

Academic Ethics and Moral Agency in EFL Writing: Census-Based Evidence from a Rural Vocational School on the West Sumatra-Riau Border

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Abstract

Academic ethics and moral agency are central to EFL writing, yet they remain underexamined in rural vocational schools where students often face limited linguistic, academic, and digital literacy support. This study examines academic ethics and moral agency in EFL writing among students at a small rural vocational school located on the West Sumatra-Riau border, Indonesia. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, the study first conducted a census-based survey involving all 74 students, followed by interviews to explain the quantitative patterns. The findings showed moderate levels of academic ethics ($M = 3.187$, $SD = 0.330$) and moral agency ($M = 3.182$, $SD = 0.350$). Spearman correlation indicated a significant positive association between academic ethics and moral agency ($\rho = .476$, $p < .001$). Bootstrapped regression showed that academic ethics positively predicted moral agency ($B = .599$, 95% CI [.340, .834], $R^2 = .319$). Interview data revealed barriers related to limited vocabulary, weak grammar, translation-tool dependence, uncertain citation practices, copy-paste habits, and unequal group participation. The study contributes context-bound evidence that moral awareness in EFL writing does not automatically lead to ethical enactment. It argues for explicit, scaffolded, and context-sensitive writing ethics instruction in rural vocational EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Academic ethics, academic integrity, EFL writing, explanatory sequential design, moral agency, rural vocational school



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1. Introduction

Academic ethics in EFL writing has become an important educational issue as writing requires students to make ethical decisions about authorship, source use, collaboration, peer feedback, and responsibility for learning. These decisions are not separate from writing competence. They shape how students produce texts, use support from peers or digital tools, acknowledge borrowed ideas, and respond to other students' work. Academic integrity is therefore better understood as a value-based academic practice rather than a narrow rule against plagiarism. It involves honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and the protection of learning as an internal good of academic life (Integrity., 2021; Mejía & Garcés-Flórez, 2025). This broader view is important because academic dishonesty does not emerge only from individual intention. It is also influenced by contextual factors such as peer norms, institutional culture, assessment pressure, and students' understanding of what counts as acceptable academic work (Bretag, 2013; McCabe et al., 2001).

The issue is not limited to higher education. Academic integrity also matters in secondary schools as students begin to form habits of authorship, collaboration, source use, and responsibility before entering university. Çelik and Razi (2023) showed that creating a culture of academic integrity at secondary school level requires explicit institutional and pedagogical attention. This argument is relevant to vocational high schools where students engage in writing tasks, group assignments, internet-based information use, and peer collaboration. If ethical writing practices are not developed at this level, students may carry weak academic habits into higher education, workplace communication, and digital literacy practices. In this sense, academic ethics in EFL writing should be treated as part of students' academic formation, not as a disciplinary concern that only appears when plagiarism is detected.

In EFL writing, academic ethics becomes more complex because students must write in a language that they are still learning. They may have ideas in their first language but lack the vocabulary, grammar, and genre knowledge needed to express those ideas independently in English. This condition affects ethical behavior. Students may copy sentences from the internet because they do not know how to paraphrase. They may rely on translation tools because they cannot construct sentences confidently. They may submit group work written mostly by one capable friend because they feel unable to contribute linguistically. For this reason, plagiarism and textual borrowing in L2 writing should not always be interpreted as intentional misconduct. They may also reflect limited academic literacy, weak paraphrasing skills, low confidence, unfamiliarity with textual ownership, and insufficient instruction in source-based writing (Keck, 2006; Pecorari & Petrić, 2014; Pennycook, 1996; Shi, 2004; Weigle & Parker, 2012).

This debate is central to the present study. A punitive view of plagiarism may identify students as dishonest, but it may fail to explain why they copy, translate, or borrow text.

Pennycook (1996) argues that plagiarism must be understood through complex relationships among text, ownership, memory, and learning. Pecorari and Petrić (2014) also show that plagiarism in second-language writing is a broad and contested field, where students' textual borrowing may involve language development, academic socialization, and different levels of awareness. Jamieson and Howard (2019) further argue that plagiarism should not be separated from broader academic integrity. These perspectives suggest that ethical writing instruction should move beyond punishment. It should help students understand authorship, source use, paraphrasing, and responsible writing as learnable academic practices.

The problem becomes more important in rural vocational schools. Vocational students often learn English in contexts where English is rarely used outside the classroom. Their writing development may be shaped by limited exposure to English, limited learning facilities, low access to writing models, and practical school cultures that prioritize task completion. Research on Indonesian vocational English teaching shows that English instruction in vocational high schools should respond to students' specific vocational needs, yet classroom practice often remains similar to general English instruction (Mahbub, 2018; Natsir et al., 2022). This mismatch can reduce students' engagement because English writing may not be clearly connected to their vocational identity, future work, or real communication needs.

