The Case of "Underdeveloped" Academic Literacy Skills of Undergraduates: Contrasting Perspectives

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Abstract

This article reports on the partial results of a longitudinal study I conducted to investigate the first-year students' experiences in dealing with the challenges they face while attaining the academic literacy skills required of them and constructing their academic identities at an American university in the UAE. While the challenges encountered by the students, all of whom were Arab L2 speakers of English, were reported elsewhere, the focus of this paper is on the contrasts between the students' and professors' perspectives. The main source of data was semi-structured interviews with thirteen professors the student-participants took courses from. The analysis of the interviews with the professors highlighted a discrepancy between their expectations and students' knowledge of the required academic literacy demands in English. It also revealed that many of the professors either underestimated or were unaware of the struggles students go through to meet those expectations. Another important discrepancy revealed was between the perspectives of the professors who teach academic writing courses and those who teach discipline-specific courses. These findings call for enhancing communication not only between professors and students, but also collaboration between English language/writing experts and academic staff in the disciplines.

1. Introduction

A common point of complaint among academics teaching at higher education institutions with an English medium of instruction (EMI) across the UAE is the issue of underdeveloped academic literacy skills of university entrants, as well as the gap in educational standards between schools and universities (Durham & Palubiski, 2007; Findlow, 2006; Gobert, 2009; Hatakka, 2014; Hatherly-Greene, 2012; Khoury & Duzgun, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2009; Education initiative, 2014; Hameli & Underwood, 2014; Naido, 2010; Salem & Swan, 2014). Likewise, in informal conversations I have with colleagues, teaching academic writing exclusively or discipline-specific courses, they tend to point fingers at students' previous educational experiences, which they often find ineffective in teaching the essential reading and writing skills required at university level.

The dissatisfaction with university entrants' academic literacy skills is certainly neither a unique issue experienced only in the UAE, nor a new problem. It has been a subject of debate and a common point of complaint also in the UK, US, and Australia (Carrol, 2002; Spack, 1997; Horner, 2014; Wingate, 2015), namely, "inner-circle" countries, based on Kachru's Three Circle Model (Kachru, 1985). A great majority of the previous studies on academic literacy development of undergraduates have been conducted in inner-circle countries with participants who are native English-speaking (NES) students and, more recently, non-native English-speaking (NNES) students. The UAE, on the other hand, fits the definition outer-circle countries, where English is not the native language but plays an important role as a lingua franca. Few research studies have examined the academic literacy development of undergraduates in this setting. While these studies contributed to our understanding of the significance of the issue, they adopted a narrow definition of academic literacy, focusing exclusively either on writing or reading skills, failing to acknowledge the interrelations between the two skills by design (Durham & Palubiski, 2007; Hatherly-Greene, 2012; Khoury & Duzgun, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2009).

The term *academic literacy*, as used in this study, does not simply refer to the teaching of academic reading and writing skills with a focus on grammar instruction and study skills, which represents a traditional perspective underpinned by the autonomous model of literacy that continues to inform policy about literacy in many educational programs around the world. The multifaceted nature of academic literacy can be reflected more accurately when it is seen as "the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community" (Wingate, 2015, p.6). My conceptualization of academic literacy draws on this perspective and *the academic literacies model*, which is "concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369) This model foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context and regards the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions, and social identities. Hence, academic literacy, as used in this study, refers to "the activity of interpretation and production of academic and discipline-based texts" (Leki, 2007, p. 3) in an academic *discourse community*. Gee (1989) explains that although not all Discourses involve writing or reading, all writing and reading is embedded in a Discourse, emphasizing the social nature of literacy.

1.1. Research Question

This paper reports on the *partial* results of a longitudinal study I conducted to investigate the first-year students' experiences in dealing with the challenges they face while attaining the required academic literacy skills at an American university in the UAE. While initially I set out to uncover the students' perspectives on their own experiences, the insights I gained from the preliminary interviews with the students, particularly issues regarding their interactions with their professors and course-related materials, compelled me to pursue an additional direction in the study, which is the focus of this article: the *perspectives of the*

student-participants' professors – not only the professors teaching academic writing exclusively, but also discipline-specific courses. Hence, this article addresses the following research question:

What are the professors' perspectives on their students' existing academic literacy skills and the role of these skills for the students' success in their courses?

My objective in expanding the main research question by including the professors' perspectives was to get a more holistic picture of the academic literacy requirements the students were expected to meet and to compare those expectations with the students' interpretation of them. I also wanted to explore how the students' portrayal of their experiences compared to their professors' impressions of them.

1.2.   Background

While the challenges encountered (Bilikozen, 2018a) as well as the impact of going through these experiences on the students' identity development (Bilikozen, 2018 b) were reported elsewhere, a brief summary would be useful at this point to make sense of the professor's views in comparison.

The findings regarding the students' perspectives revealed the importance of three factors in their assessment of their situation at the beginning of the academic year: a) Significance of grades, b) their perceived weakness in reading and writing skills in comparison to other students, and c) doubts about the contribution of academic literacy requirements to their general academic progress. Starting their academic journey with this perspective, the students faced a number of challenges such as lack of time, transition to English as a medium of instruction (EMI), adapting to the changing requirements of academic reading and writing practices across the curriculum, using the library and doing research, and building socio-academic relationships. They tried to cope with these challenges first through studying for extended periods of time at the expense of eating, sleeping, or socializing; using several corner-cutting strategies; and finally consulting with knowledgeable others as well as developing assignment-specific study strategies. While going through these experiences did not change the students' initial perspective on the academic literacy requirements placed on them, eventually they got better at responding to these requirements, though they continued to question their purpose. Interestingly, despite showing a certain degree of awareness of possible reasons why various reading and writing assignments were given from the professor's perspective, they were not always convinced by those reasons. The findings also highlighted the impact of the above mentioned experiences on the students' construction of identity. The students' declining academic standing, which they mostly attributed to their weak reading and writing skills, combined with the difficulties they faced in building socio-academic relationships led the students to develop an identity of deficiency and incompetence, standing in contrast to their former view of self, pre-university. This emerging identity was not only constructed by the real difficulties they faced, but also reinforced by others in their new discourse community, directly or indirectly. Nonetheless, certain literacy practices that they could relate to and that supported their understanding and performance through pair/group work, regardless of the grades they received, helped many of the

participants overcome this negative sense of self to some extent. However, the identity of deficiency and incompetence manifested itself throughout the whole study in the cases two participants.

