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Plagiarism policies in Iranian university TEFL teachers' syllabuses: an exploratory study

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Abstract

Plagiarism has been on the rise amongst university students in recent decades. This study puts university teachers in the spotlight and investigates their role in raising students' awareness about plagiarism. To that end, plagiarism policies in 207 Iranian university TEFL teachers' syllabuses were analyzed. The researchers analyzed the syllabuses to find out if they contain a plagiarism policy, and if so, how the term is defined; whether they approach the issue of plagiarism directly; if they offer students any guidelines on how to avoid plagiarism; and if the consequences of committing plagiarism are specified. The results indicated that the majority of the syllabuses (83.6%) lacked a plagiarism policy and those that did include a policy were often vague in their definition of the phenomenon. However, when there was a plagiarism policy in the syllabuses, the teachers tried to address the issue directly half of the time and offered students brief guidelines on how to avoid plagiaristic behavior, which was a small step in the right direction. It is recommended that other higher education institutions make it obligatory for their academic staff to include a plagiarism policy in their syllabuses if they wish to cultivate academic integrity in students.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Syllabus, Teachers, TEFL, University

Introduction

It is an absolute right of every author to expect their original words to be identified with their name only and not with someone else's; that, however, is not always the case. It occasionally happens that novice or even experienced researchers use the words of others without proper accreditation, a practice generally referred to as *plagiarism*, but also known variously as "misappropriation, faulty citation, copyright infringement, literary theft, imitation, cheating, cribbing, and stealing, to name a few," Marsh (2012, p. 1). The term has also been variously defined by different researchers. In fact, Pennycook (1996, p. 226) sees part of the problem of dealing with plagiarism in the application of the term plagiarism "as if it described some clearly definable practice." Similarly, Carroll and Appleton (2001) state that "any discussion that goes beyond a dictionary definition will soon reveal considerable variation in understanding," (p. 4).

Carroll (2002) defines plagiarism as "passing off someone else's work, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as your own for your own benefit." Colnerud and Rosander's (2009) definition is more specific in that they delineate what the practice

involves. To them, plagiarism means “using parts, or the whole, of a text written by another person without acknowledgement; submitting the same paper or parts of it for credit in more than one course; and falsification of information” (p. 506). Park’s (2003) definition has a criminal ring to it, stating 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” (p. 472). Williams, Nathanson, and Paulhus (2010) gives a technology-laced definition of “any nonzero percentage detected by Turnitin (after screening)” (p. 294).

There are, however, certain commonalities in the definitions of the term, some of which were mentioned above. As early as 2002, Pecorari, after surveying 53 definitions of plagiarism, concluded that six common elements could be drawn from the definitions; that is, plagiarism is “(1) an object (i.e., language, words, text), (2) which has been taken (borrowed, stolen, etc.) (3) from a particular source (books, journals, Internet), (4) by an agent (student, person, academic), (5) without (adequate) acknowledgement and (6) with or without intention to deceive” (p. 60). What is interesting in Pecorari’s multi-faceted definition is that plagiarism is not limited to the use of articles or books but can include a wide range of other materials such as photos, music, lectures, websites, and that the act can be committed advertently or inadvertently.

The difficulty to define plagiarism can partly be related to the different attitudes towards it (Helgesson, 2015; Sutherland-Smith, 2008). Whereas in Western contexts the long-standing, the dominant modernist position on plagiarism honors the ownership of words and the focus of research has been more on the belief that plagiarism should be viewed as “stealing” (Kolich, 1983, p. 143) or in the words of Martin (1994) a “grievous sin” (p. 36). The more recent postmodernist position questions this stance and, taking a more relativist attitude, posits that one cannot own words and ideas (Pennycook, 1996; Roy, 1999). Pecorari and Petrić (2014) contend that the current trend sees authorship as something that is constructed through negotiation and interface with other discourses and texts and reusing the on-hand resources. Weigle (2014) adds that written materials should not be seen in isolation; on the contrary, they are framed by other texts produced before. Howard (1995) also maintains that, from a pedagogical angle, the traditional, unitary authorship disregards the profits of learning through imitation. Proponents of the postmodernist view offers terms such as *patchwriting* or *language reuse* as alternatives to the word plagiarism, considering such terms reflective of the progressive stages in academic writing (Chandrasoma, Thompson and Pennycook, 2004; Howard, 1995; Pecorari, 2003).

The growing body of research on plagiarism is indicative of the unprecedented attention the issue has been getting in higher education. Many of these studies have revealed that students do not know what constitutes plagiarism and the consequences of committing the act (Bamford and Sergiou, 2005; Park, 2003; Rezanejad and Rezaei, 2013; Wheeler, 2009); that instructors are typically indifferent towards both term projects and plagiarists (Ahmadi, 2014; Bartlett and Smallwood, 2004). As Sutherland-Smith (2008) rightly points out, “one of the most frequent criticisms in the higher education sector is that students enter university ill-equipped to study at tertiary levels” (p. 158). The present study, therefore, builds on and adds to the existing research on plagiarism by putting university teachers, in this case Iranian university teachers working in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) programs, in the spotlight to

find out if they take the plagiarism problem seriously. One way of tapping into this issue is to inspect the teachers' course syllabuses as syllabuses are indicators of teachers' beliefs and expectations. What makes this study significant is the fact that very few studies have investigated university teachers' plagiarism and academic integrity policies as revealed by their course syllabuses.

