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Academic cheating online during COVID-19 (studying a foreign language as a case study)

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Abstract

The online academic cheating (OAC) is widely discussed in academic circles of different countries. The present study was conducted after the second COVID-19 wave and therefore reflects the process of mass transition to online learning, which contributes to the originality of the research. The specificity of methodological approach is comparing the opinions of teachers and students, a total of 488 respondents answering online questionnaires. According to the data obtained, from 70 to 80 % of students resort to OAC. As a rule, students tend to use lecture and lesson materials for copying and peeking, contrary to the teachers' perception of the use of electronic media. On detecting the deception, 57 % of teachers just admonish students, 39% deduct marks. One third of students believe that teachers tend to overlook fraud. Students report resorting to deception because of lack of confidence in their knowledge. Teachers believe that the reason lies in insufficient preparation for classes. From 50 to 70 % of respondents think that such forms of assessment as a spontaneous answer, free-source research and project work reduce cheating. According to students, individual creative tasks can be added to this list. The most important factor reducing cheating is intrinsic motivation (50-60% of students and teachers). Among the measures proposed by students to combat academic fraud, didactic methods are given the highest priority as well as students' initiatives like the movement in social networks #iliketobehonest, whose icon is shown on a student's screen in an online activity reflecting a conscious decision made by the student.

Keywords: *higher education, academic dishonesty, distance education, online assessment*

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Онлайн-мошенничество студентов в период пандемии COVID-19 (на примере изучения дисциплины «Иностранный язык»)

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Аннотация

Проблемы академического мошенничества онлайн (АМО) широко обсуждаются в научных кругах ученых разных стран. Оригинальность настоящего исследования, проведенного после второй волны пандемии

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COVID-19, заключается в том, что является срезом ситуации, отражающей процесс массового перехода на онлайн-обучение. Особенность методического подхода заключается в сопоставлении мнений на данную проблему преподавателей и студентов. В общей сложности на вопросы онлайн-анкеты ответили 488 респондентов. Согласно полученным данным, к АМО прибегает от 70 до 80 % студентов. Преподаватели российских вузов переоценивают цифровую информационную компетентность студентов при списывании в условиях дистанционного обучения. Как правило, студенты используют для списывания и подсматривания материалы лекций и занятий вопреки распространенному мнению преподавателей об использовании для списывания электронных носителей. Однако 57 % преподавателей при обнаружении факта обмана делают студентам замечания, 39 % снижают баллы. Треть студентов считает, что преподаватели лояльны к проявлению случаев академического мошенничества. Студенты прибегают к обману, так как они не уверены в своих знаниях. Преподаватели считают, что причина кроется в недостаточной подготовке к занятиям. От 50 до 70 % преподавателей полагают, что обман минимален при таких формах контроля, как спонтанный ответ, аналитические задания со свободным доступом к интернет-ресурсам и выполнение проектной работы. По мнению студентов, это еще и индивидуальные творческие задания. Наиболее важным фактором, способным противостоять мошенничеству, является личностная мотивация (50–60 % ответов студентов и преподавателей). Среди предложенных студентами мер борьбы с АМО первое место отводится дидактическим методам. Снижению мошенничества могли бы способствовать такие инициативы, как движение с тегом «Мне нравится быть честным», отражающее решение, осознанно принимаемое самим студентом и значок которого отражается на экране студента на онлайн-занятии.

Ключевые слова: высшее образование, академическое мошенничество, дистанционное обучение, онлайн-контроль

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Introduction

The massive forced transition to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic as highlighted the problems whose solution requires a broad exchange of views. The problem of student academic fraud in the digital world is one of them. The importance of its solution is determined by the fact that it is directly related to the quality of education and therefore will influence the level of competence of future specialists in all industries [1], including vitally important. The problem is so widespread and pervasive that it is widely discussed in the media of many countries in the context of the devaluation of higher education in the mass consciousness and the downgrading of higher education [2].