1.3.   *The context*

The UAE is a country that has undergone many dramatic transformations throughout its short history as a result of industrialization, urbanization, modernization, and globalization. After the discovery and commercial development of profitable oil fields and having gained independence from its status as a British Protectorate in the late 1960s, it was officially formed as a federal state in 1971 (Al Abed, Vine, & Al Jabali, 1996). Right after its establishment, with almost no local educational system except for a small number of religious schools in some local mosques and royal courts, the UAE resorted to importing the skills needed to build local educational capacity. At the beginning, the UAE hired expatriate faculty from Arab countries, such as Egypt and Jordan, since their teachers were accessible, relatively less costly and seen as culturally similar. However, later on the preference turned to American, British, Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand teachers to run the growing higher and tertiary level sector. Despite the UAE government's recent efforts to Emiratize the national workforce and as a result of the surge in the number of foreign, private schools and universities, the UAE has become home to thousands of migrant educators, teaching at a large number of educational institutions that follow various models, systems and curricula (Kirk, 2010).

The present study was conducted at an American university located in the emirate of Sharjah. Founded as an independent, co-educational institution in 1997; today, the university is considered one of the leading higher education institutions in the Gulf and serves approximately 5,000 sk,ltudents from more than ninety different nations. As indicated in its mission statement, while the university is based upon an American model of higher education, it is also grounded in the Arab culture of the region. The language of instruction is English (Fast Facts, 2015).

Students who receive below the minimum TOEFL/ IELTS score but who otherwise meet the university's admission standards are required to successfully complete a series of remedial language classes offered by the university's Achievement Academy Bridge Program (AABP). Having passed the AABP exit tests and scored 76 (540) or above on the TOEFL or 6.5 or above on the IELTS, they are eligible to take the English Placement Test (EPT), a test developed and assessed by a group of professors in the Department of Writing Studies (DWS). Students are placed in one of the three courses offered by the DWS depending on the score they receive on the EPT. The main objectives of the DWS include providing students with the academic language, critical thinking and rhetorical foundations essential to writing and reading successfully in a university environment. It offers a series of three academic writing courses that all undergraduates are required to take either as a pre-requisite or a co-requisite for a large number of courses they have to take to complete their degree programmes: WRI 001: Fundamentals of Academic Discourse; WRI 101: Academic Writing I; WRI 102: Academic Writing II.

I have been teaching the above mentioned courses in the DWS for about ten years. It is not unusual to hear students note that they find the courses offered in the program very demanding and that they feel overwhelmed with the number of reading and writing assignments they are expected to complete across the curriculum on a daily basis. In informal conversations I have with them, many students also note that they have difficulty in comprehending the written course material and/or expressing their ideas clearly, especially in written form. What seems to exacerbate the issue for students in the initial stages of their undergraduate careers is that the required academic writing courses are considered either pre-requisite or co-requisite for many of the other courses they have to take. This seems to exert a great pressure on many of them, sometimes leading to a loss of interest in their studies, feelings of disappointment, frustration, and self-doubt.

2. Method

This study is informed by the underlying principles of the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivists' choice of methodology is guided by their endeavor to understand the subjective world of human experience while retaining the integrity of phenomena being investigated (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Guided by my research purposes and question, the theoretical position I take in the present study predominantly draws on symbolic interactionism, one of the main schools of thought subsumed within the interpretive paradigm (O'Donoghue, 2007).

2.1.   Data collection

As stated before, this article reports of the partial results of a longitudinal study, which was conducted in two phases over two academic semesters. The data collection in the first phase focused on the student-participants' perspectives, which was reported elsewhere. With the commencement of the second semester, the students started to take various courses across the curriculum that required more evaluated reading and writing assignments. Hence, their interactions with their professors with regards to the reading and writing requirements started to become an important topic during the interviews. As a result, I decided to conduct interviews with the professors of all other courses that the students were taking and also had evaluated writing and reading requirements, which was the second phase of the data collection process. The main source of data concerning the professors' perspectives was semi-structured interviews.

2.2.   Sampling and participants

After receiving the permission of the student-participants, I contacted their professors. Except for one, all of the academic writing professors agreed to take part in the study. In addition to the academic writing professors, I contacted the professors of all other courses the students were taking and that also required evaluated reading and writing assignments. A total of thirteen professors agreed to participate in the study in response to an email I sent to them explaining the main objectives of the study and what would be expected of them if

they agreed to take part in it (See Appendix A: List of the professors interviewed, courses taught by them, and the student-participants enrolled in these courses). Hence, the sampling for the second-phase of the study was based on the criteria of purposiveness and accessibility (Silverman, 2001).

Out of the thirteen professors who agreed to take part in the study, four taught academic writing (WRI 102: Academic Writing II) in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), two taught Physics (PHY 101 L: General Physics Laboratory I and PHY 101: General Physics I) in CAS; one taught Mathematics (MTH: Calculus I) in CAS, two taught design courses (DES 122: Modern Developments in Architecture and Design and Des 112: Descriptive Drawing II) in the College of Architecture, Art and Design (CAAD) and three taught UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students at the Achievement Academy Bridge Program (AABP). UPA 200 is a non-credit, remedial course, required for students who are on-probation. It focuses on developing students' study skills such as note-taking, active reading, annotating and accessing the library for research purposes as well as critical thinking, time management, basic reading and writing skills.

