

## Why Do Students of English Cheat Online and How Do They Do It?

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### ABSTRACT

The global pandemic that started in 2020 brought a variety of challenges in many spheres of life. Higher education was not an exception, as all classes were moved to online environments. One of the main challenges became the one of academic integrity, since students' knowledge and skills were tested online as well. This paper will discuss a case study carried out at Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania) in 2021 that involved Lithuanian students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who filled in an anonymous questionnaire with open ended and closed ended questions. The study aimed to find out if the students had cheated in any form of EFL assessment (tests, midterm tests, examinations, etc.) online during the pandemic. They were also asked to indicate the ways in which they had cheated and explain why they had behaved this way. The results showed that eighty percent of all the students had engaged in "digital cheating" in one way or another but provided a variety of reasons to justify such a dishonest behaviour. For example, they wanted to obtain good grades, check the spelling of some words online or translate unknown words (which they should have learned). However, not all students perceived such a behaviour as dishonest. They indicated that what they had done could not be seen as a "big crime."

*Keywords:* academic integrity, distance learning, English as a Foreign Language, higher education, online learning

### Introduction

Academic dishonesty has always been a topical issue (Michael and Williams, 2013) not only at school but also at university level. It is an issue probably almost impossible to eradicate completely. However, due to the spread of COVID-19, a shift of university classes to distance learning environments has

brought even more challenges than before. In order to fight those challenges, in spring 2020, foreign language and other teachers at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) were given recommendations that could help to ensure academic integrity while assessing students' skills in the virtual (online) study environment during the pandemic. Some of the most popular and effective means were the following: computer cameras used by students during assessment; restricted possibility to return to previous tasks during all written tests or other assignments; a time limit to do certain tasks (e.g. examinations), which was hoped would not leave time to consult other sources; 3–4 versions of the same task so that the computer system would assign a different task to students randomly and even mix the task order – in case students get the same task, they would not see it at the same time. It does not mean that students did not cheat then, as their teachers still did not see the screen view of their students, so the teachers could not be sure if the students had opened something else rather than, for example, a test on Moodle. Later, in the beginning of 2021, these and other rules were included into the Order for Distance Language Learning compiled by teachers of the Institute of Foreign Languages at VMU. So students studying foreign languages had to stick to the rules in the spring semester of 2021 and later, since the pandemic continued and foreign language classes were held online even in the spring semester of 2022. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to learn about student behaviour related to academic integrity a year before this order. Therefore, a small-scale study was carried out with an aim to find out whether Lithuanian VMU EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students cheated (that is, engaged in academically dishonest behaviour) in any form of assessment (tests, midterm tests, examinations, etc.) online during the pandemic, how and why they did it, since their classes were delivered online, and assessment took place online as well.

### **Academic Integrity / Honesty and Academic Dishonesty / Cheating**

So what is academic integrity, which is also referred to as academic integrity/honesty, and academic dishonesty/cheating, as both terms will be used further in this article? According to Imani and Johnson (2018), there is no single definition of these phenomena. In fact, “literature defines academic dishonesty but identifies academic integrity as avoidance of academic dishonesty” (Imani & Johnson, 2018, p. 1365). Having reviewed various sources on the topic, it is possible to claim that different definitions provided by researchers focus on either particular values that academic integrity includes or behaviour that academic dishonesty involves. For example, Benson et al. (2019) provide the following definition:

*Academic integrity is understood as the commitment to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. In this vein,*

*academic misconduct constitutes a participation in acts by which a person gains or attempts to gain an unfair academic advantage. (p. 2)*

