



# University Students in the Writing Courses From the Centre to the Periphery: A Critical Perspective

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**Abstract:** Because English is the medium of instruction in higher education in the UAE, many students coming from public schools, where English is taught as a subject, find themselves at the periphery; excluded from access to the discourses of the academic culture, and rather blamed for lacking the skills and the proficiency to cope with the demands of writing courses. These freshmen are compelled to master academic writing, an endeavor they are poorly prepared for. They recognize that they would not go on to wear the undergraduate gown, no matter how brilliantly they had performed in all the subjects, unless they had a credit in English (Ngugi, as cited in Pennycook, 1995). Very few studies have examined the difficulties these students face in coping with writing demands. This study aims to analyze within a critical applied linguistics framework what these students go through as a result of contradictory language policies. It also aims to give these students the chance to voice their challenges and suffering. An exploratory methodology with an element of critical ethnography was employed. Qualitative data obtained through interviews and classroom observation showed that these students face huge difficulties with the writing courses due to their previous poor schooling. Consequently, they suffer from a sense of marginalization from the classroom discourse. Results also showed that the price these students paid was very high in relation to their GPA and academic success.

**Keywords:** academic writing, medium of instruction, higher education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is given prominence in the Arabian Gulf countries because it is perceived to provide “linguistic power” where “knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin’s lamp, which permits one to open, as it were, the linguistic gates” (Kachru, as cited in McKay, 2010, p. 96) to success, prosperity, and prestigious education. However, these gates are not open for everyone. English now functions as a gatekeeper to positions of prestige in society in that “it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions” (Pennycook, 1995, p. 40). This is the case with most government school students who, amid the enthusiasm to adopt English as the language of instruction in higher education, find themselves victims of such policy and such enthusiasm.

Many studies have examined how most government schools students have to join extensive English programs before starting their mainstream university programs (Al Falasi, 2008; Troudi & Jendli, 2011). However, very few studies have examined the impact of the discrepancy

between the language policy of schools and higher education on students after they start their university studies. This study aims to fill this gap and to highlight the students’ suffering in coping with writing demands after they meet the entry requirements. The study also seeks to raise awareness to their situation, and to give these students a voice to articulate and speak out their suffering being unprepared for the demands of academic writing due to their poor schooling. Cook-Sather (2014) asserted that “young people have a right to be heard” and that educators should believe “in the right and necessity of students speaking for themselves” (p. 133).

The study is based on critical applied linguistics and critical pedagogy which see the mission of teachers is to transform the experience of domination in students and to empower them to become ‘emancipated’ in a full democracy (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Education, in the words of Giroux, “is always political because it is connected to the acquisition of agency and the ability to struggle with ongoing relations of power, and is a precondition for creating informed and critical citizens” (2011, p. 147). From critical pedagogy perspective, educators need to examine “students’



everyday experiences of oppression, of being 'silenced', of having their cultures and 'voices' excluded from curricula and decision-making" for such acts have hidden ideological messages (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 32). Therefore, critical approaches to literacy are "underpinned by a strong equity and social justice agenda" (Janks, 2008, p. 183), and are committed to reshape literacy education in the interests of marginalized groups of learners, who have been excluded from access to the discourses and texts of dominant economies and cultures (Luke, as cited in Pennycook, 2001, p. 12) because of their economic, social or linguistic backgrounds.

## 2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

UAE has its own unique particulars in that it has a small indigenous population and much larger expatriate communities that came as a result of the recent and rapid modernization that accompanied the sudden oil wealth which transformed the country in a short period of time from a "poor and sparsely populated tribal homelands with no formal education system, to a politically, economically and technologically sophisticated federation of seven states" (Findlow, 2006, p. 23). This rapid shift put the country under the pressure of meeting globalization demands while maintaining cultural and national identity which created contradictions in the language policy. These contradictions, according to McCarty (2004), are expected in contexts of historically constituted power relations, where they can be viewed as "a response to larger political, socioeconomic, and demographic forces" (p. 73). Findlow (2006) argues that the UAE has embraced a policy of linguistic dualism where English is associated with business, modernity and internationalism, and Arabic with religion, tradition, and localism. However, this dichotomy has been criticized and rejected and is seen as perpetuating an unrealistic dilemma of associating local languages with traditions, and English with modernity (Annamalai, 2005). Annamalai argues that decolonizing education is to question and to reject this linguistic dichotomy in policy and practice.

