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Changing attitudes towards academic integrity with language students: Practitioner insights

Roisin Dewart* and Emily Rosales

Abstract
Teaching a language has changed considerably in the last decade due to advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and generative AI (GenAI). In some ways, Google Translate and ChatGPT have simplified using an additional language for many people. However, these tools have also complicated language learning with myriad crutches and supports. At a university in Montreal, undergraduate students and professionals register in English as a second language (ESL) courses for varied reasons. They may have personal motivations, professional motivations, or low motivation when simply fulfilling a program requirement. Likewise, the students' former academic experience may vary greatly. However, they also have something in common: research has indicated that students functioning in an additional language are at an increased risk of suspected academic infractions. A student may be accused of plagiarism or unauthorized assistance when a submitted assignment doesn't reflect the student's previously demonstrated linguistic level. With a sensitivity to the context of language learners, two teachers initially set out to prevent plagiarism by providing information to students in English programs, and this objective shifted over time to promoting academic integrity. This paper details the evolution of a 10-year project, including the impetus for creating a learning module integrated into the university's learning management system (LMS), the conception of the original module, its implementation and impact, and its complete redesign to reflect insights from contemporary scholars in academic integrity and to address concerns with emerging technology. Theoretical underpinnings, the relevant literature, and methods precede the discussion of practical applications.

Keywords
academic integrity; Canada; ESL; GenAI; language; learning module; LMS; plagiarism

Université du Québec à Montréal
***Corresponding author**: dewart.roisin@uqam.ca

Introduction

This practitioner article outlines how the specific needs of language learners and the collective concerns of teachers and administrators were addressed through the creation of a learning management system (LMS) module focusing on academic integrity for English as a second language (ESL) students in a Canadian university. Further, the evolution of the LMS module over a decade reflects the theoretical shift from a punitive to a proactive approach; as such, concerns about overreliance on generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) are addressed.

Theory and Current Literature

Students studying in an additional language may be caught in the crosshairs of institutional policies on academic integrity. International students have been identified as being at a higher risk for reported infractions (Bertram Gallant et al., 2015). Pecorari & Petrić (2014) posit that "patch-writing," such as superficial modification, may be a reason for the higher incidence of these accusations, and Rogerson and McCarthy (2017, as cited by Fatemi & Saito, 2020) characterize this as "source-dependent composition" relating to insufficient academic writing skills. These authors support a position that these suspected infractions are not necessarily intentional. Elaborating on this idea, Fatemi & Saito's (2020) study of unintentional plagiarism among international students found that even high-proficiency speakers of English may not fully understand plagiarism and lack the necessary skills in citing and referencing to meet the host university's norms. In a similar vein, Davis (2024) draws attention to plagiarism detection software that "is disadvantageous to international students who are foreign language speakers, as they are likely to be more reliant on source text and have more difficulty with paraphrasing." (p. 66).

Another issue that can further challenge these students is the complexity and lack of transparency in institutional policies that put students studying in an additional language at a

disadvantage (Davis, 2022; Sanni-Anibire et al., 2021). Further complicating the situation, Rossi (2022) notes that teachers often align paraphrasing with avoiding plagiarism, rather than properly explaining the true art and purpose of this academic skill. These challenges underscore the complex barriers language learners face when engaging with academic integrity frameworks and institutional expectations, as they face challenges that hinder their academic success at multiple stages. Teachers' emphasis on avoiding plagiarism, as well-intentioned as it may be, has left many students feeling stressed, frightened and confused (Sanni-Anibire et al., 2021).

Potentially addressing this issue, research related to academic integrity in the last decade has seen a pronounced shift from a focus on punitive practices to proactive practices (Eaton et al., 2017). Likewise, the rhetoric has shifted from a focus on plagiarism, cheating, and fraud to promoting academic integrity and shared values, as reflected in the following definition from the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) 2021: "Academic Integrity is a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to six fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage" (p. 4).

This shift has coincided with a growing interest in equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). A meta-analysis of thousands of English-language abstracts conducted by Wolbring & Nguyen (2023) highlights how an increased awareness of the wide range of learner needs has led to an urgent yet unequal engagement of EDI issues in educational policy and pedagogical practices in higher education across multiple disciplines. Their study sheds light on important gaps in research literature leading to unequal representation, suggesting a bias and a hierarchization of some EDI groups receiving more attention than others across disciplines. In the context of academic integrity and misconduct, Eaton (2022) draws attention to this issue and cautions against a bias in beliefs about academic integrity that often disadvantages international students.

