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## Foreword

Welcome to the June 2021 issue of the Journal of English as an International Language. This issue is yet another declaration of EILJ's unflagging commitment to nurturing a plurality of research agendas and interests that are consistent with our pedagogies and practices in the teaching of EIL. The array of papers presented in this issue demonstrates our authors' well-informed attempts to propose and disseminate conceptualizations that resonate with EILJ's mission of promoting locally appropriate, culturally sensitive and socially attuned methodologies and materials in EIL. It is our fond belief then that such on-going endeavours would optimize EILJ's resolve to democratize and dehegemonize the use of English across the cultures and continents of the world.

Maureen O'Day Nicolas and Samer Annous' joint paper entitled "The Realities of English Medium Instruction in Lebanon: Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Place of English Communication Skills in a Cultural Studies Program" sets the tenor and tone for this issue. The authors use their well-informed theoretical positions to investigate the dynamics and fall-outs of the translatability of communication skills acquired in Lebanese university mandatory English courses to the university required Cultural Studies courses. In light of this, the authors deemed it necessary to elicit the beliefs and perceptions of all the eight professors (who teach the four courses of the Cultural Studies program in English) about students' communicative skill in English and about their untold responsibility as Cultural Studies professors to the development of that skill. Further to this, the authors interviewed student focus groups to gain insight into students' perceptions of the function of the Cultural Studies courses in their overall academic development, especially its translatability to skill development in English. Based on the analysis and discussion of their data, they confirm that teachers and students do not believe that Cultural Studies courses delivered in English either enhance students' English language skills or help them understand the role of reading in enhancing their literacy. Attributing this largely to their university's uncritical adoption of an American model of tertiary education that uses English as medium of instruction (EMI), the authors call for urgent facilitative cum associative pedagogical modifications that would facilitate their students' ability to communicate, critically analyze and synthesize information and knowledge in English. Needless to say, that such an avowal chimes in with EILJ's metaphor of border crossing, the underlying epistemic candour of the authors will go a long way in demolishing the false dichotomy that separates language communication skill from discipline specific knowledge/content. By the same token, it will underscore the urgent need for the professors in the Cultural Studies program to transcend their traditional territorial borders by teaching their students appropriate communication skills and strategies alongside their teaching of discipline specific knowledge.

Maisoun Abu-Joudeh's paper entitled "Jordanian EFL Learners' Comprehension of Color Idiomatic Expressions: The Role of L1 Transfer", examines the ability of Jordanian EFL learners to comprehend culturally bound color expressions and its concomitant complexities. Further to this, the author aspired to find out whether L1 transfer has any influencing role in the processing and internalizing of color idioms by the Jordanian EFL learners as it is consistent with the fundamental assumption underpinning her study. In view of this, the 24-item multiple choice test (MCT) featured in the study assumes particular substance and prominence. In addition, the author draws on the stimuli and synergies of some idiom processing studies to factor in the degree of L1-L2 similarity as a criterion for classifying English color idioms. As a result of this, she identifies six types of color idioms in keeping with her adoption of a model developed by Charteris Black (2002). The findings of her study confirm that idiomatic expressions with an equivalent conceptual basis and an equivalent linguistic form turned out to

be the easiest ones for the students to learn. In contrast, the findings of her study appeared to suggest that the most difficult color idioms in English were those with: (1) a similar conceptual basis and a different linguistic form; and (2) culture-specific expressions which have a different conceptual and linguistic basis. The study is meant to propose some pedagogical implications that may assist EFL teachers to familiarize their students with color idiomatic expressions in English. Notwithstanding the all-encompassing focus and aim of the study, which is meant to investigate the idiomatic competence of Jordanian EFL learners moderated by similarity to L1, the study believes that highlighting the conceptual and linguistic differences and similarities between L1 and the target language in classroom curriculum design can facilitate manifold the acquisition of figurative language by EFL learners. The ensuing figurative proficiency of the Jordanian EFL learners can be further augmented by exposing them to real world situations that can help these expressions stand out from the language around them. In addition, this would also help expand their knowledge of L2 figurative phraseology thereby minimizing their negative transfer of L1 conceptual or linguistic knowledge. In light of this, the author has enumerated some very helpful and beneficial pedagogical applications for classroom practice by the EFL teachers. EILJ fondly believes that our global readership will use the insights and issues presented in the paper to deduce pedagogical relevance for their respective classroom practices.

Omnia, T. EL-Sakran and Tharwat M. EL-Sakran's joint paper entitled "The case of culturally sensitive topics in the English language classrooms: Secondary school teachers' perspective" investigates secondary school teachers' perceptions towards the discussion of culturally sensitive topics in three private schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While reinforcing the inevitable relationship between culture and language, the paper problematizes the issue whether English can be taught without focusing on its cultural aspects which can very often entail discussing taboo topics such as such as sexuality, alcohol consumption, teen suicide, birth control, superstitions, pork, boyfriends or girlfriends, dating, drugs, gay rights, same sex marriages, and other related issues in classrooms. Likewise, the paper interrogates if the coverage of taboo topics as presented in the English text books can affect students' cognitive skills negatively or not. The authors employ a well-informed mixed methodology that is predicated on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to answer their research questions which encompass as well as encapsulate some sensitive aspects of the Emirati culture. In addition, the authors factor in their critical awareness of the English language teaching materials used in the three respective Emirati schools chosen for their study, which serves as an epistemic bulwark to the study. The rich findings yielded in the study while pointing to the teacher participants' positive grasp/understanding of the strong connections between language and culture, signpost their deliberate avoidance of discussing culturally sensitive topics as they believe that it can help them stay clear of problems both at a personal and institutional level. Notwithstanding this, the teachers are of the view that avoidance of discussing culturally sensitive topics has no bearing on their students' cognitive development, which they think should happen in consonance with the sensitive aspects of the Emirati culture. In this regard, the authors believe that the Emirati cultural framework should serve as a determinant for what to cover or not cover in class. Therefore, the authors are able to come up with a set of suggestions which can help sensitize the expatriate teachers who take up EFL teaching in the UAE.

Uloma Nkpurunma Obi, Ignatius Khan Ticha and Muhammad Nakhooda's joint paper entitled "Teaching Academic Literacy in English for Multiple Objectives at a University of Technology" explores student experiences predicated on collaborative teaching and learning of academic literacy and content knowledge directed at multiple objectives at a South African University of Technology. The authors used a qualitative research methodology to conduct in-depth

interviews and administer questionnaires with their randomly selected undergraduate students following a Communication Skills Course in English. Against a rather disempowering institutional backdrop, which viewed academic literacy courses as peripheral, the authors used the context of their study to factor in an inclusive decolonizing pedagogy that sought to synthesize as well as synchronize the key issues and insights of academic literacy with discipline specific knowledge via the space, stimuli and synergies that collaborative teaching, blended learning and social media practices offered. In some respects, this paper is reminiscent of the first paper in this issue as it problematizes pedagogies and practices that seek to widen the divide between academic literacy in English and content specific knowledge. The confirmatory support provided by the authors eminently attest to the efficacy of their inclusive pedagogy, which prioritized their students' plurilingual backgrounds as well as the context-bound characteristics of their collaborative and proactive teaching learning repertoire thereby helping them avoid the ugly absolutes of imperialism that characterize the ways by which academic literacy practices serve to colonize student's minds with "one size fits all" actions and outcomes. In light of this, the authors fervently believe that their students' use of home language in their class discussions not only served to empower or motivate their participation in their classroom activities but also exposed them to the benefits of translanguaging, even when it is initiated in academic literacy course delivered in English. In sum and spirit this paper is a robust illustration of how academic literacy practices can be decolonized when teachers are receptive to the cultural and linguistic capital that their students bring to the classroom and how that can help in their non-threatening acts of co-creating knowledge for their academic advancement.

Genevieve Suzann Lentz and John Wankah Foncha's joint paper entitled "Lecturer's views on using Blended Learning as an intervention programme for teaching English language Academic Writing to Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) first year students" examines the promise and potential blended learning has for promoting students' academic writing in English. Having framed their study in Bourdieu's structural constructivism theory, the authors direct their attention to the specifics of an intervention programme that used the space that digital platform provides for non-judgmental and non-threatening learning experiences for their first-year students. Using participant observations, focus group discussions and interviews with their students as their data, the authors present an interesting thematic analysis which unfolds the dynamics and fallouts of their inquiry. The authors note that phased or progressive teacher guidance should be the mainstay in any academic writing programme in English failing which students can find it difficult to master the ins and outs of paragraphing, organizing their longer academic texts in addition to addressing the grammatical issues in it. Articulating their experientially supported beliefs about the use of English in academic writing, the authors argue that academic writing should be seen as one that traverses across disciplines and not one that conforms itself to a narrowly conceived instructional exercise performed by language teachers specializing in academic English. In light of this, the study reported in the paper points to the efficacy and safety of blended learning intervention practices. The authors then lead us to believe that the facilitative and associative practices replete in blended learning contexts can provide for translanguaging, thereby encouraging students to reckon with their diversity as a reliable means of strengthening or negotiating power relations in class via their use of English in a multilingual framework. Seen with reference to their institution's language policy, the authors confirm that the methods and strategies used in their study enriched the responsive dimensions of their blended learning interventions. They further add that the opportunities for translanguaging triggered by their blended learning interventions can significantly improve their students' ability to think, process and write meaningfully without hampering their intellect. (\* EILJ is indeed delighted to note that this paper is an outcome of scholarly collaboration between John Wankah Foncha, one of EILJ editors and Genevieve Suzann Lentz who has been his M.



Ed supervisee.)

Fehime Aslan's paper entitled "Which is worth more? From non-native speakers' perspective: British or American" focuses on Turkish English instructors' accent preferences in regard to British accent and American accent. Given the increasing currency of World Englishes (WE) and the wide range of debates that encourages its acceptance, the author believes that an investigation into the attitudinal issues of the Turkish instructors of English can help explain as to how and why their accent preferences are determined by the sociolinguistic necessities that assume particular relevance in their Turkish context. The mixed method design used in the study featured 37 Turkish English language instructors working at either private or state universities in Turkey. The data gathered through questionnaire and interview suggest that the accent preferences of the English instructors can have a particular bearing on their beliefs about the ownership of English. While the instructors regard the British accent "more educated", they believe that the American accent sounds better. Needless to say, that the British accent is seen as more prestigious according to the findings, the author contends that English language instructors in Turkey express a certain affinity for American English as they believe it is clearer and easier for them to understand. Notwithstanding this, the instructors believe that what matters most in the teaching of pronunciation is being able to teach pronunciation practices that meet the intelligibility criteria rather than expect their students to attain native-like pronunciation. In light of this, the paper underscores the need for raising awareness about the ownership of English, World Englishes, and EIL concepts for pre-service teachers. By the same token, the author observes that the accent preference of the Turkish instructors of English cannot serve as consensus among them to determine whether non-native varieties of English should be taught or not. However, given the increasing status of English as a Lingua Franca, the author urges her readership to take due cognizance of the sociolinguistic implications and its concomitant pedagogical imperatives in designing teacher education programs and curriculum development units. The issues and insights signposted in this paper we hope will be of particular interest to our global readership.

In closing, I wish to applaud the gusto and gumption with which the contributing authors of this issue have showcased their alternate discourses of current reckoning in EIL. Such endeavours are pivotal to EILJ's declared mission of creating "a heterogeneous global English speech community, with a heterogeneous English and different modes of competence" (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 211). Given this, I am certain that the issues and insights discussed in this issue would serve as a lamp to all of us, who otherwise would be stranded in a "methodological wasteland of EIL". Read on!

**Dr Sivakumar Sivasubramaniam**  
**Chief Editor**

# **The Realities of English Medium Instruction in Lebanon: Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Place of English Communication Skills in a Cultural Studies Program**

**Maureen O'Day Nicolas\***

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the transfer of communication skills acquired in a Lebanese university. All eight professors teaching in the four courses in the Cultural Studies program that are taught in English were interviewed to elicit their beliefs and perceptions about students' communicative skill in English and about their responsibility as Cultural Studies professors to develop the skill. Student focus groups were also conducted to glean insight into students' perceptions of the function of the Cultural Studies courses in their overall academic development and if they were aware of transferring skill in English to the cultural studies context. The results showed that teachers and students do not believe that Cultural Studies courses promote the enhancement of English communication skills. In addition, students do not equate reading in Cultural Studies with communication skill development.

**Keywords:** communicative language skills, language across curriculum, second language skill development, English Medium Instruction, Lebanon, Higher Education

## **Introduction**

Globalization and internationalization of higher education in developing countries have become synonymous with the Americanization of universities where English becomes the lingua franca of higher education institutions. In the Arab world, using English has become a symbol of "modernity", "technology" and "education" (Joseph, 2013; Karakas, 2017). Many new private universities in the Arab world, especially in Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf States and Lebanon, have adopted English as the medium of instruction and claim that they follow the American system of education. The characteristics of the universities following the American model are: management by a Board of Trustees, American credit-based system, international admission criteria such as SAT, curriculum that includes major courses in addition to general education courses (English and Cultural Studies in the case of this university) and elective courses; in addition to the use of English as the medium of instruction.

Compared to neighboring Arab states, Lebanon is linguistically unique. Bilingualism and multilingualism are socially desirable and English and French are considered important languages and sometimes as more important than their native language, Arabic. Arabic in most schools and universities is accorded a secondary status and is only taught as a subject. In fact, the learning of English in Lebanon is now associated with prestige and modernity, and Arabic is no longer perceived as instrumentally important (Orr & Annous, 2018; Zakharia, 2010).

English-medium instruction in Lebanon dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of missionary schools and universities. In the period of the French colonization (1920-1943) and after independence, English continued to penetrate, permeate and expand in the Lebanese educational system and is currently taught as a second or third language in all public and private schools in Lebanon. In addition to the historical roots, the major factors that led to the dominance of foreign languages in education are the weakness of the Lebanese state

intervention in the educational system coupled with the freedom of education that is granted by the Lebanese constitution. This policy has given freedom to the private sector to lead in the promotion of foreign languages in education. 25 out of the 28 new private universities that mushroomed after the civil war (1990-till now) have adopted English as a medium of instruction. In addition, French is increasingly being replaced by English in both secondary schools and tertiary education.

The adoption of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has not been sufficiently studied in terms of its educational effectiveness (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2014). Investigating EMI and the role of content teachers at the “micro level” (Tsui & Tellefson, 2004) can help in understanding the realities and effectiveness of adopting English medium instruction programs at the tertiary level. Many new universities, especially in non-English speaking environments and peripheral contexts see English as a “magic wand” that “makes it all happen” (Kim, 2002). These universities fail to study the educational ramifications of the uncritical adoption of English as a medium of instruction. Kim (2002) warns of the need to reflect and carefully examine the value of using English as a means to meet the needs of students operating in non-English speaking environments. The common assumption that EMI automatically enhances students’ performance in English stems from the theories of content-based learning (CBL) (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Wannagat, 2008). However, many content teachers in EFL settings do not feel that teaching English is their responsibility: “content specialists immersed in the discourse of their discipline do not easily recognize the language demands of curriculum, let alone the language learning needs and opportunities” (Annous & Nicolas, 2015; Davison, 2006, p. 457).

Notwithstanding the afore-mentioned views, instructors who take such a position think that operational literacy is the ultimate goal in language acquisition. In fact, from operational literacy springs cultural literacy, which is the ability to use the language to communicate with a specific group or in the conventions of a specific discipline, and then critical literacy. Critical literacy is arguably the most sophisticated and deals with understanding of implicit messages and understanding the knowledge conveyed by reading in a critical and informed way (Green, 1996). Academic literacy can then be understood as a combination of all three and consequently, students’ acquisition of academic literacy has to be the responsibility of all in an academic institution.

## **Transfer of L2 writing**

The literature reports that a large number of students lack operational literacy, specifically skill in communicative writing, even students writing in their first language (L1) (Defazio, Jones, Tennant, & Kook, 2010). Therefore, a logical assumption would be that students who must write in their L2 would have even more difficulty. Hinkel (2010) cites many areas where L2 writers lack ability when compared to a similar population of L1 writers writing in similar genres. Among the several areas that L2 writers exhibit deficiencies, Hinkel (2010, pp. 527-528) includes the assertions that L2 writers usually produce shorter less elaborate texts, under-developed arguments, and produce short and subjective conclusions. Such weaknesses in cultural and critical literacy need to be addressed in a systematic communal way especially given that “learning to write in an L2 is a process foundationally and substantively distinct from learning to write in an L1” (Hinkel, 2010, p. 528).

From the students’ point of view, it is argued that students’ receptiveness to learning is influenced strongly by what they perceive to be important (Leki & Carson, 1994). Consequently, emphasis on effectual communication skill in all courses outside of the communication courses themselves could lead to the nurturing of these skills by emphasizing the importance of the communication skills. Bahous and Nabhani (2011) report that students,

in a context very similar to the context of this research and also located in Lebanon, are not motivated to enhance their writing skill in their L2 (English), because of unclear links between the skills learned in their English courses and their major courses as well as to their future careers. Some research also reports that students claim that if they knew the way of thinking in their discipline before they were required to write in the discipline, they would be more confident in their ability to do so (Hunter, 2013). The students in Hunter's (2013) study, who are native speakers of English, realized that to think of writing as separate from their discipline was to create a "false dichotomy" (p. A-102). The link between the way of thinking and how one should express that thinking in writing needed to be made explicit.

Transferring skill across epistemological boundaries may require explicit training even for native speakers of the target language as confirmed by Hunter (2013). In an EFL environment the situation becomes even more complicated. For teachers whose native language is not the target language and find themselves teaching students in students' L2 often are not confident in their own L2 ability and therefore, lack confidence in giving feedback to students' L2 output (Annous & Nicolas, 2015; Winer, 1992). However, Winer (1992) claims that non-native speakers are often aware of the differences between their mother tongue and the target language and therefore, can more easily explain these differences to learners. This attribute combined with their knowledge of discipline-specific genres can make instructors teaching in their L2 a formidable influence on students' communicative skill acquisition in the target language. Winer (1992) goes on to express that a natural empathy can also exist between instructors using their L2 when teaching students using their L2.

Further to what we have voiced above, research, according to Hinkel (2010), has revealed that there is a wide acceptance of content-based writing approaches for L2 writers or a variant of this model. However, that same research suggests that the language teachers likely do not have the level of expertise in the content aspect of this pedagogical model. "Many published reports have pointed out that practicing L2 teachers are well-equipped to deal with language instruction, but far less so in the areas of content and discipline-specific academic writing and discourse frameworks" (Hinkel, 2010, p. 534).

Literature on writing across the curriculum and in disciplines (WAC/WID) strongly asserts that writing needs to be contextualized and embedded in a university curriculum to enhance learning and academic achievement (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004; McDermott, 2010). The very same literature claims that thinking and writing strategies in a discipline are intrinsically linked (Astin, 1993; Carter, 2007; Hyland, 2009). In addition, Brent (2011) asserts that explicit instruction in writing genre requirements would facilitate students' transfer of rhetorical knowledge from one class to another. Although many professors agree with the necessity for effective written communication, the challenge is to get them to release some of the time designated for curriculum content to the nurturing of communicative skills (Annous & Nicolas, 2015; Clughen & Connell, 2012). More worryingly, both studies cited here, Clughen and Connell (2012) and Annous and Nicolas (2015), report that discipline specific professors also think that it is not their job to teach students communication skills and that it might even be beneath them to do so.

The emergence of cultural studies programs initially was to question and challenge disciplinary borders, connect teaching and learning with form and content (Giroux, 1993). Giroux (1993) even says one of the initial issues that served to direct the advent of cultural studies programs was "the refusal to accept the limitations of established academic boundaries and power structures" (p.15). In other words, a primary goal of these programs is to empower students to learn and to acquire necessary skills. In an L2 environment, such skills include acquiring cultural and critical literacy in the L2 including the ability to communicate complex ideas in the target language in writing as well as to critically question and think beyond everyday assumptions.

As a “peripheral” English speaking country (Cangaragah, 2002), Lebanon belongs to the “outer circle” of English (Nicolas & Annous, 2013). In such a context, the Lebanese private universities often uncritically replicate and benchmark the American system of education in order to promote their programs. The university at the center of this inquiry could be such an example. In light of this, our paper investigates the views and perceptions of students and content teachers in the University of Balamand, a Lebanese English-medium private university, regarding the transfer of English communication skills to the cultural studies courses.

### **Context of the study**

The Department of English Language and Literature runs the two university-required English courses. These two courses are required of all students in all majors taught in English. Students either are placed into the first of the two by scoring 600 on the TOEFL test or they enter the course through the remedial strand of language courses offered by the department. The entire Composition and Rhetoric Sequence run by the Department of English Language and Literature is guided by the principles of an academic English curriculum, which would foster critical thinking and enhanced reading ability in students to better prepare them for their academic work.

The Cultural Studies program at this university, which is the focus of this research, is a series of four courses that are a required part of a student’s degree program. Cultural Studies programs can be designed in many ways for different purposes (Giroux, 1993). The program at this university deals with four specific topics/areas. The four areas the program addresses include, early civilization, religions, philosophy and Arab thinkers.

### **Methodology**

This investigation intended to discover the cultural studies’ instructors’ perceptions of students’ communicative skill in English and their role, if any, in nurturing that skill. The investigation utilized a semi-structured interview protocol. Two researchers were present during each instructor’s interview, which lasted close to an hour and took place in one of the researcher’s office. One of the researchers typed the responses as they accrued while the other took notes during the interview. At the end of the interview the typed transcript was read back to the respondent to establish respondent validation of the data (Cohen & Manion, 1994).

The investigation also intended to discover students’ perceptions of the relationship between the university-required cultural studies courses and their English skill development. A student focus group that was comprised 10 students, five females and five males, from all four of the different cultural studies courses was interviewed. The two researchers participated in the interview. One researcher conducted the interview and facilitated the discussion. The other researcher sat on the outside of the discussion group observing and taking notes of salient points that were made. Students spoke in either English or Arabic. The entire discussion was tape recorded in order to have a record of the raw data to refer to during the analysis and extraction of the themes. The goal of the focus group was to learn what the students think the purpose of the cultural studies courses is and also whether or not these courses play any role in their English skill development specifically.

A semi-structured interview protocol was followed which began with asking students to describe a typical lesson. Through a more thorough understanding of the type of pedagogy that is practiced in these courses, the researchers hoped to be able to determine if communication skill in English is promoted at least implicitly. The discussion was then steered to other areas of interest to the study such as do the instructors give guidelines on how to write

essays or how to write for the exams and do the students receive feedback on their writing.

### ***Data analysis***

The analysis of the data involved an inductive, iterative process. The analysis of the instructors' interview transcripts went through several iterations. Data were coded and identified as like kinds and then grouped together as emergent themes were identified. A table of respondents and their answers was generated to better identify common and divergent opinions and commonalities related to a theme. Matrices were made for each emergent theme and the supporting data for that theme. Once all emergent themes were identified, the themes that addressed similar issues were clustered together to generate primary findings from the instructors' interviews.

The data from the student focus groups were analyzed by both researchers separately. Both employed an iterative process looking for main points implicit in the discussion. The researchers then came together and compared their analyses. The raw data were consulted when needed to confirm a theme. Themes generated through this data gathering process were agreed upon. These themes were then compared to the themes generated from the instructors' interviews. The principal findings are a result of the triangulated themes from the two different data sources.

### **Findings**

Three primary findings emerged from triangulating both data sets. The following tables present the three primary findings and the themes that generated the findings.

Table 1

#### *Primary finding 1*

1. The methodology of the cultural studies courses does not promote skill/literacy enhancement, explicitly or implicitly.
<i>"inconsistent and ineffective group work"</i>
<i>"lack of research designed activities"</i>
<i>"use of L1 in class"</i>
<i>"uneven or ineffectual feedback given to students"</i>

Table 2

#### *Primary finding 2*

2. Neither students nor teachers believe these courses serve to nurture English language skills.
<i>"instructor's academic role"</i>
<i>"Purpose of CS is not language skill acquisition"</i>
<i>"purpose of the courses is to develop critical thinking"</i>
<i>"content courses/content coverage as the primary ILO"</i>

Table 3

*Primary finding 3*

3. Students either fail to understand the importance of reading for the development of their communicative skill or the readings do not lend themselves to this function due to their level of difficulty
<i>“the texts are too difficult for the students”</i>
<i>“students generally do not read the assigned readings and/or do not understand what they’ve read”</i>
<i>“students rely heavily on Spark notes for comprehension”</i>
<i>“This is not a reading culture”</i>

In addition to the primary findings, the student focus group generated two additional findings of importance. These two findings are a result of respondent triangulation within the focus group (Cohen & Manion, 1994).

1. Students do not see the relevance of the cultural studies courses beyond adding to their general knowledge base.
2. Students claimed to know the content and ideas stressed in classes but felt they could not express themselves adequately in written exams.

These two secondary findings are discussed in an embedding/embedded manner within the discussion of the primary findings.

## Discussion

This discussion will be organized around the three primary findings. The supporting data will be identified with FG if the data came from the student focus group and with a number if it came from one of the interviews with the professors, P1, P2 etc. The number corresponds to the position on the master interview matrix. (The primary findings will all contain themes from both the professor interviews and the student focus group as explained above). This strategy creates an audit trail, which we believe can add to as well as augment the credibility of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **1. The methodology of these courses does not promote skill/literacy enhancement, explicitly or implicitly.** (Table 1)

The methodology of these courses does not promote skill/literacy enhancement, explicitly or implicitly due to the lack of guiding pedagogical principles and uniformity of educational strategies across sections (each course runs multiple sections each semester) and across the four courses. “Inconsistent and ineffective group work” emerged as a theme that gives rise to this finding (Table 1).

*“In small groups they could take the discussion anywhere. I want the discussion to be purposeful.” P3*

*“Rarely use group work because there is a lot of material to cover – lecture and class discussion.” P1*

*“No group work-sometimes discussion but not always.” P4*

*“All lecture and discussion.” P5*

*“Sometimes group work and they prepare 6-8 questions in pairs or groups of three.” P6*

*“What happens in class depends on the “doctor” if there is group work or lecture.” FG*

Cooperative learning strategies can serve to engage students in the class. Student to student interaction has long been a tenet of the liberal arts and a catalyst for the development of “intellectual arts and habits of mind” (Seifert, Goodman, Lindsay, Jorgensen, Wolniak, Pascarella, & Blaich, 2008, p.110). The data reveal that in these required courses, students do not always feel engaged in the content as expressed below:

*“How interesting the course is really depends on who’s teaching it.” FG*

*“I like the discussions; I feel the discussions are the most important part.” FG*

A “lack of research designed activities” is another theme that supports this primary finding. (Table 1)

*“You learn when you research. Now we jump from author to author with no time for secondary sources/in depth analysis.” P3*

Research focused work is largely considered an essential aspect of tertiary education. University level courses should automatically incorporate research requirements. Furthermore, Pally (2001) suggests that students learn critical thinking skills when students synthesise, analyse and compare challenging sources over time.

