that academic faculty know best the cultural norms and expectations in their disciplines as ESL instructors often "start and end at the door."

On the other hand, Khoo (2021) reported on a reading-writing program at the University of Toronto that aims to empower students in academic integrity and writing skills. Khoo's emphasis on the principles of three "no's," which are no risk, no grading, and no penalty in the writing skill practice, has played an essential role in students' interest in participating in the writing practice. As researchers (Pecorari, 2015, 2016; Shi, 2012) noted, good paraphrasing for ESL students is almost impossible without adequate writing skills. Pecorari (2022) rightly stated that when a gap exists between what ESL students can do and what they need to do, namely, when asked to write beyond their skills, they will patchwrite. Thus, it is critical to develop students' academic reading and writing skills alongside citation skills.

Other researchers have explored students' use of similarity detection software like Turnitin to help avoid plagiarism (Lege, 2021; Mphahlele & McKenna, 2019; Zheng, 2021). For instance, in her study of Chinese undergraduate students at a Sino-foreign joint university in Shanghai, Zheng (2021) found that most students saw Turnitin as an effective tool for detecting and reducing plagiarism in their writing. Lege (2021) noticed, not surprisingly, that graduate students in Japan who used corrective software had less plagiarism detected and concluded that such software might help mitigate both intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Turnitin compares a piece of writing against its "industry-leading content database" (Turnitin, n.d.) and produces a similarity report to determine the possibility and extent of plagiarism or over-citation. Turnitin suggests that writing with a similarity score of 25% or less is considered original and that a percentage above 25% is too much, especially if it is not referenced (Smart, 2020). Although such suggested numbers are worth further exploration and there are significant differences in similarity tolerance between humanities and social sciences (HSS) and sciences and technology (ST) (e.g., Kessler et al., 2022), the software does indicate areas that possibly need attention.

Despite the findings of previous and ongoing research, for universities to offer adequate assistance to prevent plagiarism, more is needed to understand what ESL students consider to be their problems and challenges regarding academic integrity and what they think universities and instructors can do to best help them deal with the challenges (see also Packalen & Rowbotham, 2022). It would be ideal if teachers understood what students need and how to assist students in avoidingplagiarism. This study attempts to fill the gap. The research questions are:

1. What are ESL student challenges to academic integrity at Canadian universities?
2. How can the universities best help ESL students deal with the challenges?

## 4 Methods

The study employed semi-structured individual in-depth qualitative interviews using an interview guide (see Appendix) with 20 ESL students who had just finished an advanced EAP writing course at a Canadian university in Winter 2021 (see Table 1). Since the topic of the interviews was about the participants' views and experiences with plagiarism and citations and, therefore, highly sensitive and confidential, individual interviews were one of the best data collection methods (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The participants were selected based on equity, diversity, and inclusion principles (Government of Canada, n.d.) and their willingness to participate after being emailed a letter of invitation. Together, they represented 11 countries of origin: China, India, Iran, Bangladesh, Russia, France, South Korea, Japan, Sri Lanka, Brazil, and Indonesia. Twelve of the participants were male, and eight were female. Eleven participants had just completed senior high school, and others had finished undergraduate or graduate studies in part or whole. Four participants had completed their last one to four years of high school in Canada. Given the sample size, the participant diversity was remarkable, representing a microcosm of the international student population in the EAP program at the university. The first author conducted each interview online via BlueJeans (similar to Zoom) for about an hour and transcribed the interview simultaneously. Each transcript underwent subsequent member checking. The interview data were read multiple times and analyzed qualitatively for recurrent themes (Hu, 2009) discussed below.

