

**Academic Literacy Development and Identity Construction of Undergraduates at  
an American University in the UAE**

Submitted by

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## Abstract

Informed by an interpretive framework of research, this study explores the challenges encountered by six Arab students enrolled at an English-medium American university in the UAE, who are all non-native speakers of English and share the common desire to develop fluent control of the academic literacy practices that will ensure their success in their undergraduate careers. In addition to exploring the nature of challenges the students encounter, the study also aims to illuminate the impact of going through these challenges and the role played by social context dynamics in the development of each participant's identity. I used frequent in-depth interviews conducted regularly with each student participant throughout an entire academic year, document analysis, and interviews with the professors as the main methods of data collection for this study. The findings highlighted the importance of three factors in forming the students' perspectives on the academic literacy requirements: the perceived significance of grades, weakness in reading and writing skills, and doubts about the contribution of these requirements to their general academic and professional development. Starting their academic journey with this perspective, the students faced a number of challenges such as lack of time, transition to English medium of instruction (EMI) at undergraduate level, adapting to the changing requirements of academic reading and writing practices across the curriculum, using the library and doing research, and building socio-academic relationships. They tried to cope with these challenges first through studying for extended periods of time, using several corner-cutting strategies, and finally consulting with knowledgeable others and developing assignment-specific study strategies. While going through these experiences did not change the students' initial perspective on the academic literacy requirements, eventually they got better at responding to these requirements, though they continued to question their purpose.

The findings also highlight the impact of the above mentioned experiences on the students' construction of identity. Their declining academic standing and the difficulties they faced in building

socio-academic relationships led the students to develop an identity of deficiency and incompetence, standing in contrast to their former view of self. This emerging identity was partly constructed by the real difficulties they faced and also reinforced by others in their new discourse community, directly or indirectly. Nonetheless, certain literacy practices that they could relate to and that supported their understanding and performance through pair/group work, regardless of the grades they received, helped many of the participants overcome this negative sense of self to some extent. However, the identity of deficiency and incompetence manifested itself throughout the whole study in the cases of two participants who were required to take a non-credit remedial course in spring.

Finally, the analysis of the interviews with the professors highlighted the discrepancy between their expectations and students' knowledge of the required academic literacy demands. It was also revealed that many of the professors were not fully aware of the struggles students go through to meet the expectations.

These findings emphasize the significance of understanding the complex nature of challenges undergraduates face and the problem with a remedial approach. Based on the findings and their implications, it is suggested that an inclusive curriculum-integrated model of academic literacy instruction could help English-medium higher education institutions in the UAE to address students' academic literacy development needs more effectively, thereby saving them from most of the challenges described earlier as well as the identity adjustments brought about by those challenges. Other recommendations include an increased emphasis on academic reading instruction, more effective reading and writing assignments, helping students build effective socio-academic relations and positive identities, enhancing communication and collaboration between English language/writing experts and academic staff in the disciplines, and eliminating non-credit, remedial course requirements for students who are on academic probation.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Nature of the study

A perspective is an angle on reality, a place where the individual stands as he or she looks at it and tries to understand reality....a perspective is an absolute basic part of everyone's existence, and it acts as a filter through which everything around us is perceived and interpreted. (Charon, 2009, p. 3)

The quote above represents one of the underlying principles of symbolic interactionism, a major theoretical position subsumed within the interpretivist paradigm (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Underpinned by this research paradigm, the present study focuses on students' *perspective* on the academic literacy demands of the undergraduate curriculum at an American university in the UAE. The study explores how the students, all of whom are Arab L2 speakers of English, cope with the challenges they encounter throughout their first year of undergraduate education and how this process influences their academic identity formation.

The widespread use of the term "academic literacy" with reference to the teaching of academic reading and writing skills with a focus on grammar instruction and study skills represents a narrow view of literacy and lack of consideration for the recent developments in the field of language, literacy, and identity research. Recent publications emphasize that academic literacy should be understood as "the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community" (Wingate, 2015, p.6). My conceptualization of academic literacy draws on this perspective and *the academic literacies model*, which is "concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369) This model foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context and regards the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions, and social identities. Hence, academic literacy, as used in this study, refers to "the activity of interpretation and production of academic and

discipline-based texts” (Leki, 2007, p. 3) in an academic *discourse community*. Gee (1989) believes “that any socially useful definition of literacy must be couched in terms of the notion of Discourse” (p. 9). He explains that although not all Discourses involve writing or reading, all writing and reading is embedded in a Discourse, emphasizing the social nature of literacy. According to the same author, Discourses are ways of being in the world, namely, they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. Discourse community, as defined by Swales (1990), refers to a group of people who share a set of social conventions directed towards some purpose, such as an academic community using language for specific communicative events and purposes through texts which are recognizable within the members. As opposed to what is suggested by some researchers discourse communities are not homogenous and closed groups; they are dynamic and open entities that are subject to change and composed of many sub-groups of various sizes (Prior, 1998).

With regards to the strong connection between literacy and construction of identity, Egbo (2004) states that acquisition of literacy affects individuals’ perceptions of their selves and social positioning, particularly in contexts with asymmetrical power relations and social inequalities. She adds that access to literacy is associated with life chances in many parts of the world and has implications for self-esteem, self-confidence and an overall sense of well-being. In fact, most researchers in the field of language and identity contend that “for some L2 students, learning itself may be less important than the construction and projection of a satisfying identity” (Leki, 2007, p. 263).

Underpinned by the above mentioned theories and recent research, this study focuses on the interrelation between academic literacy development and identity construction of L2 undergraduates in the UAE.

## **1.2. Rationale for the study**

This research study has originated in questions which developed during my experiences as a writing professor at an American university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which like most universities with an English medium of instruction (EMI), provides a series of compulsory academic writing courses that seek to instil in students critical reading and writing skills. These courses are offered by the Department of Writing Studies (DWS), where I have been working as a full time instructor since 2009. The main objectives of the department include providing students with the academic language, critical thinking and rhetorical foundations essential to writing and reading successfully in a university environment through a series of three academic writing courses that all undergraduates are required to take either as a pre-requisite or a co-requisite for a large number of courses they have to take to complete their degree programmes.

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

The picture outlined above is often attributed to the students' previous educational experiences, which is believed to not have provided them with essential reading and writing skills required at university level. The issue of underdeveloped literacy skills as well as the gap in educational standards between schools and universities in the UAE have been addressed in a number of research studies (Durham & Palubiski, 2007; Findlow, 2006; Gobert, 2009; Hatakka, 2014; Hatherly-Greene ,2012;

Khoury & Duzgun, 2009; O’Sullivan, 2009) and are also frequently addressed in publications aimed at a more general readership in the UAE (e.g. “Education initiative”, 2014; Hameli & Underwood, 2014; Naido, 2010; Salem & Swan, 2014). While concerned authorities, that is, universities, schools and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research are discussing ways to overcome the problem, the students who are trying hard to bridge the gap between their existing competencies and what is expected of them in their degree programs remains the party who suffer the consequences of the disparity.

As I continued to casually observe my students, I found myself wondering how I could help them deal with this challenge. I understood that to be able to be of any assistance to them, first and foremost, I had to have an in-depth understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives, but most importantly, listen to their voices. Hence, in this study, I would like to explore the nature of challenges students experience while acquiring the academic literacy skills necessary for success at an American university in the UAE. To put it simply, the main motivation behind this study is to understand and then figure out ways to alleviate the tension and challenges most undergraduates encounter while trying to meet the academic literacy requirements they are expected to fulfil in the new discourse community they have entered. Given that students’ academic literacy development is inevitably interwoven with their social, personal, and all other academic experiences, this study also seeks to uncover the interrelations between the students’ academic literacy growth and identity construction, investigating the process students go through to create comfortable subject positions for themselves in their new discourse community.

### **1.3. Significance of the study**

It is crucial for educators and researchers to learn more about undergraduates’ academic literacy development because a student's inability to manipulate academic literacy generally goes hand

in hand with limited success in post-secondary education (Hirvela, 2004). Academic discourse, too often, serves a gatekeeping role, preventing students from progressing educationally (Farr, 1993).

The dissatisfaction with university entrants' academic literacy skills has not only been a subject of debate in the UAE, but also a common point of complaint in the UK, US, and Australia (Carrol, 2002; Spack, 1997; Horner, 2014; Wingate, 2015). Spack (1997) states that "Despite the ever-increasing number of undergraduates entering the academy who are said to be underprepared for its demands, we have relatively little substantive knowledge of the processes through which students acquire the academic discourses necessary to achieve success" (p.3). Although Spack makes this point in reference to undergraduate education in the US about two decades ago, the problem, exactly as it is described in the quote, is still experienced in the UAE. Despite being a common point of complaint among academics teaching at higher education institutions across the UAE, few research studies have examined the academic literacy development of undergraduates in this setting. While these studies contributed to our understanding of the significance of the issue, they adopted a narrow definition of academic literacy, focusing exclusively either on writing or reading skills, failing to acknowledge the interrelations between the two skills by design, and not taking into account the impact of the challenges faced on learners' identity construction. For instance, defining academic literacy as writing strategies, library research strategies, and general study skills, Hatakka (2014), investigated the academic socialization experiences of male Emirati students enrolled in an engineering programme in the UAE. Other studies focused on the development of reading skills (Khoury & Duzgun, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2009) and general academic problems associated with the transition from school to university (Durham & Palubiski, 2007; Hatherly-Greene, 2012).

Hence, the present study can contribute to the field by turning the attention to a group of learners whose experiences have yet to be documented adequately. The significance of the study lies in its recognition of the interrelation between reading and writing development, its focus on the impact of

the challenges faced by the students on their identity, as well as its attempt to get a holistic view of the students' experience by taking their professors' perspectives into account.

Based on Kachru's Three Circle Model<sup>1</sup> (Kachru, 1985), a great majority of the previous studies on academic literacy development of undergraduates have been conducted in inner-circle countries with participants who are native English-speaking (NES) students and, more recently, non-native English-speaking (NNES) students. The UAE, on the other hand, fits the definition outer-circle countries, where English is not the native language but plays an important role as a lingua franca. The emergence of English as a lingua franca at all levels of the UAE society over the past fifty years has been the subject of some recent studies conducted locally (e.g. Boyle, 2012; Randall & Samimi, 2010). In a study which explores the higher education and "linguistic dualism" in the Arabian Gulf, Findlow (2006) pictures the UAE as a rapidly changing country where "people (especially young people at university) are exposed to 'otherness' in a way that their parents were not, local heritage is steeped in political struggle, official discourse endeavours to be eclectic and reconcile" contrasting world views (p.23). She goes on to describe the UAE as a country which was "transformed from a collection of materially poor and sparsely populated tribal homelands with no formal education system to a politically, economically and technologically sophisticated federation of seven states" (p. 23) over the final quarter of the twentieth century. These differences in the social and ideological contexts surrounding participants in previous research and this study can significantly influence their experiences.

Additionally, as noted above, unlike many of the previous studies on academic literacy development in L2, this study adopts a broad definition of context by describing the role played by social context dynamics in each participant's academic literacy development and identity construction.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Kachru's Three Circle Model, the Inner Circle represents countries where English is spoken as native language such as Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Outer Circle refers to countries such as India, Nigeria and Malaysia, where English is not the native language but has an important role as a lingua franca. Lastly, the Expanding Circle includes countries where English has no historical or governmental role, but is still broadly used as a medium of international communication.

Despite the increase in research on L2 academic literacy since the early 1990s, as Leki (2007) notes, the view of the students and of the students' experiences have been very limited even in qualitative research studies. She criticizes these studies for adopting quite a narrow definition of context that is limited to various writing assignments, the previous or current writing the students did for one course or another, thereby failing to attend to broader, more human and personal contexts. Further emphasizing the significance of social context influences, she states that language and literacy development, academic growth, and even the ability to complete course assignments go hand in hand with the extent, stability, and success of socio-academic relations students build and in some cases cannot progress until such relationships are formed.

Moreover, while the shortcomings of academic literacy instruction at higher education, both in L1 and L2, have been addressed in a number of studies, the focus of these studies has been almost entirely on academic writing. The fact that this issue was raised by Spack (1997) almost two decades ago and has been very recently brought up again by Wingate (2015) shows that academic reading remains a neglected area in academic literacy research and pedagogy. This study, on the other hand, acknowledges the interrelation of writing and reading by investigating the participants' development in both areas.

#### **1.4. Contribution to knowledge**

The present study strives to give students a voice in expressing the tensions, challenges and complexities embedded in their academic literacy development as well as their construction of academic identity. Hence, the findings can be of great value to a wide group of academics. To begin with, it should serve a useful purpose with curriculum development and instructional practices. With the insights it provides, the study may contribute to development of strategies to facilitate students' acquisition of academic literacy.



The study also makes a valuable contribution to an underrepresented area of research in L2 academic literacy development by taking into account the socio-cultural factors in students' academic literacy growth as well as investigating the connection between academic literacy and identity construction in a unique context, as described previously.

### **1.5. Aims and Research Questions**

Informed by an interpretive framework of research, this study regards the individual to be the centre of any understanding of social reality. It explores the challenges encountered by six Arab students enrolled at an American university in the UAE, who are all non-native speakers of English and share the common desire to develop fluent control of the academic literacy practices that will ensure their success in their undergraduate careers. To be more specific, it seeks an answer to the following overarching research objective: How do students in their first year of undergraduate careers respond to the challenges they face while attaining the academic literacy requirements of an American university in the UAE, at an academic, a personal and social level? Three research questions were generated to meet the overarching research objective:

1. How do students in their first year of undergraduate careers deal with the academic literacy requirements of an American university in the UAE?
2. How do these students' experiences in trying to meet the academic literacy requirements influence their academic identity formation?
3. What are the perspectives of the professors on the academic literacy skills of the freshmen and the role of academic literacy skills for success in their courses?

### **1.6. Structure/ organization of the thesis**

Following this brief introduction to the study, the next chapter, Context, presents a detailed description of the setting this study takes place with a discussion of the cultural, socio-economic, and political issues surrounding it. It also describes the population of the study. Chapter 3, Literature Review, offers a detailed, critical review of the previous research and the conceptual framework that guides this thesis. Chapter 4, Methodology, explains the research framework, research questions, research design and methods as well as the theoretical justification for each decision taken. It also presents the research procedures such as sampling and data collection methods. A discussion of the ethical considerations and research quality issues such as trustworthiness, genuineness and quality of the data is followed by an account of the challenges encountered when conducting the study and limitations. Chapter 5, Analysis and Discussion, provides answers to the research questions by presenting a detailed analysis of the data gained in relation to each research question followed by a critical discussion of each finding. The final chapter, Conclusions and Recommendations, offers a summary of the main findings, implications of the study, and ends with recommendations and suggestions for further research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **CONTEXT**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter illuminates the complex contextual factors that form the background of the present study. After presenting a brief overview of the political, historical, socio-cultural and socio-economic profile of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it will describe the development of higher and tertiary education in the country with a focus on attitudes towards literacy and the status of academic literacy instruction in the UAE. Finally, the immediate context of the study will be described.

#### **2.2. A Brief Country Profile: United Arab Emirates**

The UAE, bordered by Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and both the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, is a country that has undergone many dramatic transformations throughout its short history as a result of industrialization, urbanization, modernization, and globalization. After the discovery and commercial development of profitable oil fields and having gained independence from its status as a British Protectorate in the late 1960s, it was officially formed as a federal state in 1971 through the union of six emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Umm Al-Quwain, Ajman, and Fujairah. The seventh emirate, Ras Al-Khaimah, joined the union in 1972 (Al Abed, Vine, & Al Jabali, 1996). While each state has a large degree of independence, the UAE is governed by a Supreme Council of Rulers made up of rulers of the seven emirates (“The UAE Government”, 2013). While the scope and influence of religion underpins all aspects of society in the UAE, it is seldom as obvious an influence as can be observed in other Arab states (Kirk, 2010).

The discovery of oil fuelled the rapid transformation and progress of the country in all fields: economy, health, transportation, technology, politics, education, media, tourism, and lifestyle. In a little more than four decades, the UAE, formerly known as Trucial States, was transformed from a predominantly desert country with a tribal community that had no formal education system, to an oil-rich federation of seven states with a flamboyant economy, stable political system, strong infrastructure, developing educational system, and a multi-national population. Realizing that the oil revenues were not infinite, the UAE authorities were quick to devise plans to diversify the economy by turning their attention to other sectors, such as trade, tourism, and construction (Kirk, 2010; UAEPedia, 2015). The booming economy has brought with it an influx of foreign workers and professionals, who now make up a large majority of the population. Figures published by the National Bureau of Statistics indicate that the percentage of Emiratis in the total population is only 11.5 (Salama, 2011).

As the description above shows, the UAE has a unique landscape of rapid changes and a highly cosmopolitan international population, mostly made up of immigrants. While this picture brings with it many opportunities, it also poses several challenges for all its inhabitants, particularly the young generation, who are in the process of building their identities in the midst of this ever-changing, complicated context.

### **2.3. Development of Higher Education in the UAE**

The UAE authorities have recognized the significance of education since the establishment of the country and considered investment in education as an essential part of the nation's development plans to meet the future workforce needs of the economy and build a new society from the old tribal communities. They viewed education as crucial to establishing a new national identity and coherent social framework (Kirk, 2010; Findlow, 2006).

The history of higher education in the UAE is relatively new, starting with the foundation of the United Arab Emirates University (UAE University) in 1977. Following in the footsteps of the UAE University were Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), which opened in 1988, and Zayed University (ZU), established in 1998. All of these state universities serve male and female students in gender segregated campuses (UAE Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2013).

Higher and tertiary education in the UAE has rapidly evolved with the opening of the sector to foreign and private institutions. Today, two distinct groups of institutions, public and private, as well as a smaller, third group of semi-government universities and colleges, constitute the higher education system in the UAE (Kirk, 2010). There are currently seventy-five private higher education institutions licensed by the UAE Ministry of Education, usually located in education zones such as the University City in Sharjah, Knowledge Village and Academic City in Dubai. The language of instruction in these institutions is mostly English (Commission for Academic Accreditation, 2013).

The two state universities mentioned above, the UAE University and ZU, have seen a shift from Arabic to English as the medium of instruction. While the original published intention of the UAE University was to teach almost entirely in Arabic and ZU's initial reported plans were to teach in equal proportions of Arabic and English (Findlow, 2006), today, except for certain subjects, such as Arabic and Islamic Studies, most courses are taught in English in both universities. HCT had already started out as an English-medium institution and has not changed its policy since its foundation.

This rapid language shift in one generation has led to the present existence of what Findlow (2006) calls "linguistic-cultural dualism" (p. 19), where Arabic represents cultural authenticity, localism, tradition, emotions, and religion while English symbolizes modernity, internationalism, business, material status, and secularism. Findlow (2006) observes this dualism existing in different systems such as public/private, with public sectors operating in Arabic and private sectors in English; childhood/adulthood, with Arabic used in earlier years of education particularly in public schools, yet English used almost exclusively in higher education institutions; and finally according to academic

subject, with ‘cultural’ or locally focused subjects such as Islamic studies, arts/humanities, social sciences and education taught mostly in Arabic, while subjects with a global orientation, especially technologically or commercially oriented ones, or applied sciences, are taught in English. “This dualistic approach is not explicitly stated in language policy documents but has evolved through practice” (Clarke, 2007, p. 584). Right after its establishment, with almost no local educational system except for a small number of religious schools in some local mosques and royal courts, the UAE resorted to importing the skills needed to build local educational capacity. At the beginning, the UAE hired expatriate faculty from Arab countries, such as Egypt and Jordan, since their teachers were accessible, relatively less costly and seen as culturally similar. However, later on the preference turned to American, British, Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand teachers to staff the growing higher and tertiary level sector. Despite the UAE government’s recent efforts to Emiratize the national workforce and as a result of the surge in the number of foreign, private schools and universities, the UAE has become home to thousands of migrant educators, teaching at a large number of educational institutions that follow various models, systems and curricula (Kirk, 2010).

Decisions on a medium of instruction at schools and universities reflect the ideology of policy makers. As Findlow (2006) notes, “deciding on a linguistic medium for a HE curriculum is a decision not only about the availability of materials and staff and demands of the marketplace, but also about which society’s values to transmit” (p. 21). Currently, English in the UAE is viewed as a symbol of power and success, modernism, liberalism, freedom, equality as well as a departure from old-fashioned, inefficient, teacher-centred educational systems (Troudi & Jendli, 2011). According to Troudi and Jendli (2011), these wider socio-cultural, political, and educational factors contributed to the current language policy in the UAE. The researchers also highlight that “a language of instruction policy is not ideologically free and it is often politically and economically motivated” (p. 24). In the case of the UAE, the proponents of English as a medium of instruction at the tertiary level consider this language policy decision inevitable due to reasons such as social progress, economic and

technological development, global communication, and trade (Troudi & Jendli, 2011). Indeed, Shaikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, confirmed these views when he pointed out "We will not deny our young generation the opportunity to interact with the outside world in English, today's language of science and technology" in response to a question regarding Federal National Council's (FNC) proposal to make Arabic the primary language of instruction in state universities ("Nahyan: English to stay as medium of instruction", 2009). FNC's proposal can be seen as an initial reaction to rapid and dramatic social changes in the UAE, where "the language issue has caused heated debates and controversies in the academic and political arenas" and where there is a growing concern that "the Arabic language and 'national identities' are being 'sidelined' (Hellyer, 2008, as cited in Ahmed, 2010, p. 7)

Undoubtedly, the decision to opt for a hybrid model of imported Western and traditional Islamic-based education has helped the UAE achieve a widespread educational provision in a very short amount of time; however, a public policy strategy that relies on buying in educational models and the required expertise raises questions about the appropriateness and efficacy of a largely imported educational provision for the indigenous population, particularly in the long run (Kirk, 2010). This situation brings the UAE face to face with a number of educational reform dilemmas such as "rapid expansion at the possible cost to quality; the regional and national educational goals as opposed to local socio-cultural needs; exploring and addressing questions of equity and equality, particularly regarding gender differences; and developing an indigenous, homegrown system versus imported systems, programmes and qualified personnel", and "preserving elements of traditional society while embracing modernization" (Kirk, 2010, p.20). Given the complicated picture drawn above and the increasing significance of English in the region, it seems a key challenge for the UAE's higher education system is "how to reconcile the competing demands of local, regional, national, and religious identities with the homogenizing tendencies of globalization and English" (Clarke, 2007, p. 584).

## **2.4. Academic Literacy Instruction in the UAE**

A number of research studies conducted locally indicate that most students in the UAE lack the required reading and writing skills at universities, where the language of instruction is almost entirely in English. With regards to academic reading, a research study conducted at HCT Fujairah Women's College urges educators in the UAE not to assume that their students already possess a range of reading skills usually expected at college level and that they will be able to cope with the academic reading requirements at university easily (Khoury & Duzgun, 2009). The study reports that a typical student enrolled at the Foundations programme of the college has a fifty per cent chance of having at least one illiterate parent; may have had someone read her stories when she was a child, but only as rarely as once a month; reads for only two hours or less not counting her school work; never goes to a bookshop and rarely visits a library, is more likely to read the Qur'an than any other reading material, but also reads fiction books, magazine, and poetry; and likes reading but only "a bit" (Khoury & Duzgun, 2009, p. 28). Other researchers (O'Sullivan, 2009; Gobert, 2009) attribute the issues with Arab students' literacy skills to a lack of extensive reading experience in Arabic as well as English, a negative experience in learning how to read in Arabic due to the intensive reading nature of how L1 Arabic is taught at schools as well as the phenomenon of Arabic diglossia, a problem caused by the major differences between the two written forms of Arabic (Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic) and colloquial forms known as Spoken Arabic Vernaculars . Some scholars note that learning Modern Standard Arabic, taught at schools, is more like learning a second language because of the wide variety of differences in syntax, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary between written and spoken forms of Arabic (Abu Rabia & Taha, 2006; Saiegh-Haddad, 2004).

The problems described above have been frequently addressed in publications aimed at a more general readership too. To illustrate, according to local newspapers reports, high school students in Dubai ranked below average in both 2009 and 2012 in reading literacy on an international assessment



test, called The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is conducted every three years by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to evaluate the education systems by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in reading, science and mathematics (Ahmed, 2010). The results showed that one third of the students in Dubai did not even reach the baseline level two in reading literacy, which the programme considered the minimum level required for success in a knowledge-based economy. In another newspaper article on the Arab youth's reading skills, it was reported that, according to a 2008 UN survey, the average Arab in the Middle East reads about four pages of literature a year while Americans read an average of eleven books a year and Britons an average of eight (Swan & Ahmed, 2011).

The same issue is also observed in students' writing skills. It was reported by the Ministry of Education that public school students' writing skills in Arabic and English were far below expected standards, according to an assessment of over 40,000 public school students in 285 schools across the country. The tests were developed by the ministry with the help of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the UAE National Assessment Programme (UAENAP) (Absal, 2011).

The problems described above complicate the transition from school to university for most students. A newspaper article reports a study conducted by the UAE University, which "shows that nearly eight out of 10 students – 77 per cent – need additional English support because they lack the necessary language skills, particularly reading and writing, to study for their degrees" (Hameli & Underwood, 2014, para. 15). Another one reports the Provost of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), the largest higher education institution in the UAE, stating that "around 90 per cent of public and private secondary school graduates in the UAE who apply to federal universities are not qualified for undergraduate studies" (Naidoo, 2010). Likewise, according to the results of the UAE's university entrance examination, the vast majority of students have to take remedial classes that may take up to eighteen months to improve their English language skills before starting their degree. While the

Ministry of Education and Scientific Research and university officials interpret the students' low scores on the test as indicating a need for a major overhaul in the curriculum and teaching methodology of primary and secondary school systems, they also underline that the remedial programmes place a heavy burden on universities (Lewis, 2010). Recognizing the gravity of this issue, the government has launched several education reform programmes since the late 1990s. In 1999, authorities announced "Vision 2020" was an ambitious programme to improve the education system in the first two decades of the 21st century (Ahmed, 2010). However, the reforms had to be discarded because it did not resonate with the local teachers, who felt that methods created by foreigners were being imposed on them. When the Ministry of Education introduced the Education Strategy 2010-2020 in 2010, reducing instances of students requiring a foundation year before entering universities was on top of the ministry's agenda as well as providing better teacher training, restructuring of secondary education, aligning national standards for examinations with international standards and more stringent recruitment policies for teachers (Sankar, 2010). The decision to eliminate the foundation year offered in state universities by the UAE Cabinet at the end of 2013 has intensified the debate on the quality of education in schools and high-school graduates who are found underprepared for higher education. Foundation programs provide new students with remedial courses in English, particularly reading and writing, study skills, math and science in order to help students meet the entry requirements of the universities. According to 2012 Ministry of Higher Education figures, about ninety per cent of students must first complete a foundation year, which takes up about thirty per cent of the federal universities' budget. It is stated that the decision to phase out the foundation year by 2018 is partly motivated to cut this cost and improve the standard of education at schools ("Education initiative", 2014).

A number of academic challenges, particularly in keeping up with the reading and writing requirements, face students upon their transition to university. Troudi and Jendli (2011), who examined Emirati students' experiences of English as a medium of instruction at the tertiary level, noted that especially students from public schools experienced a total shift in the medium of instruction, from

Arabic to English. The reported experiences of the participants highlighted the difficulties they faced while trying to meet the required reading and writing skills as well as the gatekeeping role of English as a medium of instruction. In a similar study, Hatherly-Greene (2012) described the experiences of first-year male Emirati students who “move from their pre-dominantly Arabic life-world associated with their families and schooling to the pre-dominantly western culture found in higher education” (p. ii) at HCT, using the Giroux’s cultural border-crossing metaphor. The findings showed that majority of students who were placed in lower levels in the college’s Foundation program had found border crossing difficult or impossible and left college for employment opportunities. Focusing on the acquisition of academic writing strategies of first-year male Emirati students studying engineering in a higher education institution with an EMI in the UAE, Hatakka (2014) identified lack of library research strategies, digital literacy skills and sense of ownership as obstacles to success.

The challenges described above are closely linked to the aforementioned phenomenon of linguistic-cultural dualism, which is predominantly the result of the state’s language of instruction policy that implies “throughout childhood, Arabic supplies all or most communication needs, while the transition at age 18 to learning in English requires a substantially changed cultural mindset” (Findlow, 2006, p. 27).

## **2.5. The Teaching and Learning Context**

The present study was conducted at an American university located in the emirate of Sharjah. Founded as an independent, co-educational institution in 1997; today, the university is considered one of the leading higher education institutions in the Gulf and serves approximately 5,000 students from more than ninety different nations. It offers twenty-six majors and forty-six minors at the undergraduate level and fourteen master's degree programmes through four academic divisions, which are the College of Architecture, Art and Design; College of Arts and Sciences; College of Engineering; and School of Business and Administration. As indicated in its mission statement, while the university

is based upon an American model of higher education, it is also grounded in the Arab culture of the region. The language of instruction is English (Fast Facts, 2015).

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

- WRI 001: Fundamentals of Academic Discourse is a non-credit course students who score between 0 and 6 on the EPT are required to successfully complete to be able to take WRI 101 and WRI 102. It helps students become familiar with the conventions of academic writing through reading and writing activities and contextualized grammar instruction. It also helps students in developing goal setting, Lack of time, and study skills while reading and responding to university texts.
- WRI 101: Academic Writing is a three-credit required course students who score between 7 and 10 on the EPT are placed into and required to successfully complete to be able to take WRI 102 as well as a large number of required courses in their degree programs. It helps students analyse and evaluate academic and professional texts; write effective summaries and paraphrases; compose coherent academic essays that have well-structured, articulate thesis statements located effectively in audience conscious introductions, and related topic sentences

supported with logical, relevant and coherent evidence; use a range of rhetorical strategies and modes effectively to achieve complex idea development; and follow APA style.

- WRI 102: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum is a three credit required course students who score between 11 and above on the EPT are placed into and required to successfully complete to be able to take another required academic writing course, ENG 204, offered by the English Department as well as a large number of required courses in their degree programs. It builds on the reading and writing skills acquired in WRI 101 and helps students write critical analysis of academic texts, essays that demonstrate logical development and arrangement of arguments, counterarguments and refutations, and incorporate synthesis of multiple sources; develop library research skills; and use APA documentation guidelines correctly.

Copies of the common syllabi for all three courses, including the course descriptions, objectives, common assessment methods can be found in Appendix A.

As I stated in the previous chapter, I have been teaching the above mentioned courses in the DWS for over six years and the main objective of the present study is to understand how undergraduates in their first year of academic careers deal with the challenges they encounter while trying to meet the academic literacy requirements placed on them in the required academic writing courses mentioned above and all other courses they have to take as part of their degree programme. While doing so, it will also seek to uncover the interrelation between the students' academic literacy growth and identity formation.

## **2.6. Chapter Summary**

After highlighting the historical, political, socio-economic and socio-cultural issues that are integral to understanding the contextual background of the present study, this chapter has brought to the fore the complexities and dilemmas facing the higher education institutions in the UAE, as well as the current status of academic literacy instruction with a focus on the challenges often experienced by students

during their transition to higher education. The chapter has then delineated the immediate context of the study, that is, the teaching and learning context, and the population of the study. Hence, it has illuminated the background dynamics that are essential to be clarified to understand the following chapters.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

The main objective of this study is to explore the challenges encountered by six Arab students enrolled at an American university in the UAE, who are all L2 speakers of English and share the common desire to develop fluent control of the academic literacy practices in English that will ensure their success in their undergraduate careers. In addition to exploring the nature of challenges the students encounter, the study also aims to illuminate the role played by social context dynamics in the development of each participant's identity. To have a clear understanding of the concept of academic literacy and its relationship to identity, it is first necessary to examine the complex, multifaceted notion of literacy. Thus, the literature review starts with introducing the concept of literacy, its controversial nature, and a critical review of major approaches to it. Next, it presents a critical review of major approaches underpinning academic literacy, followed by a methodological and thematic overview of important research studies on academic literacy development in higher education along with their pedagogical implications, both in L1 and L2. At this point, I would like to emphasize on my agreement with the argument that all students are novices in their chosen academic disciplines, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background, that is, for instance whether they speak English as L1 or L2 (Gee, 1990; Boudieu & Passeron, 1990; Boughey, 2000; Wingate, 2015). All university-entrants are faced with the challenge of acquiring a new use of language, "a secondary discourse", as Gee puts it (1990, p. 153). Hence, the following review of studies, first in L1 and then L2, is only adopted for organizational purposes, not because of the belief L1 and L2 users' academic literacy acquisition

follow completely different paths. The chapter, then, continues with establishing the strong bond between academic literacy and identity research and ends with a critical review of what is now called “literacy-and-identity” studies. By critically reviewing the large body of research underpinning the key constructs central to this study and introducing my approach to each one of them, this chapter, hence, provides a rationale for the theoretical framework that informs and guides my research.

### **3.2. Major approaches to literacy: History, characteristics, and pedagogical implications**

“Many languages do not have a word for *literacy*” (Janks, 2010). This should not come as a surprise if one considers the complexity of the notion and multiple meanings it entails in different social, cultural, and historical contexts. In its most conventional sense, literacy refers to the ability to read and write. However, a careful review of literature shows a more complicated picture. There are various models and approaches developed to demystify the notion of literacy and their pedagogical impact, such as Street’s (2001) autonomous and ideological models of literacy, where he characterizes the two views as oppositional theoretical positions.

Before explaining these models, however, it is important to note that the use of the terms autonomous and ideological models of literacy refers to Street’s way of characterizing the distinction between the two perspectives, which, he thinks, highlights “the underlying coherence and relationship of ideas which on the surface might appear unconnected or haphazard” (Street, 1993, p. 5). Street clarifies that the writers or perspectives he characterizes in this way do not necessarily use the phrases autonomous and ideological “but the use of the concept helps us to see what is entailed in adopting particular positions, to fill in the gaps left by untheorized statements about literacy” (p.5). Nevertheless, he adds that the word “autonomous” is used by influential writers on literacy such as Goody (1986), Olson (1988), and Ong (1982) (as cited in Street, 2001). For the purposes of this review, this distinction is important because it captures different ontological views of literacy.

