



A Search for a Common Thread: Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL Students' Perceptions of Academic Misconduct

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Abstract: The paucity of studies on plagiarism in some under-explored contexts, such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan, highlight the necessity of conducting this study. To this end, 200 Iranian, 185 Afghan, and 170 Tajik EFL students, who share certain commonalities regarding culture and language, participated in the study. The iThenticate (2013) questionnaire and two essay-type questions on the main reasons for committing plagiarism and possible ways to cope with it were employed to examine the participants' perceptions toward it. Findings revealed that the participants from these three countries shared the same ideas regarding the most common and serious forms of plagiarism. It was also found that overall lack of knowledge about plagiarism, absence of severe punishment, and ease of plagiarizing was among the most important reason for committing plagiarism. The study proposed “raising students' awareness of plagiarism and its consequences” and “establishment of severe punishment” as the best possible ways to cope with it.

Keywords: Academic Misconduct; iThenticate; Perceptions; EFL Students; Plagiarism

1. Introduction

With the advent of the Internet, one of the most serious ramifications of the rapid dissemination of information has been the increasing proclivity among students to resort to plagiarism. Although plagiarism dates back hundreds of years, due to the unprecedented technological advances made since the 1990s, it has reemerged as a grave concern of academicians (Pecorari 2008). According to Howard (1995), “An absence of ethics or an ignorance of citation conventions” is the main rationale behind an individual's academic misconduct. Although intellectual property rights and copyright laws have been officially recognized throughout different countries across the globe, specifically in the West, the plague of plagiarism is still on the rise.

Given the high prevalence of academic misconduct at tertiary levels and the threats that academic dishonesty present, both researchers and policymakers are interested in finding proper and plausible ways to prevent plagiarism. A true understanding of the determining factors that affect students' decisions to involve in dishonest behavior can help reduce the prevalence of plagiarism both institutional and academic levels, guarantee the integrity of the degrees that are offered by the authorities, and solidify their brands, reliability, and trustworthiness of higher education systems in general (McCabe et al. 2008). Plagiarism can be regarded as a very important issue for university students (Sutherland-Smith 2008), and many studies have dealt with various dimensions of this issue. One significant area of research has targeted addressing students' viewpoints, attitudes, and perceptions of plagiarism (Kroll 1988). Another important area has investigated the impact of culture on English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' perceptions of plagiarism. While a number of studies have indicated that culture affects plagiarism (Adiningrum & Kutieleh 2011; Deckert 1993; Marshall and Garry 2006), others have shown no significant relationship between culture and plagiarism (Pecorari 2003; Wheeler 2009). Moreover, Park (2003) and Devlin and Gray (2007) have delved into why students plagiarize.

The present study seems important from different vantage points: First, such themes (perceptions about and attitudes towards plagiarism) are critical and pivotal issues that have drawn researchers' attention and led to many published papers. Second, perceptions of and attitudes toward plagiarism are important since such issues impact the kind of perspective academicians adopt and the action they might take (Ismail and Omar, 2017). Finally, perceptions of and attitudes toward plagiarism have attracted researchers' attention from different geographical settings and cultural milieus as conceptualizations of plagiarism are highly influenced by culture (Husain et al. 2017). However, what seems to be the missing element and remains underexplored in the

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previously-done studies is the probable impact that cultural and linguistic similarities might have when it comes to students' perceptions of plagiarism, what it entails, and the way it can best be prevented in various academic settings. Accordingly, the present study attempted to explore the perceptions of the Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students toward the most common and serious forms of plagiarism as they share certain commonalities with regard to their culture and the language that is spoken in their discourse communities. Most Tajik and Afghan people recognize their links with the Persian language, literature, art, and culture (Joharifard, 2010). In spite of the dialectal dissimilarities among these nations, the members of such communities can readily communicate with one another (Spooner, 2012).

2. Literature Review

Afghanistan and Tajikistan were separated from Iran during the Qajar dynasty. When the Paris Treaty of 1857 was signed by Iran and Britain. Iran recognized Afghanistan's independence, and Afghanistan earned its independence from Iran. The Treaty of Akhal was also signed by Persia and Imperial Russia in 1881, according to which Tajikistan was annexed to Russia. Though Persian is regarded as an important language in different countries in West, South, and Central Asia, its status varies from country to country. Although approximately more than half of the Iranian population speak a language other than Persian (Azari/Azeri Turkish), this language is predominantly used as the only official or national language in the country. Persian is also viewed as the official language of Tajikistan, while this status is unofficially shared with Russian as well. Although Persian is considered the official language in Afghanistan, Pashto is viewed as the national language. Nevertheless, other languages can also be spoken in the country without any formal limitations regarding their use. The Afghan dialect of Persian, Dari, is regarded as the second major Afghan language and is widely spoken by the elites. The Persian language is named Dari in Afghanistan, Tajik in Tajikistan, and Farsi in Iran. In spite of the dialectal dissimilarities among these nations, members of these communities can readily communicate with one another without any recourse to assistance from a native interpreter and are able to comprehend a transcribed passage to a similar extent (Spooner, 2012).