Table 1

*Student Participant Profiles*

| Student Participant | Country of Origin | Prior Ed | Gender | Age |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | China | S High | M | 21 |
| 2 | China | Bachelor's | F | 25 |
| 3 | China | Bachelor's | F | 28 |
| 4 | China | Bachelor's | F | 24 |
| 5 | China | S High (Gr 11-12 in Canada) | M | 19 |
| 6 | China | S High (Gr 12 in Canada) | F | 19 |
| 7 | Iran | Bachelor's | F | 39 |
| 8 | Iran | Master's | F | 50 |
| 9 | Iran | Bachelor's | M | 33 |
| 10 | Bangladesh | 3-year diploma | M | 25 |
| 11 | Bangladesh | S High | M | 20 |
| 12 | India | S High | M | 23 |
| 13 | India | Bachelor's | F | 32 |
| 14 | France | Year 2 of univ | M | 22 |
| 15 | Indonesia | S High | F | 19 |
| 16 | Japan | S High | M | 20 |
| 17 | South Korea | S High (G 9-12 in Canada) | M | 20 |
| 18 | Brazil | S High (Gr 10-12 in Canada) | M | 19 |
| 19 | Russia | S High | M | 18 |
| 20 | Sri Lanka | S High | M | 23 |

# 5  Findings and Discussion

Two major themes of interest emerged in the interview data analysis, one relating to challenges the participants encountered in trying to avoid plagiarism and achieve academic integrity, and the other about what the participants thought the host institution should do to help ESL students deal with the challenges. This section presents and discusses the findings.

## 5.1 Student challenges to academic integrity

### 5.1.1 Understanding plagiarism

The research findings suggest that the predominant challenge that affected the participants in achieving academic integrity was their lack of experience using citations before studying at the Canadian university. The participants who had completed only secondary or undergraduate education in their home countries had generally written either no formal essays or only opinion-based essays with no source requirement. Many of them had written the British Council IELTS (International English Language Testing System) to enter Canadian universities, but this test does not require external sources in writing. Thus, most participants had limited or no knowledge of plagiarism. The following interview excerpts by participants from different countries of origin illustrate this observation:

> S7: *Honestly, before coming here, I did not face this word plagiarism. I studied [English] for four years in my country [Iran]; I never learned about it.*

> S8: *Some undergrads have not done research or research writing. They have no idea that they should cite when citing sources. Citing is a new culture. It may be essential for them to learn how to cite before taking academic courses which require extensive writing. In Iran, undergrad students do not write research but do so only in grad studies.*

S7 was an English major, but regardless, in undergraduate programs in Iran, the students were not required to write research papers. It was only in graduate studies that they needed to do research and, therefore, cite sources. Similarly, secondary and undergraduate students in China and Russia write short essays based on personal opinions or general knowledge but are not required to cite sources, as shown in the following.

> S1: *English class [in China] is more to test students' vocabulary and whether there are grammatical errors [grammar knowledge]. Before university, the school [student] only needs to write 100 words in writing of English class…We just write based on our understanding in general rather than on specific sources.*

> S19: *[In Russia] just like IELTS (no dictionary or cell phone) …. We wrote essays and reports but did not have to use sources.*

The participants from India and Bangladesh also found the concept of plagiarism foreign to them. The emphasis in learning English was on grammar and vocabulary, less on essay writing. They were even expected to reproduce or copy the source texts verbatim without citing the sources in writing exams. For example,

> S13: *…coming from India, it was a totally different system. We did not learn about plagiarism or academic integrity…. In India, it was normal to copy others. They [teachers] appreciate exact reproduction and not changing the original…. I just did exams and short answer questions but did not write essays.*

> S12: *[In India] I knew not to copy another student but did not know copy and paste from the Internet is not allowed.*

*S10: To be honest, in my country [Bangladesh], I had no idea about citation. I had zero knowledge about citation in my L1. English is not my first language in my country. There was no topic about plagiarism or citation when I learned English, just grammar and vocabulary.*

Even in France, which belongs to Western culture and where many English teachers are English speaking, citations are not emphasized, according to one participant who completed two years of university in France. As a result, he wrote many essays based on personal opinions rather than sources.