Writing instruction in Indonesian EFL classrooms also faces persistent challenges. Adam et al (2021) report that English teachers in Indonesian vocational schools encounter challenges related to teaching techniques, limited instructional time, linguistic barriers, and student motivation. Pasaribu et al (2024) also show that Indonesian EFL students experience difficulties in academic writing, including grammar, mechanics, and clarity of expression. In rural settings, these problems may become more difficult because schools often face unequal educational resources, limited internet access, infrastructure constraints, and limited professional support for teachers. Mariyam et al (2025) show that English teachers in Indonesian rural schools deal with resource limitations and must adapt their teaching strategies to local conditions. These studies indicate that EFL writing ethics in rural vocational schools cannot be separated from the material and pedagogical conditions in which writing is taught.

SMK Negeri 1 Padang Laweh provides a relevant site for examining this issue. The school is located in a rural area of Dharmasraya, near the border between West Sumatra and Riau, Indonesia. It serves a small student population, and many students come from lower-middle socioeconomic backgrounds. Many parents work as laborers in oil palm plantations. This context matters because students' academic behavior is shaped by access to learning resources, family educational background, peer culture, school size, vocational orientation, and classroom writing routines. In such a setting, academic ethics in EFL writing should be examined as situated practice. It is not enough to ask whether students know that cheating or plagiarism is wrong. A more important question is how students understand and enact ethical responsibility when they face real writing difficulties.

Existing studies on academic integrity and plagiarism have produced important insights into cheating, source use, citation practices, and plagiarism prevention. However, much of this literature focuses on higher education, urban institutions, or university-level academic writing. Less attention has been given to school-level EFL writing, especially in rural vocational

contexts. This gap is important because academic integrity does not begin at university. Students start forming ethical writing habits through school assignments, peer feedback, internet source use, and group writing. If these practices remain implicit, students may learn to value task completion more than authorship, revision, source acknowledgment, or fair contribution.

This study also addresses a conceptual gap by connecting academic ethics with moral agency. Academic ethics refers to the values and practices that guide responsible academic work, including honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, and proper use of sources. Moral agency refers to students' capacity to recognize ethical situations, judge appropriate action, prioritize moral values, and act consistently. Rest's Four-Component Model provides a useful framework because it explains moral action through moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral implementation (Rest, 1986; Rest et al., 1999). Bebeau (2002) shows that this model has contributed to professional and educational ethics because it explains moral action as a multidimensional process. Latif (2002) also demonstrates the relevance of the model for understanding ethical behavior in educational contexts. More recent work on ethical competence further emphasizes that moral sensitivity and moral implementation are important elements of ethics education (Osbeck et al., 2018).

Rest's model is especially useful for analyzing EFL writing. Moral sensitivity appears when students recognize that their comments on a friend's draft may affect confidence and motivation. Moral judgment appears when students decide whether it is fair for one group member to complete most of the writing task. Moral motivation appears when students choose honest work even when copying or full-text translation is easier. Moral implementation appears when students consistently revise their writing, acknowledge sources, avoid copy-paste practices, and maintain respectful interaction during peer feedback. These four components show that moral agency in writing is not abstract. It is visible in ordinary classroom actions such as brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, giving feedback, citing sources, and submitting assignments.

The study therefore combines academic integrity scholarship and Rest's Four-Component Model as its theoretical foundation. Academic integrity scholarship provides the value structure of ethical academic conduct, while Rest's model explains how students move from ethical awareness to ethical action. This combined framework is useful as EFL writing ethics requires both normative clarity and pedagogical understanding. Students need to know what counts as honest, fair, respectful, and responsible writing. At the same time, teachers need to understand why students may fail to enact these values when they face vocabulary limitations, grammar difficulty, peer pressure, unequal group participation, or dependence on translation tools.

Methodologically, this study contributes by using census-based evidence from a small and clearly bounded school population. Small sample size is often treated as a limitation in quantitative research. However, in a small rural school, total population sampling can provide a complete within-school profile rather than a partial sample. This study does not claim statistical generalization to all Indonesian vocational schools. Instead, it offers context-bound evidence from an underrepresented rural vocational school. The addition of follow-up

interviews also allows the study to explain the quantitative patterns through students' and teacher's accounts of writing difficulty, source use, peer collaboration, and classroom ethics.

The novelty of this study lies in four areas. First, it shifts the discussion of academic ethics from higher education to vocational high school EFL writing. Second, it examines academic ethics not as general school behavior but as a writing-specific construct involving honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, and proper source use. Third, it connects academic ethics with moral agency by using Rest's Four-Component Model to explain the movement from ethical awareness to ethical enactment. Fourth, it provides census-based evidence from a rural borderland school, a context that remains underrepresented in international EFL and academic integrity research.

Based on this background, the study aims to examine the level of students' academic ethics and moral agency in EFL writing at SMK Negeri 1 Padang Laweh. It also investigates the relationship between academic ethics and moral agency and explains the quantitative findings through interview data. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- a) What is the level of students' academic ethics in EFL writing at a rural vocational school on the West Sumatra-Riau border?
- b) What is the level of students' moral agency in EFL writing?
- c) Which dimensions of academic ethics and moral agency appear strongest and weakest among the students?
- d) To what extent is academic ethics associated with moral agency in EFL writing?
- e) How do students and the English teacher explain the patterns of academic ethics and moral agency found in the survey?