The emergent theme of the “use of L1 in class also contributed to this finding.

*“Arabic is allowed in group work but they must present in English.” P6*

*“ When they do [speak in Arabic] I ask them to say it in English. Their English translation is not usually accurate. They have more depth in their Arabic.” P4*

*“Sometimes I will give an Arabic word if I want to be sure they understand an English word.” P7*

*“Students would prefer to have all foreign teachers because Arabic speakers sometimes speak Arabic although they gave credit to some Lebanese who insist on English.” FG*

Research asserts that the methodology used in a teaching/learning environment contributes to the development of students’ literacy and communication skills. Instead of Arabic being seen as a helpful resource to learn English, both teachers and students in this study seem to have internalized what Phillipson (1992) calls the “English-only fallacy” and therefore indirectly feel ashamed if L1 (Arabic) is used in the classroom. Doiz, Lasagabaster, and Sierra (2013) discuss the benefits of trans-linguaging, which they define as “the adoption of bilingual supportive scaffolding practices” (p. 218) in English medium universities. Van Der Walt and Kid (2013) also report on how L1 can be used to acquire knowledge through English. However, the students in this study have acquired a high level of proficiency in English by the time they enter university level courses. The idea that they need to use their L1, Arabic, to understand a task or the content is highly questionable. More likely, students use Arabic for other reasons, for example, identity issues, or the need for guidance in choosing effective discipline specific vocabulary or rhetorical strategies.

Methodological strategies for skill development would importantly include the use of feedback on student production. However, the students reported that they did not receive any useful feedback. There was an unbalanced response from the professors concerning feedback, which, along with the data from the focus group, gave rise to the theme of “uneven or ineffectual feedback given to students”. Students even claimed that they would be given their exams to look over for five minutes or so and then have to return them to the instructors without understanding why they lost points. The following excerpts/data strands point to that:



*"I tried to do what the teacher wanted me to on the next exam but I got the same grade." FG*  
*"We don't know how grades are arrived at and how we can improve." FG*  
*"Some professors just want length so you can write a recipe in the middle of your answer and they'll never know since they don't read closely anyway." FG*  
*"Instructors are interested in content; how much we know. They should ask us direct questions and we give direct answers (not require essay answers on exams)." FG*  
*"I give feedback on speech and writing." P2*  
*"I offer feedback on short assignments and presentations." P3*  
*"Why do I have to worry about their English skills? Do I have to become an English teacher?" P1*  
*"I will underline language errors." P4*  
*"I have a reputation for pointing out mistakes." P5*  
*"I give group feedback after the first exam and then I mark the language pretty extensively." P7*

This lack of feedback precludes any potential teaching and learning intervention(s) for skill development. Students do not have any idea what to improve much less how to improve resulting in the status quo being reinforced. Research contends that skill transfer happens when it is a conscious by-product of course design and enhanced through specific pedagogical objectives (Justice, Rice, & Warry, 2009). Moreover, Giroux (1993) espouses the importance of pedagogy in cultural studies and of writing as a pedagogical tool.

## **2. Neither students nor teachers believe these courses serve to nurture English language skills.** (Table 2)

Professors and students revealed a common point of view concerning tertiary education. The data from both sets of participants strongly suggest that both sets have an internalized discourse with firmly established borders separating course content and language skill development. Students in the focus group blatantly and specifically said that the cultural studies courses *"are not English courses after all"*; the focus group generated a lengthy discussion on the purpose of the cultural studies courses eventually and unanimously asserting that their purpose is to increase students' general knowledge base. Such points of view generated another primary finding. The finding to emerge is that all of the respondents, professors and students, do not think that it is the objective of these courses to enhance communication skills in English.

A theme of "instructor's academic role" contributed to this finding and the following data established that theme (Table 2).

*"I am not teaching English; it's not my purpose in these classes" P7*  
*"I will try to teach them words, but it's not my job." P1*  
*"Maybe the English courses need to be tougher, English dept. needs to fail more." P8*  
*"The CS courses are not English courses after all." FG*

Table 2 shows that another theme that contributed to this finding is the theme that says: "Purpose of CS is not language/skill acquisition". Data from both data sets produced this theme.

*"... after all this is CS and not English." P7*  
*"We can't become English teachers!" P1*  
*"I know it's not an English class and I respect that some concepts are difficult for them so*

*allow the Arabic when discussing with each other.” P6*

*“Writing on midterm and final is more than enough. it’s not English class” P8*

*“... communication skills need to be learned in high school; they can’t be learned in the short time at university.” FG*

*“... it’s not CS instructors’ job to teach us English.” FG*

This primary finding from this study corroborates research in other contexts that report similar points of view on the part of subject professors (Annous & Nicolas, 2015; Clughen & Connell, 2012; Jackson, 2005; Zhu, 2004). The main concern elucidated by professors in all these studies is that time for content coverage cannot be sacrificed. There appears to be an inherent misconception that skill development will take away time from the course that could and should be devoted to content. What this perspective misses is that without the language skill needed to communicate knowledge, much meaning is lost (Astin, 1993; Carter, 2007). Students will fail to absorb complex ideas and ways of communicating those ideas without the necessary language skill set. A “false dichotomy” exists in this way of thinking (Clughen & Connell, 2012). One of the respondents seemed to realize this, if at least implicitly as shown below:

*“The texts are very complex (philosophical) and someone like Nietzsche requires you to read between the lines and they can’t do that.” P3*

Students corroborated their inability to thoroughly understand the difficult texts. They confessed to relying on Spark notes for better understanding of what they read. Critically, native speakers of English have reported that texts of this nature are complicated and difficult to read and in addition, students do not understand their practical application (Giroux, 1993). Rather, the professors all strongly emphasized the courses really intend to develop higher order processes generating the theme that “the purpose of the courses is to develop critical thinking skills.” (Table 2)

*“We are interested in educating them in opinions and ideas and history.” P7*

*“Critical thinking is the absolute objective.” P5.*

*“Critical thinking is an ILO and is measured by how they engage with the text.” P6*

The data presented above revealed the theme of “content courses/content coverage as the primary ILO” although professors claim development of higher order processes is the aim of the courses. Data from the focus group also corroborates this theme.

*“These courses enhance our general knowledge.” FG*

*“Four courses are not needed to accomplish this goal [enhancing general knowledge].” FG*

Consequently, the coverage of content in conjunction with the emphasis on critical thinking prohibits any development of students’ communication skills in L2, according to this data. But these professors do not seem to realize that written communication and critical thinking are inextricably connected (Astin, 1993; Carter, 2007; Hyland, 2009). However, one of the respondents lamented that he does “not even try to measure this. It’s [critical thinking] an advanced skill our students don’t have.” P3

The students in the focus group failed to realize the potential of these courses in developing their operational literacy in English or their ability to think critically leading to a higher level of cultural and critical literacy. The students expressed the idea that “critical thinking is an English skill”. The students in this focus group were oblivious to the aspect of

critical thinking inherent in these courses. They completely and unanimously thought that the courses were needed to develop their general knowledge base but beyond that, i.e., develop critical thinking and/or develop communication skill in English, the students did not recognize that the courses could serve to benefit their language acquisition or any other literacy skill. Such a view is not unique to this context. Students in other contexts also have believed that the texts in cultural studies courses were meant to be taken at face value for their content and were not to be challenged or critically engaged with (Giroux, 1993). Consequently, it is left to the instructor to instigate critical discourse and use the texts to challenge students' beliefs and perspectives as well as to teach genre specific conventions and nurture basic rhetorical elements.

Some students realized at the point in the discussion when language skill development was being debated, that students who were French educated before coming to this English medium university, were benefitting from the cultural studies courses more than the English language educated students were. The consensus was that French educated students' English language skill would improve simply because they are being exposed to English in another course. The students asserted that "you cannot learn to write in one or two courses" [referring to the two required English courses]. English educated students, however, "do not learn English in the university required English courses anyway", they claimed. They come to university already knowing English. This revelation provoked the insight that students come to university with a firmly established idea of academic borders. As a result, they inhibit their own growth and enhancement of their skills by not consciously transferring those skills to other courses and nurturing them to develop and expand through the different context and content.

**3. *Students either fail to understand the importance of reading for the development of their communicative skill or the readings do not lend themselves to this function due to their level of difficulty.*** (Table 3)

The themes that generated this finding will be intertwined with this discussion. See Table 3 for a breakdown of the themes. Ultimately, the finding reveals that students have not been guided to understand the importance of reading to the development of their own literacy and language skill improvement throughout their educational careers. Obasi (2018) highlights the reflective property inherent in reading and how the act of reading points out the irregularities of English and language learners can become conversant with the irregular forms so prevalent in English. In fact, as Arabic speakers, students in this study face the problem of diglossia, in which two varieties of Arabic are used in different situations: High version or classical Arabic and Low version or the vernacular. The High variety is the written and literary form; it is usually taught in schools but is not the mother tongue of any Lebanese or any other Arabic speaker. It is the Low variety that children acquire at home and is used in the daily conversations. According to Ayari (1996), diglossia is a major cause of illiteracy in the Arab world and can also explain the difficulties Arabic-speaking university students face in reading. Respondent P2 asserted that the students are "*much better at the oral skill than writing. They tend to use colloquial vocabulary; they don't have any idea how to write.*" This assertion tallies with Hinkel's (2010) report that claims L2 writers use more conversational and high frequency words than L1 writers do as well as use more personal pronouns in their writing.

The students in the focus group claimed that the Lebanese do not read and those in the group that said they enjoyed reading said they began reading in university once they became a bit passionate about something. This claim corroborates research that reports that students in EFL contexts change their notions of their reading in L2 for the positive when they begin reading academic, content-based material (Ohata & Fukao, 2014). The focus group students claimed that throughout their high school years they were not required or encouraged to read.

Their comments support a widely held belief that this particular culture does not value or promote reading neither as a leisurely past time nor as a means to knowledge acquisition.

The education system in the elementary and secondary years in this country is predominantly dependent on memorization of content: rote learning. The methodology in the years leading up to tertiary education is largely based on teaching to the official exams administered by the Ministry of Education and the content needed to successfully pass those exams (Freyha, 2003). An educational consequence of this approach to education is a generation of passive learners whose time is devoted largely to memorization with little time left for reading or enhancing a general knowledge base. One of the instructors claimed *“they learn by rote and so there’s a lot of plagiarism and they don’t even realize it”* P2. Consequently, students arrive at university without realizing the importance of reading for their cognitive growth and expansion of ideas. All instructors that were interviewed referred to or alluded to this accepted truth in one way or another.

Humanities courses by their nature require an exorbitant amount of reading and Lebanese students enter these courses without the necessary appreciation, and acceptance of the amount of reading that is necessary for these courses. All of the respondents in this study claimed that students do not read the assigned readings before coming to class and the student focus group corroborated this assertion. In addition, the data generated a theme that supports this finding and declares that *“the texts are too difficult for the students”* (Table 3). Respondents offered these comments that generated this theme:

*“I even wonder if they understand the text we ask them to read.”* P5

*“The texts are very complex (philosophical) and someone like Nietzsche requires you to read between the lines and they can’t do that.”* P3

*“We should have students read less of these difficult texts and them more interesting, short texts.”* P2

*“Some admit to not reading the assignments because they are too difficult and resort to Spark Notes.”* FG

*“These are not major courses so we can’t give the readings as much time as they need.”* FG

If students are reticent to read in the first place, it is unlikely that they will invest the necessary effort to tackle texts that are inherently difficult for the best of readers. Still the students claimed that their reading does improve even with the little they do because they are learning a lot of new vocabulary from the readings. However, they reasserted that in spite of that gain, their writing in English did not improve.

## Conclusion

This university has adopted an American model of tertiary education in conjunction with English as the medium of instruction (EMI). However, this context calls for some unique modifications to that model in order to produce graduates with a competitive skill set particularly concerning language skills in their second or even third language. The homogeneity of each discipline at this institution is a detriment to the students’ English language development. Crossing academic borders in terms of intended learning outcomes is essential if students are to make the necessary skill transfer and to see the relevance of the attributes of one discipline to another as well as to students’ future careers.

Top-down attempts to incorporate writing across the curriculum strategies are doomed to failure particularly in contexts that have inbuilt resistance. The context of this study subscribes to a traditional tertiary format that strengthens subject disciplines’ territorial borders (Annous & Nicolas, 2015). Clughen and Connell (2012) suggest that in such resistant heavy

contexts creative approaches be developed that respect discipline specificities rather than “import ready-made initiatives” (p. 343). In this context in particular, as King (2002) warns, the reasons behind adopting an EMI model need to be made clear and explicit. The uncritical adoption of the model for the prestige factor discussed above can create a chaotic pedagogical situation that impedes rather than facilitates the ultimate intended student outcomes.

The deeply rooted issue of “native-speakerism” well integrated into EFL pedagogy as asserted by Nguyen (2017) is alive and well at this institution as well. These instructors believe that their skill in English is not good enough for them to be able to guide the students in developing communicative English nor do they have the pedagogical training to know how to guide students. Karakas (2017) posits this lack of pedagogical preparedness is a worldwide concern in EMI institutions. However, these instructors should realize that academic programs in an EMI context are meant to educate and cultivate the total skill set in students. Traditional territorial borders hinder the attainment of the end product. The end product should be graduated students that go out into the community armed with sufficient content knowledge, but more importantly the ability to communicate that knowledge in English and to be able to critically analyze and synthesize information in English. Consequently, the ability to use English in such a skilled way will require that skilled English be required and nurtured throughout all courses in an EMI model. Students need to receive content knowledge in pursuit of their degrees but they also need knowledge about the processes of how to communicate that knowledge. Separating communication skill from discipline knowledge is a “false dichotomy” (Hunter, 2013). These two necessary building blocks are not polar opposites.

## **Recommendations**

A pedagogical imperative exists in the cultural studies program at this university. Giroux (1993) argues strongly that pedagogy must be an integral part of any discourse about cultural studies. Specifically, writing needs to be viewed as a tool to engage students with the texts and with their views on the texts. Instructors in this context should reorient their thinking and come to the realization that disciplines are not domains of declarative knowledge (Carter, 2007) but rather have particular ways of thinking and of expressing or communicating (Annous & Nicolas, 2015; Nicolas & Annous, 2013). Giroux (1993) illustrates a strategy of having groups of students write position papers on a reading(s) and then the papers are distributed throughout the class and used as the basis for discussion. This is one of many ideas of how writing can become an integral tool without compromising content in these courses. The study reported here corroborates this principle. Students in this context require help with skill transfer and development.

Tertiary professors in second language contexts need to be oriented to the fact that students’ language skill acquisition is a community responsibility. Specifically, these professors need to be trained and habituated to the fact that taking time to focus on communication skill requirements will not detract from time for content. In fact, such an orientation will lead to students’ more complete understanding of content; to students’ more profound grasp of ideas and opinions; and importantly, to students’ ability to communicate ideas generated from their complete understanding of content.

Additionally, our research highlights the critical importance of developing a reading culture in this context. Secondary schools need to re-evaluate their curriculum and determine how the reading skill can be emphasized. Students need to enter tertiary institutions with an awareness of the importance of reading for their intellectual and English skill development.

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# **Jordanian EFL Learners' Comprehension of Color Idiomatic Expressions: The Role of L1 Transfer**

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## **Abstract**

Learning language is always a challenge. A more daunting task is learning those culturally bound aspects of language. The present study examines the ability of Jordanian EFL learners to comprehend culturally bound color expressions. It also investigates whether L1 transfer plays a role in their processing of color idioms. To achieve this goal, I designed a multiple-choice test (MCT) that consisted of 20 items. Each item contained a color idiomatic expression within its contextual meaning. The main assumption underpinning my present study is that native language transfer plays a facilitating role in learners' ability to comprehend color idioms. The findings have revealed that idiomatic expressions with an equivalent conceptual basis and an equivalent linguistic form were the easiest. The most difficult were those with (1) a similar conceptual basis and a different linguistic form and (2) culture-specific expressions which have a different conceptual and linguistic basis. The study is expected to propose some pedagogical implications that may assist EFL teachers to familiarize their students with color idiomatic expressions in English.

**Keywords:** color idiomatic expressions, L1 transfer, L2 idiom comprehension

## **Introduction**

An idiom is a figurative way to encapsulate our intended meaning in one decomposable expression; the parts of which do not contribute directly to the total meaning of the expression. Many researchers (Fraser, 1970; Hockett, 1959; Katz & Postal, 1963; Strässler, 1982) have expressed different notions of idiomaticity but all agree that the meaning of an idiom cannot be derived from its grammatical structure. Due to their prevalence in everyday language, mastery of idioms is considered an integral part of language learning, especially for EFL learners. Foreign language acquisition does not only require learners to master the four basic skills which are the pinnacles of language but also to acquire other unique aspects that offer insights into the culture of the language being acquired. Idioms are therefore viewed as lexical items but of a peculiar nature as their meanings are not deducible from the individual words of which they are composed. It follows that for learners to be able to successfully decode the meanings of idioms, knowledge of the target culture must be integrated into language teaching and learning (Taki & Soghady, 2013).

Several studies have shown that developing familiarity with idioms in an L2 context is a daunting task for L2 learners (Abel, 2003; Al-Houti & Aldaihani, 2018; Cieśllicka, 2006; Sadeghi, Dastjerdi, & Ketabi, 2010; Taki & Soghady, 2013; Vasiljevic, 2015). Cieśllicka's (2006) experimental study reported that idioms pose a great difficulty for second language learners and that the literal meanings of idiom constituent words receive priority over their figurative interpretation in the course of processing L2 idioms. Furthermore, an issue that inspired a plethora of research was the strategies employed in accessing the figurative meanings of idioms by L2 learners (e.g., Cooper, 1999; Wang & Shang, 2006). Cooper (1999) explored the online processing strategies employed by non-native speakers of English and found out that models of L1 idiom processing did not apply to the comprehension of L2 idioms. The results also revealed that the participants followed a heuristic approach to comprehend

idioms by employing a variety of strategies through trial and error to arrive at the figurative meaning of the idiom being processed.

Utilizing L1 as a strategy in decoding L2 idioms is an issue that has generated a lot of interest in the role of L1 (Irujo, 1986; Hussein, Khanji & Makhzoomy, 2000; Taki, 2013; to mention a few). In addition to reliance on L1 to process L2 idioms, the level of transparency has been found to play a significant role in facilitating the comprehension of these idioms. Lack of correspondence between the literal and the figurative meanings of an idiom leave L2 learners stranded cognitively on an island which is beyond reach (e.g., Abel, 2003; Al-Mohizea, 2000; Gibbs, 1986; Laufer, 2000). Al-Mohizea (2000) found that Saudi learners' understanding of body-parts idioms was facilitated significantly by the level of the transparency of idioms.

Motivated by the findings of the relevant literature on L2 idiom processing, the present study aims to investigate the ability of Jordanian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) to comprehend English color idioms as culturally loaded expressions. It also attempts to investigate whether L1 conceptual and linguistic knowledge have a facilitating role in the comprehension of these expressions. The results of the study are expected to be of relevance to users of English as an international language in that it can provide insightful perspectives to EFL teachers on how to integrate such expressions in their teaching practice.

## **Literature review**

An inevitable aspect of linguistic competence is to master those aspects that are language-particular. Learning idiomatic expressions poses a great burden on the EFL learner's shoulders who must struggle not only with a different linguistic system, but also with a completely different culture-centered conceptuality. Due to their pervasiveness in everyday interaction, researchers have started to show keen interest in the study of color idiomatic expression across cultures (Abel 2003; Allan, 2009; Al-Mohanna, 2014; Btoosh, 2014; Kim, 2013; Rabab'ah & Al-Saidat, 2014; Yao, 2010). Certain other studies tackled the translatability of these expressions by EFL/ESL learners (Awwad, 1990; Aladel, 2014; Hasan, Al-Sammerai, & Abdul Khadir, 2011; Li, 2011; Rakhieh, Al-Saidat, Alshammai, & Rabab'ah, 2014; Salim & Mehawesh, 2013). A few studies, however, investigated the comprehension of these expressions among EFL learners (Sadeghi, Dastjerdi, & Ketabi, 2010; Saleh & Zakaria 2013; Titone & Connine 1994). Saleh and Zakaria (2013) examined the difficulties faced by Libyan EFL learners when processing L2 idioms. It was found that Libyan learners used a variety of strategies though there was a lack of sufficient input in the classroom setting. To interpret the meanings of idioms, they utilized the strategies they acquired during their first language acquisition.

According to Asl (2013) and Wray (2000), EFL learners are not always provided with content-rich curriculum that properly and sufficiently addresses idioms. This is attributed to the fact that some facilitators tend to teach English adopting a grammar-focused approach. Similarly, Khan and Daşkin (2014) examined the extent to which idioms are incorporated in materials designed by EFL teacher-trainees. Their findings revealed that teacher-trainees hardly used figurative language expressions in their instructional materials and that those who utilized such expressions did not integrate them efficaciously/judiciously enough to enhance learners' communicative competence.

In one of the most relevant studies of the intrinsic difficulties that figurative language entails, Boers, Eyckmans, and Stengers (2007) pointed out that EFL learners often lack the ability to disambiguate the figurative meaning in the way native speakers may do. Therefore, they adopted a very innovative approach to introduce idioms to learners by associating an idiom with its etymology. It was assumed that the etymological association would help enhance retention. The results revealed that knowledge of the origin of idioms can help learners

comprehend their figurative meaning as well as facilitate recall. Language learners are also at a disadvantage when it comes to their perception of idiom compositionality. Experimental research has shown that compositionality plays a significant role in their comprehension, with non-decomposable idioms being processed more slowly than analyzable idiom phrases (Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989).

Another frequently reported feature of idiomatic competence of EFL learners is the heavy reliance on L1 as a strategy to decode idioms. The role of L1 has generated a keen interest among researchers regarding whether it facilitates or hinders the comprehension of L2 idioms (Abdullah & Jackson, 1998; Al-Mohizea, 2000; Bulut & Yazici, 2004; Fontiveros-Malana, 2018; Hussein, Khanji, & Makhzoomy, 2000; Irujo, 1986, 1993; Shehata, 2008; Zibin, 2016a). Zibin (2016a) investigated the comprehension of figurative language expressions by Jordanian EFL learners using a multiple-choice test to examine the impact of their L1 (i.e. Jordanian Arabic) conceptual and linguistic knowledge on their comprehension of these expressions. Her results showed that expressions with different conceptual bases in both languages posed the greatest challenge to the participants. In contrast, expressions with equivalent or similar conceptual bases were the easiest to comprehend. In the same vein, Abdullah and Jackson (1998) examined the comprehension of idioms by 120 advanced Syrian learners of English using a multiple-choice test and an English-to-Syrian Arabic translation test. Their findings revealed that the degree of similarity to L1 had a significant impact on the participants' performance. Learners scored high in the comprehension of cognate idioms and attributed this to positive language transfer. In contrast, language transfer played a negative role when processing idioms which were identical in form but different in meaning (false cognates) in Syrian Arabic.

The argument whether mother language has any effect on learning a foreign language has caused considerable controversy in the field of second language acquisition. One of the most influential constructs that has evolved substantially in this field is Contrastive Analysis (CA) theory. Formulated in Robert Lado's (1957) *Linguistics Across Cultures*, the key endeavour of the theory is to highlight those areas that pose great difficulty for learners and create barriers to effective learning. In the strongest formulation of the CA hypothesis, it is proposed that a careful comparative analysis of the target language and the native language would provide a springboard to a successful description of these areas of difficulty. The prediction is that those constructions that are similar in the two languages will be easy to master and those that are different will be difficult. Lado (1957, p. 158) emphasizes that "The basic premise of CA hypothesis is that language learning can be more successful when the two languages – the native and the foreign – are similar".

Several studies have been conducted to validate the claim by CA that difference is difficulty (Al-Khreshah, 2010; Faghih, 1997; Kharma, 1983; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Mompeán-González, 2001). Pedagogically, this prediction of areas of potential difficulty is claimed to help in designing materials that address the target language in a systematic fashion. In contrast, the weak version of the CA hypothesis has an explanatory rather than a predictive power (Al-Khreshah, 2016, p. 332). The assumption is that researchers observe errors made by learners in the classroom and then utilize the differences between the linguistic systems of the TL (target language) and NL (native language) to diagnose these errors. Errors were thus viewed as the result of "transfer" from learners' mother language. However, in the 1960s the CA hypothesis gained adverse criticism as an amazing array of empirical evidence revealed that not all second language learners' errors can be attributed solely to first language transfer (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 42). A detailed analysis of these errors revealed that some errors are due to learners' developing knowledge of the target language linguistic structures rather than to first language transference. This finding led a number of researchers to adopt a different approach to analysing learners' errors. This came to be known as "error analysis". According

to Lightbown and Spada (2006), error analysis was not an attempt to predict errors. Rather, it aimed at pinpointing and describing errors in an attempt to figure out how second language learners' process second language data (p. 43). It has as its core construct the attempt to diagnose errors after they have been made. In this sense, it intersects with the explanatory function or the weak version of CA hypothesis as both recognize the importance of interference across languages.

Many error analysis studies have been conducted taking many aspects of different languages in general and idiom errors in particular but to my best knowledge, the comprehension of color idiomatic expressions by Arabic-speaking EFL learners has received little attention if any. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge the gap by attempting to answer the following questions:

- 1) To what extent does similarity to L1 facilitate the participants' understanding of English color idiomatic expressions?
- 2) Does conceptual or linguistic mismatch between idiomatic expressions in L1 (i.e., Jordanian Arabic) and L2 have an impact on the participants' comprehension of color idiomatic expressions?