### 3.2.1. The autonomous model

The autonomous model, “consistent with prevailing views in linguistics about the autonomy of the linguistic system” (Albright & Luke, 2008, p. 52), sees the issue of literacy as a technical one: “that people need to be taught how to decode letters and they can do what they like with their newly acquired literacy after that” (p. 7). The assumption is that literacy in itself – autonomously – will influence other social and cognitive practices. This model, however, has come under attack as it conceals the cultural and ideological assumptions it is based on as if those assumptions were neutral and universal. It imposes Western conceptions of literacy on to other cultures and can be seen “as part of the construction of Western symbolic domination, part of the discourse which legitimizes Western colonialism and neo-colonialism” (Albright & Luke, 2008, p. 52).

Critics of the autonomous model and its assumptions have come to see literacy practices as inseparably related to cultural and power structures in society, and recognized the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts. They argue that:

the traditional view of literacy as the ability to read and write rips literacy out of its sociocultural contexts and treats it as an asocial cognitive skill with little or nothing to do with human relationships. It cloaks literacy’s connections to power, to social identity, and to ideologies, often in the service of privileging certain types of literacies and certain types of people (Gee, 1996).

The reflections of the autonomous model of literacy or the assumptions that underpin this perspective continue to inform policy about literacy and can be seen in many language programmes based on the study skills approach (see 3.3.1.1. The study skills model). As a result of the failure of many traditional literacy programmes (Abadzi, 2003; Street 2005), academics and practitioners working in literacy in different parts of the world find the autonomous model inadequate for understanding the diversity of reading and writing around the world and have, instead, turned to what Street (2001) calls the *ideological* model of literacy.



### 3.2.2. The ideological model

The ideological model of literacy holds a more culturally-sensitive view and regards literacy as “a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles” (2001, p. 7). This model acknowledges that the ways in which people deal with reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. Street explains that he calls this model ‘ideological’ rather than just ‘cultural’ to draw attention to the power dimensions of reading and writing processes as well as the cultural meanings. Literacy in this model is viewed as a social construction in that “it varies from one culture or sub-group to another and its users are embedded in relations of power and struggles over resources” (Street, 1984, p. 28). Hence, it is vital for researchers to suspend judgment as to what constitutes literacy among the people they are working with until they can appreciate what it means to people themselves, and which social contexts the meanings of reading and writing originate from.

For Street and supporters of the ideological model (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Baynham, 1995; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984, 2000), the reference is to literacies, rather than literacy. These researchers’ work has been known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS). Challenging autonomous models of literacy, NLS have successfully pluralized “the concept of literacy by looking at literacy practices cross-culturally, in different domains, in different discourses and as they vary in relation to different sign systems and different technologies” (Janks, 2010, p. 117). These studies have used anthropological theories and ethnographic methods to go beyond the surface meaning of reading and writing.

Hence, NLS has turned its attention to how literacy is used in different social and institutional contexts. Literacy practices and literacy events are two of the key terms used in these studies. Introducing the concepts of literacy events (Heath, 1983) and literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984, 2000), NLS has provided a methodology and a literature that can be used to understand the underlying social and cultural meanings of reading and writing. A literacy event, one of the key terms in NLS, is “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the

participants' interactions and their interpretative processes" (Heath, 1982, p. 50). The concept of literacy events focuses on what people do with literacy in their everyday lives, rather than on what literacy does for them (Barton, 1994). Although this term is useful in that it enables one to observe an event that involves reading and/or writing and draw out its characteristics, it fails to inform one how the meanings are constructed (Street, 2001). A literacy practice, on the other hand, is a broader and more robust concept that incorporates not only literacy events as empirical occasions which literacy is integral to, but also "folk models" of those events and the ideological preconceptions that underpin them (Street, 1987). "The concept of *literacy practices* attempts both to handle the events and patterns around literacy and to *link* them to something broader of a social and cultural kind" (Street, 2011, p. 11). Since literacy events take place in social and cultural settings, they have a social and cultural meaning, which is difficult to reach through observation or simple survey questions. The notion of literacy practices refers not only to the literacy event, but also to the ideas and constructions that people have of what is happening when they are involved in it. It involves answers to questions such as what people think reading is and what they count as reading (Baynham, 1995; Street, 1995). The meaning given to the literacy event can be something that is not considered literacy instantly; it may be about religion or status for example. The concept of literacy practices tries to capture this broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts.

Gee's conceptualization of literacy is also compatible with the NLS and the ideological model. His approach to literacy is considered very influential because his work showed the interconnectedness of the constructs of literacy, discourse, linguistics, and identity. In an article where he clarified the interconnections between literacy, discourse, and linguistics, Gee (1989) claimed that "the focus of literacy studies or applied linguistics should not be language or literacy but social practices" (p. 5). He construed literacy as "mastery of or fluent control over a secondary Discourse" (p. 9). According to the same author, Discourses are ways of being in the world, namely, they are forms of life which integrate

words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. Gee believes “that any socially useful definition of literacy must be couched in terms of the notion of Discourse” (p. 9). He explains that although not all Discourses involve writing or reading, all writing and reading is embedded in a Discourse, hence emphasizing his conceptualization of literacy as a social practice.

### **3.2.3. Final thoughts**

This section has shown that definitions of literacy abound, but there is no single generally accepted definition. In fact, competing definitions of literacy and opposing approaches to teaching it have divided the field of literacy to the extent that they have been commonly referred to as the ‘literacy wars’ (Janks, 2010, xiii). However, as discussed above, more recent approaches no longer construe literacy as a neutral and objective technical skill that can be learned and taught in a vacuum. They recognize the significance of social, cultural, and political aspects of it. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the ideological model does not deny technical skills or the cognitive aspects of reading and writing, but rather views them as encapsulated within cultural wholes and structures of power (Street, 1993). The approach I used as a theoretical guideline while conducting this study is compatible with the ideological model of literacy. Hence, my understanding of literacy is of reading and writing as a social practice. Conceptualizing literacy as a social practice involves the following propositions:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.

- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000, 8).

As indicated in the second proposition, there are different literacies in different contexts. As Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič (2000) state literacies are coherent configurations of literacy practices, which are often identifiable and named, as in academic literacy or work-place literacy, and they are associated with particular aspects of cultural life. Since this study focuses on academic literacy, the following sections present an in-depth overview of academic literacy and major approaches to it.

### **3.3. Academic literacy: History, characteristics, and pedagogical implications**

Academic literacy has been traditionally defined as “the ability to read and write and compute in the form taught and expected in formal education” (Ogbu, 1990, p. 37). However, recent developments in the field of literacy, as outlined above, have greatly enhanced our understanding of academic literacy. Today, the definition of academic literacy is more complex and has been extended to include situated literacies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000) and multiliteracies (Street, 1993, 1995, 2000, 2001). Emerging from NLS, the notion of situated literacies underlines that all uses of language can be seen as located in particular times and places, and that all literate activity is indicative of broader social practices. Situated literacies take account of the context and the importance of literacy practices and events. In this view, literacies are positioned in relation to the social institutions and power relations which sustain them. The notion of multiliteracies, on the other hand, refers to different types of literacies found within various academic contexts. The present study employs this extended definition of academic literacy, that takes into consideration the “the social turn” (Trimbur, 1994) and more recently “the identity turn” (Moje, Luke, Davies & Street, 2009) in language learning and academic reading and writing studies.

Wingate (2015) discusses five major approaches to academic literacy instruction and research in a recent literature review, drawing on the classifications of Lea and Street (1998), which is discussed in detail below, Ivanič (2004), and Hyland (2002): The skills approach, process approaches, genre approaches, social practices approaches, and the socio-political approach. After critically reviewing these approaches, she concludes that the animosity between some approaches, which arises from their traditional confinement into specific contexts, causes the absence of an academic literacy pedagogy suitable for the mainstream, rather than specific target groups. She points out that how different approaches can complement each other has not received much attention in the field despite “many points of convergence” (Jones, 2004, p. 255) and “considerable overlaps” (Johns, 2006, p. 247) between them, except for a few attempts (e.g. Johns, 2006; Coffin & Donahue, 2012). Hence, Wingate calls for an inclusive academic literacy pedagogy drawing on the best aspects from existing approaches, focusing on *Critical English for Academic Purposes* (Critical EAP) and *Academic Literacies*, the two dominant approaches underpinning the research in the field of academic literacy development in higher education. While Academic Literacies has been especially influential in the UK’s higher education sector, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has had a more international impact. Despite the many overlaps between the two approaches, Academic Literacies portrays EAP as an approach that is unable to address the political and ideological nature of academic literacy development. However, this criticism is found outdated by many critics, who highlight that Academic Literacies ignore the recent developments in the field of EAP, and consequently target an oversimplified version of it (Wingate & Tribble, 2012, Wingate 2015).

The following sections present a critical review of these two approaches to academic literacy development in higher education.

### **3.3.1 A critical review of the development of academic literacies research**

Academic literacies is a perspective developed to understand student writing and literacy in academic contexts, which conceptualizes writing in academic contexts, such as university courses, at the level of epistemology, rather than engaging in debates about good or bad writing (Lea & Street, 2006). Proponents of this perspective conceptualize student writing and literacy in academic contexts through the use of three overlapping, successive models: 1) study skills, 2) academic socialization, and 3) academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998). They indicate that these models are not mutually exclusive; rather, “each model successively encapsulates the other” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158) and has emerged as a result of the negative reaction the earlier one received. So, each model is quite critical of the previous one.

#### **3.3.1.1. The study skills model**

In the study skills model, writing and literacy are mainly viewed as a set of atomised, independent and cognitive skills, which can be transferred to other contexts in a simple and straightforward way once learned. Student writing is seen as technical and instrumental. Hence, the focus of instruction is on surface language features such as grammar and spelling and “on attempts to 'fix' problems with student learning, which are treated as a kind of pathology” (Lea & Street, 1998). The study skills model “is implicitly informed by autonomous and additive theories of learning, such as behaviorism, which are concerned with the transmission of knowledge” (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369) and has been criticized due to its insensitivity to broader issues of learning and social context as well as its construction of reading, writing, and literacy as atomized, cognitive skills. Wingate (2015) explains that many contemporary universities still follow this approach in their academic literacy instruction. The discourse surrounding this approach is that of deficiency and remediation. Remedial classes with a focus on teaching essay writing, note taking, and general language and study skills, offered in many Anglophone universities around the world to students who are believed to struggle with the literacy demands in their disciplines as well as the compulsory first-year composition classes, also called

“College Composition” or “Freshman Writing” (Beaufort, 2007) in the US, are all reflections of the study skills model because they have been traditionally basic skills courses teaching students how to produce acceptable writing and how to conform to the conventions of standard written English (Wingate, 2015). Wingate explains the popularity of this generic and extra-curricular skills provision with common beliefs about language learning and budget limitations. These common beliefs are based on the assumption that academic literacy is a set of skills which can be learned independently from subject knowledge and, once acquired, can be transferred to any context, as well as the assumption that difficulties with academic literacy can be addressed through remedial language classes (Boughey, 2002; Ivanič & Lea, 2006; Lillis, 2001). As for university budgets, the design and delivery of instruction for large, heterogeneous groups of learners is not only less expensive but also “logistically undemanding, and requires less skilled staff to implement” (Hyland, 2002, as cited in Wingate, 2015, p. 40)

### **3.3.1.2. The academic socialization model**

The academic socialization model developed as a response to the criticism the study skills model received and is associated with the growth in constructivism and situated learning as organizing frames, as well as with work in the field of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and genre theory (Lea & Street, 2006). According to this model, students can acquire academic literacy through immersion in disciplinary and subject-based discourses and culture. Compared to the study skills model, this model is more sensitive to social context influences. However, Lea and Street (2006) criticize this model for failing to take into account language, literacy, and discourse issues concerning institutional production and representation of meaning. They hold that institutional practices such as processes of change and the use of power are not addressed either. They also criticize the academic socialization model for assuming that the disciplinary discourses and genres are static and that academy is a relatively uniform

culture, resulting in the belief that students can become academically literate once they have understood the rules governing a particular academic discourse.

However, this criticism is found unfair and vague by critics who note that Academic Literacies theory does not provide a clear description of which approaches are actually referred to under the category of “academic socialization”. Wingate (2015) notes that this categorization ignores the nuanced characteristics of different genre schools, as well as “the considerable development of genre pedagogies” (p.33) over the last two decades.

### **3.3.1.3. The academic literacies model**

The last model, the academic literacies model, is the most closely related to the NLS. “It takes as its starting point the position that literacy is not a unitary concept; reading and writing—literacies—are cultural and social practices, and vary depending upon the particular context in which they occur” (Lea, 2004, p. 740). Unlike the aforementioned models, which see student writing at the level of skills and socialization, the academic literacies model considers these issues at the level of epistemology and identities. It views academic literacy practices at the institutional level and stresses important factors such as relationships of power, authority, meaning making, and identity. It also acknowledges that literacy practices used in other institutions such as government, business, or university bureaucracy have an implicit influence on the nature of academic literacy skills students are expected to gain. As Lea and Street (2006) note, an academic literacies perspective draws attention to literacies that are not necessarily directly associated with subjects and disciplines, but those associated with broader institutional discourses and genres. They emphasize that a prominent aspect of academic literacy practices from the student perspective is the need to change their writing styles and genres according to different settings, to employ a range of literacy practices suitable for each setting, and to deal with the social meanings and identities that each arouses.



Hence, Lea and Street (2006) hold that this approach challenges an important assumption made by the academic socialization model: that students can be acculturated into the academic culture simply through immersion into the academic culture and exposure to the literacy practices used in the dominant discourse. However, the academic literacies model does not consider this process to be smooth and straightforward since the academy and disciplinary discourses and genres are not necessarily as homogeneous and stable as they are construed in the academic socialization model. The process of acculturation, from an academic literacies perspective, is further complicated by the active role students play in the process of meaning-making in the academy. Hence, the primary concerns of the academic literacies model are issues of language, identity and the contested nature of knowledge.

The academic literacies model has been mainly criticized for the model's lack of pedagogical application. As a response, Lea (2004) examined how research findings from the field of academic literacies might be used to support course design across the extensive curriculum of higher education in England. Rather than drawing on research data, she used a case study, by way of illustration, from a specific teaching context, where an attempt was made to integrate the principles of an approach to course design based on an academic literacies model. The case study drew attention to the ways in which course designers adopting principles of course design derived from academic literacies research could utilize new technologies to their advantage. Noting that course designers often overlook the significance of the role of writing and other textual practices in the process of learning, Lea (2004) set out to show the relevance of an academic literacies perspective for course designers, foregrounding the relationship between the institutional practices of teaching and course design. Results of the study showed that in spite of some limitations, principles of academic literacies can help address and deal with the integral tensions between students' own ways of making meaning through texts and the conventional bodies of long-established knowledge that represent any subject or discipline, especially in an increasingly technologically mediated, higher education arena.

In a similar study, Lea and Street (2006) showed further examples of how an academic literacies model could be used to frame curricular and instructional design drawing on experiences in two very different academic programs: a university program for widening participation in the university for linguistic minority students and a university law program. Illustrating the limitations of relying merely on study skills and academic socialization models, the study set out to demonstrate the relative value of an academic literacies model, emphasizing the importance of teachers being explicit in teaching students the range of genres, modes, shifts, transformations, representations, meaning-making processes, and identities involved in academic learning within and across academic contexts. The results of the study underlined the relationship between cultural practices and different genres, the importance of feedback on students' written assignments in the learning process, and how both students and their teachers can learn from foregrounding constructing meaning and identity in the writing process, emphasizing that such "understandings, when made explicit, provide greater opportunities for teaching and learning, as well as for examining how such literacy practices are related to epistemological issues" (p. 376).

Nevertheless, while these applications of the academic literacies model to pedagogical practice provide valuable ideas for specific contexts, to what extent these ideas can be applied broadly to mainstream higher education and practical classroom teaching is found unclear by critics (Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

Most recently, critics have also pointed out that the lack of reference in the academic literacies literature to the large body of research and pedagogic literature associated with EAP suggests that academic literacies proponents might not be fully aware of the contributions EAP has made to the field (Tribble, 2009). For instance, the academic literacies model subsumes all categories of EAP under the academic socialization model, which, as explained previously, is criticized by the proponents of academic literacies model for various reasons. However, Wingate and Tribble (2012) note that these criticisms do not take in account EAP's founding principles, recent research findings and innovation in

current instructional practice. To illustrate, proponents of the academic literacies model criticize EAP for regarding disciplines as stable, or assuming that students can write across all disciplines once they have understood the conventions of one discipline. However, in reality, while the assumption of academic writing and discourse communities “as monolithic and homogeneous” has existed in EAP “until fairly recently”, it is now outdated (Hynland, 2004, x, as cited in Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

Hence, the aforementioned criticism of EAP reflects a lack of awareness regarding the recent developments in EAP on the part of the proponents of academic literacies model. Rather than being two separate strands of research, EAP and academic literacies approaches can be brought together as complementary components in an inclusive writing pedagogy for students of all backgrounds (Wingate & Tribble, 2012). The following section offers a brief overview of the recent developments in EAP in an attempt to show the similarities between the academic literacies model and EAP.

### **3.3.2. A critical review of the development of EAP and critical EAP**

The early history of EAP can be traced back to the mid-1960s beginning with the emergence of English for Science and Technology (EST), with theoretical foundations in linguistics, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, communicative language teaching, writing across the curriculum, learning theory, and genre studies. The early years of EAP focused more on curriculum and instruction at the expense of research and theory, which led some EAP specialists to be concerned about unquestioned assumptions driving the development of classroom materials and activities. In subsequent years, though, social context, with its unpredictability and multiple meanings, has become a fundamental concern in EAP. It is currently recognized that knowledge is socially constructed and that linguistic analyses of text, the basis of the early EAP instruction, are an insufficient foundation of instruction (Benesch, 2001).

While acknowledging that EAP attends to the social construction of knowledge, Benesch (2001) criticizes it for overlooking the socio-political issues affecting life in and outside of academic

settings. She argues for an approach called critical EAP, which “combines two fields that have much to offer each other: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and critical pedagogy (Benesch, 2001, p. xiv). The term *critical pedagogy* is often associated with the work of scholars such as Freire (1970), Giroux (1992), Luke (1992), Luke and Gore (1992), and McLaren (1989) in the field of education. Benesch (2001) explains that while EAP provides informed and focused instruction, based on needs analysis, critical pedagogy is concerned with institutional power relations, studying how students’ and teachers’ multiple identities complicate teaching and learning.

Critical EAP is informed by the works of theorists such as Freire (1994), Foucault (1980), Pennycook (1999) and feminist critical theorists such as Luke (1992) and Gore (1992). While, from an EAP perspective, the teacher’s role is often limited to enacting predetermined requirements, helping students reach target demands unquestioningly, the notion of hope in critical pedagogy challenges this approach to education. Freire (1994) views teaching that simply perpetuates the status quo without the possibility of changing current conditions as training, not education. Benesch (2001) maintains that “Hope as a construct offers a vision of EAP as the means for greater dialogue in academic classes, more interesting readings, better-conceived assignments, and greater joy in learning. It encourages students to aim for these reforms in academic institutions and then to improve conditions in the workplace and community” (p. xvii).

As Dudley-Evans (2001) notes, critical EAP represents a radical departure from mainstream approaches to EAP, which assume that international students in English-medium situations just want to succeed in their courses and are not concerned with questioning the teaching or the assignments. Such views, Dudley-Evans (2001) remarks, represent an underestimation of students and a lack of respect for their abilities. Critical EAP, in contrast, seeks to help students perform well in their academic courses while encouraging them to question and shape the education they are being offered. It views students as active participants who can influence academic goals and assignments rather than

obediently accepting them without questioning. Through these practices, critical EAP aims to increase students' active participation in the workplace, civic life, and other areas.

Likewise, in his influential introductory article published in a special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* devoted to critical approaches to TESOL, Pennycook (1999) draws attention to political questions, issues of power, disparity, difference or desire in language education. He notes that a critical approach to pedagogy needs to “aim at transformation, a way of shifting pedagogical relations to give students more curricular control, and ways of engaging with difference not merely in terms of inclusivity and issues but also at the level of desire” (p.341). Pennycook asserts that a critical approach in TESOL requires a post-modern problematizing stance, in other words, “self reflexivity” (Pennycook, 2001, p.8) – a constant questioning stance turned on itself, that is questioning the theory, practice, content, and politics of one's own experiments. As Benesch (2001) puts it “Problematizing practice is a feature of critical pedagogy, allowing the theory to guide teaching, and teaching to complicate theory” (p. 135).

Benesch (2001) also draws attention to the recognition of politics of pedagogy as an emerging field in L2 writing. She shows the problematic nature of traditional second language (L2) composition research by criticizing its assumptions. One assumption she challenges is that students' relationships to their native language and to English are unproblematic, that learners can simply add an additional language to their repertoire with positive results. She indicates that these assumptions are now being questioned in critical research and pedagogy with a view to capturing the complexity of L2 learning in a variety of contexts by students of various social backgrounds. In her discussion of politics of ideology in L2 writing, she focuses on critical and pragmatic stances toward academic writing; the contested meaning and role of the cultural nature of critical thinking in L2 writing classrooms; and the threatening influence of Internet technology on all of our educational practices. Likewise, in their analytical discussion of the most influential findings in L2 writing research over the past two decades, Leki, Cumming, and Silva (2008) foreground the importance of ideological, political, and identity

issues in L2 academic literacy development. Within ideological and political issues, they also examine the critical and pragmatic stances toward academic literacy.

This brief review of current developments in the field of EAP shows that the prominent concerns of the proponents of the academic literacies model (i.e. the role of politics, ideology, and identity in academic literacy development) have in fact already been addressed in critical EAP.

### **3.3.3. Final thoughts**

For the purposes of this study, the academic literacies model offers a valuable framework for examining the social dynamics in the focal students' academic literacy development and their experiences in building their academic identities; however, so does critical EAP, which has a lot in common with the academic literacies model. Therefore, while the present study heavily draws on the academic literacies model in conceptualizing the students' academic literacy experiences, it also recognizes and benefits from the contributions of critical EAP to our understanding of undergraduates' academic literacy development. As mentioned above, Wingate and Tribble (2012) call for the constructive sharing of best practice from these two influential approaches to academic literacy instruction. Wingate and Tribbles' approach (Wingate & Tribble, 2012; 2013) that combines critical EAP and academic literacies principles to bring about a feasible, appropriate and inclusive mainstream writing pedagogy in higher education presents a strong argument for curriculum-integrated academic literacy instruction.

Wingate (2015) explains this inclusive curriculum-integrated approach to academic literacy instruction in a recent book, where she lays out the four principles the proposed model is based on. The first principle is concerned with the content and methodology of instruction and requires that academic literacy instruction be closely linked to, or part of, subject teaching, dealing with literacy

activities that are particularly challenging for students, such as writing from sources or argumentation, which can only be learned in authentic subject context. Wingate argues that the content of academic literacy instruction should go beyond grammar and features of what she calls “a non-existing universal academic language that is not situated in any specific context” (p.128). The focus, instead, should be on how academic language is shaped by the discourse community and its epistemologies, conventions and communicative requirements. Following the recommendations from critical EAP and academic literacies, she argues that the genres students have to produce should be the focus of instruction, which should help students develop critical awareness of the practices influencing text production. The second principle is based on the argument that all students are novices in their academic disciplines and therefore need to learn the relevant discourses and conventions. Wingate (2015) adds that linguistic and study skills support for students who may need extra help should be provided in addition to the curriculum-integrated academic literacy instruction. Following from the first two principles, the third principle calls for an instructional format that goes beyond additional or curriculum-linked instruction and that instead takes place alongside, or arises from, content teaching. She notes that academic literacy instruction can only be fully integrated into the curriculum if it becomes an assessed component of the subject-curriculum. Acknowledging that this level of integration would require substantial changes at institutional level, she emphasizes that this is the only way to ensure all students can learn discipline-specific discourse conventions in their authentic communicative context, adding that the integration would also help reduce the workload pressure created by “additional literacy instruction” (p.130). The fourth principle states that academic literacy instruction should be underpinned by collaboration between writing instructors and other academic staff teaching discipline-specific courses. While the expertise of writing instructors is needed for the identification of opportunities for literacy work in the subject curriculum, the analysis of target genres and subsequent preparation of learning resources, the expertise of subject lecturers is needed for their knowledge of the discourse community’s literacy conventions and genres. Wingate (2015) stresses that the model

requires substantial changes in the curriculum, but also notes that such changes may be inevitable, considering global market forces such as increasing competition for high-fee paying students and the importance of student satisfaction and meeting their needs.

### **3.4. A methodological and thematic review of research on academic literacy development**

Research studies on academic literacy acquisition have seen a departure from quantitative methods, larger sample sizes, and short-term studies to qualitative methods, smaller sample sizes, and long-term studies since the early 1990s. Another change can also be observed in the issues these studies have focused on. While early research focused on pedagogical issues, texts, composing processes, development of effective reading and writing skills, post 1990 research has turned to students as the central players in their own academic experiences and explored the opinions, perceptions, goals, attitudes and preferences of students, initially by more qualitative means and later in more richly individualized portraits (Leki, 2007; Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008).

Academic literacy studies in L2 (second language) have been largely influenced by those in L1 (first language) research. Hence, the following sections present an overview of influential studies that exemplify this departure from statistical methods to more in-depth qualitative research studies both in L1 and L2 along with their pedagogical implications.

#### **3.4.1 Research on L1 academic literacy development and its pedagogical impact**

While earlier studies into L1 academic literacy tended to focus on statistical methods from relatively large student populations to measure performance, research has shifted toward qualitative research methodologies since the early 1990s (e.g. Carroll, 2002; Chieseri-Strater, 1991; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Lea, 2004; Lillis, 2001; Sternglass, 1997).

From an academic literacies perspective, Chieseri-Strater (1991) explored the literacy experiences of two NES (native-English speaker) students across the undergraduate curriculum in



USA. Both of these students were enrolled in a writing workshop. Chiseri-Strater set out to explore the ways students were initiated into academic discourse communities; the ways their individual differences, in terms of their self-expectations, personal abilities, and learning styles, were acknowledged or denied, and the nature of curricular transformation that would enable students to make sense of what they were learning in one course and connect it to other courses and finally to their own lives. After observing the students' academic literacy development for two semesters through interviews, observations, and other qualitative methods, Chiseri-Strater concluded that the students' academic experiences in higher education had constrained rather than promote their self-understanding and intellectual progress. He, therefore, argued that higher education is tragically flawed by its insistence on intellectual conformity, which is a situation that he thought should change.

Likewise, emphasizing the need for longitudinal and culturally-diverse postsecondary research studies, Sternglass (1997) explored the experiences of NES (native-English speaker) and also a few NNES (non-native-English speaker) students whose academic careers in higher education were at risk because of their difficulties with the academic literacy requirements placed on them. The purpose of the study, which was conducted at an urban university in USA, was "to examine the ways in which the development of complex reasoning strategies was fostered by writing, to determine the role that writing plays in learning, and to understand how the multifaceted social factors in students' lives affected their academic progress" (p. xiv). Following four students from the beginning of their college experience to the end and drawing on data including examples of student writing over the six years of the study, interviews with the students, classroom observations, standardized test scores, and grade transcript summaries, Sternglass (1997) demonstrated how the students' writing skills changed over the course of the study, taking into consideration many factors influencing a student's writing: the interaction of the educational setting with the (particularly urban) student experience; the impact of certain composition pedagogies on student learning; common types of institutional writing tests and graduation writing requirements; the impact of instructional format and assignment specifications on

student development. The results of the study showed that many of the underprepared students in her study could achieve substantial academic goals. She maintained that underprepared students could develop the necessary academic literacy skills to succeed in higher education “if they are given the time” (p. 296). She challenged the belief that students were ready to deal with the academic requirements of higher education after they had completed a composition course, for the progress occurred over extended periods. However, the widespread “discourse of deficiency and remediation” (Wingate, 2015, p. 10) among higher education institutions, usually characterized by complaints about students’ poor levels of reading and writing skills and accompanied by the quick fix solution of decontextualized remedial academic English classes (see 3.2.1.1), is a sign that the amount of time learners need to acquire the required academic literacy skills at university level is often underestimated for both NES and NNES. I would like to avoid the native/non-native speaker of English dichotomy here, as many scholars agree that all university entrants, irrespective of their linguistic or cultural background, are novices in their academic disciplines and therefore need guidance and instruction in the relevant discourses, taking into account the diversity in academic disciplines, genres, and discourse conventions (Boughey, 2002; Gee, 1990).

Carroll (2002), too, supported a developmental perspective in academic literacy acquisition. In a longitudinal study of twenty students enrolled in a midsize, independent university in USA, seven per cent of whom were described as “international”, the researcher showed why a one- or two-semester, first-year course in writing was insufficient in meeting students’ academic literacy needs across the curriculum in their entire academic careers. Her data collection methods included surveys, interviews, and document analysis. Challenging “the myth that adequately prepared students should be able to write fluently and correctly on any topic, at any time, in any context” (p. xi), the findings of her study showed that first year composition courses cannot meet all the needs of even generally successful high school graduates and that “students’ complex literacy skills develop slowly, often idiosyncratically, over the course of their college years, as they choose or are coerced to take on new

roles as writers” (p. xii). However, she concluded that first-year composition classes still serve “a useful, albeit limited, purpose as a transition from high school and other previous writing experiences to writing in the university” (p. 119). While there is no such entity as the generic academic essay, there are some general academic expectations such as reading and evaluating difficult texts that offer diverse viewpoints on complex issues, locating and then making sense of the overwhelming volume of information available through paper and digital sources, integrating new knowledge with personal experience and values, understanding and employing the conventions of new genres of writing, and writing as an expert for an often critical audience. She added that academic writing classes cannot help students master all these skills, but can act as a point of transition in introducing these skills that should be enhanced throughout students’ experiences in other courses.

Also using qualitative research methods, Lea and Street (1998) examined the conflicting and contested nature of writing practices in higher education, drawing on the findings of an earlier research project which examined the divergent expectations and interpretations of academic staff and students concerning undergraduate students' written assignments. The study, which used the academic literacies model as a theoretical framework, was conducted at two universities in England, one new and one traditional. While the researchers admitted that time constraints did not allow them to use the in-depth ethnographic approach which such research would call for, they stated that they adopted an ethnographic style approach. Hence, the data collection techniques included individual and group interviews with a total of forty-seven students, interviews with a total of twenty-three academic staff as well as the “learning support” staff, participant observation of group sessions and attention to samples of students' writing, written feedback on students' work and handouts on 'essay' writing.

Three thematic categories regarding ways of looking at student writing emerged from the research data. The first focused on students and attributed the challenges students faced to a deficiency in basic literacy skills that could be primarily remedied with supportive study skills instruction or learning support unit. The second thematic category focused on student-tutor

interactions and was concerned with issues such as student and tutor assumptions and understandings of assignment titles, tutor feedback on students' written work and, especially from the students' perspectives, the significance of their own 'identity' as writers rather than just the acquisition of academic writing skills required at university level. The third theme was primarily at an institutional level and concerned with the implications of modularity, assessment and university procedures on student writing. The researchers argued that these themes were related to power and authority and could not be reduced to the skills and competences required for access to, and success within, the academic community. They added that traditional approaches to academic writing tended to reduce the so called problems to the students themselves, or view them as a consequence of the mass introduction of "non-traditional" students into higher education. However, they considered such explanations narrow and suggested that an academic literacies perspective could provide the foundation for the necessary reflection on learning and teaching in higher education.

The experience of "non-traditional" students in academic writing in higher education in the UK has also been extensively documented by Lillis (2001) in a book-length study. Lillis (2001) defines "non-traditional" students or "disadvantaged minorities" as they are referred to in North America, "as students from social groups who have historically been largely excluded from higher education" (p. 1). Drawing on a three-year case study with ten undergraduate non-traditional students and findings including literacy history interviews, extended discussions with students about their writing of discipline-specific essays, and extracts from essays, Lillis explored three key issues in the field: access to higher education and to its language and literacy representational resources; regulation of meaning making in academic writing; and desire for participation in higher education and for choices over ways of meaning in academic writing. Lillis argued that current ways of conceptualizing student writing in official discourse failed to broaden non-traditional students' access to higher education. Highlighting the parallels between Lea and Street's academic literacies model (1998) and what Ivanič (1999) called "critical language awareness", Lillis argued that academic literacies along with insights

from critical language awareness could be a useful research framework for conceptualizing students' academic writing experiences. She also stressed that any attempt to explore student writing should consider students' written academic texts and their accounts of the production of these texts, and that current pedagogic practice surrounding student writing needs to be transformed. Particularly, she criticized the dominant practice of tutor feedback, which denies the actual participants', that is, student-writers' role in the construction of meaning in written texts. Lillis suggested a more dialogic approach involving collaborative talk between student-writers and tutors over the construction of meanings. According to Lillis, such an approach would push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable meanings within academia.

Although academic literacies model has recently gained support in the field, it is also criticized for several reasons. While critics acknowledge that it is powerful in challenging current theories and practices with regards to student writing, it is still unclear how it could contribute to student writing pedagogy and practice as a design frame (Lillis, 2003). As a response, as reported in detail earlier, Lea (2004) and Lea and Street (2006) have shown illustrations of how principles of academic literacies can be integrated into curriculum design. Both of those studies were also conducted with a case study design.