The first part of this definition focuses on the values that describe academically honest behaviour, while the second part of it is related to actions which are seen as dishonest behaviour. Such behaviour includes issues from plagiarism to cheating on tests and examinations to submitting a work written by somebody else as their own (Imani and Johnson, 2018), which shows a great variety of activities which can be seen as academically dishonest, so cheating can be seen as “a complex system” (Rarisi, 2013, p. 183) of certain behaviour. To be more precise, it “can be more than a single event; it can be a way of perceiving the world” (McKaya et al., 2019, p. 2). One’s perception of the world matters because as some research suggest, students do not necessarily see all kinds of academic dishonesty as cheating. The perception may differ depending on one’s culture, country, or individual understanding (McKaya et al., 2019) of what is considered as a good/ acceptable or bad/unacceptable behaviour. McKaya et al. point out that “[c]heating is experienced differentially across cultures with some evidence of culturally specific factors such as a higher level of cheating in collectivist countries although the evidence is not entirely conclusive” (2019, p. 4). There is a variety of other reasons why students engage in dishonest behaviour. Some of these are a “lack of responsibility, laziness, lack of respect for academic rules and being apathetic” (Mamoun Saleh & Meccawy, 2021). In addition, sometimes cheating may be seen as a way of socialisation similar to the one on social networks, thus this behaviour is perceived as a way to support each other rather than dishonest behaviour (Mamoun Saleh & Meccawy, 2021, p. 31). The present study involves only Lithuanian university students, but the number of participants is rather limited and the results could not be generalisable and applicable to all Lithuanian students and their dishonest behaviour in online EFL classes.

Moreover, student perception of what is possible may vary depending on where dishonest behaviour is exhibited. According to Langa (2013),

*Students seem to find it more acceptable for them to personally cheat when using IT than when not using IT. However, students do not perceive that same difference for others. They seem to regard cheating for others the same with or without the use of IT. (p. 427)*

In other words, when students engage in dishonest behaviour, they do not necessarily see it as cheating if they use technologies, so they would tend to cheat online more rather than in a physical classroom. Furthermore, when other students cheat with the help of or without technologies, it is considered as dishonest behaviour, even though the students would not necessarily see the same behaviour as cheating if they engaged in it themselves. In fact, Azulay

Chertok et al. note that technologies help to cheat because “new modes of academic dishonesty” have become possible and thus evolved, but again it is important to note that there is no clear definition of what actually constitutes online cheating as such (2014, p. 1324). Similarly, Imani and Johnson (2018) agree that the use of technologies not only have improved teaching and learning but also have brought academic integrity-related challenges, one of which is an increased “risk to academic integrity” (Azulay Chertok et al., 2014, p. 1324). The Internet makes it easier to access all the available information quickly and use it, while social networks, which students use, create conditions for communication and information sharing and exchange (Azulay Chertok et al., 2014, p. 1328).

On the one hand, it is thought that students do not have much time for that during assessment online, but Azulay Chertok et al. argue that “multi-tasking is an expectation in the digitally oriented reality” (2014, p. 1328). Most of our students nowadays are digital natives who can do quite many things that involve technologies at the same time. According to Peterson,

*[c]heating has gone beyond just copying papers or answers. Students can now (...) send each other answers through phones and other devices – one student can share answers with another via digital media and suddenly half the class has the same answers. (Peterson, 2019, p. 25)*

This is why Rarisi refers to such behaviour as “digital cheating” (2013, p. 179). In fact, Hayes et al. emphasise that “[t]here are literally hundreds of ways students can cheat” (2006) online (and offline). Therefore, the ways of cheating depend on student imagination and become more and more sophisticated (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 4), since “temptation for cheating is always around” (Naghdipour & Emeagwali, 2013, p. 265). What is also important is that, as Michael and Williams point out, the

*online environment, by its nature, may make it more difficult to prevent [cheating] or catch students who are involved in working together when they are not supposed to be. (Michael & Williams, 2013, n.p)*

In the context of VMU, it may be less likely that students worked together on tasks during the pandemic, because they did not know each other well and were from different study programmes, so they met only in their EFL classes online. Yet, it is known that EFL students do create Facebook groups and sometimes communicate there (even when their classes are held in physical classrooms), thus cooperation may happen even though the students are almost strangers to one another and have not met in the real world. However, Peterson claims that the belief that academic dishonesty online is more widespread than in physical classrooms is not true because a “*number of studies have been completed in this area*

and, in fact, many have shown that students are more likely to cheat in on-campus courses than in online courses” (Peterson, 2019, p. 24, italics in original). Yet, it was not possible to find any of such studies while doing literature review for the present paper.