Literature review

Plagiarism is a relatively well-researched topic in higher education (e.g. Adam, 2015; Childers and Bruton, 2016; Greenberger, Holbeck, Steele and Dyer, 2016; Krishan, Kanchan, Baryah, Mukhra, 2016; McGrail and McGrail, 2015; Pecorari, 2015; Tauginienė, 2016) and in the realm of second language (L2) medium higher education (e.g. Abasi and Akbari, 2008; Abasi and Graves, 2008; Adam, 2015; Ahmadi, 2014; Flowerdew and Li, 2007; Joyce, 2007; Pecorari 2015; Pecorari and Petrić 2014). That is not surprising in this electronic age when access to various online sources is quick and copyright law can be infringed upon quite easily (e.g. Flowerdew and Li, 2007; Gunnarsson, Kulesza and Pettersson, 2014; Helgesson, 2015; Kauffman and Young, 2015; Sutherland-Smith, 2008). Research suggests that the quantity of digital plagiarism, namely copying and pasting from the Internet without crediting the source, has exceeded the traditional forms of plagiarism (Stephens, Young and Calabrese, 2007). Hence, the necessity of protection of authorship and novelty is now more important than ever before.

According to Pecorari and Petrić (2014), the earliest concept of plagiarism stems from the Enlightenment period when authors were considered as the one and only creators of a text and no one else was involved in inventing it. Pennycook, in his 1996 article in which he delves into the roots of plagiarism, states that plagiarism is a concept that originates from Western cultures and societies; a concept which came into existence as a consequence of the birth of copyright law in western nations in the 17th and 18th centuries. In spite of its Anglocentric origin, the concept of plagiarism is controversially claimed to be influenced by different cultures and attitudes (Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, 2005; Pecorari, 2015; Sutherland-Smith, 2008). Price (2002) writes that "in drafting a plagiarism policy, we must remember that its readers come from a variety of cultural contexts, across which definitions of new and original, not to mention the value placed upon newness or originality, may change" (p. 95). Surely, cultural dissimilarities are not solely responsible for the occurrence of plagiarism; several other factors promoting its perpetration may be involved. Firstly, it might be thought that it is acceptable to copy from other texts to some degree; secondly, the linguistic and cognitive burden of the task can be so heavy that the writer/student is forced to plagiarize; the third factor that might affect plagiarizing is the pressure of completing the task on time, and the fear of being penalized for not having done so. Last but not least, unfamiliarity with the topic and the discourse of the target community can provide the foundation of plagiarism (Flowerdew and Li, 2007; Pecorari, 2003). The findings above can be a seal of approval for the causes of intentional plagiarism, meaning that students are aware of what they are doing as they search for a detour to finish the task. However, plagiarism sometimes happens inadvertently due in part to not being aware of the appropriate fashion of quoting and citing.

The issue of plagiarism has been investigated from several other angles. Studies have explored different aspects of the issue, such as students and teachers' perceptions of plagiarism (Ahmadi, 2014; Jones, Reid and Bartlett, 2007; Rezanejad and Rezaei, 2013; Zafarghandi, Khoshroo and Barkat, 2012), why students plagiarize (Bedford, Gregg and Clinton, 2011; Colnerud and Rosander, 2009; Comas-Forgas and Sureda-Negre, 2010, Greer et al., 2012; Hughes and McCabe, 2006; Shanahan et al., 2013), and measures/strategies on how to deter students from plagiarism (Abdi, Idris, Alguliyev and Aliguliyev, 2015; Bretag and Mahmud, 2009; Gunnarsson, Kulesza and Pettersson, 2014).

Research also focused on university policies towards plagiarism (Freye et al., 2013; Ma et al., 2008; Tindell and Bohlander, 2012; Waithaka and Gitimu, 2012). McGrail and McGrail (2015) investigated plagiarism policies appertaining to the undergraduate students of 20 research-intensive universities (5 public and 15 private) in the United States. The researchers concluded that the policies were related to an honor system describing ethicality in the eyes of the institution. While inspecting the honor systems of each institute, they came up with some common elements discussed among these plagiarism policies such as abundant and different views on what constitutes as plagiarism, lack of specific information on plagiarism among some universities, issues of intentional or unintentional plagiarism, multiple submissions of a paper, unauthorized collaborations, and issues concerning the definition of verbatim and non-verbatim plagiarism. McGrail and McGrail also examined the universities' penalty procedures for plagiarizers, concluding that universities had a multi-level process usually starting with a conference with the instructors and holding what is called *informal meeting* with the student in order to reach a resolution. If no resolution is reached through the informal process, the case will be resolved by the formal process which usually consists of an academic review body.

In a longitudinal study, Sims (2002) measured the effectiveness of a plagiarism policy at a university in the Southeast United States. Before the implementation of the policy, which was in the form of a signed certification of authorship, 119 students were asked to judge the dishonesty level of 18 school-related behaviors based on a 6-point scale. Four items, namely *using someone else's paper for their project* ($M = 4.21$), *using sources not included in the bibliography* ($M = 2.50$), *using direct quotes without proper citation* ($M = 3.14$), and *handing in the same paper for more than one project* ($M = 2.27$) directly related to the policy. After four years, 116 students were asked to participate in the same survey conducted before. Results indicated that the students surveyed after the implementation of the policy rated three out of the four items (i.e., *using sources not included in bibliography* (3.27), *using direct quotes without proper citation* ($M = 3.65$), *handing in the same paper for more than one project* ($M = 3.25$)) as more dishonest in comparison to those surveyed four years earlier.