### **3.4.2. Research on L2 academic literacy development and its pedagogical impact**

The tendency towards qualitative research methodologies has also been observed in the field of L2 academic literacy development since the early 1990s (e.g. Casanave, 1992; Carson, Chase, Gibson, & Hargrove, 1992; Fishman & McCarthy, 2001; Harklau, 2000; Leki, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997; Prior, 1991). Documenting L2 student literacy life at the tertiary level, many of these studies investigated the ways these students tackle the literacy requirements that confront them in their ESL (English as a Second Language), English, or writing courses as well as their discipline-specific courses across the curriculum.

To illustrate, in a study that reported the results of a literacy analysis of “a high demand, high attrition course at a major urban university” in USA, Carson, Chase, Gibson, and Hargrove (1992, p. 25) concluded that the main literacy requirement of the course was integration of writing with reading and of in-class and out-of-class learning. The data, which consisted of faculty interviews, student surveys, and analysis of written materials, texts, and examinations, revealed that the most challenging aspect of reading and writing requirements of the course, from the student perspective, was integration of skills writing and reading skills and materials, which was deemed crucial by the professors. In other words, there was a discrepancy between students’ abilities and performance as well as between professors’ and students’ expectations. The researchers interpreted this finding as an indication of the inadequacy of academic preparation programs in meeting students’ needs.

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers offered a set of important pedagogical implications. They suggested that academic preparation programs should focus on integration of reading and writing skills such as summarizing and synthesizing content from a variety of sources to help students become proficient at both comprehending and producing the kinds of discourse needed in entry-level courses. They added that writing and reading instruction should be based on authentic classroom demands. With regards to writing, the focus should go beyond traditional essays, writing from personal experience, and teaching rhetorical patterns in isolation to include training in writing essay exams, critiques, notes, summaries, and writing short answer questions. Reading instruction should also be based on authentic target needs with the amount and kinds of reading resembling those of content area courses. It was also suggested that focusing not only on the process but also the acquisition of knowledge of word meanings and factual information through assignments, discussion and examination would be conducive to students’ success in content area coursework. A final suggestion concerned the sequencing of preparatory courses in reading and writing in the traditional undergraduate curriculum. Traditionally, these courses were offered as pre-requisite to regular academic courses. It was, however, suggested that requiring this instruction as a co-requisite alongside

other content courses could be more effective as students are more likely to be motivated when they feel an immediate need or use for certain instruction.

In another study on L2 undergraduates' academic literacy development, Leki and Carson (1994) used a survey to investigate the students' perceptions of the relationship between the writing instruction they received in ESL writing classes and the actual writing tasks they were assigned in courses across the disciplines. The results showed that while the majority of the respondents felt that their training in EAP writing courses helped them accomplish their goals in writing assignments in classes across the curriculum, they also expressed frustrations with their EAP writing courses in specific areas. An important finding of this study was that students' experiences in writing differed depending on the source of information utilized in writing a text: a) general world knowledge or personal experience; b) a source text or texts used as a springboard for ideas; c) or any other form of other external reality, the content of which the student was to demonstrate knowledge. In subsequent more in-depth study, Leki and Carson (1997) investigated ESL students' experiences in their EAP writing classes and academic content classes across the curriculum with a focus on the aforementioned different sources of information. The findings, which came from data gained through interviews held with 36 undergraduate and graduate ESL students, revealed an important discrepancy between writing classes and other courses which suggested that writing classes required students to demonstrate knowledge of a source text much less frequently compared to other courses. Based on these findings, Leki and Carson argued that writing assignments that did not require source texts deprived students of the opportunity to engage in the kinds of interactions with text that stimulate linguistic and intellectual growth.

Since the late 1990s, the number of case studies that strive to create a more complex understanding of how a variety of factors interact to bring about a particular picture of L2 literacy development has increased (Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008). These studies explored various challenges encountered by students, especially undergraduates. To illustrate, some of these studies

investigated the challenges faced by students while responding to specific course demands for L2 literacy (Curie, 1998; Troudi & Jendli, 2011; Fishman & McCarthy, 2001; Leki, 2007; Spack 1997; Sternglass, 1997). They also explored students' struggles in developing L2 literacy and academic competence, sometimes in spite of institutionally created impediments to learning and language development (Gentil, 2005; Leki, 2007; Spack, 1997; Sternglass, 1997), such as heavy emphasis on testing, and sometimes as a consequence of limited access to print literacy and powerful discourses as a result of issues of social class, race and power (Leibowitz, 2005). Some of these studies also reported the experiences of students trying to find ways to meet literacy demands through compensatory strategies (Leki 1995, 1999, 2003; Rodby, 1999), and finding their identities socially constructed for them by teachers and institutions as primarily ESL students (Harklau, 2000).

Among these studies, Spack's three-year-long case study (1997) is one of the first longitudinal studies in the field. Spack examined the reading and writing strategies of a Japanese student and traced her acquisition of college-level academic literacy in English. She employed multiple sources of data such as interviews with the student and two of her political science professors, classroom observations, and texts from a number of courses from three disciplines. The study showed that the student's educational background had formed her approach to American discourse practices and the way she interpreted them. However, the findings also showed that her approach and the way she viewed her own experiences changed over time. The longitudinal nature of the study raised questions about the validity of short term studies on acquisition of academic literacy.

Although most of the aforementioned studies are significant in their insights, what they seemed to lack, according to Leki (2007), was a comprehensive account of students' literacy experiences embedded in a broader context involving their personal, social, and other experiences as well as the socio-political factors. These studies' overemphasis on the development of writing skills at the expense of a thick description of the institutional and social nature of students' academic experiences have resulted in a constricted view of the students and their experiences, not to mention a narrow description



of the context, often not going beyond the context of various writing assignments, and the previous and current writing the students did for a course.

In order to address this lack, Leki (2007) explored four undergraduate L2 students' academic experiences entwined in the broader frame of their personal histories, the human context of their development, and the discipline specific contexts of their majors over a five-year period of time. Leki (2007) set out to find out how useful L2 writing courses were for the students who were required follow to them, what the students carried with them from these courses to their other discipline specific courses, and what happened to those students after they left ESL, English, or writing classes. The findings showed that the L2 students in her study faced problems associated with assigning single-draft papers, not relating course readings with writing assignments, not linking writing assignments to each other, providing inadequate guidelines in general education courses, and not providing effective feedback on writing assignments. The study also revealed the challenges the students encountered as a result of being immigrants in the U.S. and having less experience with writing and English. Leki noted that the importance attached to writing by the students was much less discernible when compared to their other experiences, interests, and duties. Moreover, the findings showed that the social and ideological aspects of the students' academic lives shaped their struggles for identity, social inclusion, and ideological resistance, which more often than not were invisible to their professors. By this token, Leki (2007) noted that documenting and acknowledging these experiences would give literacy education a perspective that would more aptly portray the students' academic experiences than one that only focused on their literacy development.

The pedagogical implications of the study included avoiding assigning meaningless work for already overburdened L2 students by not wasting their time with filler topics and instead acknowledging their agendas, avoiding confusing L2 students by representing English department genres as universal, and not isolating writing classes in the first year of college considering how little writing might be assigned during those terms. Moreover, drawing on Freirean "limit situations", which

Benesch (as cited in Leki, 2007) described as “a personal or political obstacle perceived by humans to restrict their freedom and ability to carry out their goals” (p. 285), Leki suggested that L2 writing classes could be used to encourage students to explore the academic discourse community they have stepped into by examining and responding to literacy demands across the curriculum. She explained how the focal students in her study experienced such limit situations, for instance, when they found themselves not selected for group work, not knowing how to defend themselves against accusations, and being essentialized by professors. She added that guiding students to analyze such situations and seek solutions collectively by utilizing their developing L2 literacy skills would be appreciating their intellectual skills and experience properly. Finally, emphasizing the importance of developing socioacademic relationships in academic success, Leki drew attention to the centrality of building such relationships in L2 students’ academic careers in terms of receiving assistance from writing centers as well as engaging in effective communication with their peers and professors.

### **3.4.3. Final thoughts**

All of the studies outlined above have significantly contributed to our understanding of the development of academic literacy in higher education. As outlined above, recent research has turned to more in-depth, qualitative research methods. However, longitudinal studies have raised questions about the validity of short term studies on acquisition of academic literacy because the longitudinal studies were able to capture the changes in the way students viewed their own experiences over time (Spack, 1997). Nonetheless, even in most of the long-term qualitative studies, the context has been very narrowly defined, with little or no attention given to the institutional and social nature of students’ academic experiences, resulting in a constricted view of the students and their experiences (Leki, 2007). Reviewing these studies, their limitations, as well as their pedagogical and research implications has given me a clear direction as to how I should approach my research questions, which will be explained in the following chapter in detail. Moreover, the growing focus on the relationship between

academic literacy development and identity in more recent studies has directed my attention to the increasing body of research in what is now called “literacy-and-identity” studies.

### **3.5. A critical review of a recent strand of research in academic literacy: “Literacy-and-identity studies”**

The interconnectedness of the concepts of literacy and identity has been acknowledged and widely documented in recent literacy studies, which construe literacy as a social construct. As explained in detail earlier, ideological model of literacy, the academic literacies model, NLS, and critical EAP agree that the ways in which people deal with reading and writing are themselves embedded in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. Lave and Wenger (1991), too, note that “Identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another” (p. 53). Similarly, Gee’s definition of literacy (1989) as “mastery of or fluent control over a secondary Discourse” (p. 9) concurs with the NLS and the ideological model. Discourses, in Gee’s words, are ways of being in the world. As Gee memorably puts it a Discourse is “an ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (p. 7).

The focus on the learner and the view of literacy as a social construct in recent literacy studies marks a diversion from the history of research in SLA. Indeed, Candlin (2000) calls attention to this epistemological difference between the history of studies in SLA and that of another applied linguistics practice, literacy. He states that while the former can be characterized by “the consistent anonymising, if not the actual eclipsing of the learner”, the latter by a “continuing and principled involvement of researchers in the literacy lives of individuals in their communities of practice, [. . .] and, stemming from this a reliance on the qualitative explanation of narratives of experience as a source of question and as a resource for explanation” (p. xiii).

Research on voice in writing and on multiliteracies has become increasingly prominent since the 1990s and early 2000s (Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008). The main theme in these studies is that both what and how one reads and writes can have an impact on the type of person one is recognized as being and on how one sees oneself (Baker & Freebody, 1989; Davies, 1989; Street, 1994). While this “recent identity turn” (p. 415) in literacy studies is crucial, “literacy-and-identity studies” (p. 416) have been criticized for oversimplifying the construct of identity (Moje, Luke, Davies & Street, 2009). In a comprehensive review of literature, Moje, Luke, Davies and Street (2009) problematize this issue by questioning how particular views of identity shape the way researchers construe literacy and, conversely, how the view of literacy taken by a researcher shapes meanings made about identity. They emphasize that subtle differences in identity theories have remarkably different implications for one’s understanding of how the constructs of literacy and identity interrelate and are important for one another. Using five metaphors for identity documented in the identity literature, the authors review various ways of conceptualizing identity. These metaphors are identity as difference, sense of self/subjectivity, mind or consciousness, narrative, and position.

However, as Ivanič (1998) points out, there is disagreement about distinctions between terms like “‘self’, ‘person’, ‘role’, ‘ethos’, ‘persona’, ‘position’, ‘positioning’, ‘subject position’, ‘subject’, ‘subjectivity’, ‘identity’, and the plurals of many of these words” (p. 10) between researchers from different disciplines. Hence, it is important to clarify these terms before moving on. Simply put, as Ivanič (1998) states, identity “is the everyday word for people’s sense of who they are” however, “it doesn’t automatically carry with it the connotations of social construction and constraint”. As a result, a number of “ways of talking about ‘identity’ that ‘foreground’” these connotations have been created by identity researchers (pp. 10-11). Ivanič gives an overview of these terms. Below is a list of some of the key terms used in current research on identity, which will be helpful in understanding the aforementioned metaphors used in literacy-and-identity studies.

- self and person: This is a distinction made by some anthropologists and found for example in the work of Besnier (1991, 1995) and Street (1993), in which one's "self" is who he/she feels himself/herself to be, emotionally and "affectively", while "person" is the identity he/she projects to others in his/her socially defined roles (as cited in Joseph, 2004, p. 9).
- subject, subject position, positioning: These are terms deriving from the work of the French structuralists Althusser (1918-90), Foucault (1926-84), Bourdieu (1930-2002) and those they have influenced, for whom the self is product of the "discourse" and social "field" in which it is located. Since structuralism traces its origin to linguistics, these might seem particularly useful terms for investigating language and identity. But Ivanič notes [...] that 'the singular terms "subject position" in particular is misleading, since it suggests one unitary position to which an individual is subject, rather than a variety of dimensions on which a person might be positioned simultaneously' (Ivanič, 1998, p. 10, as cited in Joseph, 2004, pp. 9-10).
- subjectivity, subjectivities, positioning, possibilities for selfhood: These are Ivanič's (1998) preferred terms, which she sees as "carrying the connotation that identity is socially constructed and that people are not free to take on any identity they choose, but adding a sense of multiplicity, hybridity, and fluidity (as cited in Joseph, 2004, p10).
- identify, identification: It has recently become common to eschew "identity" in favor of the verb "identify" and its nominalization "identification", on the grounds that these refer to a process rather than a "fixed condition" (as cited in Joseph, 2004, p. 10).

Moje, Luke, Davies and Street (2009) acknowledge that not all of the theories they draw on to exemplify each metaphor allude to the term *identity* explicitly. However, these metaphors offer useful perspectives for understanding how identity and its relationship to literacy, learning, and teaching

might be conceptualized. While the metaphors are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as from time to time they overlap in interesting ways, they show significant distinctions in focus and purpose.

The following extended extract presents the identity-as-position metaphor, the most comprehensive of the five metaphors mentioned above, and its relationships with the other metaphors:

It [Identity-as-Position Metaphor] recognizes the subject as called into being, invited to stand in certain positions, to take up particular identities . . . Identity as position allows for people to tell stories about themselves, to represent themselves in narrative, but also to shift positions and tell new stories . . . Finally, positioning metaphors allow for the doing of identity -- or identity in activity -- to be as powerful a means of self construction and representation as the narrativizing of identity because positioning metaphors require that the researcher follow people through different physical/ spatial and social/metaphorical positions of their lives, documenting activity, artifacts, and discursive productions simultaneously. (Moje, Luke, Davies & Street, 2009, p.431)

In this conceptualization, identity-as-position metaphor brings together all of the previous metaphors. Literacy and identity studies using this metaphor associate positions with a shifting sense of agency and interpellation. For instance, in one such study, a young man, who plays multiuser games regularly, takes up the call of the game as an engaged and authoritative practitioner of the activity while he is positioned and identified as disengaged, lazy, and sloppy in his history and language art classes (Leander & Lovvorn, 2006, as cited in Moje, Luke, Davies & Street, 2009). Another study shows the case of Latina youth identified as English language learners who were repositioned as proficient readers and writers when writing fan fiction online (Black, 2006, as cited in Moje, Luke, Davies & Street, 2009). In both examples, the subject has agency in some spaces and not others. In different spaces – online worlds versus the classroom -- they are positioned differently both in terms of literacy skills and identities. However, the ways that youth are called by others in power and how they respond to those calls is partly determined by the space and time they inhabit. With reference to a study of Latina/o youths' literacy practices across multiple spaces, Moje (2004) argues that the access the youth have to particular kinds of space shape their choice of texts and, consequently, the ways they chose to identify and be identified. The multiple spaces of their lives enable multiple ways of being

and multiple identities to be enacted. Hence, despite some variations, a key point in all identity-and-literacy-as-position studies is that movement across time and space, relationships in particular spaces, as well as access to texts and other artifacts create identities and literate practices.

The metaphor for identity I used in this study is identity-as-position as it is the most compatible one with my understanding of identity as well as the conceptualization of identity in the academic literacies model. Indeed, Moje, Luke, Davies, and Street (2009) stress that academic literacies research has a lot to offer literacy-and-identity studies because it demonstrates how the development of literate practice depends on knowledge of self and on awareness of one's identity enactments, rather than only skill, knowledge of words and vocabulary, and organization.

### **3.6. Major theories of identity in L2 language and literacy education**

One of the objectives of this study is to uncover the process L2 students go through to create comfortable subject positions for themselves while dealing with the challenges they face throughout their academic literacy development in English at an American university in the UAE. Both Norton's constructs of investment, imagined communities and imagined identities in L2 learning and Dörnyei's model of "L2 Motivational Self System", which represents a major reformation of previous motivational thinking by its explicit utilisation of psychological theories of the self, offer a suitable framework for understanding the nature of the relationship between the students' academic literacy growth and academic identity formation in the present study.

Norton's view of identity is in line with the identity-as-position metaphor explained above, as she views it as a construct that is multiple and shifting based on the situation as well as social and power relations (Norton, 2000). Norton believes that second language theorists have not developed a comprehensive theory of identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context. She goes on to argue that there is a need to reconceptualise identity with reference to larger, frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in everyday social interactions.

Norton introduced the sociological construct of “investment” to complement the psychological construct of motivation in SLA in its traditional sense, which failed to capture the complex identities of language learners as well as the often unequal relations of power they negotiated in different sites. The notion of investment acknowledges that learners often have variable desires to engage in the range of social interactions and community practices in which they are situated. It also seeks to make meaningful connections between a learner’s desire and commitment to learn a language and their changing identities. (Norton, 1997, 2000, 2001; Norton & Tohey, 2011). Imagined communities are defined as “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). Future relationships that exist only in learners’ imagination as well as affiliations, such as nationhood or even transnational communities, are all part of their imagined communities. For many learners, the target language community is a community of the imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future. Hence, investment in the target language is also viewed as an investment in the learner’s own identity.

Kanno and Norton (2003) emphasize that the impact of imagined communities on learners’ current actions and investment may be stronger than that of the communities which they have daily engagement in. She argues that imagined communities expand a learner’s range of possible selves: “A learner’s imagined community invite[s] an imagined identity, and a learner’s investment in the target language must be understood within this context” (p. 166). As Pavlenko and Norton (2007) put it “language learners’ actual and desired memberships in imagined communities affect their learning trajectories, influencing their agency, motivation, investment, and resistance in the learning of English” (p.589). The way a language learner positions himself/herself in an imagined community can impact his/her engagement with educational practices, compelling him/her to seek certain kinds of educational opportunities he/she might otherwise not even think of and also to reframe his/her learning experience in a positive or negative way. Hence, the difference in learners’ imagined relationship to their



educational experiences may have a significant impact on their learning trajectory. To illustrate, a language learner, in spite of being highly motivated, may not be invested in the language practices of a given classroom. As a result, he/she could be excluded from those practices, or choose not to participate in classroom activities and eventually be positioned as a ‘poor’ or unmotivated language learner by others (Norton & Toohey, 2001)

In response to the criticism traditional L2 motivation theories received from scholars working in the field of language and identity in sociology, Dörnyei reframed L2 motivation within a “self-framework” and proposed the model of “L2 Motivational Self System” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 29), drawing on the theory of “future self-guides” (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). This theoretical shift in L2 motivation research in psychology is marked by a focus on the internal domain of self and identity rather than an external reference group, namely, the target language community. Dörnyei (2009) denies that L2 motivation is static and unable to change according to context. L2 Motivational Self System includes three components, known as future-self guides: Ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and the L2 learning experience. One’s ideal L2 self, which is an aspect of one’s ideal self, is a powerful motivator for learning the L2 because of one’s desire to reduce the discrepancy between his/ her actual self and ideal self. Dörnyei (2009) construed the ideal self as subsuming traditional integrative and more internalized instrumental motives. Less internalized, traditional instrumental motives are discussed as part of ought-to-L2 self, which concerns attributes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes, such as failing a course or disappointing parents. L2 learning experience, on the other hand, concerned situation specific factors that had to do with the immediate learning environment such as the teacher, educational resources and so on. As Dörnyei (2009) states, reconceptualising L2 motivation within the L2 Motivational Self System offers novel pathways to motivating language learners, which can also be viewed as conditions that are essential for future self-guides to exert their motivational power. To clarify, the Ideal L2 Self is an effective motivator if (1) the learner has a desired future self-image, (2) which is elaborate and

vivid, (3) which is perceived as reasonable and is in agreement or at least is not in contradiction with the expectations of the learner's family, peers and other elements of the social environment, (4) which is regularly activated in the learner's working self-concept, (5) which is accompanied by relevant and effective procedural strategies that act as a roadmap towards the goal, and finally (6) which also contains elaborate information about the negative consequences of not achieving the desired end-state.

As a result of this paradigmatic shift in L2 motivational research, I believe Norton's constructs of investment, imagined communities and imagined identities in L2 learning can no longer be viewed as incompatible with Dörnyei's conceptualization of L2 motivation, reframed in a 'possible/ideal-self' perspective. Dörnyei (2014) states that the concept of ideal L2 self can be meaningfully linked to Norton's concept of "imagined communities" in that one's idealized L2-speaking self can be viewed as a member of an imagined L2 community. Hence both frameworks will be used for understanding the nature of the relationship between the students' academic literacy growth and academic identity formation in the present study.

### **3.7. Chapter summary**

This chapter has presented a critical overview of competing definitions of literacy offered by the autonomous and ideological models, major approaches to student writing and reading in academic settings, a methodological and thematic review of research on L1 and L2 academic literacy development, and finally a critical review of literacy-and-identity studies. In doing so, it has provided a rationale for the theoretical framework that informs and guides my research. I have been influenced and inspired by the ideological model of literacy while conducting the present study. Accordingly, the theoretical framework that guides this thesis originates from the academic literacies model, which is "concerned with meaning making, identity, power and authority and foreground [s] the institutional nature of what 'counts' as knowledge in any particular academic context" (Street, 2009, p. 3). However, it also draws on critical EAP, following Wingate's argument that an effective and inclusive academic

literacy pedagogy must draw on the best aspects from existing approaches that complement each other, rather than being affiliated with one camp (Wingate, 2015). I believe Wingate and Tribbles' approach (Wingate & Tribble, 2012; 2013) that combines critical EAP and academic literacies principles to bring about a feasible, appropriate and inclusive mainstream writing pedagogy in higher education presents a compelling argument for curriculum-integrated academic literacy instruction. As indicated previously, in addition to exploring the nature of challenges the students encounter, this study also aims to the role played by social context dynamics in the development of each participant's academic identity. To understand how identity and literacy relate to each other, I take the identity-as-position perspective, a perspective that is also compatible with the academic literacies model. I will analyse this relationship through the theoretical lens of Norton's constructs of investment, imagined communities and imagined identities in L2 and Dörnyei's model of "L2 Motivational Self System".

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the research framework underpinning this study and lays out the research questions guiding the research design, methods, and research procedures, while also explaining the theoretical justification behind each decision taken. It then proceeds with a discussion on the trustworthiness and quality of the data, ethical dimensions taken into consideration, challenges faced and the limitations of the study.

#### **4.2. Research framework**

##### **4.2.1. The interpretive paradigm**

The present study is informed by the underlying principles of the interpretive paradigm. There are many competing definitions of the concept of research paradigms; however, as used in this study, it refers to a “cluster of beliefs and dictates” which guides scientists in a particular discipline in their decisions about “what should be studied, how research should be done, how results should be interpreted, and so on” (Bryman, 1988, p. 4). Likewise, underlining the complexity of the term, Punch

(1998) defines paradigm as “a set of assumptions about the social world, and about what constitutes proper techniques, and topics for inquiry” (p. 28). He views it as “a very broad term, encompassing elements of epistemology, theory and philosophy, along with methods” (p. 28). The term paradigm is mostly associated with Kuhn’s research on the history of science. In essence, Kuhn (1970) argues that researchers who share a commitment to a particular paradigm are committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice. These rules and standards involve highly philosophical issues and principles that combine beliefs about ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Creswell, 2007).

While ontological concerns relate to the nature of reality and its characteristics, epistemological assumptions have to do with the relationship between the researcher and that being researched (Creswell, 2007). Grix (2004) points out that interpretivism is based on an anti-foundationalist ontology. Foundationalists support the view that “true knowledge must rest upon a set of firm, unquestionable ... indisputable truths from which our beliefs may be logically deduced, so retaining the true value of foundational premises from which they follow” (Hughes & Sharrock, 1997, pp.4-5). In contrast, interpretivists subscribe to the view that the world and social phenomena do not exist independently of our knowledge and interpretation of them. Researchers are inextricably part of the social reality being researched. Consequently, objective, value free analysis is impossible, because knowledge is theoretically and discursively laden and a researcher necessarily is the sum total of his/her own personal and subjective opinions, attitudes and values. The world is socially constructed through the interaction of individuals, and separation of fact and value is not as clear-cut as the positivists claim. Hence, interpretivists do not strive to establish causal explanations in the social world, as their emphasis is on understanding. To them, the social world needs to be studied from within and with methods different from those used in the study of natural sciences (Grix, 2004).

Interpretivists’ choice of methodology is guided by their endeavour to understand the subjective world of human experience while retaining the integrity of phenomena being investigated.

Ethnography, case studies, and grounded theory are some of the examples of methodology mainly used by interpretive researchers. These methodological preferences highlight the interpretivists' concern for the individual. They view events and individuals as unique and largely non-generalizable. The main endeavour is to understand the subjective world of human experience through the eyes of participants, not the researcher. Reality in an interpretive paradigm is viewed as multi-layered and complex; hence, "thick descriptions" representing the complexity of situations are preferable to simplistic ones (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 17).

#### **4.2.2. Symbolic interactionism**

While the key principles outlined above distinguish interpretivism from other research paradigms, interpretivism includes a variety of schools of thought, each with its own subtly different epistemological viewpoint; hence, it is far from being a homogeneous position. However, these schools of thought are primarily united by their common rejection of the belief that human behaviour is governed by general, universal laws and characterized by underlying regularities, as well their adherence to the ontological, epistemological, and methodological beliefs outlined above. Phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and symbolic interactionism constitute the main theoretical positions within the interpretivist paradigm (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). As O'Donoghue (2007) notes, "while the different interpretivist positions are underpinned by the same general foundation principles, they nevertheless developed out of an interest in addressing different, even if related research questions" (p, 26). He also adds that "one should be 'guided by the research question' *within* paradigms as well as *between* paradigms" (p. 26). Hence, guided by my research questions and purposes, the theoretical position I take in the present study predominantly draws on symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism, as Prus (1996) puts it, can be viewed as "the study of the ways in which people make sense of their life-situations and the ways in which they go about their activities, in

conjunction with others, on a day-to-day basis” ( p. 10). The notion of symbolic interactionism originates from the work of Mead and subsequently has been associated with researchers such as Blumer, Hughes, Becker, and Goffman (as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Elaborating on Mead’s ideas, Blumer (1969, p. 2) laid out the three fundamental premises of symbolic interactionism as follows:

1. Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows.
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified, through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

Woods (1979) explains the first principle with the concepts of the natural world and the social world, the two different worlds human beings inhabit. In the natural world, the external world exists independently of humans, who are organisms of drives and instincts. In the social world, however, they give meaning to ‘things’, that is to say, material objects, people, institutions, and concepts in their environment, through symbols such as language. This constant process of attributing meaning, what can be called interpreting, is what makes them uniquely human and social. They are not organisms that just respond; in contrast, they are dynamic individuals in relation to each other, acting, perceiving, and interpreting constantly. This is why symbolic interactionists give special attention to the world of subjective meanings and the symbols through which they are produced and represented (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). As for the second principle, what is implied is that meaning is arrived at through one’s experience of the world and since people are in continuous interaction with the world that meaning may be confirmed, modified, reinforced, or changed (O’Donoghue, 2007). The third principle rejects a view of human action as originating from internal forces such as instincts, drives, needs, and attitudes, as well as large scale external forces such as social system, culture, status, social role, custom, institution, social situation, social norm and values. In contrast, this principle underlines

that human action emerges from a reflective and social interpretation of the internal and external forces that are present (O'Donoghue, 2007, p. 19).

As partly introduced by the three principles laid out above, there are several key ideas central to symbolic interactionism. These key ideas include symbols, self, mind, taking the role of the other, action, social interaction, and society (Charon, 2009).

Symbols are one class of social objects used intentionally to communicate and represent something and are considered the foundation for almost everything that characterizes the human being in nature. Words are viewed as the most important symbols. Using symbols, human beings actively create and recreate the world rather than just passively responding to a reality that imposes itself. Through symbols, humans name, remember, categorize, perceive, think, deliberate, solve problem, transcend space and time, transcend themselves, create new ideas, and direct themselves (Charon, 2009).

Another central idea in symbolic interactionism is the self, which is construed as a social object as it arises in interaction. Since the self is seen as a social object, the individual can act toward himself/herself, just like he/she can act toward others. There are three general categories of action that we can take towards our self: self-communication (i.e. talking to ourselves); self-perception (i.e. perceiving ourselves in certain ways, thereby developing a self-concept, self-judgment, and identity); and self-control (i.e. telling ourselves what to do in various situations, monitoring and controlling our actions). In other words, as interacting, self-reflective beings, people not only develop ways of viewing and acting toward other objects, including themselves; but also can direct, monitor, evaluate, and adjust their own behaviour over time (Charon, 2009; Prus, 1996; Radnor, 2002).

Mind can be defined as the ongoing symbolic action the actor takes toward the self, the constant process of making indications to ourselves about objects in our environment, particularly about how they can help us in achieving our goals. A central part of mind action is taking the role of the other, in other words, seeing ourselves as others see us and understanding the perspectives of others



as we act. The human ability to take on the role of the other is essential for the development of self, symbolic communication, and social intelligence (Charon, 2009, Radnor, 2002).

The notion of action in symbolic interactionism brings together the notions of social objects, symbols, self, mind, and taking the role of the other. Human action can only be understood in a continuous stream of action, both explicit and implicit, influenced by ongoing decisions we take along that stream. These decisions are taken as a result of social interaction and interaction with self. An act is a segment within that stream of action, which becomes a social object to us as we isolate and define it according to our present situation. Hence, action results from our definition of the situation and is oriented toward the goals and objectives we see important. This is why what other perspectives see as causes of action (i.e. past, emotion, other people, and society) are treated as part of our definition of the situation and social objects in symbolic interactionism. Humans, therefore, are thought to have a certain degree of control over their actions (Charon, 2009).

The two other key ideas central to symbolic interactionism are the notions of social interaction and society. The ongoing social interaction we have with others influences what we do in situations and also becomes the source of human society, which is construed as a dynamic entity, continuously being created and recreated, shaped through social interaction, and held together by the voluntary commitment of the actors involved. Social interaction is of paramount importance because it shapes our identities. To be clearer, identity is formed through a negotiation process that arises in interaction and our action is influenced by who we consider ourselves to be (Charon, 2009). In other words, as Goffman (1971) states, creating an identity is an active negotiation process between who others tell us we are and our continuous attempts to present who we think we are to others.

Charon (2009) positions symbolic interactionism as “an important and unique perspective that regards the human being as active in the environment; an organism that interacts with others and self; a dynamic being; a being that defines immediate situations according to perspectives developed and

altered in ongoing social interactions” (p. 41). He summarizes the five central ideas in symbolic interactionism as follows (p. 28-29):

1. The human being must be understood as a social person. *It is ongoing social interaction that leads us to do what we do.* Instead of focusing on the individual and his or her personality, or on how the society or social situation causes human behavior, symbolic interactionism focuses on the activities that take place between and among actors.
2. *The human being must be understood as a thinking being.* Human action is not only interaction among individuals but also *interaction within the individual.* [ . . . ]
3. Humans do not sense their environment directly, instead, *humans define the situation they are in.* An environment may actually exist, but it is our *definition* of it that is important. *Definition* does not simply randomly happen; instead, it results from ongoing social interaction and thinking.
4. *The cause of human action is the result of what is occurring in our present situation.* Cause unfolds in the *present* social interaction, *present* thinking, and *present* definition. It is not society’s encounters with us in our past that causes action, nor is it our own past experience that does. It is, instead, social interaction, thinking, definition of the situation that takes place in the present. Our past enters into our actions primarily because we think about it and apply it to the definition of the *present* situation.
5. Human beings are described as active beings in relation to their environment.

Put briefly, we must focus on social interaction, human thinking, definition of the situation, the present, and the active nature of the human being in order to understand human action.

As I stated earlier, while my approach to research is informed by the underlying principles of the interpretive paradigm, guided by the objectives of the study and the research questions, the perspective I take in this study primarily draws on symbolic interactionism. O’Donoghue (2007, p. 32)

states that studies aimed at generating theory<sup>2</sup> on the perspectives which participants hold with regard to something and studies aimed at generating theory on how participants ‘manage’, ‘deal with’, ‘or ‘cope with’ a phenomenon are mainly two basic types of studies which can be developed from the symbolic interactionist view of the individual. Briefly put, this study explores how the participants *cope with* the challenges they encounter while trying to meet the academic literacy demands placed on them in an American university and how this process influences their academic identity formation. These objectives of the study make symbolic interactionism a well suited approach to take to understand the participants’ experiences from their *perspectives*.