The education system of the UAE is divided into public and private sectors that operate in almost equal numbers (Gaad, Atef & Scott, 2006). The government funds the public schools which have a strong Islamic and Arabic influence (Ibid). In the same time, UAE hosts hundreds of western universities and national universities that use English as the MI. The university, where the study was conducted, is one of these universities. It is "based upon American institutions of higher education" and "is accredited in the United States of America" (Catalog, 2014). As it is documented in the university Catalog, "The medium of instruction is English and a good command of the language, both oral and written, is essential for students to be successful at [the university]." This explains why students, who get 6.5 in IELTS, sit for a writing placement test that decides their writing

proficiency level and whether they start with WRI 001 or WRI 101 followed by WRI 102 and then WRI 204 and WRI 207. According to the catalogue, "The purpose of the Department of Writing Studies is to provide students with the academic language, critical thinking and rhetorical foundations essential to writing and reading successfully in a university environment." However, these high standards in academic writing might be a nightmare for many students. It even becomes more pervasive when they come from public schools.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is informed by critical approach based on critical applied linguistics. The literature review outlines the theoretical framework, provides an introduction to critical applied linguistics, discusses language policy in the UAE and its implications on students, differentiates between fluency and proficiency, and finally analyzes the concepts of voice and equality.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study aims to problematize the 'taken for granted' assumption that all students have the sufficient linguistic background in English, and are prepared for the demands of writing at a university level. This assumption is creating inequality between the students who come from public schools, and those who come from American and British curriculum schools. Problematizing the givens is in the heart of critical practice that aims to question the taken-for-granted components of our reality and the 'official' descriptions of how they eventually came to be the way they are (Pennycook, 2001). From this critical stance, "we need to turn a skeptical eye toward assumptions, ideas that have become 'naturalized' notions that are no longer questioned" (Ibid, p. 7) through addressing issues of difference, power, and political and social capital (Hunt, 2012). This practice is described by Dean as "the restive problematization of the given" (as cited in Pennycook, 2001, p. 7). Unlike problem solving, problematization emphasizes questioning without expectations of answers (Pennycook, 2001) for it does not seek finding the alternative truth "but rather the constant questioning of all categories" (Ibid, p. 8).

### LANGUAGE POLICY IN THE UAE

Shohamy (2006) defines language policy as "the primary mechanism for organizing, managing and manipulating language behaviours as it consists of decisions made about languages and their uses in society" (p. 45). These ideological decisions are manipulative tools that determine which languages to be legitimized, used, learned and taught, which languages to be given status and priority in society and which language to be considered "important for its economic and social status, such as business languages, like English" (Ibid, p. 47). Language policy implicitly or explicitly manipulates and imposes language behaviours due to its power in



determining the languages and their uses in education and society; therefore, the understanding of the real language policy can be achieved through observing the impact of these very devices that are often subtle and hidden from the public eye but have power to determine de facto practices (Ibid).

Schiffman differentiates between overt and covert language policies. He suggests that overt LPs are explicit, formalized, and manifest while the covert LPs are implicit, latent, and unstated (as cited in Shohamy, 2006). He argues that we need to look at "what actually happens down on the ground, in the field, at the grass-roots level", not taking the overt language policies at face value (as cited in Shohamy, 2006, p. 51). This should be the case in the UAE with the absence of a clear language policy. Troudi argues that "the status of the English language within the educational system in the UAE is not as clear as it appears to be" (p. 200). This marked absence of overt language policy at the national level (Karmani, 2005, p. 95) in the UAE resulted, according to Gallagher (2011), in 'unplanned language planning' which contributed in the inexorable increase in the role of English. However, Piller and Cho (2013) suggest that neoliberalism which competes within a covert form of language policy to impose English as a neutral and natural medium of academic excellence is responsible for the massive power of English. When English is used as the MI and as a requirement for acceptance to institutions of higher education, its power is perpetuated as well as the domination and influence of the west and its ideologies, and de facto LP is created with regard to the English language (Shohamy, 2006). Shohamy explains that "it is through these mechanisms that ideology turns into practice" p. 54). This is evident in the UAE where "English is now firmly established as the de facto medium of instruction of almost all tertiary and technical education" (Karmani, 2005, p. 94) that it is now almost impossible to obtain any form of tertiary education in the UAE through the medium of Arabic (Gallagher, 2011).

While language policy at schools seems to be motivated by national agenda, higher education seems to be motivated by global and pragmatic one. In public schools, Arabic is the medium of instruction, and English is taught as a foreign language (Gitsaki, Robby, & Bourini, 2014). Here, the educational agenda seems to be guided by "the ideologies of loyalties, belonging and group solidarity" (Shohamy, 2006, p. 51) which are emphasized through having Arabic as medium of instruction. However, higher education in the UAE is delivered in English. Findlow suggests that "the linguistic bifurcation of the educational stages is coterminous with that between localism-authenticity and globalization-pragmatism" (p. 27). Arabic is assumed to supply communication needs in childhood and therefore, the Ministry of Education and Youth in the UAE "emphasizes the importance of fostering Islamic and Arabic culture" at that stage; however, the transition at age 18 to learning in English requires a changed cultural

mindset and therefore Higher education adopts English which has high socio-economic status, and is associated with modernism and internationalism (Findlow, 2006, p. 27).