*S14: I did not know why the teachers did not talk about citations at the French university. Even if I had English-speaking teachers in my French university, they did not talk about plagiarism or citation. I don't know why. At Thompson Rivers University, plagiarism and citations are so important, but there they are not. I knew a bit of plagiarism in France. I did a lot of essays but mostly based on [personal] opinions.*

On the other hand, the participant from Indonesia acknowledged having learned about APA and MLA (Modern Language Association) formats, but the citation practice is different. For example, there is no need to use in-text citation in the case of indirect quotes.

*S15: In high school [in Indonesia], I learned how to use APA and MLA when writing in English, so I am not surprised about APA at Thompson Rivers University…. We do not pay attention to citation that much in general writing. When writing scientific research, we use citations, mostly indirect quotes, no need to cite in citing indirectly. We may cite indirectly but do not give the source in the text but just list the sources in the bibliography.*

Such a practice goes against the APA rule of one in-text citation corresponding to one listed reference and vice versa. S15 is not alone, as we see other students at Canadian universities from different countries providing more bibliography than what is required by in-text citations. The students may have consulted the sources or used the sources in indirect quotes but assumed that only direct quotes need in-text source documentation. They are unaware that not providing the source for indirect quotes results in plagiarism.

The participant from Japan, too, had a misunderstanding of plagiarism. He knew about the term before coming here but did not have a thorough understanding of what plagiarism involves or how to avoid it, as he revealed:

*S16: Before Thompson Rivers University, I learned about plagiarism and intellectual property and academic integrity during high school. There is an essay, and I used a sentence from the very old essay [without citing]. I thought that would be a good strategy; I thought when I was back then. But I felt right now it's not good. I feel that it's kind of cheating.*

S16 represents many, possibly most, ESL students misunderstanding plagiarism or only partially understanding plagiarism before taking the EAP writing course or another course that discusses plagiarism at Thompson Rivers University.

Like S14 above, S20 from Sri Lanka had British Council teachers back home, but he could not remember learning about APA 6 (APA 7 became available only in October 2019). It suggests that citations in APA style were not an emphasis in the student's secondary school learning as he stated:

*S20: I had no idea about APA 7 before this class in Winter 2021. I cannot remember learning about APA 6. I may have learned something from British Council teachers, but I cannot remember.*

Most participants coming directly from foreign countries found plagiarism a new concept; even some participants who attended Canadian high schools for one to four years understood plagiarism somewhat differently from what is generally considered plagiarism at Canadian universities. For example,

*S5: (grades 11-12 in Canada): I knew copying others was wrong, so I did not copy but did not know using APA form wrong is also plagiarism.*

> *S17: (grades 10-12 in Canada): I did not know self-plagiarism [resubmitting a submitted work for another assignment] is not allowed. In high school, I sometimes copied a sentence here and there and did not know I had to cite.*

The experiences of S5 and S17 appear to be common not only in Canada but elsewhere. For instance, Skaar and Hammer (2013) in their study of 67 upper secondary students in Norway found that 75% of the students plagiarized online sources in course assignments and that 25% of the students' text was plagiarism.

Copying from a source, failing to provide quotation marks in a direct quote, forgetting or simply failing to document the source for direct or indirect quotes, presenting a paraphrase too similar to the source, or misplacing the source in a text can all be considered forms of plagiarism (see Section 2). Some forms (e.g., several lines of direct plagiarism) are more severe than others (e.g., not providing the source for a short indirect citation) and should receive harsher punishment if detected. Unfortunately, university AI policies in general do not make a clear distinction between major and minor plagiarism cases. Thus, teachers and AI administrators often issue the same penalties regardless of the severity of the case, and students become perplexed over a major punishment (e.g., F for the course) for a minor offence.