By answering these questions, this study argues that EFL writing ethics should be taught as an explicit, scaffolded, and context-sensitive component of writing instruction. For rural vocational students, ethical writing cannot be assumed as an automatic outcome of moral knowledge or school discipline. It needs to be developed through practical classroom routines, guided source use, ethical use of translation tools, transparent group roles, structured peer feedback, and writing tasks that value process as much as final product.

2. Method

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-method design to examine academic ethics and moral agency in EFL writing among students at SMK Negeri 1 Padang Laweh, a small rural vocational school located in Dharmasraya, near the West Sumatra-Riau border, Indonesia. This design was selected because the study aimed to first obtain a complete quantitative profile of students' academic ethics and moral agency, and then explain the statistical patterns through follow-up interviews. In an explanatory sequential design, quantitative data are collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data collection to clarify or deepen the interpretation of the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative phase used a census-based cross-sectional survey because the school had a small and clearly bounded student population. All 74 students participated and provided valid responses. The survey measured academic ethics through five dimensions, namely honesty,

responsibility, fairness, respect, and proper use of sources. It also measured moral agency through Rest's four-component model, namely moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral implementation (Rest, 1986; Rest *et al.*, 1999). The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree, and included both positive and negative items to reduce response predictability. Negative items were reverse-coded before analysis so that higher scores consistently represented stronger academic ethics and stronger moral agency. After the survey phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six purposively selected students and one English teacher. The students were selected to represent relatively high, moderate, and low survey profiles. The interviews focused on writing difficulties, source use, translation-tool dependence, peer feedback, group participation, revision practices, and classroom strategies for developing ethical writing behavior.

Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, reliability testing, construct validity diagnostics, normality testing, correlation, and regression. Mean, standard deviation, minimum score, maximum score, and category were calculated to describe the level of academic ethics and moral agency. Cronbach's alpha and corrected item-total correlation were used to examine internal consistency and item performance. Cronbach's alpha was applied because it is widely used to evaluate the extent to which items in a scale measure a related construct, although it must be interpreted carefully and should not be treated as evidence of validity by itself (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Construct validity was examined through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy, Bartlett's test of sphericity, and corrected dimension-total correlations. The KMO procedure was used to assess whether the data were suitable for factor-based interpretation, following Kaiser (1974) index of factorial simplicity. Normality was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test, supported by skewness, kurtosis, histograms, and Q-Q plots. The Shapiro-Wilk test was selected because it is a well-established test for evaluating whether a sample distribution significantly departs from normality (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965). Because the composite scores were not normally distributed, Spearman correlation was used to examine the association between academic ethics and moral agency. A simple bootstrapped regression was then conducted with moral agency as the dependent variable and academic ethics as the independent variable. The model was kept simple because the study involved a small census-based dataset and did not aim to build a multi-predictor causal model.

The qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis was selected for it provides a flexible yet systematic approach for identifying patterned meanings across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis combined deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding was guided by the study's theoretical framework, particularly the dimensions of academic ethics and Rest's four components of moral agency. Inductive coding was used to capture themes that emerged from students' and teacher's explanations, such as linguistic insecurity, dependence on translation tools, uncertainty about citation, copy-paste practices, unequal group participation, and limited peer feedback. The qualitative findings were then integrated with the quantitative results to explain why students showed moderate levels of academic ethics and moral agency. All student data were anonymized, participation was voluntary, and the findings were reported only in aggregate form.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings from the census-based survey and the follow-up interviews. The quantitative analysis was conducted after reverse-coding the negatively worded items. Therefore, higher scores consistently indicate stronger academic ethics and stronger moral agency in EFL writing. The qualitative findings are then used to explain the statistical patterns.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of academic ethics and moral agency in EFL writing

Scale	Dimension	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Category
Academic Ethics	Honesty	74	3.088	0.455	2.000	4.500	Moderate
Academic Ethics	Responsibility	74	3.200	0.494	2.000	4.833	Moderate
Academic Ethics	Fairness	74	3.171	0.529	2.000	5.000	Moderate
Academic Ethics	Respect	74	3.196	0.478	2.000	4.333	Moderate
Academic Ethics	Proper Use of Sources	74	3.279	0.456	2.500	4.667	Moderate
Academic Ethics	Overall	74	3.187	0.330	2.433	4.300	Moderate
Moral Agency	Moral Sensitivity	74	3.117	0.491	1.833	4.333	Moderate
Moral Agency	Moral Judgment	74	3.212	0.508	1.833	4.333	Moderate
Moral Agency	Moral Motivation	74	3.227	0.469	2.333	4.333	Moderate
Moral Agency	Moral Implementation	74	3.171	0.480	2.000	4.333	Moderate
Moral Agency	Overall	74	3.182	0.350	2.500	4.208	Moderate

The results show that students' overall academic ethics in EFL writing was moderate ($M = 3.187$, $SD = 0.330$). All five dimensions also fell within the moderate category. Proper use of sources obtained the highest mean score ($M = 3.279$, $SD = 0.456$), followed by responsibility ($M = 3.200$, $SD = 0.494$), respect ($M = 3.196$, $SD = 0.478$), fairness ($M = 3.171$, $SD = 0.529$), and honesty ($M = 3.088$, $SD = 0.455$). The relatively small standard deviation for the overall score indicates that students' responses were moderately clustered around the mean, although the minimum and maximum scores still show individual variation.