The topic of academic cheating (AC) arouses international research interest. Since online academic cheating cannot be viewed in isolation from its traditional forms, it is necessary to refer to the studies analyzing its causes, characteristics, rate of expansion, and proposing solutions.

Academic cheating is interpreted as “providing or receiving assistance in a manner not authorized by the instructor in the creation of work to be submitted for academic evaluation including papers, projects, and examinations (cheating); and presenting, as one’s own, the ideas or words of another person or persons for academic

evaluation without proper acknowledgment (plagiarism)” [3].

Various forms of cheating are singled out, the most common forms of which are copying and plagiarism [4, p. 53–54], but in the case of online evaluation looking up answers online should be added.

The number of students who violate ethical standards in their studies ranges from 40 % to 80 % [5]. The percentage of students who have never cheated does not exceed 18 % [1]; 28 % believe that copying several phrases from the Internet is not considered dishonesty [5].

Empirical research conducted in Russian universities prior to the pandemic period shows that between a quarter and half of the students of Russian universities resort to academic cheating [6], with the number of cases of academic cheating increasing to the end of the training period [6, p. 48]. Russian universities are tolerant enough to academic cheating and rarely suppress it at the institutional level [7, p. 10].

With the introduction of the Internet into the educational process, the number of AC cases begins to increase significantly due to the increased availability of cheating methods, the difficulty of its detection, and the high degree of adaptation of students to new technologies.

The switch to distance learning during the pandemic has multiplied the AC problem. ETICO, a special portal of UNESCO, provides data on the unfair behaviour of students from many countries of the world¹.

Data that expose the causes of cheating in the academic environment are of special interest. As a rule, the most frequent is the desire to get the best grade, be among the best in the competitive environment of the university or avoid failure. AC is typical both for weak students and overachievers [4, c. 62]. In the Russian educational sphere, cheating is often perceived as a form of mutual assistance.

What is more, one of the factors is the “tacit collusion”, when students violate ethical norms with the tacit consent of teachers, who in turn reduce the requirements for students, thereby lowering the quality of education [8]. Researchers see the deep-rooted reasons for this situation in the adherence to the “agreement of non-involvement” [9].

Hungarian researchers of the Institute of Psychology regard the teachers’ attitude to their work as one of the reasons for students’ academic dishonesty. They found that less enthusiastic teachers were more likely to have students inclined to AC [10].

Some authors suggest that AC should be seen as a new form of rational copying [11].

As a rule, cases of dishonest behavior of students are detected during an oral or written online assessment, the forms of which are systematized by Canadian researchers [4, p. 12].

The increasing role of academic ethics can help combat academic cheating if it becomes the norm in students’ lives. There are two main approaches to this problem [12]: punitive [13] and value-based [13, 14]. The first is aimed at the application of anti-fraud measures, while the second is based on awareness-raising activities and aimed at the creation of honor codes that exist in a number of universities (e.g. Russian School of Economics, European University). However, in both approaches, the authors draw attention to certain difficulties which, in the case of punishment, are related to different interpretations of dishonest behaviour by teachers and students [15], and, in the second case, to insufficient effectiveness of the codes adopted [16, 17]. The implementation of ethical codes is also hampered by the specificity of the punitive discourse of official documents [12]. In practice, the effectiveness of punitive measures is assessed from high [18, 19] to low [13].

E. D. Shmeleva draws attention to the importance of obtaining empirical data and notes a lack of

situational factors analysis in terms of cheating within individual disciplines [6, c. 19].

The present study is aimed at the study of current forms of online academic cheating (OAC) and the reasons that abet students in cheating to find a solution to the problem.

Conducting the study, we believed that comparing and contrasting teachers’ and students’ opinions on the AC problem would help to understand and analyze students’ predilections for defrauding teachers, identify weaknesses in the organization of assessment by teachers, and propose ways to reduce OAC.