The fact that international students who attended Canadian high schools failed to have an accurate understanding of plagiarism suggests that at least some Canadian high schools do not teach students properly in terms of academic integrity. This is likely one reason why 1000-course-level or first-year students are reported to have breached academic integrity policies more frequently than students at upper levels (Renee & Anderberg, 2020). Therefore, even Canadian English-speaking students may need AI support, especially in their first semester at university. Clearly, two gaps exist: a bigger gap between the lack of understanding or misunderstanding of plagiarism among ESL students upon arrival at TRU and faculty expectations, and a smaller gap between Canadian high school graduates and university faculty expectations. While it may not be realistic to expect all high schools and universities outside North America to teach source referencing conventions practiced at North American universities, scholars who wish to publish in internationally recognized English journals will need to learn how to cite properly to avoid being accused of plagiarism. Teachers at Canadian high schools, on the other hand, will need professional development to update their knowledge of academic integrity periodically as Canadian university professors expect their students to have mastered source referencing skills (Peters & Cadieux, 2019).

### 5.1.2 Paraphrasing and citing

As indicated earlier, paraphrasing is using one's own words to report someone else's ideas. Keywords can remain unchanged, but non-keywords should be one's own while the same meaning is maintained (see Section 2). Almost all the participants found paraphrasing difficult, even almost impossible, because as developing second language learners, the participants were learning others' language and had not developed their own language or voice, and therefore, did not have their own words in a sense (Shi, 2012). Furthermore, paraphrasing is especially hard in that ESL students need to understand the original text accurately and reasonably quickly, that the paraphrase does not distort the meaning of the source, and that the rephrased language needs to be clear, correct, and idiomatic, and be incorporated into one's text in a coherent and fluent manner (Pecorari, 2016), following the academic writing style. Clearly, rephrasing demands a high level of linguistic, rhetorical, and writing skills. ESL students with low literacy are bound to encounter difficulty. The following interview excerpts illustrate the challenges of the participants.

> *S3: For paraphrasing, it is difficult because the wording from the source is perfect. If I change ... I am not sure if I can keep the meaning with different words, but I have to use different words.*

*S16: It is difficult because first, I don't have high skills in editing. Second, you have to change the vocabulary and sentence structure, write your own sentence. Come up with your version of the original. To write in your own words, and that is not easy. The difficult part is that I had to make it much more understandable to the reader so the reader will not misunderstand or get confused. So, the challenge is to use your own words to rephrase, to make sense, make your sentence understandable, and stay true to the original.*

*S9: Sometimes, I want to paraphrase a sentence, such as changing some words or whole sentences for paraphrasing. But to what extent to change? It is hard because how many words do we have to change to avoid plagiarism? Hard to tell, especially for beginners.*

Unlike other citation skills such as quoting directly and documenting sources, paraphrasing demands accurate reading comprehension, a considerable mastery of vocabulary and sentence structures, and competent academic writing skills. Therefore, paraphrasing is an academic skill to be developed over years (Pecorari, 2016; Shi, 2012), although short-term efforts by advanced ESL students can lead to some success (Khoo, 2021). In this sense, while students at low levels in EAP programs can be asked to use direct quotes, they should not be required to paraphrase; otherwise, the result will likely be either incorrect, incomprehensible English, or a type of plagiarism like patchwriting (see Section 2).

Another challenge related to citation is to find relevant and reliable sources and decide which parts should be selected for direct or indirect citation. This is an issue if students need to use some sources but cannot overcite, as S17 explained:

*S17: You cannot use more than 10% [of your writing] for direct quotes [(Lester, 1976)] and 30% for all quotes [direct and indirect]. Students cannot use many quotations even if they want to. They have to choose what to cite and what not in order not to exceed the citation limits. [In addition], there is fake news and unreliable sources.*

While over-citing was not an issue among the participants owing to the instructor's repeated warnings, over-citation does happen among other inexperienced university writers. Another problem the first author found while teaching academic writing is that some ESL students use direct quotes with glaring errors in language and, sometimes, content. Unfortunately, the students fail to notice and mark the errors (e.g., using sic.) or turn to alternative sources. Citing unreliable sources, especially those with serious language errors, negatively reflects the writer's judgment, but many ESL students are unaware of the consequence.