Students' overall moral agency was also moderate ($M = 3.182$, $SD = 0.350$). Moral motivation had the highest mean among the four dimensions ($M = 3.227$, $SD = 0.469$), followed by moral judgment ($M = 3.212$, $SD = 0.508$), moral implementation ($M = 3.171$, $SD = 0.480$), and moral sensitivity ($M = 3.117$, $SD = 0.491$). These results indicate that students did not show a low moral profile, but their moral agency had not reached a high or very high level.

Students had some awareness and willingness to act ethically in writing, but the level of internalization remained moderate.

Table 2. Reliability and construct validity diagnostics

Construct	Diagnostic	Result	Interpretation
Academic Ethics	Cronbach's Alpha	.667	Marginal, interpret with caution
Moral Agency	Cronbach's Alpha	.648	Marginal, interpret with caution
Academic Ethics	KMO, item-level	.683	Factorable
Moral Agency	KMO, item-level	.655	Factorable
Academic Ethics	Bartlett's Test	$\chi^2 = 868.392$, $df = 406$, $p < .001$	Significant
Moral Agency	Bartlett's Test	$\chi^2 = 655.876$, $df = 276$, $p < .001$	Significant
Academic Ethics	KMO, dimension-level	.745	Factorable
Moral Agency	KMO, dimension-level	.686	Factorable
Academic Ethics	Dimension-level PCA	46.9% variance explained	Supported
Moral Agency	Dimension-level PCA	52.1% variance explained	Supported

The reliability results show that the overall academic ethics scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .667, while the overall moral agency scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .648. These values indicate marginal internal consistency. The results should be interpreted cautiously because the instrument measured multiple related dimensions rather than a single narrow construct. At the dimension level, reliability values were weak. Therefore, the dimension-level findings are treated as descriptive profiles rather than evidence from highly stable subscales.

Construct validity diagnostics provided stronger support at the construct level. The academic ethics instrument was factorable at the item level after removing one constant item, AE.1, which had zero variance. The KMO value for academic ethics was .683, and Bartlett's test was significant, $\chi^2 = 868.392$, $df = 406$, $p < .001$. The moral agency instrument was also factorable, with KMO = .655 and a significant Bartlett's test, $\chi^2 = 655.876$, $df = 276$, $p < .001$. Dimension-level diagnostics showed clearer construct support. Academic ethics produced a KMO value of .745, while moral agency produced a KMO value of .686. Dimension-level PCA showed that the first component explained 46.9% of the variance in academic ethics and 52.1% of the variance in moral agency. These results indicate that the constructs were interpretable at the dimension level, although item-level refinement is still needed in future studies.

Table 3. Normality, correlation, and regression results

Analysis	Result	Interpretation
Shapiro-Wilk, Academic Ethics	$W = .943$, $p = .002$	Non-normal
Skewness, Academic Ethics	.946	Positively skewed
Kurtosis, Academic Ethics	2.193	Leptokurtic tendency
Shapiro-Wilk, Moral Agency	$W = .937$, $p = .001$	Non-normal

Analysis	Result	Interpretation
Skewness, Moral Agency	.817	Positively skewed
Kurtosis, Moral Agency	.538	Slight positive kurtosis
Spearman Correlation	$\rho = .476, p < .001$	Significant positive association
Pearson Correlation	$r = .565, p < .001$	Significant, reported as supplementary
Regression Coefficient	$B = .599, SE = .103$	Positive prediction
Bootstrap 95% CI	[.340, .834]	Does not include zero
Model Fit	$R^2 = .319$	31.9% variance explained
Model Test	$F(1,72) = 33.722, p < .001$	Significant
Residual Normality	Shapiro-Wilk $p = .459$	Residuals normally distributed

The Shapiro-Wilk tests showed that the composite scores for academic ethics and moral agency were not normally distributed. Academic ethics was non-normal, $W = .943, p = .002$, and moral agency was also non-normal, $W = .937, p = .001$. Therefore, Spearman correlation was used as the primary correlation test. The result showed a significant positive association between academic ethics and moral agency, $\rho = .476, p < .001$. Pearson correlation was also significant, $r = .565, p < .001$, but it was treated as supplementary because the normality assumption was not met.

A simple bootstrapped regression was then conducted to examine whether academic ethics predicted moral agency. The model was significant, $F(1,72) = 33.722, p < .001$, and explained 31.9% of the variance in moral agency. Academic ethics positively predicted moral agency, $B = .599, SE = .103$, 95% bootstrap CI [.340, .834]. The residuals were normally distributed, Shapiro-Wilk $p = .459$. These results indicate that students with stronger academic ethics in EFL writing tended to show stronger moral agency.