## Method

To ensure a minimum threshold of English proficiency, 69 advanced Jordanian EFL learners, third- and fourth-year majoring in English Language and Literature at the Hashemite University took part in the current study. Their mean age was 21.5 years. Gender of the participants was not considered as an independent variable in the present study as most of the participants were female (7 males and 62 females). This is attributed to the fact that women outpace men in higher education in Jordan. At the time of data collection, the participants were assumed to have completed 90 to 100 credit hours of advanced English courses, e.g., linguistics, semantics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, drama, literary criticism and syntax. This guarantees that they have the requisite competence to complete the MCT.

The study referred to McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms (2007) and The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (2004) to extract color idioms and their contexts in English with minor modifications.

A 24-item multiple-choice test was designed to conduct the present study. Each item contained a culturally bound color idiom within its contextual meaning.

In the same vein as several L2 idiom processing studies (e.g., Awwad, 1999; Charteris-Black, 2002; Irujo, 1986; Zibin, 2016a), the degree of L1-L2 similarity was taken as a criterion in classifying English color idioms in the present study. Therefore, adopting a model developed by Charteris-Black (2002), six types of color idioms are identified:

- (1) English color idioms which have equivalent conceptual basis and equivalent linguistic form in Arabic.
- (2) English color idioms which have equivalent conceptual basis and similar linguistic form in Arabic.
- (3) English color idioms which have completely different equivalent linguistic form in Arabic.
- (4) Color idioms which have equivalent conceptual basis in English and Arabic but completely different linguistic forms.
- (5) Color idioms which have completely different conceptual basis and completely different linguistic form but are transparent because they are receptively accessible
- (6) Color idioms which have completely different conceptual basis and completely different linguistic form but opaque because they encode a culture-specific meaning.

The participants were asked to choose one answer that reflects their understanding of the color idiomatic expression. One option was deemed correct and one or more of the other three provided incorrect meanings supported by the context. To assess the role of transferability, the participants were asked to provide an Arabic equivalent to the English color idioms used in the test. The assumption is that if the participants accessed their L1 conceptual knowledge in comprehending English color idiomatic expressions, then they would find those types that have equivalent and similar conceptual bases in the two languages easier to comprehend than those which have different conceptual bases in the two languages.

## Hypotheses

- (1) The participants' performance in the test is expected to be generally poor due to linguistic and conceptual differences between Arabic and English.
- (2) The similarity between the two languages is assumed to play a facilitating role in the participants' understanding of these types of color idioms.
- (3) Since the same group of participants will be tested on several groups of stimuli (6 types of color idioms), a one-way ANOVA will be conducted to test whether the differences between the participants' responses on the six types of color idioms are statistically significant.

## Results and Discussion

summarizes the descriptive statistics of accurate responses on the six types of color idiomatic expression on the test.

Table 1

*Accurate responses on the six types of color idiomatic expressions on the test*

Type	% of correct responses	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	81	3.42	.67
2	82.6	3.30	.75
3	69.6	2.79	1.06
4	47.8	1.91	.98
5	68	2.73	1.00
6	36.5	1.46	1.05
Average	65	15.63	3.65

The results show that the participants' performance on the test was generally very good. However, comparing the scores obtained by the participants demonstrates an apparent dominance of type 1 and type 2 over the other types. This suggests that conceptual and linguistic similarity play a positive role in facilitating the recognition and comprehension of color idioms by Jordanian EFL learners. Thus, confirming the conclusions of Bulut and Yazici (2004) as well as Nippold and Martin (1989). To further discuss the participants' performance on each test item of the six types of color idiomatic expressions, Tables 2-7 summarize the percentage of correct responses for each of the items tested. As anticipated, color idioms with equivalent conceptual basis and equivalent linguistic form proved the easiest: 81% of the participants were able to recognize the idiomatic meaning of the expressions. This provides evidence of activation of both first language conceptual and linguistic knowledge in dealing with items of this type of idioms, and we may, therefore, anticipate that learners would have no difficulty with this type of figurative expressions. Pedagogically, the only task a learner

must face when it comes to acquiring these idioms would be to learn the L2 linguistic equivalents for L2 figurative units (Charteris-Black, 2002).

Like those of type 1, the test items of type 2 did not cause any difficulty to the participants. However, table 3 shows that 58% of the participants had difficulty understanding the idiom *pretty green*. This is quite unpredictable since this idiom has a similar conceptual and linguistic basis in Arabic. This erroneous interpretation of the figurative meaning of the idiom represents what Bulut and Yazici (2004) called *false friends*. According to Bulut and Yazici (2004), L2 speakers sometimes tend to treat idioms which have a perfect match in L1 and L2 as *false friends*. To figure out the figurative meaning of these idioms, they assume that the idiomatic meaning of the L2 idiom does not match with that of L2 and thus will rely on context rather than on the literal meaning of the constituent words. Types 3, 4 and 5 color idioms scored low as compared to type 1 and 2. This lends credence to the main assumption underpinning the present study and other relevant studies (cf. Bulut & Yazici, 2004) that conceptual or linguistic mismatch and conversely parallel idiomatic expressions in the learner's L1 and L2 will have a remarkable effect on processing the idioms.

Table 2

*Type 1: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
Little white lie	73.9
The green light	81.2
Golden opportunity	89.9
A black day	79.1

Table 3

*Type 2: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
On a silver platter	81.2
A green thumb	94.2
Born with a silver spoon in his mouth	97.1
Pretty green	58.0

Table 4

*Type 3: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
Red ink	69.6
Blue bloods	55.1
Redeye	84.1
Blue eyed boy	71.0

Table 5

*Type 4: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
Gray matter	73.9
Showing the white feather	53.6
White sheep	34.8
Silver tongue	29.0

Table 6

*Type 5: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
Golden shake	66.7
Green with envy	63.8
The black sheep	87.0
Go green on me	56.5

Table 7

*Type 6: Correct responses on each test item on the test*

Idiomatic expression	% of correct responses
The blues	30.4
Green about the gills	31.9
In the red	23.2
A red-letter day	60.9
Average	36.6

Table 7 demonstrates that the test items of type 6 which have completely different conceptual bases and linguistic expressions in English and Arabic may have contributed to the participants' performance. In the absence of L1 equivalent, it is not surprising that only 37% managed to recognize the figurative meaning of the idioms correctly. This lack of correspondence constitutes a stumbling block to their comprehension of idioms. There were significant differences between type 6 and type 1 color idioms as anticipated which indicates that figurative units with equivalent conceptual bases and equivalent linguistic forms are less problematic for EFL learners than those with completely different conceptual bases and linguistic forms. This finding calls for more attention on the part of foreign language teachers as well as learners to shed more focus on figurative units that do not match in the learner's L1 and L2. It is thus very beneficial to raise learners' cultural awareness of these conceptual bases in an explicit way in the target language. Shokouhi and Isazadeh (2009, p. 6) indicated that the use of real contexts while clarifying the culture of the target language can positively affect the communicative competence and other language skills of EFL learners. This underlying assumption was also emphasized by Zibin's (2016b) study which reported that the lack of cultural background knowledge led to misunderstandings of L2 marked connotations by Jordanian EFL learners. In order to find whether there are any differences between the participants at different levels of academic achievement and their performance, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted. The participants were divided into three groups to examine the relation between academic success as measured by grand point average and performance.

Table 8  
ANOVA

	Type of idiom	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
1	Between Groups	4.263	2	2.131	5.298	.007
	Within Groups	26.549	66	.402		
	Total	30.812	68			
2	Between Groups	11.870	2	5.935	14.649	.000
	Within Groups	26.739	66	.405		
	Total	38.604	68			
3	Between Groups	22.683	2	11.341	13.740	.000
	Within Groups	54.477	66	.825		
	Total	77.159	68			
4	Between Groups	8.730	2	4.365	5.077	.009
	Within Groups	56.748	66	.860		
	Total	65.476	68			
5	Between Groups	5.488	2	2.744	2.838	.066
	Within Groups	63.816	66	.907		
	Total	69.304	68			
6	Between Groups	13.756	2	6.878	7.393	.001
	Within Groups	61.403	66	.930		
	Total	75.159	68			

There were statistically significant differences between the participants' answers on the six types of color idiomatic expressions ( $p < 0.05$ ). For all the idiomatic types the values were significant except for type 5 idiom. Taking type 1 idiom into account, the significant value for between and within groups was 0.007 which is less than 0.05 hence significant. Similarly, for type 2 idiom (0.000), type 3 idiom (0.000), type 4 idiom (0.009) and type 6 idiom (0.001) between and within groups values are less than 0.05 which shows their significance. On the other hand, type 5 idiom, between and within group significant value was 0.66 which is greater than the value of 0.05, hence showing its insignificance. The results of paired comparison indicated that the performance of students with high GPA was better than those with low GPA. Same results have been reported by several studies (Dev & Qiqieh, 2016; Hasan & Akhand, 2014).

## Conclusion

Motivated by the findings of the relevant literature, the overarching aim of the present study was to investigate the idiomatic competence of Jordanian EFL learners moderated by similarity to L1. It particularly aimed to investigate whether the use of the conceptual and linguistic knowledge of the learners' mother language, i.e., Jordanian Arabic (JA), would facilitate their comprehension of English color idiomatic expressions. A multiple-choice test consisting of 24 items divided into six types was designed to measure their figurative proficiency. As anticipated, the findings of the study have shown that color idiomatic expressions which have an equivalent conceptual and linguistic basis were the easiest; the most difficult were those which have a different conceptual basis and a different linguistic form because they reflect a culture-specific content.

In keeping with the findings of previous studies, the present study suggests that highlighting the conceptual and linguistic differences and similarities between L1 and the target



language in classroom curriculum design can facilitate the acquisition of figurative language by EFL learners.

Their figurative proficiency can be further developed by providing them with real world situations that help these expressions stand out from the language around them. This would also help develop their knowledge of L2 figurative phraseology and reduce negative transfer of L1 conceptual or linguistic knowledge. EFL teachers must then be alert whenever an impromptu moment for idiom teaching arises.

It is worth noting that some of the participants' erroneous responses in the present study might have been affected by the context provided for them in the test. Therefore, it is recommended that a study that explores the ability of Jordanian learners of English as a Foreign language to process color idiomatic expressions using a think- aloud protocol is required. This will shed some light on the strategies employed by learners to decode L2 color idioms. To conclude, as most language teachers will attest, foreign or second language learners struggle when processing idiomatic and culturally bound expressions. Based on the findings of the study and the observations of EFL teachers, I suggest some pedagogical implications that may assist EFL learners in comprehending these expressions:

- 1) EFL teachers must highlight idiomatic and culturally bound expressions that are semantically similar between L1 and L2. This will motivate learners to integrate these expressions in their daily writing and speaking activities which will develop their communicative competence in L2.
- 2) In EFL context, teachers must expose learners to detailed interpretations of salient culturally bound expressions that are opaque due to lack of conceptually equivalents in L1. This may enhance their comprehension and production of these expressions and thus reduce native language negative transfer.
- 3) In the EFL classroom, there is a need to shift focus from single -word vocabulary to lexical chunks. According to Lewis (1997), lexical chunks include collocations, fixed expressions, formulaic utterances, sentence starters, verb patterns, idioms, and catchphrases. This can be achieved by creatively engaging learners in communicative tasks and improvisation activities. Such activities can improve their academic attainment and fluency. As Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) concur, "The use of chunks can help students to be perceived as idiomatic language users, disposing of a relatively impressive lexical richness and syntactic complexity" (p. 37).
- 4) Teacher educators should encourage prospective EFL teachers to acquire requisite knowledge that raises their awareness of the potential areas of difficulty for EFL learners in order to address these challenges properly in their teaching practice.
- 5) EFL Curriculum designers and EFL textbook writers should focus on the integration of the culture of the target language in the design of EFL coursebooks as an important parcel of language learning.

In sum and spirit, the present study attempted to shed some focus on one of the most notoriously challenging areas of teaching English as an international language, namely colour idiomatic and culturally bound expressions. It supports the claim that similarities and differences between L1 and L2 may affect learners' comprehension of these expressions. It also lends support to the results of other studies in the vast literature on L2 idioms processing that idiomatic expressions that lack conceptual equivalents in L1 are the hardest to comprehend by EFL learners. Further cross-linguistic research on phraseology, especially figurative expressions is needed as it may offer insightful perspectives on how to approach these expressions by international users of English.

This study has some notable limitations. The number of participants to whom the instrument was administered was relatively low for a quantitative study. Administering the instrument to a larger sample could give a large amount of data that might significantly enhance the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, observations and interviews with students as they respond to the instrument could result in different interpretations of the findings of the study.

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### **Note on Contributor**

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# **The Case of Culturally Sensitive Topics in the English Language Classrooms: Secondary School Teachers' Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines secondary school teachers' perceptions towards the discussion of culturally sensitive topics in three private schools in the United Arab Emirates. In light of this, it probes into teachers' perceptions on the relationship between culture and language and whether English can be taught without covering its cultural aspects. It also investigates the implications of discussing such topics on the teachers' career paths. By the same token, it questions whether there are consequences on the students' cognitive skills when teachers cover taboo topics, such as sexuality, alcohol consumption, teen suicide, birth control, superstitions, pork, boyfriends or girlfriends, dating, drugs, gay rights, same sex marriages, and other related issues in classrooms. Data were gathered through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and careful examination of the English language teaching materials used in the respective schools. The results indicate general positive teacher attitudes towards the strong connection between language and culture. They also show that the majority of teachers avoid discussing "culturally sensitive" topics in order to avoid creating problems for themselves or the school or because they believe that they have no positive impacts on the students' cognitive skills. The research indicates that the country's overall cultural framework is the determinant behind what to cover in class and what not to cover. The study concludes with some pedagogical recommendations for foreign ELT teachers.

**Keywords:** ELT teachers' perspectives, culture and language, culturally sensitive topics, taboos, high school students, United Arab Emirates

## **Introduction**

In the course of a person's life and upbringing, parents, surrounding family members, schools and the society at large inculcate values such as love and respect. We grow up, for instance, cherishing and absorbing certain ideals, certain customs and habits which clearly show through our daily practices. We start having regulators of culture in our life at an early age; i.e., values that we hold to, heroes we look up to, languages we like to learn and speak, and topics we appreciate discussing. Among these regulators in the Arab world, the dominant religion of Islam stands out (Cannadine, cited in Jandt, 2013). In Arab countries, education is viewed as a means for "stabilizing religious and cultural norms" (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015, p. 4). For example, "Islam continues to fortify didactic practice throughout the UAE and remains integral to the educational structure" (ibid, p. 5). Hence, several topics, concepts and/or practices spread a reputation for being "culturally sensitive". Expressed simply, "cultural sensitivity" means topical areas that are perceived by the society as off-limits. Examples of these in the Arab world include, but are not limited to, sexuality, alcohol consumption, teen suicide, birth control, superstitions, pork, boyfriends or girlfriends, dating, drugs, gay rights, same sex marriages, and other related issues (Gobert, 2015), that may be normal to talk about and discuss in books, TV shows, and newspaper reports outside Arab countries.

In order to find out what best serves students' communicative and cognitive needs, this research examines expatriate secondary school teachers' perceptions (SSTPs) on "culturally sensitive" topics in three private secondary schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and explores whether these topics are covered explicitly, implicitly, or totally ignored. Moreover, this study sheds light on the importance of the cultural competence of ELT educators so as to establish effective intercultural communication with students and overcome any potential cultural conflict that could hinder the teaching and learning processes. This area of research would be of concern to all ELT professionals, especially teachers in the Middle East who might be facing the same critical issues in their respective classrooms.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the perception of expatriate English language teachers working in secondary schools in the UAE of "culturally sensitive" topics?
- 2) What are the perspectives of expatriate English language teachers working in secondary schools in the UAE towards discussing "culturally sensitive" topics in classes?
- 3) What are the implications of discussing "culturally sensitive" topics in classes on the teachers' career paths (i.e., job retention)?
- 4) Do age and years of teaching experience play a role in the coverage or non-coverage of "culturally sensitive" topics in class?
- 5) Do the study participants believe that the discussion of "culturally sensitive" topics impact the students' English language competence?

To put this research in the EFL teaching context of the UAE, some background information is needed to warrant prospective readers' understanding of the arguments presented in this investigation.

### **The educational system in the UAE**

There are several educational systems in the UAE. First, public schools within the seven emirates follow the same curriculum: students take uniform Ministry of Education (MoE) exams at the same time. All school subjects are taught in Modern Standard Arabic with the exception of English. The majority of students in public schools are Emiratis; however, there are some Arab expatriates, but all students are Arabic speakers. Second, there are also private international schools, such as American, Australian, British, Russian, Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, Filipino, and French schools. Although these schools implement different curricula, use different textbooks with students, recruit expatriate teachers, and follow different educational systems, all programs follow the regulations stipulated by the MoE in the UAE.

### **Review of literature on culture, language and culture and intercultural communication**

This section presents a critical review of definitions of culture, language and culture, language and intercultural communication, linguistic and cultural differences between teachers and students and the teaching materials, taboo in English language teaching, and multiculturalism in the UAE.

#### ***Culture: Definitions and facets***

Despite several attempts to define the concept "culture", scholars have not come up with a shared definition yet. According to Triandis (1994), "Culture is a shared meaning system found among those who speak a particular language, dialect, during a specific historic period" (p. 34).

In simple terms, culture is defined as “perceptions concerning our system of values, our ways of thinking, our beliefs, and our psychological orientations” (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & McDaniel, 2015, p. 4). Thus, culture reflects the way we think and the things we do as well as the elements we acquire as individuals from the people around us and the society at large. Culture can also be viewed as a set of values, beliefs, approaches and assumptions, behavioral traditions, certain rules and regulations that are shared by society members and affect the way they deal with others (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Raddawi (2015) argues that “Culture can be understood as a nation and/or ethnicity, or can be faith based or gender based and even be discourse based (community speeches and styles)” (p. 2). This suggests that people’s identity, gender, and beliefs affect their understanding of culture and their attitudes towards other cultures. Hence, culture is a “very broad concept embracing all aspects of human life” (Seelye, 1993, p. 15). Consequently, these broad definitions of culture leave English language teachers to determine the aspects of culture that should be taught to students.

### ***Language and culture***

As culture is one of the components of a language (Alptekin, 2002), the latter cannot be taught without discussing its culture. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) note that students should know how to use the language in socio-cultural contexts. According to Stoller (2006), since language emerges from societal interactions, second language learners cannot truly learn the language without acquiring knowledge about cultural denotations and connotations of its lexis and its native speakers. In a similar vein, House (2007) argues that “language is viewed as embedded in culture such that the meaning of any linguistic item can only be properly understood with reference to the cultural context enveloping it” (p. 8). Hence, it is important for language teachers and learners to be culturally competent in order to be effective users of the language (Huang, 2019).

### ***Language and intercultural communication***

Teaching language without focusing on its culture leaves the job half complete Aliakbari (2005). This is not only the case with English, but also with all languages in general. Risager (2007) notes that “apart from developing the students’ communicative competence in the target language, language teaching ought ... to enable students to develop into multilingually and multiculturally aware world citizens” (p. 1). Furthermore, House (2007) notes that, “in several linguistics schools of thought, culture has been seen as intimately linked with language” (p. 8). In other words, some linguistic items are difficult to understand unless the recipient is aware of the culture and the reference behind such items. Thus, several researchers believe that culture is an essential component in language teaching. Wei (2018), for instance, points out that “language teaching consists of teaching the four skills plus culture” (p. 298). According to Jandt (2013), “Communication and culture are inseparable. Culture cannot be known without a study of communication and communication can only be understood with an understanding of the culture it supports” (p. 39). Therefore, in order to successfully communicate with native speakers of the language and to maintain the relationships without misunderstanding or miscommunication, language users should be competent intercultural communicators. Zhu (2011) defines intercultural communication as:

A situation where people from different cultural backgrounds come into contact with each other; or a subject of study concerned with interaction among people of different cultural and ethnic groups and comparative studies of communication patterns across cultures. (p. 422)

Thus, successful communicators should be able to understand and respect each other's cultures and ideologies when exchanging messages. Consequently, it is essential that teachers and students should know the culture of the language they teach and learn.

### ***Linguistic and cultural differences between teachers and students and the teaching materials***

Textbooks are usually used as the main resource in educational institutions at the primary, secondary or tertiary levels (Ariyan & Pavlova, 2019). These textbooks may also contain culturally inappropriate topics or pictures that may conflict with the students' values, religions, and beliefs (Abd Rashid & Engku, 2018; Hinkel, 1999). Besides, such textbooks are mainly produced in English-speaking countries for learners of English as a first language and they might present culturally inappropriate pictures, texts, ideas or topics when used outside the borders of these countries. Therefore, such textbooks may not address EFL learners' needs since textbook designers assume that learners can function well linguistically, socially, and culturally in English communicative acts. However, as the majority of students in the UAE are foreign language learners, students' ideologies and values might be affected as they discover new ideologies which sometimes are far away from their own (Moloney & Saltmarsh, 2016).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned issues, some countries and educational institutions contextualize the contents of the teaching materials to avoid any clashes with their local culture. Examples of these cases are studies conducted by Hajjaj (1981, as cited in Aliakbari, 2005, p. 4) in Kuwait; Krishnaswamy and Aziz (1978, as cited in Aliakbari, 2005, p. 4) in Yemen; and Al-Quraishi, Watson, Hafseth, and Hickman (1999) in Saudi Arabia. The researchers found out that the English language teaching materials mirrored the source culture of the countries in which the English language was being taught. In other words, book designers contextualize the topics and illustrations in textbooks to make them conform to the students' culture. Some of these institutions use in-house tailored English language textbooks that reflect students' culture, background, values, and beliefs instead of presenting the culture of the English language (Aliakbari, 2005; Hinkel, 1999). For instance, in a swimming context, instead of showing a female in her swimming suit, she is introduced wearing the traditional clothes of the UAE, an *Abaya*, a loose dress that covers the whole body: The former being the outfit of foreign cultures, and the latter being one of the local cultures. However, it is essential that the educational materials used in class include the important cultural components of the lexis of the language being taught. Thus, the question that arises is: Whose culture should be taught in the ELT classroom? Should students' culture or native English speakers' culture be integrated into language teaching? There are several factors that affect what students learn in classes, such as educators, trainers, authorities and the institutions themselves (Gobert, 2015; Moloney & Saltmarsh, 2016). According to Motha (2014), teachers' identities affect their teaching and the students' learning as well.

This is also supported by Luu (2013, as cited in Motha, 2014, p.13) who writes, "Who you are is as important as who you teach". This point leads us to "culturally sensitive" topics and how different teachers approach them.

### ***Taboo in language teaching***

The word "taboo", according to Allan and Burridge (2006, as cited in Gobert, 2015, p. 109) holds a "comprehensive meaning that includes actions which cannot be done, objects which cannot be touched, or words that cannot be said". Along the same lines, Crystal (2003) defines "taboo" language as the language that is avoided for being embarrassing, inappropriate or offensive. "Taboos" differ from one culture to the other; as such, they are culture specific.



Hence, a topic that could be discussed in the USA or Australia could be inappropriate or forbidden in the Arab world (Gobert, 2015). In this regard, Haynes (2000), in a study conducted on foreign EFL teachers working in Japanese high schools, investigated the question of whether teachers should discuss “taboo” topics such as AIDS in their classrooms. The researcher surveyed and interviewed 69 EFL teachers. He found that Japanese students did not mind discussing topics, such as AIDS with their teachers; however, some teachers faced several challenges by offending someone in class. Although it is impossible to keep everyone happy, this conclusion suggests that teachers should seek help from school administration regarding what to cover and what not to cover in class.

Along the same lines pointed out earlier, Timina and Butler (2011) examined the topics that would make Taiwanese students uncomfortable to discuss in the classroom. To know students’ perspectives on the discussion of “culturally sensitive” topics, 70 English language major students (58 females and 12 males) were studied. The authors reported that Taiwanese university students do not feel comfortable when discussing “culturally sensitive” and controversial topics, such as boyfriend/girlfriend, sex, politics, personal family income, gay and lesbian families, death, ghosts, and childless and adoptive families. The students in this study mentioned that such topics are not usually discussed in their native language; thus, it is also hard to discuss them in the second/foreign language.

### **Method of the study**

This exploratory study took place in three private secondary schools in the UAE: one in the Emirate of Sharjah, another in the Emirate of Dubai, and the other in the Emirate of Ajman. The motivation for selecting these three different Emirates was to examine if the Emirate’s conservative style impacts the teachers’ freedom in covering “culturally sensitive” topics, since it is locally known that Dubai is the most open cosmopolitan city in the Emirates, that Sharjah is more conservative and traditional than Dubai and that Ajman is less wealthy and more reserved than both Dubai and Sharjah.

These schools, in addition to having to use the English language textbooks prescribed by the MoE, opt for other English language textbooks they deem suitable for their schools’ vision and mission and the English language level of the students. Worth noting that private schools take pride in selecting textbooks that carry the names of renowned publishers such as Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Routledge, among others. Public schools were not considered for this study since they use commissioned English language textbooks. That is, textbooks specifically tailored to meet the UAE’s cultural context. In other words, the schools are assigned their English language textbooks for the various levels by the MoE.

Thirty expatriate secondary school English language teachers from the three private schools were involved in the study; 10 teachers from each selected school. All participants were English language teachers of grades 10, 11, and 12. On top of this, a senior female English language teacher from one of the schools and a senior male teacher, who had 30 years of English language teaching experience and English language teacher training in the UAE, Canada, and Iran, his home country, were interviewed as consultants for the researchers for further questions and clarifications.

To get a deeper insight into teachers’ perspectives, three teachers, one from each selected school, volunteered to be interviewed. The first interviewee was an Arab female English language teacher who had four years of teaching experience at private schools and language institutes in the emirates of Dubai, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi. The second participant was a head teacher at one of the schools, with a teaching experience of over 15 years, and the third was a senior English language teacher with over 25 years of ELT teaching experience in

the UAE.

Twenty participants were initially supposed to be surveyed from each school; however, some teachers refused to be part of the survey as they felt it might affect their employment. In other schools, the number of teachers who teach secondary classes was not enough.

Participants' demographics show that 66.7% were female teachers, and 33.3% were males (see Table 1). Participants were from different nationalities: the USA, Canada, Britain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines, and Tunisia. The majority of them, however, speak Arabic as their first language. Teachers' ages ranged from 21 to more than 50 years.