Before moving on, it is important to clarify how the concept of *perspectives*, as used in symbolic interactionism and in this study, differs from other similar concepts such as perceptions, and attitudes, which are used interchangeably by some interpretive researchers. While, for the most part, these terms have similar meanings, this practice leads to confusion (O’Donoghue, 2007, p. 27). In the most general terms, a perspective can be defined as “frameworks through which people make sense of the world” (Woods, 1983, p. 7) or a “point of view” (Charon, 2009, p. 3). To be more specific, as Charon (2009) aptly explains:

A perspective is an angle on reality, a place where the individual stands as he or she looks at it and tries to understand reality....a perspective is an absolute basic part of everyone’s existence, and it acts as a filter through which everything around us is perceived and interpreted. There is no possible way that the individual can encounter reality ‘in the raw’, directly, as it really is, for whatever is seen can only be part of the real situation. (p. 3)

The above definition foregrounds both the importance of the notion of perspectives as a vital tool for people to make sense of the world and the limiting side of it in that one can only see what their perspective allows them to see. However, this does not mean that there is no truth at all, or that reality does not exist. Charon (2009) holds that reality exists; as he puts it “there is something actually happening out there in the world – but we cannot know it completely or in any perfectly accurate way

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<sup>2</sup> What is referred to by “theory” here is ‘a set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict phenomena’ (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p.15).

because we always see it through filters we are here calling perspectives” (p. 6). This definition of the concept of perspectives differs greatly from that of perceptions and attitudes. Charon (2009) explains the relationship between perspectives and perceptions when he states that “perspectives are not perceptions but are guides to our perceptions; they influence what we see and how we interpret what we see” (p. 8). Attitude, on the other hand, is often defined as “a person’s set of beliefs and feelings towards an object, or class of objects, that predisposes the person to act in a certain manner when confronted by that object, or class of objects” (O’Donoghue, 2007, p. 31). This view conceptualizes the notion of attitude as a stable quality of an individual over time, being carried around from situation to situation with the environment acting as a stimulus. In contrast, symbolic interactionists consider the individual as an active being who interacts, defines situations, and acts according to what is going on in the current situation. They strongly disagree with the former view as they believe it “is premised on a notion that the individual is passive and thus not use the attitude, instead, the attitude directs the individual” (ibid).

As stated above, the main objectives of this study make symbolic interactionism a well suited approach to take to understand the participants’ experiences from their perspectives. Additionally, key ideas that are central to symbolic interactionism, particularly symbols, the self, and social interaction offer important insights into the main aspects of this study. As I clarified in the previous chapter, the literature review, my understanding of academic literacy is of reading and writing as a social practice, rather than an autonomous skill. Likewise, my definition of academic literacy includes situated literacies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000) and multiliteracies (Street, 1993, 1995, 2000, 2001), which take into account the role of social institutions and power relations in academic literacy development. Hence, while trying to understand the participants’ experiences in dealing with the challenges they face during their academic literacy development, I will take into consideration the role of social context and social interaction dynamics.

Another reason why a symbolic interactionist perspective is well suited for this study lies in its focus on the relationship between academic literacy development and identity. This study tries to understand how the participants create their academic identities in interaction with others and in interaction with self. Through a set of periodical interviews that I conducted with each participant over two academic semesters, I tried to capture the participants' definition of the situation and view of self, and the process by which they change through interaction with others (i.e. professors, fellow students, etc.) and with self.

#### **4.3. Research aim and questions**

At the outset, the main objective of the present study was to understand how the primary participants of this study, six Arab undergraduates, all of whom are non-native speakers of English in their freshman year of academic studies, deal with the challenges they encounter while trying to meet the academic literacy requirements of an English medium university in the UAE. As in much interpretive research, the original primary research question was as open-ended as possible. However, as O'Donoghue (2007) notes, symbolic interactionist studies that investigate how participants deal with a certain phenomenon may take new and unexpected turns as participants relate their positions. He argues that researchers have to be ready to follow any new line of thought on the part of the participants. He emphasizes that even if these new lines of thought have been unanticipated, they should be taken into account because the focus of the study should be on what is important to the participant. Following this principle, which also governs other interpretive research perspectives, I modified my initial research question. The insights I gained from the initial interviews with the students compelled me to pursue two new directions in this study. The first one had to do with the identity formation of the participants. Over the course of the initial data collection process, the students brought up issues that were closely related to their identity formation in response to some interview

questions; in other words, their responses to some of the interview questions centred on the struggles they were going through to create comfortable subject positions for themselves in the new discourse community they had entered. Another subject that the participants repeatedly brought up in the interviews was their interactions with their professors and course-related materials, which turned my attention to the professors' *perspectives* on the above mentioned challenges faced by the focal students. Hence, I expanded and tweaked the original research question as the study unfolded. This process yielded the following overarching research aim: How do students in their first year of undergraduate careers respond to the challenges they face while attaining the academic literacy requirements of an American university in the UAE, at an academic, a personal and social level? Three research questions were in turn generated from the overarching research aim:

1. How do students in their first year of undergraduate careers deal with the academic literacy requirements of an American university in the UAE?
2. How do these students' experiences in trying to meet the academic literacy requirements influence their academic identity formation?
3. What are the perspectives of the professors on the role of academic literacy skills for success in their courses?

What I sought to examine with the first question was the focal students' perspectives on the academic literacy requirements they were expected to meet at the beginning of their undergraduate careers at an American university; how they acted in the light of their perspectives; and what kind of changes, if any, took place in their perspectives as a result of their actions, in other words, as a result of their ways of dealing with these academic literacy demands.

As for the second question, my objective was to investigate how these experiences shaped the students' perception of who they were in the new academic community they had stepped into. As I explained in detail before, my understanding of identity construction involves interaction with others and self. Therefore, answering this question required examination of the students' socio-academic

interactions with their peers, professors and all other members of the academic community they had just become a part of, as well as how these interactions influenced their views of themselves.

With the last question I wanted to explore the professors' perspectives on the nature of reading and writing skills required for success in their courses as well as what they thought of the first year students' ways of coping with these requirements. The intention behind this question was to get a more holistic picture of the academic literacy requirements the students were expected to meet and to compare those expectations with the students' interpretation of them. I also wanted to explore how the students' portrayal of their experiences compared to their professors' impressions of them.

#### **4.4. Research design and methods**

The research design is the basic plan for a piece of research that situates the researcher in the empirical world and connects the research questions to data (Punch, 2009). A researcher's choice of methodology and methods is closely connected with his/her views of reality and knowledge. As Grix (2004) says, "researcher's methodological approach, underpinned by and reflecting specific ontological and epistemological assumptions, represents a choice of approach and research methods adopted in a given study" (p.66) As noted in the above section, the present study is informed by the central underlying principles of the interpretivist paradigm. Within the interpretive paradigm, guided by my research objectives and questions, I mainly draw on symbolic interactionism to understand the participants' experiences from their perspectives. My choice of various qualitative research methods reflects this theoretical approach.

The recommended methods of data collection in symbolic interactionism include but are not limited to semi-structured interviewing, participant and non-participant observation, and document analysis (O'Donoghue, 2007; Charon, 2009). Through these methods, the researcher can unearth participants' perspectives on a given phenomenon and investigate how they act in the light of their perspectives. Ideally, the researcher should observe the participant's actions closely for an extended period of time in real-life settings and seek for clarification from the participant regularly to avoid any

misinterpretation. However, when a researcher does not have either the time or the resources required for observing the participants in everyday life situations, he/she can use other indirect methods that would help him/her understand the definitions the participants give to their actions, even if doing so means simply asking them for “retrospective accounts of their actions” (Denzin, 1971, as cited in Charon, 2009, p. 187). Hence, in addition to going out and watching people in real-life situations, researchers who adopt a symbolic interactionist perspective can also use methods that would help them examine real-life situations indirectly. Charon (2009) notes that these indirect methods include interviewing, personal accounts and life histories, and what he calls *non-reactive* techniques such as analysing non-verbal communication, content in written materials, and audio-visual tapes. With non-reactive, he refers to techniques that “aim at understanding perspectives and action without direct involvement with the actors themselves” (Charon, 2009, p. 187). Likewise, for cases when direct examination of the participant’s actions in real-life situations is not possible due to constraints in time and resources, O’Donoghue (2007) recommends planning a set of interview questions regarding the participant’s actions to be asked as recall questions during the same session when the researcher is interviewing him/her about his/her current perspectives on the phenomenon in question. Alternatively, he suggests that the researcher can develop a picture of participants’ actions by communicating with them at regular times between interviews through phone and email contact, as well as by encouraging them to keep a diary.

Following these suggestions, I used frequent in-depth interviews conducted regularly with each student participant, document analysis, and interviews with the professors as the main methods of data collection for this study. At the outset, my intention was to use periodical, frequent interviews as the main method of data collection in addition to asking the student participants to keep a weekly journal of their experiences regarding the reading and writing requirements of each course they take, which, I thought, would help me get a more complete picture of their academic literacy experiences. However, soon after the study started, I noticed that most of the journal entries were quite short and repetitive.



When I realized keeping a weekly journal was becoming an unnecessary burden on the students rather than providing a more complete picture of their academic experiences, I decided to use interviews and document analysis as the main methods of data collection. I was able to meet with each student participant every three to four weeks for the interviews. I also communicated with them through e-mails to schedule each interview and to check on their academic progress. As I mentioned before, while my original intention was to conduct interviews with the students only, the insights I gained from the initial interviews with them turned my attention to their professors' perspectives on the challenges the students said they were going through, which is why I decided to conduct interviews with the professors of all courses that required evaluated writing, too. Hence, the sources of data collected for this study consist of the following:

- In-depth, qualitative, semi-structured interviews with the six focal students over two academic semesters, focusing on their perspectives regarding the reading and writing assignments they were required to do in their academic writing classes and other courses they take across the curriculum as well as the strategies they used or developed to meet those requirements.
- Examination of documentation related to the primary participants' course work, such as course syllabi, course notes, class texts, writing assignments, drafts of papers, copies of exams, and the like.
- In-depth, qualitative, semi-structured interviews with the professors of all courses that required evaluated writing, focusing on their perspectives on the role of reading and writing in their courses and their impressions of the focal students' academic standing in meeting the reading and writing requirements of the courses they offer.
- Regular e-mail communication with each research participant not only to schedule the interviews, but also for the purposes of clarification of their responses to some interview questions when needed.

- Notes I take after each interview, which included my reflections on how the interview went, what I should focus on in the next interview, or anything (e.g. a statement, the participant's body language, tone of voice etc.) that stood out during the interview.

#### **4.4.1. Interviews**

The primary method of data collection used in this study was interviewing mainly because it “is a very good way of accessing people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality. It is also one of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others (Punch, 2009, p. 144).” Likewise, Silverman (2000) notes that the interview “offers the opportunity for an authentic gaze into the soul of another, or even a politically correct dialogue in which the researcher and the researched offer mutual understanding and support” (p. 823).

Interviewing has many different purposes and a wide variety of forms, particularly in a qualitative research context. The type of the interview employed in a study should be in accordance with the research paradigm, research purposes and questions (Punch, 2009). As a researcher adopting a symbolic interactionist theoretical approach when conducting research within the interpretivist paradigm, I am primarily concerned with revealing the perspectives underlying the participants’ actions, the actions they take in the light of their perspectives, and the patterns which develop through the interaction of perspectives and actions over a particular period of time. Therefore, I take on the role of the researcher as the primary data gathering instrument, using guiding questions aimed at understanding a phenomenon through in-depth, qualitative interviews with the participants.

The interviews conducted for the purposes of this study were formal, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Formal interviews are arranged in advance and all parties are aware of what is taking place, as opposed to informal interviews that arise naturally (Richards, 2003). As for semi-structured interviews, the interview questions are not fully pre-planned, and there are no pre-set categories for responding (Punch, 2009; Radnor, 2002). In order to grasp as fully as possible the participants’

perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation, I needed to create an open, non-threatening, relaxed atmosphere for discussion. Hence, rather than a strict question-and-answer interview guide, a semi-structured interview guide consisting of a set of data collection questions that were thought to have the potential to engage the participants in conversations across as wide a range of areas as possible was prepared. As the study unfolded, some data collection questions that did not prove to be helpful were eliminated while others that emerged in the course of interviewing and kept the conversation moving, even in unexpected directions, added to or replaced the pre-established ones.

The strategy I followed to develop the main research instruments was developing a set of data collection questions from each of my supplementary research questions. By “data collection questions”, I am referring to questions which are asked in order to collect data to help answer the research question (Punch, 2000, p. 62). This strategy provided me with an extensive list of semi-structured interview questions and helped me form the base of the interview guides for the focal students and the professors.

For the students, in addition to the main data collection questions, I developed a set of interview questions to collect data on the students’ background (i.e. demographic information, prior educational life, socio-cultural and linguistic background, family life, attitudes towards reading and writing in the family, etc.), some routine questions that I asked each focal student on their coursework in progress, as well as some questions to be asked at the start and end of the semester. The routine questions, which were asked at every interview, were on course readings and writing assignments, exams, study habits, class activities, and the students’ social interactions (i.e. interactions with fellow students, professors, and other people the students are likely to interact with on campus such as the writing centre tutors or their academic advisor). While my intention was to cover all questions on the interview guide in some form at each interview, I wanted to give the students a chance to bring up issues of significance to them that I might not have anticipated. So, rather than following the scripted interview guide word for word at each interview, I kept the interviews conversational, taking notes of

the insights I gained and questions to be asked in the next interview. Following this strategy, I eliminated some interview questions that proved to be unproductive or redundant, while I added other questions that arose during the interviews as the study unfolded. However, the interview guide for the students remained stable after the first few weeks of the data collection process except for some minor adjustments (A final interview schedule for students is found in Appendix C). The interviews were conducted in English, as the students were fluent enough in English to respond to the interview questions and I did not speak Arabic, the students' first language. In just one case, a student participant, who spoke French as L2, was able to express what she really wanted to say neither in English nor in Arabic, and used a French word instead, which I later translated to English (see interview excerpt in section 5.3.1). Partly as a result of the open, non-threatening, relaxed atmosphere created for the interviews, the students' willingness to participate in the research study, as well as the conversational tone maintained throughout, the students seemed comfortable in expressing their ideas or asking for clarification if they did not understand something; hence, the language of the interviews did not seem to hinder our communication.

I followed a similar strategy while forming the interview guide for the professors. In addition to the main data collection questions, some follow up questions were added to the interview guide to gain more in-depth information on the reading and writing requirements of the course, assignments, exams, as well as the professors' views on the challenges the students encounter. The interview questions for the professors did not change much except for minor additions and adjustments and were followed more closely to make efficient time of the professors (A final interview schedule for professors is found in Appendix D).

#### **4.4.2. Document analysis**

Another method of data collection used in this study was document analysis. By document analysis, I am referring to examination of documents related to the participants' course work, such as

course syllabi, class notes, writing assignments, drafts of papers, copies of exams, and the other similar course materials. Both the students' and the professors' answers to many of the interview questions either mentioned or focused on these documents, which I decided to collect and examine in order to have a holistic understanding of each participant's experiences. Documentary sources of data are used in various ways in educational research, with some studies entirely depending on documents as the primary source of data. However, documentary data can also be collected in conjunction with interviews and observations for the purposes of triangulation, where an intersecting set of set of different methods and data types is used in a single study (Punch, 2009). In the present study, interviews with the students, the professors, and the examination of relevant documents provided varying sources of data and were intended to ensure data source and methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1989; Silverman, 2000). The examination of the documents mentioned above combined with the insights gained from the interviews with the professors was helpful in providing information about what was expected in each course and comparing these expectations with the students' interpretation of them. Using this method, I was able to create a detailed list of the reading and writing requirements the focal students were expected to meet in the academic year of 2011-2012 and understand the assignments the students and professors brought up during the interviews better (see Appendix G).

## **4.5. Sampling**

### **4.5.1. Primary participants: Students**

In accordance with the purposes of the study, my aim was to access first year students who were non-native speakers of English and finding it difficult to cope with the academic literacy requirements of the new academic institution they had entered, that is, an American university in the UAE, of which medium of instruction is English.

As explained in Chapter 1, my interest in the first year students' experiences originates from my observations and experience as an instructor at the aforementioned university for over six years,

where many students, especially those at the beginning of their undergraduate education, often report facing problems in keeping up with the academic literacy requirements of the courses they take across the curriculum. What makes the issue even more severe for new students is that successful completion of a series of required academic writing in English courses is considered either pre-requisite or co-requisite for many of the core courses they have to take in the first and second year of their university education. Teaching at a department, which offers these required academic writing and reading courses, has given me a privileged access to these students' experiences.

Hence, based on the criteria of purposiveness and accessibility (Silverman, 2001), a total of seven undergraduates were selected to become a part of the study. However, one student withdrew from the study towards the end of the first semester as he was not able to find the time for the interviews and later transferred to a different university. The rest of the participants continued to meet me regularly during the entire study and even after the study ended. With the exception of one, all of the participants were students enrolled in one of the four sections of an academic writing course I was teaching, called WRI 101: Academic Writing. Successful completion of this course is a requirement for all students in their first year of undergraduate studies and a pre-requisite for a large number of courses they have to take to complete their degree programmes (See section 2.5. for more detailed information on this course).

In order to identify the most suitable participants, I observed the progress of all students enrolled in the four sections of the course I was teaching for the first four weeks of the semester very closely. Out of seventy-six students I had in four different sections of the course I taught, the selected participants showed particular signs of stress in keeping up with the reading and writing requirements of the course, as evidenced by the quite low grades they received in the first few assignments, essays, exams and quizzes or their performance in class discussions of several reading assignments. While quite a few of these students had already come to see me in my office hours to share their worries about the course requirements and their level of reading and writing proficiency before I graded their

work, some contacted me after receiving their grades to ask me for advice on how they could improve their overall standing in the course. Another common feature the selected students shared was that they reported having similar problems in the other courses they were taking that semester, especially in essay type examinations and in courses which required regular reading. They reported problems such as having difficulty in understanding the course materials, and/or not being able to read the assigned texts as fast as their classmates could do due to various reasons: vocabulary issues, reading speed, not being able to express themselves in writing as they wanted or as fast as they wished, and the like. They all spoke Arabic as their mother tongue.

When I later contacted them to ask if they would be interested in taking part in a research project I was conducting, they all accepted the invitation to meet me to learn about the details of the study. While five of the six participants were all enrolled in my classes, the sixth participant was referred to me by a colleague who knew the content of my study and was teaching a different section of the same course, that is, WRI 101: Academic Writing. She said she had one student whom she thought had difficulty in keeping up with the reading and writing requirements of the course and might be interested in participating in the study. I arranged a meeting with each one of the students to explain the objectives of the study as well as their roles and rights as research participants in more detail. I provided them with a copy of the informed consent form bearing my signature and encouraged them to ask me any questions they might have regarding the study. I also clearly stated that their participation would have neither a positive nor a negative effect on their academic progress or potential grades. Hence, the data collection for study began in the fifth week of classes in fall 2011.

The reasons I selected the five out of six participants out of the students enrolled in a course I was teaching were convenience and the need for establishing a mutually respectful and trusting relationship for a study that would last two academic semesters. I believe the rapport I built with the students in the first few weeks of the semester has been influential in the students' willingness to participate in the study. While I did not have a chance to directly observe the academic literacy

progress of the sixth participant, conducting an in-depth interview with my colleague who referred him to me to learn about the progress of the student helped me get a clear picture of his overall standing in WRI 101.

#### **4.5.2. Professors**

With the start of the second semester, it was time for the participants to take the next required academic writing course, WRI 102: Reading and Writing across the Curriculum. Hence, none were enrolled in a class I taught any longer. They also started to take various courses across the curriculum that required various evaluated reading and writing assignments. Hence, their interactions with their professors with regards to the reading and writing requirements started to become an important topic during the interviews especially in the second semester. As a result, I decided to conduct interviews with the professors of all other courses that the students were taking and also had evaluated writing and reading requirements. After receiving the permission of the focal students, I contacted their professors. The interviews focused on the professors' perspectives on the role of reading and writing in their courses as well as their impressions of the focal students' academic standing in meeting the literacy requirements of their courses.

Except for one, all of the academic writing professors who were teaching WRI 102 to the focal students agreed to take part in the study. In addition to the academic writing professors, I contacted the professors of all other courses the students were taking and that also required evaluated reading and writing assignments. A total of thirteen professors agreed to participate in the study in response to an email I sent to them explaining the main objectives of the study and what would be expected of them if they agreed to take part in it. Their involvement in the study was limited to taking part in a semi-structured interview that would be audio-recorded with their permission and later transcribed for



analysis. Each professor was provided with the informed consent form bearing my signature before the interview and was encouraged to voice any concerns or questions they might have regarding the study.

#### **4.6. Research procedures**

The data collection for this study lasted two academic semesters, starting in the fall semester of the 2011-12 academic year. This section provides a thorough account of the steps I took to collect data for the study, including the piloting of the data collection instruments and the actual data collection.

##### **4.6.1. Piloting**

Both the interview guide for the students and the professors had been piloted before the data collection started. Piloting of research instruments is highly recommended in research to improve their reliability and trustworthiness (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011). The piloting of the interview questions for the students was done with the help of four freshman students who shared similar cultural and educational backgrounds as the participants of the study. They volunteered to take the time to listen to and answer the interview questions and then provide comments on the clarity of each. The interview guide for the professors was piloted with the assistance of two colleagues who had extensive experience in qualitative research methods. The same colleagues also provided comments on the interview guides for the focal students. With the help of this process, the wording and ordering of several questions in the interview guides were changed to make them clearer, easier to understand, more focused, and objective. This process also helped me refine the interview guides by identifying and eliminating any leading, ambiguous, and/or redundant questions.

#### **4.6.2. Data collection procedures**

The data collection started in fall 2011 with the student interviews. I conducted three to four interviews, each of which lasted between thirty to ninety minutes, with each student participant in fall 2011. I followed the same interview schedule with the students in spring 2012 and managed to conduct three to four interviews with each participant again. The duration of the interviews was the same as the previous semester. Hence, I conducted a total of six to eight interviews with each student throughout the whole academic year, which resulted in a total of forty-six interviews. As stated above, I also interviewed a total of thirteen professors in spring 2012. Each interview lasted between thirty to seventy minutes.

Throughout the academic year, both the students and the professors provided me with various course documents, such as course syllabi, class notes, writing assignments, drafts of papers, copies of exams, handouts, assignment guidelines, and the like. These documents were either shown by the participant as an example of a reading/writing requirement that was brought up in the interview or requested by me to understand the reading/writing requirement mentioned better.

The interview log I kept to write my reflections on each interview proved to be a very useful complementary data source. It included my reflections on how each interview went, what questions were useful and what questions failed to keep the conversation going, what I should focus on in the next interview, notes about the atmosphere of the interview, the interviewees' body language, or anything that grabbed my attention during the interview. These notes proved to be very useful during the data collection stage as they helped me improve my original interview guide by encouraging me to become more critical of the unnecessary and redundant interview questions and made me more conscious of the insights I gained from each interview. After the data collection stage, they helped me recall the context or any other important aspect of the interview that might not have been captured in the audio recorded interview.

#### **4.7. Data analysis**

The main source of data in this study came from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the focal students and the professors. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Hence, while the raw data was ready to be analysed, I had to choose a suitable strategy to analyse it.

There are various data analysis strategies used in qualitative research; however, the overall data analysis process can be conceptualized in three steps: preparing and organizing the data for analysis, reducing the data into themes through coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or discussion (Creswell, 2007).

Following Radnor's (2002) approach to analysing semi-structured interviews in interpretive research, I prepared the data for analysis first by reading the whole transcribed data several times and noting down the topics that emerged from the data. Radnor (2002) calls this stage topic ordering. In addition to reading, I also listened to the recorded interviews several times to make sure I understand the transcribed spoken interaction as well as possible, as advised by Richards (2003). While preparing the data for analysis, I organized the interviews with the focal students and the documents collected by date, which was useful in identifying change and growth in each of them. I also sorted out the interviews with the professors and aligned each with the relevant students. While the interview questions gave access to some of the topics, I made sure to read the transcripts carefully to draw out any other topics that were embedded in the responses more implicitly. I made a list of the topics, giving a name and a code (abbreviation) to each. I then read the transcripts very carefully one more time to draw out the categories within each topic. I listed these categories under each topic as sub-headings (see Appendix E: Topics, codes, and categories identified in the data and Appendix F: Extract from coded interview transcript). The next step was reading the transcripts for content, that is, going through the text one more time to highlight and code the main quotes that go under each category. Using the word processor, I copied and pasted the categories and quotes representing each topic on separate Microsoft Word documents, while keeping the intact copy of the whole transcript in the

computer as well. In the final stage of analysis, I read the chunks of data under each category one more time to paying attention to what Radnor (2002) calls “subtleties of meaning” with regard to the participants’ perspectives on the issues at hand (p.88), thereby subjecting the data to a refining process.

While going through this systematic approach did not immediately reveal the participants’ perspectives on the issues explored, it gave me an opportunity to get the most out of the data through a thorough exploration of the material. This made the raw data more manageable and formed the basis of the interpretation process.

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

#### **4.8. Trustworthiness and Quality of the Data**

Standards for high quality research vary within the qualitative research community (Creswell, 2007). According to Radnor (2002) the key criterion for high-quality interpretive research is trust. She notes that a good interpretive study should have explanatory and illuminating power about the situation under study, uncover a multiplicity of individual perceptions about the situation and increase understanding of issues that are present in the situation based on data gathered following interpretive research principles. The first principle has to do with researcher integrity. The researcher has to be aware of his/her effects on the research process and on participants and express these influences

explicitly in the process of writing of the research. The researcher should explain his/her role, the kind of data collected and the way they were analysed in detail to build confidence in his/her integrity as a researcher aiming to portray the issue at hand faithfully and accurately. This principle, which requires a heightened self-awareness on the part of the researcher in terms of his/her assumptions, biases and subjectivity, is also considered a very important standard for quality in qualitative research by other researchers in the field (e.g. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2007; Holliday, 2002; Lincoln, 1995). Put simply, this principle suggests that it is impossible for the researcher to remove her own way of seeing the process, but he/she can strive to have a critical awareness of his/her interpretive framework through a reflexive process.

Following this principle from the outset of the study, I worked towards becoming aware of my own assumptions, biases, and past experiences that may impact the research in any possible way. In keeping with the interpretive research tradition, my objective in this study was to portray the participants' experiences from their own perspectives. However, I cannot claim to have a completely transparent access to the participants' lived experiences, as there were several factors that acted as reality filters in analysing the data, for instance my experiences as an academic writing professor/researcher, my own view of teaching and learning theories, what I learnt from reading the literature on academic literacy development, and my own views of the education system in the UAE and the culture of the university. Trying to become aware of all these reality filters, helped me have a critical distance from the data, listen to what the participants said with a more objective stance, and be open to "subtleties of meaning" (Radnor, 2002, p. 88) while analysing the data. In addition, while I paid utmost attention to capture the topics and categories that were salient to the participants in analysing the data, I admit that interview questions gave access to some topics that were drawn out from the data. However, I paid great attention to portray the participants' perspectives as accurately as possible while elaborating on the topics and categories drawn out from the data.

The second principle involves establishing a strong rapport with the participants so that they are encouraged to express their views as freely as possible without worrying about being judged by anyone (Radnor, 2002). This principle is also noted by other scholars in the field of qualitative research (e.g. Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2007; Holliday, 2002; Richards, 2003) The reader should be informed of how this rapport was built with the participants so that they have confidence in the credibility of the findings. Establishing a relationship based on mutual respect, trust, and understanding was of paramount importance in this study as the study required frequent meetings with students for two academic semesters. As I explained in more detail previously (see 4.5. Sampling), I had already known the primary participants for over a month as their academic writing professor when they agreed to take part in the study. They had all approached to me to talk about the problems they had in keeping up with the academic literacy requirements of the course I was teaching and other courses they were taking that semester. They all showed great interest when I later asked them if they would be interested in taking part in a research project I was conducting. Although the students were all informed that their participation would have neither a positive nor a negative effect on their academic progress or potential grades, I believe part of the reason for their willingness to participate in the study was the positive rapport I had established with them from the beginning of the semester. In addition, quite a few of them mentioned at some point in the data collection process that they found the interviews relieving, and that the interviews provided an outlet for them to express the experiences and challenges they were going through. The initial positive rapport I built with the students was consolidated during the entire data collection process with the open, non-threatening, relaxed atmosphere created in the interviews. As a result of this positive relationship, the students continued to meet me regularly for the interviews in the spring semester although none of them were students enrolled in a class I was teaching anymore.

The third research principle for good interpretive research Radnor (2002) mentions is “ethics-in-action” (p. 34), which emphasizes the need for the researcher to show respect to the participants at

all stages of the research process. How this principle was applied to the present study is explained in detail in the next section (please see 4.9.Ethical Dimensions).

Validation is also considered a critical aspect of evaluating the quality of a study. Validation can be defined as an attempt to assess the accuracy of findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2007). There are no agreed procedures for validity checks in qualitative research (Richards, 2003; Creswell, 2007). However, qualitative researchers can use several strategies that are highly recommended to increase the overall quality of their data and to overcome any threats to the trustworthiness of their research findings. Creswell (2007) suggests that researchers use various accepted strategies to document the accuracy of their studies, such as prolonged engagement in the field and building trust with the participants, triangulation, clarifying researcher bias from the outset of the study, respondent validity, thick description, and external audits. He recommends that researchers use at least two of these strategies in any given study to minimize threats to validity in their research, depending on their resources.

Using the method and data triangulation strategy (Denzin, 1989; Silverman, 2000), I collected and analysed varying sources of data. The examination of the documents combined with the insights gained from the interviews with the students and the professors was helpful in providing in-depth information about what was expected in each course and comparing these expectations with the students' interpretation of them.

This strategy along with my prolonged engagement with the primary research participants for two academic semesters was helpful in providing the necessary details needed for the thick description of the research context as well as providing detail to support and corroborate findings. Rich and thick descriptions are important for the overall quality of a study because they provide the readers with detailed information on the participants and the setting under study, thereby allowing them to make decisions about the transferability of the findings to contexts that show similar characteristics (Creswell, 2007).

By following the strategies mentioned above, I tried to overcome one of the most common threats to validity in qualitative research, that is, “anecdotalism”, which originates from the difficulty of proving that “the findings reported are genuinely based on critical investigation of all available data and do not depend on a few well-chosen examples” (Silverman, 2000, p. 176).

Another important step taken to ensure the quality of data was preparing the research instruments with utmost care and attention to detail. The same careful approach was also taken while conducting and analysing the interviews along with all the other complementary data sources such as the interview log that includes the notes I took after each interview, as well as all the documents I collected regarding the primary participants’ course work, such as course syllabi, course notes, class texts, writing assignments, drafts of papers, copies of exams, and the like. As I stated earlier, both of the interview guides had been piloted before being put to use to make sure they did not include any leading, ambiguous, and/or redundant questions and that they were as clear, focused, and objective as possible.

While the ways interview guides are prepared and conducted are very critical for the quality of the data gathered, the reliability of interviews also relies on the ways the interviews are analysed. Silverman (2000) notes that the reliability of the interpretation of the transcripts may be severely weakened by a failure to transcribe seemingly unimportant, but often crucial pauses and overlaps. The same issue is also pointed out by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) who indicate that “transcripts of interviews, however detailed and full they may be, remain selective, since they are interpretations of social situations. They become decontextualized, abstracted, even if they record silences, intonation, non-verbal behaviour, etc.” (p. 208). To avoid this issue in the present study, consistent and detailed transcription symbols were used to reveal important features of the tape-recorded interaction during the transcription of the interviews. Moreover, in addition to reading the transcribed data, I also listened to the recorded interviews several times to make sure I understand the transcribed spoken interaction as well as possible during the data analysis.



As I mentioned in the previous section, I also used constant comparison of different data sources (Silverman, 2000, p. 179; Richards, 2003, p. 287) and respondent validation to understand and represent the participants' perspectives as well as possible, thereby ensuring the trustworthiness of research during data analysis. Using the constant comparison method, I continuously reviewed and, if necessary, revised the previous codes and categorisations I had identified in the light of new ones while analysing my research data. I also used the respondent validation technique, which is also called member checking or informant feedback. Respondent validation involves seeking the views of participants on accuracy of data gathered, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011; Cresswell, 2007; Richards, 2003). While some writers have questioned the assumption that participants' views are more reliable than those of researchers, for many scholars it remains a critical technique for establishing credibility (Cresswell, 2007; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Richards, 2003) because it provides a vital extra perspective to consider and reflect on. In this study, once each interview was transcribed, the transcript was taken back to the relevant participant for respondent validation. I also took back my preliminary analysis to the participants and asked them to express their views of the accounts.

#### **4.9. Ethical Dimensions**

The present study was conducted following the strict ethical standards of both the University of Exeter and the institute it was undertaken in. I first completed the Certificate of Ethical Research Approval form, which was signed by my research supervisor and the Chair of the Graduate School of Education Ethics Committee in the University of Exeter (see Appendix I). Next, I was asked to obtain a certificate by completing a web-based training course on protecting human research participants by the institute this study was conducted in. After obtaining this certificate, I was asked to receive the approval of the Institutional Review Board. Going through these steps ensured that all possible measures and precautions had been taken to maintain high ethical standards in this study. These

standards concern the ethical issues of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality. A consent form was obtained from each participant prior to data collection after they were thoroughly informed of the objectives of the study. Essentially, informed consent was an ongoing process throughout the entire research process. Participants were ensured and reminded that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any given time and that data related to them would be destroyed if they wished so. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, I referred to them with pseudonyms at all stages of the research process. Moreover, records of the data collected (including transcripts and any audio recordings) were stored in a secure and safe place. The views of participants were of paramount importance to this study. Hence, I paid utmost attention to listen to, respect, and represent these views as objectively as possible throughout the entire research process.

#### **4.10. My dual role as a teacher-researcher and other challenges encountered when conducting the study**

The biggest challenge I encountered while conducting this study was my dual role and responsibilities as a researcher and as teacher of one academic writing class the five research participants took in their first semester of undergraduate education. I admit that my role as a researcher was influenced by my role as teacher of one academic writing class the five research participants took in their first semester of undergraduate education. I struggled to detach myself from my role as their teacher while conducting the interviews at first. Radnor (2002) discusses this issue, when she indicates that most researchers in education hold roles as education managers, administrators, teachers or lecturers and that they are inevitably bringing to the research and are influenced by their views about education and other past experiences. However, she argues that, “This has to be recognized and when recognized enhances the whole process of engaging in interpretive research. It becomes a positive aspect in research where the researcher is the research instrument ultimately in control of the research design she constructs” (p. 30). Further, she quotes Maxwell (1999, as cited in Radnor, 2002), who

states that “separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you off from a major source of insights, hypotheses and validity checks” (p.30). She adds that, “The researcher cannot remove her way of seeing from the process, but she can engage in reflexively in the process and be aware of her interpretive framework” (p.31).