In an Australian context, Devlin (2006) outlined an educative approach which had been implemented at Swinburne University of Technology. The Swinburne Plagiarism Project consisted of eight general recommendations helping to minimize and manage plagiarism. These recommendations included ensuring that students are efficiently competent in using English language, making academic preparation courses compulsory (holding sessions and workshops for minimizing plagiarism), ensuring staff are adequately familiar with the policies and practices reducing plagiarism, providing students with subject guides which include issues concerning what is regarded as plagiarism, making a better use of language and academic advice services at hand in order to

conduct sessions and courses helping students with issues concerning plagiarism, building a databases of plagiarism cases happened in order to keep record and make appropriate decisions regarding penalties for the offenders, and finally appointing someone as academic honesty coordinator in order to keep a database, ensure necessary information is received by the staff, and make sure appropriate procedures are followed in case any instance of plagiarism happen. Eight years later, Kaktiņš (2014) investigated the plagiarism policies of four universities in Australia by conducting an appraisal analysis, and concluded that although universities and institutions still take a punitive stance on plagiarism to some extent, they are progressing towards an educative approach which puts emphasis on nurturing novice researchers by helping them to understand the expectations and norms of the target community.

The bulk of the research on plagiarism has, however, pivoted more on studying students and teachers' perceptions and less on teachers' role vis-à-vis plagiarism. Pecorari (2015) criticizes the abundance of research on students' and teachers' perceptions of plagiarism which mainly ask abstract questions, maintaining that these sorts of studies "can be found in the early and valued contributions to the current body of literature, but do not bear repeating because they have already told us as much as they can" (p. 3), and that they are not capable of adding anything new to the field anymore. Furthermore, some methodological problems can be detected in these studies as they only contribute to comprehending plagiarism in an indirect fashion. One important yet ignored aspect of academic integrity and ethics in university contexts is plagiarism policies in teachers' courses syllabuses and the role it plays in raising students' awareness regarding academic expectations. Denton and Veloso (2017, p. 1) state that "the syllabus is often the first meaningful piece of information that students receive about a course" which can affect students' impressions of instructors. Similarly, McKeachie (1987) believes that a syllabus is a means which apprises students of not only the content and the requirements of the course but also of the instructor personality, revealing how they approach learners and learning. Saville, Zinn, Brown, and Marchuk (2010) showed that students rated the instructor of a detailed syllabus as a master teacher possessing more competency and efficiency; furthermore, students claimed they would recommend participation in the courses with detailed information in their syllabus to others. Harnish and Bridges (2011) also found that the tone in which the syllabus is written can affect students' perception of both instructor and the course. A comparison of 172 undergraduate students' perceptions after reading a syllabus written in a cold tone and a syllabus written in a warm tone indicated that students formed more favorable opinions of the course and its instructor when the syllabuses were written in a friendly tone.

Littlefield (1999) argues that a syllabus has three overarching functions: motivational, such as setting the tone for the course and motivating students; structural, which serves the purpose of offering timelines for the papers and the exams, readings and assignments to be done; and evidentiary, claiming the contractual nature of syllabus between students and the faculty. Regarding the motivational function of syllabuses, Perrine, Lisle and Tucker (1995) conducted a study in which the amount of support sought by 104 undergraduate students was measured in supportive syllabuses with explicit offer of outside help and neutral syllabuses with no evidence of outside help. The results indicated that when an explicit offer of help was mentioned in the syllabus, students were

more willing to seek support from the faculty. It was also found out that younger students were more reluctant to ask for outside-the-class support if they are not sure whether their instructor is available for such a help or not, meaning that younger students would benefit from an explicit offer more than older students.

Although valuable yet separate studies were conducted on issues relating to plagiarism and the role of syllabuses in university settings, the authors could not find any research addressing plagiarism policies in the syllabuses of teachers in higher education systems. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to investigate plagiarism statements in Iranian TEFL teachers' syllabuses in order to find out how they deal with it in their syllabuses and how they inform their students of their expectations. It should be noted that the researchers decided to zoom in on only one aspect of academic integrity in the syllabuses, namely plagiarism, because academic integrity is a rather broad domain that includes not only plagiarism but also issues such as exam-fixing, cheating on exams, honest and responsible scholarship and academic, and falsification and misrepresentation of data (see Ryan, et al., 2017; Tauginienė, 2016; Ma, McCabe and Liu, 2013). Moreover, the review of the related literature indicated that although many of those issues have been investigated in Iranian higher education contexts (e.g. Ahmadi, 2012, 2014; Amiri, Khamesan and Ayati, 2012; Khoshsaligheh, Mehdizadkhani and Keyvan, 2017; Rezanejad and Rezaie; 2013), the issue of how Iranian TEFL professors' views towards plagiarism is reflected in their course syllabuses has been ignored. In order to get a better picture of the phenomena, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Do Iranian university TEFL teachers include a plagiarism policy in their course syllabuses?
2. If yes, do the syllabuses define plagiarism? How?
3. Does the plagiarism policy deal with the issue directly or indirectly?
4. Are there any suggested strategies to avoid plagiarism? If yes, what strategies are recommended?
5. Are there any specific consequences for the plagiarizing students?