Quite many researchers studying academic dishonesty also discuss the so called Fraud Triangle that comes from business studies and is used to discuss fraudulent employee behaviour (Rarisi, 2013). According to Hayes et al.,

*[a]lthough the fraud triangle is used most often to discuss financial fraud, a closer look at research on why students cheat indicates that student cheating behavior falls within the elements of the fraud triangle. (2006, p. 2)*

As Little and Handel (2016) note, the so-called Fraud Triangle was developed by W. Steve Albrecht and later improved by Donald R. Cressey and Edwin Sutherland; it formed out of the following three components: pressure, opportunity, and rationalisation. The triangle is explained in terms of employee behaviour that describes how an employee commits fraud, but it could easily be applied while describing student dishonest behaviour in any physical or online classroom. A student may feel pressure to perform well on a test or other assignment and thus is motivated to behave unethically. Distance or online learning provides an opportunity to engage in unethical activities, such as using the Internet and consulting different resources in order to find answers, but the rationale behind such a behaviour or justification of it is that everybody does it in distance or online learning, no one sees it or maybe that it is not a “big thing”. A cheater may not even see this as cheating (Hayes et al., 2006). Little and Handel (2016) suggest a possible solution to the problem of academic cheating which involves three elements: leadership (involving codes of conduct, policies, etc. and education on ethical behaviour), control (the teachers’ role to inform the students about academic integrity, rules, etc. and establish control of academic integrity in assessment) and effective follow-up (reporting of cases of academic dishonesty and making sure that the actions that are indicated in institutional, e.g. university, documents are taken). One more solution is to reduce one of the components (pressure, opportunity or rationalisation) of the Fraud Triangle, because in such a case the amount of cheating can be also reduced or eliminated (Hayes et al., 2006).

As far as other solutions are concerned, Michael and Williams point out that “an online testing environment requires different strategies and tactics from what we have had to consider in the past” (2013, n.p). On the other hand, these scholars suggest that based on their study, there will always be some cheating students no matter the effort and hard work of educational institutions (Michael & Williams, 2013). Prevention is key and starts with raised or created “awareness of the problem” (Michael & Williams, 2013, n.p), but it is

impossible to prevent cheating without knowing what and why students do when they cheat (Naghdi-pour & Emeagwali, 2013), since knowledge may help to “promote ethical responsibility” and foster “a culture of academic integrity” in both academic and institutional communities (Imany & Johnson, 2018, p. 1366). Hayes et al. (2006) suggest including academic integrity-related policies in course syllabi and discussing them during the first class in all study subjects, which could be an important step in the process of promotion of academic integrity, or reminding about the issue periodically (Krishnamurthi & Rhode, 2018).

What else can be done? There are technological solutions and ways of prevention. For example, there are remote proctor systems, including microphones and cameras, which monitor what happens during assessment in the student’s environment (Michael & Williams, 2013). There are also applications that prevent students from opening other webpages during online testing. Moreover, it is recommended to update test content constantly so that the tasks differ in different groups of the same class in the same or different semester, the same or different year.

## Methodology

The aim of the study was to find out whether VMU EFL students cheated in any form of assessment during the pandemic in 2020, what kind of behaviour they engaged in and why. 44 students of general English at upper-intermediate level at VMU were asked to fill in an online questionnaire about their academic behaviour during EFL assessment online in 2020, but the study itself was carried out in the beginning of 2021. The students participated on a voluntary basis and were granted full confidentiality. They were also informed that by filling in the questionnaire they would give their consent to participate in the study and for the results to be used for academic and scientific purposes.

