

The Relationships among Attitudes towards Cheating, Academic Self-Confidence, and General Language Ability among Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between attitudes towards cheating, academic self-confidence, and general language ability among Iranian EFL learners. One hundred and thirty-nine university EFL students participated in this study. Findings showed that attitudes towards cheating negatively correlate with academic self-confidence and ability as measured by students' GPA. The relationship between age, gender, level of education, and attitudes towards cheating was examined too. Analyses showed that there is a negative correlation between age and attitudes towards cheating. However, no relationship was found between gender and level of education, and attitudes towards cheating. Furthermore, psychometric qualities of the Attitudes towards Cheating Questionnaire were examined. Analyses revealed that some items had low and negative item discrimination indices. When malfunctioning items were deleted the reliability of the scale improved. Implications of the study on correlates of cheating among Iranian EFL learners and the validity of the Attitudes towards Cheating Questionnaire are discussed.

Keywords: Academic Self-confidence, Attitudes towards Cheating, General Language Ability

1. Introduction

Oxford English Reference Dictionary (Pearsall & Trumble, 1996) defines *cheating* as “to deceive or trick, deprive of, or to gain unfair advantage by deception or breaking rules, especially in a game or examination” (p. 249). According to Jackson, Levine, Furnham, and Burr (2002) cheating has different forms which represent different dishonest behavior that happen in business or educational situations.

Although students know that cheating is unacceptable behavior, they do not stop it on exams. Researchers believe that there is a cheating culture among students (McCabe, Trevino, &

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Butterfield, 1999). Students follow their classmates to understand what is the norm, although they know cheating is a prohibited and dishonest activity, they believe it is a norm and it is acceptable in their institution. It can be understood that peer pressure can cause the occurrence of cheating (Graham, Monday, Brien & Steffen, 1994; Kibler & Kibler, 1993). Cheating can be for different reasons; usually students cheat on exams to gain better scores.

McCabe, et al. (1999) referred to some factors like pressure to get high scores, pressures of parents, interests to be an excellent student, pressure and having stress to get a job, laziness, absence of responsibility, low self-image, a lack of self-confidence, and a deficiency of personal morality as reasons of cheating. Later McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield (2001) indicated that individual and contextual factors both impact the occurrence of cheating, but suggested that contextual factors are the most influential factors.

Collins and Schmidt (1993) indicated that personality features like carelessness, lack of responsibility, absence of trustworthiness, and also ignorance of rules and norms of society are associated with cheating, while Jackson et al. (2002) stated that environment (department situation) plays an important role in doing illegal behavior. Therefore, cheating as a wrongdoing activity is not just the responsibility of the individual.

There are individual and group factors that can cause cheating. Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes, and Armstead (1996) believe that many reasons like time pressure, extenuating circumstances, and peer pressure can cause cheating. However, there are some factors that cheaters focus on which indicates that situational factors can have more effect on the occurrence of cheating than individual factors. While some individual factors such as laziness and fear of failure can contribute to cheating, group differences such as gender, age, academic achievement, and the discipline studied can correlate with cheating too. Moreover, Murdock, Miller, and Goetzinger (2007) argued that some classroom factors like poor education and teaching system, the importance of scores, and the way students perform on the exam are some sources which make students think cheating is reasonable. As a result of this, contexts like the classroom can cause cheating to seem as a norm and a routine activity in educational settings.

Students can be divided into two groups, one group as learners whose goal is to gain knowledge and another group of students who are seeking high grades. For the latter group, performance on exams is more important and it seems that they are more motivated to cheat. Jordan (2001) and Newstead et al. (1996) suggested that students who try to gain high grades on exams and just look for the results of performance are more probable to cheat than those who are enthusiastic to learn something new. This finding seems to be true for able students; students who are seeking to learn to make progress in the long run and therefore less interested in cheating compared to students who are less able.

Many previous studies consider cheating as a unitary concept (e.g., Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992) but today researchers believe that the study of cheating as a unitary concept is too simplistic. Later they suggested that cheating is not one dimensional and is a continuum (Newstead et al., 1996). Rettinger, Jordan, and Peschiera (2004) assumed that there are two kinds

of motivation in cheating; intrinsic and extrinsic; intrinsic motivation which refers to mastery causes less cheating than extrinsic which refers to performance. Based on this research we can consider language ability as a component of mastery (intrinsic motivation) and it can be plausible to expect the same relation with cheating.

Jackson et al. (2002) in their research showed that almost 50% of the variance of cheating behavior is related to demographic, environmental, and individual differences. Individual factors such as principles, behaviors, attitudes, ethics, and norms have an effect on cheating behavior. Also, their findings showed that more successful students have reported less cheating and less successful students with lower grade point average (GPA) cheat more.