Following this insight, I made a conscious effort to become aware of my own assumptions and biases that may impact the research in any possible way. This constant endeavour to become aware of all these reality filters helped me have a critical distance from the data, listen to what the participants said with a more objective stance and fair mind. Moreover, I came to realize that my dual role benefitted the research process as it allowed me to have close knowledge of the primary participants’ academic literacy skills at the outset, to get to know them better, and to build the needed rapport with each one before the study began.

Other challenges I faced were more predictable and had to do with scheduling, transcribing, and analysing a large number of interviews with the primary participants and the professors. While the students were always cooperative in making time for the interviews, it was not easy to organize multiple interviews with each participant over two academic semesters due to occasional conflicts in time. Added to this was the difficulty of scheduling interviews with a total of thirteen professors in the following semester. Transcribing and analysing this large volume of interviews was also not a very straightforward process, but made possible with thorough planning and organization.

#### **4.11. Limitations**

While I worked towards portraying the primary participants’ experiences from their perspectives as thoroughly as possible, I was not able to use an additional qualitative research tool, class observations, to triangulate the data I gained from the interviews and the documents I collected. Observing the primary students in a number of classes they take across the curriculum would have given a more macroscopic view of their experiences and increased the rigour of the study.

The next chapter, Analysis and Discussion, will provide detailed answers to the research questions by presenting a thorough analysis of the data collected in relation to each research question along with a critical discussion of the findings.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

After introducing the primary participants of the study, this chapter presents a detailed analysis of the data in relation to the overarching aim of the study, which is to explore how students in their first year of undergraduate careers respond to the challenges they face while attaining the academic literacy requirements of an American university in the UAE, at an academic, a personal and social level. The chapter is organized in a way that presents and discusses the data with regards to the three research questions, which were generated from the overarching research aim. Each of these will be restated in the relevant section below. The findings can be better understood in light of the background information displayed in Appendix B, which provides demographic information on the participants, their prior educational life, and brief cultural and linguistic background.

#### **5.2. Dealing with the academic literacy requirements**

This section addresses the first research question: How do students in their first year of undergraduate careers deal with the academic literacy requirements of an American university in the UAE? This is done in four steps: by presenting and discussing the data on the students' perspectives on academic literacy at the beginning of the academic year; the challenges they faced; the coping

strategies they developed; and finally the changes, if any, that took place in their perspectives by the end of the academic year.

The main source of data for the findings presented here is the six to eight semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each one of the six participants over the academic year of 2011-2012. Student voices have been used to illustrate their viewpoints more clearly. Each section includes a table illustrating the themes with a relevant quote from the data. The last column in the tables shows the number of mentions for each theme identified in all interviews conducted with all student participants — a total of forty-six interviews. The interview data were complemented by document analysis, which involved examination of documents related to the participants' course work (e.g. course syllabi, class notes, writing assignments, drafts of papers, copies of exams, and other similar course materials). Because the students' answers to many of the interview questions mentioned or focused on these documents, I decided to collect and examine them in order to present a more holistic view of each participant's experiences. Based on these data sources, I created a table that presents the academic literacy requirements each participant was expected to meet throughout the academic year to further contextualize each participant's experiences, which is found in Appendix G.

### **5.2.1. The students' perspectives on academic literacy at the beginning of the academic year**

The analysis of the data with regards to the students' perspectives on academic literacy at the beginning of the academic year revealed three salient themes: Significance of grades, perceived weakness in English and academic literacy skills in comparison to other students, and doubts about the contribution of academic literacy requirements to their academic growth. The following sections explain these themes in detail. The table below presents the three themes that underpin the students' perspectives with a relevant quote from the interviews to illustrate the theme:

Table 1: The students' perspectives on academic literacy at the beginning of the academic year

Theme	Example	Number of mentions
1. Significance of grades	I'm scared really of the mark because I am on a scholarship. So that scholarship need GPA above two or 2.5 even, so if it became below than that so I start getting problems holds and I have to delay it you know. (Saif Int 3)	42
2. Perceived weakness in reading and writing skills in comparison to other students	I feel so bad when I don't know how to do something and when I see the others they are doing. They are just working, nananana writing. I'm the only one who is watching the others. (Khairea Int 3)	39
3. Doubts about the contribution of academic literacy requirements to academic and professional growth	Sometimes, I say 'What is the benefit from the writing course while I am engineering?' (Zeina Int. 3)	32

### 5.2.1.1. Significance of grades

All of the participants stated that being able to read and write well in English at university was important to earn good grades in required academic writing classes, which acted as a pre-requisite or co-requisite for most of the discipline-specific courses they had to take. When asked about their aims and intentions with regards to their progress in academic reading and writing in general, they immediately brought up their objective of receiving high grades in academic writing classes that would contribute to their GPA. They all stressed that they needed to maintain a good GPA not to disappoint

their parents or lose their scholarship. In addition, they mentioned that reading and writing well in English was important for many of their discipline-specific courses which required graded reading and writing assignments, as well as for their professional careers in the long run. They all saw keeping up with the reading and writing requirements of all courses they had to take across the curriculum as a significant determinant of their academic success and GPA.

To start with, Khairea's concern over her GPA had to do with her intentions of applying for a scholarship, but more so with the limited places available in the Department of Architecture, her desired field of study. She needed to maintain a good GPA because being selected for enrollment in Architecture was a very important academic goal for her. Khairea noted that she viewed her level of English proficiency and academic writing as the biggest obstacle to realizing her dream of being admitted to Architecture. When talking about her objectives and worries for the first academic semester she stated:

I'm really worried about my English because, as you know, architecture is going to display projects. The only course that really I'm afraid with is Writing [WRI 101: Academic Writing], 'cause I'm so bad in presenting and writing because of my English. And I'm trying, I'm trying really hard. (Int. 1)

At another interview, she repeated her concerns over WRI 101: Academic Writing and how she viewed her grades in this course as a threat to achieving a high GPA:

What I want is to be architecture, I really focus about that. I'm afraid that this semester if I will not have a high GPA. I am really worried because if I fail this course [WRI 101: Academic Writing] there is no GPA. (Int. 2)

As the semester progressed, she became more concerned about her skills in academic reading and writing since her discipline-specific courses required significantly more graded reading and writing assignments than she had anticipated. She was, for instance, surprised to find out that the midterm in DES 131: Design Foundations was a single essay question that required her to reflect on what she had learnt in the course since the beginning of the semester:

Even my professor of design, we get, we took a midterm writing which was surprising from design studio. It was one big question like "what did you learn from the beginning

of the semester? He's like graded from the mistakes the writing vocabulary, yes, that's why I get C, yes. He understand the big idea, he said you have the words but you don't know how to connect them and I have a lot of mistakes. (Int. 3)

She was also asked to write a critique of a drawing she had done for the course in DES 111: Descriptive Drawing, which she was very concerned about as she thought her weak writing skills would bring her grade down in this course, too. She said: "I'm really surprised like the Drawing class he asked us to write an essay. I am not happy [laughing]!" (Int. 3)

Like Khairea, when asked about her aims and intentions with regards to her progress in academic reading and writing in general and more specifically in WRI 101: Academic Writing, Noura immediately stated that her objective was to receive high grades, not average ones, that would contribute to her GPA and later on help her in realizing her dream of becoming an engineer:

I want to complete like, I know I can have a great grade but I should work hard. Whenever you work hard, whenever you get more marks then, that's my aim you know like to work hard in every subject that I have. I think I will, inshallah I will pass all of my subjects but the main, what I'm worry about that I will get C's in most of them. It's not most of them... like for NGN or Writing [WRI 101: Academic Writing] and I don't want that to happen. Inshallah, I will get more marks. (Int. 1)

Noura often noted that she cared about her grades especially to make her parents proud. While her father was an architect, her mother was a homemaker, who loved to read. Her parents did not necessarily encourage her to read or write for pleasure, but they cared a lot about her overall academic standing.

Zeina's goal was to receive an excellent GPA; she often said she didn't want to "just pass the course". A high-achiever at high school, who graduated with a GPA of 98 points out of 100; Zeina was very disappointed with the sudden drop in her grades. She often attributed her falling grades to the change in the medium of instruction, teaching style, as well as the overwhelming course load. As a result of her limited exposure to English before university, Zeina viewed her "weak" English as a major obstacle towards achieving her academic goals. Her biggest concern was over her reading and writing skills, not only in academic writing classes but also in other courses that require graded reading



and writing assignments. Hence, when asked about her general academic goals and more specifically with regards to her reading and writing development, Zeina immediately brought about her concern over her grades:

Like I want my GPA like to be above 3.5 and I want like to be successful in Computer Science and to do programs like related to me and like carry my name and, and some websites also useful websites like Facebook also something like that. I think the most difficult thing is my English language because when I was in school, it was everything in Arabic and my average was high, and like my average in the end of the semester was like 98. (Int. 1)

As seen in the above excerpt, Zeina had very ambitious goals with regards to her academic success, GPA, and future career as an engineer. Part of Zeina's concern over her GPA had to do with her parents. Zeina often stressed that her parents, especially her father, was very concerned about her academic standing; since he had never had a chance to complete his studies, he wanted all of his children to excel at their academic careers. Zeina and her four siblings were the first-generation university students in the family and making her parents proud was a big motivation for her to excel in her studies.

Zeina's disappointment about the sudden drop in her GPA was also experienced by Osama, who graduated from a private American high school and excelled in his studies prior to starting his university education. He was very proud of finishing high school with "the second highest GPA", but could not understand why he was not doing so well at university. He was very concerned about his declining grades throughout the time he participated in this study. He often stated that not only did he feel overwhelmed with the reading and writing requirements, but also confused why his hard work did not pay off in the form of high grades. When asked his thoughts about the progress he made in terms of his reading and writing skills towards the middle of the fall semester, he noted:

Writing the second essay, I thought I was going to get a higher grade and then ended up with a 75. The outline was all wrong and the APA wasn't in order. But other than this, in the essay itself, I know it was, it had actually problems, but actually this is my best. I can't write better than this. I actually wasted a lot of time on it and I couldn't... The thing is after all this, I get a 75. (Int. 3)

Osama restated this view, seeing reading and writing assignments as a waste of time, on several other occasions, especially when he failed to receive grades that were, in his view, proportionate to the time and effort he invested in them. This situation influenced Osama's perspective toward the academic writing classes in a significant way. Receiving grades that could only help him barely pass the course made him feel that the time he devoted to these assignments was, in his words, "wasted".

Saif, on the other hand, often emphasized that he was on an academic scholarship and that he needed to maintain a high GPA to keep it. When asked about his objectives regarding his academic reading and writing development at university, he immediately noted that reading and writing in English fluently was essential for his academic standing and GPA at university as well as his future career as an engineer in the UAE, a country where English is the dominant language in the business world. Having graduated from an English-medium high school with a GPA of 97 out of 100, he noted that that he had not expected to face any problems studying at an American university at the beginning. However, to his surprise, he said he found it quite challenging to keep up with all the reading and writing requirements. When asked to evaluate his own progress in academic reading and writing towards the middle of the first semester, he said:

I'm scared really of the mark because I am on a scholarship. So that scholarship need GPA above two or 2.5 even, so if it became below than that so I start getting problems holds and I have to delay it you know. My mark is not good. I know that. Like 70 in the first essay. I got 11 out of 20 in the first summary. (Int. 3)

Being on a scholarship exerted a great pressure on Mahmoud to maintain a good GPA, too. Meeting the reading and writing requirements at university was a significant academic goal for him as he thought being good at academic reading and writing was key to receiving passing grades in all his courses. He had an elder sister studying at the same university and he often stressed it was very important for him to maintain his scholarship as it was not easy for his parents to pay full tuition fees for the two of them.

### 5.2.1.2. Perceived weakness in reading and writing skills

Except for Osama and Saif, all of the participants had been required to take remedial English classes for a full academic year at the Academic Bridge Program before matriculating into their majors as their TOEFL scores were below the minimum needed for admission to the university. They viewed passing TOEFL, which they all found quite challenging, as a great academic achievement; however, often mentioned that they thought their level of English, particularly reading and writing skills, were not as strong as their fellow classmates. The main reasons for this, in their views, were limited exposure to English and academic reading and writing assignments in their prior education, limited vocabulary, and the excessive amount of time they needed to complete the reading/writing assignments.

To start with, Khairea stated that out of the three languages she could speak (Arabic, French, English), she found herself weakest in English, which she studied briefly as a school subject in Algeria. She attributed her weakness in English to the fact that French was the primary foreign language taught in all schools and was the medium of instruction in post-secondary education in Algeria, which had left little room for the development of her English language skills. She added that schools in Algeria did not really encourage students to read and write for pleasure. She also mentioned she had never written a fully developed academic essay or a research paper before, neither at school nor at her previous university in Algeria. Her experience with academic writing was limited to short passages, descriptive writing, or narratives. Referring to her academic literacy experiences at school and briefly at university in Algeria, she noted that:

Even in schools so rarely you found a professor who advise you to read or is like writing for me is something new. We never did that [ . . . ] That's why everything is new.  
(Int. 2)

She often compared the time and effort she devoted for completing the reading and writing assignments to the time she thought her friends would spend, which she estimated as dramatically less.

For instance, commenting on the DES 131: Design Foundations midterm that required her to write a full essay, she said:

I feel so bad when I don't know how to do something and when I see the others they are doing. They are just working, nananana writing. I'm the only one who is watching the others. It was... I am really nervous when I see the others working and they know what they are going to do but I'm like okay what I'm supposed to do. So, I just follow my instinct I just wrote what I understand, that's it. I know the answer but like I don't know how to formulate it. (Int. 3)

As for reading assignments, Khairea seemed comfortable with keeping up with the expectations, noting that she could understand the assigned readings and she went to each class having completed the assigned work. She also stated that she found most of the readings interesting, especially those assigned in her discipline-specific courses. However, after receiving a series of low grades on some tests assessing her reading comprehension, such as quizzes and midterms, in a number of courses including WRI 101: Academic Writing, she started to bring up her reading skills in English as a serious concern. Her main concerns were failing to understand questions in examinations, vocabulary, and the time she needed to complete an assigned reading to fully understand it. For instance, in DES 121: Introduction to Architecture and Design History, she was not able to score a high grade on quizzes and the midterm, which included multiple choice and other types of closed ended questions such as matching a term with its meaning. She explained the issue as follows:

Sometimes I'm confused about the question because of my understanding in English is still weak. I got some difficulties to understanding questions in the first exam. Some questions... I went to see the professor in his office. We went through the answers together and I was surprised. He was surprised because I answered to the questions, I understand them and in the exam I wasn't able to answer correctly so... (Int. 3)

She often noted that she had to read the assigned texts many times to understand them due to her “poor English” as opposed to her fellow classmates, whom she thought could read much faster without having to look up new vocabulary. What complicated Khairea's situation even further was her prior education in Architecture in Algeria, which was in French. Talking about the difficulty she had in understanding the architectural terminology in English, she noted:

There are some words that I confuse because there is another meaning in French, another meaning in English. Same word but they have different meaning. That's why I have little bit bad grade on meanings matching because of confusing in words in the quiz and midterm. (Int. 2)

Like Khairea, Noura often stated that she found her proficiency in English quite low, especially compared to other students who studied at schools that used EMI. Having studied at a public school in Arabic, she found her proficiency in English, especially in reading and writing, insufficient. She stated that reading and writing were not given much importance at school and that she had never been required to write a full essay before she started to study at university. Her experiences with academic reading and writing had been limited to short paragraphs. Noura also brought up how challenging it was for her to read and write in English, especially longer texts, not only in academic writing classes, but also in other courses. She often noted that she felt “stressed”, “upset”, and “frustrated” when she could not do well on an exam because of her “poor English” even though she “knew the answer”. She stated that she had to study at least double the time her classmates studied for an exam or to get ready for a class as she had to look up each new word and note down the meaning of it. For instance, reflecting on what might have gone wrong in the NGN 110: Introduction to Engineering and Computing midterm, which she failed, she noted:

I think I did understand most of the things but when it comes to the question with very... How can I say it? It's like more than three sentences, I get confused because it's like, again I don't know the words, some words I don't know the meaning of it. (Int. 3)

To give another example, while talking about her experiences in PHY 101: General Physics, she mentioned how her limited vocabulary in English prevented her from understanding even simple questions in quizzes and exams. The following excerpt from an interview I had with her illustrates this issue:

Noura: I didn't know the meaning of “radius”. It's one of the main, you know, word that you should know. But you know she didn't mention it before so I didn't know the meaning of, or I just like skip it... Because of that I got 6.5 out of ten. I was really being sad because I was like I studied hard.

Researcher: If you knew the meaning of “radius”. Would you...

Noura: (interrupts) Yeah, of course because radius is like half of the sphere. You should know it.

Researcher: How did this experience make you feel?

Noura: I was really mad because it's the first quiz and you should get marks. And one of my friends was saying if you didn't get marks from the beginning you will not get it. So, okay I didn't marks. Where will I get marks? (Int. 3)

She had similar problems with vocabulary and understanding the main ideas in longer texts in WRI 101: Academic Writing as well. Reflecting on her poor performance on the reading comprehension part of the midterm, she said:

But you know maybe the main problem that I had, I didn't even read a long article in the Bridge program that it contains three pages. So, it's hard for me to get the points sometimes. Because it's like you have more than five paragraphs and all of them they are talking in, on one topic sentence. (Int. 3)

Noura also thought that her "weak" writing skills were getting in the way of her academic progress in all of her courses that required graded writing assignment. In NGN 110: Introduction to Engineering and Computing, she had to write bi-weekly lab reports with three other team members. After her first written contribution to the teamwork, her colleagues were strongly critical of what she wrote, which really upset Noura. She noted:

Before the first, first time I write the lab report with them, they were like "you didn't write any concept" you know. It was really hurting me because it's like I really work hard for it and I didn't get what I want to do or I didn't get what I want to ... It's like, because you are like, how can I say it, you are trying your best but you couldn't do anything about it. I just told them about my stuff and the I mean my weak English, my writing and I say that I'll do my best whenever I can, whenever I can do much work I will do. (Int. 1)

Zeina attributed her "weak" English to her limited exposure to English before university. With regards to her reading, the most common issue she brought up was the difficulty she faced in understanding questions or instructions in various types of examinations such as quizzes, midterms, finals, and so on. Talking about her low score in a quiz in Physics, she said:

Like, when I read the question, I understand, like what, which formula I should use but like there is sometimes like vocabulary, hard vocabulary I don't understand. So I don't know if it is like a kind of rope or something or a kind of object. (Int. 1)

She faced this problem in all her courses, even in Calculus I, which did not include any substantial reading assignments. Although she considered herself very good at math, she was not able to do well in the MTH 103: Calculus I midterm as she could not fully understand the questions. She said:

Like in the last classes we took a new lesson, the new lesson is about like questions, but in the form of a reading questions, you know. So I faced some difficulties in these questions. For example, like I don't have question, but like they are applications from our life, cases. Like, "read, think and put a formula for this". But sometimes I can't understand the case (Int. 3).

In the same way, she found WRI 101: Academic Writing too time consuming as she could comprehend the assigned reading only after looking up every new vocabulary. Even then, she noted it was difficult for her to get the main idea of the assigned text, especially if it is a long one.

When you are announce us to read some articles in our book I read them but sometimes I don't understand them like I need to translate each word, like more than one word in one line but then I can understand. But it takes a lot of time, and like sometimes I don't understand which is the, what is the main idea for the article (Int. 2).

Writing assignments in WRI 101 posed another area of difficulty for Zeina. In addition to vocabulary and grammar, she found writing a thesis statement and organizing her essay confusing. She noted that she devoted most of her study time to completing reading and writing assignments given in this course.

Osama, too, found his vocabulary insufficient for the readings assigned in WRI 101: Academic Writing and later WRI 102: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum. In several interviews, he described the readings assigned in academic writing classes as "Japanese" or "Chinese" to emphasize how difficult it was for him to make sense of them, mainly due to his limited vocabulary. Nonetheless, his accounts of how he studied for all his courses over two semesters showed that most of the times he did his best to complete the reading and writing assignments, often at the expense of not eating, sleeping, and having any social life, which will be explained in detail in the next section.

Talking about writing assignments given in academic writing classes both semesters, Osama often brought up the excessive amount of time he needed to complete the assignments and the confusion he experienced about the process of producing the final essay, such as writing multiple drafts, getting feedback from the professor, securing an appointment at the Writing Center, doing

library research, using APA, and so on. He thought, going through all these steps, whether successfully or not, should have helped him receive higher grades. Stressing how overwhelmed he was with the amount of time he needed to finish the reading and writing assignments required for each course, Osama noted:

Here you have to study every day, every day, every day! And you still don't finish, you don't finish! It never ends.

Saif also reported weaknesses in vocabulary, meeting the required word count in graded writing assignments, organizing his ideas and providing supporting details, using APA, and finding credible sources. He identified his limited experience with academic writing in his prior education as a reason for his weaknesses, noting:

Like APA, back in school we never used to do these things so in 101 [WRI 101] it is the first time I'm learning about it. Like back in school we used to just like to fill the page. We don't think about what to write or how it is to be written; just write your introduction, body paragraph and conclusion. (Int. 3)

He also found it difficult to keep up with the reading assignments, admitting that there were times he was not able to read the assigned material for some courses, which, he thought, caused him to score low marks on some quizzes and other exams such as midterms.

In a similar vein, Mahmoud's main concerns regarding his academic literacy skills in English were vocabulary and the time he needed to complete the assigned reading and writing activities. Coming from an educational background in Arabic, reading and writing for his academic writing classes and all other courses was very challenging for him. He noted that he could not fully understand the assigned reading texts in academic writing classes, as a result of which he failed a few reading comprehension quizzes and summary assignments. Mahmoud often said that he was worried as he thought it took him much longer to finish the assigned reading than it did his friends. He noted:

Sometimes I think that, I have a friend of mine, when me and him we started together he finished with half an hour, I take I finish mostly after one hour so I take more time. I was upset, I was scared 'cause I said to myself "In the future what am I gonna do if I keep going like this? Everybody else finishes things early, but me! I take too much time." (Int. 3)



His “weak” reading comprehension in English also influenced his performance in MTH 002: Prep Business Mathematics, BIS 101: Business Information Systems, and CHM 105: Chemistry and the Environment. In MTH 002, he was not able to understand exam questions that included a description of a problematic case to be solved. In BIS 101, he had difficulty conducting research and understanding the sources he found for a project that he had to do with a partner. In CHM 105, reading the required course material was “too-time consuming”. Writing assigned in his academic writing classes was also confusing for him not only because of the process he was required to follow (writing multiple drafts, getting feedback, doing library research, revising etc.) but also the topics he was asked to write about. He often noted it was hard for him to come up with convincing ideas on topics he did not know much about, like globalization and politics, particularly so in English.

### **5.2.1.3. Doubts about the contribution of academic literacy requirements to their academic growth**

At the beginning of the study, when asked about the importance of the required academic reading and writing skills for their life or the outcomes they expected from pursuing their objectives, the students usually brought up their grades and the importance of English for their future careers to the fore. However, as the semester progressed and the challenges intensified, most of the participants expressed their doubts about the value of learning academic writing and reading skills for a student in their major. To illustrate, Zeina expressed her thoughts as follows:

Yeah, sometimes I think like this, for example sometimes some assignments in English... Sometimes, I say “What is the benefit from the writing course while I am engineering?” But then some people say to me “You will be more expert then in writing and you need it in writing reports and something like that”. Of course my friends in [X] University, they don’t have writing courses. I think like this sometimes, when I bother from writing. But, when I’m thinking carefully it is good... Because I think now English is in everywhere. I think you will need it. (Int. 3)

One of the significant causes of this doubt was the differences in the expected form and strategies needed for various writing assignments across the curriculum. This specific issue is discussed in detail

in the following section as part of the challenges the students faced; however, since it gave rise to a sense of doubt in the students regarding the usefulness of learning academic literacy skills, it is also briefly analyzed as part of the students' perspectives in this section.

Khairea questioned how necessary it was for a student in her major to learn the principles of academic writing, especially at the beginning of the study, as she saw no point in transferring the writing skills and conventions she was required to learn in academic writing courses to her discipline-specific courses. She thought the graded writing assignments given in CAAD (College of Architecture, Art and Design) (see Appendix G) lacked a clear guideline and grading criteria. As a result, she noted that she did not know how detailed her writing was expected to be or what kind of an organizational pattern she needed to follow as opposed to the detailed guiding instructions she received in her academic writing courses. This discrepancy was a significant source of confusion for her and eventually caused her to question the relevance of studying conventions of academic writing for a student in her major. At the end of the first semester, as she was reflecting on what she had initially thought of the required academic writing courses, she noted:

I was thinking, "Why I'm taking Writing?" It is not important. I'm like studying Architecture. I'm like, I don't want to understand writing. (Int. 4)

Other students expressed confusion and doubts regarding the necessity of following the APA referencing style, which was not required in other courses with graded writing assignments. Omar expressed his scepticism as follows:

APA is easy, it's just rules. Yeah, but why? I know where I got it from so what's the point? Maybe, because all of us have to write it in the same way, but only in writing courses. (Int. 3)

The students continued to express their doubts more often towards the end of the semester as they questioned the purposes of some reading and writing assignments. This issue is discussed further in section 5.2.4, where their perspectives at the end of the year are presented.

## 5.2.2. Challenges

The analysis of data showed that the students encountered six main challenges while trying to meet the academic literacy demands of the curriculum, which are explained in detail below. While presenting these findings, I used student voices to illustrate each category of challenge and coping strategy that emerged from the data, as in the previous section.

Table 2: Challenges faced by the students

Theme	Example	Number of mentions
Lack of time	Khairea: "I haven't really much time to go to the Writing Center to go through the grammar mistakes and organization." (Int.3)	51
Transition to EMI	Mahmoud: "I don't know maybe, the thing is changing from Arabic to English is kind of a little bit difficult." (Int. 3)  Zeina: "When I don't understand something I feel nervous, and like I will not solve it. In this question, I didn't even try actually." (Int. 3)	47
Adapting to the changing requirements of academic reading and writing practices	Osama: "APA is easy, it's just rules. Yeah, but why? I know where I got it from so what's the point? Maybe, because all of us have to write it in the same way, but only in writing courses." (Int. 3)	42
Using the sources in the library and doing research	Saif: "I thought I have time, it's easy, like I will do it. But it required more research and finding the credible sources takes time." (Int. 6)	36
Building social and academic relationships	Osama: "The thing is that I don't think he [the professor] would really help me. (Int. 4)	33
Accessing university services that offer support for academic writing	Noura: "Really, I don't think they [the Writing Center tutors] are good enough. You know it's like they are saying like read it for us and half an hour I only read the essay. I don't know why but it's like half an hour. And then they said what do you want to do? It's like you know losing time." (Int. 1)	31

### 5.2.2.1. Lack of time

Over the course of the study, the participants provided accounts of many challenges they faced in their efforts to bring their academic literacy skills on par with the expectations of their university,

among which lack of time was the most commonly stated. This was a complex challenge since it intensified or gave rise to the other challenges the students faced. Each student brought up the issue of lack of time at almost every interview as a reason for not taking other steps that could have helped them overcome many of the challenges they encountered in their efforts to fulfill the reading and writing demands of the curriculum. When asked if they had any plans to overcome a challenging issue they were facing, the students would often note that they were either going to study harder, talk to their professor, or go to the writing center. However, the follow up interviews showed that rarely did their intentions materialize into actions. Mostly due to lack of time, the students were not able to:

- build social and academic relationships with their peers and professors
- go to the university writing center
- complete reading and writing assignments on time
- use the university library to do research

To give an example, Khairea noted that she was not able to go to the writing center to receive some help on one of the major writing assignments given in WRI 101: Academic Writing. She said:

I decided also to take Writing Center to go through my critical response. I'm really aware about that and really I planned to do something for that. I haven't really much time to go to the writing center to go through the grammar mistakes and organization. I know that I made many grammar mistakes. (Int. 3)

Osama stated that he was not able to receive my feedback on a major writing assignment in WRI 101: Academic Writing although he was concerned about his thesis statement and topic sentences. His reasons were:

I was too late to come to your office, cause actually everyone is busy and actually I didn't have time to come to your office. You know even Wednesday we had the essay, you told me what's wrong. On Thursday I had two quizzes and a midterm. It was awful, it was awful! Every day I have something every day, every day! (Int. 4)

What concerned the students even more about this specific challenge was the constant comparison they made between themselves and their classmates with regards to their use of time. They would always estimate the amount of time they needed to complete the reading and writing

assignments as significantly more than what they thought others would need. While talking about the amount of time she spent on her reading and writing assignments, Noura noted:

It takes a lot of time. Because I should understand every word that's said, it's not like Arabic you know. It's really stressful. You can say most people like take one hour, but I take like two hours or more, double than them. I just see people. It's like from the midterm, I should like study it before two days just to like finish all material and review everything again. (Int. 4)

Zeina added: "I need much more time than my friends for improving because I went to Arabic school".

(Int. 3)

Lack of time remained the biggest challenge the participants brought up most frequently also in the spring semester, especially for Osama and Mahmoud, whose GPA was lower than 2.0 out of 4.0 at the end of the fall semester. As a result of their low GPA, Osama and Mahmoud were placed on academic probation in spring and were therefore required to take an additional course called UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students, a non-credit remedial course graded as pass/fail, which demanded extra time from the already overwhelmed, time-stricken students.

This finding is discussed further in response to RQ2, as it is closely related to the students' process of identity construction.

#### **5.2.2.2. Transition to English Medium of Instruction (EMI)**

Another challenge the students faced was the transition to EMI, as a result of which they had trouble in understanding written instructions in various forms of assessment such as quizzes, midterms, final examinations; guidelines prepared for assignments such as lab reports, essays, and projects; as well as written feedback in graded writing assignments and taking notes.

Zeina explained how her confusion about two words caused her to score only three out of ten points on a quiz in CHM 101: General Chemistry:

In most questions he used the word "oxide", like "which element is oxide?" I think oxide is like the other word... What is the other word? "Oxide" and "reduce". So it is

about the vocabulary. Like, in Arabic, if he told me, I know what it is if he say the word. I know if it is in the past or in the present, I know which one to choose. (Int. 2)

Her limited vocabulary prevented Zeina from understanding examination questions in other courses as well. In MTH 103: Calculus I, she had trouble in understanding what she called “long questions”, which included vocabulary she was not familiar with. She expressed her feelings when faced with such questions as follows:

When I don't understand something I feel nervous, and like I will not solve it. In this question, I didn't even try actually. Here, it says “Flies a kite”, this I don't know the meaning of “kite”. The rest is OK. (Int. 3)

Understanding the instructions in quizzes and exams was also challenging for Mahmoud, mainly due to the shift in the language of instruction. He explained the difficulties he faced in MTH 002: Prep Business Mathematics, which he would eventually have to repeat, as follows:

The problem in math, I study from the notes from the book, but I don't know when I go to the midterm, I don't know why I don't get a good score. I don't know maybe, the thing is changing from Arabic to English is kind of a little bit difficult. And it makes me sad `cause actually I'm good with math, but I don't know what's the problem. I can't always understand the questions. (Int. 3)

Limited vocabulary was an obstacle to understanding written feedback in graded writing assignments, usually given in academic writing classes. To give an example, Noura did not what “awkward” meant, a comment she usually saw written next to quite a few sentences on her graded essays. Even after looking up the word, she felt confused about how to respond to this specific comment, which she explained saying:

I don't know, it's like I don't know what's the awkward sentence. It's like I don't know English well, so how can I know that this is an awkward sentence you know. This is the problem. (Int. 5)

Another area of difficulty the students often brought up had to do with taking notes in English. To illustrate, although Zeina was taught note taking skills in the Academic Bridge Program before matriculating into her major, she was not able to take notes properly because most of the time she thought the professor spoke too fast. Moreover, she could not understand the notes she took in English

if she were to read them a week later unless she translated them into Arabic right after each class. She explained her situation as follows:

Zeina: I can't use the note taking techniques. I think it takes a lot of time and the professor speaks fast.

Researcher: Do you take notes in English or Arabic?

Zeina: In English, but sometimes when I need, need to understand something, like when I read it after, after a one week for example, like I will not understand if it is in English. So I translate it in Arabic after class so I can understand. (Int. 4)

### **5.2.2.3. Adapting to the changing requirements of academic reading and writing practices across the curriculum**

A significant source of confusion experienced by all participants had to do with identifying, understanding and adapting to the different strategies they needed to follow to complete various reading and writing assignments given in different courses they took across the curriculum. Based on their accounts of the challenges they faced while working on these assignments, it seemed, especially at the beginning, they did not really know how to approach the required reading or writing assignment. In other words, they were not aware that they needed to utilize different reading and writing strategies for different purposes. As a result, they were disappointed and confused when a strategy that worked for one assignment did not work for others, even for the same course. For instance, while reading an assigned article once or twice to get the gist of it was a strategy that enabled the participants to participate in or at least understand class discussions in various courses, it usually did not bring success in quizzes and exams, which the students came to realize after a series of failing or barely passing grades. This was a significant challenge that Khairea faced in DES 121: Introduction to Architecture and Design History and later in DES 122: Modern Developments in Architecture and Design. Reflecting on the reasons why she failed the first midterm in DES 121, Khairea expressed her confusion as follows:

This is the problem what I found, like I'm reading, I understand even in the class. He used to ask us if you have questions and you didn't understand, I am the only one who understands everything. But in the questions I am giving wrong answers; this is what I

didn't understand. I don't know what is the problem exactly but I'm reading, like I'm taking the big idea for that text, for example that paragraph, I am having big idea but not going through the specific things... that's why.