The professors' involvement in the study was limited to taking part in a semi-structured interview that was audio-recorded with their permission and later transcribed for analysis. Each professor was provided with the informed consent form bearing my signature before the interview and was encouraged to voice any concerns or questions they might have regarding the study.

2.3.   Instruments

In order to grasp as fully as possible, the participants' perspectives, I prepared a semi-structured interview guide consisting of a set of data collection questions that had the potential to engage the participants in conversations across as wide a range of areas as possible on the phenomenon under investigation, that is, academic literacy.

Piloting of research instruments is highly recommended in research to improve their reliability and trustworthiness (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The interview guide for the professors was piloted with the assistance of two colleagues who had extensive experience in qualitative research methods. With the help of this process, the wording and ordering of several questions in the interview guides were changed to make them clearer, easier to understand, more focused, and objective. This process also helped me refine the interview guides by identifying and eliminating any leading, ambiguous, and/or redundant questions.

I met with each professor who agreed to participate in the study. The interviews with the professors focused on their perspectives on the role of reading and writing in their courses as well as their impressions of the students' level of success in meeting the academic literacy requirements (see Appendix B: Interview Guide for Professors).

3. Data Analysis

All of the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Following Radnor's (2002) approach to analysing semi-structured interviews in interpretive research, I prepared the data for analysis first by reading the whole transcribed data several times and noting down the topics that emerged from the data. Radnor (2002) calls this stage topic ordering. I made a list of the topics, giving a name and a code (abbreviation) to each. I then read the transcripts very carefully one more time to draw out the categories within each topic. I listed these categories under each topic as sub-headings (see Appendix C: Topics, codes, and categories identified in the data). The next step was reading the transcripts for content, that is, going through the text one more time to highlight and code the main quotes that go under each category.

During the analysis of the semi-structured interviews, I also used the strategy of constant comparison of different data sources (i.e. complementary data sources such as the interview log that includes the notes I took after each interview, as well as all the documents I collected regarding the student-participants' course work, such as course syllabi, course notes, class texts, writing assignments, drafts of papers, copies of exams, and the like) and member validation to consolidate and adjust my interpretations where relevant and necessary. In support of this approach, Richards (2003) notes that the relationship between the interview data and other data sources should never be ignored and that it is "incumbent on the researcher to make use of all available data sources in order to get the best possible fix on the information that is presented in the interviews" (p. 92).

4. Findings and Discussion

While the professors were specifically asked about the performance of each student-participant taking their courses, their responses to most interview questions covered their general impressions of all students taking their courses. All of the thirteen professors interviewed stated that the students' reading and writing skills were below what was expected of them to succeed in their courses. Seven main themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews with the professors, which are listed below:

4.1.   Incomplete reading assignments

All of the professors stated that the students would rarely come to class having read the assigned work as noted by Ibrahim, a professor teaching PHY 101 L: General Physics Laboratory I: "They do not come very well prepared to the lab. They have to read the theory in the manual, and also they have to read the recommended sections in the book." The professors encouraged students to read the assigned work using strategies such as unannounced quizzes, both in academic writing classes and discipline-specific classes. For instance, Lynda said:

I send them an email these are the readings for this week. So they are supposed to be read because there can always be a quiz. They are all pop quizzes. So one day they will walk in and they've read it and there is nothing, and the next time they walk in, I'll give a quiz.

Likewise, Robert, a professor teaching DES 112: Descriptive Drawing II in CAAD, noted that: "Well, first many students don't read the reading assignments. And, the only way I know to make sure that students read is to give them a quiz on the reading." Michael, who teaches DES 122: Modern Developments in Architecture and Design, used the same strategy: "The constant possibility of drop quizzes on the reading assignment for that day keeps most students reading."

4.2.   *Lack of analytical and critical reading skills*

Another issue brought up by all professors was lack of analytical and critical reading skills. Most professors stated that the students tried to "memorize" the assigned readings rather than approaching the assigned text strategically to make sense of it. One observation each professor shared was that the students did not know how to distinguish between main points and supporting details in a text. Michael, who teaches DES 122: Modern Developments in Architecture and Design, focused on the students' unfamiliarity with discipline-specific vocabulary as well as their lack of experience in reading as reasons behind students' failure to catch up with the reading requirements in his course:

The reading is very important for success in this course. Many learn by about the middle of the semester, that it pays to follow the often repeated advice, as to what to focus on in the readings. Western art, philosophy, religion, etc. are fields many are not familiar with. Thus, much of the language is new to them. Some students complain that they are not good at memorizing. In reality they are often good at it, but have not learned how to learn.

Similarly, Lynda pointed out the students' ineffective approach:

They think everything in there is important since it is a published paper or essay.   So instead of just reading it through, putting it aside [. . .] and then try to tell someone about it, you know, what the most important things were, they want to go through everything, paragraph by paragraph, and list everything.

4.3.   *Following written instructions and understanding questions in exams and assignments*

One major issue all of the professors pointed out was problems in following written instructions/questions in exams or assignments. Lynda described this issue as follows:

I think a lot of problems with the midterm had to do with people not understanding the questions. You know, it was like not responding to the prompt; like when they start going off in to some other direction they feel comfortable writing about. They see a question and say, "oh I know something that is related", but you didn't answer the question!