Methodology

Participants

Two hundred eighty-five (285) Iranian TEFL teachers from 26 different universities across the country were asked to share one of their course syllabuses with the researchers. The teachers were specifically told to share those courses syllabuses in which students were required to hand in an assignment. They were also told that the syllabuses were needed to investigate their contents and policies and the information obtained would be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. Out of the 285 teachers, 207 agreed to share their course syllabuses. Three reasons were speculated for the reluctance of those teachers who did not participate. First, they may not have had any syllabuses for their courses. Second, they may not have wished to be criticized; and third, they may not have wanted their well-thought-out syllabuses to be easily obtained by others. The teachers who participated were all PhD holders from national and international universities and ranged in age from 32 to 68 (mean age: 47.92).

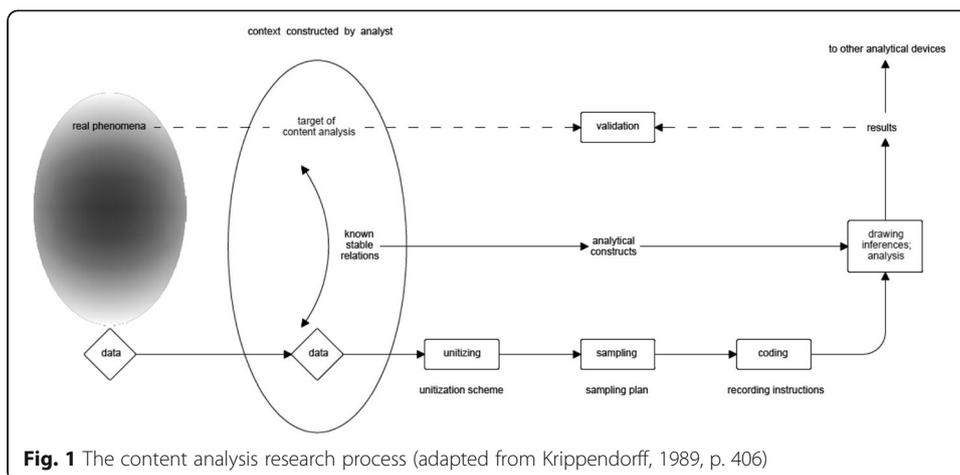
Data collection and analysis

The data was obtained by e-mailing 285 TEFL teachers who were asked to provide the researchers with one of their recent (between 2013 and 2016) course syllabuses. The teachers were assured that the data they were providing would be kept confidential and anonymous (i.e., all the information identifying them such as their names, the name of the universities, and cities would be removed). The communications yielded 207 TEFL course syllabuses. The syllabuses were only restricted to the TEFL major because both researchers are EFL teachers and it was easier for them to obtain syllabuses. The syllabuses included courses on *Second Language Acquisition*, *Second Language Teaching Methodology*, *Second Language Testing and Assessment*, *Academic Writing in English*, *Second Language Research Methodology*, *Teaching Second Language Skills*, *English Phonetics and Phonology*, *Materials Development in Second Language Teaching*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Discourse Analysis*, *English for Specific Purposes (ESP)*, *Psycholinguistics*, and *Sociolinguistics*.

Since the obtained data were in the form of written texts, content analysis was deemed to be the proper procedure for data analysis (Krippendorff 1989). Ary (2014) characterizes content analysis as “a research method applied to written or visual materials for the purpose of identifying specified characteristics of the material [which] can be textbooks, newspapers, web pages, speeches, television programs, advertisements, musical compositions,” (488). Content analysis has proven to be an advantageous tool in qualitative research owing to the inherent characteristic of unobtrusiveness, meaning that the fact and the truth being observed is something fixed, and the presence of the observer would not affect that truth (Ary 2014). Another advantage of content analysis is the permission-free characteristic of the method, because the researcher does not need to obtain permission from any participants or corporations. Furthermore, studies conducted via content analysis easily lend themselves to replication (Ary, 2014). One major attribute of qualitative content analysis is the intrinsic systematicity of the method since it requires the researcher to follow certain steps in conducting a content analysis (Schreier, 2014). However, researchers should bear in mind that content analysis, with its benefits and gains, is an arduous, slow and time-consuming task (Ary, 2014).

Krippendorff (1989) proposes a model consisting of several steps for the researchers wishing to conduct a content analysis study (See Fig. 1). The researchers of the current study strived to follow the suggested model in a step-wise fashion from designing the study to coding and drawing inferences.

In the first phase of the study, an attempt was made to specify which research questions were going to be answered, which in this case was determining the plagiarism policies in Iranian university TEFL teachers' course syllabuses. In the second phase, the media from which the representative samples were going to be drawn were selected. Based on the requirements of the study, TEFL-related course syllabuses were gathered. Convenience sampling was subsequently used for data collection, and participation in the study was voluntary considering that the participants were not obliged to share their syllabuses - they did so on their own volition. Afterwards, consultations were held between the two researchers in order to reach an interceder agreement regarding the coding system. The syllabuses were categorized by their course level (BA, MA, and PhD) and codified from 1 to 207. Afterwards, content analysis was conducted based on



the questions posed in the study. The consultations between the researchers and another data analysis expert produced a checklist containing five categories of *existence*, *definition*, *directness*, *guidelines*, and *consequences* of plagiarism, put another way, the categories were determined on a priori grounds. The lack of each of these categories in the syllabuses was given the numerical code of 0 and their presence was given the code of 1. The data were triple-checked, in case there were any inconsistencies in the analysis. The next phase, which was drawing inferences, was the most important part in Krippendorff’s model. Krippendorff says that at this stage the researcher should try to apply “the stable knowledge about how the variable accounts of coded data are related to the phenomena the researcher wants to know about” (p. 407). The final step in conducting a content analysis is the validation process of the obtained results. Result validation is a difficult task in content analysis studies because of the inherent inference making of this method of analysis; it is demanding to validate the evidence that is not readily at hand. In this study, the codified data were checked three times in order to maintain valid and reliable results. Schreier (2014) suggests that at least some parts of the material be double-coded for the sake of clarity and unambiguity, and in order to test data coding quality. Five inconsistencies in coding were found in the second check-up which might have been due to fatigue, and/or the large the quantity of the data. The data were randomly checked for a third time one month after the second examination as a means to make sure of the coding validity and reliability. No inconsistencies were found in the third examination.