Ties with the Persian language, literature, art, and culture are recognized by the majority of Tajik and Afghan people (Joharifard 2010). Many great Iranian, Tajik, and Afghan thinkers, known as Khorasan thinkers, such as Farabi, Rudaki, Kharazmi, Sanaei, Mulavi, Al-Ghazali, and many others, contributed considerably to the Persian language, culture, and heritage in various fields of art, poetry, and religious sciences. Moreover, these three countries share some cultural and religious events like Norouz, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha that make cultural bonds among their people even more intimate and stronger (Seyed Javad, 2012).

2.1. Plagiarism and its roots

The word *plagiarism* has roots in antiquity (Pecorari 2008), and "the derivation from the Latin word meaning 'kidnap' or 'plunder' is indicative of how it has been regarded as a criminal activity since its first usage - parallel to stealing other people's offspring!" (Ange'lil-Carter 2000:16-17). According to (Park 2003: 472), the word plagiarize can be traced to the English word plagiary derived from the Latin word "plagiaries" which means "kidnapper." Plagiarism, as a constant threat and a continuing challenge for academicians, has received various terms in academic writing that makes a distinction between the intentional and unintentional plagiarism (Flowerdew and Li 2007). For instance, Pecorari (2002:2) described plagiarism as "an object which has been taken from a particular source by an agent without acknowledgment and with or without intention to deceive". Taking a stricter stance, Park (2003:472) maintained that "plagiarism involves literary theft, stealing (by copying) the words or ideas of someone else and passing them off as one's own without crediting the source".

2.2. Studies on plagiarism

One interesting avenue of research involves investigating the motives and causes behind plagiarism. Many studies have concentrated on the reasons behind plagiarism and why students engage in such academic dishonesty. Jones (2011) probed into the reasons why students engage in academic dishonesty, primarily cheating and Internet plagiarism. The findings revealed that 92% of the students committed plagiarism to gain better scores in exams. Other reasons mentioned included: lack of interest, time constraints to submit assignments, being too busy, viewing academic dishonesty as trivial and unimportant because everyone else is doing it, and eventually peer pressure.

Maloshonok and Shmeleva (2019) delved into the determining factors impacting academic dishonesty among Russian undergraduate students. The results were: (1) subjective norms seemed to be the strongest predictor of academic dishonesty across Russian universities; and (2) the perceived behavioral control also positively correlated with the dishonest behavior.

Costley (2019) probed into the interview responses of the students attending cyber university classes to gain insights into their perceptions and incentives for cheating. Their responses varied but displayed the unplanned nature of this academic misconduct, and that students believed that it was a natural dimension of their learning experience.

Mohammad Hosseinpur et al. (2018) examined the views of the editor-in-chief, university professors, and postgraduate students about the reasons for committing plagiarism in Iran and the ways it can best be prevented. Findings demonstrated that lack of consciousness-raising and appropriate training from the early stages of education, the publish-or-perish tendency among university professors and students, and ease of admission to universities at post-graduate levels were regarded as the most important reasons to commit plagiarism in Iran.

Most of the studies in the existing literature have been of a survey-based and descriptive nature. However, very few studies have relied on either an exclusively qualitative design or a mixed-methods design (e.g., Sutherland-Smith 2008; Gullifer and Tyson 2010). What is missing in the already-reviewed literature so far is the absence of research dealing with the associations between the variables. Notably, studies focusing on perceptions of and attitudes toward plagiarism have mostly turned a blind eye to the association of perceptions or attitudes with sociocultural variables. This is consistent with Scollon (1995), who stated that "the concept of plagiarism is fully embedded within a social, political, and cultural matrix that cannot be meaningfully separated from its interpretation" (p. 23). However, whether students' perceptions of various forms of plagiarism and the way it can best be prevented might differ from one cultural setting to another or whether an adiscernible pattern could exist in terms of such attitudes and solutions among Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students have not yet been examined. To this end, the researchers formulated the following research questions :