Table 1  
*Demographic information of participant teachers*

Biographical information	Participants	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	20	66.7
	Male	10	33.3
Age	21 - 29 years old	15	50
	30 – 39 years old	9	30
	40 – 49 years old	4	13.3
	50+ years old	2	6.7
First language	Arabic	18	60
	English	5	16.7
	Urdu	3	10
	Tagallo	2	6.7
	French	2	6.7

In order to answer the research questions, this research utilized mixed research methods and data were triangulated through both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments as discussed below.

The English language textbooks used by the selected secondary schools were examined for the existence of any “culturally sensitive” topics. Although these textbooks were checked by MoE representatives for conformity with the local cultural context, some “culturally sensitive” topics were found in the reading passages in the textbooks. These were highlighted and used as examples for the purposes of this study.

A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was administered in English to the teachers to know whether or not they will cover any “culturally-sensitive” topics they may come across in the English language textbooks they use in their respective schools. Questionnaire items included participants' personal information: gender, age, ethnicity, first language, and their qualifications. The second section asked about experiences, situations, and perspectives on teaching English and the teachers' understanding of the concept of “culturally sensitive” topics. This section covered topics such as the ethnicity of students, the relation between culture and language, textbook materials, teachers' practices in classrooms and school policies and regulations. Other open-ended questions were also added in order to individualize the responses.

The questionnaire was piloted with five volunteer expatriate teachers from the selected schools. Based on the teachers' responses and feedback, some questions were revised and fine-tuned. The questionnaire was also verified by an expert educationalist. Besides, teachers who participated in piloting study were excluded from the study. The final questionnaire version was handed to the participants by the first researcher. The questionnaire required participants

who participated in later interviews to supply their names and contact details.

After collecting the completed questionnaires from the teachers, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with three volunteer secondary school teachers from the selected schools, followed by interviews with the research consultants. These interviews gathered in-depth background information about the teachers' perceptions towards the discussion of "culturally sensitive" topics and the constraints teachers may face when covering such topics in UAE schools (see Appendix 2 for questions). Some of these teachers' testimonies are provided below. They are also accompanied by the teachers' pseudonyms, gender and age.

Pseudonyms were used for all the participants. After collecting the completed questionnaires and conducting the interviews, a thematic analysis for the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the interview questions was carried out. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involves rich accounting of the data. It allows for the generation of both explicit and implicit themes from a direct and critical interpretation of the evidence. Explicit themes emerged from area identifying vocabulary used in the responses. Examples of these are the topics that the respondents consider as "culturally sensitive". For this categorization process, Braun and Clarke's (2006) stipulated steps were used as the framework for the analysis through progressing in this order:

- 1) familiarization with the data;
- 2) generating initial codes; and
- 3) constructing, renaming, and reviewing themes.

Moreover, the concept of "topic", defined by Brown and Yule (1983, p. 73) as "what is being talked/written about", was also of great help in this regard. Brown and Yule's (1983, p. 67) concept of "topic shift" was also useful in this process. The emerging "culturally sensitive" topics were broken down into categories and checked by a reviewer for reliability of results.

## **Results and Discussion**

In order to understand teachers' ideas and beliefs of what "culture" is, they were asked to provide a definition of "culture". Teachers' responses were content analyzed by breaking their definitions into themes and calculating totals. Table 2 displays the topics from the most to the least frequent.

According to the teachers' responses, customs, traditions, and beliefs are the factors that shape someone's culture the most. When asked to define "culture", the senior teacher, said the following in English:

In my view, culture is an intricate system of written and unwritten values that emerge when people live in groups or societies. Such values are collectively decided and are often influenced by religion and literature although they're not the whole story. I think an important component of any culture is the framework that shapes people's attitudes to and judgment of others' behaviors (appropriate vs. inappropriate). Such "codes" vary across cultures and can significantly influence how successfully one can integrate into the larger community. (Youssef, male, 54)

Table 2  
*Defining keywords of culture*

Keywords	Number of Appearances
Customs	7
Traditions	7
Beliefs	7
Way of life	4
Behavior	4
Ideas	3
Norms	2
Habits	2
Identity	1
Rules and codes	1
Thoughts	1
Arts	1

This concurs with the views of Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, and McDaniel (2015) who regard culture as values, ways of thinking, and beliefs. Spencer-Oatey (2008) also sees culture as values, beliefs, approaches, behaviors, traditions, rules and regulations. As different teachers expressed varying views of what culture entails, this may lead to variations in their responses to the other survey questions. Furthermore, teachers were asked if there is a relationship between language and its culture. Ninety seven percent indicated a strong relationship between language and culture; whereas, only three percent expressed disagreement. One of the participants explained that:

“language is a means to expressing culture”. (Alia, female, 33)

Another noted that:

“culture and language represent the identity of a nation” (Allen, male, 39).

Omaima, a senior female teacher, commented:

I believe that language and culture cannot be separated. They have a reciprocal relationship, too. When we communicate with others, we constantly, and perhaps subconsciously, gauge the appropriateness of our utterances – a process that is informed by culture. Cultural norms and values inform the decisions we make in terms of what is appropriate or inappropriate and without this knowledge, we are likely to confuse, disengage and even offend others. In some cases, culturally inappropriate behavior may even cost someone his or her life. (Omaima, female, 45)

In response to the question whether language can/cannot be taught without touching upon culture, six percent of the participants believe that language can be taught without culture; whereas, ninety-four percent note that culture cannot be separated from language teaching.

Teachers’ elaborations on the question- whether language and culture can be separated in language teaching are summarized in the response below:

culture influences language especially when it comes to literature. Some stories/novels cannot be taught to students without discussing the culture of its people, culture affects the way we think and therefore it affects what we say, language, language is acquired through someone’s culture and language tells stories of a particular culture. (Nabi, male 28)

In support of the above stated response, Wei (2018) views culture as one of the core skills of language and believes that language and culture cannot be separated. In the same vein, Jandt (2013) and Mahmoud (2015) argue that verbal communication cannot happen and succeed without the understanding of its culture. This may indicate that language teaching cannot happen without understanding the culture and teaching it to students to “become proficient in cross-cultural communication” (Wei, 2018, p. 296).

The participants were questioned on how often they come across sensitive topics in the textbook(s) they use in class. Some teachers mentioned that they spend the first couple of weeks to go over the syllabus, the topics to be covered and the lessons in the teaching materials to ensure that they do not contain any sensitive topics. Other teachers said that they design their own teaching materials in an attempt to relate the topics covered to students’ cultures and backgrounds. This aligns with Hinkel’s (1999) statement that some institutions design their own textbooks to mirror students’ values and beliefs rather than presenting native speakers’ culture that might be too distant from their own. This is echoed by one of the teachers who stated,

We never encounter any sensitive topic, but if we do, we remove it completely after consulting others whether such a topic is sensitive or not. In the public sector (public schools, researchers’ insertion), however, this does not happen because before any material reaches the teacher, it has already have been screened several times ... but if we want to use any additional materials from the internet, we do make sure that the words are removed or the pictures adapted. (Julian, female, 40)

It is worth reminding again that UAE public schools use contextualized textbooks, specifically designed for EFL learners. However, in the case of imported textbooks, according to Ahmed, male, 48, one of the research consultants, a committee is entrusted with the task of going over the “soft copies” of these textbooks before sending an order to print them as they might include “culturally sensitive” topics. He added:

We had to ask for a replacement of picture of a girl standing in the balcony wearing a swimming suit.

However, he also noted that some of the topics may still be in the English language teaching textbooks. In this regard, 16% of the teachers mention that they always encounter “sensitive” topics, 65% said they occasionally do; while only 19% indicated that they never encounter such topics. Yet, some participants from the same school reported encountering “sensitive” topics whereas others remarked that they never come across them in the same textbooks. To verify this issue, the researchers examined samples of the textbooks used and found some topics/texts that had escaped their attention. Some of these were gay rights, lesbians, a boy kissing his girlfriend, having ham for breakfast, wife swapping, etc. Therefore, there comes a time during which teachers and students face “culturally sensitive” topics.

The aforementioned responses show that there is no agreement on which topics are “in/sensitive”. In other words, topics that might be “sensitive” to some teachers might not be so for others.

To know what actions teachers take when they encounter “culturally sensitive” topics in the English language teaching materials, they were asked whether they teach or skip them. Although 94% previously mentioned that language cannot be separated from culture, 48% of the teachers reported skipping such topics; whereas, 52% did not. In order to have more insights into the reasons for this discrepancy in the responses, the participants provided further explanations in the interviews. One of the Dubai-based teachers commented,

I teach these topics, but I never go into details to avoid further explanation and parents' complaints. (Ferdinando, male, 38)

A second teacher said,

Students won't benefit anything from discussing foreign cultures. (Ji, female, 51)

To analyze teachers' responses and the reasons behind the different comments, two variables were compared; the correlations between teachers' ages, years of teaching experience in the Gulf and the teachers' coverage of "sensitive" topics (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Correlation between teachers' ages, years of teaching experience and coverage of sensitive topics*

Age ranges	I explain them (%)	Frequency (n)	I skip them (%)	Frequency (n)
21- 29	73.3	11	26.7	4
30- 39	44.4	4	55.6	5
40- 49	25	1	75	3

From Table 3, it can be inferred that the younger the teachers, the more inclined they were to cover "culturally sensitive" topics. However, the percentages of coverage of these topics seem to decrease with older teachers. Results also show that 73% of the teachers, 21 - 29 years old, explain "culturally sensitive" topics whereas 27% skip them. This could be due to the assumption that younger teachers realize the importance of covering these topics or that they are used to discussing them in the societies they come from. This point supports Yamazaki's (2000) argument that culture is not fixed; it goes through several transformations because of different generations and the never waning influence of globalization. This might explain the observed differences in the teachers' responses. By contrast, correlations between the teachers' responses to the same question and the years of their teaching experience in the Gulf region reveal that the more experience teachers have in the Gulf region, the less the coverage of sensitive topics in class (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Correlation between years of teaching experience and coverage of sensitive topics*

Years of experience	I explain them (%)	Frequency (n)	I skip them (%)	Frequency (n)
0- 3	66.7	4	33.3	2
4- 8	55.6	5	44.4	4
9- 15	33.3	3	66.7	6
More than 15 years	16.7	1	83.3	5

Table 4 shows that 66.7% of the teachers with between 0-3 years of experience tend to explain "culturally sensitive" topics, whereas 33.3% skip them. On the other hand, this percentage gradually decreases in the responses of the teachers who have between 4-8 and 9-15 years of experience. This might suggest that the more experienced the teachers are, the more likely that they might have encountered situations where they were told not to cover these topics.

Another item on the survey asked teachers to write and rank the five most "culturally sensitive" topics in the region. Results show that "sex", with 47%, is the most highly-ranked

sensitive topic. Teachers' responses include: sex education, sex orientation, and out-of-marriage love; all of these sub-topics are categorized under "sex". Furthermore, "religion" is the second-ranked sensitive topic, 42%, while "politics", 11%, is the least ranked. Nonetheless, the senior teacher (Youssef) ranked "religion" as the first since he believes that "sex" comes under religious values and beliefs.

Results also show that family affairs, gay rights, and racism are seen as "sensitive" topics. Some of the proposed topics could be considered part of politics (racism) and others are related to religion (gay, family affairs). This means that some teachers might discuss some sub-topics that are related to politics, but they choose to avoid other controversial topics. For example, a teacher (Rehab, female, 36) who mentioned that she avoids discussing political issues mentioned that she discusses topics related to refugees with her students. Other teachers' responses also indicate coverage of other topics, such as relationships, and gay rights, which are part of sexual orientation.

On a different note, participants were asked to identify three "culturally sensitive" topics that they may discuss with their students and mention three other topics that they will never discuss with them (Table 5).

Table 5

*Culturally-sensitive topics teachers might/never discuss in class*

Culturally-sensitive topics	Frequency of response	Percentage (%)
<b>Topics that teachers NEVER discuss</b>		
Sex (sex education, homosexuality)	15	50
Religion	11	36.7
Gay rights	2	6.7
Politics	6	20
Transgender issues	2	6.7
Social relations	2	6.7
Nationalities,	1	3.3
Abortion	1	3.3
<b>Topics that teachers MIGHT discuss</b>		
Discrimination	4	13.3
Traditions	3	10
None	3	10
Race	3	10
Refugees	2	6.7
Customs	2	6.7
Word expression	2	6.7
Personal views	1	3.3
Segregation, politics, social class, social habits, relationships, identity, media coverage, roles of family members	1 each	3.3 each

All teachers reported that they never discuss religion or sex while only one teacher mentioned that she discusses politics. However, some teachers said that they discuss race, refugees, segregation, social class, and identity, which are related to politics and religion. This indicates that there is no agreement on what is related to politics or religion and should not be discussed and what could be explained to students. Therefore, teachers' responses are most likely related to their beliefs and attitudes and experiences in the region towards which issues are sensitive and which are not.

As for the consequences of covering or discussing sensitive topics, results indicate that

39% mentioned that it affects the reputation of the school; 32% believe that such discussions affect the culture of students only; and 16% remarked that it affects the identity of students. This suggests that the majority of teachers believe that the school reputation is being negatively impacted by discussing taboo topics. We as researchers believe that when teachers cover such topics, such a practice does not mean that teachers or their students should adopt taboo topics and make them part of their culture. Conversely, students and teachers should have a proper understanding of others' culture(s), which will hopefully foster respect and tolerance of cultural differences.

Worth noting here is that our study found no significant differences between the teachers' perceptions from the three emirates selected. In other words, although it is locally known that Dubai is the most open cosmopolitan city in the Emirates, that Sharjah is more conservative and traditional than Dubai and that Ajman is less wealthy and more reserved than both Dubai and Sharjah; it can be concluded that teachers are impacted by the country's stance on such issues. The document included in Appendix 3 could be viewed as evidence for this interpretation. Putting the above -stated teachers' perceptions in the context of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about cultural features "that people's understanding of the world, their cognitive processes and behavior, correspond to features of the lexicon and grammar of the language that they speak" (Tulviste, 2019, pp. 215-216), will require experimental evidence of positive or negative impact of effect, which may suggest using two groups of students- one as control and another as experimental to teach these culturally sensitive topics and see what the effects will be. Yet, we should realize that this may result in harming the members of the experimental group, which is unethical.

### **Implications of discussing culturally sensitive topics on teachers' career paths (Job retention)**

Among the factors that affect teachers' discussion of taboo topics, institutional constraints were the most noticeable. Teachers were asked if they faced any restriction(s) when they discussed such topics. Although 51% mentioned that they explain sensitive topics, 55% said they never faced any institutional restrictions, while 45% stated that they were asked not to cover certain topics.

One of the participants remarked that:

Subject coordinators advise them on what topics to go over in detail and which topics to avoid in order to avoid problems. (Tim, male 27)

The fact that supervisors tend to hold meetings and advise teachers on what to discuss and what to ignore is an important feature of the filtering system. Nevertheless, 22% mentioned that there is a total agreement between them and school administrators on the discussion of taboo topics; 23% said there is an average agreement, and 55% said that there is none.

Moreover, one of the questionnaire items asks whether teachers have been in a situation when they covered a sensitive issue and the school administration warned them. Results show that 13% were approached by principals or language coordinators, who asked them not to cover such topics. One of the participants said,

I received a complaint from one of the parents who addressed the issue to the school administration, and I was in trouble. (Karen, female, 33)

Furthermore, results show that teachers face different situations when covering or skipping cultural topics. Some of them encounter problems while others do not. This might suggest that



teachers tackle sensitive topics using different methods. According to Gobert (2015), teachers should be careful when covering a sensitive topic and should be aware of their students' needs. This might mean that teachers are not supposed to cover cultural aspects of different cultures that their students might find explicitly offensive; however, they should be able to address such topics in a way that makes students comfortable and that does not offend anyone's local culture (Gobert, 2015).

As some teachers faced problems when they covered sensitive topics, they were asked if they were guided on how to touch upon "culturally sensitive" topics in class. Results point out that 58% received training or guidance on how to tackle such issues while 42% did not. One of the teachers commented,

We were asked to skip any topic that might cause troubles with parents. (Renad, female, 26)

Another teacher mentioned,

We were not given formal training. The English coordinator told us to explain the topic, not explicitly though; however, she advised us to inform students the origin of a topic. (Lara, female, 34)

Another participant said,

I never tackle such issues. There are no clear guidelines or written documents on which topics can be covered in class and which ones should be avoided. (Mango, male, 45)

According to Zarate (1986, as cited by Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), covering "culturally sensitive" topics has been problematic in some institutions as no clear instructions are provided to practitioners on what is to be taught and how. As a result, these teachers receive warnings and sometimes dismissal from schools because they cover issues they were not told not to cover.

### **The impacts of discussing culturally sensitive topics on students' English language competence**

In order to know the reasons why some teachers choose to cover or skip "culturally sensitive" topics, they were asked to rate the usefulness of discussing such topics. Results reveal that 81% view teaching these topics as having a positive impact on students' English language development compared to 19% who do not. Teachers' comments were as follows:

Discussing culturally sensitive topics broadens the students' perspective. (Rayan, female, 35)

They can better understand each other. (Hans, male, 28)

It helps them develop intellectually. (Stewart, male, 44)

A broad culture horizon will lead to tolerance. (Hanna, female, 52)

It is better to be aware of culturally sensitive topics from school rather than other sources. (Mena, female, 47)

It opens their minds to different aspects of life; we do not need to be overprotective, and it is useful to explain what is related to the curriculum only, not more or less. (Noor, female, 44)

One of the research consultants noted,

It is useful to discuss culturally sensitive topics as these students will be culturally competent. They will develop intellectually as well. (Reema, female, 56)

On the other hand, other opposing views mentioned,

It has negative effects on the society. (Sabir, male, 47)

What they do not know will not harm them. (Tasqeen, female, 37)

This leads to unnecessary arguments. (Nameer, male, 28)

They come from different cultures, and these topics may not be discussed at home; therefore, they cause problems in class. (Cristian, female, 50)

The 19% who reported that discussing culture would negatively impact the students' language development believe that discussing these topics may lead to unnecessary arguments among students or between students and the teacher. In this context, Gobert (2015) mentions that discussing unrelated topics to students' culture may distance them from their learning. However, in order to overcome such a conflict, Gobert believes that teachers should not focus on the details of the topic rather than explaining the general idea. Estaji and Savarabadi (2020) also believe that communication cannot happen if participants are not aware of each other's cultures. This last point is also emphasized by Tatar and Adıgüzel (2019, p. 123) who argue that the discussion of controversial topics enhances students' critical thinking skills and intercultural communication; A point that may be difficult to objectively measure.

## **Conclusion**

Although there has been research on the cultural representations in English language teaching materials (Aliakbari, 2005; Abd Rashid & Engku, 2018; Huang, 2019), it has limited itself to the examination of the teaching materials' cultural contents. We believe that what makes our present study unique is that it examined secondary school teachers' perceptions towards the discussion of "culturally sensitive" topics in three private schools in the UAE by probing into teachers' perceptions on the relationship between culture and language and whether English can be taught without focusing on its cultural aspects. It also investigated the implications of discussing such topics on the teachers' career paths. Moreover, it questioned whether there were any consequences on the students' cognitive skills if teachers covered taboo topics, such as sexuality, alcohol consumption, teen suicide, birth control, superstitions, pork, boyfriends or girlfriends, dating, drugs, gay rights, same sex marriages, and other related issues; in the classrooms.

We are inclined to believe that our research distinguished itself from previous studies by having culled the study data through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and careful examination of the English language teaching materials used in the respective schools used for this investigation. The results indicate general positive teacher attitudes towards the strong connection between language and culture. Nevertheless, results also show that the majority of teachers avoid discussing "culturally sensitive" topics in order to avoid creating problems for themselves or the school or because they believe that they are not beneficial. They also reveal that some teachers might avoid covering "culturally sensitive" topics although they may have positive impacts on the students' cognitive skills. Our research indicates that the country's overall cultural framework is the determinant behind what to cover in class and what not to cover. It is, therefore, recommended that newly-recruited expatriate teachers, regardless of their nationalities or cultural background, are familiarized with and acclimated to the local

culture, its contents, taboos, sensitive topics and the like. In other words, they should be instructed on the overall social context of the country they are working in (Moloney & Saltmarsh, 2016; Sifakis, 2019). Furthermore, foreign teachers should be presented with real and practical examples of such topics, given guidance on which ones are acceptable for class discussions, which ones to avoid, how to tackle potentially controversial topics, and how much coverage should be delivered to students. Such a practice would, if not totally erase any cultural conflicts, reduce students', parents', schools' and other stakeholders' complaints concerning new teachers' insensitivity to the specifics of the local culture and alert them to the sociopragmatic foundation (Nieto, 2020) of "culturally sensitive" words. In addition, all stakeholders need to understand that English language learners have to acquire some of these "culturally sensitive issues" so that they can develop "... proficiency for international communication ... " (Lin, 2020, p. 131). This will also help "safeguard students against any potential negative attitudes they may encounter when learning about a new set of norms at odds with the ones of their own" (Mahmoud, 2015, p. 22).

We wish to acknowledge that the current study has some limitations that could be addressed in future research. Researchers may repeat the same study with a larger number of teachers from both private and public schools to find out whether their results will support those reported in this paper. Future researchers may also consider how teachers' and students' genders impact the coverage or avoidance of such topics. In this study, the number of female participants, 68%, was higher than the males, 32%; therefore, it was difficult to study the differences in perspectives between both genders. Future researchers may choose to investigate if females and males hold the same perspectives when discussing taboo topics or not. Future studies may also consider comparing teachers' perceptions based on their nationality and religion. Another interesting area is to compare and contrast between the perceptions of teachers in secondary schools in rural and urban areas. It should be announced here that the biggest portion of this study depended on the teachers' personal perceptions. This may require future researchers to personally attend classes and observe how certain "culturally sensitive" topics are approached by teachers to verify the opinions expressed in this current study. Research may also consider probing into secondary school students' understanding of "culturally sensitive" topics and see if their perceptions match teachers' perceptions.

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## Notes on Contributors

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## Appendix 1: Teachers' Questionnaire

### ELT Teachers' Attitudes towards the Discussion of "Culturally Sensitive" Topics

This questionnaire aims to collect information about English teachers' attitudes in private secondary schools in the UAE. It explores their attitudes towards discussing "culturally sensitive" topics with students during class. The researchers would appreciate your help by answering the following questions. Your honest and sincere responses are highly valued. The questionnaire is anonymous which means that you do not need to provide your name. It is designed on a voluntary basis. It will take you around ten minutes to fill it in. Responses will be used for research purposes only. Thank you very much for your help.

"Culturally sensitive" topics refer to topics that allow you to understand and learn about people whose cultural background is not the same as yours. In the context of the study, these topics could be against students' culture, traditions, beliefs or religion and some of them can be considered taboos.

I. Kindly complete the following information about yourself.

- 1) Gender: a) Male b) Female
- 2) Age: a) 21-29 b) 30-39 c) 40- 49 d) 50+
- 3) Ethnicity (cultural background, e.g. Lebanese, African, American, .etc):  
.....
- 4) What is your first language?  
a) Arabic b) English c) Other: (Please specify).....
- 5) Qualification:  
a) A bachelor in ..... b) Master Degree in ..... c) Other:.....
- 6) Country of qualification: .....

II. Kindly complete the following questions about teaching English

- 1) For how long have you been teaching English in the Gulf?  
a) 0- 3 years b) 5-8 years c) 9-15 years d) 15+ years
- 2) How many of your students are non- native speakers of English?  
a) All of them b) Most of them c) A few of them d) None
- 3) What is the ethnicity of the majority of the students' in your class? (Please specify).  
.....
- 4) What gender of students do you teach? (Please circle all that apply)  
a) Girls only b) boys only c) mixed students
- 5) Can you define culture from your own perspective? Culture is  
.....
- 6) Do you think there is a relation between language and culture?  
a) Yes b) No  
How? .....
- 7) Can language be taught without culture?  
a) Yes b) No  
Please explain:.....
- 8) In your opinion, what are the most "culturally sensitive" topics in the region (Please rank from the most to the least)  
1) ..... 2)..... 3) ..... 4) ..... 5) .....

- 9) How often do you come across sensitive topics in the textbook(s) that you use in teaching English?  
a) Always b) Occasionally c) Never
- 10) What do you do when you encounter taboo words and/or sensitive issues in the textbook(s) or any teaching material that you use for teaching English?  
a) I explain them b) I skip them c) Other action (Please specify) .....
- 11) Have you faced any institutional restrictions when teaching a specific topic? (If not, please go to question 13)  
a) Yes b) No
- 12) If yes, how did you come to know about it?  
.....
- 13) Do you think the school environment impacts teachers' coverage or non-coverage of these topics?  
a) Yes b) No  
Why/ why not? .....
- 14) Does your school provide any guidance as to how to handle "culturally sensitive" topics?  
a) Yes b) No
- 15) Have you ever been in a situation when you touched on a "culturally sensitive" issue and the school administration warned you against repeating this?  
a) Yes b) No c) Other action: (Please specify): .....
- 16) Do you use sensitive words in your own language in class?  
a) Yes b) No
- 17) How much agreement is there on sensitive topics between you and the school Administration?  
a) Total b) average c) none
- 18) How much agreement is there on sensitive topics between you and your students?  
a) Total b) average c) none
- 19) Do you believe in the hidden curriculum?  
a) Yes b) No c) Maybe
- 20) Would you use it to discuss sensitive issues in class?  
a) Yes b) No c) Maybe
- 21) Do you find it difficult to discuss "culturally sensitive" topics with students from the same gender as yours?  
a) Yes b) No  
**Why?** .....
- 22) Do you find it difficult to discuss "culturally sensitive" topics with students from the opposite gender as yours?  
a) Yes b) No  
**Why?** .....
- 23) In your opinion, how useful is it for your students to discuss "culturally sensitive" topics?  
a) not useful at all b) not useful c) useful d) very useful  
**Why?** .....
- 24) Why do you think there are restrictions on these topics?  
.....
- 25) Do you believe that teaching these topics would affect (Please circle all that apply)  
a) Reputation of the school  
b) Identity of student  
c) Culture of student  
d) Other (specify)
- 26) Mention 3 "culturally sensitive" topics that you never and will never discuss with your

students in class:

a. .... b. .... c. ....

27) Mention 3 culturally sensitive topics that you discuss or may discuss with your students in class?

a. .... b. .... c. ....

Thank you for your time and cooperation!