Material and Methods

393 undergraduate students of different specialities and 95 university teachers of foreign languages (FL) of higher education institutions of the Russian Federation were interviewed online. The subject matter of the study required honesty in students’ responses. However, empirical research experience shows that students tend to choose “the correct answers” (manifestation of social desirability). To avoid this, we involved the students themselves in the research to conduct an online survey as part of their research projects.

Results

About 80 % of the surveyed foreign language teachers do not believe that online assessment tasks are performed by students on their own. Half of them are convinced that students resort to machine translation.

Is recourse to outside help sporadic or permanent? 69 % of teachers consider the use of supplementary materials during online assessment occasional, 25 % of teachers suppose that the students always do it.

Students’ answers rates exceed teachers’ expectations, bringing the frequency of rare supplementary materials use to 80 %. Rates of students who always answer independently differ by a factor of 5. The students’ rate of those who confess to copying or looking up supplementary materials permanently is twice as low as the teachers’ (11 %).

The OAC forms are quite varied in written assessment (Figure 1). According to the results of the teachers’ survey, the most common OAC form is the use of machine translation (about 60 %), followed by social media, chats, and the help of friends (about 50 %). In free responses, teachers write that the choice of academic cheating form is determined by the assignment type.

Students’ responses to this question differ markedly. Most of them (66 %) use lecture materials and textbooks.

¹ <https://etico.iiep.unesco.org/fr/topic/academic-fraud?page=16>

Deceiving a teacher in an oral response is more difficult for students, hence we see a smaller set of AC forms (Figure 2). However, students still have the opportunity to look at the screen of another electronic device, which is widely used by them. According to the teachers, textbooks and students' notes are used half as frequently. A third of the students are believed to use headphones.

However, students' practices differ markedly from the teachers' perception. Textbooks and records (62%) remain their main source of information, and only about 40% of them use another electronic device.

What is the teacher's reaction to academic cheating? (Figure 3).