### 5.1.3 Reference list

Creating a reference list in APA 7 presents challenges to all the participants in the beginning, especially since different types of sources require different formats in terms of information order, upper/lower case, italics, and punctuation. For example, some participants complained:

*S10: I used capitals when I was supposed to use lower case. For the authors' names, we are not supposed to use full names, just the first name initial and middle name initial.*

*S11: Hard because of journal articles, website pages, and so on. Every type of source has a different format.*

*S16: I struggled. APA 7, always like author, date, title, address. Some have no author, no title, no date. For me, very confusing. In "Introduction to University Writing" [ENGL 1100], some research I read [using MLA style] is confusing.*

Adding to the confusion among different types of sources requiring different formats, some  professors of the English Department at this university adopt the Modern Language Association (MLA) format,

different from APA 7. Learning one format is hard enough but navigating between two (and potentially more) citation formats for different instructors is doubly challenging. It is not surprising that most university students will have to be familiar with two or more citation formats by graduation. Fortunately, as some participants acknowledged, this challenge, which is mechanical, can be overcome with appropriate templates, samples, and guided practice.

## 5.2 Suggestions for pedagogical and institutional strategies

As plagiarism, academic integrity, and citations are new concepts for nearly all ESL students based on the current study, universities and teachers should provide ESL students explanations, style templates, models, samples, interactive workshops, and practice at the beginning of an advanced writing course or during university orientation. If such interventions happen too late, students may have committed plagiarism and received penalties. The following suggestions appear reasonable.

> *S8: It would be better for ESL students to learn how to cite properly from the beginning before [or when] they take courses that have writing that requires citations.*

While helpful, early intervention is not sufficient but should continue to be available throughout students' studies as suggested by the wrap-around or multi-touchpoint model designed by Douglas College (see above). The intervention can come from sources such as teachers, writing or learning centers, and the library. As to precisely what assistance the participants preferred, some recommended the following:

> *S12: Give templates and reference samples. The reference list is an issue. Some resources illustrating reference lists would be good. Workshops would be helpful too.*

> *S13: Thompson Rivers University should offer APA 7 citations in orientation. At the beginning of any class, instructors need to find out if there are students who are unfamiliar with APA 7.*

> *S17: Take a class out and go to a workshop. That is the only way [some] students can be aware of plagiarism and how to avoid plagiarism. Better than just give students the info. I did not know if I copied, I would get zero… Orientation. Explain plagiarism and self-plagiarism. When I went to the workshop, I realized a lot: "OK, OK; that is how I should do." Explanations and examples. Even though I knew a bit about plagiarism, I did not know the details about how to use APA 7 format. Video workshops are helpful but not good enough because they're not interactive… In academic courses, when you try to learn about plagiarism, it is too late. Not many ESL students know they would get 0 or kicked out if they copy. Need the orientation workshops to tell them.*

> *S5:  Maybe for new students in ESL courses, give them a chance because they do not know APA. Some teachers, if they see students wrong, they will tell the school [report to the Academic Integrity Committee]; it is really not good because we really don't know [how to use sources properly]. To punish them right away is unfair; they should be given a chance to learn to use sources properly.*

> *S14: Practice APA through exercises and essay writing.*

It is worth emphasizing the importance of orientation workshops on academic integrity required of all new ESL students at the beginning of a semester. The workshops may be offered by the library, student services, writing center, international student center, or the EAP program. At our university, most ESL students have high  scores on IELTS or another English test and go directly to academic courses. Some academic instructors have a paragraph or reference about the university academic integrity policy in their course outline; however, some do not, assuming that all students, domestic or international, already know

plagiarism very well (Peters & Cadieux, 2019), or do not think discussing academic integrity is their responsibility (Rossi, 2022). Unfortunately, the truth is the opposite; as the current study shows, most ESL students do not understand plagiarism well. By admitting them, the university has a responsibility to educate them on AI values and practices.

Hopefully, a variety of resources, teaching strategies, and guided practice followed by teacher feedback will help the students learn the new rules, appreciate the value of academic integrity, and avoid plagiarism.