The use of technology has been welcomed in the literature to ensure EDI for disadvantaged groups (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). The elaboration of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (Centre for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2024) is one such example. Davis (2022, 2024) strongly recommends UDL to bridge the gap between EDI and academic integrity by increasing the accessibility of the educational context. More precisely, she encourages integrating UDL principles in material design and delivery, noting that

> students do not all have the same starting point with academic integrity, even if they are all expected to reach the same end point of competence in their academic practice. Due to cultural and prior educational backgrounds, some students may be far from where they need to be. (Davis, 2024, p. 1140)

Research in academic integrity addresses the importance of accounting for EDI in developing policies and procedures intended for students while also implementing a proactive approach (Davis, 2024; Eaton et al., 2017). Defining the shift to a proactive approach, Eaton et al. (2017) underscore the importance of helping students become confident writers equipped with solid citing and referencing skills, as well as encouraging open dialogue about academic integrity and copious feedback.

However, the landscape that covers academic integrity has been further complicated in the last five years with the introduction of GenAI. For example, Corbin et al. (2025) found that a lack in institutional guidelines left the brunt of decisions in terms of ethical use of AI up to students, creating additional stress. The authors acknowledge that a single unified approach for institutional guidelines is unrealistic and instead suggest a *Dynamic Educational Boundaries Method* that is discipline specific. This addresses the need for guidelines but also acknowledges that a single institutional approach to GenAI usage is unrealistic. It is in this context, with little institutional guidance, and with specific language courses vulnerable to GenAI misuse, that the module presented here was developed.

Sociocultural Framework

Students enrolled in English language courses may come from diverse backgrounds and, as such, may potentially differ in their understanding of academic integrity and the values it encompasses. Davis (2024) identifies international students and those of certain ethnic or widening backgrounds as EDI populations requiring additional support when it comes to understanding academic integrity. Compounding this complexity, these groups may encounter conflicting messages about GenAI use in their courses at university (Corbin et al., 2025). Consequently, providing students with a shared resource to support their understanding of key concepts related to academic integrity ensures that students are not left to navigate dense policy documents (Davis, 2022) on their own. Grounded in sociocultural theory, this intervention reflects the dynamic process of regulation, wherein cognitive tasks are managed through external or internal mediation via three processes: object-regulation (supported by objects), other-regulation (supported by other people), and self-regulation (Lantolf et al., 2020). Specifically, an asynchronous academic integrity module serves as a tool for *object-regulation*, scaffolding individual development. While classroom activities and peer engagement facilitate *other-regulation*, the module ensures that all students begin with a unified point of reference. This shared foundation reinforces integrity principles, fostering the internalization process where the cultural tool (the module) and social interactions collectively cultivate *self-regulation*. Ultimately, the goal of adopting a unified approach across all English language courses is to ensure that students possess clear, consistent reference points for making informed decisions regarding the use of AI in their studies.

Methods

Student Population and Context

The targeted student population consists of adult undergraduate students enrolled in high-beginner to advanced ESL classes at a French-language university in the province of Quebec. French is a first or additional language for all students, and varied first languages are represented, including Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and Farsi. These students are either in a one- or two-year English language program or fulfilling an English language proficiency requirement from other programs, such as business, accounting, communications, or science. The university's credited English language programs comprise oral and written comprehension and production courses.