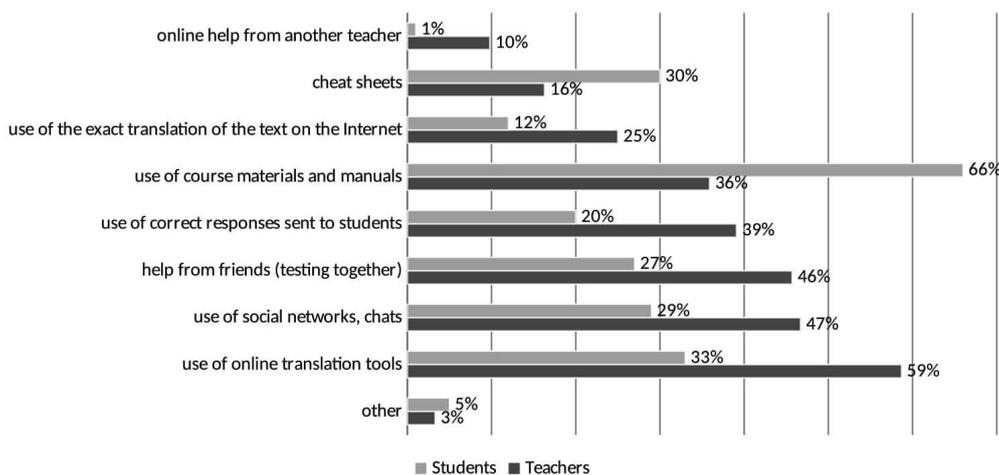


Figure 1. Forms of students' AC during a written online assessment

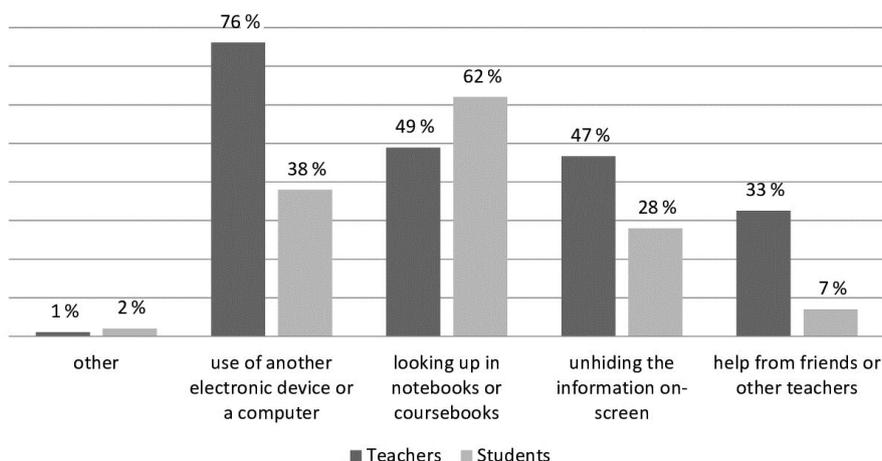


Figure 2. Forms of students' AC during oral online assessment

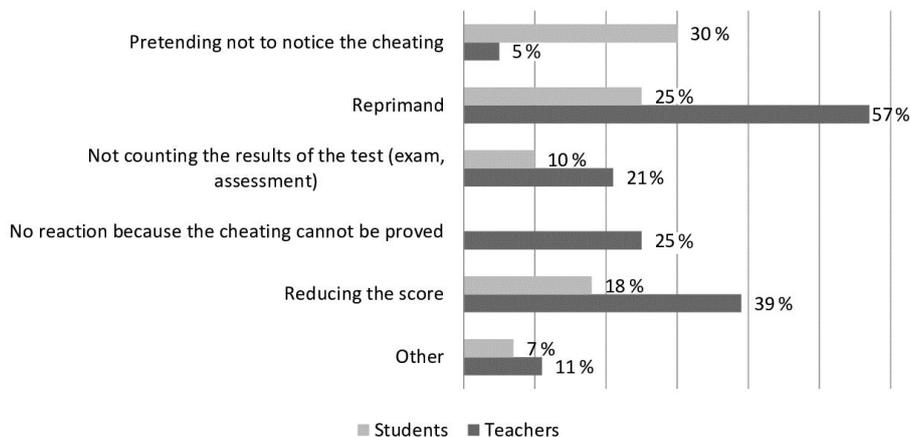


Figure 3. Teachers' reactions to academic cheating

Almost every second teacher reacts to breaches of academic ethics and admonishes the students. Less than a quarter of teachers do not count the results of the test, and a quarter do not react to cheating because they cannot prove it. A third of the students think the teacher is just pretending not to notice cheating. In the experience of a quarter of them, the teachers confine themselves to an admonition.

According to every second teacher, the main reason for AC is a lack of preparation for classes (Figure 4), followed by a fear of poor grades (42 %) and uncertainty in knowledge (37 %).

The students' opinions on this issue vary considerably. For every second of them, the reason for AC is their lack of confidence in their knowledge. For approximately half of them, it is fear of getting a low mark, and for only a third of the students surveyed it is insufficient preparation for classes.

What forms of online assessment will minimize AC? In foreign language (FL) classes, the opinions of teachers and students are similar in terms of spontaneous responses (75 % and 52 %); every

second teacher and student mentioned tasks requiring an independent analytical decision with free access to the Internet resources and implementation of the project. However, there is a wide divergence of views among teachers and students. These include the performance of an individual creative task, which is underestimated by the teachers (8 %), and the reformulation of a pre-prepared topic immediately prior to the oral response (students – 8 %, teachers – 36 %).

What factors would motivate students not to use AC? The absolute leader in the two groups of respondents is “the intrinsic motivation of the students” (Figure 5). The second factor in absolute terms of sum scores is “the absence of the answer evaluation”, closely followed by “honesty”. The remaining factors do not exceed 30 %.

The extent to which students are aware of the negative effects of AC can be seen in Figure 6. Every second is aware that they are self-deceiving, about 40 % feel that they are, and a third of respondents prefer to give up their honesty for good marks.