Based on reviews, some studies found a negative relationship between cheating and GPA (Crown & Spiller, 1998), whereas others show a positive relationship between these two variables (Whitley, 1998). Bushway and Nash (1997) pointed out that lower school achievement leads to cheating more while Whitley (1998) found a reverse relationship between these variables. Also, McCabe and Treviño (1997) studied some individual-level factors and found that students with higher GPAs cheat less than students with lower GPAs.

Scheers and Dayton (1987) found a negative relationship between the GPA of students and willingness to cheat. Many researchers believe that cheating is common in education (Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff, & Clark, 1986). Based on this belief, it seems that it is impossible to eliminate cheating behavior or stop the incident of cheating completely in educational systems, but maybe by knowing its correlates and the variables which lead to cheating its rate of occurrence can be controlled or decreased.

Newstead et al. (1996) argued that generally as achievement increased in students, the incidence of cheating decreased. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, individual factors such as self-image, evaluation apprehension (Jahedizadeh & Ghanizadeh, 2021), and personality are related to the tendency to cheat. Thus, the aim of the present research is to study the relationship between academic self-confidence, GPA, and cheating among undergraduate students of English as a foreign language.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

One hundred and thirty-nine Iranian English as a Foreign Language university students, 49 males, and 90 females participated in the present study. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 54 ($M=25.69$, $SD=6.46$) and were all selected based on their availability. The questionnaires of the study were shared online on Google Forms and those who were interested took part in this study.

2.2 Instruments

In this study, two questionnaires were used to collect the data. Attitudes Towards Cheating Questionnaire (ATC, Gardner & Melvin, 1988) was used to collect information on the students' propensities toward cheating. The questionnaire had demographic questions too. It was

in a four-point Likert scale ranging from 4 (*Strongly Agree*) to 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) (see Appendix, in the Persian language). Higher scores indicate more relaxed and carefree attitudes towards cheating. Items 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 20, 23, 24, 27, 29, and 34 should be reverse scored. The original questionnaire was in English, but for the purposes of this study, it was translated into Persian. The Persian version was back-translated into English by another colleague and the two English versions were compared and major discrepancies were noted. The psychometric properties of the Persian ATC were examined in this study.

The Persian translation of the Academic Self-confidence questionnaire (Sander & Sanders, 2006) was used for measuring academic self-confidence in Iranian EFL learners. It was translated and validated by Heydari (2018, as cited in Tabatabaee-Yazdi, Samir, Baghaei Moghadam, 2020) and was in Likert format with six options. The questionnaire contains 24 items on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*Not at All Confident*) to 5 (*Very Confident*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the scale in this study was .95.

3. Analyses

3.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, variances, minimum, and maximum for each of the scales in the study. Since the nature and the number of items in each test are different we cannot directly compare the tests. The maximum possible score for each test is given to make comparisons.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics for the tests used in the study

	ATC	ASC	GPA
Mean	64.02	78.49	16.23
Median	65	81	16.25
Mode	66	80	16
SD	8.98	23.76	2.05
Variance	80.73	564.71	4.23
Range	54	98	19.85
Min.	40	22	12
Max.	94	120	19.85
Max. Possible Score	104	120	20

ATC= Attitude toward Cheating, ASC= Academic Self-Confidence, GPA= Grade Point Average

3.2 Psychometric properties of the Persian translation of the ATCS

Since the ATC scale was translated from English into Persian some psychometric analyses were conducted to establish the quality of the questionnaire. Table 2 shows the corrected item-total

correlations, means, and the value of Alpha if the items deleted. The table reveals that Items 6, 9, 12, 13, 15, 22, 24, 25, and 33 have small (below .20) or negative item total correlations; therefore, do not contribute to the definition of the ATC Scale. Thus, these items were deleted.

Table2.