## 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study finds that the predominant challenges for the ESL students in achieving academic integrity are (1) the students' lack of experience in writing essays requiring citations or source documentation and, in this connection, (2) limited or no knowledge of plagiarism. These are significant factors contributing to potential plagiarism, whereas other factors identified in earlier research such as first culture influence, target language incompetence, poor time management, and pressure for achievement (Cleary, 2017; Ma et al., 2008; Shi, 2006) appear secondary. One reason that many students have not written source-referenced essays is the education system driven by exams, and the most influential international exams are TOEFL and IELTS. The writing components of the exams, even in the academic version, assess students' ability to write opinion-based essays or essays to describe a given table or figure. Such writing does not require reference to external sources or allow the use of websites during the test. To truly assess international students' ability to write for academic purposes, maybe the next standardized test innovation is to include source citation skills.

Another major challenge for ESL students is paraphrasing, which requires proficient reading comprehension and highly competent linguistic, rhetorical, and writing skills to rephrase the original in one's own words. Understandably, developing this skill will take persistent efforts over a long term, especially for EAP students. However, with guidance and practice, advanced EAP students can feel more confident after some time (Pecorari, 2016; Rossi, 2022; Shi, 2012). Nevertheless, due to paraphrasing difficulty, low-level ESL students should not be required to paraphrase but to use direct quotes accordingly.

The third major challenge for almost all the participants is creating a reference list in APA 7, which requires different formats for books, book chapters, journal articles, independent web articles, etc. Fortunately, advanced ESL students can generally become comfortable with the mechanics over one to two semesters with proper guidance and practice.

Based on the participant perspectives and related literature, we propose a three-step approach for the university to help students deal with the above challenges. First, the participants suggested that to help them overcome the challenges, they need universities and teachers to provide a combination of style templates, models, samples, videos, and especially, interactive workshops with explanations, examples, and anti-plagiarism games (Bradley, 2015; Cumming et al., 2016; Kier, 2019) at the beginning of a semester. In addition, they need opportunities to practice citations and essay-writing that requires sources.

Second, universities and teachers can make plagiarism detection software available to ESL students and offer training workshops. Traditionally, teachers and administrators have used software such as Turnitin, Grammarly, and Quetext to detect text similarity and plagiarism in student assignments and to punish plagiarizers. However, students can use the software to find similarities in their writing to sources and, if needed, revise the writing before submission. Like the Microsoft Word spell checker, the software suggests similarities and possible plagiarism; the writer decides whether to leave the similarity alone or make changes. The self-correction software is valuable for detecting both intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Thus, the software becomes a tool that helps students learn to cite properly. Several articles

(Lege, 2021; Mphahlele & McKenna, 2019; Zheng, 2021) have reported positive student reception of the software and significant benefits to second language students in reducing plagiarism and improving academic writing. However, as Lege (2021) advises, such software should facilitate but not replace teaching and training in plagiarism prevention.

A final step for university intervention is teacher feedback which is critical for ESL students as the latter may not realize their misunderstandings or mistakes. Without feedback, a misunderstanding can go unchecked for years (Pecorari, 2022). For feedback purposes, we recommend a simultaneous oral-written feedback approach (SOWFA) whereby the teacher dialogues with the student while offering verbal and written feedback at about the same time (Hu, 2019). As reported in an earlier publication, this approach has been practiced and well received by ESL students (Hu, 2019). Feedback is not just the duty of ESL instructors and writing center tutors; academic faculty should also share the responsibility. Given that ESL students, in general, do not have sufficient experience in writing source-referenced essays before attending a Canadian university and different academic disciplines may require different citation formats (e.g., APA 7, MLA, and Chicago), it is critical that universities offer resources and opportunities to educate students on academic integrity throughout their studies rather than just publish policies.