## **Appendix 2: Interview Questions**

- 1) How do you define “culture”?
- 2) Can language and culture be separated? Why?
- 3) Are there any clear or written guidelines on teaching “culturally sensitive” topics?
- 4) How often do you encounter “culturally sensitive” topics?
- 5) What do you think affects the materials covered in class?
- 6) Have you been trained on how to discuss “culturally sensitive” topics with students?
- 7) Do you think it is useful for students to discuss culturally sensitive topics?

### **Appendix 3: Tolerance Document**

#### **Tolerance Document for Employees in Education System to denounce Discrimination and Hate**

“The promotion and observance of human rights without discrimination as to origin, sex, religion or language and denunciation of speeches of violence and hate is a reflection of our tradition, and moral values, and represents an affirmation of the policies and principles of the late His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan in the field of human rights, which we are very keen to remain among the first countries in the world that protect and strengthen human rights”.

His Highness Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan,  
President of the United Arab Emirates

“The United Arab Emirates- “The objectives of the Government are to build a kind society... environment that supports tolerance ...strong families... educated generations.... Equal economic opportunities for all”

His Highness Sheik Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum,  
Vice President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai.

Tolerance represents one of the original values in the United Arab Emirates community which derives its origins from our Islamic Religion as affirmed in the United Arab Constitution and reflects the obligation of the State of the United Arab Emirates in all international agreements, which concentrate on tolerance, co-existence, and denunciation of violence, extremism, and hate.

In accordance with the national program for tolerance in the United Arab Emirates and in order to strengthen the ambitions of our wise leadership of the United Arab Emirates to become a model to be followed in tolerance and denunciation of hate, and a beacon which will contribute in the dissemination of these valuable values in all countries as emphasized by His Highness Sheik Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai.

Accordingly, I the undersigned voluntarily and with full legal capacity and absolute conviction during my work (as an academic member) in governmental or private educational institutions agree on the following:

- The commitment of teaching the educational programs as set by the relevant authorities and preparing the students for it;
- Respect the United Arab Emirates Constitution and all legislations and rules in force;
- Abide by the principles and values of tolerance and mercy, and cooperate in my interaction with all those concerned with the educational system from inside or outside, in order to build a cohesive society based on tolerance, peace and positive coexistence;
- My conducts and interactions shall be governed by non-discrimination with all individuals based on origins, or nationality or convictions or social status, and will seek to promote such moral values within and outside the educational system;
- Maintain the stability and cohesiveness of the society and shall avoid any words or acts which may threaten the societal peace and security;
- Making sure that the contents supporting the educational programs are free from any insinuation of discrimination or violence or hate;
- Affirm that I have received a copy of the law by decree no. 2 for the year 2015 concerning the Suppression of Discrimination and Hate, and have read it, and undertake not to commit any

act punishable by this law or to violate any provision of this document.

Name:

Job:

Place of Employment:

Signature:

Date

# Teaching Academic Literacy in English for Multiple Objectives at a University of Technology

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## Abstract

This paper aims to explore student experiences resulting from collaborative teaching and learning of academic literacy and content knowledge, for multiple objectives at a South African University of Technology. Using the qualitative research approach, undergraduate students who attended the Communication Skills course were randomly selected. Data were collected using in-depth interviews and questionnaires. The data were thematically coded to make sense of the experiences shared by the participants. The results indicated that academic literacy courses in the Faculty of Applied Sciences at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) were often regarded as peripheral, until we the lecturers in the present study collaborated to align disciplinary or content knowledge with academic literacy. Our alignment included the practice of decolonising the language and academic literacy curriculum, collaborative teaching, integrating content and language teaching and learning, and implementing a range of blended pedagogies, along with social media. Based on the student reflection and feedback, we are inclined to conclude that this pedagogy enhanced the overall teaching and learning experience. We further found that student learning experiences improved as the literacy course was moved from the periphery to the mainstream of the academic project by adopting various approaches in teaching and learning, guided by student needs, the language context of the class, and the learning outcomes or needs of the discipline.

**Keywords:** Communication, collaborative teaching, decolonisation, multilingualism, translanguageing

## Introduction

Communication skills and academic literacy courses are often seen as occupying a peripheral place in the curriculum project in the sciences at Universities of Technology. Students and academics may not always attribute due value to academic literacy courses. Rather, they may see the core business of learning and teaching to equip students with disciplinary knowledge and, at a university of technology, with hard and technical skills that students require to perform a specific job for which they are being trained. It has been suggested that “language and literacy tend to only become visible institutionally when construed as a problem to be solved through additional remedial support” (Lillis & Scott, 2007, pp. 5-7). This reality dictates that academic literacy lecturers package and offer the course(s) at the Cape Peninsular University of Technology in innovative ways that may attempt to move them from the periphery to the mainstream of the academic project – in reality and symbolically.

This paper examines the various approaches adopted during the 2018 academic year, to package and teach academic literacy courses in the Faculty of Applied Sciences, at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). Some of the broad areas that are investigated in this paper include decolonising language and the academic literacy curriculum, collaborative

teaching by integrating content and language learning, and blended learning through computer assistive tools and social media.

## **Background**

Language is one of the key elements that influences the way humans experience and engage with their world. For example, viewed from the theoretical frame of linguistic determinism, “the language one speaks determines the way s/he interprets the world ... language ... influences one’s thoughts about the world” (Reis, 2010, p. 1014). Considered from all perspectives, the language question is an important one and even more so, in the higher education sector. At CPUT as at other higher education institutions in South Africa, English is the default language of learning, teaching and of administration. However, a large majority of students are mother tongue speakers of languages other than English. The language landscape of students at CPUT in 2018 percentage wise was Afrikaans 14.5%, English 23.9%, other 12.7% and isiXhosa 48.9% (Management Information Services – MIS Portal Cape Peninsula University of Technology, 2019). This illustrated language landscape and dynamics at CPUT allow for several interpretations. CPUT is a truly multilingual institution with indigenous African languages spoken as first language by most students. The incongruity of this situation is that students are learning in an unfamiliar language, that has various implications on how they may experience learning, teaching, and social engagement, and this may consequently affect academic performance and throughput. Faced with this situation, and in response to prescriptions of institutional and national language policies, an array of approaches has been adopted in an attempt to make the teaching and learning space linguistically decolonised and more inclusive through the multilingual practices and initiatives.

The CPUT Language Policy (2019) among many other laudable claims, states as its intent: “By 2025, to advance CPUT towards an inclusive multilingual environment using regional languages and South African Sign Language (SASL), while promoting other national and regional languages” (Cape Peninsula University of Technology Language Policy, 2019, p. 2). To achieve this, the Policy states as one of its main procedures and principles that:

while English is the current Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), teaching practices using other languages should also be adopted to facilitate epistemological access. ... Academic literacy practices in English, as well as in isiXhosa and Afrikaans, should continue to ensure successful teaching and learning. (CPUT, 2019, p. 5)

Drawing from the principles and ideals of the South African Constitution, and the relationship between language and cognition in the learning process, the Revised Language Policy Framework in Higher Education seeks to promote multilingualism as a strategy to facilitate meaningful access and participation by everyone in various university activities and in cognitive and intellectual development (Language Policy for Higher Education, South Africa, 2017, p. 2).

Another important policy document is the Western Cape Language policy, which has as some of its goals to:

ensure that the Western Cape is a caring home for all by promoting multilingualism and to give increasing effect to the equal constitutional status of the three official languages of the Western Cape. (Western Cape Provincial Government, 2001, p. 2)

All three policies – the CPUT Language Policy, the Language Policy for Higher Education and the Western Cape Language Policy speak directly to the continued marginalisation (coloniality) of indigenous languages and make resounding calls for redress.

The practices adopted in the design and teaching of the Communication Skills module in Biotechnology and in other academic programmes in the Faculty of Applied Sciences at CPUT (where we the researchers are based) try to some of the issues highlighted in the policy documents. This study examined students' responses to these interventions.

### **Purpose of study**

The study set out to answer the question, how does an approach that teaches academic literacy in English for multiple objectives contribute to improving the learning experience of students and move the course from the periphery to the mainstream of the academic project?

More specifically, the study examined how a collaborative and integrated pedagogy to teaching academic literacy, using disciplinary content, and through the agency of multilingualism, grant access to the LoLT, contribute to learning experiences, and shift literacy from the periphery to the mainstream of the academic project?

To address this, the study undertook a general survey of the student perceptions of the communication skills subject in a selected academic programme in the Faculty of Applied Sciences at CPUT.

The study is grounded in the theoretical positions of New Literacy Studies as elucidated by Barton (1994), Cazden et al., (1996), Street & Street (1984) and Street 2003), These scholars have argued for a new approach to understanding literacy that challenges the dominant "deficit" model. They conceptualised academic literacy through the use of three overlapping perspectives or models. The first of these is the study skills model which sees writing and literacy as primarily an individual and cognitive skill. It presumes that students can transfer their knowledge of writing and literacy unproblematically from one context to another. The second model is termed academic socialization and is concerned with students' acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres. Students acquire the ways of talking, writing, thinking, and using literacy that typified members of a disciplinary or subject area community. The third model, termed academic literacies is concerned with meaning making, identity, power and authority and foregrounds the institutional nature of what "counts" as knowledge in any particular academic context. It views the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes which include power relations among people and institutions, and social identities (Lea & Street, 2006, pp. 227-228). The theory is relevant here as the teaching and learning approaches adopted in the course under study target multiple objectives that cut across all three models of this theory, some more than others. Considering this theoretical paradigm and the scholarly positions advanced in the literature discussed below, the paper covered the following aspects:

### **Decolonising the language and academic literacies curriculum**

There have been growing calls for the decolonisation of higher education, especially in the South African context. Similar calls have been echoed in most of the previously colonised world, which still experiences various degrees and forms of coloniality. Language remains a key component of the de-coloniality project. For any effort at decoloniality to have an impact, it should direct significant attention at rectifying the hegemonic impact of colonial languages. In light of this, a concerted effort should be made in the design of both curricula and pedagogy of communication and literacy skills subjects, to align with the values and objectives of the decolonisation project.

The decoloniality project in general and in language in education is universal, taking different forms in different postcolonial societies. Martin (2005) offers a comprehensive overview of the decolonisation project in a book that is appropriately titled, "Decolonisation, globalisation:

language-in-education policy and practice”. Interestingly, English as is the case in the context under study emerges as the default language in most of the postcolonial contexts discussed in the volume. The value of the volume lies in its evocative depiction of how several postcolonial societies grapple with the language issue. For example, considering the case of India, it argues that the colonial disposition towards the language of education was fractured and multiple. It notes that approaches to dealing with the language issue included offering prominent European works to the indigenous elite in translation, in order to avoid disruption and imparting European knowledge to a majority of the population through indigenous languages. It further claims that efforts toward national linguistic cohesion in India have to a certain extent been undermined through the training of students in multiple languages. In the case of Singapore, the text explores measures that have been instrumental in reproducing a class of elites who share proficiency in English, but also working-class Cantonese-speaking subalterns who have ambivalent feelings toward English and its usefulness. In the case of Malaysia, the text explores how teachers use Malay and English to the exclusion of Sa’ben, a language used outside of the classroom by teacher and student alike. Framing the discussion on Turkey around the language medium policy of a major state university, the text captures the dilemma faced by institutions of higher education in the ‘developing world’ in balancing the teaching of a world language with the teaching of an indigenous one. The book characterises the language medium policy measures and efforts of Istanbul Technical University as an alternative based on the institution’s desire to combat “the challenge of English linguistic imperialism”. However, it explains that neither the faculty nor students emerge from the institution with an awareness of the goal. In the case of Kenya, the book reveals that for children to improve their English and Kiswahili, Gikuyu, the language spoken in the school’s environs, is banned from Standard four on. This is in spite of the fact that all three languages are found to have specific pragmatic effects and enable ‘hidden messages’ in classrooms such as the tediousness of reading and its decontextualized irrelevance to life outside the interaction. Turning attention to South Africa, the text explores the intersection of classroom realities, language policy, neo-colonial, and globalisation discourses in schools. It notes that the South African Language in Education Policy of 1997 values cultural diversity, and multilingualism as a means to intercultural communication and nation-building, and national and international communication. Further to this, it outlines some ways in which the apartheid legacy has made English, the language associated with various forces of globalization in South Africa, both desirable and problematic for most South African schools (Lin & Martin, 2005, pp. 318-321). The book offers a very useful universal perspective that serves as a valuable lens through which to examine students’ responses to various teaching and learning approaches, directed at decolonising the curriculum, through the teaching of communication and academic literacy skills in an undergraduate Biotechnology qualification.

### **Multilingualism**

This is the ability of societies, institutions, and groups to engage with more than one language in their day-to-day lives (European Union Commission, 2007, p. 6 in Cenoz, 2013, p. 5). It is different from plurilingualism which is the ability of a speaker to express himself or herself in several languages with equal and native-like proficiency (Bussmann, 1996). According to Lyons (1981), multilingual societies are characterised by the co-existence of several languages. These languages may be official or unofficial, native, or foreign and national or international. An aspect of the present study examined the value of multilingualism in teaching and learning interventions adopted in the communication skills subject. These included the use of multilingual glossaries, the use of home or mother tongue languages to complete projects, such as a digital storytelling project, code switching and translanguaging. This study engaged with students’ responses and their experiences of these interventions.

## **Translanguaging**

García and Wei (2014) define translanguaging as a language practice of bilinguals where bilingualism acts not as two autonomous language systems, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been socially constructed as belonging to two separate languages. The epistemological changes that are taking place as global interactions, real and virtual, define our language exchanges, and create a transformational nature of language in new configurations of practices and education. Several authors (e.g., García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014; Heugh, 2015; Probyn, 2015) have promoted translanguaging as a systematic and pedagogically sound means of connecting the language of teaching and the languages of Learning. The study would engage with the view that translanguaging enhances communication and classroom learning amongst multilingual students (Charamba, 2020).

## **Collaborative teaching**

There is vibrant debate on the best approach to teaching communication skills, academic literacies and language in higher education. Some favour an approach where these skills are integrated and embedded in disciplinary content and where there is close collaboration between the content lecturer and the language and literacies specialist. Yet others advocate the generic teaching of these skills outside of a disciplinary context. In the case presently under study, the communication skills, and academic literacy module was embedded in the content subject of “Immunology” and there was close collaboration between the content lecturer and the communication skills lecturer to ensure integration and alignment of the types of teaching material selected, the mode of engagement with content, and the forms of assessment.

Content language integrated learning (CLIL) is either “soft” where the “content of the subject is subordinate to the language and higher emphasis is put on learning the language” or, “hard” where “the main lesson objective is the content objective not the language” (Šulistová, 2013, p. 47). The qualities of Soft CLIL primarily apply to this study, since the objective of the Communication Skills course that formed the context for this study was not the content knowledge, but the communication and literacy skills covered. However, it is believed that teaching the skills in the disciplinary context may contribute to making the content knowledge more explicit.

CLIL is advantageous in that it enhances the critical thinking ability of students, the learning process may be based on real life situations, learning may be conducted in groups or teams and it can be peer-led, thereby raising intercultural awareness among students and teachers, thus breaking prejudices, and facilitating the acquisition of communicative skills (Šulistová, 2013, p. 50).

## **Blended learning, digital technology and social media**

Students in our current first year classes comprise the demographic cohort born around the mid to late 1990s, referred to as “Generation Z”. This is a generation of students that shows a strong leaning towards using digital technology, the internet and social media. As such, these students can be engaged in a variety of innovative ways, in addition to the traditional face-to-face lecture format. The use of digital technology has enhanced students’ abilities to draw on the benefits of a range of resources, pedagogies, and tools to improve the overall learning experience. For example, in a review of 34 published, empirical evaluations of computer-based instruction involving more than 10,000 students, Fletcher (2003, p. 6) reported that the technology enhanced learning in 30 out of the 34 studies investigated. Results like these may attest to the value of computer assistive learning and teaching in improving student involvement in their



learning. But there are several other formats through which students may now be engaged. The present study considered the use of social media as a learning and teaching platform. An increasing number of studies have observed that the use of social media in the classroom has added value to the learning experience, and thus justified its wider implementation. For example, Mason (2008) cited in Alabdulkareem (2015, p. 214) suggests that “using social media in the classroom allows the teacher not only to incorporate multimedia and multimodal texts but also to share these quickly and easily, providing a collaborative learning environment where students can communicate at any time”.

Considering the scholarly perspectives advanced on the value of social media as a learning and teaching platform, the study examined social media platforms such as WhatsApp that are used to support learning and teaching in the context of the course under study here, especially in fragile times such as prolonged student protests when learning and teaching can only happen remotely.

## **Method of study**

We have adopted a qualitative case study design in this paper. This method is particularly suited to the study as the intention is partly to give voice to the experiences of students for whom the learning interventions are designed, besides giving them space to offer an evaluative perspective. Additionally, a qualitative method of research, we believed was better suited as it opened space for participants to offer deep, detailed, and complex engagements that are rooted in their individual learning experiences.

The population for this study were students in the Faculty of Applied Sciences, at the District Six Campus of CPUT, Cape Town, South Africa. The study took place primarily in the Biotechnology Programme, within the core subject “Immunology”, where Communication Skills as a module is embedded. The Immunology subject has as a formal learning outcome, the ability of students to be proficient in academic literacy, and to be fluent in communication, for both formal and informal objectives. As a result, Communication Skills form a significant teaching and learning component of the subject and incorporates a range of teaching and learning pedagogies. Assessments also take various forms, such as reflective assignments, digital storytelling incorporating multilingual narratives and subtitles, as well as engagement with published articles in the discipline (Biotechnology in this case). Presently, a sample of 10 students was randomly selected for interviews and questionnaires from a cohort of 80 students who took Communication Skills in the 2018 academic year.

The primary data collection instruments for this paper were interviews and questionnaires. Using semi-structured interviews allowed an in depth and a detailed engagement with the issues highlighted in this paper. In addition, interviews provided scope for broad information on the topics covered and allowed the respondents to share their opinions, feelings and perceptions and created space for the interviewer to seek clarity on any ambiguities. Open-ended questions in the questionnaire held similar value as interviews but also allowed the respondents more free-thinking time that resulted in even more detailed and well thought out responses as the respondents were not pressured by the formal context of a face-to-face interview. The questionnaire was piloted with a different set of students not involved in this study. Amendments were made following the piloting to ensure that it was reliable, valid and credible and aligned with the aims of the research question. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at scheduled times. We believed that this format has the advantage of allowing the researcher the ability to read body language and facial expressions, prompting clarification by the interviewer, should this be necessary (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 9).

In coding the data, Tesch’s (1992) steps of data analysis approach cited in Cresswell (2017)

was used as a guide. The analysis of the data was comprehensive and employed a wide range of procedures commonly used in educational research. The content analysis unlike statistical/numerical analysis does not measure or quantify patterns. It is based on interpreting opinions and perspectives of various subjects. Common themes and concepts from both sources of data were identified. The data were analysed using the content analysis approach of Tesch (1992), thus:

- 1) Read all transcripts and handwritten notes carefully.
- 2) Pick a response and think about the underlying meaning in the information.
- 3) Make a list of all topics and put them in groups.
- 4) The topics should be abbreviated and coded.
- 5) Pick out themes and categorise them.
- 6) Assign abbreviations to the codes to avoid confusion and error.
- 7) Cluster similar categories to harmonise categories.
- 8) Recode existing data where necessary.

Content analysis has been described as “a research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena” (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 9).

## **Results**

The first section deals with the demographic characteristics of the respondents who participated in the study. Ten students were selected to participate in both the interviews and the questionnaires. All of them indicated that they were pursuing their degree/diploma programme while two of them did not specify the qualification. The respondents were all from the Biotechnology Programme in the Faculty of Applied Sciences attended the Communication Skills module which was a component of the Immunology subject in the first-year level of study.

### ***Home languages spoken by students***

The responses show that the students spoke various home languages. It emerged from the students' responses that a majority of them spoke isiXhosa while others spoke Afrikaans, English, French, Luganda Portuguese, IsiZulu, Sepedi, Siswati and Tshivenda.

Apart from the home languages, some of the respondents also speak other languages. Some of them were bi- or even plurilingual, with one respondent speaking up to six languages, that is, English, Afrikaans, Setswana, Sepedi, Zulu and Xitsonga. Many respondents, besides English spoke a combination of other languages which included Kiswahili, Lingali, Ndebele and Sesotho.

### ***Language of instruction***

Almost all the respondents reported that in the context of the District Six Campus at CPUT, the lecturers primarily use English, sometimes use isiXhosa, occasionally use other languages, but never use Afrikaans. The students were asked to explain how the language of instruction at CPUT affected their ability to study. Almost all the students who participated reported that they could not express themselves very well in English. The respondents reported that this affected their understanding of some scientific terms and concepts. The following are some of the responses from the respondents concerning how the exclusive use of English as a language of instruction in a context where there is a weak mastery of the language of instruction

(English) and where some accents are unintelligible. This affected their learning abilities, as shown in these excerpts:

Student 1: I went to public schools where most of the time I was taught subjects in my own home language. And at high school we used to communicate with our home language with our teachers. Coming to university was a childhood dream till I had to speak English all the time. English has badly affected my ability to study. I was not used to it. I couldn't even ask the lecturer questions.

Student 2: As a native English speaker, the language of instruction did not have any negative impacts on my ability to study. I was able to effectively understand the course material and lectures.

Student 3: As I am Xhosa speaking, I do not understand some of the English terms so sometimes it does affect my ability to study negatively.

Student 4: At times, it's hard to follow since it is my first additional language. This results in poor answering.

Student 5: Communication remains a problem here at CPUT. It's not really the language that affects [the] ability to study. Rather the accents, which is understandable. But it would be helpful of the lecturers at least try to consider other learners.

Student 6: CPUT uses English in all the modules, in the courses that I am taking. And it is sometimes difficult to understand because in some modules the English that is used is very dense and it is not simple and easy to understand.

Student 7: This affects my ability to study because I do not understand some texts or words in English but I can understand them in my own language.

Only a few students reported along the lines of, "It does help because most if not all modules are taught in English. That aids the vocabulary."

### ***Language other than English used to converse in the classroom***

The respondents were also asked how often they used a language other than English to converse in the classroom with their peers. More than half of the students reported that they sometimes use languages other than English in informal conversations but also, when they did group work and discussions in class. When asked about the lecturers, tutors, mentors and other facilitators of knowledge and their use of other languages in the classroom, the respondents said that they never do, and they never encourage them to use any language other than English to converse in the classroom. The respondents gave reasons why the lecturers did that as presented below:

Student 1: As we are not all familiar with our different home languages, we were advised to use English as our medium of communication so as to accommodate everyone.

Student 2: Because everyone has different home languages. It was instructed that one speaks English as it is a common language most of us can understand.

Student 3: In my class, we speak different languages and English was the medium language that accommodates us all.

Student 4: Lecturers, tutors and mentors prefer the use of English in the classroom to accommodate everyone in the lecture room.

Student 5: When discussing school-related stuff, he does allow us to use our home languages for better understanding.

Student 6: We work as a group most of the time. We are from different places and speak different languages so we need a language that will suit us all to effectively make a better collaboration.

We asked the respondents how often they used a language other than English to converse in the classroom with their lecturers at first year. A majority of the students responded “Never”, with less than one tenth of the respondents indicating that they occasionally do. The use of the home language to guide peer-led discussions does appear to offer an advantage in terms of content knowledge acquisition, which students can then use to transition into the language of the discipline.

### ***Multilingual practices***

The results show that there are some multilingual practices in the classroom, which impact on the students’ learning experience. Key among these is the use of the multilingual glossary that has relevant terms in three languages – English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans. The respondents were asked how useful/helpful the multilingual glossary was in helping them understand important terminology. Some of the students reported that they used the glossary and that it was helpful. Some also mentioned that they did not know about the glossary until they were given a task to complete that required them to use the multilingual glossary as expressed by them below:

Student 1: Because I was able to understand each word definition in both English and isiXhosa. That helped for better understanding.

Student 2: I have come to understand some words I thought I understood in English. But the glossary explained them in a way [that] I could thoroughly understand, in my own language.

Student 3: I managed to have a better understanding of other terms as they were expressed or defined in Xhosa.

Student 4: I never knew about the glossary until our last assignment. It should be included and offered to us in our study guides.

Student 5: I was able to understand terms which I did not understand before. I read the multilingual glossary because the terms are explained correctly in my home language.

Student 6: It allowed exposure to the generally accepted explanation of terminology of the content in various languages. It allowed for an analogy of the definition in both English and native languages.

Student 7: They were very useful because I learned some new words and also definitions. The words that I thought I knew their definitions, I was wrong. So the multilingual glossary helped me understand thoroughly even in my own language.

Student 8: Useful in the manner that English sometimes has ambiguous, bombastic words. So with the help of an African language, it was easy to understand because I was able to relate it to something I was familiar with.

The respondents were asked how they came to use the multilingual glossary and what made them use it. A majority of the students said their communication lecturer asked them to use the multilingual glossary while some said the Immunology lecturer encouraged them to use it. Some said,

Student 1: I was given a task to complete that required me to use the glossary.

Student 2: I decided to use the glossary on my own.

The general view from most of the respondents is that the multilingual glossary could be improved. The respondents had this to say:

Student 1: The glossary should be developed as a software with a search engine, whereby users can search the terms or any word across all the faculties.

Student 2: A survey of the top 3 majority languages spoken in the Varsity should be conducted before its construction, as well as provision of the pronunciation.

Student 3: Add more languages as not all of us are Xhosa and Afrikaans speaking.

Student 4: Addition of more words in a particular subject, e.g. Biotechnology

Student 5: For me, it was very helpful, but it can be improved by breaking down and pointing out some examples to make it crystal clear for others to understand.

Student 6: More words could be added especially from the Immunology module.

Student 7: Since I was only exposed to the Biotechnology multilingual glossary, it uses three languages: English, Xhosa and Afrikaans. I think it would be best if it would international languages too like French because we also have international students. Hence, it would be helpful to them as well.

The respondents strongly believe that a multilingual teaching and learning environment is very important to them.

### ***Social media used in communication skills course***

It emerged strongly that social media was used to support teaching and to communicate with the students. The social media commonly used were Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp. Others that were used were: Twitter, YouTube, Blackboard, Email, Google and Photo story.

When asked how they felt about the use of social media in teaching and learning, it came out strongly that the respondents are more comfortable communicating with the lecturer by social media (WhatsApp) than through formal modes of communication e.g. email. They believe that the use of social media allows for easy communication between lecturer and students. The following responses appear to support what they said:

Student 1: A common calendar updated by the lecturers themselves would be better e.g. Blackboard calendar.