### **THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONTRADICTIONS IN THE LP**

These contradictions, mismatch and dissonance in the language policy have put students in real dilemma when they step out of school to university. Gallagher noted that in the UAE, "poor achievement in English in college is preceded by low attainment levels at school" (p. 69). Troudi (2009) suggests that by the time students reach university level; they are expected to have studied English for twelve years. However, "a closer look at these twelve years of English will reveal that they are worth much less in terms of actual contact hours" (p. 202). Many university instructors complain about students' proficiency in English "which is hardly unexpected, as the quality of English instruction these students received in their pre-university education did not prepare them to write reports or give oral presentations" (Troudi, 2009, p. 207). The author reflects on his own experience teaching in one of the UAE universities saying that "the overall language proficiency of [his] students, at its best, remains at the intermediate level" which is expected since students study English as a subject among many others in the curriculum (Ibid, p. 200). However, they should take it seriously later if they want to have access to university education which is "not normally what is expected from students who learn a foreign language as a component of a national curriculum" (Ibid).

### **FLUENCY, PROFICIENCY AND THE USE OF ENGLISH AS MI**

Cummins (2000) suggests that the conceptualization of language proficiency should be central to language policy decisions. He argues that there is a distinction between fluency, which is referred to as BISC (basic interpersonal communication skills), and the academic aspects of language proficiency which he refers to as CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency). He defines CALP as the "expertise in understanding and using literacy-related aspects of language" in oral or written modalities by means of language without the reliance on contextual or paralinguistic cues (p. 70). In order to develop CALP, Cummins argues that academic literacy tasks such as writing essays or reading textbooks should be context reduced and cognitively demanding (as cited in Starfield, 1994).

For students to be able to meet the demands of writing courses, they should have reached a threshold in their language proficiency at schools that would help them to meet the demands of writing at university level. However, unfortunately students in public schools in the UAE have poor proficiency in the language because there is "no real teaching of the language by doing extensive reading and writing or analyzing texts" (Masri, 2014, p.



78). Based on her study in two public schools in Dubai, the author concluded that students were not proficient in English due to the focus on fluency in teaching English. Beckett and Haley (2000) argue that by focusing on English as a means of communicative fluency, valuable time that cannot be made up is wasted. Instead, they suggest that we need to begin to integrate academic language into the ESL curriculum. Carrasquillo and Rodriguez (1995) also contend that instruction should move beyond effective communication as a primary goal toward focus on 'academic competence' which demands more focus on "literacy development, vocabulary enrichment, critical skills, social skills, and learning strategies" (p. 61).

### VOICE AND EQUALITY

While some people believe that English provides opportunities and opens doors for better jobs and better chances, a critical analysis shows that it is creating inequalities. Many critics of the spread of English recognize that its value is not the same for everyone, and that its spread often results in inequality rather than opportunity, and that it is often a barrier to education and employment (Tollefson, 2000). When students from public schools go to university, their English will prevent them from acquiring the social status and benefits English offers to others. Thus, "English does not equalize opportunities as projected, but it actually reproduces inequality" (Annamalai, 2005, p. 35). What is really hazardous is when educators do not consider this differential access that students from different educational backgrounds have to English linguistic and cultural resources as responsible for students' lack of English resources and ascribe it instead to "individual attributes like lack of competence, or initiative" (Lin, 2005, p. 44).

Inequality is created when English proficiency is a major criterion for access to higher education because not everyone has equal access to high-quality English education (Tollefson, 2000). This is evident in the contexts of dual system of Education where public schools are not of a very high quality in teaching English while in contrast the system of private schools offers a high-quality system of education. This is creating inequality when public schools have fifty minutes of English every day only, "the majority of private schools teach in English" (Findlow, 2012, p. 25) and the students' exposure to English is higher (Troudi, 2009). Here, the graduates of the private English schools are privileged having "major advantages, including superior English proficiency" (Tollefson, 2000, p. 18). Thus, this policy of favouring English creates the hegemony of English because the students who went to private schools would enjoy the educational opportunities that English provides (Tollefson, 2000).

To address inequality, students should be heard. Hunt argues that "ELT practitioners are required to understand and participate in the process of social

change, so that the voices of the disadvantaged, dominated or dispossessed are heard" (2012, p. 298). Voice, in the words of Pennycook, is "the opening up of a space for the marginalized to speak, write or read ... so that the voicing of their lives may transform both their lives and the social system that excludes them" (p. 101). As Giroux argues, voice constitutes the focus for a critical theory of education which addresses the students' marginalization and exclusion of schooling by encouraging them to develop their own voice (as cited in Pennycook, 2001).

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges that AUS freshmen who come from public schools face in writing courses?
2. What are the students' views regarding their writing proficiency and the difficulties they face coping with academic writing courses?
3. How does their writing affect GPA and academic achievement?