Lyndsay, a professor teaching the same course as Lynda, had similar experiences: "I could go over those essay instructions over and over again for two weeks and I would still have a student say, 'what did you want me to do?' They simply don't read the instructions carefully." Sarah had similar comments about the students in her class: "They're totally incapable of following instructions, incapable of cognitively processing what they're asked to do and that particular student I have big problems with and I don't know if he will pass the course because he can never understand what I'm asking him."

This issue was also an equally serious concern for the professors teaching courses other than academic writing. For example, Noman, who teaches PHY 101: General Physics I, described this scenario:

Very often you will find students who call us saying "I don't understand this question, can you please explain?" Many questions in Physics include a detailed scene, a scenario, a story. If you don't understand the story, then you will be writing wrong equations and you will be spending twenty minutes calculating this and that, then you get zero. You will be surprised how many times the students just solved the problem completely wrong because they start from the wrong equation.

The same concern was also brought up by Ibrahim, who teaches PHY 101 L: General Physics Laboratory I:

We assume they understand, they will catch whatever we are saying, but sometimes they will not follow, even the instructions in the manual. Some of them just can't follow the instructions, although they are clearly put in the work sheet. And later when I ask them why they didn't follow the instructions, they say "Oh! Is it mentioned that we have to do that?"

Fuad, a professor teaching MTH 103: Calculus I, commented on the same issue in relation to examination questions suggesting that the students' failure to understand and respond to

the questions may have to do with habits formed during prior educational experiences and lack of motivation to engage in critical thinking:

> The format of our exams is one third of the exam is multiple choice and two thirds is essay questions. Students do prefer the short questions because most of them like to memorize the formula and the types of the questions that they might see and then they just want to apply the formula. They don't want to think, or it's difficult for them to think. I think it's a habit that comes from high school. As for essay questions, they explain a real life type of situation and they have to apply calculus to that. For these questions the success rate is very low unfortunately. In some situations, even though they know the meaning of each word, still, it's a trouble to understand.

These comments echo the student-participants' reported experiences with regards to their failure to understand "long" examination questions in the same course (Bilikozen, 2018b). However, from their perspective the reason was their limited vocabulary; not their lack of motivation. Fuad, on the other hand, emphasized that even students who knew the meaning of all words would find it difficult to understand such questions, which was confusing for him.

4.4. *Assumptions about students' prior educational experiences: lack of a strong foundation in reading and writing*

Most professors, regardless of the course content, attributed the challenges faced by the students to the students' past educational experiences and lack of importance given to reading and writing at home or, more generally, in the culture. Lynda, one of the professors teaching WRI 102: Reading and Writing across the Curriculum, explained her view of the students' reading problems, focusing on factors related to family, school, and the changing culture:

> They don't read much; this is the problem. [. . .] I think it starts at home, I don't think parents are reading anymore. Everyone is an internet person and kids are not seeing books. It's not in the culture anymore and it's a shame. And I also think they don't spend time reading and writing in any language in high school.

Sarah, another professor teaching the same course noted:

> Largely, their traditions are oral. They learn a language by listening to it and not reading it. They are not asked to read much at high school either. It's a case of fear; it's a case of something foreign and they shut down when they can't comprehend the text at their first attempt.

Lyndsay's comments were similar to Sarah's: "They'll immediately look at something and say 'oh! I have to read this, no!' "I think that they are just not used to challenging themselves. I think it is very easy to say I don't understand and they shut down."

Comparable comments were made about students' writing skills, with Lynda commenting:

I think they don't spend time writing any language in high school some of them will say, "We didn't write, we never write. We were memorizing our Arabic." And for English, it's just grammar, so they think they are A students.

Several of the lecturers showed frustration at the students' inabilities to follow the conventions of the APA referencing style and following written directions, attributing the challenges the students faced to their past educational experiences. Loren, who teaches UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students, noted: "It's just carelessness. I can't quite understand this idea unless in high school they were just pampered and babied and things were just let go, that they have no concept of following directions." Along with problems in using APA style, the widespread mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammar and format as well as failure to follow written instructions in exams and assignments were attributed to a lack of motivation to learn, which was partly tied to past educational experiences as well as lack of importance given to reading and writing in the family. To give an example, in the following excerpt, Mike, one of the academic writing professors states his thoughts about possible reasons for students' failure to follow assignment guidelines and APA style, while trying to avoid overgeneralizations:

I think some of the kids are spoiled, they are not thinking that it matters because it probably did not matter in high school. I mean not everybody, but some will finish here and they will get a job in their father's company, and they will be an engineer but they won't actually do any engineering stuff. They'll hire a guy who will do the stuff and they will just sign it. Some of them I think have no real motivation and I think a lot of them don't have role models. Not that my father was the greatest role model but I get to look at him reading all the time, and maybe they don't have that.

Lynda, too, considered lack of motivation to learn as a possible reason underlying the problems students face in APA referencing style as indicated in the following excerpt, which also shows her frustration with students' failure to learn what she perceived to be a simple concept:

APA! They drive me nuts! I mean they'll tell me we are more mathematically oriented, and I am like, this is a formula! Plug it in, plug in the name and the initials! They can mess up

APA like I've never seen. I don't know whether it's because they don't want to learn it. They seem to have this block, they hear APA and they shut down.

While many professors attributed the weak academic literacy skills to the students' academic experiences at high school, some professors who teach discipline-specific courses pointed to the academic writing courses all undergraduates were asked to take, which they found ineffective. Robert, a professor teaching DES 112: Descriptive Drawing II, stated that they had made some curricular changes at college level to address this issue. He noted:

Our feeling is that those courses [required academic writing courses] are so basic that our students don't really get what we want them to get from them. It makes communication difficult. It makes it problematic to assign critical papers or papers that involve some criticism or some discussion. It just affects the whole range of what level we are working at in the classroom. In order to address this problem, we've decided a couple years ago, that all our courses must contain a written component. Their English language skills, their conversational skills are often pretty good, but writing skills are rarely very good.