- 1) What are Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students' attitudes toward the most common and serious forms of plagiarism?
- 2) What are the main reasons for committing plagiarism in the opinions of Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik students?
- 3) What are the best solutions to cope with plagiarism in the opinions of Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik students?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Due to the administrative challenges inherent in randomization, the researchers utilized convenience sampling and used available classes in Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan. Two hundred Iranian, 185 Afghan, and 170 Tajik male and female EFL students at BA and MA levels with an age range of 18-33 participated in the study. Iranian EFL students at BA and MA levels were selected from the University of Qom. Afghan BA students were selected from the University of Faryab, a state university located in Maimanah city, Faryab. Afghan MA students were selected from Afghan students studying at different universities in Iran due to a lack of MA courses in TEFL in Afghanistan. Tajik BA and MA students majoring in TEFL were selected from Sadridin Ainistate University located in Doshanbeh city.

3.2. Instrumentation

To collect data, the researchers used the iThenticate (2013) questionnaire, which consists of 10 distinct types of plagiarism. iThenticate is developed by Turnitin, the leader in plagiarism and originality-checking for educational institutions worldwide. The researchers and scientific-research institutes use iThenticate to ensure the originality of their own and other researchers' works. This questionnaire surveys how common and serious different types of plagiarism are on a scale ranging from 1 to 10. One indicates the least serious and common types of plagiarism, whereas 10 refers to the most serious and common types of plagiarism. Moreover, the questionnaire has already been validated and enjoys a high-reliability index. The following types of plagiarism are included in the iThenticate questionnaire:

- 1- **Replication:** Submitting a paper to multiple journals in an attempt to get it published more than once.
- 2- **Duplication:** Re-using work from one's own previous papers without proper attribution.
- 3- **Secondary Source:** Using a secondary source, but only citing the primary sources contained within the secondary one.
- 4- **Misleading Attribution:** Removing an author's name, despite significant contributions; an inaccurate or insufficient list of authors who contributed to a manuscript.
- 5- **Invalid Source:** Referencing either an incorrect or nonexistent source.
- 6- **Paraphrasing:** Taking words of others and using them alongside original text without appropriate attribution.
- 7- **Repetitive Research:** Repeating data or text from a similar study with a similar methodology in a new study without proper attribution.
- 8- **Unethical Collaboration:** Accidentally or intentionally using each other's written work without proper attribution; when people who are working together violate a code of conduct.
- 9- **Verbatim:** copying others' words and works without providing proper attribution, indentation or quotation marks.
- 10- **Complete:** Taking a manuscript from another researcher and resubmitting it under one's own name (iThenticate, 2013).

3.3. Data collection procedure

To collect the data, first, the researchers gained participants' consent for their participation in the study, and the participants were ensured about the confidentiality of the information they provided. Furthermore, they also were informed that the questionnaire had been designed to collect information about plagiarism in the academic context. They were informed that the survey was voluntary and the results would be used for research purposes only. Next, the iThenticate Questionnaire (2013) was distributed among all the participants, and they were given a general explanation about how to fill it out. Afterwards, they were invited to complete the questionnaire. For the convenience of the participants and the researchers, the questionnaires were distributed to the participants in class session in all three countries. Finally, all the participants were presented with two essay-type questions on the main reasons to commit plagiarism and possible ways to cope with it. The participants were asked to provide their full, detailed and comprehensive responses to the above-mentioned essay-type questions so that the researchers could have an in-depth analysis of their responses.

3.4. Data analysis

To analyze the data obtained from the iThenticate questionnaire, the researchers utilized descriptive statistics and counted the frequencies and percentages of the different types of plagiarism. To explore the essay-type questions, the researchers employed the common content analysis technique introduced by Plano Clark and Creswell (2014). All the essay-type responses provided by the participants were separately and thoroughly examined by two of the researchers several times and all the distinct and most frequent opinions and ideas were identified, extracted, and classified accordingly. The inter-rater reliability index for the essay-type responses stood at .89 after calculating the Cronbach formula (Kuder-Richardson 20 formula).

4. Findings

4.1. The first research question

The first research question was an attempt to probe into the most serious and common forms of plagiarism from Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students' viewpoints. As displayed in Table 1, complete plagiarism was the most serious type of plagiarism from Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students' perspectives. Although Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students shared the same opinions about the first most serious type of plagiarism, their ideas differed with regard to the second most serious type of plagiarism. Iranian EFL students viewed verbatim plagiarism (6.67%) as the second most serious type of plagiarism whereas Afghans regarded misleading attribution (6.42%) as the second most serious type of plagiarism. Moreover, Tajik students considered repetitive research (7.13%) the second most serious type of plagiarism.