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Considering the critical nature of the study and the research questions, an exploratory methodology with an element of critical ethnography formed the paradigmatic stance which aims to critically analyze freshmen's challenges in coping with the demands of writing courses. Critical ethnography was adopted in observing the classroom while exploratory methodology was adopted in interviewing the students who come from public schools. This study is critical in nature that views society and social reality as shaped by the hegemony of power and marked by inequality, and therefore aims to help alleviate pain, establish equity in society and redress all forms of alienation, discrimination, exploitation, marginalization and injustice (Troudi, 2015).

The critical ethnography's theoretical basis lies in critical theory which is concerned with exposing oppression and inequality (Cohen et al., 2007). Its methodological techniques enable researchers to study the participants' own points of view in their natural context (Canagarajah, 1993) in order to catch the diversity, variability, creativity, individuality, uniqueness, and spontaneity of social interactions (Cohen et al., 2007). Critical ethnography differs from descriptive ethnography in that it seeks to demystify the interests of particular cultures in order to unravel relations of power (Canagarajah, 1993).

Mertens (2015) argues that there should be a mechanism that links research results to social action. Therefore, "those who are most oppressed and least powerful should be at the centre of the plans for action in order to empower them to change their own lives" (p. 54). The critical agenda of the research aims to raise awareness to the students' marginalization and repression. Raising awareness of inequalities is an important step to



overcoming them (Cohen et al., 2007). Pennycook suggests that the critical work has succeeded in avoiding the trap of articulating 'utopian' visions of alternative realities while seeing "the potential for change through awareness and emancipation" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 8). Learning about student challenges in writing "can help administrators and faculty make informed decisions about how to best support student learning and academic development" (Pessoa, Miller, & Kaufer, 2014, p. 150). Furthermore, disseminating the findings of the research is important for raising awareness. This will be done through sharing the results with participants and presenting them in conferences and symposia. Informal presentations in the university will help raise the educators' awareness to the suffering of these students.

### **PARTICIPANTS**

The participants are divided into two groups; classroom observation participants, and interview participants. The total number of the students in the classroom was 11 students; 4 males and 7 females who were from diverse nationalities (two Nigerians, two Indians, one French, and six Arabs). In the first week of the course, I gave the students a short survey to complete (See Appendix B). It asked them to give information about their previous schooling. The survey revealed that two students were new who joined the university in the Summer course and were placed in WRI 101 through the university placement test. Eight students took WRI 001 in Spring, while one student was in the bridge program.

Among these eleven students, I found out that eight students studied in American, and British schools while three students studied in public schools. These three students (two Palestinian females and one Emirati male) were the intended classroom observation participants. The observation focused on their interaction, proficiency, competence, and roles. The schools that these students went to were in Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, and Dubai. They studied English as a subject and had six English classes a week. Regarding their final grades in high school, Hiba got 98.5% in grade 12 and was an A student in English while Sami got 94% but his grade in English was 78. Sally got 97 % which allowed her to grant scholarship but her grade in English was 80. Hiba and Sally passed the TOEFL from the first time while Sami had to repeat the IELTS several times and joined the bridge program for one semester.

The three students volunteered to be interviewed and showed particular interest in the interviews which indicates that they wanted their voice to be heard and their suffering to be taken into consideration. One of the three students was in the Bridge program while the other two took 001 in Spring. I conducted the interviews in my office after I explained to them the aim of the study and received their consent to take part in the study. I sent emails to the three students and agreed on appointments to conduct the interviews. Each interview lasted for about 45-50 minutes. I assured the students that their identities

will be concealed. Sally, Hiba and Sami are pseudonyms that are used in the study to conceal their identities. Having seven Arab students in the classroom helps conceal the identities of these three students, especially that the information about each student in the university is usually confidential and cannot be revealed in terms of their background and other information.

Ethical issues such as informed consent, anonymity and privacy were strictly adhered to

### **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

In consistence with the critical theoretical framework of the study that views knowledge as subjective, value mediated, and reality as intertwined with power and shaped by political, social, economic, and ethnic factors (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), qualitative methods were used with the aim not to describe and understand only but to challenge and change certain practices (Troudi, 2015).

#### *Ethnographic Interviews*

I conducted exploratory semi-structured interviews with three of the classroom observation participant students who reflected on their difficulties with the writing courses, which is crucial in the research because it gives the participants the chance to have a voice (Cohen et al., 2007). The interview questions were developed to answer the research questions and to meet the critical agenda of the research. It is a qualitative study with a critical agenda that aims at revealing the repression and marginalization of these students. Interviews, in the words of Kvale, are "descriptions of the lived world of the interviewees that seek to understand the world from the subjects' points of view and to unfold the meaning of their lived world. The interviews give voice to common people, allowing them to freely present their life situations in their own worlds" (2006, p. 481). Interviews give voice to the marginalized who "can in interview studies have their social situations and their viewpoints communicated to a larger audience" (Ibid, p. 482), to see what challenges they face and what their attitude towards the demands of English writing. One interview was done in English and two were in Arabic depending on the preference of the students. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed, and the two interviews in Arabic were then translated into English.