The students faced the same adaptation challenge while dealing with the graded writing assignments given in various courses they took across the curriculum. As mentioned before, the differences in the expected form and strategies needed for these writing assignments confused the students. In academic writing courses they were expected to write formal essays, which usually required a clear argument, carefully organized supporting points, and integration of research following a standard documentation style, APA. Not only were the students unfamiliar with the form, but also had little experience with the process they needed to go through to complete the assignment, which usually required them to produce several drafts, receive feedback from their professor, peers, the writing center, and finally revise their work accordingly. The students were not asked to or even expected to follow most of these requirements in discipline-specific writing assignments. To illustrate, in CAAD, the evaluated writing assignments lacked clear guidelines, at least from Khairea's point of view. Similarly, in the School of Business, Mahmoud thought the purpose of the graded writing assignments and the guidelines provided were vague. Nevertheless, the students, especially those in the College of Engineering, managed to receive fairly good grades in most of these assignments in contrast to their grades in academic writing classes.

There are a number of possible explanations for this. In the College of Engineering, the graded writing assignments were primarily composed of weekly lab reports assigned in NGN 101, PHY 101 and PHY 102, ranging from four to eight pages. The kind of writing required was usually formulaic with very specific step-by-step instructions. In NGN 101, the students were also asked to write a project report, to be completed in groups, which was expected to be between twelve to fifteen pages long. In all of these writing assignments, the students were expected to use a few sources and list the sources at the end of the assignment. In the School of Business, Mahmoud was required to write a



research paper in CHM 105: Chemistry and the Environment referring to a few library sources. However, none of the students were required to cite their sources following a standard documentation style like APA; as a result they questioned the usefulness of learning the APA style, as mentioned in the previous section (see 5.2.1.3).

Collaboration with colleagues was also encouraged in some colleges. In the College of Engineering and School of Business students were asked to work in groups of four to five to produce the graded writing assignments, whereas they were asked to write their papers individually in academic writing courses. Working in groups allowed most of the participants to avoid the written parts of the assignments, which will be discussed in the following section as a common coping strategy developed by them.

As a result of these differences in assignment requirements, most of the participants expressed their doubts about the value of learning academic writing conventions and skills for a student in their major at some point during the two semesters this study continued.

#### **5.2.2.4. Using the sources in the library and doing research**

Another challenge often mentioned by the students had to do with doing research and using the library sources effectively. They all noted that they preferred using online search engines such as Google to using the university library as they were under the impression that the sources in the library were difficult to understand. They also thought Google gave them quicker results.

For a project assigned in BIS 101, Mahmoud was required to create an attendance system on Excel. While the project did not require a written report, as he explained, he had to read many sources to find the information he needed to create the attendance sheet. The following excerpt illustrates the challenge Mahmoud faced and his thoughts about the research process:

Mahmoud: Well it [the research process] went well but it took too much time.

Researcher: Yeah?

Mahmoud: Too much time rather than working on the project itself.

Researcher: What kind of sources did you use?

Mahmoud: Google

Researcher: Was it helpful?

Mahmoud: Yeah, yeah. I didn't go to the library 'cause I don't know Google is much easier. I don't know, but I think if I find things, books, I think it will be too much complicated. 'Cause I don't want the whole thing; I only want a part of the things I am working on you know, so Google was helpful. But it still took too much time to get the information.

This exchange illustrates another noteworthy finding that stood out about the students' understanding of research: their over-reliance on Google as a key to everything they found incomprehensible in their text books or instructions for specific assignments. Zeina used Google to help her understand incomprehensible assignment instructions and questions in CHM 101: General Chemistry I:

Sometimes I don't understand the questions. Like, sometimes I confuse. Then, I write the same question in the internet and maybe I find an explanation, and I find.

Zeina resorted to the same strategy to understand articles she found difficult in her academic writing classes, too. While talking about the challenges she faced in reading assignments given in WRI 102, she said she usually looked for a summary of the assigned article on the internet.

Like, if she give us an article to read, to discuss it in the class, I like read it and translate it, the difficult words. And also I search about the summary of the essay so I can understand. In the summary, they use like simple words.

While using Google was a strategy that helped them for some projects, it was not useful for some other assignments, especially when a professor asked them to use library sources only. To give an example, the students found it very time-consuming and challenging to look for specific library sources, such as books and articles in academic journals or databases in the library, for essays assigned in WRI 102: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum. They noted that it was difficult for them to look for a relevant source, understand it, and then skim through the entire source to find an idea that they could integrate in their essays. Saif showed that he realized this; reflecting on what went wrong on a graded writing assignment given in WRI 102. He noted: "I thought I have time, it's easy, like I will do it. But it required more research and finding the credible sources takes time."

### 5.2.2.5. Building social and academic relationships with peers and professors

Over the course of the two semesters this study continued, the participants faced numerous challenges in building effective social and academic relationships with peers and professors due to various reasons. One of the routine questions I asked the students on the courses in progress each semester had to do with their relations with their classmates and professors. The students' responses to this question and accounts of various experiences showed that they usually worked in isolation unless they were required to work as part of a group by their professor or they received an unexpectedly low grade on an assignment or examination. Khairea explained why she preferred to work alone and why she did not have a wide circle of friends at university, saying:

It's like I have problem with communications. Like, when I'm saying joke, it doesn't make sense because in my language it does make sense but it's translated in English... It's like it's killing the sense. I have friends. I think everyone knows me and it's not really friends, but just "hi, how are you", you know. My only friend is my sister.

She added that she usually spoke to her friends in English rather than Arabic as she thought her Arab friends could not understand her Arabic dialect, which she described as "Algerian". Hence, she attributed her limited interaction with her classmates to a lack of common language, in which she could express herself as she wanted to. She also stressed that she had no time to socialize as she had to work part time to help her father pay her tuition fees.

While Noura, Zeina, and Mahmoud continued to socialize with their friends they had met at the Academic Bridge Program the year before they matriculated in their majors or their friends from high school, they had difficulty in building new friendships or interacting with classmates who took the same courses with them. Saif and Osama also noted that they usually studied alone as they had no time to make new friends. To illustrate, while talking about the challenges she faced in PHY 102: General Physics II, Noura pointed out that she found the course lectures difficult to understand and that she often felt isolated:

Well, unfortunately I didn't really have friends. You know, friends, it is hard to get. Some [students] were with the groups, but for me I didn't know many people there.

In cases where they were required to work as part of a team, the participants chose to take on a more passive role, especially in tasks which required their written contribution, mostly due to thinking that their level of English was not good enough. To illustrate, while talking about a group assignment in WRI 101: Academic Writing, which required the group to summarize an assigned article, Noura stated that she thought she needed take a more passive role due to her limited English. She described her role in the teamwork as follows:

I'm the listener most of the time. I put my ideas there when I'm confident, but most of the time I'm the listener, because I should learn and it's like learning process. Because, most of them are better than me in English.

While talking about the same group assignment, Saif brought up a different reason for taking on a more passive role, which was feeling intimidated due to the presence of the opposite gender in the group. He stressed that after studying in gender segregated schools for twelve years, he needed to go through an adaptation process to get used to studying in a co-educational institution and expressing his opinions freely in group activities where female and male students worked together. He noted:

At the beginning, because twelve years we are studying you know separately, it was like just adapting. Once we adapted, it was okay. But I know there are some students you know at the beginning they didn't like it. You know, we are boys, like now we have to think, because some of the girls, you know, they are like straight; they'll say "OK, he's wrong!" but you know the boys, between them, they will just find that you are mistaken, but it's okay, we'll keep quiet. Like, even the teacher, maybe sometimes will not recognize that thing, but yeah they'll work as a group. But now, it's okay I don't get scared or shy, because it's my opinion.

Moreover, there were many times the students did not see their professors during their office hours to ask for help on many of the challenges they faced in their reading and writing assignments, mainly due to lack of time, as noted before. Most of the time, the students talked to or at least considered talking to their professors after receiving a failing or an surprisingly low grade on an exam or assignment, usually to understand their mistakes or sometimes to negotiate a better grade. To give

an example, Zeina visited her WRI 102: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum professor for the first time after getting an F on a summary assignment. She said:

The first time I took F, I talked to my professor. I asked her why I got F and she told me because “You didn’t write the name of the article or the author”. She didn’t see the other thing, because of that she give me F. And then the next summary I wrote it and she gave me C I think and for another summary B.

Mahmoud sought help from his professors, hoping that they could give him some practical suggestions or a better grade due to his hard work. In particular, he usually talked to his MTH 002 professor to share his concerns about his failing grades. He noted:

The thing that really I’m not happy about is I study too much, but I don’t get good grades. I told him this, he said to just try do your best and everything will be fine. And the second midterm I got eleven per cent out of twenty. I went to him, he told me that just focus more and try to get eighty five or above and we will talk. ’Cause I really don’t want to repeat the course, ’cause it’s 002 and actually this is the beginning. If in the beginning I will repeat the course, how about the other courses? That’s what worries me.

The challenges the students faced in building effective social and academic relationships with peers and professors will be further discussed in response to RQ2, as it is closely related to the students’ identity construction process.

#### **5.2.2.6. Accessing university services that offer support for academic writing**

The students were all aware of the services of the Writing Center; however, they were not able to or did not want to make use of the services offered by the center due to reasons such as lack of time, problems with making an appointment before their assignment deadline, or the doubt some of them had whether the student-tutors at the Writing Center would be knowledgeable enough to guide them.

Although they were mostly convinced that it would be helpful to get help from the Writing Center, all of the students pointed to lack of time as the primary reason for not going to the Writing Center as often as they thought they needed to, as Noura stated:

If I go to the Writing Centre, I will have more marks. But it's like you don't have the time, you don't have the time for yourself.

Despite lack of time, most of the students tried to get help from the Writing Center a few times, but they found it was not a very straightforward process. Osama's first attempt at visiting the Writing Center was unsuccessful as he was not aware of the need to book an appointment in advance. His next attempt failed too as he tried to get an appointment right before his assignment submission deadline, at a time when the Writing Center was fully booked. Hence, he was not able to get any help from the Writing Center throughout the entire first semester.

While Saif and Noura thought it would be helpful to receive as much feedback as possible to improve their essays, they were uncertain that the Writing Center was the right place to get help from. Their lack of trust for the Writing Center made it difficult for them to access additional support to improve their academic writing skills when they were unable to see their professors during office hours due to time constraints. Saif thought the Writing Center was for students "who got very bad mark at the beginning". Although he was not content with receiving a C on his first major writing assignment in WRI 101: Academic Writing, he did not go to the Writing Center for support for any of his assignments, preferring to get feedback directly from the teacher.

Like Saif, Noura did not think the Writing Center was helpful enough. Reflecting on her experiences in trying to improve one of her major writing assignments given in WRI 101 and getting help from the Writing Center, she noted:

Really, I don't think they are good enough. You know it's like they are saying like read it for us and half an hour I only read the essay. I don't know why but it's like half an hour. And then they said what do you want to do? It's like you know losing time.

She was disappointed as she expected the tutors to identify and correct her mistakes directly rather than being asked to take on a more active role in the revision process. However, she still tried to get help from the Writing Center whenever her busy schedule allowed her to do so.

### 5.2.3. Coping strategies

The analysis of the data showed that the students developed three coping strategies to deal with the major challenges, which were described above. These coping strategies are shown in the following table and explained in detail below.

Table 3: Coping strategies developed by the students

Theme	Example	Number of mentions
Excessive studying	Osama: “And then the thing is that I found out, when I woke up I found out that I forgot to eat that day.” (Int. 2)	28
Corner-cutting strategies	Noura: “I believe that it’s good to have groups in NGN because most of them are better than me in English so whenever I have mistakes in my lab reports they change it for me or edit it. So, I don’t have to think.” (Int. 2)	21
Seeking help and developing more effective study habits	Khairea: “After the bad grade I got, I decided to go to Writing Center. I was surprised, because what they told me it’s not really helpful, but now I think it is.” (Int. 4)	20

#### 5.2.3.1. Excessive studying

The students’ accounts of how they studied and worked on the reading and writing assignments given in all their courses throughout the academic year showed that they invested a lot of time and effort in completing these assignments, frequently putting studying before sleeping, socializing, and even eating. To illustrate in the following excerpt, Osama describes the day he submitted one of his major writing assignments for WRI 101: Academic Writing. The excerpt shows that he had not eaten anything for more than twenty four hours due to his busy course schedule:

Osama: I finished my classes 5 pm. I ate, and then I went with my friends, we studied. Then at 11 pm, I started, no at 10 pm, writing the essay till 4:30 a.m. I slept at 5 p.m. and then I woke up at 7:30 cause the class is at 8 a.m. And then I went to the class, and I

found out that I still have to make the worksheet; I did it in one hour and half. At 11 am I submitted the essay, and then I had a class from 11 to 12:15, then from 12:30 to 1:30. At 02:30 I went to the workshop, the English workshop, and then I finished at 03:20. I went back home, I had to send the essay online. So the thing is that I had everything separated, so I had to put everything in, and then you know, the page numbers, they change, and even the title and everything, so I had to fix it. It took me one hour and thirty minutes just to do everything. And then I slept at 5 p.m., I woke up at 9 p.m. And then the thing is that I found out, when I woke up I found out that I forgot to eat that day. So, I called and the delivery came at 12 at night. So I ate, and I kept studying a bit and then I slept at 3 or 4 am. And I woke at 8:30 in the morning.

Researcher: Quite a busy day!

Osama: Yeah, that's the thing! That every day I have a lot of stuff like this. The thing is that each professor thinks that it's the only course! (Int. 3)

The other participants had very similar experiences to Osama's. What made this issue more challenging to deal with for the students was failing to receive the grades they aimed for in spite of their hard work. The students' level of disappointment was proportional to the amount of time and effort they invested in studying and it seemed their level of stress and confusion increased over the course of this study when they repeatedly received failing or barely passing grades no matter how much they studied.

### **5.2.3.2. Corner-cutting strategies**

When the excessive amount of time and effort invested in studying did not bring the expected level of success, out of desperation, the students resorted to what can be called "corner-cutting strategies", strategies which they thought would help them save time in completing assignments or simply get a passing grade on a given reading or writing assignment while doing the minimum required from them. These strategies included but were not limited to using an online search engine or translation tool to help with their assignments, having someone else do their homework, or avoiding certain parts of the work.

A number of students used online facilities in an attempt to save time. Reflecting on why she might have received a D on her first major writing assignment she wrote for WRI 101, Khairea



explained that she had written the essay in French and then used an online translation tool to translate it into English before submitting it. She noted:

I think why I got this bad grade because I wrote everything in French and I put it in Google translation and I translated directly. And I copy-paste it directly, and I did some changes because, the others, it seems to me like it's correct, that's why. And now I decided never to do that. Maybe I'm going to write directly in English, everything in English, and that's what I did for the second essay. **(Int. 3)**

Khairea had resorted to this strategy because she was disheartened by the low grades she had received on her previous minor writing assignments and quizzes. She had used this strategy while she was taking remedial English classes in the Academic Bridge Program and believed it helped her to pass. The difference was that now she was required to write much longer essays compared to the short paragraphs she was asked to write before. She noted:

When I was in the bridge program, it worked because it was paragraphs. It wasn't one thousand words. I feel stupid doing that, normally I shouldn't do that! Well it was an experience, bad experience. (Int. 3)

Zeina also turned to Google for support, searching for summaries of the articles assigned in her academic writing classes or explanations for confusing instructions for assignments in other courses by copying and pasting the instruction in the Google search bar.

Avoidance strategies of various kinds were acknowledged. Noura discovered from her experiences in NGN 110 (Introduction to Engineering and Computing) that she could avoid the written parts in group projects by taking on a more active role in non-written parts of the assigned work and started using this strategy in other courses. She had to work with four other students for the final NGN 110 project, which required them to design a car that could cross a 10-meter racetrack in the shortest time yet have the lightest weight. As a team, they had to write a detailed 10-page report of their experiences and the research they conducted to help them design the car. However, as her team members found Noura's writing skills in English quite weak, they asked her to work on parts of the project that did not require any writing. While Noura was upset with their criticism at first, she

eventually started to appreciate having one less graded writing assignment. Commenting on how the NGN project was going at an interview, she said:

I believe that it's good to have groups in NGN because most of them are better than me in English so whenever I have mistakes in my lab reports they change it for me or edit it. So, I don't have to think. (Int. 2)

Osama used the same strategy while working on the same project with another group of students. He explained:

I am responsible for building the car. We have the smartest guy in our group. He's the one who takes care of writing; he checks after all of us, he checks spelling and the grammar and everything. We trust him, this guy is smart.

A third avoidance strategy was to ask a friend to do the work, but this clearly carried a risk. Mahmoud asked his roommate to do a writing assignment given in BIS as he was too sick to do it before the deadline. The assignment required him to provide a solution to a problematic business case. He was asked to provide solutions to ten cases throughout the semester, which accounted for ten percent of his overall grade for the course. However, his friend copied and submitted someone else's work electronically on his behalf. Worrying about being accused of plagiarism, he decided to tell his professor what had happened, but he did not get the reaction he had expected. He expressed his feelings about his meeting with the professor as follows:

I've been working on it so hard. I said "Okay, give me zero on the one that I uploaded wrong". He said no. I'm running with a D, it's like an F now. He said "Okay, we are done now. Don't talk to me again about the subject, or I will send you to the dean, or give you an F". But I'm the one who told him that I did it by mistake; he didn't know. There are ten cases, which is ten percent. He said "I will give you zero on all of it 'cause you plagiarized". But this is not fair. Because of one and I didn't do it. My friend did it and I was sick!

Mahmoud was confused and disappointed as he had expected his professor to be more lenient with him in return for his confession. He did not realize that asking someone to do his assignment was also a form of plagiarism. His confusion was due to his incomplete understanding of what plagiarism meant.

While corner-cutting strategies such as the ones illustrated above occasionally helped the students in achieving their short term goals, the consequences were more often than not unpleasant.

The students continued to use the strategies that worked in the following semester as well; however, those which did not bring the expected positive outcomes forced the students to seek more effective and productive ways to respond to the reading and writing requirements placed on them such as the ones explained below.

### **5.2.3.3. Seeking help and developing more effective study habits**

The participants started to talk about how they tried to overcome the difficulties they faced by seeking help from the support system available on campus more often; some by the end of the fall semester, some in spring. Among these developing strategies were visiting the Writing Center, communicating with professors, and getting psychological support from the university counseling services.

The following excerpt shows Khairea's changing views of the Writing Center towards the end of fall semester. In the example below, she talks about her progress in WRI 101: Academic Writing:

After the bad grade I got, I decided to go to Writing Center. I was surprised, because what they told me it's not really helpful, but now I think it is. I took my essay that I got bad grade. I went through the whole essay with one of the tutors. She explained me a lot of things and she advised me some stuff. So I tried to make order in my writing. When I show them my writing they like it and they said it is good. You have the ideas but you don't know how to express it, just do that. I tried to avoid little bit French, never to google translate! (Int. 4)

Osama managed to get help from the Writing Center in spring after his previous failed attempts in fall.

He commented on the kind of support he received from student-tutors at the Writing Center stating:

They are helpful. Like you go and just tell them to read with you and then see what is wrong. Just like the thesis statement and the arrangement of the paragraphs, the outline and some grammar mistakes. (Int. 6)

It became clear to some of the students that they could get much-needed help from their professors. Khairea approached her professors more often to ask for advice as to how she could

improve her overall standing in the course. To give an example, she changed the reading strategies she used to study for DES 122: Modern Developments in Architecture and Design after talking to her professor. As she had taken the previous course, DES 121: Introduction to Architecture and Design History, with the same professor, she said she was more comfortable talking to him this semester. The following excerpt shows the changes that took place in her reading strategies:

I didn't study for the midterm. I got bad grade. I got 50 something. I went to the professor, I told him everything. I'm keeping the way that I'm studying, but I don't know what happened this semester. He was like "It is not the same method". So what I have to do? I have to change the method because I am giving the same method that I used to do in the last semester. So he said like "Yes, change it". And he gave me another way to study and I felt... Today we have a quiz, it's ten per cent, and yes it works [ . . . ] Before, I'm reading, I am having big idea, but not going through the specific things. (Int. 7)

Zeina, Noura and Mahmoud started to see their professors to receive feedback or ask questions more often and more timely, as well.

Some students showed more individual strategies for seeking help. Osama decided to see a therapist upon a suggestion made by his WRI 102 professor in spring. He explained how he decided to seek psychological support as follows:

I started going to a therapist now. My English professor, after an entry in my notebook... So I'm writing how stressful life is, and then she tells me "You're really stressed, you can try going to a therapist" and I was like, "No"! And then she was like "Take her email and talk to her". And after I went to her once. It was way better, it was quite helpful. (Int. 6)

Saif, who continued to state that he did not have enough time to see his professors or to go to the Writing Center, started paying more attention to the written feedback on his graded writing assignments and made sure to avoid the issues pointed out in his next assignment. While he never visited the Writing Center, he asked his siblings or a few of his friends, whom he thought had stronger English skills than him, to proofread his essays several times before submitting them.

As a result of using these strategies and learning from the lessons they drew from their experiences in dealing with the challenges they encountered, it seemed the students started to develop

more assignment-specific, independent study habits. They seemed more aware of the specific assignment requirements in different courses and were more in control of how they studied. For instance, Zeina, who considered her limited vocabulary as the biggest obstacle to her success in assigned reading and writing assignments subscribed to a website that taught her five words a day and started underlining new words in assigned texts. Khairea started to use more effective reading strategies, such as annotating the assigned text while reading it, a strategy she said she had first learnt in WRI 101: Academic Writing. The following excerpt shows the changes that took place in her reading strategies in spring while studying for DES 122: Modern Developments in Architecture and Design:

For example, we have from page 246 to 256. So I start to read normally. I look at first what is important. Before I used to read everything, but now I can recognize which is really important. I will like annotate one paragraph, I can take one sentence. This is what they needed for the exam. I'm always taking notes when I'm going to the class and the professor is explaining. Sometimes I'm making question mark for things I didn't understand, and when he explain it, I just put the answer. I have another paper, I write next to it what the professor is talking. So I have a lot of information. Before, I don't know what it mean annotated and from Writing maybe I got this idea because while we are annotating and we used to underline. In my book you can see underline, highlight the words that are difficult. (Int. 7)

Mahmoud had difficulties in creating a reference list and incorporating research into his essays following a standard documentation style especially in fall. However, he started using an electronic citation tool to help him create in-text citations and a reference list in assignments that require research. At an interview towards the end of the spring semester, he noted:

For the APA style I actually use the website quote citation machine now. 'Cause you make sure that hundred per cent you are right. 'Cause sometimes you get mistakes by writing it. (Int. 7)

In the same interview, he also talked about the changes in his reading strategies:

I have to read each text five, six times to understand. I have to underline the words I don't understand. So now I do it early because I know it'll take time. (Int. 7)

#### **5.2.4. The students' perspectives on academic literacy by the end of the academic year**

The fourth main theme on how students deal with their academic literacy requirements addresses how they view their academic literacy at the end of the year. The data presented above suggest that the overwhelming workload prevented the students from developing essential social and academic relationships that could have helped them achieve their academic goals regarding their academic literacy development more easily, especially in the first semester. However, eventually they became more aware of the strategies they should use to achieve their short-term goals and deal with stress, which helped them complete some reading and writing assignments more successfully despite the fact that they did not necessarily see much value them. The students' experiences throughout the first academic year did not change their perspective on the academic literacy requirements; nevertheless, they often seemed to respond to these requirements more effectively and started to question the purposes behind them towards the end of the second semester. Hence, there were two salient themes that emerged from the data with regards to this aspect of the first research question: increased questioning and effective strategy use.

The following excerpt shows Mahmoud's thoughts about the readings assigned in UPA 200, clearly indicating that he questioned the purpose of the assignments given.

There is some stuff I don't know how they are related to the course or our university. For example, time management, I got it. But brain function! What am I going to do with brain function? The left, right, what does it do, I don't know, there is the middle section. I think this is what got me failed! Things like this I don't know why we need to read. I told the professor and she said this book is made especially to help students to pass out of the probation. But for me I think it's just useless and waste of time. (Int. 7)

He added that he shared his confusion and frustration with his professor, whose response failed to change his initial thoughts about the assigned readings.

In the following quote, Zeina explains why she found one of the reading assigned in WRI 102 pointless:

Zeina: I found this article difficult because there is like too many vocabularies, I don't understand them. The writer talks about himself and where he live. I read only the first two pages, and after it is hard. She said read it and come to class with questions, but no one read it. The professor say like it's interesting; he talks about his name. His name is

Edward Saeed and his name is like English and Arabic. The writer is confusing. I don't find it interesting. Because he's talking about himself, what's the benefit? But now it should be interesting for me! Also because maybe some words are difficult and I feel confused, like this word. [She shows me a word she underlined in the text.] What is it? Researcher: "Nostalgically". So you underline the words you don't know the meaning of? Zeina: Yeah. (Int. 6)

By memorably adding "But now it should be interesting for me!", she revealed her despair and sense of obligation for academic conformity despite her scepticism about what is institutionally seen as "right" for her. Nonetheless, she made an effort to understand the text using the reading strategies she had learnt such as annotating.

The students felt the same way about some writing assignments, too. To give an example, the quote below shows Mahmoud's thoughts on a writing assignment given in MIS in the spring semester and how he was not convinced with the professor's justification for the assigned work:

It was the first assignment for MIS. I didn't get the point, because it was the second or third class, and he directly told us to write this case and give me a report or something. I don't know anything about management; management is just a word for me, how come I'm going to understand everything? When I told him this, he said this is the way to get you interested in the course. (Int. 7)

Like Zeina and Mahmoud, the other participants started to develop more effective, course-specific strategies suited to the task at hand towards the end of the second semester as explained in detail as part of the coping strategies developed by the students above (see section 5.2.3.3). Similarly, their answers to some interview questions showed they could see the professors' reasons why certain reading/writing assignments were given while they were not necessarily convinced by those reasons.

### **5.3. The students' academic literacy development and identity formation**

This section addresses the second research question: How do the students' experiences in trying to meet the academic literacy requirements influence their identity formation? The data, collected through frequent semi-structured interviews with each participant throughout the full academic year, revealed a sense of discomfort in the students mainly due to the discrepancy between the ways they

positioned themselves and the way they were positioned in their new educational institution in various ways. This discrepancy was most visible when the students' talked about their declining academic standing as a result of their weak academic literacy skills, and their socio-academic relationships, which were two of the three salient themes that emerged from the data. The third was literacy practices that had a positive impact on the students' view of self.

Table 4: The impact of the students' experiences on their identity construction

Theme	Example	Number of mentions
Declining academic standing and view of self	Zeina: Here I'm monkey. I was more confident in high school and like I was more popular. Like I used to teach my friend, now my friend teach me. (Int. 3)	42
Socio-academic life and view of self	Saif: "I don't like feel comfortable talking to her [the professor]." (Int. 3)	35
Literacy practices that had a positive impact on the students' view of self	Osama: "I ended up with a C- again. But writing the essay, I actually enjoyed it more, because I wanted to write about this." (Int. 6)	19

### 5.3.1. Declining academic standing and view of self

The students' accounts of how they viewed themselves as an individual and a student in their prior educational life, as well as the academic and professional goals they set for themselves at the beginning of the academic year showed that they all used to have a more positive self-image before starting their academic life at university.

To start with, Khairea, an international transfer student who had previously studied Architecture at a French-medium university in Algeria for three years, often sounded very proud of the quality of work she produced while talking about her academic experiences in her previous university. She stressed that she was not a "nerd", but she had never been below average in terms of her academic standing- neither at school, nor at university. She was very disappointed not only about not receiving



any transfer credit for the courses she successfully completed in her previous university and having to start from scratch, but also about the sudden decline in her GPA, which she mostly attributed to her weak English skills as mentioned before. Despite these issues, she often noted that becoming an architect was her “biggest dream” and that she was determined to work hard to realize it. She sounded very committed when she noted:

I have big *volonté* [will power] but my capacities in English didn't allow me a little bit in this university. I'm not nerd but I'm not stupid also. But I have the *volonté*. I want to be architecture. Because I like what I'm doing, I really focus about that. (Int. 2)

Likewise, the way Noura and Zeina viewed themselves as an individual and student changed dramatically as a result of the challenges they faced while adapting to English as a new medium of instruction. Both described themselves as successful students in high school, who always worked hard and received above average grades. Having studied in Arabic-medium schools all their lives, they stated that they felt an intense academic pressure as soon as they stepped in their new academic environment as it was overwhelming for them to use their recently acquired English language skills in an academic setting. For instance, Noura noted:

There is a gap now between the basics itself and being professional you know. Here, the people that I know are studying this language for twelve years. I didn't study this language for twelve years; yes we study English but not that way. We don't have to write many paragraphs, you know, in our English exams. It was like only one paragraph and they didn't expect much from us. They didn't show us how exactly. (Int. 2)

The following extract from an interview I had with Zeina shows the dramatic change in her view of self.

Zeina: Here I'm monkey. I was more confident in high school and like I was more popular. Like I used to teach my friend, now my friend teach me.

Researcher: How do you feel about all these changes?

Zeina: It's not fine. I think about my father and my mother, so I want to be successful. Sometimes when I get low grade they say “why?” I say “because sometimes I don't understand well”. They say “Try , try!”. (Int. 3)

This also shows how failing to maintain the excellent academic standing she used to have at high school caused Zeina to fear that she would disappoint her parents. Before matriculating into their

majors, both Noura and Zeina had studied at the Academic Bridge Program for a full academic year to improve their language skills in English and achieve the necessary TOEFL score. Passing TOEFL was an impressive achievement for both, especially Noura, who often mentioned, how her parents were very proud that she could finally start taking classes in her major, Civil Engineering. The feeling that they were inferior to their peers in terms of their linguistic proficiency caused Noura and Zeina to take on a more passive role in pair and group work as well as class discussions that accompanied reading and writing assignments due to the fear of having their “weak” English on display.

While Noura was initially upset about her peers’ lack of appreciation for her contribution in group work, soon she accepted her new role and adapted to it quickly as she thought it saved her time and effort (see the interview excerpts in sections 5.2.1.2 and 5.2.3.). She usually emphasized that since she had a lot to learn from her peers, she chose to take on the role of “listener” in most literacy practices to be completed in pairs and small groups, including the tutoring sessions at the Writing Center (see the interview excerpts in sections 5.2.2.5 and 5.2.2.6). As mentioned before, she was not comfortable when the tutors expected her to take on a more active role in the revision process of one of her essays rather than identifying and correcting her mistakes.

Interestingly, the way Noura positioned herself in group/pair work at university stood in contrast to the way she positioned herself in her non-academic writing activities that she brought up a few times in interviews. In her accounts of how she worked with a close friend to create a Manga-style comic book, she revealed the disagreements and the heated discussions she and her friend had about the topic selection and language to be used; while Noura wanted to write in Arabic, her friend argued for English. The way she positioned herself in this non-academic literacy practice was far from being just the “listener”, which shows how her socio-academic interactions and definition of situation in her new academic community changed the way she viewed and positioned herself.

Despite all the difficulties mentioned above, Noura, Zeina, Khairea, and Saif managed to have a positive perspective regarding their overall academic literacy development and the way they viewed

themselves towards the end of the spring semester, reminding themselves of the magnitude of the progress they had made since the beginning of the academic year. Reflecting on her level of English at the beginning, more specifically her vocabulary, Noura commented:

Last time I was speaking with a friend I was with in my Bridge Program, I was laughing with her and I was telling her, “Do you remember the first time when we enter university? We don’t even know what “admission” mean! We don’t even know what architecture mean!” And stuff like that; you know, the really basic English, and we were laughing at each other. You know, like we didn’t know many things what they mean. I don’t know how to explain it, but you can really see the difference. (Int. 7)

This positive perspective was not fully shared by Mahmoud and Osama. What had a significant impact on the way they viewed and defined their situation was being placed on probation in the spring semester. As noted before, due to their low GPA and probation status, they were required to take an additional course called UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students, a non-credit remedial course graded as pass/fail. Both were upset that they were required to take this course and thus positioned as students who needed remedial classes. As noted in the syllabus, the main purposes of UPA 200 were “developing a positive attitude towards study at university and providing the skills necessary for success in all classes”, with a focus on practicing “goal setting, time management, and specific study skills such as note-taking and accessing the library for research purposes”. According to the university’s academic policy, in order to be removed from probation, a student must pass the University Preparation class and raise his/her GPA to at least 2.0 out of 4.0. Failing the course would cause the students’ registration for next semester to be blocked. Despite the institutional importance given to this course, Mahmoud and Osama found this course completely unnecessary as they thought it took so much of their time with extra reading and writing requirements, while the biggest reason they were on probation was lack of time. Mahmoud expressed the strength of his feelings about this course as follows:

I don’t think I need to take a course like this, I don’t see the point. If you don’t attend, then you will fail. And it need work, presentation. I think it’s a waste of time. I don’t know why university brought it anyway. It’s just a waste of my time. If they really care

about the students, okay, let the course be for one week, or make it like a review session, just like slides, and give the students a quick view but not like do the presentation, writing critiques etc. This is a waste of time. They need to focus on their courses in order to get out of the probation, not to be doing this course and this stuff. If there was a credit definitely it could help me with my GPA. It's a zero credit, pass/fail course. I don't know the point. I went like 12 weeks going to classes wasting my time instead of studying and focusing on my other courses. (Int. 7)

Mahmoud ironically failed this course due to his excessive number of absences. Osama was just as upset as Mahmoud about having to take the additional course and was equally critical:

Actually, having to take it is really ridiculous because it is a waste of time. Monday, Wednesday one hour and fifteen minutes. It's a waste of time because if it had credit on it, because it's zero credit. If they put at least two credits, that will be really good. There's quizzes, presentations and then all of this is just pass or fail. You do all that work and you get nothing for it. It doesn't help the GPA at all. It's more like a punishment. Big time! It just wastes your time and makes you go back and you're back from the other people. It's so stupid. I get the highest marks in class and I don't know what's going on really. (Int. 6)

### **5.3.2. Socio-academic life and view of self**

The students' socio-academic relationships with their professors and peers emerged as an important factor that determined and revealed the ways they positioned themselves in their new academic community.