Table 4. Qualitative themes explaining the survey results

Theme	Evidence from Interviews	Link to Quantitative Findings
Linguistic insecurity	Students reported difficulty with grammar, tenses, vocabulary, sentence construction, and paragraph development.	Explains why honesty and independent writing remained moderate.
Translation-tool dependence	Higher-profile students used dictionaries or translation tools selectively, while lower-profile students copied full translated texts.	Explains the gap between ethical awareness and ethical writing behavior.
Weak source-use literacy	Several students did not know how to cite sources, while others assumed internet texts were free to use.	Explains why proper source use was moderate rather than high.
Unequal group participation	Group writing was often completed by one or two capable students, while others copied, printed, presented, or contributed money.	Explains moderate fairness, responsibility, and moral implementation.

Limited peer feedback	Students often gave vague comments such as “good” or “okay” because they lacked confidence to critique writing.	Explains moderate respect and moral sensitivity.
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The interviews revealed four major explanatory patterns. First, students experienced linguistic insecurity. Students across score categories described writing in English as difficult because they struggled with grammar, tenses, vocabulary, sentence construction, and paragraph development. One high-profile student explained that the idea was already available in Indonesian, but the student became afraid when converting it into English as the structure might be wrong. A low-profile student expressed the problem more sharply by saying that if asked to write independently, the paper would be blank. The English teacher confirmed this pattern by explaining that many students became silent when given a writing topic and did not know how to begin.

Second, students depended on translation tools and internet sources in different ways. Some students used dictionaries or Google Translate to check individual words. Others entered full Indonesian sentences into translation tools and copied the English output. Lower-profile students reported copying from friends or internet articles. The teacher identified three dominant forms of academic dishonesty in writing: translating full paragraphs through applications, copying internet texts without modification, and free-riding in group work.

Third, source-use literacy was weak. Some students knew that taking information without acknowledging the source was inappropriate, but they did not know how to write the source. Others did not understand source acknowledgment at all. One student believed that if a text was available on Google, it was free to use. Another stated that the most important thing was submitting a task on time. The teacher also reported that students had not been familiarized with plagiarism, citation, or textual ownership before entering vocational high school.

Fourth, group writing often involved unequal moral participation. Students with higher survey profiles described group work as a shared activity involving idea discussion, vocabulary search, and drafting. However, moderate and low-profile students reported that the writing task was often completed by one or two more capable students. Other members contributed by copying the text onto paper, printing the task, reading it during presentation, or paying group expenses. This pattern shows that group work did not always function as collaborative writing. In some cases, it became task distribution without equal learning participation.

Peer feedback also remained limited. Students rarely gave substantive comments on peers' writing. Higher-profile students focused on spelling, punctuation, or polite encouragement. Moderate-profile students gave vague comments because they felt uncomfortable criticizing friends or lacked confidence in their own English. Lower-profile students often did not read their friends' writing carefully. This explains why ethical interaction in peer feedback remained moderate. Students tended to avoid conflict, but avoidance did not necessarily lead to meaningful academic feedback.

The findings show that students' academic ethics and moral agency in EFL writing were moderate rather than high. This pattern is theoretically and pedagogically important. It indicates that students were not detached from ethical values, but their ethical writing practices

had not yet become stable learning habits. The moderate profile should therefore not be read as simple moral weakness. It should be read as evidence of developing but fragile ethical agency. In this rural vocational context, students appeared to know that honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, and source acknowledgment mattered. However, they did not always have the linguistic competence, academic literacy, confidence, or classroom routines needed to enact these values consistently.

This finding supports the view that academic integrity should be understood as a pedagogical issue, not only as a disciplinary issue. Academic integrity is often discussed when misconduct has occurred, especially plagiarism or cheating. Such a reactive approach can make integrity appear as a matter of punishment. The present study suggests a different interpretation. Students' moderate scores and interview responses show that ethical writing behavior is shaped by learning conditions, peer norms, task design, teacher guidance, and students' ability to complete writing tasks independently. This interpretation aligns with McCabe et al (2001) who show that academic dishonesty is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by contextual factors, including peer behavior. It also supports Bretag (2013) argument that plagiarism in education is a complex problem that cannot be reduced to simple rule violation.

The rural vocational setting strengthens this argument. SMK Negeri 1 Padang Laweh represents a small and under-resourced school context where students' English exposure is limited and writing support is not always intensive. In such a setting, academic integrity cannot be assumed to emerge automatically from school rules. It must be taught through classroom practices. Çelik and Razi (2023) show that developing academic integrity at secondary school level requires institutional and pedagogical commitment. This point is highly relevant to vocational schools because students are still forming their academic habits. If writing ethics is not taught explicitly, students may learn that completing the task matters more than authorship, process, source acknowledgment, or fair contribution.