Results and discussion

Regarding the first research question of the study (i.e., the existence of plagiarism policies in the syllabuses), the syllabuses were checked twice by the two researchers to find out whether they included a plagiarism policy. For the cases in which the two raters disagreed on the existence of plagiarism policy, a third rater was called in to resolve the disagreement (out of 207 syllabuses only five fell in this category). The process also involved a rater reliability control stage in which almost 35% of the content (72 syllabuses) was analyzed by a third rater that produced 82% interrater reliability for the target criterion. Overall, the data indicated that 16.6% of the syllabuses included a plagiarism policy as part of their content. Since five mismatches were found

between the first and second analysis, the data were randomly analyzed for a third time in order to ensure the authenticity of the data. Finally, it was revealed that only 34 syllabuses (16.4%) included a plagiarism policy (See Table 1).

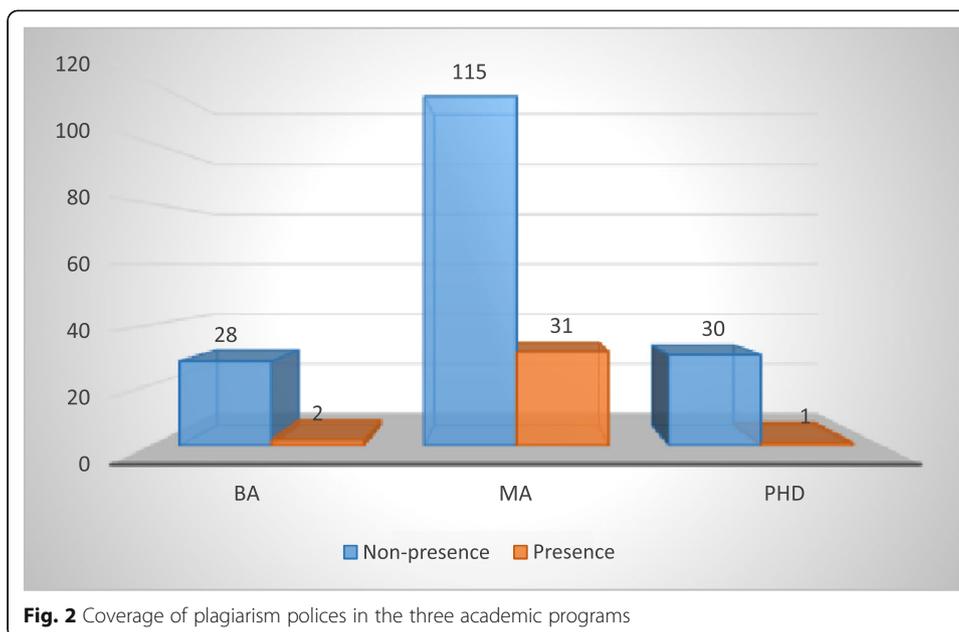
Figure 2 gives a graphic comparison of the presence and (non-presence) of plagiarism policies in the three academic programs.

As can be seen in Fig. 2, the MA course syllabuses included plagiarism polices significantly more than the PhD and BA ones. The reason for this difference, according to the researchers' observation, was that most of the MA level teachers were young (mean age: 34.94) and newly recruited at their universities and their syllabuses often broke away from the more traditional type of syllabuses; syllabuses which only include basic information such the name of the course and course instructor, his or her contact information, office location, appointment time, classroom number and class meeting time(s), mid- and final exam dates, and/or perhaps the assignments but not the teachers' policies on issues such as late submission of assignments, missed exams, disability statements, and academic integrity. The BA and PhD program syllabuses contained the fewest plagiarism polices. To find out why the teachers of these programs did not have a plagiarism policy in their syllabuses, the researchers randomly selected and contacted four BA and five PhD program teachers and asked them the reason. The BA program teachers' main reason was that they did not assign students of this level many and serious assignments, thus were willing to forgo a plagiarism policy in their syllabuses; they acknowledged that having a plagiarism policy in their syllabuses was a good idea nonetheless. The PhD program teachers, however, believed that PhD level students already mastered APA style and issues concerning research ethics in the MA program and including a plagiarism policy in the syllabuses would be stating the obvious. Moreover, sixteen more instructors whose syllabuses did not include a plagiarism policy were randomly contacted to find out if they clarified their views and policies towards plagiarism and plagiaristic behavior. Only two instructors said that they always made sure that they talked about academic integrity and responsible scholarship to their students. The other 14 teachers said that they would make such a clarification only if the need arises in the classroom and that it was not part of their routine teaching practice. These teachers also admitted that not having a plagiarism policy in their course syllabuses was a shortcoming that needed to be removed.

The 34 syllabuses with a plagiarism policy were meticulously examined by the researchers to determine how many of the 34 syllabuses actually defined plagiarism, whether they approached the issue of plagiarism directly, whether the syllabuses offered any guidelines or strategies on avoiding plagiarism, and whether the consequences of committing plagiarism were specified. The results are summarized in Table 2. With regard to the second research question (i.e., if and how the syllabuses defined plagiarism), the analysis revealed that only nine out of the 34 syllabuses (26.47%) actually defined plagiarism.