#### *Critical Classroom Observation*

Observing my own writing 101 class aimed to examine the difficulties that students who come from public schools face in the writing courses and what the nature of these struggles is. In this study, I had 'participant-as-observer' role in which I, as a researcher, participated and interacted in the setting of the research due to being the instructor of the course. The observation was structured in that I had an observation checklist and the information obtained from the observation was recorded under headings (See Appendix C). I observed the class for three weeks. The course started on 22 of



May. Each week we had five sessions and each session lasted for one hour and a half due its being intensive summer course.

The observation had a critical agenda that considers classroom interaction based on power relations. Students' interaction in the classroom was crucial for revealing whether they were marginalized or not and to what extent they were active participants of the classroom discourse and interaction. Mertens (2015) suggests that "by entering into firsthand interaction with people in their everyday lives, ethnographers can reach a better understanding of the beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of the people in the study that they could by using other method" (p. 242). Cohen et al. (2007) suggest that observation can reveal if what people do may differ from what they say they do, and so provides reality check of the everyday behavior which ultimately enables the researcher to discover things that participants do not freely talk about in interviews, to move beyond perception-based data obtained from interviews, and most importantly, to catch the dynamics of situations, the people, personalities, contexts, resources and roles. Moreover, data obtained from observation enjoy unique freshness since observed incidents are less predictable (Ibid). I asked students if they would allow me to videotape some sessions so that I can watch them later more closely to analyze the observation. However, some rejected the idea for cultural reasons. Therefore, I depended on taking notes at the end of each session.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, condensed and categorized into the main themes that emerged from the interviews. Kvale suggests that data analysis involves developing the meanings of the interviews in a way that brings the participant's own understanding into the light while providing new perspectives from the researcher (Kvale, 1996). Moreover, the observational data, which consisted of the field notes, were grouped into themes and then triangulated with the data obtained from the interviews. Furthermore, observational data gave the study reality check and more insight into the lived experiences of the participants.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results that emerged from the study are presented in sections:

##### *Teaching Writing and Reading at Schools*

The interviewed students drew a very depressing image of English writing at schools. They suggested that writing was not given any real emphasis at schools and that writing depended on memorization with the absence of any element of critical reading or writing. Writing at school, according to the interviewed students was a different writing that "had nothing of real academic writing that [they] discovered later but the name. It was misleading," as Hiba said. she added, "teachers misled us by making us believe that writing was just introduction,

body and conclusion. It was always the same style. The focus was always on language; vocabulary and grammar. I never got a low grade because the ideas were not clear or not well developed." She noted that teachers didn't even teach English using English. She said, "Even the English teacher didn't use English. If there was no supervisor, the teacher might teach English via Arabic. If she gave up, she would teach in Arabic." Sally 's problem with English writing was more pervasive because in her school, she never practiced writing in class but only memorized given essays. She stated that students in her school were never asked to write an essay of their own, but were just asked to copy the teacher's model essay. She said:

We never focused on writing. They used to give essays to memorize. No readings. The teachers were not good. I remember since I was a child, we were told, 'Just memorize the essay and then copy it in the exam.' If the question in the exam changed a word, I would be lost.

Sami also had tough experience with English writing at school. He said,

Writing was not done in the correct way. In writing, we knew that writing an essay means introduction, body and conclusion. We never heard of thesis statement, or topic sentences that we have here in the university. There was no focus on English. It was a very trivial thing. An English teacher may come to say that this English is not so important for you now. It might be later on in the future. Focus now on the science subjects.

Sami also suggested that same concepts were repeated over and over during his school days. He said, "We used to get into the English class doing the same thing over and over, taking the same lessons; simple past, simple present, present continuous. When we got advanced, we took complex and compound sentences in G12." What students mentioned about their experiences with writing in schools shows that they did not receive proper writing teaching that can prepare them to the writing at university.

Teaching reading also suffered from the same problems. It didn't go beyond reading simple texts and answering comprehension questions which would result in severe problems when moving to university where critical reading is a prerequisite for successful writing "since academic language is found primarily in written texts" (Cummins, 2000, p. 98). Sami said,

The teacher used to read the lessons himself, and answer the questions. We only used to copy the answers. This made us read without understanding of any text we read. He used to read and answer and we just copy. This was a problem. It developed in us the inability to



comprehend. That is why when we read, we don't understand.

Hiba also considered that teaching reading was "so bad" since "it focused only on what is in the book" and didn't require any research or finding outside sources. It was just about skimming and scanning or finding the main idea of a very simple text. She added that it was limited to the book and that the questions were basically MCQs that were straight to the point.

In the light of this background, students are not prepared to face the demands of college writing because, as Giuliano and Sullivan suggested, "Without adequate reading comprehension, writing proficiency, students pursuing higher education are vulnerable to failure" (2007, p. 7). If bridging the gap between high school and college is not an easy task (Giuliano, & Sullivan, 2007, p. 7) in general, it is more difficult for public school students.