Means, corrected item correlations, and Alpha if item deleted for the ATC Scale

Item	Mean	Corrected item-total Correlation	Alpha if item deleted
1	2.71	.28	.81
2	2.18	.32	.81
3	1.99	.41	.81
4	2.42	.38	.81
5	3.16	.25	.81
6	2.72	.15	.81
7	3.00	.29	.81
8	2.75	.33	.81
9	3.49	.19	.81
10	2.31	.41	.80
11	2.26	.38	.81
12	2.44	.06	.82
13	2.99	.17	.81
14	2.64	.34	.81
15	2.59	.00	.82
16	2.70	.50	.80
17	2.57	.48	.80
18	2.84	.26	.81
19	2.40	.59	.80
20	3.20	.40	.81
21	2.96	.49	.80
22	2.01	.14	.82
23	3.24	.38	.81
24	3.21	.19	.81
25	2.40	.14	.82
26	2.22	.29	.81
27	2.30	.34	.81
28	2.22	.53	.80
29	2.72	.37	.81
30	2.61	.45	.80
31	2.91	.37	.81

32	2.17	.40	.81
33	2.12	-.10	.82
34	1.93	.30	.81

Table 3 shows the different reliabilities for the scale. According to Table 3, the reliability of the ATC questionnaire increased when the low-quality items were deleted. Thus, a 26-item scale is suggested.

Table 3.
Reliability Statistics

	ATC-34	ATC-26	ASC
Cronbach's Alpha	.81	.84	.95
Spilt-half	.81	.84	.95
Guttman	.81	.83	.95
N of items	34	26	24

ATC-34= Attitude toward Cheating with 34 items; ATC-26= Attitude toward Cheating with 26 items; ASC= Academic Self-Confidence

3.3 Correlational analyses

Table 4 depicts the correlations between the 26-item scale of Attitude Towards Cheating, Academic Self Confidence, and Grade Point Average (GPA). As expected, there is a negative correlation between attitude toward cheating and academic self-confidence and GPA. That is, those who are more tolerant of cheating or have positive attitudes toward cheating have lower academic self-confidence and lower GPA.

Table 4.
Matrix of correlations between the variables

	ATC	ASC	GPA
Attitude toward Cheating	1	-.26*	-.24*
Academic Self-Confidence		1	.44*
Grade Point Average			1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3.4 Demographic variables and cheating

The relationship between gender, level of education, age, and attitude towards cheating were also examined. Findings revealed that there is a small negative significant correlation between age and cheating ($r = -0.20$, $N = 139$, $p < .05$). However, results showed that there is no significant difference

between males ($M=66.95$, $SD=9.05$) and females ($M=67.60$, $SD=10.47$) in attitudes towards cheating $t(137) = .36$, $p = .71$. A one-way analysis of variance showed that year of study is not related to attitudes towards cheating ($F(137, 3) = .43$, $p = .73$). That is, there was no significant difference in the ATC means of first-year ($M=69$, $SD=5.56$), second-year ($M=65.20$, $SD=12.70$), third-year ($M=67.17$, $SD=9.87$), and fourth-year ($M=67.37$, $SD=9.96$) EFL university students.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the correlates of attitudes towards cheating. To this end, two factors were selected and their associations with the propensity to cheating were examined. ASC and GPA were selected as predictors of tolerance for cheating. The Attitudes towards Cheating Questionnaire (Gardner & Melvin, 1988) and Academic Self-Confidence Scale (Sander & Sanders, 2006) were employed to measure the variables of the study. Respondents' GPAs, as reported by themselves, were also obtained.

In the first step, the ATC scale was translated into Persian. The psychometric properties of the Persian version of the scale were examined. Corrected item-total correlations and reliability indices were evaluated. Eight items with low and negative item-total correlations were deleted and a 26-item scale was used. The shorter scale enjoyed better psychometric properties than the full scale.

The correlations between the ATC and ASC and GPA were computed. The coefficients of correlations between attitudes towards cheating and students' academic self-confidence and their GPA were small and negative. This is an indication that students with lower self-confidence and those with lower ability are more tolerant of cheating and will cheat more often. Although Jordan (2001) stated that there is no significant relationship between cheating and GPA, most of the previous studies have revealed a negative relationship between cheating and GPA (Klein, Levenburg, McKendall, & Mothersell, 2007; Nazir & Aslam 2009; Vandehey, Diekhoff, & LaBeff, 2007).

It is worth mentioning that these correlations support the construct validity of the ATC scale too. Bachman (1990) states that in construct validation we empirically test the hypothesized relationships between latent traits. Such hypotheses are conjectural statements about the relationships among constructs. In other words, construct validation is a kind of verification or falsification of a scientific theory. In the case of the current study, we can conjecture that attitudes towards cheating should be negatively related to academic self-confidence and GPA. Coefficients of correlations confirmed these hypotheses and, therefore, can be considered as validity evidence for the ATC scale. Furthermore, there was a moderate correlation ($r = .44$) between GPA and ASC indicating that more confident students have higher GPAs.

Many researchers have tried to understand the reasons and correlates of cheating and have found different reasons for cheating including peer pressure, laziness, low self-image, etc. (Collins & Schmidt, 1993; McCabe, et al., 1999; Newstead, et al., 1996). The current research contributed

to our understanding of the correlates of cheating as academic self-confidence and low ability were found to be contributing to the tolerance of cheating.