Table 1 The frequency and percent of presence of plagiarism policy in the syllabuses

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not present	173	83.6	83.6	83.6
	Present	34	16.4	16.4	100.0
	Total	207	100.0	100.0	



It should be noted, however, that the none of the definitions were comprehensive and often sufficed to a phrase such as *a form of academic dishonesty* as seen in syllabus No. 12:

*M.A. students of the TEFL program MUST [emphasis in original] observe the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. **Plagiarism is a form of academic dishonesty**; all sources of reference from which class members take quotations, theories, or concepts must be properly cited. Plagiarism will not be tolerated.*

The third research question asked whether the syllabuses expressed their plagiarism policy directly or indirectly. Direct presentation of a plagiarism policy meant that the syllabuses made direct reference to the word plagiarism and its derivations, as seen in syllabus No. 19 where it says *Do not **plagiarize** in this class!* Another example of direct expression of the plagiarism policy can be seen in syllabus No. 64 where the course instructor states unequivocally that:

*Your research paper should reflect your words and your understanding. If you feel uncertain about what constitutes **plagiarism**, consult APA (6th edition) so that you do not unintentionally commit it.*

On the other hand, indirect presentation of plagiarism policies meant that the syllabuses made no straightforward mention of the word plagiarize or its derivations.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of the content of the syllabuses with a plagiarism policy

Definition		Directness		Guidelines		Consequences	
Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
9	26.47%	17	50%	30	88.24%	11	32.35%

Syllabuses categorized as containing indirect plagiarism policies mostly asked students to conform to ethical norms in conducting research (and writing assignments) and comply with the APA manual. For instance, in syllabus No. 13, the instructor asks students to adhere to the ethical codes of research by stating:

*Your written assignment must **comply with the requirements of the APA Style Sheet**, the 6th edition, published in 2010.*

Results showed that among those syllabuses that included a plagiarism policy, 17 syllabuses (50%) approached plagiarism directly (See Table 2). It is worth noting that even though syllabuses No. 64 and No. 13 both indicate the necessity of consulting with the APA publication manual, they are different in that the former explicitly mentions the word *plagiarism* whereas syllabus No. 13 does not say anything that would alert the students.

The fourth research question examined guidelines provided by the syllabuses to assist students avoid plagiarism. Out of the 34 syllabuses with a plagiarism policy, 30 (almost 88.24%) provided recommendations to that effect (See Table 2). Two main types of guidelines were found among these 30 syllabuses. Twenty-one of them recommended that students follow the manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) as a reference to guarding against plagiarism. They usually advised students to *comply with the requirements of the APA Style Sheet, the 6th edition* or to *follow standard writing features vaccinated against language deviations, editorial problems, or APA-related inconsistencies*. The second type, eight syllabuses, recommended that students have in mind the ethical standards of writing by stating that *students of the TEFL program must observe the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity* and that *all sources of reference from which class members take quotations, theories, or concepts must be properly cited*. One syllabus made it clear that students need to write their assignments independently. The reason behind the inclusion of statements such as *comply with the APA* as a kind of guideline is that in the APA publication manual, two of the key issues dealt with are *crediting sources* (chapter 6) and *reference examples* (chapter 7). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that these instances can be counted as plagiarism avoidance guidelines. What follows is an excerpt from syllabus No. 13 attempting to inform students of what their course project should look like:

*Please note that no late assignment is accepted. Make sure that you hand in all your assignments on the day of [the] final examination. Besides, all your written assignments must **comply with the requirements of the APA Style Sheet**, the 6th edition, published in 2010.*

Similarly, syllabus No. 28 invites students taking that course to abide by the APA style in the manner described below:

*Note that your paper must be written in Standard English, **following the APA style** (6th edition).*

In syllabus No. 60, the course instructor informs his students of professional writing policy as follows:

*Assignments submitted are expected to **follow standard writing features vaccinated from language deviations, editorial problems, or APA-related inconsistencies.***

The final research question was about the consequences and penalties for those who intentionally or unintentionally committed plagiarism. Among the syllabuses with a plagiarism policy, 11 (32%) made specific references to that (See Table 2). Four of them warned of *receiving a failure, and sending to the office of the graduate studies or suspending and expelling the student from the course if they plagiarize*. Seven syllabuses only bothered themselves to just mention that *plagiarism will not be tolerated*, which seems like an empty threat. The following is an excerpt of the consequences teachers wrote in their syllabuses. In syllabus No. 59 the instructor issued the course takers a clear warning:

*...cannot tolerate any form of academic dishonesty. **Any form of plagiarism or cheating receives maximum penalties from the university and the instructor.** The penalties could result in the suspension or expulsion of the student from the course. All submitted reports from the students are considered to be each student's own product though students are encouraged to confer with each other for their assignments.*

The instructor of syllabus No. 61 also cautioned about the aftermath of plagiaristic behavior in a decisive manner:

*Students accused of intentional/unintentional plagiarism or cheating **will receive a failure on this course and will be sent to the Office of Graduate Studies for further penalties.***

To sum up the distribution of all the indices covered in previous research questions, we also developed an index of coverage defined as an umbrella concept subsuming existence, definition, directness, guidelines, and consequences criteria. The existence of all the indices generated a maximum score of 5 representing all the five categories and a minimum score of 0 for the absence of the categories. The comparison was done among three levels of BA, MA and PhD. Given the nature of the data being categorical, a nonparametric procedure was employed. A Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there was a statistically significant difference coverage score among the three different educational levels, $\chi^2(2) = 8.433$, $p = 0.015$. The finding indicates that the three levels emphasized the importance of non-plagiaristic behavior in significantly different ways. In other words, the academic degree bore an influence on the plagiarism policy of the syllabuses, with MA course syllabuses putting the highest degree of emphasis on it than PhD and BA course syllabuses.