Instruments and Implementation

In 2016, faculty disciplinary records indicated that academic infractions were particularly high in English language programs. Through formal and informal exchanges, teachers were prompted to reflect on measures to address this issue. Teachers collectively noted that language proficiency created barriers at several occasions. First, students with lower French or English skills struggled to access and interpret critical resources like university regulations, citation guidelines, and course syllabi. Second, teachers reported inconsistent instruction on integrating references across courses, leading to student confusion regarding proper citation methods and paraphrasing. Third, teachers perceived that the distinction between acceptable collaboration and copying from peers, as well as the notion of self-plagiarism were ambiguous for students. These challenges highlighted the potential for an accessible, low-stakes educational tool that could be easily integrated into all courses to support students in understanding complex academic integrity concepts and appropriate behaviour. In light of these insights, the first iteration of the academic integrity module featured specific definitions, paraphrasing guidelines, and links to additional university resources. Students were required to complete the module, cheekily named *Can't Say You Didn't Know*, before accessing any content for each of their courses. This ensured that students grasped both the practical and regulatory aspects of academic honesty before beginning their studies. By integrating comprehension questions with immediate, non-punitive feedback, the module aimed to bridge the gap between inconsistent teacher instruction and student misunderstanding. This approach further sought to clarify university regulations while accommodating diverse language proficiencies through user-friendly, accessible content using the familiar interface of the LMS. The implementation of this first iteration of the module had a positive impact, with no reported academic infractions for several years.

Following the pandemic in 2020 and the introduction of ChatGPT in November 2022, there was a slow but steady rise in the number of reported cases of academic infractions. Considering this context, revisions to the module attempted to integrate certain aspects of UDL to improve engagement, representation, and action/expression, which are informally known as the *what, why, and how of learning* (CAST, 2024). Specifically, modifications for engagement (the "what") addressed setting expectations by mentioning the module's purpose and duration, and by optimizing autonomy through the integration of an honour code. Representation additions (the "why") addressed perception, language, and comprehension. Perception improvements included audio reinforcement of all information. Language modifications included providing resources in French for additional support. Comprehension updates addressed the activation of background knowledge. Action and expression (the "how") were promoted by providing alternative resources, including a link to in-person assistance. Unfortunately, these revisions did not have an impact on the rising number of reported cases of infractions.

The third and final phase of the module was a complete paradigm shift away from a focus on plagiarism towards embracing the aforementioned six values of the ICAI definition of academic integrity. Given the university's stated intention to develop a separate institution-wide module addressing cross-discipline issues, such as referencing and paraphrasing, minimizing redundancy was a priority. Consequently, the design of this phase narrowed to address the specific challenges encountered by students working in an additional language, and the new module aimed to better reflect the proactive approach set forth by Eaton et al. (2017) and promoted by Davis (2024). To achieve this, the module was structured around the four guidelines for the UDL principle of "comprehension" (CAST, 2024): activating or supplying background knowledge; highlighting patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships; guiding information processing and visualization; and maximizing transfer and generalization. By embedding these strategies, the module ensures that complex concepts of academic integrity are not merely presented but are made accessible and transferable for learners navigating a second language. This final iteration emphasizes the vocabulary associated with academic integrity by beginning with an exercise identifying the six values and a matching exercise associating specific behaviours to those values. This is followed by screen captures and short animations that depict students engaging in acceptable versus questionable behaviour as they use AI to support their language studies. Students must identify which of the two behaviours best reflects the six values of academic integrity. These short screen captures and the behaviours associated with the six values in the first part of the module are randomized so students are exposed to new behaviours each time they complete the quiz. This feature models and reinforces appropriate behaviour, and it ensures that students continue to engage and reflect on the topic of academic integrity. It also retains elements of the first iteration being low-stakes, easy to use and incorporating immediate feedback.

Key Insights and Practical Applications

Returning to sociocultural theory and the three processes of mediation, the module presented here represents *object-regulation* through the development and integration of an academic integrity learning module, which constitutes one strand in a multipronged approach as other scholars have advocated (Dawson et al., 2024; Eaton, 2022, 2024). Another critical strand involves *other-regulation* in the form of teacher guidance, student discussions, and open advocacy, which have also been underscored in previous literature (Davis, 2024), which needs to be nurtured throughout students' academic career.

This values-based orientation aligns with contemporary calls to move beyond punitive measures toward educational models that foster genuine understanding and reflects Eaton's (2024) call to ensure inclusive practices that respect cultural differences. Also, by directly addressing appropriate use of AI in a language class by modelling behaviour that promotes learning rather than AI reliance, this module reflects Eaton's (2024) insistence that use of AI is not necessarily synonymous with infraction. Finally, by alleviating some of the instructional burden on teachers and treating academic integrity as a shared, department-wide engagement, the focus returns to pedagogy and moves away from policing, as promoted by Eaton (2024). The approach of this module aims to ultimately support the internalization process, wherein students develop self-regulation capacities that extend beyond the immediate context of the module into broader academic practice.

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