The first major issue concerns the relationship between source use, plagiarism, and academic literacy. The survey showed that proper use of sources was moderate, while the interviews revealed that many students were still unsure about how to use internet sources ethically. Some students knew that copying was not ideal, but they did not know how to paraphrase, cite, or distinguish their own ideas from borrowed information. Others assumed that information found on Google could be used freely. This finding shows that source-use ethics is not only a matter of willingness. It is also a matter of procedural knowledge. Students cannot be expected to cite or paraphrase well if they have never been explicitly taught how academic ownership works in writing.

This finding is consistent with second-language writing scholarship. Pecorari and Petrić (2014) argue that plagiarism in second-language writing must be examined in relation to students' language development, academic literacy, and source-use knowledge. Pennycook (1996) also warns against a simplistic view of textual borrowing by showing that writing, memory, ownership, and learning are deeply connected. Shi (2004) further shows that textual borrowing in L2 writing is shaped by students' understanding of source texts and writing conventions. Keck, (2006) demonstrates that paraphrasing is difficult for L2 writers because it requires more than replacing words. It demands control over meaning, syntax, and textual

transformation. This explains why students in the present study often depended on copying, translation, or minimal modification when they faced writing difficulty.

The finding also clarifies why academic ethics and language proficiency should not be separated in EFL writing. A student may want to be honest but still copy because they cannot formulate sentences independently. A student may want to acknowledge a source but still fail because they do not know citation conventions. A student may intend to paraphrase but still produce patchwriting because their vocabulary and grammar are limited. Weigle and Parker (2012) show that source borrowing in integrated writing assessment is complex because students must process source texts and produce their own writing at the same time. This complexity is even more visible in rural vocational classrooms where students have limited exposure to academic English. Therefore, ethical writing instruction should be integrated with writing instruction, not added as a warning after misconduct occurs.

The second major issue concerns peer feedback. Quantitatively, respect was in the moderate category. Qualitatively, students tended to avoid harsh comments and tried to maintain politeness when responding to friends' writing. This appears positive, but it also reveals a limitation. Respectful interaction did not automatically become useful feedback. Many students gave vague comments such as "good" or "okay" because they lacked confidence, did not know what aspect of writing to evaluate, or felt uncomfortable correcting friends. This pattern shows that peer feedback cannot rely only on students' politeness. It must be specific, text-focused, and supported by clear criteria.

This finding aligns with L2 writing feedback research. Yu and Lee (2016) show that peer feedback in second-language writing can support learning, but its effectiveness depends on how it is structured, how students understand their roles, and how feedback is used for revision. Lee (2015) also shows that secondary students' peer feedback practices require careful pedagogical design because learners may not automatically produce useful feedback. Hyland (2000) emphasizes that feedback involves issues of student autonomy, teacher control, and ownership of revision. Carless and Boud (2018) further argue that students need feedback literacy, which refers to the capacity to understand, interpret, and use feedback for improvement. In the present study, students' moderate respect suggests social readiness, but their limited feedback quality shows that feedback literacy remains underdeveloped.

This distinction is important. A classroom can be socially polite but academically weak. Students may avoid offending peers, yet still fail to help peers revise their texts. In EFL writing, ethical peer feedback requires two forms of competence. First, students need moral competence to respond respectfully and avoid humiliating others. Second, students need textual competence to identify problems in content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, and source use. Without the second competence, peer feedback becomes emotionally safe but pedagogically shallow. Therefore, the ethical task for EFL teachers is not only to encourage kindness. Teachers must also model how to give specific, constructive, and text-centered comments.

The third major issue concerns collaborative writing. The survey showed moderate scores in fairness, responsibility, and moral implementation. The interviews explained why these dimensions did not reach a high level. Group writing was often handled by one or two students who were perceived as more capable in English. Other members contributed by copying the

final text, printing, presenting, or paying group expenses. This arrangement helped the group complete the assignment, but it did not ensure equal academic participation. It also allowed free-riding to appear as cooperation. In this sense, the problem was not merely individual laziness. It was also a weakness in task design.

Collaborative writing has strong pedagogical potential in L2 classrooms. Storch (2019) explains that collaborative writing involves two or more learners producing a single text and can create opportunities for language discussion and joint problem-solving. Wigglesworth and Storch (2012) also argue that collaboration can support learning because learners negotiate language, meaning, and feedback together. However, the present study shows that collaboration can become ethically problematic when contribution is not structured. If the most capable student writes the text while others only provide logistical support, group writing becomes task outsourcing rather than shared learning. This finding extends collaborative writing research by showing that collaboration should also be examined as an ethical practice.

The implication is clear. Teachers should not assume that group writing automatically promotes fairness or responsibility. Group tasks need transparent roles. For example, one student can be responsible for generating ideas, another for drafting, another for checking vocabulary, another for revising grammar, another for checking sources, and another for preparing presentation. Each role should leave visible evidence of contribution. This can reduce free-riding and help students understand that ethical collaboration means contributing to the learning process, not only helping the group submit a product. In rural vocational classrooms, where students' English proficiency may vary widely, role-based collaborative writing can also distribute participation more fairly.