The main aim of this study was to investigate Iranian university TEFL teachers' syllabuses to see whether they contained a plagiarism policy or not. Results showed that only around 16.4% of them included such a policy or statement. Among the syllabuses with a plagiarism policy, almost all were wanting in their definition of plagiarism, leaving the students with the faintest idea of what constitutes it. Furthermore, it was observed that half of the syllabuses with a plagiarism policy made direct reference to it and 88.24% supplied students with brief instructions on how to avoid plagiaristic

behavior. It was also observed that 32.35% of the syllabuses clearly spelled out the consequences and penalties for it. Most of the syllabuses either did not discuss the consequences and penalties or sufficed to a word of warning- *plagiarism is not tolerated*. The reluctance to be straightforward on the matter could be due to the “taboo” air surrounding the topic (Martin, 1984, p. 188). Martin adds that the problem will continue to occur as long as these taboo topics are avoided to be discussed openly.

Conclusion

One way through which course instructors can reflect their thoughts, values, and priorities is their syllabuses. A syllabus is “a general statement as to the pedagogical arrangement of learning content” (McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara, 2013, p. 11). Matejka and Kurke (1994) contend that a syllabus is “an important legal document” (p. 115), acting as an official contract between teachers and students. Viewing a syllabus as a contract requires teachers to consider some profound implications when designing it. One important aspect requiring reflection in drafting a syllabus is discussing the issue of plagiarism: supplying students with a definition of the term, information regarding the consequences and penalties for committing plagiarism, and university policies about academic dishonesty (Parkes and Harris, 2010). As discussed earlier, students appreciate and react positively to lengthier syllabuses that bear the marks of being well planned. Jenkins, Bugeja and Barber (2014), compared the effect of additional course content information and additional restrictive course boundary information such as fixed deadlines and expectations on students’ perception of instructor’s effectiveness showed that addition of the latter leads to a more positive impression. As a result, including straightforward restrictive boundaries in the syllabus would not only improve the instructors’ status in the eyes of the learners but also clear up the confusion which some student might have about the course. Parkes and Harris (2010) state that the conflict of understanding whether a student or an instructor has abided by the syllabus can turn into a legal issue. Therefore, it is important that the course instructors provide students with a comprehensive syllabus, explaining their expectations thoroughly given the findings that one of the main reasons that students resort to plagiarism is lack of awareness-raising about plagiarism itself and its consequences (Rezanejad and Rezaei, 2013). With that being said, the researchers of this study deemed it necessary to empirically examine plagiarism policies in Iranian university TEFL teachers’ syllabuses to find out whether the teachers devote a section to plagiarism policy or not, how they define and approached the issue, whether or not they offer any advice or guidelines on how to avoid plagiarism, and the teachers’ reaction to plagiaristic behavior, that is, what the consequences of committing the misconduct are.

Overall, it was concluded many of the syllabuses were devoid of any plagiarism the criteria described above. Out of the 207 syllabuses, 173 (83.6%) did not include a plagiarism policy. The findings of this study lend support to those obtained by Ahmadi (2014) and Rezanejad and Rezaei (2013), suggesting that students receive little instruction or information on plagiarism and plagiaristic practices from their teachers and universities. While straightforward plagiarism policies and honor codes are being drafted and implemented in many universities and colleges around the world, easily available to both students and the staff with the expectation that they will read and follow them (Sutherland-Smith 2008), the situation seems to be far below standard among educational institutions in Iran. As a result, it is an absolute necessity for every university and higher education institute to

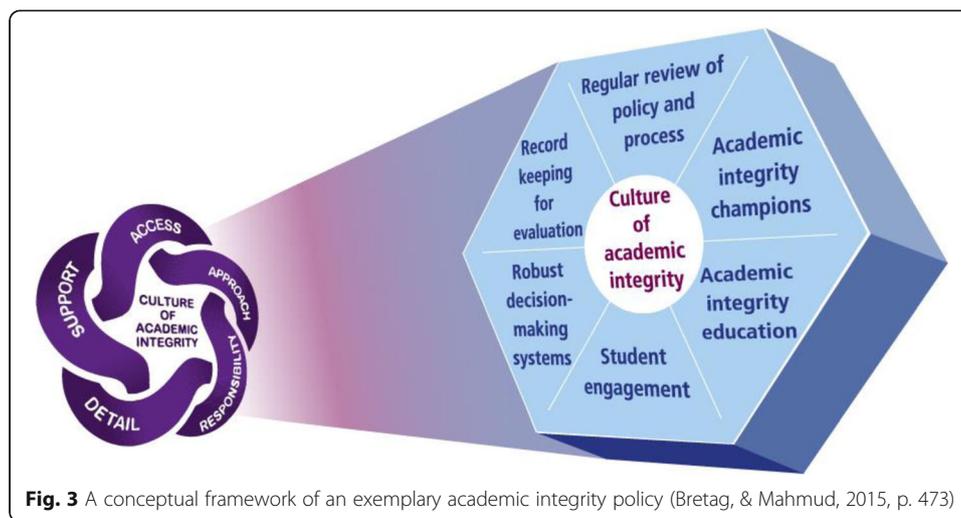
provide its members and students with a set of policies unambiguously explicating the standards, expectations, and rules. As explained by Weber-Wulff (2014), a suitable policy for appropriate academic practice should not just include a list of offences and penalties; rather, the ultimate goal of a good policy should be drawing a line between proper and improper practices so that students can distinguish between the two. She also maintains that every member of an academic institution, including students, should be thoroughly informed about the existence and the content of the policy in order to leave no space for doubts and discrepancies. It should be noted that in publishing a policy draft on plagiarism, there is no need to start from scratch; a great many of good models can be easily accessed on university websites and blogs around the world. Those models can be used as a framework for devising a new scheme (Weber-Wulff, 2014).