4.5.   Lack of organization

A significant issue regarding students' writing skills was lack of organization, which was brought up by all professors, regardless of the course content. Academic writing professors showed the students' lack of interest in following the recommended steps to write an organized essay, such as brainstorming and outlining, as possible reasons for this issue. For instance, Mike stated:

Organization is a big problem. A lot of times they have good ideas but they don't organize them. You read through and you are like there is a good idea here and a good idea there, but they are all over the place they don't flow together, they don't build on each other. They don't like brainstorming and they don't like outlining and it really shows. They are not convinced that they need to do it.

The last point in Mike's comments is particularly noteworthy because it matches with the student-participants' perspectives on the academic literacy requirements, more specifically their skepticism about the contribution of academic literacy requirements to their academic and professional growth as well as their increased questioning of the purpose of some required academic literacy practices (Bilikozen, 2018b).

5.6.   Weak arguments and critical thinking skills

All professors teaching academic writing classes and discipline-specific courses brought up the difficulty students faced in building strong arguments backed up by sufficient supporting

details, reflecting critical thinking skills. Academic writing professors focused on the students' problems in taking a position and maintaining throughout the paper in addition to providing sufficient supporting evidence. For example, while talking about her students' experiences in writing an argumentative essay and a critique, Lynda noted:

> They start out sort of getting it, you know they think, "we have to take a stand", and then we lose them along the way when they try to come up with the counter argument, and then suddenly they are with the counter argument. Their analysing skills are not very strong. When we ask them to write a critique, they really don't have much to say. They are like "ah I agree with this", but they don't say why and in what way and how was this important.

Similar comments were also made by Lyndsay about the critique and the argumentative essay. In the following quote, she talks about the problems faced by Osama and all other students who received a C range grade on the critique:

> There was a problem with critical response. He didn't have the analysis, like he wasn't making a connection between the readings and his argument, his thesis and so on. That was the case with most people who got a C.

Her comments about the argumentative essay below reveals her state of shock as she gradually realized how little prior experience the students had in expressing their opinions not only on controversial issues but any topic in life, as well as her frustration about how difficult it was for students to understand what a thesis statement was:

> They had to come up with their own thesis statements. I said a thesis statement is simply your opinion. They acted like I asked them to give me their soul. I literally had a student just tell me, "But I never had to make an opinion in my life".

Robert, a professor teaching in the CAAD, brought up weak analytical and critical thinking skills while talking about a student-participant's writing skills (Bilikozen, 2018b) as well as the common issues he found in other students' writing, emphasizing the importance and relevance of strong writing skills to their discipline, difficulty of understanding incomprehensible student papers due to poor language use, and the issue of lack of supporting details.:

> Khairea is a very thoughtful person, but her writing in English is not very strong. I don't grade for spelling or grammar; I try to find some conceptualizing behind what they are

saying. Our feeling in this college is that the ability to express oneself in writing and verbally is closely related to the ability to express an intention visually as well. It is not enough to say "I like it", one has to know why one likes it. I think we are all sort of tired of reading these papers we can't understand.

Noman had similar comments about students' lab reports in PHY 101: General Physics I, like all other professors emphasizing lack of supporting details and expression of valid reasoning. Like Robert, he emphasized the importance of good writing skills in his course and noted:

They find the part they have to analyze their findings hard. They say "I don't know what to write? Okay so I found this and that and I think my results are good." That's it. I say "Why do you think your results are good?" Explain. It's not like "Oh, that's what I think!" **I**t has to be backed up by arguments just like when you write an essay. Tell me why you think this is good? Point to the quantity that allows you to claim that your results are good, or if you think there is an error or some margin of error. Explain to me why that is? Where did that come from? What in the experiment did not make your results so fully precise? Explain all of that. So at first- the first few weeks- they keep going to the lab instructor and say: "I don't know what to write here." And when they don't get a full grade and they say "I don't know, it looks subjective". To them it looks subjective, because they think writing is just subjective.

The last part of Noman's comments also highlight the disappointment and confusion experienced by students upon receiving a less than expected grade on written assignments, which was discussed previously.

4.7.   *Group work as a facilitating tool*

Almost all of the professors interviewed, except those who taught in CAAD, stated that they found group work to be an effective strategy in helping improve their academic literacy skills. While acknowledging some challenges and difficulties such as student complaints about group members who fail to attend meetings or do their part of the job on time, all other professors interviewed stated that group work helped students learn from each other and increased student motivation. Sami, a professor in College of Engineering, explained that they asked the students taking NGN 101 to write six lab reports and a project report in groups of five, as they wanted to show students how engineers in real life work and the importance of writing in their discipline. He stated:

We tell them writing is extremely important from the first lecture. I have this full slide that shows them all the items that are written in the life of an engineer, all the way from

a simple two-line email to a hundred-page dissertation. But we know that we have students who are excellent in English and we have students who are very weak in English. Because the groups are randomly split, in most of the cases at least two out of the five students are good English writers. So when they split the work, the ones who are good in English do the writing. And the ones who are not will do the technical part or the research. So they distribute it equally, so that's why we rarely see a poorly written document. They also learn from each other.

Sami's comments reveal his acknowledgement and approval of one of the corner-cutting strategies used by the student-participants, which is avoiding written contributions in group projects in return for taking a more active role in non-written parts of the assigned work (Bilikozen, 2018b). While students may learn from each other and manage to submit a fairly well-written project thanks to the "good English writers" in their teams, it is questionable how those who avoid writing can improve their writing skills.