Student 2: During the student protest WhatsApp was the easy way to connect with everyone. Students lack internet access for Black Board and Email.

Student 3: I was able to go back to the information written on social media when I was doing my assignment.

Student 4: It is affordable and almost everyone has access to it.

Student 5: Students can ask something they don't understand through WhatsApp.

Student 6: Students have the ability to interact with lecturers in an informal, less stressful manner.

Some respondents reported on challenges like:

Student 1: Social media is not really reliable. If there's no network, [then] that would leave a wide communication gap.

Student 2: Some people do not have enough data and WhatsApp is fairly affordable as a message is charged at a small rate.

They said that the use of social media allows for close collaboration among students. These are some of their responses:

Student 1: Because some of us are introverts and shy in front of people, it is easy on social media.

Student 2: Communicating via email is boring and the messages are sometimes not

received early. WhatsApp is much better with instant texts.

Student 3: Fellow students are able to help each other through social media.

Student 4: For the communication science class, we had a WhatsApp group. It was a mix of first years and second year ECP. We started communication there.

Student 5: It allows more bonding among students, because in the WhatsApp group, we as students state things that we are not happy about and inform the class rep, rather than fight in class with the lecturer. So it creates more and better understanding and a healthy relationship.

Student 6: Students who would never speak would come into contact on WhatsApp and bond.

They also said that the use of social media ensured that guidance on projects could continue when classes were disrupted (e.g. by protest action) and ensured that work that was not completed in class could be completed as can be seen in the following responses:

Student 1: During the time of disruption and disturbances, social media was the medium of communication for updates.

Student 2: Especially during the strike/protest that took place. Work and assessments were done and completed.

Student 3: Instead of coming in and risking our lives. Yes.

Student 4: This came in handy. Very convenient.

Student 5: Whenever there is a shutdown on campus, the lecturer could still communicate through WhatsApp messages.

Student 6: We were given some explanations of work we didn't understand so that we can continue with our work.

More than half of the respondents strongly agree that, the use of social media improved the quality of teaching and learning, and they have these to say:

Student 1: Announcements are broadcasted through social media, and it is not time-consuming.

Student 2: I cannot say this was helping in terms of teaching, but it was helpful in terms of communicating.

Student 3: The use of social media was quite helpful to engage with the lecturer, should there be no chance to do so in class.

### ***The use of digital technology (e.g. digital storytelling) for teaching, learning and assessment***

The respondents reported that digital technology like digital story telling was used for teaching, learning and assessment. More than half of the students agree that digital storytelling assessment is better than traditional modes of assessment but quite a few of them remained neutral. They pointed out that:

Student 1: Because talking in public is a bit too much. In the digital story, no one sees who is talking.

Student 2: Because we do it in our most comfort zones.

Student 3: I strongly agree because when you are recording, you are at your private space, you're more relaxed and the presenting becomes better.

Student 4: It is fun and a different way of learning but requires a lot of work and technical capabilities.

Student 5: Not all students can perform satisfactorily under pressure, but can through

digital assessments.

Student 6: Traditional modes of assessment require a lot of time and work.

These findings highlighted the fact that digital storytelling ensures better student engagement and deeper learning. Again, some chose to remain neutral. They said:

Student 1: Because it's done in multi languages.

Student 2: Here, it is where students' talents are revealed.

Student 3: More research is needed on a topic which ensures a better understanding.

Student 4: Students were interested in what other students were able to do.

Student 5: The questionnaires we conducted improved our knowledge about malaria, and also traditional medicine.

Student 6: Students cannot properly interact with the creators of the digital story to answer queries.

Some of the respondents expressed some of the difficulties they encountered with digital storytelling. They highlighted the following points:

Student 1: But a little problem I had with my laptop was with the speakers.

Student 2: Couldn't balance the recording and music firstly because I didn't know how to use the app.

Student 3: I could not download the photo story app, since I do not have internet access and the university was shut down.

Student 4: I struggled a bit in combining everything into a story.

Student 5: The process was a bit confusing as I didn't know how to do it the application was in another language (making it difficult).

Student 6: Getting information from the lecture is better than getting it from technological apps.

### ***Collaborative teaching between communication skills and content lecturers***

The Communication Skills lecturer and the content lecturer collaborated with each other to offer the Communication Skills subject. The respondents were asked how they feel about it. The general view of most of the students who participated in this study regarding the collaboration between the Communication lecturer and the Immunology lecturer was that it ensured there was content language integration. The students commented on the fact that, "the material (article) used to teach Communication Skills was taken from the content subject - Immunology." They noted that aspects of Immunology were included in the teaching of Communication Skills. The respondents made the following comments:

Student1: [It is] interesting. Much more information was learned.

Student 2: Being taught to communicate well helps a lot on the content lecture assessments as it is difficult to answer a question without having a full understanding.

Student 3: It helped in improving and better reading of articles. And how to understand words I do not know. It also helped in understanding the chapter on Malaria.

Student 4: It is a good thing as it has enabled me to write good practical reports. I just wish communications formed part of Analytical Chemistry instead. AC is a harder subject than Immunology and we could use a boost in [our] marks.

Student 5: The communication module as well as Dr [... the lecturer's name] help allowed us to understand more about technology. It allowed us to be aware of sources

like the multilingual glossary, which is a very good and effective source that many of us were not even aware of

Student 6: There was more understanding of the immunology subject.

Student 7: We had an understanding of malaria on both the Immunology and Communication [modules].

Student 8: Malaria study was part of the content studied.

The respondents strongly agreed that in the collaboration between the Communication Skills lecturer and the Immunology lecturer, the communication subject acquired more relevancy because it used content from the discipline they were studying. They went further to say that,

Student 1: It allowed us to apply communication skills whilst using content we have worked with.

Student 2: This makes us understand some concepts more and better.

Some of the respondents pointed out that the assessment of Communication covered aspects of Immunology, and aspects of Communication were covered and assessed in the Immunology subject, indicating close and cooperative alignment between the learning outcomes of the Communication Skills and Immunology components of the subject.

## **Discussion**

The findings revealed that the teaching strategies and approaches adopted in the Communication Skills course in the Biotechnology Programme in the Faculty of Applied Sciences at CPUT contributed to moving academic literacy from the periphery to the mainstream of the academic project and this we believe is quite valuable for the learning experience of students. In the present study, the lecturers did this by: 1) attempting to decolonise the language and academic literacies curriculum; 2) collaboratively teaching Discipline content, academic literacy, and communication (content-language integration); and 3) through using blended learning, computer assistive tools and social media.

The students who participated in the study spoke various home languages. They explained that many of them are bilingual, a view also highlighted by Nguyen (2017), and some are plurilingual. While students acknowledged the value of using home languages as languages of learning and teaching, they also recognise that this can be challenging. They hold the perspective that for effective communication to take place among the students, it must be in a language that they commonly understand and speak, and, in most cases, this is English which is also the primary LoLT at CPUT. Karakas (2017) had voiced his support for the views of Botha (2013) and Sert (2008) who emphasized that using English as the medium of instruction other than the students' own language is instrumental, for example in career development, boosting English skills and intrinsic values like socialising via English, reading in another language. In the course of decolonising the language and academic literacies curriculum, the language of instruction as well as the language used by the lecturers was considered. It emerged that the language of instruction that the lecturers used affected the respondents' learning experience. This is because some of them are not very fluent in English, as it was not their home language. It was revealed that many of them were taught in their first language, IsiXhosa at their primary and secondary schools. This changed at the tertiary level, where all the courses are taught in English, resulting in most of the students struggling to understand and communicate effectively. As a result, we designed the Communication Skills course to include instructions from the digital story and other assignments. This enabled the students to use other languages such as isiXhosa and Afrikaans in the digital story, promoting multilingual practices



in the classroom. This resonates with the views of Heleta (2016), who contends that the decolonising of the language curriculum makes the teaching and learning environment very conducive for supporting the students. In addition to the use of multiple languages in the digital story, translanguaging was used as an approach, by providing planned and systematic use of the home language of learners with the language of the classroom, in order to foster learning and teaching. This concurs with the views of Csillik & Golubeva (2020), who state that different languages are used interchangeably, in order to overcome language constraints, to deliver verbal utterances or written statements effectively, and to ultimately achieve successful communication. Translanguaging was used as a pedagogic tool to enhance teaching and learning. The students felt more comfortable and relaxed to use home languages other than English among themselves for group discussions in class.

We believe that the findings of this study are well supported by all three policies – the CPUT Language Policy (CPUT, 2019), the Language Policy for Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017) and the Western Cape Language Policy (2001). These policies support the decolonising of the language used in teaching and learning thereby promoting the practice of translanguaging. It is widely acknowledged by the participants that a multilingual teaching and learning environment is very important to them. The lecturers' included the use of multilingual glossaries, used languages other than English to complete projects – particularly the digital storytelling project, code adopted switching and translanguaging. All these interventions helped the students in the studying of the Communication Skills course.

It also emerged from the findings that collaboration between the language lecturers and the content lecturers have enhanced their learning of the subject. They highlighted the fact that it made studying the course easier and it helped them in writing their reports. These findings corroborate with those of Šulistová (2015) who maintains that content language integrated learning is advantageous in that it enhances the critical thinking of students, it is significant that the learning process is based on real life situations that raise intercultural awareness of students and teachers, breaks prejudices, and facilitates the acquisition of Communicative Skills (Šulistová, 2015).

The findings also resonate with those of Mason (2008) cited in Alabdulkareem (2015, p. 214), who suggests that “using social media in the classroom allows the teacher not only to incorporate multimedia and multimodal texts but also to share these quickly and easily, providing a collaborative learning environment where students can communicate at any time”. The lecturers used Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp: Twitter, YouTube, Blackboard, Email, Google and Photo story. It was widely acknowledged by the respondents that social media improved the quality of teaching and learning. The participants were able to communicate with the lecturers and their fellow students freely using social media. Although some of them highlighted some of the difficulties, they encountered like not having enough data or staying in remote areas, the majority of the participants still felt that using social media helped them to communicate among themselves especially during times of disruption and breakdown of face-to-face classes.

## **Conclusion**

It became obvious that the Communication Skills course in the Biotechnology Programme in the Faculty of Applied Sciences, at CPUT was in some cases seen as occupying a peripheral place in the curriculum. Hence, the Communication Skills and content (Immunology) lecturers collaborated to package and offered the course in innovative ways. This was done by attempting to decolonise the language and academic literacy curriculum, and collaborative teaching using various approaches that included multilingual practices, the use of social media

and digital storytelling. The teaching and learning of Communication Skills was enhanced as evidenced by student reflections. Our paper then recommends that more innovative approaches should be explored in the teaching and learning of communication skills and literacy courses. These approaches are best guided by student feedback, allowing students the agency to recommend modes of instruction and forms of engagement that may best suit their context. Additionally, placing value on the cultural and linguistic capital that the students bring to the classroom is a valuable means of enhancing engagement and deepening understanding of the need for effective communication skills, both in the language of the discipline and in general discourse. The teaching of communication skills goes beyond the teaching of merely the language of the discipline, but through creative ways, such as social media, digital stories, and other means of drawing on student voices and experiences, communication becomes a richer part of the overall student learning experience. It is through this pedagogy that academic literacy knowledge can be co-created in the classroom, in a collaborative manner, connecting lecturers who bring disciplinary knowledge and those who bring literacy knowledge, all working together to more holistically meet the learning outcomes of undergraduate classes, and attributes of graduates.

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# **Lecturer's Views on Using Blended Learning as an Intervention Programme for Teaching English language Academic Writing to Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) First Year Students**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to seek blended learning as an intervention programme in first year's students' English language academic writing. The 21<sup>st</sup> century's focus on technology presents an ideal opportunity to use the digital platform as a space for students to learn. This is believed to work well particularly with students who might be struggling with academic writing. It may also apply to students who appreciate not being publicly exposed to the stigma of a struggling student. On the digital platform, they can experience the freedom and space to learn at their own pace and convenience. The study is framed theoretically in the Community of Inquiry based on Bourdieu's structural constructivism theory. The study used the stimuli and synergies afforded by the qualitative interpretivist paradigm that involves a population of 36 people. It used a purposive sampling of six first year English Home Language students and three Intermediate Phase Lecturers. The data were collected through participant observations, focus group discussions and interviews. Thematic analysis served as the analytical tool for the data collected. We believe that this study is of paramount value because it informs and assists the teaching of English as the language of teaching and learning in the classroom to hone academic writing practices of students.

**Keywords:** Blended learning, Writing intervention, English as Language of teaching, Community of Inquiry, Constructivism

## **Introduction**

Blended learning is an online conveyance of content and teaching which gives the student partial control over time, place and pathway of understanding. This kind of pedagogy is one which allows the student to learn at their convenience. The student then is neither restricted to the classroom nor to the university but also to the virtual space. In light of this, the timetable and the uploaded content gives them the freedom to learn according to their individual needs. The students are also not under strain to learn at the pace of their peers in the classroom. As such, the aim of blended learning writing intervention is to ensure that students are able to write texts independently in the topics they define themselves, by using suitable guidance and the skills gained in classrooms and virtual platforms (Karasu, 2018, p. 116). During the writing of texts, the manner of implementation and duration of the stages vary. This may be implemented through intensive action by the facilitator as a model, or drafts may be written by students individually, after the pre-writing stage is completed. Writing is an essential part of life that plays a vital role in teaching and learning as it is used to gather knowledge (Harris et al., 2013, p. 538).

Given the importance of writing across the curriculum and for academic purposes, this paper seeks to understand and identify barriers encountered in writing for academia. In view of this, the National Department of Basic Education (NDBE) compiled a qualitative analysis

of the Annual National Assessments (ANA) 2011 Results, in which they determined the difficulty in the level of questions and learners' responses in terms of competencies, skills and knowledge (NDBE, 2011). The report reflected that the average score for language and mathematics was 30% and below which is why some form of intervention is required to boost language and Mathematics. Learners had a low competency level in literacy and basic language skills which is why when they enter institutions of higher education, they struggle to cope with the literacy demands. They have poor comprehension skills and are not able to infer meaning nor evaluate questions critically. Also, they cannot write creatively despite being given visuals to stimulate their imagination (NDBE, 2011). Van der Berg (2015) identifies learning deficits across the education system and how these deficits affect the school career. The study identified a distinct gap between children from advantaged and non-advantaged backgrounds prevalent in Grade 4 and that this reflected similarly amongst the grade 12s. Access to university may be pre-determined by grade 4 performance and so interventions based on the ANA results should not be done in Grade 9 as is the case, but it should be done from Grade 4.

The apparent failure of the ANA results means that there is no current language proficiency indicator available to the National Department of Education or its teachers. As a result, no remedial interventions are or have been put in place. This has further resulted in learners with low English language adeptness being given access to Higher Education, who are not necessarily able to cope with the level of English proficiency that is required at this level.

### **The transition from school to tertiary education**

Post 1994, South African higher education institutions (HEIs) became racially and culturally diverse (Pather & Chetty, 2016). The heterogeneous students, with diverse needs and expectations ultimately require HEI's to adapt and address their extreme inequalities in terms of their schooling, race, class, and socio-economic resources (Nelson et al., 2011). In the same vein, Boughey and McKenna (2016) argue that students' understanding of, and how they should adapt to academic literacy, is a pertinent attributing factor in the demeanour they require to transition into HEI. In view of this, Tinto (1993) argues that students can integrate academically and socially at universities if an enabling space is created by the institution. This is suggestive of using any means available and conducive to reducing student's fears and anxiety which in this study is synonymous with blended learning.

To get a better understanding of the context of South Africa, we referred to results from the Benchmark Test Project National Report of 2016, which show that the academic literacy levels of students intending to study teaching are low and that these students have attained only the basic levels of reading and writing due to their poor literacy skills. A major concern that is highlighted in the report is that these learners who envisage studying teaching are ultimately confronted with numerous challenges. One prominent challenge is the lack of preparedness for the rigorous demands of higher education and exposure to technology.

Students pass through stages during the improvement of writing skills. While they are more dependent on their lecturers at the beginning of this process, they gradually improve their writing skills with the facilitator's acting as their model and guide (Tompkins, 2007). Blended learning intends to evaluate the success of teaching students face to face and using the digital platform in recording short videos based on Academic Writing, which are then uploaded on Blackboard, for students to learn at their own pace. Students whose home language is not English are for the most part expected to cope with the demands of a university degree without any intervention from their lecturers (Ravichdran et al., 2017). Although Academic Literacy is compulsory in HEIs, its main objective is improving students' academic writing. However, due to students' tight class schedules, they struggle to find the time to attend classes (Tran, 2013). To turn around this hassle, blended learning should be specifically designed to improve

academic writing in English as the language of learning and teaching in almost all South African Universities.

Students at universities of Technology are known to encounter difficulties to write well and proficiently using academic discourses. Pineteh (2013) justifies that due to their linguistic and language backgrounds, their negative attitudes toward English academic writing becomes an unavoidable occurrence. Although academic discourse practices are not being taught at secondary schools in South Africa, a high proficiency is required from students at tertiary level. Many first-year students fall below the required proficiency level for home language or the language of preference at higher education institutions (DHET, 2017). This can be noticed in first year students' writing at HEIs who struggle to cope with the standard of home language proficiency defined by and required at HEIs. Pineteh (2013) further highlights the gap for multi-modalities and its potential to reach students who are struggling with academic writing. In view of this, very little research has been conducted about enabling academic spaces being created for first year students, transitioning students to practise academic writing skills in order to hone their academic writing practices.

The South African National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 was developed to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for higher education (DoHE, 2012). According to the Language Policy DoHE (2012), most students who enter HEIs are not fully proficient in the main languages (English and Afrikaans) being used for teaching and learning in higher education. Many first-year students are found to fall below in the required proficiency level for home language or the language of preference at higher education institutions (DHET, 2017). In South Africa, the minimum requirement to pass the National Senior Certificate (NSC) in one's home language is 40%, while the minimum requirement for higher education in home language is 50%. Results from the Benchmark Test Project National Report of 2016 show that the academic literacy levels of students intending to study teaching are low and that these students have attained only the basic levels of reading and writing. A major concern highlighted in this report is that these learners who envisage studying teacher's education are ultimately confronted with numerous challenges, one being their lack of preparedness for the rigorous demands of higher education. This also indicates that secondary education and higher education institutions are not aligned in terms of their minimum requirement to pass home language. Thus, students achieving the minimum NSC home language requirement may either never enter HEI's or they would struggle with the officially designated language of learning and teaching once they enter HEI.

Given that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a vital requirement in educational institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most HEI learning and teaching pedagogies have evolved from traditional face-to-face classes to blended learning that is teaching and learning using face-to-face encounters in combination with online learning. Based on this, it is important that HEIs, not only those based exclusively on a distance learning model, take advantage of the benefits of e-learning to improve teaching and learning platforms. This would help lecturers and students to cope with the increasing demands from higher education and training (Al-Qahtani & Higgins, 2012). Using digital technology in higher education may further augment the effective implementation of curriculum policy as well as create a learning platform in which students are keen to participate and to engage with the content (Waghid & Waghid, 2016). The 21<sup>st</sup> century focus on technology presents an ideal opportunity to use the digital platform as a space for students to learn, particularly those students who might be struggling with academic writing and who would appreciate not being publicly exposed to the stigma of struggling. On the digital platform they might experience the freedom and space to learn at their own pace.

In May 2018, the South African Minister of Higher Education Naledi Pandor, placed emphasis on the implementation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the implications that they are likely to have for education (DHET, 2018). The Fourth Industrial Revolution is

progressing at a rapid pace and is set to significantly transform the systems of the world as we know today. The Minister's speech reinforces the need to move forward with the Digital Age. On this basis, our academic writing intervention is intended to take place face to face and on a digital sphere, *Blackboard*. This necessitates that we propose the research question (RQ) as shown below:

How is blended learning currently implemented in the regular teaching and learning to improve first year students writing?

### **Theoretical framework**

Bourdieu (1990) in his *Theoretical Tools* of structural constructivism takes students' integration a level further. He investigates black minority, and low-income students to understand the environments in which they were raised, their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, and how these influenced their ability to cope with HEI discourses. Pather's study (2016) developed a holistic integrated framework named *the Conceptual Model* by using both Tinto (1993) and Bourdieu's (1990) works. The findings revealed that students' sense of belonging is shaped by the environments in which they are raised. Pather (2016) also identifies the gap between school and the HEI in students' transitioning process and encourages social interaction by building extra-curricular activities into the academic timetable to build and strengthen students' first year transition from schooling to HEIs. Her argument is that, should the transitioning gap be closed, fewer students are likely to drop out.

The above cited position offers a good context for the students under study and in a way clues the lecturers on the way forward. In keeping with the central tenets of with structural constructivism, Hibbert and Foncha (2019); Garrison et al.'s (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework integrates three elements, overlapping "presences", to trigger and sustain successful educational experiences in HEIs. These elements are:

- 1) cognitive presence,
- 2) social presence, and,
- 3) teaching presence.

Garrison et al. (2001) define the cognitive presence within the Community of Inquiry framework as the degree to which learners can construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and dialogue with one another, and the course content. Garrison et al. (2001) categorised the cognitive presence into a four-phase process of practical inquiry:

- 1) a triggering event, which refers to when an issue or problem is identified and needs to be resolved.
- 2) exploration, which refers to when students exploring the issue both individually and corporately through critical thinking and dialogue.
- 3) integration, which refers to learners moving from higher level critical thinking to developing their ideas; and
- 4) resolution, which refers to when learners apply the knowledge gained in an educational context.

Apart from students reflecting on their own academic writing, the lecturer should create a conducive platform of blended learning in class and on *Blackboard* for the students to use their critical thinking skills by deliberating and challenging one another's academic writing. Collaboratively, students need to develop problem-solving techniques by sharing their opinions and challenges with their peers and lecturer in the classroom as well as online. Students are



required to peer assess each other's work by identifying five challenges that they may be experiencing with writing. The peer then must resolve those identified challenges. The role of the lecturer would be to facilitate this exercise. Spiller (2012) states that students can help each other to fill the gaps in learning and make sense of formal learning. This means that when students discuss content among themselves, they use a simplified way of explaining, one that their peers would understand. For example, the lecturer may discuss the concept of pedagogy and perhaps not all the students grasp the concept. However, when the students are placed in groups there might be one that understood the concept of pedagogy and can explain it to their peers in a simple manner by perhaps saying that pedagogy refers to various teaching approaches. This simple explanation might make the concept clearer for their peers to understand. Orikassa (2012); Cooper et al. (2017) concur that group work creates the space for students to listen to one another and present opinions as they work towards a solution. Based on the above, this study intends to use blended learning as a social space to reduce fear and anxiety in the students where Blackboard comes in very handy. We next propose to address the contemporary debates which we believe will constitute the core of our review of literature on blended learning.

## **Literature review**

### ***Language learning as social practice***

Learning through technology has proliferated over the last decade and several studies conducted on technology and learning have proven the opportunities to improve teaching and learning (Bransford et al., 2000). In light of this, the effects of Augmented and Virtual Reality (AR and VR) has motivated language learning (Li et al., 2014). AR and VR are hyponyms for information technologies that enhance the real world with digital tools. Digital environments are created with ARs such as play station games and VRs create platforms for users to engage with each other and access information such as the Blackboard (BB) platform. For years, engineering students have been tasked to work with virtual tools using AR (Martín-Gutiérrez et al., 2010.). Similarly, history students could virtually visit historical artefacts and museum via AR (Pollalis et al., 2017), while science students may experiment mixing substances virtually within a safe environment (Sahin & Yilmaz, 2020).

AR has also proven beneficial to language learning (Holden & Sykes, 2011) where students can use AR to navigate their way around a town to find clues of a story. Gadelha (2018) states that VR is advantageous to students learning as they are absorbed in the VR. This helps to reduce distractions that generally takes place in the classroom. Meyer et al. (2019) also supports learning via VR by using videos because students can understand subject matter and how it impacts reality. Bonner and Reinders (2018) mention several other advantages of language learning such as the benefit of mobile learning where the students can move around with their devices and practically study from any location that suits their needs, thus promoting individuality. With the aid of gadgets, students can access information and resources to scaffold their knowledge at their comfort and convenience as well as actively partaking in their learning. This is meant to suggest the importance of blended learning pedagogy and methodologies as a conducive environment for learning.

### ***Asynchronous vs Synchronous teaching and learning***

E-learning and distance learning have become prominent in the past years but more so in 2020 when the world experienced the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic, as a result of which teaching and learning was moved onto this platform (Kim, 2020). According to the World

Health Organisation (2020), COVID-19 “is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus” which came to South Africa on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2020. During this period, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology ordered the early recess of universities and post-school institutions as a measure to contain the spread of Covid-19. The minister further said that universities had to “identify and explore digital online methodologies for teaching and learning” (University World News, 2021). Universities around the world including CPUT were obliged to convert face-to-face classes to online synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning. In order for students to access content and teaching, they turned to the use of multi-modal devices ranging like smart phones, laptops and tablets to be connected. This proved to be a huge problem as several students did not have access to smart phones or other devices at home but remained the only means through which the academic year could be completed.

Ultimately, teaching and learning proceeded via distance learning/e-learning modes. Since academics were new to teaching online during the pandemic, they had to use pedagogy that would have maximum engagement with students. Academics had to decide between using asynchronous learning vs synchronous learning. According to Tuominen and Leponiemi (2020), COVID-19 presence will continue to be a learning experience for the entire educational community. This means, hence forth, academics would need to embrace the online platform as life takes on a new normal in the educational sphere. Asynchronous learning refers to engaging students via e-mail and discussion groups facilitated by the instructor (Buxton, 2014). Later, pre-recorded videos were accepted as well and students had control over where and when they would learn (Griffiths & Graham, 2010; Watts, 2016). Watts (2016) highlights the transactional distance created by online learning as students need to be engage and interact with their peers and instructor.

### ***Blended learning***

We believe that the aim of blended learning writing intervention is to ensure that students are enabled to write texts independently in topics that they define themselves by using suitable guidance and the skills gained (Karasu, 2018, p. 116). The term blended learning is also known as e-learning, virtual learning and cyber learning with a brick-and-mortar element which is a teaching and learning space away from home. Blended learning course is characterised by partially being online and partially through various other connected modalities. This is to suggest that, what the students learn online informs what they may learn face to face. Expressed differently, an educational curriculum combines online digital media with the traditional classroom teaching methods. Blended learning is a broad approach, which includes e-learning and micro-learning. The difference between traditional instruction and e-learning is that traditional learning is structured and focuses on face-to-face learning which is teacher-centred. Although e-learning is a structured program as well, it is also student-centred as learning materials are uploaded online and students determine their time, place and pace of learning.