As shown in Table 1, Iranian (7.91%) and Afghan (7.22%) EFL students shared the same ideas about the first most common form of plagiarism, both viewing verbatim plagiarism as the most common form. Tajik EFL students viewed paraphrasing (8.04%) as the most common form of plagiarism. From Iranian EFL students' perspectives, paraphrasing (7.83%) and invalid source (7.76%) came second and third respectively regarding the most common forms of plagiarism. Interestingly enough, replication (7.20%) tightly contested with verbatim plagiarism (7.22%) when it came to the most common forms of plagiarism from Afghan students' viewpoints and ranked second with a very narrow margin. From Tajik students' vantage point, verbatim plagiarism (7.69%) and misleading attribution (7.31%) ranked second and third respectively when it came to the most common forms of plagiarism.

Table 1: Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL Students' Attitudes toward the Most Common and Serious Forms of Plagiarism

The Most Serious Types Of Plagiarism					The Most Common Forms Of Plagiarism				
		Iranians	Afghans	Tajiks			Iranians	Afghans	Tajiks
1	Replication	5.62	5.65	5.73	1	Replication	6.46	7.20	5.77
2	Duplication	3.83	4.04	3.44	2	Duplication	6.03	5.70	5.13
3	Secondary Source	5.76	6.36	3.85	3	Secondary Source	6.52	6.10	5.31
4	Misleading Attribution	5.33	6.42	6.73	4	Misleading Attribution	5.38	6.94	7.31
5	Invalid Source	6.16	5.99	6.58	5	Invalid Source	7.76	6.94	6.47
6	Paraphrasing	6.01	5.33	6.78	6	Paraphrasing	7.83	6.81	8.04
7	Repetitive Research	5.36	5.52	7.13	7	Repetitive Research	7.16	6.07	6.66

8	Unethical Collaboration	4.78	5.58	4.37	8	Unethical Collaboration	6.21	6.86	4.97
9	Verbatim Plagiarism	6.67	5.97	6.96	9	Verbatim Plagiarism	7.91	7.22	7.69
10	Complete Plagiarism	7.31	6.66	7.74	10	Complete Plagiarism	3.29	3.33	3.19

4.2. The second research question

The second research question investigated the main reasons to commit plagiarism from Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL learners' vantage points. As Table 2 reveals, a total number of 163 Iranian students (81.5%) viewed time constraints and pressure to submit high-quality assignments as the first most important reason to commit plagiarism in the Iranian academic contexts. Needless to say, 157 Iranian students (75.5%) regarded insufficient knowledge about what constituted plagiarism as the second most important reason to commit plagiarism. Furthermore, 144 Iranian students (72%) ascribed committing plagiarism among Iranian EFL students to the ease inherent in the act of plagiarism itself specifically, with the technological advances and the velocity with which it can be committed through the speedy and unlimited access to the Internet. Tajik EFL learners shared the same opinions with the Iranians since they both attributed the act of plagiarism to lack of knowledge or unfamiliarity with plagiarism (85.3%) and ease of plagiarizing (77%). However, Tajik students regarded the absence of severe punishment for plagiarism as the third most important reason to commit plagiarism. Moreover, a total number of 143 (77.3%) Afghan EFL learners viewed lack of knowledge and unfamiliarity with plagiarism as the first important reason for committing plagiarism, so did the Iranian and Tajik students. Nevertheless, a total number of 129 Afghan students (69.7%) attributed plagiarism to the lenient and careless teachers and viewed such leniency and recklessness on the part of language teachers as the second most important reason to commit plagiarism. In addition to that, 120 Afghan students (64.8%) regarded EFL students' weak and underdeveloped academic writing skills as the third most important reason to commit plagiarism. Ease of plagiarizing ranked fourth with a very narrow margin (63.8%).