## 7  Directions for Further Research

The student sample size (n=20) of the study was limited, so future research should expand the size not only in number but also in country representation. Future research may also explore teacher perspectives on plagiarism and plagiarism prevention strategies, the extent of intentional versus unintentional plagiarism in reported academic integrity violation cases among EAP students and ESL students taking 1000-level courses, and what percentages of the reported plagiarism cases were committed by ESL students and native-English speakers respectively. These research directions should help the institution better understand campus-wide plagiarism and be better positioned to provide more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

## Note

A preliminary report of the study was presented at An International Online Teaching Symposium, University of Windsor, Canada and published as Hu, J., & Zhang, C. (2021). *ESL student plagiarism prevention challenges and teacher interventions* [Extended abstract]. https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/itos21/session4/session4/8/

## Appendix

### ESL Student Interview Guide

*Academic Integrity Challenges and Institutional Strategies*

Note: You can pass on any question you choose and do not need to disclose information that you do not wish to share.

1. **Personal background**

    1.1 Name:

1.2 Year of birth:

1.3 Gender identity (select all that apply):

    1.3.1 Woman

    1.3.2 Man

    1.3.3 Transgender

    1.3.4 Non-binary/non-conforming

    1.3.5 Prefer not to respond

1.4 Home country and home language:

1.5 Time of arrival in Canada:

1.6 Time to start studies in Canada:

1.7 Time to start studies at Thompson Rivers University:

## 2. Educational background

2.1 What was the highest level of education you completed in your home country?

    2.1.1 Senior high:

    2.1.2 University/college: 2–3-year program:

    2.1.3 Bachelor's degree:

    2.1.4 Years completed in an unfinished undergraduate program:

    2.1.5 Post-graduate, e.g., Master's:

    2.1.6 Area(s) of undergraduate and/or graduate studies:

2.2 What ESL courses had you taken at Thompson Rivers University and elsewhere in Canada prior to ESAL 0580 Academic Writing with me in Winter 2021 at Thompson Rivers University?

2.3 What other ESL courses have you been taking this semester?

2.4 What major or program have you been studying or are you going to study (e.g., BBA) after ESL?

2.5 What are your final academic (e.g., M.Ed.) and career goals (e.g., high school teacher)?

## 3. Challenges in avoiding plagiarism and citing in APA (7<sup>th</sup> ed) style when writing essays

Please answer the following questions truthfully to help me learn how well you understand plagiarism and citation in APA 7 and what challenges, difficulties, and problems you have had in writing essays with academic integrity or in citing in APA 7.

3.1 How do you understand plagiarism?

3.2 What about self-plagiarism?

3.3 Has your understanding of plagiarism, intellectual property, and academic integrity changed since coming to study at Thompson Rivers University or in Canada, in particular, in ESAL 0580 in Winter 2021? Please answer and explain.

3.4 Do you take notes when you read so that you may be able to use the notes when writing in the future? If so, how do you do it?

3.5 Do you read sources in another language (e.g., your first language, not English) and try to use the sources in your essay writing? If so, please explain how.

3.6 What difficulties and challenges do you have in writing with integrity and avoiding plagiarism?

3.7 What challenges do you have in providing in-text direct quotes in APA 7?

3.8 What challenges do you have in providing in-text indirect quotes in APA 7? What about paraphrasing and writing a summary of a reading?

3.9 What challenges do you have in writing a reference list in APA 7?

3.10 In what situations do you need to use direct quotes? Or: For what purposes do you need direct quotes?

3.11 In what situations do you need to paraphrase or use an indirect quote? Or: For what purposes do you need to use paraphrase or indirect quotes?

3.12 Do you usually read articles and books (hard copy or Internet) before writing a paper?

3.13 How is the citation in English using APA 7 different from the citation in your first language or culture?

3.14 How is the need to cite sources in your first language different from that in English?

3.15 Citing in a format such as APA 7 appears to be straightforward. Why do many ESL students find citations difficult?

3.16 What other questions and difficulties do you still have regarding citations in APA 7 and/or avoiding plagiarism?

3.17 What would you suggest that Thompson Rivers University do to help ESL students, especially new ESL students, to follow APA 7 (or another citation format) in academic writing and maintain academic integrity?

3.18 What suggestions and comments do you have for this research project?

## Acknowledgement

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