The fourth major issue concerns translation tools. Interview data showed that students used translation tools in different ways. Some used them to check vocabulary or sentence meaning. Others translated full paragraphs and copied the output with little revision. This pattern reflects a common dilemma in EFL writing. Translation tools can support students who have limited vocabulary and grammar, but they can also replace learning when used without guidance. The present study therefore suggests that banning translation tools completely is not realistic. At the same time, allowing unrestricted use may normalize dependency and weaken students' authorship.

Research on machine translation in EFL and L2 writing supports this balanced position. Lee (2020) found that machine translation can support EFL students' writing and revision strategies, but its benefits depend on teacher guidance and students' awareness of limitations. Chon et al (2021) show that machine-translated texts may improve some surface-level features of L2 writing, but they can also create problems such as mistranslation and inappropriate word choice. These findings help explain the present data. Students who used translation tools selectively were more likely to treat technology as support. Students who copied full translated paragraphs treated technology as replacement. The ethical issue is therefore not the tool itself. The issue is whether the tool supports learning or bypasses learning.

This point is central to writing ethics in the current digital learning environment. Students in rural schools may depend on digital tools because they lack other forms of language support. For them, translation tools can function as an accessible scaffold. However, scaffolded use

requires explicit rules and routines. Teachers need to show students how to use translation tools to check vocabulary, compare sentence options, identify errors, and revise drafts. Teachers also need to explain when tool use becomes academically dishonest, especially when students submit machine-generated or machine-translated text without understanding, revising, or acknowledging the process. Guided ethical use is therefore more pedagogically productive than absolute prohibition.

The fifth major issue concerns the gap between moral awareness and moral implementation. The survey showed that moral agency was moderate, and interview data showed that students often knew what was expected but struggled to act consistently. This pattern fits Rest's Four-Component Model. Moral action requires moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral implementation (Rest, 1986; Rest *et al.*, 1999). In the present study, students could often recognize that copying, unequal group work, or harsh feedback was problematic. However, recognition did not always become action. Writing difficulty, limited English ability, peer dependence, task deadlines, and the desire to submit a completed product weakened moral implementation.

This finding is theoretically important since it shows that academic ethics and moral agency are not identical. Academic ethics provides the normative expectations of writing, while moral agency explains students' capacity to enact those expectations under real classroom conditions. A student may understand honesty but lack the ability to write independently. A student may value fairness but accept unequal group work because only one friend can write in English. A student may value respect but avoid meaningful feedback because they fear offending others. These examples show that ethical failure in EFL writing often occurs between knowing and doing. The task of pedagogy is to reduce this gap.

The significant relationship between academic ethics and moral agency supports this interpretation. Students with stronger academic ethics tended to report stronger moral agency. The regression model also showed that academic ethics explained 31.9% of the variance in moral agency. This result does not prove causality, but it suggests that ethical writing practices and moral agency develop together. When students practice honest authorship, fair collaboration, respectful feedback, and responsible source use, they also exercise moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and implementation. EFL writing is therefore not only a language task. It is a repeated moral practice in which students learn how to act responsibly with texts, peers, tools, and sources.

The findings also show why academic ethics must be embedded in writing pedagogy. If ethics is taught only through warnings against plagiarism, students may understand what not to do but remain unsure about what to do. They need procedural alternatives. Instead of only telling students not to copy, teachers need to teach them how to paraphrase. Instead of only prohibiting translation tools, teachers need to teach ethical and strategic use. Instead of only asking students to work in groups, teachers need to design accountable roles. Instead of only asking students to give feedback, teachers need to train them to use rubrics and sentence frames. This is consistent with Mejía and Garcés-Flórez (2025) view of academic integrity as a practice that protects the internal goods of academic life, including learning, knowledge development, and shared responsibility.

The study therefore contributes to academic integrity research by extending the discussion into rural vocational EFL writing. Much academic integrity research remains concentrated in higher education. This study shows that secondary vocational students also face complex ethical writing demands. They use online sources, translation tools, peer assistance, and group writing strategies. These practices can support learning, but they can also create ethical risks when not guided. The contribution of this study is not to claim that rural vocational students are uniquely problematic. Rather, it shows that their ethical writing practices are shaped by the intersection of language difficulty, resource limitation, peer culture, task pressure, and limited academic literacy instruction.

The study also contributes to L2 writing pedagogy by showing that writing ethics should be treated as a teachable component of writing competence. In this context, competence includes the ability to generate ideas, organize texts, use grammar and vocabulary, revise drafts, respond to feedback, acknowledge sources, and use digital tools responsibly. These abilities are interconnected. A student who cannot paraphrase may copy. A student who cannot evaluate writing may give vague feedback. A student who lacks vocabulary may overuse machine translation. A student who has no role in group writing may become a passive participant. Therefore, improving writing ethics requires improving the instructional ecology of writing.