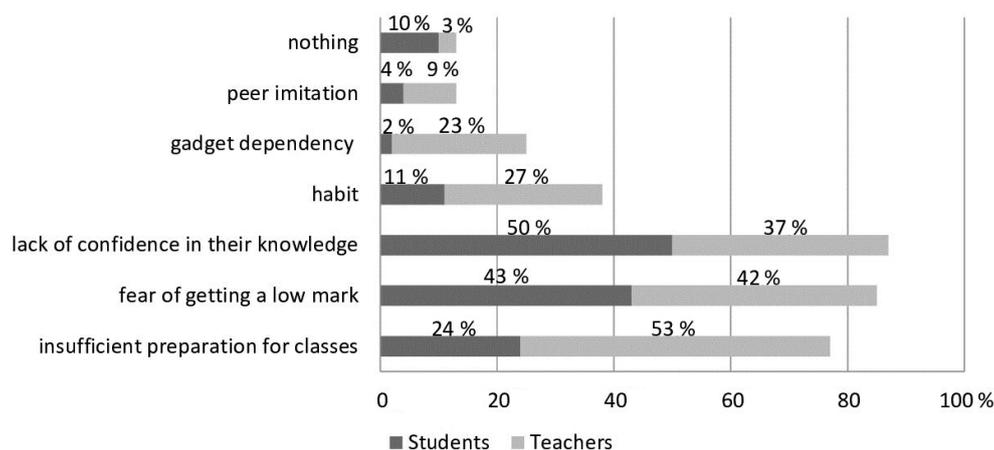


Figure 4. What makes students use outside help during a written or oral online assessment?

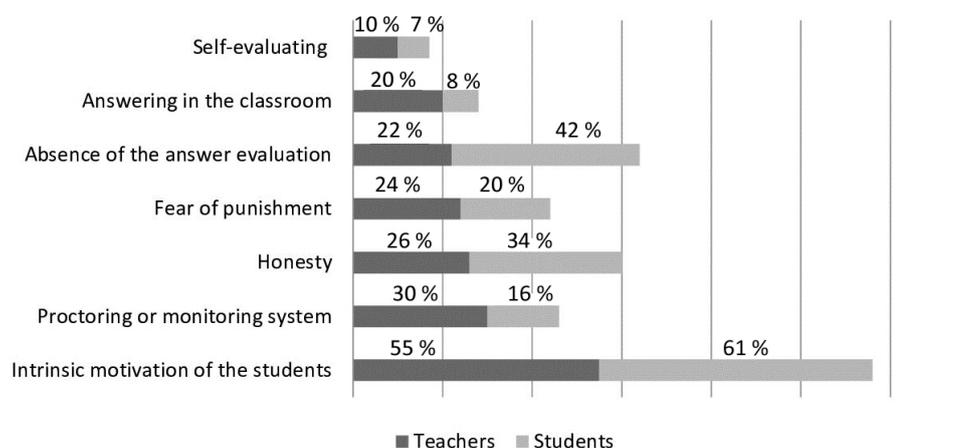


Figure 5. Factors that might motivate students not to resort to academic cheating

I realize that when I am cheating, I ...