Although most of the previous studies have shown that males have more propensities towards cheating (Al-Qaisy, 2008; Becker & Ulstad, 2007; Lim & See, 2001; Nazir & Aslam, 2009) the results of this study revealed that there are no differences between males' and females' attitudes toward cheating, which can support Ahmadi (2012) who carried out a study on the patterns of cheating behavior among Iranian ELF learners. This is in line with Crown and Spiller (1998) who found that the effect of gender on cheating is declining.

Tang and Zuo (1997) found that the older students cheat more than younger students, though many studies have found that the rate of cheating is more in younger students, and negative correlations have been found between age and cheating among students (Klein et al., 2007; Newstead et al., 1996; Vandehey et al., 2007; Whitley, 1998). As well, in this study, researchers found a negative correlation between age and attitudes toward cheating among EFL students ($r = -0.20$). This is in line with Ahmadi (2012) who also found a small negative significant correlation between age and attitudes towards cheating ($r = -0.27$). This means that younger students have more tendencies towards cheating. Nazir and Aslam (2009), however, mentioned there is no relationship between age and cheating.

Al-Qaisy (2008), Christine and James (2008), and Zastrow (1970) stated that there is no significant relationship between the level of education and rates of cheating. However, Jordan (2001) found that there are differences among first-year students, juniors, and seniors. He stated the rate of cheating is higher in first-year students. The results of this study are in line with those of Al-Qaisy (2008), Christine and James (2008), and Zastrow (1970). Similar to Ahmadi (2012) we found no significant differences among students of different years of study in attitudes towards cheating.

In this study, only the contribution of GPA and ASC to ATC were examined. Further research in the future should examine other personality and demographic factors that might explain the propensity to cheating among Iranian students. One major contribution of this study is the introduction of a cheating scale and providing some initial validity evidence for it. Further studies are required to adduce other sources of evidence for the validity of the ATC questionnaire both in English and Persian. We examined the relationship between age, gender, and academic level with attitudes towards cheating. Other researchers are encouraged to study the relationship between the field of study, marital status, occupational status, type of university, and stakes of the test with attitudes towards cheating.

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			17- تمام امتحانات باید با کتاب باز باشد، چون در زندگی واقعی (روز ممر) همیشه می توانیم به کتاب نگاه کنیم.
			18- دانشجویانی که تقلب دانشجوی دیگری را ببیند و گزارش دهد، نباید در شناسایی متقلب کمک کند.
			19- اگر بیشتر از نصف کلاس در تکالیف تقلب می کنند، دیگران نیز حق دارند تقلب کنند.
			20- دانشجویان باید متقلب را با اسم گزارش دهند.
			21- اگر سیستم نمره دهی استاد ناعادلانه است، دانشجویان حق دارند تقلب کنند.
			22- درس خواندن معمولاً باعث نمره ی بهتر نمی شود.
			23- بیشتر دانشجویانی که تقلب می کنند، آدم هایی غیلا لاقی هستند.
			24- بهانه آوردن برای انصراف از یک درس برای جلوگیری از افتادن، تقلب است.
			25- دانشجویان باهوش بدون داشتن مطالعه نمرات خوبی کسب می کنند.
			26- تمام هدف دانشگاه رفتن، مدرک گرفتن است.
			27- دانشجویانی که تقلب می کنند، به اندازه ی دیگران یاد نمی گیرند.
			28- هیچ چیز اشتباهی در رابطه با تقلب وجود ندارد، غیر از خطر گرفتار شدن (لو رفتن).
			29- اگر دانشجویانی تصادفاً جواب سوالی را روی برگه ی یک نفر دیگر ببیند، نباید از آن جواب استفاده کند.
			30- امتحان و نمره فقط یک بازی با دانشجویان است، که دانشجویان یک طرف و استاد در طرف دیگر است.
			31- امتحانات دانشگاه اطلاعات مفید و یا توانایی را اندازه گیری نمی کند.
			32- بیشتر دانشجویانی که متهم به تقلب کردن هستند، در واقع بی گناهند.
			33- بیشتر دانشجویان هرگز تقلب نمی کنند.
			34- وقتی که دانشجوی متقلب، تقلب را انکار می کند، اینکار در واقع دروغ گویی است.

Items 6, 9, 12, 13, 15, 22, 24, 25, and 33 were deleted due to low and negative item-total correlations.

Items 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 20, 23, 24, 27, 29, and 34 should be reverse scored.