#### ***Academic Writing at University and The Difficulties in Coping with it***

Having such linguistic background in English, it would be expected that academic writing would be difficult. Academic writing at university requires students "to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting" (Irvin, 2010, p. 8). It requires students to have knowledge of research skills, to have the ability to read complex texts, and to understand the key disciplinary concepts, and the strategies for synthesis, analysis, and critical response, usually within a limited time frame (Irvin, 2010, p. 7).

In the light of what students mentioned regarding their school writing, these skill will be very hard for these students to demonstrate. Interviewed students talked about huge difficulties encountered in writing. Sally said, "I don't know how to write, how to start, how to avoid plagiarism. I don't understand what professors want." Moreover, Hiba had a serious problem with developing an essay of 600 words in her 001 course. She said, "When she gave us a narrative essay. I couldn't reach 600 words. I told her to decrease the number of words. The maximum I wrote in school was 200." Sami had a problem in clarifying his thoughts in writing. He said that he sometimes feels that he is translating from Arabic which makes his ideas sound awkward.

Regarding the support they receive from instructors, Hiba said that the feedback she got from her instructor in 001 helped her improve her writing. She also pointed out that the writing centre in the university helped her with editing her language and improving the organization of her essays. However, Sally and Sami found the feedback of their teachers vague and not very comprehensible. They said that despite responding to the teachers' feedback, they still got low grades. They also found the writing centre not very helpful as it just helped with

language while "the professors' demands were much more than having proofread essays," as Sami suggested.

Classroom observation confirmed what students said regarding the difficulties with English in general and writing in specific. Their essays suffered from many problems. While other students had problems with citing sources, and supporting their claims, the three students had problems with language in the first place. Sally and Sami were basically translating from Arabic which made their writing vague. Their writing had serious problems with organization, development of ideas, and coherence. Moreover, they didn't have good oral language skills which are "not only critical in signaling classroom participation, they also serve as a foundation upon which reading and writing skills are based" (Bailey, 2006, p. 11). While Hiba was hesitant to participate and speak in class, Sally seemed uninterested and unwilling to be part of the classroom discussions. However, Sami was more willing to ask but his language failed him and resulted in embarrassing him in many occasions. Three students' presentations showed that their fluency in English is way behind their colleagues. Sami had serious issues with pronunciation. For instance, he pronounced *foreigner* with 'g.' Hiba was well prepared for the presentation but also was not fluent. Other students were mostly very fluent and confident in speaking and presenting their essays which made these three students the least fluent in class.

Regarding reading, Sami and Sally were unable to answer comprehension questions about the assigned readings. They also needed longer time than other students in finishing their quizzes and exams which also indicated that they needed longer time for reading and processing information. These findings are in line with Webb's research results that suggested that college teachers reported their "learners generally do not comprehend ... academic concepts in English, very seldom participate in classroom discussions, and perform poorly in assessment tasks" (2004, p. 230). He suggested that their fluency in English didn't help them since their "proficiency in English is generally not adequate for the purposes of formal learning" (p. 230).

#### ***From the Centre to the Periphery***

The students' perception of their language abilities changed after they entered the university. They suggested that they felt that they were at school in the centre, appreciated by teachers and equal with all other students, while feeling marginalized at the periphery in the university looking at the good students in writing, the students who came from American and British schools, as the lucky ones. Sally said:

At AUS I felt the weakness. When I started with 001, I saw that everyone was good in English except me. I told myself, 'Ya Allah [oh God], everybody is good in writing and I don't know how to write.' Psychologically, I was tired. Ya Allah, all of them are good. They know how to



write. I wish I studied in American or British schools, but they were expensive.

Sally said that at school, she didn't feel different. She said, "In the school It was Ok. Many students were like me. Few students were good in English." Similarly, Hiba felt that she is not as good as other students in the writing courses. She said reporting a conversation that she had with one of her colleagues who was in American school:

She was very comfortable about the research paper. She didn't care. She told me, "This is not the first time. I did so many research papers and they were worse than this. It is only 12 pages. Come on! We wrote 25 page-research papers in high school.' I told myself, what high school! She knows exactly how to do a research. she is used to this.