While group work in writing assignments was used both in academic writing courses and some discipline-specific courses, group work to facilitate reading comprehension was less common. It was only brought up as an effective strategy by the academic writing professors interviewed, including those who teach UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students. To illustrate, Lynda explained why she used this strategy as follows: "They like to work in groups; this way they bounce ideas off each other. It is easier for them to interact with their peers and then when I get involved they seem to be more open to talking."

Lyndsay had a similar scaffolding strategy. In one class, she used three related readings that would contribute to one of the writing assignments. She said that the first reading was done in groups in class, the second one required the students to come to class having read the article at home and engage in group discussions on guiding questions provided by her in class, and the last one was expected to be completed individually. All professors who used this strategy stressed that it was helpful for students who had weak reading skills, as Lyndsay explained "even if someone doesn't get it when they first read it, we go over it in groups and they get to see how other students respond."

5. Discussion: One Problem, Contrasting Perspectives

Many of the weaknesses and challenges identified by the professors had been also revealed in the analysis of interviews with the students. To begin with, the challenge of transition to EMI was a significant issue acknowledged by the professors as they talked about incomplete reading assignments, the students' lack of analytical and critical reading skills, their assumptions about the students' prior educational experiences, problems with following written instructions in exams and assignments, lack of organization, as well as weak arguments and analysis in students' written work.

However, there was a crucial contrast in the students' and professors' perspectives regarding the reasons underlying these issues. For instance, while catching up with the readings assigned was an issue frequently brought up by both the professors and the students, the perspectives of the two sets of participants on the reasons behind this perceived challenge were quite different.

As noted above, the professors described the students as "not used to challenging themselves", "spoiled", or "not motivated". This general impression the professors had of the students seemed to be perceived as the main reason for the students' failure to meet the expected objectives, which played an important role in their choice of several teaching strategies. For instance, professors said they tried to get the students to read the assigned work through unannounced quizzes, considered by some as the "only" solution. While this strategy seemed to serve the purpose, it is not clear how useful it was in improving the students' reading skills. In contrast to this perspective, the students believed they invested a lot of time and energy in the assigned readings, which they usually found too "difficult" due to various reasons; eventually, they ended up lagging behind as a result the overwhelming course load. The novice students' struggle with the extensive reading required of them at university, involving lengthy texts with unfamiliar vocabulary and terminology, has also been documented in past studies, echoing the experiences of the students in this study (Abbot, 2013, Jolliffe & Harl, 2008; MacMillan, 2014; van Pletzen, 2006; as cited in Wingate, 2015). However, despite the research findings emphasizing the need to teach effective academic reading skills and strategies at undergraduate level, Wingate (2015) maintains that academic reading remains a neglected and invisible area in higher education. Likewise, the professors in this study seemed to be unaware of the excessive amount of time the students devoted to the assigned readings as well as the challenges they encountered while adapting to the changing requirements of academic literacy in different courses.

Another frequently brought up issue about students' academic literacy was their inability to fully understand and respond to assignment guidelines, written instructions, or questions in various forms of assessment. No matter how clearly or frequently stated, the professors thought, the instructions seemed to be ignored by the students, which led to a great level of frustration and confusion among the professors. This issue was also acknowledged by the students; however, they mostly attributed it to their limited vocabulary, and their confusion especially when faced with what they called "long questions".

Students' weak argumentation skills was also brought up as a problem by the professors, pointing to a discrepancy between students' knowledge and professors' expectations. The mismatch between students' and professors' concepts of argument has been addressed in a number of publications, not only in relation to L2 speakers but also students learning in their L1 at undergraduate level and has been largely attributed to inconsistent and vague guidance provided to students both at university and secondary school (Andrews, 1995; Lea & Street, 1998; Mitchell & Riddle, 2000; Wingate, 2012, 2015).

A more general concern voiced by all professors' was the students' weak foundation in reading and writing. A number of factors were shown as culprits including the culture, poor

quality of education provided by the local school system, and also the ineffectiveness of the required academic writing classes at university, which was brought up by some professors teaching discipline-specific courses. Despite the difference in context, very similar complaints have been reported in inner-circle countries such as the US, UK, and Australia with lecturers blaming the secondary schools for graduating students with poor literacy skills and complaining that universities have to bridge the gap with remedial language and writing classes (Wingate, 2015). This discourse of deficiency and remediation is found troubling for a number of reasons by Wingate (2015). Firstly, it shows a lack of understanding that today's higher education is accessible to a wider, more diverse, and less prepared population of students who need more support in adjusting to university compared to the highly selected student intakes in previous elite systems. The comparison between the previous elite system and the more accessible system of today does not apply to the UAE as the higher education system in the UAE is relatively new compared to the inner-circle countries mentioned above. The dissatisfaction with school graduates found underprepared for higher education and the challenges associated with transition from school to university is mostly attributed to the "linguistic and cultural dualism" (Findlow, 2006) present in schools and higher education institutions in the UAE. Wingate argues that this discourse of deficiency and remediation oversimplifies the challenges faced by the students as language problems despite the increasing number of studies revealing that students struggle with epistemology and ways of communication of their discipline (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). As a result of this failure to fully understand the nature of challenges faced by the students on the part of higher education institutions, ineffective measures of remediation are taken, such as the remedial language, study skills, and writing programs as a quick fix (Wingate, 2012). Instead of these, Wingate (2015) proposes a more inclusive curriculum-integrated model of academic literacy instruction, in line with the academic literacies model, which requires the universities to increase their awareness of the needs of their student populations and adapt to those needs more effectively. These insights could contribute to development of strategies to facilitate undergraduates' acquisition of academic literacy in contexts such as the UAE.