Practical implications follow from these findings. First, EFL teachers should teach academic ethics before misconduct occurs. This includes simple lessons on authorship, copying, paraphrasing, citation, and acceptable support. Second, source use should be scaffolded through short source logs, paraphrase practice, and comparison between copied, patch written, and properly paraphrased sentences. Third, peer feedback should be supported with rubrics, checklists, and sentence starters so students can give comments that are polite, specific, and useful. Fourth, collaborative writing should use assigned roles and contribution records to ensure fair participation. Fifth, translation tools should be integrated into writing instruction through guided ethical use rather than treated only as prohibited shortcuts.

These implications are especially important for rural vocational schools. Students in such contexts may not receive extensive exposure to academic English outside the classroom. They may also have limited access to models of ethical source-based writing. If teachers rely only on final products, students may continue using shortcuts because shortcuts help them survive the task. If teachers emphasize writing process, students can learn that ethical writing is built through planning, drafting, revising, checking sources, asking for help appropriately, and reflecting on contribution. The shift from product-only assessment to process-oriented writing instruction is therefore central to building academic ethics and moral agency.

Overall, the discussion shows that academic ethics in EFL writing is not a simple matter of student obedience. It is a complex pedagogical issue. Students need values, but they also need tools, routines, models, and opportunities to practice ethical writing. The moderate level of academic ethics and moral agency in this study should be seen as a developmental signal. Students have the beginning of ethical awareness, but they need stronger instructional support to turn awareness into consistent action. For rural vocational EFL classrooms, the most productive response is not stricter punishment alone. It is explicit, scaffolded, and context-sensitive writing ethics instruction.

4. Conclusion

This study examined academic ethics and moral agency in EFL writing among students at SMK Negeri 1 Padang Laweh, a small rural vocational school located on the West Sumatra-Riau border. Using a census-based survey of 74 students and follow-up interviews with six students and one English teacher, the study found that students' academic ethics and moral agency were both at a moderate level. Academic ethics obtained an overall mean of 3.187, while moral agency obtained an overall mean of 3.182. These findings indicate that students were not ethically disengaged, but their ethical writing practices had not yet become stable academic habits. The strongest pattern was not a lack of moral awareness, but a gap between knowing what is appropriate and consistently doing it in real writing tasks.

The study also found a significant positive association between academic ethics and moral agency. Spearman correlation showed a moderate positive relationship between the two constructs, and the bootstrapped regression indicated that academic ethics positively predicted moral agency. This result suggests that students who reported stronger honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, and source-use awareness also tended to show stronger moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral implementation. In EFL writing, academic ethics and moral agency work together. Ethical writing requires students to make decisions about authorship, source use, peer feedback, group contribution, revision, and task completion. These decisions are moral actions, not only technical writing skills.

The interview findings deepened the statistical results. Students' moderate ethical profile was shaped by limited vocabulary, weak grammar foundations, dependence on translation tools, uncertainty about citation, copy-paste habits, and unequal group participation. These findings show that academic dishonesty in rural EFL writing should not be explained only as intentional misconduct. In many cases, it also reflects limited academic literacy and insufficient instructional scaffolding. Students often knew that independent work, source acknowledgment, and fair group contribution were important, but they did not always have the linguistic ability, confidence, or procedural knowledge to enact these values consistently.

This study has several implications. For EFL teachers, writing ethics should be taught explicitly as part of writing instruction. Teachers need to guide students in paraphrasing, simple citation, responsible use of translation tools, peer feedback, and revision. For vocational schools, writing tasks should assess both product and process. Students should be encouraged to submit outlines, drafts, revision notes, source records, and group contribution logs. For curriculum designers, academic integrity should not be treated only as a disciplinary rule. It should become part of learning design, especially in writing activities that involve collaboration, digital sources, and language-support tools.

The study is limited to one rural vocational school with 74 students. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized statistically to all Indonesian vocational schools. The reliability values of the instrument were also marginal, and several item-level diagnostics suggest that future refinement is needed. However, this limitation is also part of the study's design. The research aimed to capture a complete profile of a small and bounded school population rather than to represent a national population. The addition of interview data helped strengthen the

interpretation by explaining the quantitative patterns through students' and teacher's classroom experiences.

Future research should involve larger and more diverse vocational school samples across rural, urban, and borderland contexts. Further studies should also refine and validate the academic ethics and moral agency instruments through stronger psychometric procedures. Longitudinal research would be useful to examine whether explicit writing ethics instruction can improve students' honesty, source use, peer feedback, and moral implementation over time. Experimental or classroom-based intervention studies could also test strategies such as guided paraphrasing, ethical use of translation tools, structured peer feedback, and role-based group writing. Such studies would move the field beyond describing ethical problems toward designing practical solutions for EFL writing classrooms.

Overall, this study concludes that rural vocational students' academic ethics and moral agency in EFL writing are developing but still fragile. Students need more than moral reminders. They need structured opportunities to practice ethical writing. In small rural schools, academic integrity can grow when teachers connect ethical values with concrete writing routines, clear feedback, guided source use, and fair collaboration. This study therefore argues that academic ethics should become an explicit, scaffolded, and context-sensitive component of EFL writing instruction.

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