Table 2: The Main Reasons for Committing Plagiarism from Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik Students' Perspectives

Iranians	Frequency	Percentage
1. Shortage of time and pressure to submit high-quality assignments	163	81.5%
2. Lack of knowledge about what constitutes plagiarism (Unfamiliarity with plagiarism)	157	75.5%
3. Ease of plagiarizing (esp. through the Internet)	144	72%
4. Absence of severe punishment for plagiarism	129	64.5%
5. Weak academic writing skills	117	58.5%
6. Lenient and careless teachers	109	54.5%
7. Prevalence of plagiarism among students and its impact on other students	64	32%
8. Prevalence of obtaining a university degree	44	22%
9. Quantity precedes quality in our educational system	44	22%
Afghans		
1. Lack of knowledge about what constitutes plagiarism (Unfamiliarity with plagiarism)	143	77.3%
2. Lenient and careless teachers	129	69.7%
3. Weak academic writing skills	120	64.8%
4. Ease of plagiarizing (esp. through the Internet)	118	63.8%
5. Absence of severe punishment for plagiarism	109	58.9%
6. Students' laziness and deceitfulness	74	40%
7. Tendency to use shortcuts to progress	51	27.5%
Tajiks		
1. Lack of knowledge about what constitutes plagiarism (Unfamiliarity with plagiarism)	145	85.3%
2. Ease of plagiarizing (esp. through the Internet)	131	77%
3. Absence of severe punishment for plagiarism	122	71.7%
4. Weak academic writing skills	113	66.4%
5. Prevalence of plagiarism among students and its impact on other students	92	54.1%
6. Shortage of time and pressure to submit high-quality assignments	91	53.5%
7. Lenient and careless teachers	86	50.6%

4.3. The third research question

The third research question intended to delve into the best probable solutions to deal with plagiarism from Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik students' perspectives. Concerning the best possible ways to deal with plagiarism, Iranian and Tajik EFL learners had a lot in common. They both proposed *raising students' awareness of plagiarism and its*

consequences and *establishment of severe punishment for plagiarism* as the two best ways to deal with plagiarism. As shown in Table 3, a total number of 191 Iranian students (95.5%) and 160 Tajik students (94.1%) viewed raising students' awareness about plagiarism and its possible ramifications as the first most important probable way to keep plagiarism in check. Likewise, a total number of 165 Iranian students (82.5%) and 149 Tajik students (87.6%) suggested establishing severe punishments for plagiarism as the second most important way to handle plagiarism in academic settings. It is interesting to note that *not compelling students to do assignments beyond their knowledge and ability* as one probable way to deal with plagiarism enjoyed the same percentage (82.5%) as *establishing severe punishments for plagiarism* from Iranian students' viewpoints. Although Afghan students shared the same opinions with Iranian and Tajik students about what had to be done to cope with plagiarism, all viewing *raising students' awareness of plagiarism and its consequences* and *establishing severe punishments for plagiarism* as the two most important ways to do so, the order of appearance and occurrence was reverse for the Afghans. A total number of 161 Afghan students (87%) suggested *establishing severe punishments for plagiarism* as the first important way and with only a very slight margin, 158 of them (85%) proposed *raising students' awareness of plagiarism and its consequences* as the second most important way to cope with plagiarism.

Table 3: Ways to Cope with Plagiarism from Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik Students' Perspectives

Iranians	Frequency	Percentage
1. Raising students' awareness of plagiarism and its consequences	191	95.5%
2. Establishment of severe punishment for plagiarism	165	82.5%
3. Not compelling students to do assignments beyond their knowledge and ability	165	82.5%
4. Awareness raising on research codes from basic levels	111	55.5%
5. Instruction on required skills for doing scientific research	107	53.5%
6. The greater sensitivity of the teachers to the issue of plagiarism and seriousness in dealing with it	95	47.5%
Afghans		
1. Establishment of severe punishment for plagiarism	161	87%
2. Raising students' awareness of plagiarism and its consequences	158	85%
3. Instruction on required skills for doing scientific research	120	64.8%
4. The greater sensitivity of the teachers to the issue of plagiarism and seriousness in dealing with it	94	50.8%
5. Not compelling students to do assignments beyond their knowledge and ability	62	33.5%
6. Encouraging and welcoming original, though weak, works by students	40	21.6%
Tajiks		
1. Raising students' awareness of plagiarism and its consequences	160	94.1%
2. Establishment of severe punishment for plagiarism	149	87.6%
3. The greater sensitivity of the teachers to the issue of plagiarism and seriousness in dealing with it	119	70%
4. Instruction on required skills for doing scientific research	116	68.2%
5. Not compelling students to do assignments beyond their knowledge and ability	100	58.8%
6. Awareness raising on research codes from basic levels	86	50.6%