39 out of 44 students agreed to reveal their behaviour by participating in the survey. Out of all the participants, 74.4% were female and 25.6% were male students. They were 18 to 22 years old, but the biggest part, 56.4% of them were 19, while 28.2% were 20 years old. All the participants were bachelor’s degree students. In fact, most of them were freshmen, as 89.7% of them were year one students, while the rest of the sample – 10.3% – were in year two of their bachelor studies. The students indicated their demographic information in the first part of the survey, while in the second part the respondents were able to choose all the statements (out of thirteen given ones) that applied to their experience and (non)academic behaviour in the online learning of English as a foreign language in 2020 at VMU in terms of academic integrity or dishonesty. Even though the study was both qualitative and quantitative, the biggest attention in

the study was dedicated to the qualitative part that included respondents' explanations of what exactly they did during their assessment of English and why (the components of the earlier discussed Fraud Triangle – *pressure*, *opportunity*, and *rationalisation*).

Having received and processed the research data of this small scale case study, the students were presented the results and informed about the academic behaviour that was considered as unacceptable. It was hoped that the students would change it.

## Results and Discussion

In the second part of the online questionnaire, the research participants were asked to choose all the statements that applied to their academic experience of being assessed in English online in 2020. The options were the following:

Table 1. Statements on Academic Integrity or Dishonesty

Statement	%
1. I used my notes during tests/exams, etc.	29.2
2. I used my class materials, e.g. handouts, slides, books, etc., during tests/ midterm tests/exams, etc.	13.8
3. I used the Internet (e.g. Google) for information during tests/ midterm tests/ exams, etc.	16.9
4. I asked for help from my family members or relatives during tests/ midterm tests/ exams, etc.	0
5. I asked for help from my friends during tests/ midterm tests/ exams, etc.	7.7
6. I sent print screen pictures to other course peers to learn the answers during tests/ midterm tests/ exams, etc.	3.1
7. I took a test/ midterm test/ exam, etc. later, so I asked other students who had taken it about it, hoping I would get the same one.	0
8. I paid someone to take a test/ midterm test/ exam, etc. instead of me	0
9. I sent my test/ midterm test/ exam, etc. answers in some form (e.g. print screen pictures) to a friend or a course peer in a chat/ email, etc.	1.5
10. I copy-pasted information from an article/ the Internet or some other resource when I prepared my presentation	4.6
11. I submitted a work from my previous class as a new one in a different class (no matter if there were any changes made or not)	1.5
12. I did something that is not mentioned here, but I will indicate and explain it in the box below.	1.5
13. I always relied on my own knowledge and did not engage in any dishonest academic behaviour in my English tests/ midterm tests/ exams, etc.	20

Later the respondents of the questionnaire were asked to comment on their choices by explaining why they engaged in the particular type(s) of behaviour. As Table 1 shows, approximately 29% of the respondents used their notes during tests, midterm tests and examinations. Thematic analysis was employed in this study in open-ended answers in order to identify most common explanations and reasons of dishonest behaviour. In the case of cheating by using notes, the reasoning was the following:

- The students forgot something and wanted to check.
- The students did not believe in/ trust their knowledge of English.
- The students were stressed.
- They could/ the materials were reachable.
- By using their notes the students could do better in their assessment.
- It helped to understand how to do a task or make sure they were doing a task correctly.
- Doing this is not a big crime.

In other words, the students had low self-esteem or were stressed because they wanted to succeed (*pressure*) and an *opportunity* to feel less stressed presented itself, since the assessment was done online. As a result, many used the *opportunity* to behave dishonestly. The table below shows some answers provided by the research participants (their language here and elsewhere in the paper has not been corrected).

Table 2. Students used their notes during their assessment of English

Statement 1
R9. I used my notes during tests/ midterms/ exams, etc. I wrote answers after I finished exam, to check later what mistakes I made and how it should be correctly.
R13. I used my notes not because I wanted to cheat on my test. I did that because I forgot something and looked at my notes. That happened once maybe twice.
R15. I used my notes during test/ midterms/ exams because I did not believe my knowledge.
R18. used my notes because I could in distance learning.
R19. I used my notes because I'm stressed when I have to write an exam, I'm the slow one, so I always run out of time.
R22. I used my notes (...) because I was afraid of the grade I could get. The tests were really important to me.
R28. Yes, using the notes during test/midterm is cheating, however learning shouldn't be like hammering in. Using notes while writing or learning is much more better. (...) University teaching should be based more on using notes plus your general knowledge that you learned during the course or school.
R29. In my personal thinking using notes from the lectures and information from books is not a big crime. It helps me to comprehend how task is required to be done. And also I think, that way I avoid stress.