To start with, while talking about the difficulties she faced during her adaptation to her new academic life, Khairea often brought up the differences in the way students were treated in her previous and current university. She complained that the professors treated her like a "kid" now – an uncomfortable subject position for Khairea, who was engaged to be married soon and who worked at several part-time jobs to help her father pay her tuition. She noted:

I am not that kind of person that someone have to oblige me to do something. But I feel little bit here this university is a little bit like high school. It's not like my country. When I was in the university there is no attendance. It's up to you. If you want really to know what's happening in the course, you have to attend. (Int. 4)

Moreover, in an interview I had with her in spring, she mentioned a conversation she had with one of her professors from her college, which had deeply demoralized her. Khairea's recollection of the

conversation was that after seeing a few examples of her written English, the professor had told her: “I hope you are not planning to work at an international company after you graduate; `cause your English is terrible” (Int. 8). Khairea was very upset as she thought this comment was out of place and had nothing to do with her skills and knowledge as a future architect or the course this professor was teaching.

Being reduced to her L2 skills in several incidents such as the above stood in contrast to Khairea’s “imagined identity” (Norton, 2011), which was a future architect. As a result of these experiences, her quest for a comfortable subject position in her new academic community got more complicated. In addition, she had difficulties in communicating and socializing with her peers on campus for various reasons, but most importantly a lack of common language for her to express herself as she wanted to (as explained in 5.2.2.6. Building social and academic relationships with peers and professors). Having a tight schedule that she devoted to studying and her part-time jobs, she was also unable to enjoy any of her hobbies, such as playing chess, which, she noted, added to her feelings of stress and loneliness.

Like Khairea, other participants barely found any time to practice any of their hobbies or socialize during the entire data collection process, which they also often brought up as a reason for feeling isolated and stressed. Noura mentioned working on a project with a friend of hers to create a Manga style comic book in English or Arabic, which she spoke very enthusiastically of; however, towards the end of the study she noted that she had given up on this project as she needed to concentrate her studies. Osama, who was a player in the university’s volleyball team and a member of the dance club, had to give up his hobbies as he was unable to attend the practice sessions. He was quite demoralized as he was expelled from the volleyball team due to his absences in training sessions.

Receiving any kind of recognition from their professors was very important for all participants, which, in a sense, was indicative of their need and/or search for a comfortable subject position in their new educational context. To illustrate, when I asked Mahmoud about his relationship with his

professors, he sounded pleased that his WRI 101: Academic Writing professor knew his name, although she recalled him as the student who “always comes late”. He said:

My relationship with professors is actually good. For example, Ms. [X] knows me, she knows my name and she is good. Cause I’m the first student in the list. So, yeah and she said I always come late; I came after the class for like four minutes, three minutes. My friend told me that when I was on the way coming, she said that this student always comes late. (Int. 3)

While the participants talked about the importance of the relationship with their professors, they showed an unwillingness to talk to their professors about what they saw as a personal and academic shortcoming, which can be viewed as a face-saving strategy. Some of the participants stated that they felt disappointed when they were unable to understand a subject despite investing a lot of time and effort in reading the related course materials. They thought they “should” have understood the subject on their own based on the provided sources such as the assigned readings and textbook chapters, without the need to ask for further help. When asked if they ever considered asking for help or feedback from their professors when faced with a challenging issue on any given course, some of them stressed that they were not the “only” students who found that specific part of the course challenging. Osama even added that he was not “that stupid”, as seen in the excerpt below. Hence, partly to maintain a good student image, they avoided discussing what they found confusing in the course with their professors unless they received a very low grade on an assignment or exam. To them, asking for help was equal to revealing an academic shortcoming to their professor. For example, Saif did not want to make use of his professors’ office hours as he thought the course lectures and other course materials should have been enough for him to understand what he found confusing on a given subject. While talking about the challenges he faced in pre-calculus, he noted that he did not feel comfortable visiting the professor:

I don’t know, I don’t like feel comfortable talking to her. Usually I refer to the book and the book it’s like the math book; it give us each and every step. Like by reading the book, I should understand. After that, it’s okay, if I didn’t understand, maybe friends or someone to get help before like seeing her. (Int. 3)

The implication is that asking for feedback or help from his professor was something he could consider only after exhausting all other options he had for academic support. Like Saif, Osama said he did not consider asking for help from his professors as a helpful strategy. To illustrate, while talking about the challenges he faced in Physics, he said he had never talked to his professor about the problems he had been having in understanding the course concepts, offering this justification:

Osama: It's something that you have to understand. And, I'm not understanding the whole thing. Actually everyone is doing bad, but I have to understand something. I'm not that stupid, maybe I don't understand that part. I don't enjoy anything I can't understand. Even though I'm doing well in the quizzes, but like in the midterm I didn't do well at all. I got nine out of twenty. Lately I skipped a lot of classes, cause I'm thinking ninety per cent I'm gonna drop, 'cause I'm not understanding.

Researcher: Have you talked to your professor about this?

Osama: No, the thing is that I don't think he would really help me.

Researcher: Why not?

Osama: 'Cause I don't understand. Actually, he always sends us emails. If you want something, just come. But, I can't most of the times it's also because of the timings.

Zeina's response to the same question also showed a reluctance to approach the professor. She mentioned that it had been much easier for her to understand Chemistry when she took it in Arabic in high school as she was familiar with the vocabulary, but when I asked her if she had ever considered asking her professor for help, she immediately responded as follows:

No. Actually I'm not the only student in class face this problem. So there is another girl talk about this problem. Also she tell me that she also find this material easier in the school.

The examples in this section show the ways the students' socio-academic interactions complicated their search for a satisfying subject position in their new educational context. Nevertheless, certain literacy practices the students were asked to take part in helped them view their academic identity in a more positive light, which will be explained in the next section.

### **5.3.3. Literacy practices that had a positive impact on the students' view of self**

While the participants often noted that they felt helpless when faced with reading and writing assignments that they found unfamiliar, difficult to relate to, or beyond their linguistic proficiency as

illustrated in the previous sections (see 5.2.2. Challenges), they showed more engagement in assignments that they were able to personally relate to in terms of content and those that were accompanied with class discussions, small group activities, peer reviews, debates and group presentations that preceded or followed the assigned work. These activities seemed to motivate them, support their reading comprehension and assist them in writing assignments, and eventually gave them a sense of confidence, even pride and accomplishment in the midst of their quest for a comfortable subject position in their new academic community.

Zeina, Noura, Khairea, Saif, and Osama sounded relatively more confident of their performance in a summary writing assignment that they had to complete in teams in WRI 101 in fall.

Khairea explained why she felt confident:

It was really good, I will get a good mark. Because when I did the summary, I have some points and when we did the group I was like I mentioned points that someone else didn't mention, and someone else mentioned some points and like we are sharing information, we exchange informations. It was really helpful. I noticed that I did some mistake and they corrected me. (Int. 3)

Writing about familiar topics, real-life issues, or topics that they could relate to was also a factor that increased the students' sense of self-confidence and ownership of their work. Saif explained why he expected a high mark in the WRI 101: Academic Writing final examination, which required him to write a causal analysis essay on anger management: "Because I found the topic interesting. I had more points about the topic to write about". Similarly, when left free to choose a topic for his research paper in WRI 102, Osama chose to write about "stress in universities and colleges". Sounding in control and confident of his progress in the assignment, he added:

To prove my point I wrote my thesis that although it's easy to blame the students or the young generation for doing everything but the fault lies with the university and stressful environment. And then one of the things I found because I needed an attention grabber in the beginning about a guy who committed suicide. (Int. 6)

Although this was a challenging assignment that required Osama to cite eight academic sources from the library, he stated that he enjoyed working on it as he could relate to the subject due to his personal



experiences dealing with stress (see 5.2.3.3). Despite the barely passing grade he received at the end, his involvement in the assignment seemed to have reduced his preoccupation with the grade he scored.

He said:

I ended up with a C- again. But writing the essay, I actually enjoyed it more, because I wanted to write about this. (Int. 6)

All of the participants, even Noura and Zeina, who preferred to take on the “listener” role in most group activities, were eager to take part in group presentations in courses such as WRI 101: Academic Writing and NGN 110: Introduction to Engineering and Computing as they were more “comfortable” in expressing their opinions in English after practicing and rehearsing a few times at home. Not only did these activities give the participants a sense of pride and accomplishment, but they also seemed to enhance their understanding of the reading or writing assignment in question. Taking part in a debate on their persuasive essay topics in WRI 101 had a similar impact on the students.

Noura said:

After the debate, you know, we kind of understood, what points were kind of strong; what points to write in my essay. And our team win; the class chose our team. We couldn't believe. We were saying to each other, see we could win. (Int. 4)

Despite her fear of having her weak English skills on display, taking part in debates and presentations related to her writing assignments had also a positive impact on Khairea's self-confidence, which she brought up in interviews I had with her both semesters. Like Khairea, Mahmoud was excited about a three-minute presentation he had to do before submitting his final paper in WRI 102: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum. As part of this assignment, he had to propose a solution to end poverty in a small town in Nepal. The assignment required him to base his argument on the course readings on globalization, which he previously found difficult due to various reasons mentioned before (see 5.2.2.2). However, towards the end of the course, he sounded very excited about and engaged in this assignment. The following long interview excerpt shows his enthusiasm about the presentation, command of the assignment topic, his plans to outline the essay based on the feedback he received on

the presentation as well as his sense of pride about his professor's appreciation of the argument he presented:

Mahmoud: I was the first one to do the presentation and in the class I don't know anyone. But, it was good actually. I got, I think 87. Because I work really hard on the presentation; I put pictures, few things that explain about my project. In three minutes, I explained everything. The day before, I went through the slides many times. I was presenting and my friend he was listening. The professor had a comment. He said to me he liked my idea because wind turbine actually in the real world, it's a perfect solution because it doesn't use electricity and wind power it doesn't need fossil fuel or greenhouse or anything. Because wind is free and the money that is used to make this project is almost free. And at the same time, wind energy is clean to the environment, and the village in Nepal is between mountains and farms; so the perfect place for it to run in between mountains, hills. I will write an essay based on those ideas. I choose even on the map the perfect place to build it. In the essay the first part I have to write the introduction, the second part, defining the problem and then solution and then counter argument, you know the advantages and disadvantages and let the reader get interested. Then finally write the conclusion.

Researcher: You sound very interested in this assignment. What makes this assignment so interesting for you?

Mahmoud: Because I think I'm really doing something that is related to real life. You know it's not about books or anything; it's about you trying to help this village. It's all about your ideas. He gave us too many option, and it was good. Now I know how a wind turbine works. I can explain. (Int. 6)

It seemed this positive experience, particularly his sense of accomplishment over finding a convincing solution to a real-life issue, had increased his motivation in the assignment. Another literacy practice that engaged all of the participants studying engineering (i.e. Osama, Zeina, Noura, and Saif) was the NGN 110 presentation, which was a requirement that accompanied their written project, completed in groups of five. Despite encountering some challenges in teamwork, such as team members not showing up at meetings or not doing their part of the job, (which was a particularly serious concern for Saif), all of the participants sounded excited about the presentation, as they believed presenting projects would be part of their jobs as future engineers. Zeina, whose team got the fourth place in the competition mentioned previously, expressed how pleased she was about presenting their project as she thought working in teams and presentation skills were important for her future career:

I think he asked us to work, like in teams `cause engineers work in groups. So, he said they also have to present their project. So, he asked us to do presentation. The presentation, I think it was good, but not perfect. It was good practice for us, like for our

career. And then in the competition the fourth winner was us. So I was really happy. Because I remember when the competition has started, I told them, my group, I want to be one of the winner. They told me “No, no, we can’t be! We just wanna pass.” I told “No, we can, we can! “ Then, like my dream became true. (Int. 7)

The literacy practices shown as examples above were the highlights of the academic year for the participants in terms of their academic literacy development. They shared a few common characteristics such as engaging the students in real-life issues or topics that they could relate to, as well as improving skills that they considered important for their present or future selves. These literacy practices, which were characterized by activities that supported the participants’ academic reading or writing growth in various ways, provided the students with a sense of accomplishment, pride, and confidence, which seemed to help them see their academic identity in a more positive light.

#### **5.4. Discussion of research questions 1 and 2: Coping with academic literacy demands and the quest for a comfortable subject position**

In this section the findings presented in response to research questions 1 and 2 will be discussed with reference to the literature and other studies on academic literacy development.

In order to answer the first research question on how the students coped with the academic literacy requirements, I examined the data regarding the students’ perspectives on academic literacy at the beginning of the academic year; the challenges they faced; the coping strategies they developed; and finally the changes that took place in their perspectives by the end of the academic year. The participants’ perspectives at the outset, marked by the significance they attach to grades, perceived weakness in reading and writing and doubts about the contribution of academic literacy requirements to their academic growth, were shaped by the way they made sense of their situation. This negative perspective was intensified by the challenges they faced while trying to meet the academic literacy demands.

The findings of this study in terms of the challenges faced by the students concur with many of the results from previous studies on the academic literacy development of L2 students. Based on survey and interview results, Evans and Morrison (2011) found that limited vocabulary, understanding professors' academic requirements for reading and writing assignments, processing and producing key disciplinary genres, synthesizing ideas and information from multiple sources, and referencing style were the main sources of difficulties faced by 28 NNES undergraduates during their first semester at an English-medium university in Hong Kong. The issue of time management was mostly mentioned in relation to keeping up with the reading requirements. The researchers concluded that the process of disciplinary acculturation takes much more than a semester. In a similar study, Wingate (2015) examined undergraduates' experiences with the first writing assignment during their first semester at a London university through questionnaire, interviews, and diary data. While her participants were mainly native speakers of English, twenty-three per cent were ethnic minorities speaking languages other than English at home. The findings showed that the students identified time management, structure and using sources as the main challenges, while resistance was identified as the fourth theme in reference to the students' reactions to the restricting literacy conventions and instructions they received. The issue of source-based writing has also been addressed by McCulloch (2013) and attributed to lack of critical reading skills. The difficulties with source based writing, time management, and adapting to changing requirements of academic literacy across the curriculum have been also documented in Leki's (2007) longitudinal study of four L2 undergraduates' academic literacy development, as noted in Chapter 3. Other challenges encountered by the participants of this study such as getting help from the writing center (Leki, 2007, Murshidi & Al Abd, 2014, Bruce&Rafoth, 2004; Wingate, 2015), transition to EMI (Findlow, 2006; Troudi & Jendli, 2011), and building socio-academic relationships (Ferenz, 2005; Leki, 2007; Skyrme, 2010, Wingate, 2015) have been all documented in several other studies and confirm the findings of the present study. However, except for the studies of Troudi and Jendli (2011) and Findlow (2006), both conducted in the UAE and

discussed in previous chapters, and Evans and Morrison's study (2011) all other studies mentioned above have been conducted in in "inner-circle countries" (Kachru, 1985).

While studies on the academic literacy development of L2 undergraduates usually examine the challenges faced, very few of them explicitly report on the coping strategies used by students. One such study is Howell's (2008) small-scale ethnographic study on five male Arab students' perceptions of social identity and agency and the usefulness of the construct of the Community of Practice for struggling writers in the context of a pre-university EAP program in New Zealand. Using surveys, interviews and documents analysis, Howell addressed the impact of the participants' perceptions on their sense of agency as writers in the EAP program. Based on the findings, the agentive choices made by the participants were identified as "fight, flight, or change", which closely correspond to the coping strategies reported in the present study: excessive studying, corner-cutting strategies, and seeking help.

Encountering these challenges from the very beginning of their academic careers and not being able to fully overcome them with their coping strategies intensified the students' negative perspective on the academic literacy demands of their new discourse community. They all thought trying to complete the reading and writing assignments for all their courses, especially for academic writing classes (WRI 101 and WRI 102), demanded a significant amount of their time, and did not always bring about positive results in the form of high grades they expected. These requirements, the participants in the present study thought, actually prevented them from achieving their objective of gaining academic excellence, which some of them, such as Zeina and Noura, materialized as an "excellent GPA". While they did not necessarily see much value in reading and writing assignments for their own sake, they worked hard to complete the assignments to achieve a high GPA that would make their parents proud and help them maintain their financial aid/scholarship. They were often quite worried about not being able to keep up with the required work, receiving a low GPA that may prevent them from progressing towards their degree, and the possibility of losing their scholarship/financial

aid. These findings suggest that they all viewed academic reading and writing requirements at university as a source of stress and threat against their immediate academic objectives and long-term career goals. The gatekeeping role of academic writing classes, which acted as a pre-requisite or co-requisite for most of the discipline-specific courses the students had to take, intensified the feeling of stress experienced by each participant and caused them to see the academic literacy requirements as a threat against their personal and academic goals.

This particular perspective shared by all participants can be explained by the constructs of investment, imagined communities and identity (Norton, 2011). The data suggest that the students were all highly invested in improving their academic literacy skills, as evidenced by the amount of time and effort they spent on completing the assigned work (see section 5.2.3.1. Excessive studying). However, the problem was that, especially at the outset of the study, they did not really know *what* to do or *how* to achieve their goals and resorted to using ineffective strategies, which gave them a sense of incompetence. Their frustration and confusion increased when they realized they were unable to achieve their goals despite the amount of time and effort they invested. Norton views learners' investment in the target language at particular times and in particular settings as an indication of their belief that "they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p.240), which will enhance their cultural capital. As the value of their cultural capital increases, they reassess their sense of themselves and their desires for the future. In this respect, a learner's investment in the target language can be viewed as an investment in the learner's own identity. Based on this theory, the students' investment in improving their academic literacy skills could be seen as a sign of their expectations in terms of higher grades and eventually a more satisfying sense of self. While the focal students in the present study positioned themselves as "weak" learners with regards to their academic literacy skills at the beginning, they expected that they could overcome these problems with what they perceived as hard work. When their expectations did not come true, their state of confusion, self-doubt, and frustration increased.

Drawing on Dörnyei's theory of L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009), it can also be argued that the perspective of the students in this study was mainly underpinned by "ought-to L2 self", which concerns attributes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes, such as failing a course or disappointing parents, rather than "ideal L2 self", absence of which is seen as a major source of lack of L2 motivation in general (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 33). The participants' answers to questions about their aims/intentions with regards to their academic literacy development mostly focused on short term instrumental motives, which represent aspects of the participants ought-to-self, such as scoring high grades to avoid disappointing their parents or losing their scholarship and also relatively long-term motives such as utilizing the new skills they learned in their fields of study or later on in their professional lives, which can be seen as part of the participants' ideal L2 self. Referring to a number of research studies (Miller & Brickman, 2004; Pizzolato, 2006), Dörnyei (2009) underlines that because future self-guides specify distant goals, learners have to create specific, proximal guides themselves, setting concrete courses of action that will help them reach their long term goals. He adds that there are certain conditions that can enhance or hinder the motivational impact of the ideal and ought-to-selves, one of which is procedural strategies. As mentioned above, the students in this study were all highly invested in improving their academic literacy skills, as evidenced by the amount of time and effort they spent on completing the assigned work. The problem was they did not quite know what to do or how to achieve their goals especially at the beginning, which gave them a sense of incompetence and eventually intensified their frustration and confusion. When interpreted from Dörnyei's perspective, the problem here is caused by the students' lack of knowledge of "procedural strategies", one of the conditions that has to be met for successful goal accomplishment. Without a clear roadmap of tasks and strategies to follow in order to approximate the ideal self, one cannot realize their goals no matter how motivated they are.

The experience of “amotivation” (Noels, 2009) can also offer a helpful framework in making sense of the students’ perspectives. When amotivated, people can go through the motions to carry out the activity that makes no sense to them until they can escape it.

Amotivation arises under various, related conditions: when a person does not value the activity or the outcomes it could yield; when one feels a sense of incompetence in performing the activity; and/or when one feels that their actions are irrelevant for bringing about the desired consequences. (Noels, 2009, p. 298)

It is clear that the students in the present study were not always convinced how certain reading and writing assignments, especially those they found beyond their capabilities, would contribute to their academic literacy development. However, they all invested a lot of time and effort in the assigned tasks hoping to increase their academic standing and eventually achieve a more satisfying sense of self, which brings the discussion back to the relationship between students’ academic literacy development and identity formation, analyzed in research question two.

As a result of the sudden drop in their grades despite their hard work, and the changes in their socio-academic life, the students all reported going through a sense of helplessness, confusion, and frustration. Mostly as a result of their perceived weaknesses in English reading and writing skills in comparison to other students, they developed an identity of deficiency and incompetence. This identity was partly constructed by real difficulties they faced, but also reinforced by their peers, who did not seem to be interested in their contribution to group projects, and also some professors, as in the case of Khaireia who was discouraged from seeking future career opportunities in international companies due to her “terrible” English. These findings concur with insights provided by other studies that report on the ways international students develop identities of deficiency co-constructed by the students’ self-perception and behaviours of other members of the discourse community (Morita, 2004; 2009; Fotovatian, 2012).

The identity of deficiency and incompetence has been most noticeable throughout the whole study in the case of two students, Osama and Mahmoud, who were required to take a non-credit



remedial course in spring. As noted before, the course was found too demanding, “time-consuming” and “worthless” by both students. This finding concurs with past research which highlights the ineffectiveness of the common approach to enhancing student learning through separate study skills courses, called the “bolt-on” approach (Wingate, 2006, p. 457). These remedial courses, which usually address the skills of time management, essay writing, grammar, presentation, note taking and revising for exams, are viewed ineffective mainly because they separate study skills from the process and content of learning (Thomas, 2002; Wingate, 2006, 2015). This approach arises from the study skills model of academic literacy, which views student inability to write successfully at undergraduate level as a deficit (Lea & Street, 1998) that merely requires a quick fix (Turner, 2004). Previous research also underlines that such courses often suffer from low attendance (Durkin & Main, 2002) and that students do not view them as relevant to their subject (Drummonds et al., 1998; Durkin & Main, 2002), echoing the experiences of Osama and Mahmoud, the two students who were required to take a similar remedial class in this study. In contrast to the study-skills model, an academic literacies approach, argues that the learning of academic literacies should take place over the long-term, and be fully integrated into content courses (Lea and Street, 1998; Lea, 2004; Wingate 2006, Wingate, 2015), whether taught by subject specialists, or EAP specialists working alongside subject specialists.

Moreover, the findings of this study regarding the impact of socio-academic relationships on L2 learners’ learning and identity concur with the results of another study (Skyrme, 2010) which reports on one-to-one interactions between Chinese undergraduates and teaching staff during office hours at a New Zealand university, an aspect of socio-academic relations that has not been widely studied in the literature (Leki, 2006). The study shows the students’ “fear of revealing to those with the power to judge them that their English was inadequate or that the questions they were asking were ‘dumb and inappropriate’” (p. 211). These concerns are very similar to those reported about the students in the present study, as noted before.

While the challenges the students encountered caused them to form a negative assessment of their academic identity, this perspective seemed to have disappeared, or at least subsided, when they talked about their engagement in certain academic literacy practices such as reading and writing assignments that they could relate to and were motivated to voice their opinions on, or reading and writing assignments that were supported by instructional activities in the form of pair and group work that facilitated their understanding and/or performance, thereby alleviating their sense of inadequacy and their negative sense of self. With respect to the first type of literacy practices, the importance of topics that students could relate to has been underlined in previous research in the academic literacy development of L2 undergraduates, with specific suggestions for assignment topics that would give students an opportunity to address the various “limit situations” confronting them in their new discourse community (Benesch, 2001, p. 50 ; Leki, 2007, p. 285 ). As for the second type of literacy practices, the importance of identity as group membership in learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Johnson, 2003; Hyland, 2005), more specifically in the acquisition of academic literacy skills of undergraduates (eg Duff, 2010; Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Leki, 2007; Wingate, 2015) and identity as a social construct (Charon, 2009) has been widely documented and highlighted in past research. In fact, as Leki (2007) memorably puts it, “for some L2 users, learning itself may be less important than the construction and projection of a satisfying identity” (p.263); students may seek interactions with knowledgeable others not only to learn, but maybe more importantly, to be seen as a particular type of person, maybe even only to be noticed. The experiences of the students reported in this study (see 5.3.2.) support these statements; especially the case of Mahmoud, who stated how glad he was to be recalled by one of his professors by his name despite being remembered as the student who “always comes late”.

The impact of going through these aforementioned challenges on the students’ identity is likely to go unnoticed when the process of academic literacy acquisition is examined within the frameworks of study skills and academic socialization models, the traditional approaches to teaching academic

literacy skills at higher education (Lea & Street, 2006). These approaches, as explained in detail before, view student difficulties with academic reading and writing as arising from surface level, structural errors and socialization issues, overlooking the complex interplay between linguistic practices, meaning systems, as well as the changing socio-cultural dynamics and power relationships in both the disciplines and institutions students are studying in. An academic literacies approach, on the other hand, takes into account the interplay of all these factors and addresses the acquisition of academic literacy at the level of epistemology and identity, drawing attention to the relationship between academic literacy development and the construction of self (Turner, 2004; Jones, Turner and Street, 1999).

The findings discussed above show a clear picture of the challenges the students faced in their attempts to meet the academic literacy requirements of the first academic year at university, the coping strategies they developed, and the impact of these experiences on their identity. To present a more holistic picture the process, the professors' perspectives have also been explored, showing the mismatches and overlaps between the two perspectives.

### **5.5. The perspectives of the professors on the role of academic literacy skills for success in their courses**

This section addresses the third research question: What are the perspectives of the professors on the role of academic literacy skills for success in their courses? As explained before, while my original intention was to conduct interviews with the students only, the insights I gained from the initial interviews with them turned my attention to their professors' perspectives on the challenges the students said they were going through. I wanted to explore the professors' perspectives on the nature of reading and writing skills required for success in their courses as well as what they thought of the first year students' ways of coping with these requirements. Hence, I also conducted a semi-structured interview with the professors of all courses that the students were taking and had evaluated writing and

reading requirements as well. I met with each professor who agreed to participate in the study once. The interviews with the professors focused on their perspectives on the role of reading and writing in their courses as well as their impressions of the students' level of success in meeting the academic literacy requirements (see Appendix H: List of courses taught professors interviewed and the focal students enrolled in these courses ). While the professors were specifically asked about the performance of each focal student in their courses, their responses to most interview questions covered their general impressions of all students taking their courses. All thirteen of the professors interviewed stated that the students' reading and writing skills were below what was expected of them to succeed in their courses. Seven main themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews with the professors, which will be discussed below. The presentation of themes does not follow a progressive order as there were no significant differences in the frequency of each theme identified in the data. The themes are ordered based on their content: the issues with meeting the reading requirements are followed by those with the writing requirements and finally a facilitating teaching strategy brought up by many of the professors.

### **5.5.1. Incomplete reading assignments**

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

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

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

### **5.5.2. Lack of analytical and critical reading skills**

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

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

Similarly, Lynda pointed out the students’ ineffective approach:

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

### **5.5.3. Following written instructions and understanding questions in exams and assignments**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fuad, a professor teaching MTH 103: Calculus I, explained the same issue in relation to examination questions suggesting that the students’ failure to understand and respond to the questions may have to do with habits formed during prior educational experiences and lack of motivation to engage in critical thinking:

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

These comments echo Zeina's reported experiences with regards to her failure to understand "long" examination questions in the same course (see 5.2.2.2. and 5.2.3.2). However, from her perspective the reason was her limited vocabulary; not her lack of motivation. Fuad, on the other hand, emphasized that even students who knew the meaning of all words would find it difficult to understand such questions, which was confusing for him.

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

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

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

Sarah, another professor teaching the same course noted: "Largely, their traditions are oral. They learn a language by listening to it and not reading it. They are not asked to read much at high school either. It's a case of fear; it's a case of something foreign and they shut down when they can't comprehend the text at their first attempt." Lyndsay's comments were similar to Sarah's: "They'll immediately look at

something and say ‘oh! I have to read this, no!’ “I think that they are just not used to challenging themselves. I think it is very easy to say I don’t understand and they shut down.”

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

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

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

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

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



APA! They drive me nuts! I mean they'll tell me we are more mathematically oriented, and I am like, this is a formula! Plug it in, plug in the name and the initials! They can mess up APA like I've never seen. I don't know whether it's because they don't want to learn it. They seem to have this block, they hear APA and they shut down.

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

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

#### **5.5.5. Lack of organization**

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

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

The last point in Mike's comments is particularly noteworthy because it matches with the students' perspectives on the academic literacy requirements at the beginning and end of the academic year, more specifically their skepticism about the contribution of academic literacy requirements to their

academic and professional growth as well as their increased questioning of the purpose of some required academic literacy practices (see 5.2.1.3 and 5.2.3).

### **5.5.6. Weak arguments and critical thinking skills**

All professors teaching academic writing classes and discipline-specific courses brought up the difficulty students faced in building strong arguments backed up by sufficient supporting details, reflecting critical thinking skills. Academic writing professors focused on the students' problems in taking a position and maintaining throughout the paper in addition to providing sufficient supporting evidence. For example, while talking about her students' experiences in writing an argumentative essay and a critique, Lynda noted:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Khairea is a very thoughtful person, but her writing in English is not very strong. I don't grade for spelling or grammar; I try to find some conceptualizing behind what they are saying. Our feeling in this college is that the ability to express oneself in writing and verbally is closely related to the ability to express an intention visually as well. It is not enough to say "I like it", one has to know why one likes it. I think we are all sort of tired of reading these papers we can't understand.

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

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

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

### **5.5.7. Group work as a facilitating tool**

Almost all of the professors interviewed, except those who taught in CAAD, stated that they found group work to be an effective strategy in helping improve their academic literacy skills. While acknowledging some challenges and difficulties such as student complaints about group members who

fail to attend meetings or do their part of the job on time, all other professors interviewed stated that group work helped students learn from each other and increased student motivation. Sami, a professor in College of Engineering, explained that they asked the students taking NGN 101 to write six lab reports and a project report in groups of five, as they wanted to show students how engineers in real life work and the importance of writing in their discipline. He stated:

We tell them writing is extremely important from the first lecture. I have this full slide that shows them all the items that are written in the life of an engineer, all the way from a simple two-line email to a hundred-page dissertation. But we know that we have students who are excellent in English and we have students who are very weak in English. Because the groups are randomly split, in most of the cases at least two out of the five students are good English writers. So when they split the work, the ones who are good in English do the writing. And the ones who are not will do the technical part or the research. So they distribute it equally, so that's why we rarely see a poorly written document. They also learn from each other.

Sami's comments reveal his acknowledgement and approval of one of the corner-cutting strategies used by the focal students, which is avoiding written contributions in group projects in return for taking a more active role in non-written parts of the assigned work (see 5.2.3.2). While students may learn from each other and manage to submit a fairly well-written project thanks to the "good English writers" in their teams, it is questionable how those who avoid writing can improve their writing skills.

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

Lyndsay had a similar scaffolding strategy. In one class, she used three related readings that would contribute to one of the writing assignments. She said that the first reading was done in groups

in class, the second one required the students to come to class having read the article at home and engage in group discussions on guiding questions provided by her in class, and the last one was expected to be completed individually. All professors who used this strategy stressed that it was helpful for students who had weak reading skills, as Lyndsay explained “even if someone doesn’t get it when they first read it, we go over it in groups and they get to see how other students respond.”

### **5.6. Discussion of research question 3**

The analysis of the interviews with the professors showed that there were many similarities and differences between both sets of participants’ perspectives on the academic literacy requirements of the undergraduate curriculum; many of the weaknesses and challenges identified by the professors were also revealed in the analysis of interviews with the students. To start with, the challenge of transition to EMI was a significant issue acknowledged by the professors as they talked about incomplete reading assignments, the students’ lack of analytical and critical reading skills, their assumptions about the students’ prior educational experiences, problems with following written instructions in exams and assignments, lack of organization, as well as weak arguments and analysis in students’ written work.

However, there was an important difference in the students’ and professors’ perspectives regarding the reasons underlying these issues. For instance, while catching up with the readings assigned was an issue frequently brought up by both the professors and the students, the perspectives of the two sets of participants on the reasons behind this perceived challenge differed. As noted above, the professors described the students as “not used to challenging themselves”, “spoiled”, or “not motivated” (see 5.5.4). This general impression the professors had of the students seemed to be perceived as the main reason for the students’ failure to meet the expected objectives, which played an important role in their choice of several teaching strategies. For instance, professors said they tried to get the students to read the assigned work through unannounced quizzes, considered by some as the “only” solution. While this strategy seemed to serve the purpose, it is not clear how useful it was in

improving the students' reading skills. In contrast to this perspective, the students believed they invested a lot of time and energy in the assigned readings, which they usually found too "difficult" due to various reasons explained before; eventually, they ended up lagging behind as a result the overwhelming course load. The novice students' struggle with the extensive reading required of them at university, involving lengthy texts with unfamiliar vocabulary and terminology, has also been documented in past studies, echoing the experiences of the students in this study (Abbot, 2013, Jolliffe & Harl, 2008; MacMillan, 2014; van Pletzen, 2006; as cited in Wingate, 2015). However, despite the research findings emphasizing the need to teach effective academic reading skills and strategies at undergraduate level, Wingate (2015) maintains that academic reading remains a neglected and invisible area in higher education. Likewise, the professors in this study seemed to be unaware of the excessive amount of time the students devoted to the assigned readings as well as the challenges they encountered while adapting to the changing requirements of academic literacy in different courses.