5. Discussion

This study investigated Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students' perceptions of the most common and serious forms of plagiarism, the most important reasons for committing plagiarism, and the best ways to cope with it in their opinions. The study came up with some intriguing findings in this regard. Complete plagiarism was the most serious form of plagiarism in the opinion of Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students. Concerning the most common form of plagiarism, the participants interestingly and surprisingly shared the same ideas from these three countries and viewed verbatim plagiarism and paraphrasing as the most common forms of plagiarism. This can be readily explained by the fact that Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students have certain cultural and linguistic commonalities. Their worldviews might have been shaped by such commonalities and similarities as famously corroborated by Sapir's (1985) and Whorf's (1956) hypotheses which state that "the way people think is influenced by the language they speak" (Perlovsky 2009: 518). Not only do these three countries have common linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but also they share certain educational and economic relationships. Therefore, considering the fact that language and culture are tightly interrelated, it can be concluded that considerable admission rates of Afghans and to a lesser extent, Tajik students to Iranian universities and the economic ties among them might have contributed significantly to the overall similarities in their viewpoints with regard to the most serious and common forms of plagiarism. However, some researchers reject the idea of plagiarism as being culture-specific. Pecorari (2003), for instance, maintains that if plagiarism is regarded as being a cultural concept, then students' failure to observe the principles of academic writing can readily be justified as a cultural difference and plagiarism is no more an issue for the students of that specific culture. Similarly, Liu (2005) rejects the idea of plagiarism as culture-specific and believes that it is a universal concept. However, we are of the opinion that

culture can play its part at least to either underestimate or overestimate the plagiarized content and how serious plagiarism and its repercussions can be viewed.

The fact that participants from these nationalities shared the same attitudes towards the most serious and common forms of plagiarism can be an indication of the current status of plagiarism in such countries and might mean that the tendency to plagiarize is quite high because of an inherent lack of knowledge about the plagiarizing act itself rather than the existence of various cultural norms, perspectives, and values. Such extreme cases of academic dishonesty obviously point to the fact that students might feel completely out of harm's way when they plagiarize and that they won't have to face or take the consequences of their actions. This concurs with Mu (2010) and Wheeler (2009) as they suggest that the root cause of the plagiarism lies in insufficient understanding of what it entails, how it can be prevented, and what consequences one will have to face and suffer as a result if found guilty of plagiarism. Plagiarism and copyright can be regarded as the by-products of Western cultural values regarding intellectual property (Marwa, Cahyono, Latief, & Prayogo, 2021). The fact that the copyright regulations are not observed in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan might have also contributed to the similar attitudes and perceptions held by these EFL learners.

There are many intervening and overlapping variables at play when considering plagiarism (Abasi and Graves 2008; DeVoss and Rosati 2002). Various factors can be looked upon from different perspectives to deal with plagiarism. Devlin and Gray (2007) assert that discovering the underlying reasons that lead to plagiarism helps one to more successfully cope with and prevent it. The second research question of the study considered the main reasons for committing plagiarism. It was found that overall lack of knowledge about what constitutes plagiarism could be regarded as the most important reason for committing plagiarism from Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students' viewpoints. This highlights the necessity and importance of having plagiarism-wise instructors and practitioners, thus enabling them to familiarize their students with the plagiarism concept and its consequences. In agreement with previous studies (e.g., Flowerdew and Li 2007; Pecorari 2003; Wheeler 2009) which underscored a lack of consciousness as a contributing factor for unintended plagiarism, this study also demonstrated that students' unfamiliarity with the nature and forms of plagiarism and how to shun it, can be considered the most crucial factor contributing to plagiarism. Accordingly, having plagiarism-wise students certainly entails and calls for well-informed, well-equipped, and well-instructed teachers. The question, then, is whose responsibility is it to raise teachers' and practitioners' awareness about plagiarism? One probable and feasible solution is for the educational authorities at the state and ministerial levels such as lawmakers, policy makers, and even academicians to sit together, discuss, develop, and devise certain theoretical and practical instrumentations and hold relevant workshops by professionals and experts to achieve the above-stated objective.

Students mostly take the easy way out and put the blame on their instructors for not having sufficient knowledge about plagiarism. One of the participants of the study stated that:

.... once I asked my teacher about plagiarism and the ways it could be best dealt with. All I was provided with was a run-away answer with a bitter smile.

As it can be understood from the above-mentioned comment, teachers are to take more responsibility to familiarize their students with the concept of plagiarism, what it entails, and how best it can be prevented.

All in all, ease of plagiarizing was considered the second most important reason for committing plagiarism. With the unprecedented technological advances, students practically feel at ease with copying the materials directly from the Internet sources. The velocity with which the intended information can be readily downloaded from the Internet and its accessibility could be regarded as contributing factors in the increasing trend among students to plagiarize. With regard to this, one student commented:

.... whatever I wish, can be easily and quickly obtained online, so why do I have to bother myself to submit an assignment.