The perspectives of the students and professors were the same on the positive role of group work in academic literacy development. As the analysis of the interviews with both sets of participants showed, the only course-sponsored group work where the students were provided with clear instructions as to how to work as a team on a written project was the NGN 110: Introduction to Engineering and Computing. However, two out of four students taking the course avoided making a contribution that involved any writing in return for their more active involvement in other parts of the project (Bilikozen, 2018), which seemed to be acceptable for the professor as noted above. While it is questionable how this approach can contribute to the students' writing development, the professor's lack of concern for which team member may have written the project can be viewed as "reflecting work world values that stress product over process" (Leki, p. 241). The experiences of the students and views of their professor in this example are in parallel with those reported in a longitudinal case study on the academic literacy development of four L2 undergraduate in the USA (Leki, 2007).

Finally, the analysis of the interviews with the professors highlighted the discrepancy between their expectations and students' knowledge of the required academic literacy demands. It also revealed that many of the professors either underestimated or were unaware of the struggles students go through to meet those expectations, as well as the impact of the challenges faced by the students on their identity. This lack of awareness sometimes manifested itself through the professors' oversimplified explanations for the challenges faced by the students, whom they described as spoiled, under-challenged, or not-motivated.

Having drawn this conclusion from the findings, I would like to emphasize that it is not my intention to judge whether the students' or professors' perspectives reveal the truth regarding the discrepancy mentioned above. From a symbolic interactionist standpoint, my primary objective is to portray the participants' experiences from their own perspectives. However, I cannot claim to have a completely transparent access to the participants' lived experiences. A perspective, as Charon (2009) explains "is an angle on reality, a place where the individual stands as he or she looks at it and tries to understand reality.... and it acts as a filter through which everything around us is perceived and interpreted. There is no possible way that the individual can encounter reality 'in the raw', directly, as it really is, for whatever is seen can only be part of the real situation" (p. 3). While this definition explains the significance of the notion of perspectives as a tool for people to make sense of the world, it also reveals the restrictive side of it in that one can only see what their perspective allows them to see. This does not mean that there is no truth at all; "there is something actually happening out there in the world – but we cannot know it completely or in any perfectly accurate way because we always see it through filters we are here calling perspectives" (Charon, 2009, p. 6).

While I paid utmost attention to listen to, respect, and represent both sets of participants' views as objectively as possible throughout the entire research process, I have to acknowledge there were several factors that acted as reality filters in my analysis of the data, such as my experiences as an academic writing instructor/researcher, my own view of teaching and learning theories, what I learnt from reading the literature on academic literacy development, and my own views of the education system in the UAE and the culture of the university. Having interviewed each student for six to eight times throughout two academic semesters (a total of forty-six interviews conducted with the students) has provided me with a clear picture of their ways of defining their situation and how they acted based on these definitions for an extended period of time, which I tried to portray as accurately as possible. With the last question, which is the focus of this article, I wanted to explore the professors' perspectives on the nature of reading and writing skills required for success in their courses as well as what they thought of the first year students' ways of coping with these requirements. The intention behind this question was to get a more holistic picture of the academic literacy requirements the students were expected to meet and to compare those expectations with the students' interpretation of them. I also wanted to explore how the students' portrayal of their experiences compared to their instructors' impressions of them.

The difference in both sets of participants' perspectives is noteworthy. I believe to understand and then develop ways to alleviate the tension and challenges most undergraduates encounter while trying to meet the academic literacy requirements, as curriculum developers and professors, we must have an in-depth understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives, but most importantly, listen to our students' voices.

6.   Conclusion

Many of the professors interviewed in this study voiced their concerns about the students' weak foundation in reading and writing, as well as raising a number of other problems faced by the students in meeting the academic literacy demands of their courses. While they mostly questioned the effectiveness of the local school system in providing students with basic academic literacy skills, some professors teaching discipline-specific courses blamed the required academic writing classes for such deficiencies, implying that they did not really believe it was also part of their job to contribute to the academic literacy development of the students.

This belief is supported by the centrally run and generically taught EAP courses widespread in most Anglophone universities, where the complete responsibility of developing students' academic literacy is given to academic staff working in these departments (Wingate, 2015). Moreover, subject lecturers, many of whom are overwhelmed with ever increasing workload, usually have neither an explicit awareness of their discipline's literacy conventions, nor the willingness and expertise to teach them (Jacobs, 2005; Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2015). For this reason, the collaboration of English language/writing experts and academic staff in the disciplines is essential. While the former can identify opportunities for literacy work in the subject curriculum, analyse genres that students will encounter, and help students recognize genre features, the latter can help the writing expert understand the communicate intentions of the discipline's genres. Examples of various levels and forms of such collaboration between the academic writing professors and academic staff from various disciplines can be found in reports of successful practices and intervention studies, especially in Australian universities (Purser, 2011; Wingate, 2015). However, more evidence of successful practices and initiatives in this region is needed to understand the pedagogical methods and instructional content as well as the feasibility of this approach.

Hence, while the implementation of the previous recommendation may be far from an easily achievable goal as it requires changing the mind-sets of academic leaders and practitioners about the nature of academic literacy instruction, the subsequent recommendations include more practical suggestions to cater for the students' needs (and rights) more effectively without radical changes at institutional level.

Based on the findings of the study and relevant research, an important recommendation is that professors, whether teaching academic writing courses or other discipline specific courses, should consider the purpose, content, design, and relevance of reading and writing

assignments they give more carefully instead of resorting to quick-fixes, such as pop-quizzes, to encourage students to read. Cumming (2013) recommends that academic literacy activities should be devised in a way that "encourage, model, scaffold and facilitate" (p. 145) multilingual students' learning processes, allowing them to express their identity with regards to their new discourse community, and to foster their self-confidence and engagement in the literacy tasks for self-development. The findings of the study have shown that the professors acknowledged the facilitating role of group work in their students' academic literacy development, which also emerged as a positive factor supporting the student-participants' academic-identity development (Bilikozen, 2018b). The assignments the students showed more interest in seemed to motivate them, supported their reading comprehension and assisted them in writing assignments, and eventually gave them a sense of confidence, even pride and accomplishment in the midst of their quest for a comfortable subject position in their new academic community.