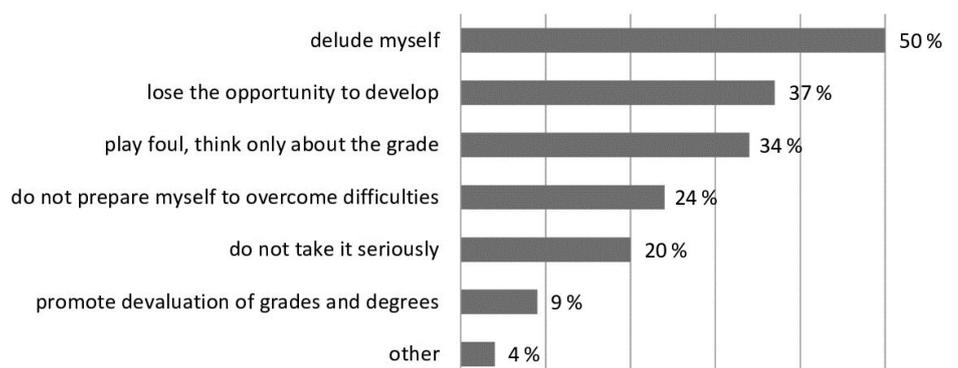


Figure 6. Students' awareness of the consequences of academic cheating

How does academic cheating affect the emotional state of students (Figure 7)? About 40 % don't care, just over 30 % feel a little remorse.

What do students see as the solution to the AC problem? A large number of free responses from students were organized into 4 major groups. A percentage of responses from their total number was counted for each group. The answer "Nothing will help" was 34 %. For each group, options for the most numerous answers are presented. The development of creative tasks was mentioned among didactic methods (34 % of answers); pedagogical methods (16 %) included motivating students, reducing score for cheating, discussing cheating with students, explaining them the value of honesty. Exam monitoring with the help of a camera and e-proctoring tools were named among the technical ones (15 %). Original suggestions (2 %) were the requirement to close your eyes when answering, or the phrase like "I will keep silent to not share ideas with you."

A little over 20 % of teachers have a positive experience in fighting AC, with more than half of them (55 %) taking partial measures. One fifth of respondents did not have one.

Facing with the problem of AC in distance learning, ¾ of the respondents concluded that it was

necessary to adapt the assessment forms to the new learning environment (Figure 8).

From the above-mentioned point about the adaptation of the assessment forms, it follows that most FL teachers (72 %) believe that measures to combat cheating are closely related to didactic tasks whereas for half of the respondents these measures must be preventive (Figure 9). A third of their colleagues rely on pedagogical ones. Supporters of strong and administrative measures are few in number (10–15 %).

The results of the research revealed similarities and differences in the way students and teachers perceive the problem of academic cheating in distance learning. Close indicators values (teachers – 76 %, students – 80 %) include understanding of the scope of the OAC; assessment forms minimizing cheating, motivation factors (intrinsic motivation) that may reduce OAC, and the didactic measures to combat OAC. Students and teachers differ greatly in their understanding of the causes of AC (teachers associate it with poor preparation for classes, while students explain this by uncertainty about their knowledge) and the forms of cheating (teachers believe that electronic media are used while students use textbooks and exercise books).

What do you feel after getting a good mark by cheating online?

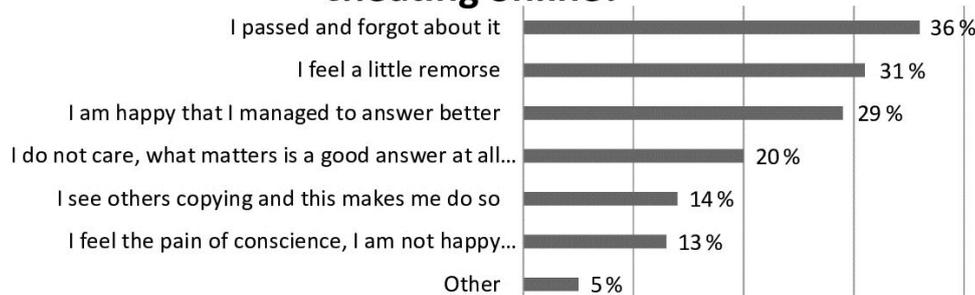


Figure 7. Students' feelings after resorting to AC

Cases of online academic cheating during assessment made you think about ...