Online learning can be informal and/or fulltime. Informal online learning is when a student uses technology to learn aside the university program by watching educational videos. On the other hand, fulltime online learning is when teaching and learning takes place in a virtual space and not in a classroom. In keeping with the issues and insights we have focused so far, we now refer to the four models of blended learning: Rotation Model, Flex Model, Self-blend Model and Enriched Virtual Model. The Rotation Model is a course in which the students have a fixed schedule when they rotate between online learning and other pedagogies such as face-to-face learning and teaching. The Rotation Model is sub-divided into four categories:

- 1) Station Rotation happens when the students rotate between online learning, face-to-face learning, group activities in class and assignments. In this study, the students moved between the face-to-face learning to working in pairs and then moving onto the online learning on blackboard.
- 2) Lab Rotation happens when the students have a fixed timetable and moves between the classroom and labs to do online learning.
- 3) Flipped Classroom happens when students have a fixed timetable for face-to-face learning in the classroom and have access to the course content online after the university day at their preferred time and place. Students have a fixed timetable and a designated time for the face-to-face teaching of English. In this case, students have access to the online materials at any time. They may choose to use the university computer labs or they may choose to work from their own devices at home and at their own convenience.
- 4) Individual Rotation happens when the students have a personalised timetable to move between learning pedagogies. The Flex model allows the students to have a fluid timetable moving between online learning and face-to-face learning. The Self Model allows students to choose either to do the course online or face-to-face in the classroom. For the Enriched-Virtual model, students move between learning on campus and online. For the purpose of this study, the students made use of the station rotation when they moved from face- to- face learning to working in pairs after they had written the first draft of their assignment. The students also made use of the individual rotation when they move from the face-to-face learning which is in their fixed timetable to a fluid timetable online to watch the videos at their own pace.

The advantages of blended learning are that a student is engaged and in control of their learning. By mixing the traditional classroom with the online classroom, students are interactive and use their senses and skills other than merely listening to the lecturer. The face-to-face interactions followed by the online interaction strengthens the benefits of each other. Knowledge gained in both the traditional and online classroom develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Lentz, 2021). We believe that the use of multiple learning platforms allows the students to have access to information in a variety of ways such as videos, podcasts among others at their leisure. Students' knowledge retention improves dramatically due to the interactive elements of the learning process which is the built-in assessment, feedback and practical implementation. Blended learning offers a richer learning experience as students apply what they have learnt and use the feedback given by the lecturer to improve their work (Langer, 2021).

Notwithstanding the points we have voiced in support of E-learning, we are aware that it can be criticised for not allowing students to socialise face-to-face. Based on this, Picciano (2006) says that blended learning bridges the gap between face-to-face learning and online learning. Viewed from this perspective, Blended Learning is an umbrella approach to learning which includes E-learning and several micro-learning approaches. These micro-learning approaches include; Face-to-face learning, virtual classroom, webinars, links, simulations, assessment and one-on-one coaching work (Langer, 2021).

## **Methodology**

For the purpose of this study the data we have used were based on our classroom/Blackboard interactions with the students. As such, we as lecturers provided students with videos and links to videos on academic writing prior to our face-to-face teaching in class. After the face-to-face learning, the students were expected to do their writing assignment which was assessed by us as their lecturers. Once the assignment was assessed, we the lecturers gave feedback to the students during individual consultation and in class with the rest of the students. Thereafter, we were able to determine which aspects of writing that needed to be addressed. Once we had done this, we identified and uploaded short videos about each of the respective aspects on the Blackboard to act like scaffolds to the students. Blackboard became the virtual classroom in which students had the opportunity to learn and engage with us the lecturers and their peers. We again assessed the students and gave them feedback individually during consultation times and in class with the rest of the students. Each of these micro-learning approaches strengthened blended learning. (We hasten to point out at this juncture that this paper forms a part of Ms Lentz Master's dissertation with Foncha playing the role of her supervisor.) The total population of the study included 30 first year Intermediate phase students and two first year IP language lecturers.

### ***Data***

The results for this study were obtained through essay writing, reading journal, WhatsApp group chats, short story and discussion group and extracts from student's essays. We also feel that it is necessary to stress at this junction that reading and writing are two sides of the same coin. Based on this, the focus of our teaching is based on how students can read a text and respond to the text which is why the use of literature is needed in the teaching of writing to make it appear as a kind of social practice. Given the enormous amount of the data collected, we have had to make a judicious selection from it which we believe could serve as a representative sampling of it. Moreover, as the collected data had remarkable resemblances and congruencies in it, we believed that such a representative sampling will be tenable.

### ***Essay writing***

We asked the students to write a one-page essay introducing themselves about how their teachers impacted on their schooling career and how this made an on the lives of the students. We chose this topic because these are education students. Once qualified, these students would be teaching in communities and have the power to impact and make a difference in the lives of children. We wanted the students to understand the pivotal role they would play in the lives of their pupils, once they qualify and started teaching. We looked at the basic structure of an essay on the blackboard.

We also discussed the writing process as mentioned by the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) Document. In view of this, the writing process involved planning, drafting, editing and re-writing. Students had to submit their essay on Blackboard. This activity was used as a baseline assessment activity to gauge the students' standard of writing. After looking at their essays it was evident that majority of the students were able to perform the task, but their writing still needed improvement. We gave general feedback to all the students about the structure and the use of linking/transitional words. However, these principles were reinforced in every creative writing lesson. For the rest of the lesson, we looked at language and language in education. We looked at the statistics of the official languages in the SA Curriculum and how South African children whose first language is not English are taught in

their home language. The class had a robust discussion about how difficult it is to transition to English from their home language. Below is a sample from a student who scored 70% in a poetry assignment:

First Language 1: English (FEN151S)

8 March 2020

*Behind my mask*

*Behind my mask* is an array of emotions even I might not fully understand. I am scared; I am worried; I am a dreamer.

*Behind the mask* of a calm, collected, mature adult lies a frightened, insecure young woman, that still feels like a child at heart. A young woman who wants nothing more than the comfort of her mother's arms. I want to achieve so much and yet fear has me trapped within its icy grip. I fear failure, I fear disappointing my parents and even more so myself. I am angry that I allow fear to cloud my thoughts and judgements.

*Behind the mask* of a supportive daughter, cousin, sister and friend is someone who is confused, frustrated and worried. Here is a girl relying so deeply on her faith, praying and believing that things will work out the way they are supposed to, even if she does not see it right now. I want to scream and cry out of anger and pain, that they deserve happiness and not heartache. I want to hold them close and encircle them in a cocoon of warmth and happiness to ward off the grey clouds lurking ahead.

*Behind the mask* of a patient, enduring student, I desire the future me. The person that has achieved the things I can only dream of at this stage in my life. The person that has her life figured out, that can support her family and lessen the burdens placed upon her parent's shoulders.

*Behind the mask* of a homebody, lies an aspirant traveller. I long for a different country. A place where there is less suffering and heartache. However unrealistic, I long for it. I long for a place where children can walk safely in the streets and are not forced to grow up sooner than they have to. I want to feel happiness when I think about the world not anger, frustration and disbelief. I want to feel safe.

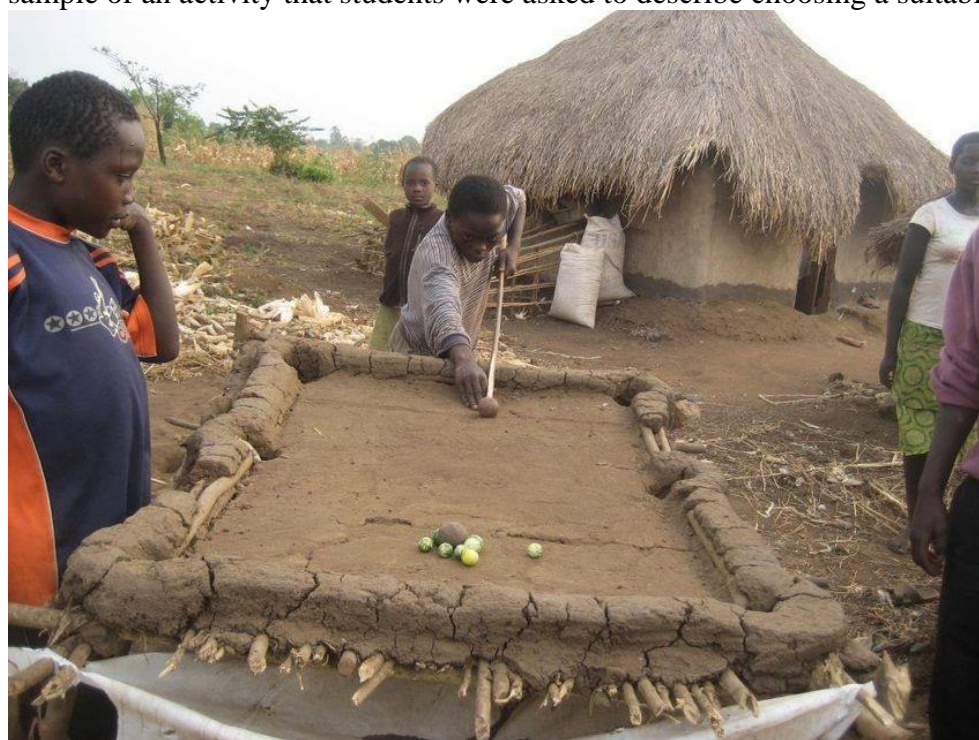
*Behind my mask* lies a girl who is trying her best to make it through life, day by day, week by week. A girl who wants to appreciate the small moments in life instead of worrying about whether the big ones will happen. *Behind my mask*, lies so much more and all of it is me.

The essay above shows the student's attempt to analyze the poem by retelling the story the way she/he understands it. Although the student is not critical at this stage, there is evidence that once she/he engages with the feedback from the lecturer, there would be improvement and development.

### ***The reading journal***

With a view to facilitating and associating the reading journal, we also taught the elements of a story: characters; setting; plot; themes, as well as reading strategies. To teach the reading strategies, we brought several children's books along to class to demonstrate the application of

the reading strategies. We would take a book and ask students to make predictions based on the title and by skimming through the book or the blurb. We further spoke about how connections are made with a book. We also taught students how to appreciate and evaluate a book. This lesson was important as the students were tasked to write six book reviews on children's books. This exercise was meant to show how students respond to the stories they read and also to provoke critical thinking and problem solving skills. At the end of the lesson, students were given the instruction for the reading journal as well as the rubric, which we uploaded to BB. Students needed to use an A5 Hardcover for the reading journal. Below is a sample of an activity that students were asked to describe choosing a suitable topic.

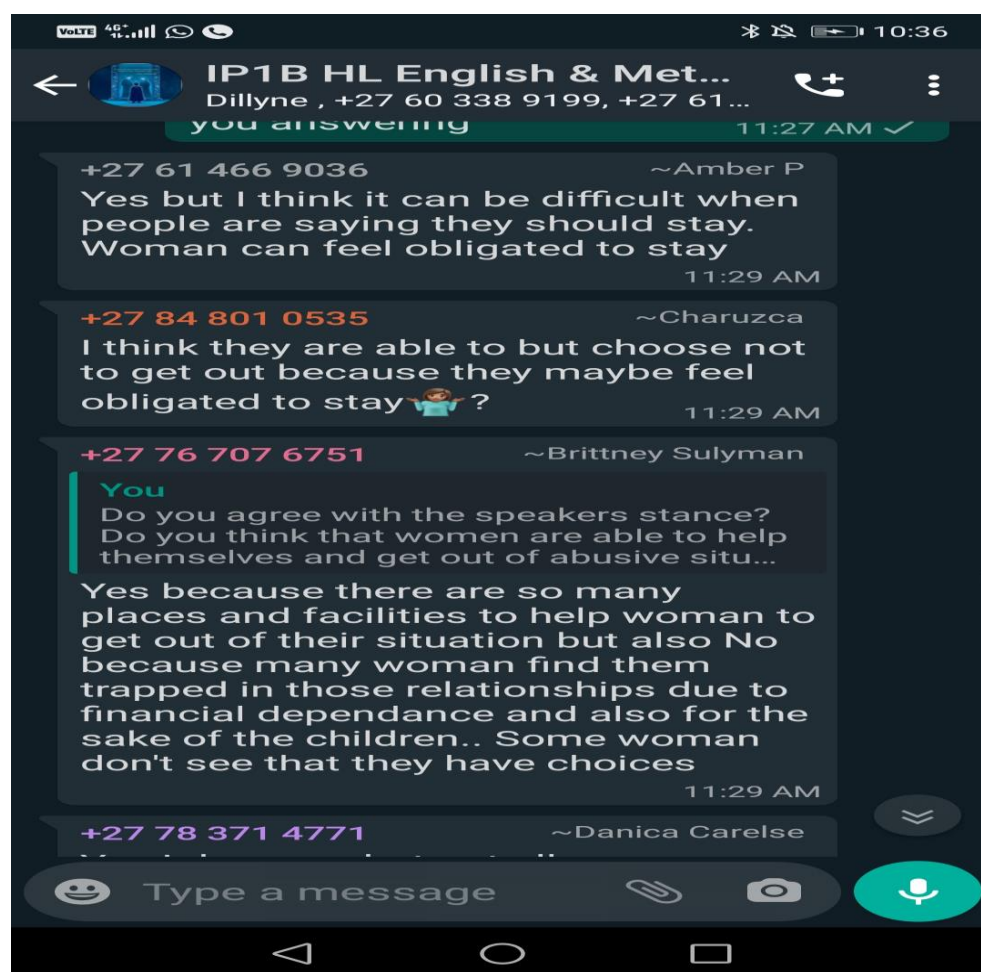


The purpose of the reading journal was to teach students how to summarize, analyze and respond to literary texts. Students had to comment on the structure of the picture by describing what they perceived as well as comment on the setting, characters, key incidents and creative features. Finally, they had to evaluate the photograph by expressing an opinion or judgement.

### ***WhatsApp groups***

Information and materials were posted on WhatsApp group chat by us for students to access at their convenience. We did this because during COVID 19, learning was only online and so this platform became one of the easily accessible/affordable by students through their smart phones. Students could ask questions in the group which was answered by us lecturers or by peers. Clarification on these questions helped some of the timid students who would not find courage to ask questions in the group. This virtual platform gave students courage to overcome their fears and also to understand that their fears and anxiety is also shared by peers. Students enjoyed the immediate feedback that they received on the W/A group. During our lecture on W/A, they would answer each other's questions or seek for clarity on what was not understood at first. Although they were not receiving face-to-face lectures, the real time feedback was equally appreciated. Eventually, the W/A platform became a crucial mode for my teaching during the Lockdown because of COVID-19. Needless to say that we used the Blackboard

(BB) Collaborate and email also came handy for uploading material and submitting assignments. Below is a sample of the WhatsApp conversation with students.



Based on the data above, the WhatsApp group chat provided a conducive environment for collaborative learning. First year students were able to raise their concerns which were either dealt with by the lecturer or peers.

### *Discussion groups*

In addition to loading teaching materials, we created discussion groups on BB on the left panel with the heading discussions. We later clicked on the discussion and created a discussion group for each week so that students could ask any question that they may have about the content that they may have. Threads would be created with each new contributor. These threads were visible to the whole class and peers could respond to them freely. We as the lecturers monitored the BB for any engagements by sometimes starting a thread with a question to arouse student's engagements and responses. Below is a sample account of the interaction with students on BB based on their assignments.



Content x +

myclassroom.cput.ac.za/ultra/courses/\_85105\_1/cl/outline

### Mark Assignment: Descriptive Essay

Assign a mark and feedback for the current assignment attempt. Override the overall mark for the assignment by typing a mark in the mark field. If multiple attempts for a test have been allowed, a Student's mark is not released until all of the attempts have been marked. Click **Hide Usernames** to mark attempts with user names hidden. Click **Show User Names** to display user information. [More Help](#)

Jump to... Hide Usernames Refresh

Viewing 65 of 77 gradable items

< [checkmark] SANELISIWE KILI (Attempt 1 of 1) >

Exit

#### Assignment Instructions

The conversion process may have changed the spacing in this submission. You can still download the original file.

Page 2 of 2

#### Assignment Details

**MARK**  
LAST MARKED ATTEMPT **15.00 / 30**

**ATTEMPT**  
08/03/20 21:27 **15.00 / 30**

**SafeAssign** 0% overall match

#### Feedback to Learner

For the toolbar, press ALT+F10 (PC) or ALT+FN+F10 (Mac).

Satisfactory attempt. However, you misunderstood the instruction. You were supposed to describe your life, behind the mask. A reflection of your own life and not regurgitate what was in the story by relaying what was behind the main character's mask. For instance, we wear various masks at home; we wear a specific mask that is acceptable and conducive to wear around our loved ones and family. We do not necessarily wear the same mask around our peers because we have a very different relationship with them. Around our family, we may feel accepted for who we are but around our peers we may feel that we need to project a certain persona to fit in with them and to be accepted by them.

The students were obliged to submit their assignments through BB which were marked online and feedback also given to them. Again, they had an opportunity to interact with the lecturer and peers

## Discussion of Findings

Based on the data findings presented above, there is justifiable evidence that first year Students are only able to structure a basic piece of writing as they were taught in high school. In view of this, first year students need guidance with structuring their writing as they would muddle points in an illogical manner. It is also interesting to note that there were problems with the technical aspects of writing (Orikassa, 2012; Street, 2004). Likewise, our students were able to write their response to the short story, poetry and novels taught in class but needed guidance with paragraphing, structuring and other grammaticality. The data appears to concur with Lillis's (2001) assertion that the skill of academic writing does not come naturally but must be taught and practiced. Needless to say, that if the majority of the students are not assisted, it would affect all their academic subjects, as they need to be competent in writing in all their modules (Costa, 2019).

To make matters worse, it is a common belief among academics that it is the responsibility of language lecturers to teach academic writing. It is in this light that academic writing is seen as collaborative pursuit across subjects to hone the skill in the students. This assertion concurs with the views of Orikassa (2012) who believe that academic development practitioners need to align their research and practices so that students can write well across disciplines. To achieve this goal, blended learning is required as an intervention to polish student's academic writing because it provides a conducive space for the students on blackboard and WhatsApp group chat. We often take for granted that students today know how to use technology because they are constantly on their phones. However, Picciano (2006), observes that the success of blended learning greatly depends on students' access to devices and knowledge of software. By virtue of poor planning and teaching, students learning may regress with the use of technology (Howard, Ma & Yang, 2016). To this end, knowledge gained in both the traditional and online classroom develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Therefore, the extension of learning improves the retention of students' knowledge because of interactive elements of the learning process which is the built-in assessment



The inquisition of assessing students' initial writing assignments manifested a struggle with structuring writing and the technical aspects of the English language. In addition, students struggled with critical thinking skills which impacted on their writing skills. Furthermore, students struggled with minimal reading skill which has had a direct effect on how they write. The inquest reflects that first-year students may have a misconceived perception of what academia is and what their contribution should be. This may be brought on by the accepted precedent set at high school. Based on the data findings presented above, blended learning is needed to make first year students understand the importance of structuring their work.

Considering all the advantages that blended learning has presented in terms of learning and teaching, it would do students injustice to solely use traditional teaching methods or virtual teaching and learning only. This appears to concur with the view of Picciano (2006), who asserts that a combination of face to face and online teaching and learning bridges the gap which traditional teaching and virtual teaching present on its own. Unequivocally, blended learning pedagogy has a role to play as intervention for academic writing (Gourlay et al., 2014).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned points, Translanguaging made students to understand that their own language is important and may afford them the opportunity to assist their peers that may be struggling with the language of learning and teaching. To this effect, Seltzer (2019); Hibbert and Foncha (2019) argue that English should not be taught in isolation from other languages but should present an opportunity for students to be flexible and creative in developing their language proficiencies. Translanguaging celebrates students' diversity and strengthens power relations in class (Wei, 2018). This is to suggest that Translanguaging gives students the opportunity to respond to the short stories, novels and poems that they read as literature text in class. This concurs with the argument that all languages need to build stronger relations between lecturers and students (Wei, 2018). As such, Translanguaging seems to align with the CPUT's Language Policy that the institution must create a multilingual environment that promotes the institution's unique African identity, conducts inclusive teaching and learning and address the historical injustices (CPUT version 0.1, 2019).

## Conclusion

It is apparent that majority of our non-English language students are challenged by the English Language policy of the institution because several students cannot participate in class discussions and critical debates. In addition, the level of their written language exercises is a strong indication that these students are severely hampered not by their intellects, but by their inability to think, process and meaningfully write in a language that remains foreign to them (Foncha et al., 2016). The acknowledgement of this fact is what has motivated us to carry out this investigation with the hope to come up with the suggested blended learning interventions that may pitch first year students to the level of Higher Education.

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# **Which is worth more? From Non-native speakers' perspective: British or American**

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## **Abstract**

The ownership of English has been hotly debated for a long time by researchers in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). World Englishes expand the ownership of English from Inner Circle countries to Outer and Expanding Circle countries based on Kachru's (1985) Three Circle Model. In light of this, it can be claimed that World Englishes concept raises awareness about different varieties of English. Therefore, the more widespread the World English concept has now become, the more research is needed to contribute to the field from different contexts. In keeping with this aim, the present study mainly focuses on accent preferences of non-native English instructors from Turkey between the two standard varieties of English, pronunciation teaching, and attitudes towards non-native varieties of English. The questionnaire and interview data collected in this mixed-method design study showed that there was a positive attitude towards adopting British accent among 37 English language instructors working at either state or private universities in Turkey. The study also revealed that there might be a relationship among English language instructors' accent preferences, their beliefs about pronunciation teaching and their beliefs about the ownership of English. Taking into consideration these findings, the present study suggests some implications for both teacher educators and curriculum development units.

**Keywords:** the ownership of English; World Englishes; prestige; the standard varieties of English.

## **Introduction**

Regardless of the number of non-native and native speakers of English, the ownership of English has been hotly debated for a long time by researchers in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). However, it is certain that English is a global language that belongs to anyone, not only the property of inner circle countries (IC) in Kachru's (1985) Three Circle model, where English is spoken as a native language. However, the ownership of English expands to the Outer Circle countries (OC) and Expanding Circle countries (EC), which are countries where English is spoken as an official second language and countries where English is spoken as a foreign language, respectively (Jenkin, 2003). As well as the studies in Inner Circle countries, the number of the studies about preference for different varieties of English carried out in Outer and Expanding Circle countries is increasing (Jenkins, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Monfared, 2019). The present study also aims to provide insights into English Language instructors' beliefs and attitudes towards two standard varieties of English, pronunciation teaching and the ownership of English from Turkey which is also one of the EC countries.

## **Literature Review**

From a sociolinguistics perspective, the term prestige is defined as "the degree of esteem and social value attached by members of a speech community to certain languages, dialects, or features of a language variety" (Nordquist, 2017). Regarding the term prestige in language attitude studies, the previous studies showed that native speaker norm was considered as the

prestigious one in the ELT field (Jenkins, 2005; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005; Soruç, 2015). Non-native speakers deem native-like accent as “good, perfect, fluent, real, original, competent, proficient, and correct” whereas a non-native accent is considered “not good, deficient, fake, and strong” (Jenkins, 2005, p. 541). In the related literature, there have also been studies about the preferences of either students or pre-service teachers about the varieties of English (Carrie, 2017; Coşkun, 2011; Kang, 2015; Ladegard, 1998; Ladegard, & Sachdev, 2006; Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2010) and attitudes towards pronunciation teaching and English as an International Language (EIL) concept, especially in Expanding Circle countries such as Iran, Greece, Norway, Japan, and Turkey (Coşkun, 2011; Khatib, & Monfared, 2017; Rindal, 2010; Sifakis & Sougari, 2005). However, there not many studies about language attitudes towards non-native and native accent of English (Akçay, 2020). The studies from Turkish context focuses on English instructors’ attitudes towards native and non-native varieties of English (Akçay, 2020) and pre-service teachers’ preferences among native and non-native varieties of English (Karakaş, 2019). Therefore, the present study mainly aims to contribute to the field by generating insights into English language instructor’s preference between native accents of English, British or American, rather than their preferences for native or non-native accents. Thus, the present study is expected to fill a gap in the literature both in terms of the participant profile and its focus.

Regarding this issue, there are also some other studies in the literature stating that Received Pronunciation (RP) has been associated with more competence and status (Ball, 1983; Carrie, 2017; Coupland & Bishop 2007; Giles 1970). However, Kang (2015) claims that the most favorable accent was seen to be British accent in the early studies, but recently, American accent has become more popular. In addition to these, Monfared (2019) found out that American accent was considered as the ideal model by Iranian and Turkish teachers from EC countries whereas Malaysian and Indian teachers, who are from OC countries, have chosen British accent as the ideal model of English. Therefore, this study takes a close look at accent preferences of non-native English instructors in Turkey, which is also one of the EC countries according to Kachru’s (1985) Three Circle Model, between the two standard varieties of English, British vs. American, their beliefs about pronunciation teaching in general. While doing this, I wish to find out whether their accent preferences among two standard varieties of English and their beliefs about teaching can be traced back to their beliefs about ownership of English. Given this, the study contributes to the field by deducing insights from Turkish context and collecting data from in-service teachers at tertiary level, unlike the studies with pre-service teachers (Coşkun, 2011; Karakaş, 2019).

In keeping with the purpose of the study, I have proposed the following research questions:

- 1) Do English language instructors in Turkey have a preference between standard varieties of English (British accent vs. American accent)?
- 2) What are the attitudes of English language instructors in Turkey pronunciation teaching in general?

## Methodology

The participants of the study are 37 Turkish instructors of English working at Schools of Foreign Languages from seven different universities in Turkey. There were equal number of participants from state or private universities in Turkey (n=18 each). There was only one person who was unemployed at the time of the study.

The participants were selected based on convenience sampling method used in the study because they voluntarily accepted to participate in the study. Also, most of the

participants were women in the study because ELT departments are generally dominated by women in Turkey and therefore, people working in School of Foreign Languages are mostly women, too.