Looking at the issue from a critical EAP perspective, as academic writing instructors, we can empower our students to challenge the limit situations they face through a pedagogy of hope and a dialogic process. In Benesch's terms, "a limit-situation is a personal or political obstacle perceived by humans to restrict their freedom and their ability to carry out their goals. They can either succumb passively to the limitations or resist them. To challenge a limit-situation requires a sense of hope and confidence; submission to its restrictions is an act of hopelessness" (Benesch, 2001, p.47). In the case of this study, the limit-situation is clearly the gate-keeping role of academic literacy requirements of the curriculum. A student's inability to manipulate academic literacy generally goes hand in hand with limited success in post-secondary education (Hirvela, 2004). Academic discourse, too often, serves a gatekeeping role, preventing students from progressing educationally (Farr, 1993). While, from a traditional EAP perspective, the teacher's role is often limited to enacting predetermined requirements, helping students reach target demands unquestioningly, the notion of hope in critical pedagogy challenges this approach to education (Benesch, 2001). Benesch (2001) maintains that "Hope as a construct offers a vision of EAP as the means for greater dialogue in academic classes, more interesting readings, better-conceived assignments, and greater joy in learning. It encourages students to aim for these reforms in academic institutions . . ." (p. xvii). As academic writing instructors, we could encourage our students to request more guidance and clarification when a reading or writing assignment is unclear (or perceived problematic for various reasons) in an academic writing or a discipline-specific course they take.

While every effort was made to minimize the limitations of the study, certain compromises from the ideal research plan had to me made due to restrictions in time and access to data sources. These limitations can be taken as suggestions for future research. It would be interesting to investigate the students' process of academic literacy development, as well as their professors' views on it, throughout their entire academic career, not only the first year. Moreover, while I worked towards portraying the participants' experiences from their perspectives as thoroughly as possible, I was not able to use an additional qualitative research tool, such as class observations, to triangulate the data I gained from the interviews

and the documents I collected. In addition, observing the primary students in a number of classes they take across the curriculum would give a more holistic view of their experiences and increase the rigour of the study.

Informed by an interpretive approach to research, this study does not have claims of generalizability. However, I hope the findings can be inspiring for those who find themselves in similar teaching environments. With the insights it provides, this study may serve a useful purpose with curriculum development and instructional practices and contribute to development of strategies to facilitate students' acquisition of academic literacy.

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Appendix A: List of the professors interviewed, courses taught by them, and the student-participants enrolled in these courses

Professor	Course	Student-participant(s) taking the course
1. Lynda	WRI 102	Zeina Mahmoud
2. Sarah	WRI 102	Khairea
3. Mike	WRI 102	Saif
4. Lyndsay	WRI 102	Osama
5. Rabia	UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students	Mahmoud
6. Mona	UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students	Mahmoud
7. Loren	UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students	Osama
8. Noman	PHY 101: General Physics I	Osama
9. Ibrahim	PHY 101 L: General Physics Laboratory I	Zeina
10. Fuad	MTH 103: Calculus I	Zeina, Noura
11. Robert	DES 112: Descriptive Drawing II	Khairea
12. Michael	DES 122: Modern Developments in Architecture and Design	Khairea

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Professors

I. Student-Participants

1. How would you describe (student name) as a student and a person? Think of something specific that makes you think of her/him this way.
2. What's hard for (student name) academically? What's easy?
3. How do you think (student name) is doing academically?
4. How do you think (student name) is doing in terms of keeping up with the reading and writing requirements of this course?
5. What else might be important to know about (student name)?

II. About the course in general

1. What are the main objectives and expected outcomes of (course name)?
2. What tasks/activities/assignments constitute the most essential part or the core of the work in this course?
3. What do students find difficult in this course? Why? How important is it for them to master that difficulty? How might they go about addressing that difficulty?
4. What do students like about the course?
5. How do you assess students' performance?
6. What is the best way to study for exams in this course?

III. The role of writing

1. How important is the writing assigned for this course? Why?
2. What kind of writing assignments do you give?

3. What is your goal in giving these writing assignments?
4. What strategies do you use in order to realize these objectives? Why?
5. What difficulties or problems do they seem to have in doing the assignments?
6. To what degree are these writing assignments like writing they might do as professionals?
7. How do the students know how to do these assignments? What other resources do you expect them to draw on?
8. What do you look for in evaluating this writing?
9. What kinds of comments, if any, do you find yourself making on the papers?

IV.   **The role of reading**
1. How important are effective reading skills for this course? Why?
2. What kind of reading requirements are students expected to meet?
3. What is your objective in giving these reading assignments?
4. What strategies do you use to realize these objectives?
5. Do students seem to have any difficulties or problems with the reading requirements?
6. Do you think students need any guidance with regards to how to approach the readings assigned in this course?

V.   **Group work**
1. Do you ever ask students to work in groups?
2. If so, what is your goal in assigning group work?
3. Do you ask students to work in groups to complete any of the reading and writing requirements of the course?
4. What is your overall evaluation of the students' performance in these assignments? Why?

Appendix C: Topics, codes, and categories identified in the data

Topic	Code	Categories
Professors' perspectives on the role of academic literacy skills for success in their courses	PP	1. Incomplete reading assignments 2. Lack of analytical and critical reading skills 3. Following written instructions and understanding questions in exams and assignments 4. Assumptions about students' prior educational experiences 5. Lack of organization 6. Weak arguments and critical thinking skills 7. Group work as a facilitating tool