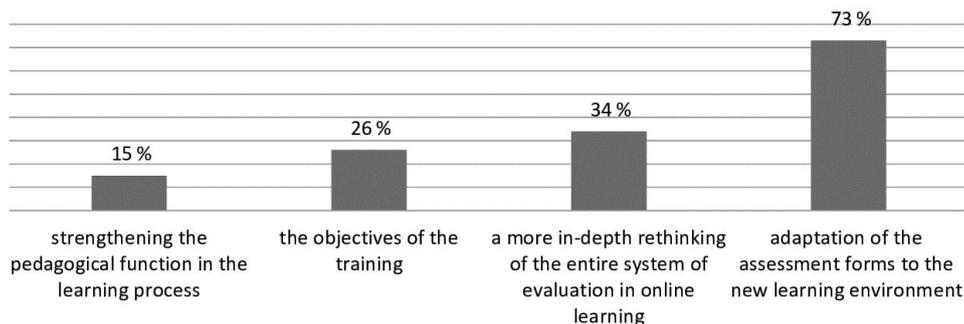


Figure 8. Teachers' reflections on massive academic cheating in the context of online learning

In your opinion measures to combat academic cheating during online assessment should be ...

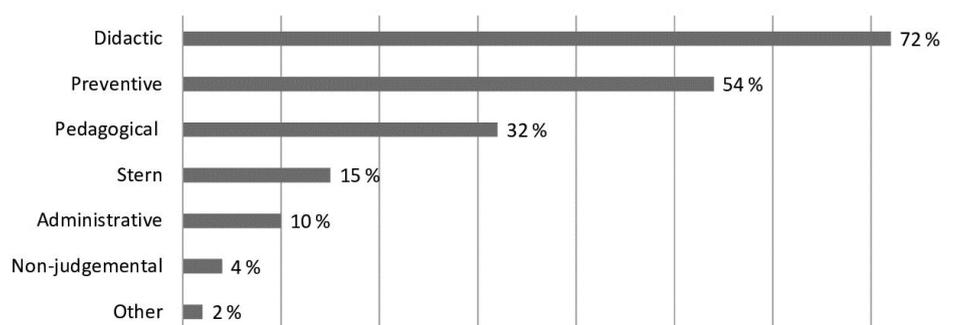


Figure 9. Features of the necessary measures to combat academic cheating

The use of textbooks and notebooks, rather than electronic devices, for cheating by students can be interpreted in two ways: either by exaggerating the students' level of information skills in the educational process or by insisting that the content of specific teaching materials be adhered to in the response. A third possibility is connected with the requirements for the material reproduction, i.e. the degree of its memorization. In favour of the latter are such comments of students as "...I have to learn everything by heart for the exam"; "We are not given enough time to learn everything by heart".

The second important point in the analysis of the didactic aspects of the OAC is the relationship between online assessment forms: diagnostic, forming, summative/final. We see that teachers, especially during emergencies, did not pay much attention to the correlation between different forms of assessment and focused on the final assessment in the form of tests. They did not take into account that this form was the most provocative for the student in terms of OAC.

In addition, high workload of teachers prevented them from developing labour-intensive assignments aimed at building high-level competencies.

In the conditions of a rigid competitive environment [20, p. 40], which is sometimes formed at universities, constant counting of points and striving for their increase becomes often the main dominant behaviour of students, affecting all categories of learners from weak to honors students. And if increasing the scores of a student becomes the main goal of the learning process, then it cannot but cause the emergence of pathological forms of behaviour that are connected with deception. What is more, for almost 40 % of the students surveyed, cheating is not perceived as an ethical violation at all. And a third of them are cheered up by an unfair mark. Only 13 % are not satisfied. At the same time, students are aware of the negative consequences of cheating but consider it more in terms of personal interests. Less than 10 % think about the social consequences of AC, such as the devaluation of an academic degree. The data are, in our view, quite disturbing and require both careful thought and a well-designed educational strategy.

Fear of poor grades (43 % of respondents) also requires the attention of teachers. This may, in part, be a continuation of the school's habit of being responsible to parents for the studies. Nevertheless,

these indicators require us to work both collectively and individually to create a comfortable, including digital, learning environment for students [21].