As R29. (R. here and elsewhere will stand for “research participant”) notes, using notes “is not a big crime.” Similarly, R28. points out that university assessment should in fact include open-book type testing where student notes would be used, even if it was a foreign language, such as English, class.

Around 14% of the research participants used class materials such as slides, handouts and others during different types of assessment when they did not understand something or wanted to check their answers before submitting them. Several examples can be found in the table below.

Table 3. Students used their class materials during the assessment of English

Statement 2
R1. I rarely use my notes. Maybe on 1 or 2 questions if I don't understand something. But usually I just guess in that case.
R7. I just used my class materials because I want to check myself and I want to do exam myself.

It seems that students did not use class materials often, but when they did, they wanted to make sure they had correct answers, which was related to the pressure they felt to be correct that later led to a better grade. On the other hand, sometimes looking at the materials served as a means to understand tasks instead of asking for an explanation from the teacher who was proctoring a particular test or some other form of assessment online.

Approximately 17% of the respondents used the Internet connection during their assessment of English. Reasons for this academic dishonesty varied. However, the following three reasons were provided most frequently by the study participants:

- It was useful to check the spelling of English words.
- They needed to check word meanings on Google Translate.
- They wanted to obtain good grades.

In other words, the reasons for cheating were related either to the students' lack of knowledge in terms of written forms or meanings of vocabulary or the *pressure* to succeed by getting good grades. Table 4 provides some examples of the provided open-ended answers.

It can be stated that the use of the Internet, Google in particular, during testing was a way to get some correct answers that would finally lead to a better grade than these students would get if they did all the tasks themselves. In addition, as the testing happened online, the students pointed out that it was easy to access the information available there, so they simply used the *opportunity*. Moreover, sometimes it was quicker to google the answer rather than try to remember what the student had learned. It was also used to fill in the knowledge gap when something had not been learned but should have been.

Table 4. Students used sources on the Internet during their assessment of English

Statement 3	
R5.	Used internet mostly to double check spelling of the word. We had tests as big as exam before mid-term and final exam to look how the exam will look like and if we're actually prepared for it, in those I've never use any notes or external material.
R8.	Most of the time I was using google translator or I was searching for verbs.
R11.	I know is wrong but it just hard not to search for answers and get better grade, when I can.
R17.	It's very hard not to use information then you have simple access to it. I know that isn't best option to do, but everyone want good grades. In the other hand i don't ask help from other students or friends, because i trust only myself.
R34.	I used the google translate because sometimes it takes time to remember one or another word.
R38.	I used a bit of internet and 1. my own notes (...), not because of not knowing, just in-case.

Some students admitted that cheating was wrong but they did it anyway: e.g. R. 11 "I know it is wrong but it is just hard not to search for answers and get better grade" or R. 28 "Yes, using the notes during test/midterm is cheating, however learning shouldn't be like hammering in" (a literal translation from Lithuanian where it means to learn something by heart). Nevertheless, almost 8% of all questionnaire respondents asked for help from their friends, as probably they would not have been able to do the tasks themselves even if they tried to consult other sources. At other times cheating happened in a way which was not clearly indicated: R2. "I a wanted better mark, so instead of not answering the question I chose to check other information I had."