As demonstrated in the findings, absence of severe punishment was viewed as another important reason for committing plagiarism among Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students. The fact that students feel that they will never have to face the consequences of their academic misconduct and can easily get away with it can explain the rationale behind this. Jones et al. (2005) reported that 43% of the students believed that most cases of plagiarism go unnoticed. Mu (2010) also found that 68% of the students maintained that they would not be punished severely if they were found guilty of plagiarizing. Some even deemed plagiarizing as an acceptable act. They believed that they would be easily excused by their teachers for their wrongdoings (Mu 2010; Sikes 2009). Another student said:

.... I really do not care about what is going to happen when I copy the materials from net, cause I don't think I am going to be held accountable at all.

Similarly, Coalter et al. (2007) found that 82.9% of the faculty members thought that acting against plagiarizers when caught, depended on the sufficiency of evidence; therefore, the faculty member is better off if he or she ignores it.

As revealed in the results of the study, weak academic writing skills counted as yet another important reason for committing plagiarism. Practically speaking, many students are not well-instructed in their writing courses as they are mostly taught theories and focus less on generating a well-written composition. Writing

teachers should pay more attention to the process of writing rather than merely focusing on a single draft produced as the final product or outcome and provide students with proper and practical tips and feedback in order to come up with a well-written project. This concurs with previous studies (e.g., Marshall and Garry 2006) and corroborates Pecorari and Petric's (2014) statement that low academic writing skill is one of two major causes for plagiarism by first-year students in applied linguistics. The following comment of an undergraduate student attests to students' frustrations and limitations with regard to their academic writing skills:

.....the idea of developing an appropriate topic into a fine piece of writing looks daunting to me, I don't know where to begin and how to end, it is a complicated process and I lack sufficient knowledge.

However, Iranian EFL students found shortage of time and pressure to submit high-quality papers as the most frequent reason for committing plagiarism. Instructors are to set realistic and practical deadlines for the assignments to be delivered by students; otherwise, students would inescapably turn to plagiarizing. When students are inundated with heavy assignment loads, or when the assignments are far beyond their current level of ability, they may have no option but to resort to plagiarism to be able to meet the required demands of the assignments within the specified deadline (Callahan 2004). One student commented:

... I feel really under a lot of pressure and stress to submit a quality work. It needs more expertise and skill which I really don't possess.

Interestingly enough, Afghan EFL learners viewed leniency and recklessness of the instructors as one of the most important causes of plagiarism. In fact, 98% of the students in Jones et al.'s (2005) study believed that teachers do not know where and how to find the plagiarized materials, which could provide students with enough margin of security for their academic misconduct and dishonesty. This finding is in line with Rezanejad and Rezaei's (2013) study in which they found that Iranian teachers did not take plagiarism and academic misconduct seriously enough because they themselves were misinformed. The more teachers turn a blind eye to plagiarism and unethical behaviors in their students' actions and writings, the higher the probability is that plagiarism occurs among students (Burnett 2002). Another student commented as follows:

... I used to do the assigned works as meticulously as possible. However, when I found the teacher never spent a fair amount of time on my work and provided no feedback I decided to submit copied materials.

The third question dealt with the best possible ways to cope with plagiarism from Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students' viewpoints. Participants from all three countries indicated *raising students' awareness of plagiarism and its consequences* and *establishing severe punishments for plagiarism* as the best ways to deal with the problem. As Park (2004) stated, students will be more likely deterred if they are properly instructed about plagiarism and its probable consequences. It can further be argued that although the act of stealing is considered a very serious crime in these three countries according to Islamic laws (Sharia), the act of plagiarism itself has not been taken very seriously as the copyright and intellectual property laws and regulations are not enforced and the majority of EFL learners are not familiar with such terms, rights, and regulations. Therefore, there is an urgent need for "institutions to develop cohesive frameworks for dealing with student plagiarism that is based on prevention supported by robust detection and penalty systems that are transparent and applied consistently" (Park 2003: 471). Vandehey et al. (2007) asserted that punitive deterrents leave a stronger impact on the plagiarizers and cheaters than internal factors such as feelings of guilt or social deterrents. Needless to say, what makes the issue at hand even more complex is the blurred boundary between plagiarism and paraphrasing (Angelil-Carter, 2000). Devlin and Gray (2007) believe that identifying the factors that result in plagiarism assists one to more successfully cope with and prevent it. Considering the significance and seriousness of plagiarism in academic contexts, both teachers and learners should feel compelled to be continuously on the watch to shun plagiarism and remove ambiguities with regard to their academic works (Howard 2007).