Classroom observation confirmed the interview data. The three students were marginalized and somehow excluded from the classroom discussions because of their lack of language proficiency and confidence. They would not answer unless were asked by name. In group work, these three students did not contribute much to the discussions, or share their ideas but were mostly relying on the other students in doing the required group tasks. They would even switch to Arabic in their discussions if they were grouped together or with other Arab students. These findings confirm Auerbach's claims that the instructional approaches where access to literacy is limited to unequal power relations, "classrooms can be seen as sites of struggle about whose knowledge, experiences, literacy and discourse practices, and ways of using language count" (as cited in Shohamy, 2006, p. 79). Students who came from public schools had limited access to literacy which resulted in marginalizing them in the writing courses. This indicates that English results in inequality rather than equality; inequalities between "those for whom proficiency in English opens doors and those for whom lack of proficiency in English closes doors" (Piller, & Cho, 2013, p. 29). It creates inequality between "those who are allowed to progress to better opportunities from those who are forced to bear the burden of underperformance by being relegated to a progressively shrinking sphere of opportunity" (Ibid, p. 31). That makes us raise the question, "To what extent do structures that have been set up in the school, ... such as the language of instruction, contribute to perpetuating discrimination and underachievement among certain groups of students?" (Cummins, 2000, p. 34).

### ***The Painful Transition***

The interviewed students expressed their shock upon entering the university and taking the first writing course. They suggested that they didn't expect this advanced level of English in the university. Sami said,

It was a shock. I was shocked when I saw a different English than the one I had in school. I asked myself, 'what is this? what is happening? Why are they complicating things? I didn't have any idea that English at university will require that high level of English. I was surprised.

Sally also said,

I never expected this level of difficulty in English writing, not to this extent. In 001, I hated my professor. I used to cry hysterically. I used to go home and cry and tell myself, 'I am [Sally], the excellent student, this is happening to me!'

These findings support what Troudi said when he argued that given the situation of English in the UAE, "students need to be provided with clear information about what is expected from them regarding English" (2009, p. 202). Students were not only unprepared for the writing courses, but they were also unaware of the level of proficiency needed to function well which is unfair. Troudi argues that English remains a major educational concern for it is not a foreign language but much more than that as it became the language of instruction in higher education, and "herein lies the real difference" (p. 203).

### ***The Price of English***

Interviewed students paid the price of their poor proficiency in English. Hiba said that the lowest grade in her GBA was her grade in the writing course. She said, "While all my courses in my major are A or A-, I got B in English which affected my GBA." Hiba's English was better than Sally and Sami, but because she was an A student, she was not satisfied with B. She even mentioned that she wants to repeat the course to get a better grade and to raise her GPA. Unfortunately, Sally has more complicated issue with English writing that affected not only her academic achievement but also her life. She said, "I lost my merit scholarship because my GBA dropped when I got C- in 001 in the first semester." This resulted in serious problems for Sally's family and reflected on Sally's attitude towards English. She had a very negative attitude that was demonstrated in her negligence to submit assignments on time and in her feeling that English is just an obstacle in her way. She expressed in many occasions that she just wanted to pass the course even with C-. She also expressed her hatred to English which was responsible for losing the scholarship.

Sami also suffered tremendously because of his poor proficiency. He was delayed two years because of English. He said,

I tried to take the IELTS exam. I couldn't get 6 which was the grade required to enter the university. I tried over and over and then went to the bridge program. Because of English, I



was delayed two years from starting my education at the university.

This was highlighted in Troudi and Jendli's study who pointed out that "the majority of the students in ... intensive English programs come from public schools background, where content subjects were taught in Arabic" (p. 34). Moreover, students suffering does not stop here but it goes on when they take the writing courses which makes English a barrier to academic success rather than a blessing.

### ***Frustration and Anger***

Students had a deep sense of frustration, fear, anger, and grief that was very obvious in their eyes and their expressions of their suffering and hardship. The use of "Ya Allah" was recurrent and used by all interviewees when their difficult moments. Sally used it eight times during the interview. They all expressed being "shocked," "surprised," "frustrated," and "overwhelmed." Moreover, Sally described her feelings in the first classes of Writing 101 saying, "The worst experience in English was in 001. She gave me C-. I remember that I was afraid. I was shaking and shivering when I was in class. I didn't know what she wanted." She added that because of the depression and frustration she had with her first writing course, she doesn't care anymore about it. Sami also felt frustrated with his inability to do well in English. He said, "We think in Arabic and write in English. I used to say, 'Oh God, when I will know how to write?' The teacher used to frown upon reading my essay because I was translating." Hiba also said, "In WRI 101, I was so scared. I felt that I might fail the course."

Classroom observation proved this anxiety and frustration. Sami kept asking after each low grade to have another chance and kept asking if he would fail the course. He was nervous during the class especially when he faced difficulty with one assignment or quiz. However, Sally was indifferent. She had a very negative attitude and didn't show any interest in the class discussions. Hiba was more persistent and more proficient, but also got panicked and frustrated at her inability to get high grades despite the great efforts she did.