Nevertheless, it is pertinent to emphasise that academic integrity is important not only in assessment that happens in a test or some other format. For example, in their English classes of different levels at VMU, students usually make presentations, so it was interesting to learn that there were some academic integrity-related issues that probably would have happened even if the classes had been held in a physical classroom, not online, as well, as some students admitted to have plagiarised or self-plagiarised: "I copy-pasted information from an article/ internet when I prepared my presentation because I didn't know the information that I had to use in the presentation and I think I also learned what I used" (R9). One more example on the issue is the following: "My actions are inexcusable and I do not have any good explanation for them. I still study hard for my exams, midterms and tests but my wish to get the best mark I can is stronger than my integrity. The reason I submitted a work from my previous class is because that was the easiest way out and my group and I were already late on that assignment, so we just used my already previously done project and just shortened it to a 5 min presentation" (R3).

This only shows that there is a need to speak about the issue of plagiarism as a component of academic dishonesty not only in a foreign language classroom but

also at all university classes. Just like in other earlier discussed cases, students plagiarised either because they wished to get a better grade or because they had not put the effort to do something themselves. It is important to point out that since the respondents were able to choose more than one provided statement to describe their behaviour, some students indicated they had engaged in several types of cheating. Yet, 80% of them cheated in at least one way.

The reasons why 20% of the respondents relied only on their own knowledge and did not engage in any dishonest behaviour in their online EFL classes when their skills were assessed were related to student personal values, as they explained that they did not like cheating in general, trusted themselves and their knowledge. Some of the open-ended answers are provided in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Students did not engage in any dishonest behaviour in their assessment of English

Statement 13
R4. I know that cheating not helps to improve your level, I am in university, cause I want to be more clever than other from my village who do not believed to powers about desire to study .
R14. I did not use any information to write my exam or midterm.
R16. I did not use notes or internet because I have enough English knowledge from living abroad.
R20. Because I hate cheating.
R21. I didn't use anything. I did everything on tests by myself.
R26. I do not like to cheat.
R37. I am always honest, so I have nothing to explain. My grades were not very good but I got them for what I really knew.
R39. I trust myself.

As R4. Rightly noted, cheating in EFL assessment does not improve one's level of English, but as the students who had cheated explained, their motivation for cheating was related to better grades rather than actual English skills (for more information about Lithuanian students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to study English see Daukšaitė-Kolpakovienė, 2021). As a result, R37 pointed out that s/he relied on the knowledge s/he had gained in the course but this did not result in very good grades. This might lead to a misconception that cheating leads to good grades while being honest does not, since good grades actually depend on one's effort to learn and demonstrated knowledge and skills. Furthermore, students will use English in many contexts outside the online or physical classroom, so by cheating in EFL assessment they actually cheat on their own understanding of the skills they have. Finally, it is good news that in the survey there were students who did not cheat in any way, but on the other hand, the part of such students was rather small.

## Conclusions

Knowledge about the ways students cheat online is useful because their teachers can search for ways to obstruct such behaviour. Most of the ways of cheating in the study could be prevented with the use of more advanced technologies to proctor student assessment. However, such technological advances are quite costly and not all universities can afford them, at least most Lithuanian universities cannot. Thus, there is a need to search for other affordable ways.

Of course, it is important to raise student awareness about the requirements of ethical behaviour whether classes take place in physical classrooms or online, but at the same time, the tasks themselves should be prepared in such a way that open-book exams become possible, as the students would need to apply the knowledge they have, synthesise and compare information rather than include something from their notes or a text book. This may not apply to lower levels of English but would be definitely useful while assessing intermediate and higher levels.

As the study has revealed, the students who cheat are often motivated by their lack of knowledge (related to something they did not learn but should have) or better grades that they hope to obtain. Therefore, it is important to help them understand that grades are meant to show how much of something they already know, what they have not studied enough yet and thus should improve in the future. Consequently, the grades received by cheating do not show anything and do not encourage further improvement or growth in any way. On the other hand, future studies may analyse why grades are so important. Some possible reasons may be related to high expectations of individual students, parental or peer-pressure, possibilities to study free of charge and receive scholarships awarded by the university.

It is important to take into account the fact that the study is limited in the number of its participants. Therefore, it is not possible to generalise its results or claim that most of VMU EFL students cheat online. However, the study sheds light on what sometimes happens in online learning.

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