In order to investigate English instructors' accent preferences between British or American English, beliefs about pronunciation teaching in general and teaching non-native varieties of English, an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were employed as research instruments in the study. The questionnaire consists of three parts (Appendix). The first part is related to the demographic information of the participants. In the second part, instructors are asked to listen to two audio recordings taken from the website the speech accent archive, where there are recordings of native and non-native speakers of different languages while reading the same passage. On this website, it is also possible to search for recordings based on speakers' demographic and linguistic backgrounds. In the present study, two recordings from this website were used to check whether there is a tendency among Turkish instructors of English to consider either British or American English as more preferable. In keeping with this aim, two speakers, who are both male and at similar ages, were chosen. One of the speakers is 20-year-old male native speaker of English from London, England, UK as a representative of British accent whereas the other one is 19-year-old male native speaker from Akron, Ohio, USA as a representative of American accent. The rationale behind the choice of these speakers, who are at similar ages and the same sex, is to avoid any possible confounding variables in the study.

After the participants have listened to the recordings without explicitly being told that one of them is British and the other one is American, they were instructed to decide which speaker sounded better and more educated to them. In addition, the participants were expected to choose some adjectives for each of the speakers. There were 15 adjectives in total, including both positive and negative adjectives. For example, there are some adjectives like confident, clear, intelligent, and enthusiastic on the positive side whereas aggressive, unkind, and unintelligent are given among the options as negative ones. Thus, this part of the questionnaire indirectly aimed to find out about the preferences of the participants about the varieties of English based on their answers. Finally, the last part of the questionnaire, comprising 14 items, were adapted from Coşkun (2011) in order to match the items with the constructs of the present study. While adapting the questionnaire, I consulted an expert from ELT field in order to ensure whether each item served the purpose of the study.

In the adapted questionnaire, the first two items are related to accent preferences of the participants and their reasons for this preference. Items 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 aim to elicit perceptions of the participants about importance and goals of pronunciation teaching. Items 9 and 10 are related to participants' opinions about non-native varieties of English and having a non-native accent, respectively. In addition, item 11 aims to find out their opinions about the ideal pronunciation teacher. After that, the definition of EIL is expected to be chosen by the participants in item 12. Finally, item 13 is related to the expectation of the participants about coursebook contents and, item 14 is aimed to explore participants' opinions about the ownership of English.

In order to facilitate triangulation in the study, semi-structured interviews were also carried out with six participants, who accepted to take part in a follow-up interview. Interviews mainly consisted of four questions adapted from Jenkins (2005) with view to understanding their perceptions about their own accents versus native accent, the prestige they attach to each accent, and their own experiences. In addition to that, there were two more questions based on questionnaire data. Firstly, they were asked to give a reason for the findings of the questionnaire data and then, they are expected to explain their adjective choices for each speaker as well.

I carried out the interviews through Google Meet platform at a particular time when the interviewees were available.

I decided to present the findings of the questionnaire data presented under seven general categories such as accent preferences of English language instructors between two standard varieties of English, the importance of native-like pronunciation and pronunciation teaching, perceptions about non-native varieties of English, and English as an International language. These categories include the findings of the study in relation to relevant items in the questionnaire. This is to suggest, that the items related to each category were presented together in order to be able to understand the whole data better. Frequency counts were also presented for each category.

In order to be able to analyze qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, content analysis was applied. Based on fourteen-staged method for qualitative interview analysis in Burnard's (1991) study, I decided to take the following steps:

- 1) Take notes during the interviews.
- 2) Read the transcriptions.
- 3) Reread the transcriptions and try to find categories as many as possible.
- 4) Group categories under higher order headings.
- 5) Revise the list.
- 6) Get help from other researchers to ensure the reliability and the validity.
- 7) Reread the transcriptions along with the final version of the categories.
- 8) Revise each transcript again and points are elicited from transcriptions about each category.
- 9) Collect all the items related to each category.
- 10) Categorize items under the appropriate heading.
- 11) Combine all the parts together for writing results sections.
- 12) Check the appropriateness of the category system by talking to the participants.
- 13) Start writing process.
- 14) Write the finding of the study either referring to previous work or not (p. 462-464).

## **Results**

### ***Instructor's accent preference between British or American English***

As regards the questionnaire results, it cannot be concluded that there is a preference between British and American English by Turkish instructors of English because the percentages are similar and there are contradictory results in two questions related to the recording. The questionnaire data show that more than half of the English instructors think that Speaker 2, who has American accent, sounds better than Speaker 1 with British accent (n=19, n=17) There is only one person who thinks that they are equal. However, interestingly, the person who is speaking with native British accent is regarded as more educated by 56.8% of the participants than American accent (n=21) whereas only 27% of the participants consider British accent as more educated (n=10). The rest of the participants claim that it is not possible to compare them in terms of being educated (n=6). Therefore, they were asked to make comments on why the study might show this result. Instructors were also expected to define British and American accent. American accent is considered as "more colloquial, daily, more intelligible, close to Turkish language, multicultural, global, more natural, informal, better, and clear" whereas they define British accent as "respected, royal, more formal, difficult, sophisticated, hard, clever, closed to the world, difficult, far away from Turkish language, and proficient".

As for the total number of positive and negative adjectives used for each speaker (see Table 1), 11 different positive adjectives were used 102 times in total for Speaker 1, whereas the participants used these adjectives 101 time for Speaker 2. In addition, four negative



adjectives were used 24 times for speaker 1 and 19 times for Speaker 2. For example, the adjective “confident” was used 17 times for speaker 1 whereas it was used 11 times for Speaker 2. However, adjective “*clear*” was used 11 times for speaker 2 but 17 times for Speaker 1. Other than these, the frequencies of positive and negative adjectives are similar to each other for both of the speakers, as shown in Table 1. Based on this, it can be concluded that the positive adjectives were more frequently used for both speakers compared to the negative ones.

Table 1

*Frequency of positive and negative adjectives used for each speaker*

	Speaker 1	Speaker 2
Positive adjectives		
Confident	18	11
Kind	15	17
Enthusiastic	6	7
Intelligent	8	5
Hardworking	4	8
Comforting	11	8
Clear	14	17
Prestigious	2	3
Good-natured	9	6
Respected	6	8
Friendly	9	11
TOTAL	102	101
Negative adjectives		
Unkind	5	5
Unintelligent	1	1
Unambitious	10	7
Aggressive	8	6
TOTAL	24	19

### ***Instructors' own accents***

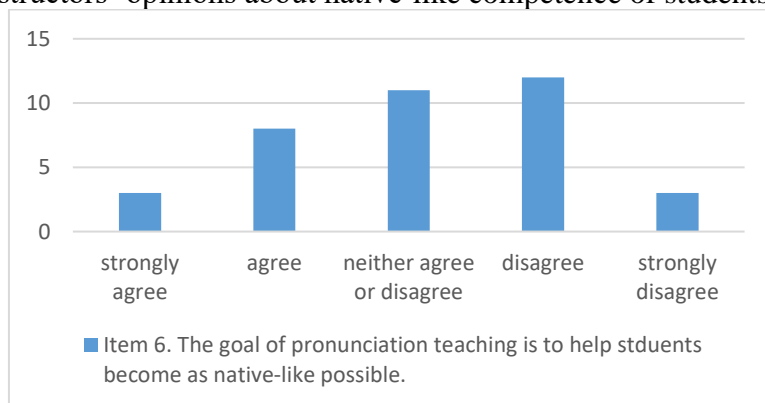
The results showed that 43.2% of English instructors think that they have a standard American English (n=16). The other 37.8% of the participants claim that they have a type of Turkish accent (n=14) and the rest of them state they have a standard British accent (n=7). Also, when they were asked to explain the source of their accent, the majority of the participants stated that they learned it at school (n=23). A total of 32.4% of the participants claim that they identify themselves with the variety of English they have (n=12), and 27.9% of the participants think that they have this variety of English because it sounds better to them (n=10). There are also instructors who think that their variety of English comes from a combination of two factors (n=10). For example, some of them said it was because of both identification and school. Finally, there is only one person who attributes his or her accent to family background.

### ***Importance of native like pronunciation and pronunciation teaching***

A great majority of the English instructors (n=22) believe that teaching pronunciation is important in their context, that is prep-schools in Turkey. Similarly, the other participants think that it is very important to teach pronunciation except two of them who suggested that teaching pronunciation is not important in their context. In addition, almost all of the instructors strongly agreed upon the importance of having clear and intelligible pronunciation as 34 out of 37 instructors in the study claimed that it is very important. However, although the majority of them give importance to pronunciation teaching and having clear and intelligible pronunciation, there are different opinions about the importance of native like pronunciation of English instructors. Nine instructors stated that native-like pronunciation for an English instructor is very important. A total of 14 participants consider it important whereas 14 other participants consider it not to be important. In addition, the instructors had a consensus on the statement that the goal of pronunciation teaching is to help students become clear and intelligible. However, when it comes to native like pronunciation for students, there is not a general agreement among instructors. For example, eight instructors agree with the statement whereas 12 of them disagree with it. The opinions of the instructors about this item are summarized in *Figure 1*.

***Figure 1***

Instructors' opinions about native-like competence of students



Finally, the results about the ideal pronunciation teacher, item 11, is also presented in this section due to its relevance. More than half of the participants (n=20) preferred native speakers for ideal pronunciation teacher, whereas the rest of the participants preferred a

successful bilingual teacher. All of these results explain the attitudes of English instructors towards pronunciation teaching, which is the second research question in the study.

### ***Perceptions about non-native varieties of English***

Overall, the study shows that there are different opinions in relation to non-native varieties of English among English instructors. As for the necessity of being exposed to non-native varieties of English in pronunciation classes, the opinions of the instructors differ from one another. Less than half of the participants (n=12) think that it is necessary to be exposed to non-native varieties. However, seven of the instructors are not sure of the necessity of exposure to non-native varieties in pronunciation classes whereas three instructors strongly disagree with this item in the study. The details are provided in Figure 2.

There is no agreement upon item 9 by the instructors in the study. In light of this, more than half of the instructors (n=20) agree or strongly agree on teaching or being taught non-native varieties of English. However, there are eleven instructors who neither agree nor disagree with this item whereas six instructors prefer to teach and to be taught non-native varieties of English. Finally, the instructors cannot agree upon whether strong non-native accent is acceptable while speaking with a native speaker of English. There are instructors who neither agree nor disagree about this statement (n=12). However, 15 instructors agree or strongly agree with it. The details about item 10 are provided in Figure 3.

Figure 2

*Instructor's opinions about exposure to different non-native varieties of English*

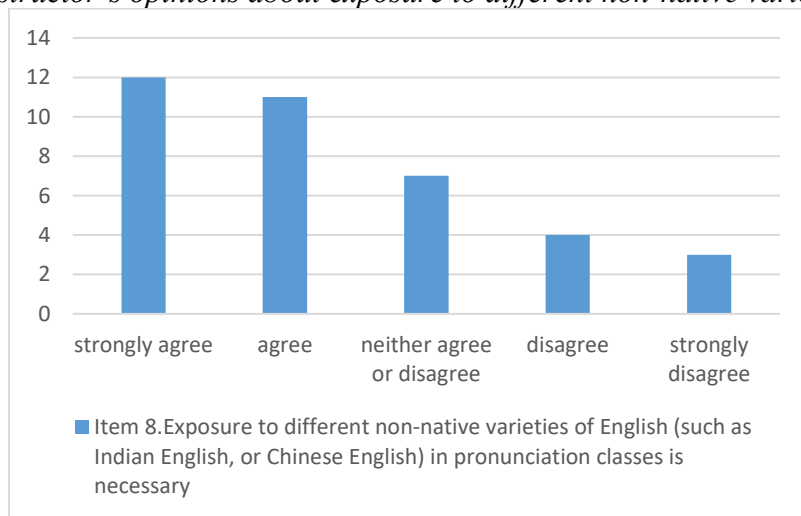
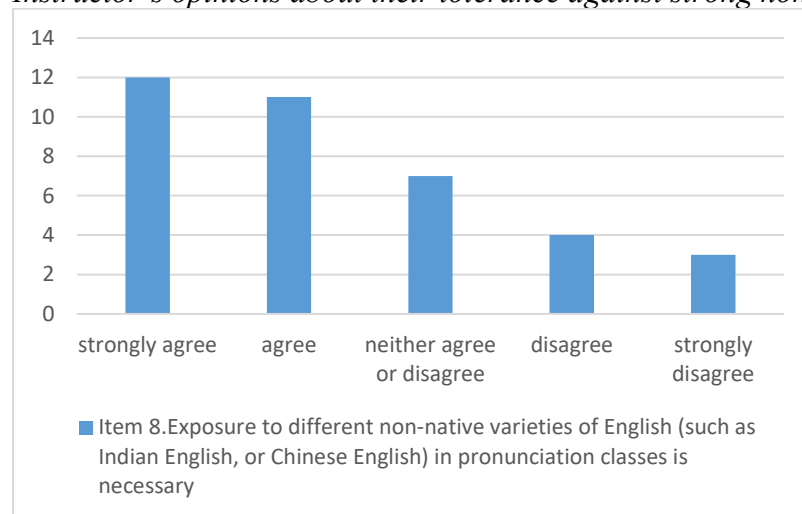


Figure 3

*Instructor's opinions about their tolerance against strong non-native accent*



### ***English as an International Language***

Item 12 aims to elicit what English instructors understand from the term International English. They could either choose among three definitions or write their own definition about the term. Except one, all of the instructors chose among the options. The majority of the instructors define EIL as English easily understood by everyone (n=33). Each of the other two definitions of EIL, “English with a particular accent” chosen by only one of the participants and “English spoken by any native speaker of English” definition was chosen by two instructors in the study. Moreover, one of the instructors suggested another definition of EIL in his/her own words; “A fundamental consensus on parameters for acceptable communication within English (P31)”.

### ***Preference for a conversation in a listening or pronunciation coursebook***

Instructors were asked to decide how frequently they use the activity types having different interaction patterns such as real conversation among native speakers, role playing assuming roles of people from other countries, and authentic videos with native and non-native speakers. Real conversations among native speakers are frequently used by the instructors without exception. Notwithstanding this, authentic videos with native and non-native speakers are also stated as activities frequently used by the instructors with only two exceptions. However, a minority group claims that they rarely use real conversation among native and non-native speakers and role playing assuming native speakers (n=3, n=4, respectively) and there is also another minority group which states that they never use role-playing assuming roles of people from other countries and role-playing assuming roles of native speakers of English. However, in general, the results showed that there is a preference for conversation or activities which include native speakers of English.

### ***The ownership of English***

The instructors were also expected to rate three groups of people in order of importance in the study. The study results showed that the majority of the instructors consider native speakers as the owner of English (n=22). Similarly, one of the teachers in the interview quotation:

P8: “The ownership of English belongs to British people”.

The number of people who think native speakers are the owners of English (n=22) are close to the number of people who believe exposure to non-native varieties of English is not necessary (n=20). This appears to confirm that there is a relationship between beliefs about the ownership of English and attitudes towards teaching non-native varieties of English.

In order to triangulate the questionnaire data, the participants were asked whether they wanted to participate in a follow-up interview and six out of 37 volunteered to participate in the interview. The interview data were analyzed by applying content analysis. As I read the transcripts of each participant again and again, certain categories emerged from the data such as features of both British and American accent, other characteristics of the speakers in the recordings, reasons why people consider British accent more educated, classroom practices in relation to World Englishes, and accent they would like to have.

To begin with, participants were asked to give a possible reason for their choice between British or American accent at the beginning of the interview. They believe that this can stem from various reasons. These reasons range from the educational background of the participants favoring British accent, the association between British accent and Royal family to the characteristics of British accent such as being more sophisticated, formal and the ownership of English. The excerpts provided below can help illustrate the point in discussion here:

P13: "I remember the university years with my instructors when this British accent is concerned."

P13: "The British accent seems more formal because of Royal spoken languages. The language reminds me of those family, the things, what is going on there but for the American accent, I generally remember film, movies, soap operas, dramas everything like the informal daily life. So, I can make a difference between to accents as this. One of them is much more informal and daily but the other is more royal and formal."

P8: "I think the ownership of English belongs to British people because they are the native speaker of that language".

P9: "British culture is more sophisticated whereas American culture are more prone to popular culture.

The instructors were also expected to elaborate their opinions about the adjectives they used for each speaker in the interviews and give reasons for their choice. It was stated that English instructors chose positive or negative adjectives not based on the accent of each speaker even if they were aware of the accent of each speaker. The interview data demonstrated that their choice was affected by a number of different factors. The instructors suggested such factors as intonation of the speaker, clarity of the speaker, smoothness of the speech, personal characteristics of the speaker, tone of the voice, pitch and stress. The excerpts provided below can help illustrate the point in discussion here:

P28: "I was able to recognize which speaker is from which country, which nationality or accent. But I didn't make my decision accordingly. I made my decision according to the intonation of the speaker, the smoothness of the speech and the tone of the voice".

P13: "There are some differences in terms of tone, pitch and stress of the sentence".

P8: "Personal characteristics of the speakers affected my decision on the adjectives".

Although this person is normally in favor of British accent, even one of the interviewee states;

P9: “The British accent was not clear. The American one was clearer. I was kind of between them”.

In order to have in-depth understanding of instructors’ opinions about both varieties of English, British and American accent, participants were asked to expand on what kind of characteristics they attribute to each accent in the interview. For American accent, instructors used adjectives such as “colloquial, informal, close to Turkish language, more intelligible” whereas they define British accent as “closed to the world, sophisticated, difficult, far away from Turkish language”.

Finally, instructors were asked about their classrooms practices related to World Englishes and non-native varieties of English in the interviews. Only two classroom practices were found out, as shown by the statements provided below:

P28: “I do not have a specific agenda for this but implicitly I try to stress this might be English you can encounter. They can speak English in their own way as long as it is mutually intelligible”.

P9: “Sometimes I show some videos about Irish accent and some extracts from TV series.”

Besides, the interview data has also shown that even if teachers want to integrate them into their lessons, they do not have enough space to use for extra activities in which they can focus on non-native varieties because of the curriculum.

Overall, the study results have shown that there is certainly preference for the British accent among English language instructors in Turkey, even for the ones who are happy with their accent. There was only one person in the interview out of 10, who is totally happy with her own accent. The other participants expressed their sympathy for British accent even if they do not try to achieve native-like competence. The excerpts provided below can help illustrate the point in discussion here:

P13: “My identity should be reflected on my speech. I do not want to be native like. I want to be understood”.

P13: “I like British accent but I can’t use it. I do not know it is not suitable for me or it is difficult”.

## **Discussion**

The present study mainly aimed to find out English Language instructors’ accent preferences between two standard varieties of English, and their beliefs about pronunciation teaching. In addition, the study concentrated on whether this accent preference and their beliefs about pronunciation teaching can be interpreted in relation to their beliefs about the ownership of English. Therefore, in keeping with this aim, research questions in this study were answered below by comparing the findings of the present study with the previous studies in the related literature.

RQ1: Do English language instructors in Turkey have a preference between standard varieties of English (British accent vs. American accent)? Findings of the data show that British accent is regarded as “more educated” even though the same participants believe that American accent sounds better. This result is consistent with what has been found in the previous study by Scales et al. (2006). Based on English Learners’ Accent Rating in that study, American accent received 3.4 points out of four with respect to “Nice to listen to” descriptor whereas British received 3.3 points in the study. On the other hand, British accent is regarded

as more educated with the mean score of 3.5 while American accent was rated lower (3.2) on the same descriptor. Furthermore, these ratings are much higher in American learners' rating, which also supports the results of the present study. In short, the present study also shows that there is also a tendency among English language instructors in Turkey to consider British accent as more educated, or more prestigious although they think American English sounds better to them. The reason for this difference might come from the similarity of sounds between Turkish and American English and therefore, it might seem more likely to have this accent. This finding can be associated with another similar conclusion with of the study conducted by Scales et al. (2006) in terms of clarity. It is claimed that "Listening comprehension was a priority among the English learners. They tended to like an accent more if they found it easy to understand" (Scales et. al, 2006, p. 728). Therefore, the reason why Turkish speakers of English working as English language instructors in Turkey regard American English "sounds better" might come from the belief system that American English seems clearer for them to understand. Moreover, the findings about the adjectives used for British and American accent can also help to understand instructors accent preferences better. English language instructors used the adjectives "colloquial, informal, close to Turkish language, more intelligible" for American English. These adjectives support the terms "greater solidarity" and "stronger affiliative feelings towards American English according to the study by Carrie (2017). However, the adjectives for British accent, "closed to the world, sophisticated, difficult, far away from Turkish language" are closely related to "prestige" and "status" (p. 442). These findings also explain the accent preferences of English Language instructors between British and American accent in terms of the more educated and sounds better criteria.

RQ2: What are the attitudes of English language instructors in Turkey pronunciation teaching in general? The findings of the study show that English language instructors in Turkey have a consensus upon the importance of pronunciation teaching and they mostly believe that it is possible for a non-native teacher to teach pronunciation as long as it meets intelligibility criteria. Moreover, they do not expect their students to reach native-like pronunciation even though most of them have an accent preference for their own speech. These are some general conclusions in relation to English language instructors' beliefs about pronunciation teaching. As for having native-like pronunciation of students, there is a contradictory result between the study by Coşkun (2011) and the present study. In the former one, 41 out of 47 claims that the goal of teaching pronunciation is to help students become as native like as possible whereas only 11 out of 37 instructors in this study either strongly agree (n=3) or agree (n=8) with this statement. This difference might derive from either difference between pre-service teachers' and in service instructors' opinions or the way of measuring this item in the questionnaire. While Coşkun (2011) gave the participants only two options, agree or disagree, in this study, instructors rated on a Likert scale, which can produce more variety in the results. This might account for the difference. If this is the case, it can be concluded that the way something is measured can affect the findings of the study. Another interpretation of this contradicting result may stem from the idea that English language instructors have been more aware of ELF, and EIL concepts since Coşkun's (2011) study was conducted a decade ago. When this finding can be supported by future research, there can be some implications for teacher education program. University educators should aim to raise awareness about the ownership of English, World Englishes, and EIL concepts for pre-service teachers. However, firstly, it should be made clear with considerable degree of certainty whether the changes in instructors' beliefs about the aim of pronunciation teaching might attribute to the World Englishes, ELF or EIL concepts with future research.

The final point I would like to discuss is classroom practices in relation to World Englishes, non-native varieties of English and pronunciation teaching. The study shows that teachers do not have enough time to initiate extra activities because of the busy schedule in

prep-school program. This finding can suggest some implications for curriculum development units. They can either provide extra time for those kinds of activities or add some activities to the program to raise awareness about World Englishes and non-native varieties of English.

## Conclusion

This study has shed some light on the preference of English instructors between standard accents of English and the attitudes of them towards non-native varieties of English. The main result of the study that can be drawn from questionnaire and interview data is that there is bias in favour of or preference for British accent among English instructors in Turkey, which is an EC country. On the other hand, there is no consensus among English instructors on whether non-native varieties of English should be taught or not. Thus, considering the current status of English as a Lingua Franca, the present study suggests some implications for teacher education programs and curriculum development units. However, future research should develop and confirm these findings by eliciting opinions from more instructors from the same context because of the small sample size of this study. In short, there is still need for further research with in-service teachers in terms of their accent preference and beliefs about the ownership of English.

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## Appendix: Instructor Questionnaire

The aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of English instructors about different varieties of English. Participation in this study is on a voluntary basis. All of your answers will be kept confidential and evaluated only by the researcher and the results obtained will be used in scientific publications.

Approval for the study

- ☐ I agree to participate in the study.  
☐ I disagree to participate in the study

Which university are you currently working at?

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### SECTION 1

Please, listen to the audio files attached to the e-mail and answer the questions below.

1. Which speaker sounds more educated to you?

Speaker 1

Speaker 2

2. Which speaker sounds better to you?

Speaker 1

Speaker 2

3. How would you describe Speaker 1?

Enthusiastic	intelligent	hardworking
Aggressive	unintelligent	comforting
Confident	clear	prestigious
Kind	unambitious	good natured
Unkind	friendly	respected

4. How would you describe Speaker 2?

Enthusiastic	intelligent	hardworking
Aggressive	unintelligent	comforting
Confident	clear	prestigious
Kind	unambitious	good natured
Unkind	friendly	respected

## SECTION 2

1. Which accent do you have while speaking English?  
Standard British English  
Standard American English  
A type of Turkish accent
2. Why do you prefer this variety of English?  
Identification  
It sounds best  
Learned it at school  
Family background
3. How important do you think teaching pronunciation is in your context?  
Yes, very important  
Yes, important  
No, not important
4. Do you think it is important for you to have native-like pronunciation in English?  
Yes, very important  
Yes, important  
No, not important
5. How important is to have clear and intelligible pronunciation for an English instructor?  
Yes, very important  
Yes, important  
No, not important
6. The goal of pronunciation teaching is to help students become as native-like as possible.  
Strongly Agree  
Agree  
Neutral  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree
7. The goal of pronunciation teaching is to help students become clear and intelligible.  
Strongly Agree  
Agree  
Neutral  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree
8. Exposure to different non-native varieties of English (such as Indian English, or Chinese English) in pronunciation classes is necessary.  
Strongly Agree  
Agree  
Neutral  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree
9. Which one do you prefer for ideal pronunciation teacher?

The native speaker from England or America  
A successful bilingual teacher

10. I prefer to teach or be taught a non-native variety of English.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

11. While you are speaking with a native speaker of English, an English language instructor should not have a strong non-native accent.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

12. What do you understand from the term "International English"?

English with a particular accent

English easily understood by everyone

English spoken by any native speaker of English

13. Which one would you prefer for a conversation in a listening or pronunciation coursebook?

real conversations among native speakers

☐ always ☐ very often ☐ regularly ☐ rarely ☐ never

real conversations between native and non-native speakers

☐ always ☐ very often ☐ regularly ☐ rarely ☐ never

role-playing assuming roles of people from other countries

☐ always ☐ very often ☐ regularly ☐ rarely ☐ never

role-playing assuming roles of native speakers of English

☐ always ☐ very often ☐ regularly ☐ rarely ☐ never

authentic videos with native and non-native speakers

☐ always ☐ very often ☐ regularly ☐ rarely ☐ never

14. Who do you consider to be the 'rightful owner' of the English language? *Rate in order of importance (1: most important).*

☐ the native speakers (independently of nationality).

☐ those whose mother tongue is another language, but have grown up using English as well (i.e. they're bilinguals).

☐ anyone fluent enough to speak the language without major problems.