### **LIMITATIONS**

Data collection methods were suitable to answer the research questions. However, if I had more time, I would have used document analysis to examine the students' writings. Regarding participants, I had access to three participants only. If I had more participants, I would have richer data. This small purposive sample does not help to generalize the findings to a larger population. Also, being their instructor, the interview participants would not reveal their real feelings about writing courses. That is why I tried to ask them more about their previous course. One major limitation was that I was the researcher and the observer.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study does not suggest changing the language of instruction at schools into English. It rather suggests that the quality of teaching English in public schools should be raised. "What is needed in ... the UAE is a solid English-language curriculum, designed with clear and realistic objectives and reflecting a sound knowledge of methodology, language pedagogy, and appropriate materials (Troudi, 2009, p. 210). Moreover, students have the right to be informed about the level of English they will have at universities. They have the right to have smooth transition between school and university. Ignoring what students are up to face with English requirements is a crime. Therefore, more collaboration is needed at all levels. High school teachers may not have a clear perception of how their efforts match up with expectations of instructors at post-secondary institutions (Sehulster, 2012). Therefore, "a shared dialogue about how student writing is perceived and valued could bring some common focus to a national hodgepodge or curricula that currently lacks much coherence" (Griffin, Falberg, and Krygier, as cited in Sehulster, 2012, p. 344). Literacy tasks should be prioritized in schools because they are what students need in university.

Educators and policy makers in the universities should be aware of the gap these students have and should help them not merely by delaying them in the Bridge program but by providing them with constant assistance and mentoring. Cummins (2000) suggests that equality is not achieved through providing students with the same teachers, textbooks, facilities, and curriculum since students who do not understand English are foreclosed from any kind of meaningful education. Instructors at university level should be aware that not all students have the linguistic background and the proficiency in English and that they need help to improve. Boylan argues that "with appropriate assistance, underprepared students can be just as successful in higher education as their better prepared colleagues" (as cited in Giuliano, & Sullivan, 2007, p. 17).

Passing TOEFL or IELTS does not guarantee students' success in academic writing. Bailey (2006) suggests that an important assessment gap exists between "the type English an ELL knows and is tested on, and the language critical to academic success" (p. 4). Therefore, students should be prepared to the phase that comes after passing the entry exam.

In the end, educators have a very critical role to play. As Giroux argues, "education cannot be neutral. It is inevitably a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge, values, desires, and identities are produced" (p. 159). Thus, we need to make a difference. As Fullan suggests, "Education has a moral purpose ... to make a difference in the lives of students regardless of background" (as cited in Giuliano, & Sullivan, 2007, p. 17).



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## APPENDIX A INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Did you study English at school as a subject or were it used as the language of instruction to teach all subjects?
2. Can you rank the skills that were focused on in school from the most imp to the least?
3. How much reading and writing were you doing?
4. Did teachers teach writing explicitly? Did you receive specific classes to teach the organization of essays, the development of ideas, the research skills, and the
5. How often were you asked to write in a semester? How many writing assignments were you requested to submit every semester?
6. How many writing sessions did you have a week?
7. What techniques did the teachers use in teaching writing that are different from the techniques in teaching writing here at university?
8. Do you think that your school prepared you well to the demands of writing at university level? Why? Explain in detail!
9. What are the difficulties that you face in writing here in the university?
10. Have you expected this difficulty before you join the university?
11. To what extent do you think your school is responsible for the obstacles you face in writing?
12. How does your proficiency level affect your interaction with other students in class?
13. Do you feel that writing hinders your academic success in the university?
14. What writing support is available for you at the university?
15. What do you think of the feedback you receive on your writing at the university?

## APPENDIX B

### The Survey

This survey is part of research on the experience of students studying English at schools and universities. Your participation in the survey is highly valued and the data collected will be held confidential. Thank you for agreeing to participate by responding to these questions.

Name:(Optional) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Nationality: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Major: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of previous high school: \_\_\_\_\_

### Circle the answer that you think fits for the following statements

1. The school you were in before joining AUS was
  - a. public school
  - b. private school
2. The school you were in followed
  - a. Arabic curriculum
  - b. British curriculum
  - c. American Curriculum
3. English in your school was
  - a. the language of instruction for all the subjects
  - b. the language of instruction for science and math
  - c. only a subject
4. You joined AUS in
  - a. Fall 2014
  - b. Spring 2015
  - c. Summer 2015



If you were in public school and studied English as a subject, I would like to have an interview with you to further ask you about your experience with English at high school and university level. If you agree, would you please write beneath if you would like to be interviewed and what are the timings that suit you.

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Thank you so much for your time and effort

**APPENDIX C**  
**Observational Field Notes**

| Descriptive Notes   | Reflective Notes | Date |
|---|------------------|------|
| Students' contribution to the classroom discussion<br>Quality<br>Frequency<br>Depth<br>Accuracy |                  |      |
| The time students need to finish the literacy tasks   |                  |      |
| The time students need to do the quizzes  |                  |      |
| The students' oral skills and presentations<br>Fluency<br>Accuracy<br>Thoroughness              |                  |      |
| The students' writing proficiency in major assignments  |                  |      |
| The collaboration with other students   |                  |      |
| Engagement and enthusiasm   |                  |      |

Note. this checklist was prepared to observe the three students who come from public school.