6. Conclusion

The current study probed into Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL students' perceptions of the most common and serious forms of plagiarism, their most important reasons for committing plagiarism, and the best approaches that can be adopted to prevent it. Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL learners shared some interesting opinions with regard to the most common and serious forms of plagiarism. Various reasons were indicated by the participants, including lack of awareness about plagiarism and its consequences, ease of plagiarizing, absence of severe punishments, weak academic writing skills, having lenient and careless teachers, and shortage of time and pressure to submit high-quality papers. Moreover, the study proposed two crucial ways to deal with plagiarism: *Raising students' awareness of plagiarism and its consequences* and *establishing severe punishments for plagiarism*. The findings highlighted the status of plagiarism in the Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik EFL contexts and called for due and closer attention to be paid to this problem. The results clearly point to the fact that plagiarism has become a common practice among EFL learners in these three countries, and now it is up to the authorities to take proper measures to keep it in check. More emphasis must be placed on consciousness-raising, instruction, and plagiarism prevention. There is also a need for "a more holistic institutional approach that recognizes the need for a shared responsibility between the student, staff, and institution, supported by external quality agencies" (Macdonald and Carroll 2006: 233). Accordingly, it should be stated that transforming, rectifying or even modifying the status quo

in the culture of academic dishonesty cannot be successfully attained unless clear-cut policies and regulations are put in place, and urgent and proper measures are taken against any breach of codes of ethics in the academic milieu. As Gullifer and Tyson (2010) suggested, “theory and research in psychology show that a thorough understanding of an individual’s view of an issue or problem is an essential requirement for a successful change of that person’s attitudes and behavior.”

Various stakeholders might benefit from the findings of the study. First and foremost, instructors should delve into their students’ perceptions and understandings of plagiarism, increase students’ consciousness about ethics in research, and determine how to equip themselves best to handle academic dishonesty (Stefani and Carroll 2001). Moreover, students are to be well aware and cognizant of the possible ramifications of their academic misconduct and wrongdoings.

Due to the multi-dimensionality inherent in the concept of plagiarism, various vantage points have been offered on plagiarism. Most studies point to the inconclusiveness concerning what it entails and how it should be shunned (Husain et al. 2017). This is congruent with Ehrich et al. (2014), who pointed to plagiarism’s intricacy and the challenge of properly explaining an individual’s involvement in plagiarism. Moreover, studies have demonstrated the inconsistencies and incongruities concerning the similarity and differences between staff’s and students’ attitudes toward plagiarism (Ford and Hughes, 2012; Gomez et al., 2014). These issues call for an immediate and urgent need for research that takes up an in-depth, sophisticated, and thorough analytical approach capable of showing how diverse contextual factors might contribute to shaping individuals’ positive and negative attitudes toward plagiarism (Husain et al, 2017). Most of the studies on plagiarism have investigated it in the Western context. In other words, the Middle Eastern (Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan) contexts have suffered a lack of studies on perceptions of plagiarism. Specifically, very few studies on students’ perceptions of plagiarism have been carried out in these contexts.

The results of the current study will have to be treated cautiously in terms of making generalizations. The researchers utilized convenience sampling through which only available and volunteer students participated in the study. A purposive or random sampling procedure might have generated different findings. A replication of the present study with the above-mentioned sampling procedures is highly recommended for future research. To further solidify and strengthen the findings of this study and allow cross-cultural comparisons, more eye-opening studies will need to be conducted in different contexts with various cultural backgrounds to focus more intensely on the issue of culture and the way it can be either interrelated or disintegrated with plagiarism. This study employed the iThenticate questionnaire to collect the data. Although this data collection method allowed data to be collected from a larger sample, a richer analysis could be carried out with additional focus group interviews. An area of investigation that deserves urgent attention from researchers is the association between the perception of plagiarism and plagiarism behavior. Studies focusing on such issues can apply sophisticated inferential statistical tools to understand how students’ self-reported attitudes (either negative or positive) toward plagiarism can be predicted through their perceptions of various forms or types of plagiarism. Few studies have been conducted to provide an all-inclusive classification of factors contributing to plagiarism. More research on why students plagiarize, how they handle software programs that detect plagiarism, and how they plagiarize can lead to advantageous outcomes (Husain et al. 2017).

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