Cogdell and Aidulis (2008, pp. 41-42.) propose a multi-faceted approach for dealing with plagiarism which can be used for both traditional and online courses. The approach is as follows:

1. *Consistent institutional approach towards plagiarism* in which the faculty is responsible for providing clear-cut policies and regulations on university website, written policies in course syllabuses available on the department's website, holding sessions in which policies and regulations are discussed at the first of the semester, collecting anti-plagiarism statements signed by students before handing in course projects.
2. *Removing plagiarism opportunities* by assessment methods which make plagiarizing more difficult, and doing course projects under examination conditions
3. *Educating students* by providing exercises which aids students notify what plagiarism is, reference giving practices, improving writing skills in order to make students feel confident about their writing abilities.
4. *Promoting ethical behavior* by incorporating bioethics and research ethics courses.

A comprehensive and clear-cut conceptual framework is provided by Bretag and Mahmud (2015) that offers strategies for plagiarism prevention, which could be used as an inclusive model for other universities and higher education institutes. A two-day roundtable with a senior academic representative of five universities ended with six themes. Figure 3 below illustrates the components of Bretag and Mahmud's (2015) framework.

At the heart of this model is the culture of academic integrity. After the roundtable sessions, six components were identified for promoting this culture. One of the factors that can help promote a culture of academic integrity is the presence of agents of change, or the so-called *academic integrity champions*- influential individuals who can lead the academic organization towards establishing a culture in which honesty and candor are of utmost importance. These leading figures can be found among the university management, academic staff, administrative staff, or even students. While the presence of academic integrity pioneers is a crucial step in inspiring others to abide by the fitness codes of ethics, it would not be sufficient on its own. Any university and institute of higher education should not suffice to the informative and inspiring role of their academic integrity champions. It also has to develop educative programs for both its students and its staff in order to raise their awareness about proper and professional



academic behavior. These programs and workshops should be as practical as they can get; in the sense that after participating in the course, students should be able to avoid plagiarism, rather than learn a definition. Educational institutions and universities can offer their students free courses on research ethics, informing them about the ethical issues in conducting academic research. In addition, they can hold academic writing workshops where students can hone their summarizing and paraphrasing skills. The policy makers should also be aware of the different and diverse needs of the students and staff members when designing a course in academic integrity. The third element to be taken care of in providing a well-thought-out anti-plagiarism policy is the engagement of students. Students should understand that their role is beyond an acquiescent recipient of the policy. Quite the contrary, they are considered as contributors who can disseminate the positive culture among others. The fourth factor emphasizes the importance of a stout decision-making system. Needless to say, having a detailed yet clear set of guidelines regarding the process of dealing with misconducts will lead to a burgeoning of the culture of academic integrity. Appleby (2003) states that defining expectations and regulations in the syllabus significantly reduces occurrence of such behaviors. Instructors can also introduce relevant support centers at their university (e.g. writing workshops, academic research seminars, etc.) in their syllabuses. Perrine et al. (1995) point out that students who read syllabuses containing information on faculty-provided services are more likely to make use of them. Becker and Calhoun (1999) add that information of this type is especially useful for freshmen as they are interested in activities and services provided by the faculty. Another significant issue to consider is record keeping. This step is extremely beneficial in the sense that the breach data can be used as an informative source for the efficacy evaluation of the whole program and making necessary changes. Last but not least, the framework, rules, and policies should undergo continuous revisions after obtaining feedback from the breach data, students, staff, and policy-makers. The revisions would allow universities to engage in a quality control procedure through which they can identify the flaws, if any, of their policies and act to plug the existing loopholes in the framework. It is hoped that universities and policy makers take decisive action to promote the ethos of academic integrity by devising well-planned anti-plagiarism frameworks and requiring the

academic staff to include them in their course syllabuses. It is also hoped that other researchers investigate whether students actually read the policies stated in the syllabuses and how it impacts their views towards academic misconduct and its occurrence.

Abbreviations

TEFL: Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Availability of data and materials

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Undertaking

The two authors have approved the manuscript for submission to *International Journal for Educational Integrity*. The authors confirm that the content of the manuscript has not been published, or submitted for publication elsewhere. However, the abstract of an earlier version of this paper was included in the 14th International TELLSI Conference Book of Abstracts, Kerman, Iran, 16–18 November, 2016.

Authors' contributions

MN 65%. AHF 35%. MN proposed the research idea, contacted the teachers for their syllabuses, wrote parts of the introduction, review of the literature, results and edited the article multiple times. He also analyzed the data, conducted the data analysis, and prepared the manuscript for submission. AHF wrote parts of the introduction, review of the literature, results and the conclusion, He also helped analyze the data and formatted the references for submission. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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