If every other student is not sure of his or her knowledge, this aspect requires serious didactic work. Again, any opportunity created for students to demonstrate their knowledge will help them to gain confidence, both in the classroom and in extra-curricular activities.

In the absence of institutional measures to deal with AC cases, we notice different perceptions of loyalty to deception by students and teachers. 30% of students tend to think that teachers tend to overlook being deceived, possibly reflecting a common social norm.

Electronic devices facilitate peeking and tempt students to search for information or ready answers during online assessment procedures. Moreover, on the unconscious level, a student may develop a sense of internal competition “Can I deceive (the teacher, perhaps less advanced in the technological aspect) using the latest innovations?”. Therefore, in this case, teachers have to convert electronic devices from a tool for clues to a tool for work even at the stage of assessment. In this regard, it seems useful to consider the concept of “digital autonomy of students during online assessment”, which presupposes a smart use of digital tools at the assessment stage involving information processing in complex intellectual activities. Naturally, the format of each discipline will have its own characteristics as well as the format of the competencies being evaluated. Again, subject knowledge will be closely intertwined with information competencies. However, such an approach would require a major overhaul of the entire evaluation system.

Teachers do not seem to support educative measures – just 15% of respondents are positive about them. However, both categories of respondents are aware of the importance of intrinsic motivation in the fight against OAC. So teachers already have a good foundation for OAC reduction. Indeed, in small study groups, where relationships based on mutual respect are formed, OAC cases can be minimized. It is more difficult to work with a large audience and in situations where the teacher does not have sufficient time and capacity to form a collective opposition to cheating. Among the educative measures taken to combat OAC, students’ responses also suggested lowering points for cheating, discussing OAC cases, and the importance of the rules of honest online conduct with students.

We have tried to involve the students themselves in the fight against OAC. To this end, we initially offered them joint participation in the project

investigating online student cheating, and then helped to launch an initiative to fight OAC in the student community. The initiators created a post for the Francophone Community Page of the Institute of Foreign Languages in social media. The informal and sincere appeal to students about the importance of being honest has elicited a huge public response and positive feedback from social media users. The students plan to continue this work at the university level.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the OAC is a multifaceted problem demanding institutional actions. However, since these measures are now either too costly or sometimes not purely technical, each teacher will have to deal with the problem in the context of a specific discipline with a particular student body. In order to do so, on the one hand, it is essential to know and understand the reasons that provoke students to OAC as part of the disciplinary path and, on the other, to rethink existing approaches to online assessment procedures.

A comprehensive approach to this problem would include the following:

1. Online testing only for diagnostics and interim assessments.
2. Providing students with the opportunity to evaluate their own work independently and self-analyze their own achievements, thus creating a culture of self-assessment in a digital environment.
3. Using situations that give rise to monological, dialogical, or polylogical spontaneous utterances in a final oral assessment.
4. Using online assessment forms in which digital autonomy of students is permitted. In this case, not only the disciplinary component of a particular section but also the information skills in a particular branch of knowledge are tested in strict compliance with ethical standards.
5. Encouraging students’ participation in foreign-language forums, websites, and blogs that can be used for educational purposes.
6. Supporting students’ initiatives to promote honest behaviour during an online assessment, e.g. placing an icon “I like to be honest” or “No cheating” on the screen.
7. Introducing post-editing tasks of machine translations in the learning process, which will allow for a better understanding of their features and shortcomings to reduce extensive mechanical use of electronic translation tools, in particular in written assessment.
8. Working out evaluation algorithms in which a student who has received a high score for a test will

have to confirm it by performing more complex educational tasks.

9. Changing the students' attitude to grades as markers of the quantitative side of an evaluation and transforming them into the means helping correct temporary gaps in the acquisition of knowledge.

10. Discussing digital ethics in the classroom, explaining both the impact of large-scale fraud on perpetrators and society.

11. Using the Internet space to showcase successful student projects, which will encourage the focus on output and provide feedback from the Internet community.

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