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4 Ways to Teach ELs About Academic Honesty

by Amy Cook

"Please, miss," the student begged. "I'll do anything. I'll kiss your feet. *Please* let me pass."

A few hours earlier, this student had cheated on the final exam. After being confronted with evidence of his dishonesty, he confessed, and he, along with his cousin, pled with me not to follow the course policy. According to the syllabus, the consequence for cheating was a zero on the exam, which would result in a failing grade for the entire course.

Though I've experienced a number of unpleasant situations related to academic dishonesty since then, that scene from my first semester teaching in a university intensive English program remains vivid in my memory.

Sadly, this situation is not unusual. Nor are such issues isolated to language classrooms. Numerous studies have shown that the majority of students have been academically dishonest during their undergraduate studies (Hughes & McCabe, 2006). Many professors are quick to express their frustration with the number of students, especially international students, cheating or plagiarizing their way through the university. It's debatable, though, whether nonnative speakers are actually more likely to cheat or are just more likely to get caught (Choo & Paull, 2013). Regardless, academic dishonesty is not an issue that can be ignored.

As English language educators, it's our job to not only teach our students the language necessary for success in their studies, but also the expectations of academic integrity in our classrooms. The idea of intellectual property isn't universal. We need to ensure that our students understand what academic dishonesty is, and what it means in your particular context. However, it's not enough to hand students a handbook full of rules and threaten them with consequences; we also need to teach students how to apply that knowledge. Granted, some aspects of academic integrity, such as not copying from another student's exam, are straight-forward. Yet others, such as paraphrasing and citing information from a source, are more complicated. As educators, we need to teach students how to be academically honest.

In my U.S. classroom, I look for ways reinforce the concepts of academic honesty through my lessons. Here are a few ways to do this.

1. Weekly Quiz: A "Cheat" Week

One of my favorite ways to do this is by creating a variation on the weekly quiz. Once the term is underway, announce that for 1 week only students can use whatever resources they want on the quiz—phones, books, notes, talking with other students—essentially everything is fair game. After the quiz, point out that if they had used their phones or other resources on the previous week's quiz, it would have been cheating. Remind them that if they use their phones on the next week's quiz, it will be cheating. Then, ask them why it wasn't cheating this week. You want your students to recognize that the context—especially the parameters set by the instructor—is critical. Emphasize the importance of asking for clarification if they don't understand the parameters of the assignment.

2. Helping vs Cheating Journal Entry

Another activity I often ask my students to do is to write a journal entry about the difference between helping and cheating. The line between helping and cheating can be fuzzy, and it helps to open a dialogue about the topic. After the students write, give them the opportunity to share their ideas and discuss them. Lead the discussion with questions, such as:

- Is it okay to work with your classmate on your worksheet?
- Is it okay to write a sentence for your cousin?
- Is it okay to look at another student's test?

As with the quiz activity, emphasize the importance of context and being aware of the parameters set by the teacher. For example, the question of whether it's okay to work with a classmate on a worksheet depends on the directions given by the teacher for that specific assignment. Remind your students that any time they aren't sure about the assignment expectations, they should ask their teacher.

3. Break Big Assignments Into Smaller Tasks

As much as possible, when I design an assignment (especially daunting tasks, such as writing a research paper), I break the assignment into smaller components. I do this for two reasons.

First, students are more likely to be academically dishonest when they don't think they know how to complete an assignment or when they don't feel they have enough time to complete it. To combat this, break the assignment into components and set smaller deadlines. Also set aside time in class for students to work on the assignment. This allows the students to invest in the assignment and gives you the opportunity to provide them with feedback early in the process. Students who feel that they can be successful are less likely to feel pressure to be academically dishonest.

Second, breaking down the assignment into smaller tasks makes it easier for students to learn from their mistakes. After all, learning about academic honesty is a process, and some students learn best from experience. You want them to learn from their failures early in the assignment, so

that they can be successful at the end. It is much easier to recover from a zero on a first draft than a failing grade on the final product.

4. Be Fair and Firm

As an educator, I do my best to prepare my students to be successful in their academic careers, yet I also acknowledge that ultimately it is up to the students to apply what I've taught them. Despite my best efforts, the reality is that some students will decide to engage in academically dishonest behavior. Difficult as it is, this necessitates enforcing consequences. Failing to address academic dishonesty frustrates students who honestly completed the assignment because they may perceive that they are at a disadvantage, and increases the likelihood that they will cheat in the future if they perceive that their peers are engaging in misconduct without negative consequences (Hughes & McCabe, 2006). Thus, along with teaching international students the expectations of academic integrity and giving them opportunities to apply this knowledge, as educators, we are also responsible with following through when we do detect plagiarism or cheating.

Much as I hated to do it, that first semester when my student cheated on the final exam, I entered a zero in the course gradebook and recorded a not-passing final grade. It was a horrible way to end the semester. Whether that student learned his lesson or not, I'm not sure, but other students benefited from his cautionary tale. The next semester as I was reviewing the policy in the syllabus regarding cheating, there was a rustle in the back of the classroom. From what I gathered, word had spread through the informal student network that I was serious about academic honesty.

References

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Hughes, J., & McCabe, D. (2006). Understanding academic misconduct. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *36*(1), 49–63.

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