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

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

A more general concern voiced by all professors' was the students' weak foundation in reading and writing. A number of factors were shown as culprits including the culture, poor quality of education provided by the local school system, and also the ineffectiveness of the required academic writing classes at university (see 5.5.4), which was brought up by some professors teaching discipline-specific courses. Despite the difference in context, very similar complaints have been reported in inner-circle countries such as the US, UK, and Australia with lecturers blaming the secondary schools for graduating students with poor literacy skills and complaining that universities have to bridge the gap with remedial language and writing classes (Wingate, 2015). This discourse of deficiency and remediation is found troubling for a number of reasons by Wingate (2015). Firstly, it shows a lack of understanding that today's higher education is accessible to a wider, more diverse, and less prepared population of students who need more support in adjusting to university compared to the highly selected student intakes in previous elite systems. The comparison between the previous elite system and the more accessible system of today does not apply to the UAE as the higher education system in the UAE is relatively new compared to the inner-circle countries mentioned above. As explained in Chapter 2, the dissatisfaction with school graduates found underprepared for higher education and the challenges associated with transition from school to university is mostly attributed to the "linguistic and cultural dualism" (Findlow, 2006) present in schools and higher education institutions in the UAE. Wingate argues that this discourse of deficiency and remediation oversimplifies the challenges faced by the students as language problems despite the increasing number of studies revealing that students struggle with epistemology and ways of communication of their discipline (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). As a result of this failure to fully understand the nature of challenges faced by the students on the part of higher education institutions, ineffective measures of remediation are taken, such as the remedial language, study skills, and writing programs as a quick fix (Wingate, 2012). Instead of these, Wingate (2015) proposes a more inclusive curriculum-integrated model of academic literacy instruction, in line with the academic literacies model, which requires the universities to increase their

awareness of the needs of their student populations and adapt to those needs more effectively. As will be discussed in the following chapter, these insights could contribute to development of strategies to facilitate undergraduates' acquisition of academic literacy in contexts such as the UAE.

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

This section has presented a discussion of the findings with regards to the professors' perspective on the role of academic literacy skills for success in their courses in comparison to the students' perspectives. The following chapter will offer several implications and recommendations as well as suggestions for further research based on the findings discussed.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Following a summary of key findings, this chapter presents the implications of the study, as well as recommendations for instructional practices and curriculum development in the field of L2 academic literacy development in higher education in the UAE. The chapter closes with suggestions for future research after addressing the limitations of the study.

#### 6.1. Summary of key findings

The findings of the study in response to the first question show the importance of the following factors in the students' assessment of their situation at the outset of the study: Significance of grades, their perceived weakness in reading and writing skills in comparison to other students, and doubts about the contribution of academic literacy requirements to their general academic progress. Starting their academic journey with this perspective, the students faced a number of challenges such as lack of time, transition to EMI, adapting to the changing requirements of academic reading and writing practices across the curriculum, using the library and doing research, and building socio-academic relationships. They tried to cope with these challenges first through studying for extended periods of time, often without eating, sleeping, or socializing, using several corner-cutting strategies, and finally consulting with knowledgeable others and developing assignment-specific study strategies. While going through these experiences did not change the students' initial perspective on the academic literacy requirements placed on them, eventually they got better at responding to these requirements, though they continued to question their purpose. Interestingly, despite showing a certain degree of awareness of possible reasons why certain reading and writing assignments were given from the professor's perspective, they were not always convinced by those reasons.

The findings in response to the second research question highlight the impact of the above mentioned experiences on the students' construction of identity. The students' declining academic

standing, which they mostly attributed to their weak reading and writing skills, and the difficulties they faced in building socio-academic relationships led the students to develop an identity of deficiency and incompetence, standing in contrast to their former view of self. This emerging identity was partly constructed by the real difficulties they faced and also reinforced by others in their new discourse community, directly or indirectly. Nonetheless, certain literacy practices that they could relate to and that supported their understanding and performance through pair/group work, regardless of the grades they received, helped many of the participants overcome this negative sense of self to some extent. However, the identity of deficiency and incompetence manifested itself throughout the whole study in the cases of the two students who were required to take a non-credit remedial course in spring.

Finally, the analysis of the interviews with the professors highlighted the discrepancy between their expectations and students' knowledge of the required academic literacy demands. It also revealed that many of the professors either underestimated or were unaware of the struggles students go through to meet those expectations, as well as the impact of the challenges faced by the students on their identity. This lack of awareness sometimes manifested itself through the professors' oversimplified explanations for the challenges faced by the students, whom they described as spoiled, under-challenged, or not-motivated (see 5.5.4), and also underlined by the students' accounts of their interactions with their professors that had a profound impact on them, as in Khairea's case, where she was discouraged from seeking future career opportunities in international companies due to her English, described as "terrible" by one of her professors (see 5.3.2).

Having drawn this conclusion from the findings, I would like to emphasize that it is not my intention to judge whether the students' or professors' perspectives reveal the truth regarding the discrepancy mentioned above. From a symbolic interactionist standpoint, my primary objective is to portray the participants' experiences from their own perspectives. However, I cannot claim to have a completely transparent access to the participants' lived experiences. A perspective, as Charon (2009) explains "is an angle on reality, a place where the individual stands as he or she looks at it and tries to

understand reality.... and it acts as a filter through which everything around us is perceived and interpreted. There is no possible way that the individual can encounter reality ‘in the raw’, directly, as it really is, for whatever is seen can only be part of the real situation” (p. 3). While this definition explains the significance of the notion of perspectives as a tool for people to make sense of the world, it also reveals the restrictive side of it in that one can only see what their perspective allows them to see. This does not mean that there is no truth at all; “there is something actually happening out there in the world – but we cannot know it completely or in any perfectly accurate way because we always see it through filters we are here calling perspectives” (Charon, 2009, p. 6). While I paid utmost attention to listen to, respect, and represent both sets of participants’ views as objectively as possible throughout the entire research process, I have to acknowledge there were several factors that acted as reality filters in my analysis of the data, such as my experiences as an academic writing instructor/researcher, my own view of teaching and learning theories, what I learnt from reading the literature on academic literacy development, and my own views of the education system in the UAE and the culture of the university. Having interviewed each student for six to eight times throughout two academic semesters (a total of forty-six interviews conducted with the students) has provided me with a clear picture of their ways of defining their situation and how they acted based on these definitions for an extended period of time, which I tried to portray as accurately as possible. With the last question I wanted to explore the professors’ perspectives on the nature of reading and writing skills required for success in their courses as well as what they thought of the first year students’ ways of coping with these requirements. The intention behind this question was to get a more holistic picture of the academic literacy requirements the students were expected to meet and to compare those expectations with the students’ interpretation of them. I also wanted to explore how the students’ portrayal of their experiences compared to their instructors’ impressions of them. The difference in both sets of participants’ perspectives was noteworthy because I believe to understand and then develop ways to alleviate the tension and challenges most undergraduates encounter while trying to meet the academic

literacy requirements, we must have an in-depth understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives, but most importantly, listen to our students' voices.

## **6.2. Implications**

A number of implications can be drawn from the findings summarized above when they are reconsidered holistically, all emphasizing the significance of understanding the complex nature of challenges undergraduates face.

### **6.2.1. Analysing the challenges faced during academic literacy development beyond surface level**

The findings of the first and second research questions, which are closely interwoven, have shown the significance of the students' socio-academic relationships, the ways they construct their identity through interactions with others and self, and the impact of these factors on their academic literacy development, implying that the challenges faced by the students during their academic literacy development cannot be truly understood when only examined at surface level, that is, by only focusing on the students' weak performance on reading and writing assignments. Indeed, numerous studies have also brought to the fore that the academic literacy difficulties students' encounter at university cannot be reduced to language problems only and that most of the challenges arise from students' struggles in understanding the epistemology (what counts as knowledge in a discipline, how it is created and communicated) and ways of communicating in their new discourse community (Benesch, 2001; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001; Wingate, 2015). As noted before, the findings of these studies have led to the conceptualizations of new models and approaches to academic literacy development and instruction at undergraduate level such as the academic literacies model, Critical EAP, and Critical Language Awareness, which could contribute to a higher education literacy pedagogy that can also cater for the needs of the student population in the UAE, as will be explained below.

Underlining the discrepancy between the professors' expectations and students' knowledge regarding the required academic literacy demands, the findings of the third question also call for a better understanding of the nature of challenges undergraduates face.

### **6.2.2. Understanding the relationship between the process of academic literacy development and identity construction**

Both Norton's sociological construct of investment (2011) and Dörnyei's "L2 Motivational Self System" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) have offered helpful frameworks to make sense of the complex connections between academic literacy development and identity construction.

Based on Norton's theory, the students' investment in improving their academic literacy skills can be viewed as a sign of their expectations for higher grades and eventually a more satisfying sense of self, closer to their "imagined identity". When most of their expectations did not come true despite their investment, the students' state of confusion, self-doubt, and frustration got intensified.

Referring to Dörnyei's theory, the students' experiences were mostly guided by "ought-to L2 self" which concerns attributes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes, such as failing a course or disappointing parents, and relatively long-term motives such as utilizing the new skills they learned in their fields of study or later on in their professional lives, which can be seen as part of the participants' "ideal L2 self". Dörnyei emphasizes that because future self-guides specify distant goals, learners have to build specific, short term guides themselves that will help them reach their long term goals. He calls these concrete courses of action "procedural strategies", one of the conditions that has to be met for successful accomplishment of goals, which are necessary for reaching one's ideal self. As mentioned above, the students in this study did not quite know what to do or how to achieve their goals especially at the beginning, which gave them a sense of incompetence and eventually intensified their frustration and confusion. When interpreted from

Dörnyei's perspective, the problem here is caused by the students' lack of knowledge of "procedural strategies".

Looking at the students' experiences from these complementary perspectives brings to the fore the inadequacy of an approach that only focuses on problems observed at a surface level, that is students' poor performance in assigned reading and writing tasks, while overlooking other fundamental issues. Such an approach leads to narrow-sighted, ineffective solutions that can exacerbate the students' existing problems, as in the case of a required remedial course that two of the participants had to take as a result of being placed on probation in the spring semester.

### **6.3. Recommendations**

Based on the findings summarized above and their implications, the following recommendations can be formulated for this specific research context. While the implementation of the first recommendation may be far from an easily achievable goal as it requires changing the mind-sets of academic leaders and practitioners about the nature of academic literacy instruction, the subsequent recommendations include more practical suggestions to cater for the students' needs more effectively without radical changes at institutional level.

#### **6.3.1. An inclusive curriculum-integrated model of academic literacy instruction**

I believe "an inclusive curriculum-integrated model of academic literacy instruction" proposed by Wingate (2015) could contribute greatly to the academic literacy instruction at higher education in the UAE for several reasons. Wingate's model draws on the best aspects from existing approaches to academic literacy instruction, focusing on Critical EAP and Academic Literacies. It is based on four principles; while the first one is concerned with the content and methodology of instruction, the rest are concerned with the context of instruction, that is, institutional provision. They are explored briefly here.

The findings of this study showed that one of the major challenges faced by the students was adapting to the changing requirements of academic reading and writing practices across the curriculum. This challenge can be avoided with the first principle requiring that instruction should focus on relevant genres and their communicative purposes within a specific discourse community. Wingate (2015) points out that current EAP programs are a long way from this teaching format and content, focusing on a non-existing universal academic language that is not situated in any specific context.

Following the second principle, which stresses that academic literacy needs to be learned by all students new to university regardless of their linguistic and cultural background, can also bring about positive results. Out of the six participants of this study, two had met the language proficiency requirements of the university and been exempt from the remedial English classes at the Academic Bridge Program, which the other participants had to take due to their low TOEFL score. These two students were also graduates of a high school with an EMI, which means that they did not have significant language issues. However, both of them reported having serious problems in keeping up with the academic literacy requirements of the curriculum like all other participants who had graduated from schools with an Arabic medium of instruction; one of them, Osama, had such serious problems that he was placed on academic probation in spring. Considering their educational background, these students found it hard to understand why they were struggling to meet the academic literacy demands of their courses, which led to self-doubt and disappointment. This negative self-image could have been avoided had the students been advised that all students need academic literacy instruction regardless of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds as they are all novices to academic literacy at university. The way academic language is shaped by the discourse community and its epistemologies, conventions and communicative requirements needs to be explicitly taught to all students. This message should be conveyed to students by all of their professors, not just the ones specifically teaching academic literacy. However, based on the findings of this study, it seems the aforementioned confusion felt by

some students as to why they cannot meet the academic literacy demands despite their “good English” was also shared by some professors.

Many of the other challenges faced by the students in this study, especially lack of time and adapting to the changing requirements of academic reading and writing practices across the curriculum, can be minimised if the third principle of the proposed model was followed. The third principle requires that academic literacy instruction be integrated into the subject curriculum and take place alongside, or arise from, content teaching, going beyond “additional” or “curriculum linked” workshops or other similar teaching formats. If the academic literacy instruction is integrated into the subject curriculum, the students who are already overburdened with their existing course load and the challenge of adapting to EMI can avoid the workload pressure created by “additional” academic writing courses, a pressure which, as Wingate states, affects weaker students more. This would also address the doubts expressed by the participants of this study about the usefulness of the required academic writing courses especially when they were not able to find parallels between what was taught in these courses and what was required in their discipline-specific courses. Following this principle can also be useful in clearing the students’ doubts about the usefulness of learning academic literacy conventions as well as its relevance and contribution to their general academic growth in their discipline.

The proposed model can also be helpful in enhancing the much needed communication between academic writing professors and professors of other courses, thereby addressing the students’ needs more effectively, which is the fourth principle of the model.

Informed by an interpretive approach to research, this study does not have any claims of generalizability and it is not right to offer broad recommendations for the entire higher education system in the UAE based on the experiences of the six participants of this study. However, the issue of underdeveloped literacy skills as well as the gap in educational standards between schools and universities in the UAE have been discussed in a number of research studies (Durham & Palubiski,



2007; Findlow, 2006; Gobert, 2009; Hatakka, 2014; Hatherly-Greene, 2012; Khoury & Duzgun, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2009) and are also frequently addressed in publications aimed at a more general readership in the UAE (e.g. "Education initiative", 2014; Hameli & Underwood, 2014; Naido, 2010; Salem & Swan, 2014). While concerned authorities, that is, universities, schools and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research are discussing ways to overcome the problem, the students who are trying hard to bridge the gap between their existing competencies and what is expected of them in their degree programs remain the party who suffer the consequences of the disparity. I believe the approach described above could be a step in the right direction in addressing students' academic literacy development needs in higher education institutions with an EMI in the UAE, thereby saving them from most of the challenges described earlier as well as the identity adjustments brought about by those challenges.

However, implementing this model requires substantial changes in instructional structures as well as in academics' and academic leaders' perspectives regarding the nature of academic literacy and students' needs, which requires a major institutional commitment. Such changes can only take place if there is sufficient evidence clearly proving the feasibility and value of this instructional model. Wingate (2015) provides examples from Australian and South African universities, where similar approaches to academic literacy instruction have been implemented with successful results. The "collaborative, curriculum integrated literacy instruction" model (Purser, 2011, p. 30) has been so influential in Australia that it has reached a national policy level. Wingate (2015) also gives examples from her small-scale intervention studies conducted at a university in the UK, which provides further evidence for the feasibility of the model. While there are examples of successful discipline-specific and curriculum-integrated academic literacy instruction in other contexts (Purser, 2011; Wingate, 2015), more evidence of successful practices in this context is needed to build a strong argument for implementing such substantial changes. In the meantime, the recommendations suggested in the

following sections can be taken into account to cater for the students' needs more successfully without radical changes at institutional level.

Before moving on with the recommendations, I would like to clarify that while I support an inclusive curriculum-integrated model of academic literacy instruction, I do not believe the required academic writing courses do not serve a useful purpose at all. The findings of this study in terms of the professors' perspectives on the academic literacy skills required in their courses showed that there were some common expectations among all faculty interviewed regardless of their disciplines: critical reading skills, understanding and following written instructions in exams and assignments, critical thinking, logical organization of ideas in written work, as well as clear arguments supported by sufficient and relevant evidence. Required academic literacy courses can serve an important goal in introducing these expectations to the new university entrants as well as the importance of flexibility in adapting to the specific requirements of each academic literacy assignment based on the audience, purpose, and genre. However, it would be naïve to assume that students can master and easily transfer what they learned in these required courses to other courses across the curriculum, considering the findings of many studies, which emphasize that academic literacy skills develop over the course of students' entire undergraduate career and are shaped by the specific requirements they are expected to follow in all of their courses (Sternglass, 1997; Carroll, 2002; Leki, 2007; Wingate, 2015), as well as the findings of the present study that showed the confusion felt by the students while trying to adapt to the changing academic literacy requirements across the curriculum. Hence, professors teaching discipline-specific courses should take a more active role in contributing to undergraduates' academic literacy development rather than assuming that the students must have learnt these skills prior to taking their courses.

### **6.3.2. More emphasis on academic reading instruction**

The findings showed that many of the problems the students faced while trying to meet the academic literacy demands of the curriculum had to do with reading as much as writing. However, academic reading has been a neglected area in academic literacy research and pedagogy for various reasons. At undergraduate level, many professors take basic reading skills for their students for granted or assume learning reading skills is an unproblematic process (Grabe, 2001). Hence, students' performance of reading is neither questioned nor supported (Van Pletzen, 2006). Hirvela (2004) and Leki (2001) also question how well prepared writing professors are to teach academic reading, particularly in connection to writing. It is also considered that academic writing, as a high-stake activity, which in most assessment systems determines failure or success, is more prominent and visible than reading (Wingate, 2015). The importance given to academic writing, usually at the expense of reading, even manifests itself in the names of instructional programmes and course names (Wingate, 2015). Likewise, in the present study, the name of the programme, "Department of Writing Studies", demonstrates the same line of thinking. However, academic reading should be explicitly taught to students because it is unlike all other types of reading (Sengupta, 2002). Wingate (2015) argues that for instruction to be effective, the whole academic literacy instruction process, including components such as reading, reading-to-write, and critical thinking must be addressed, not just as the end product, which is writing. Considering the serious problems the participants of this study had in understanding and keeping up with the required reading in all courses, as well as the findings of a great number of relevant research studies some of which are mentioned above, academic reading should be integrated into the undergraduate curriculum in the UAE over an extended period of time and the critical role it plays in students' success in all courses should be recognized by academic leaders, curriculum developers and professors.

### **6.3.3. More effective reading and writing assignments**

Based on the findings of the study and relevant research, another important recommendation is that professors, whether teaching academic writing courses or other discipline specific courses, should consider the purpose, content, design, and relevance of reading and writing assignments they give more carefully to avoid creating pointless work for students. They should take into consideration that the students are already overburdened with a heavy course load and the various challenges described in detail earlier. However, this does not mean that they should lower the standards expected. The findings of the study have shown that the participants showed more engagement in reading and writing assignments that they were able to relate to in terms of content, and those that were accompanied by class discussions, small group activities, peer reviews, debates and group presentations that preceded or followed the assigned work as opposed to assignments that they found unfamiliar, difficult to relate to, or beyond their linguistic proficiency. The assignments the students showed more interest in seemed to motivate them, supported their reading comprehension and assisted them in writing assignments, and eventually gave them a sense of confidence, even pride and accomplishment in the midst of their quest for a comfortable subject position in their new academic community. Cumming (2013), too, recommends that academic literacy activities should be devised in a way that “encourage, model, scaffold and facilitate” (p. 145) multilingual students’ learning processes, allowing them to express their identity with regards to their new discourse community, and to foster their self-confidence and engagement in the literacy tasks for self-development.

### **6.3.4. Helping students to build effective socio-academic relations and positive identities**

The findings of the present study have also shed light on the critical role of socio-academic relations with professors and peers on students’ academic literacy development and identity construction. Such relationships can play a critical role in scaffolding their learning process and help them build positive identities. Hence, students, particularly those who have just started their academic

degrees, should be encouraged and guided to make use of the academic assistance available to them, such as the Writing Center and professors' office hours.

The importance of building positive identities in language learning has been emphasized by both Norton and Dörnyei. As Norton (2001) notes, a teacher who is unaware of learners' "imagined communities" and "imagined identities" cannot build learning activities that learners can invest in. Similarly, Dörnyei (2009) emphasizes the significance of the concept of "ideal L2 self" in language learning. He provides a set of guidelines for promoting the ideal L2 self through creating a language learning vision and imagery enhancement. He states that igniting the vision includes raising students' awareness about the importance of ideal selves, guiding them through a number of possible selves that they have entertained in their minds in the past, and presenting powerful role models. However, he reminds that possible selves are only effective insofar as the individual sees them as realistic within their particular circumstances. He adds that if the learners, as in the case of some of the participants of the present study, are convinced that they cannot succeed no matter how hard they try, they are unlikely to invest effort in the particular task. One way of making the goals more realistic is to create a set of concrete action plans, which Dörnyei calls "procedural strategies" as mentioned above. He also emphasizes the role of "ought-to L2 self", which concerns attributes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes, such as failing a course or disappointing parents. He believes that one's ideal-self should be counterbalanced by the feared self. I believe all these strategies and the power of imagination, emphasized by both Dörnyei and Norton, could be used to create a realistic ideal self or imagined identity that could help L2 learners who may be discouraged by the challenges they face during their academic literacy development.

### **6.3.5. Enhancing communication and collaboration between English language/writing experts and academic staff in the disciplines**

Many of the professors interviewed in this study voiced their concerns about the students' weak foundation in reading and writing, as well as raising a number of other problems faced by the students in meeting the academic literacy demands of their courses. While they mostly questioned the effectiveness of the local school system in providing students with basic academic literacy skills, some professors teaching discipline-specific courses blamed the required academic writing classes for such deficiencies, implying that they did not really believe it was part of their job to contribute to the academic literacy development of students. This belief is supported by the centrally run and generically taught EAP courses widespread in most Anglophone universities, where the complete responsibility of developing students' academic literacy is given to academic staff working in these departments (Wingate, 2015). Moreover, subject lecturers, many of whom are overwhelmed with ever increasing workload, usually have neither an explicit awareness of their discipline's literacy conventions, nor the willingness and expertise to teach them (Jacobs, 2005; Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2015). For this reason, the collaboration of English language/writing experts and academic staff in the disciplines is essential. While the former can identify opportunities for literacy work in the subject curriculum, analyse genres that students will encounter, and help students recognize genre features, the latter can help the writing expert understand the communicate intentions of the discipline's genres. Examples of various levels and forms of such collaboration between the academic writing professors and academic staff from various disciplines can be found in reports of successful practices and intervention studies, especially in Australian universities (Purser, 2011; Wingate, 2015). However, more evidence of successful practices and initiatives in this region is needed to understand the pedagogical methods and instructional content as well as the feasibility of this approach.

### **6.3.6. Eliminating non-credit, remedial course requirements for students who are on academic probation**

The findings of the study highlighted the ineffectiveness of a remedial course that two of the participants had to take as a result of being placed on probation in the spring semester. Already time stricken, both participants found the required course ineffective, irrelevant, and useless. Indeed, one was so upset that he refused to attend the class and eventually failed the course due to his excessive number of absences.

The ineffectiveness of this remedial approach, which is often introduced in universities as a quick-fix solution to support student learning, has been revealed in a number of studies. Wingate (2006, 2015) explains that this approach originates from the previous highly selective admission system in which all students were expected to have adequate skills to study effectively at university with the exception of a few ‘at risk’ students, who were then sent outside the department for help in dedicated learning support centres. The skills most commonly addressed in these generic courses would be time management, essay writing, presentation, note taking and revising for exams, similar to the content of the remedial course the two participants had to take in the present study. This general advice would be also available in web sites or course materials, such as student handbooks but usually not embedded in subject-specific courses. This approach is problematic for several reasons: firstly, students do not see generic courses as relevant to their subject (Drummonds et al., 1998; Durkin & Main, 2002). Furthermore, it is not feasible for students who are already overburdened with the amount of reading in their subject area to read through lengthy guidelines or take additional courses on study skills, and transfer them to their particular context. Another troubling aspect of this approach is that it inevitably encourages the epistemological belief that knowledge is an “external, objective body of facts” (Gamache, 2002, p. 277) which can be acquired with certain tricks and techniques taught on these remedial courses. While the skills taught in such courses are necessary for academic success, it is doubtful if the students can learn these skills without the specific academic content (Wingate, 2006).

All these drawbacks call for an approach in which the teaching of academic literacy is not separated from the student's study programme, as explained above.

#### **6.4. Contribution to knowledge**

This study has given voice to six Arab students, all of whom are non-native speakers of English, in expressing the tensions, challenges and complexities embedded in their academic literacy development as well as their construction of academic identity in their first year of undergraduate career at an American University in the UAE. With the insights it provides, the study may serve a useful purpose with curriculum development and instructional practices and contribute to development of strategies to facilitate students' acquisition of academic literacy.

The study also makes a valuable contribution to an underrepresented area of research in L2 academic literacy development by taking into account the socio-cultural factors in students' academic literacy growth as well as investigating the interrelations between academic literacy and identity construction in a unique context.

#### **6.5. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research**

Informed by an interpretive approach to research, this study does not have claims of generalizability. However, I hope the findings can be inspiring for those who find themselves in similar teaching environments

While every effort was made to minimize the limitations of the study, certain compromises from the ideal research plan had to be made due to restrictions in time and access to data sources. These limitations can be taken as suggestions for future research. It would be interesting to see the students' process of academic literacy development and identity construction throughout their entire academic career, not only the first year. Moreover, while I worked towards portraying the participants' experiences from their perspectives as thoroughly as possible, I was not able to use an additional



qualitative research tool, such as class observations, to triangulate the data I gained from the interviews and the documents I collected. In addition, observing the primary students in a number of classes they take across the curriculum would give a more holistic view of their experiences and increase the rigour of the study.

## **6.6. Reflections**

Working on a research study of this scale has deepened my understanding and appreciation of the complexity and challenges involved in interpretive research from collecting and making sense of large volumes of data to synthesizing information gained from a large number of sources. It has helped me question and become aware of my own perspective, biases, and assumptions as a researcher and teacher while witnessing and giving voice to the experiences of six students in their journey of academic literacy acquisition and identity construction. Most importantly, I got to know my students better, which helped me adjust my teaching based on their realities more closely.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Syllabi for the academic writing courses taught in the Department of Writing Studies

<b>A</b>	<b>Course Title &amp; Number</b>	<b>WRI 001: Fundamentals of Academic Discourse</b>																		
<b>B</b>	<b>Pre/Co-requisite(s)</b>	Placement through the English Placement Test (EPT).																		
<b>C</b>	<b>Number of credits</b>	0h																		
<b>D</b>	<b>Faculty Name</b>																			
<b>E</b>	<b>Term/ Year</b>																			
<b>F</b>	<b>Sections</b>	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr style="background-color: #d3d3d3;"> <th style="text-align: center;">CRN</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Course</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Days</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Time</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Location*</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="height: 20px;"></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="height: 20px;"></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>*Location subject to change.</p>				CRN	Course	Days	Time	Location*										
CRN	Course	Days	Time	Location*																
<b>G</b>	<b>Instructor Information</b>	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr style="background-color: #d3d3d3;"> <th style="text-align: center;">Instructor</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Office</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Telephone</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Email</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="height: 20px;"></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p><b><u>Office Hours:</u>*</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul> <p>*Office Hours will be posted on the office door as well as on iLearn.</p>				Instructor	Office	Telephone	Email											
Instructor	Office	Telephone	Email																	
<b>H</b>	<b>Course Description from Catalog</b>	Introduces students to basic strategies for university success with particular emphasis on reading and writing skills. Aids students in developing goal setting, time management, and study skills while reading and responding to university texts. Helps students become familiar with the conventions of academic writing through reading and writing activities. Includes contextualized grammar instruction.																		
<b>I</b>	<b>Course Learning Outcomes</b>	<p>Upon successful completion of WRI 001, the students will be able to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• compose coherent, unified, and audience-aware paragraphs and essays that demonstrate logical thought and structure</li> <li>• identify various rhetorical strategies and incorporate them effectively into written assignments</li> <li>• demonstrate the ability to apply basic analytical decoding skills and respond to written material</li> <li>• recognize main ideas and supporting details in academic texts</li> </ul>																		
<b>J</b>	<b>Textbook and other</b>	Langan, J. (2010). <i>Exploring writing: Paragraphs and essays</i> . 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed. New																		



<p><b>Instructional Material and Resources</b></p>	<p>York: McGraw-Hill.</p> <p><b>Other:</b></p> <p>Course materials on iLearn  Handouts  Selections from the <i>DWS Reader</i>  Links on iLearn to supplemental material</p>																																												
<p><b>K Teaching and Learning Methodologies</b></p>	<p>Guides students to apply reading and note-taking/annotating skills to help them understand academic texts; to respond orally and in writing to these texts using a style appropriate to an academic setting; to use the writing process to develop their writing skills and produce academic-style paragraphs and essays, and to develop the necessary grammar and mechanical skills for written English proficiency through contextualized grammar instruction.</p>																																												
<p><b>L Grading Scale, Grading Distribution, and Due Dates</b></p>	<p><b><u>Grading Scale</u></b></p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>95 – 100</td> <td>4.0</td> <td>A</td> <td>77 – 79</td> <td>2.3</td> <td>C+</td> </tr> <tr> <td>90 – 94</td> <td>3.7</td> <td>A-</td> <td>73 – 76</td> <td>2.0</td> <td>C</td> </tr> <tr> <td>87 – 89</td> <td>3.3</td> <td>B+</td> <td>70 – 72</td> <td>1.7</td> <td>C-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>83 – 86</td> <td>3.0</td> <td>B</td> <td>60 – 69</td> <td>1.0</td> <td>D</td> </tr> <tr> <td>80 – 82</td> <td>2.7</td> <td>B-</td> <td>Less Than 60</td> <td>0</td> <td>F</td> </tr> </table> <p><b><u>Grading Distribution</u></b></p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Assessment</th> <th>Weight</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Writing Assignments</td> <td>40%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Reading</td> <td>25%.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Quizzes and Other Activities</td> <td>10%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Midterm</td> <td>10%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Final Assessment/Final Exam</td> <td>15%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Total</td> <td>100%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	95 – 100	4.0	A	77 – 79	2.3	C+	90 – 94	3.7	A-	73 – 76	2.0	C	87 – 89	3.3	B+	70 – 72	1.7	C-	83 – 86	3.0	B	60 – 69	1.0	D	80 – 82	2.7	B-	Less Than 60	0	F	Assessment	Weight	Writing Assignments	40%	Reading	25%.	Quizzes and Other Activities	10%	Midterm	10%	Final Assessment/Final Exam	15%	Total	100%
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<p><b>M Explanation of Assessments</b></p>	<p><b>Writing Assignments</b></p> <p>There will be at least three one-paragraph essays (minimum length 25 lines) each using one of the following rhetorical modes: exemplification, description, narration, persuasion, or process. At least one multi-paragraph essay will be assigned. Any of these modes and others can be used for in-class impromptu and text-generated extemporaneous writing. All phases of the writing process (from pre-writing, several drafts, peer review/editing, Writing Center consultation, and production of the polished final draft) are considered writing assignments. Development of the writer’s voice and expression of personal ideas and experiences is valued.</p> <p><b>Reading and Vocabulary Assignments</b></p> <p>Students should expect assigned reading (such as newspaper/ magazine/on-line articles, and portions of college-level expository writing) to be annotated and thoroughly understood. Whether vocabulary development is explicitly taught or</p>																																												

	<p>simply assumed, students are expected to look up unfamiliar words and make meaning out of the text. In addition, analytical skills such as separating fact from opinion and determining the implied meaning of a passage will be taught and practiced.</p> <p><b>Quizzes and Other Activities</b></p> <p>Material covered in class will be assessed using scheduled and unscheduled quizzes. Supplementary material will be determined by the individual instructor.</p> <p><b>Midterm</b></p> <p>There is one midterm exam which will occur approximately midway into the semester. The exam can be cumulative or focused on one aspect of the course. It may be administered on one, two, or three days during that week according to the preference of the instructor. Each part lasts the length of a class period and is given in the regular classroom.</p> <p><b>Final Exam/Assessment/Attendance</b></p> <p>The final exam of two hours will occur on the day and time designated by AUS. It will be administered in the regular classroom. It may be cumulative or focused on one aspect of the course. At the discretion of the Instructor, included in the final assessment is the attendance component which can be as high as 5% of the 15% allotted for the final assessment.</p>
<p><b>N</b></p> <p><b>Student Academic Integrity Code Statement</b></p>	<p>Students are advised that violations of the Student Academic Integrity Code will be treated seriously and can lead to suspension or dismissal from the university. A notation of the academic integrity code violation can become part of the student's permanent record.</p> <p>Academic violations include but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plagiarism</li> <li>• Inappropriate Collaboration</li> <li>• Inappropriate Proxy</li> <li>• Dishonesty in Examinations and Submitted Work</li> <li>• Work Completed for One Course and Submitted to Another</li> <li>• Deliberate Falsification of Data</li> <li>• Interference with Other Students' Work</li> <li>• Copyright Violations</li> <li>• Complicity in Academic Dishonesty</li> </ul> <p><b>Students MUST read the Student Academic Integrity Code outlined in the AUS Catalog and agree to abide by the standards for academic conduct, students' rights and responsibilities and procedures for handling allegations of academic dishonesty.</b></p>

## **Performance Expectations**

### **Attendance**

Attendance and participation in all class meetings is essential to the process of education at the American University of Sharjah. Students benefit from the lectures and discussions with their instructors and fellow students. For this reason, students are expected to attend class regularly.

Lateness or absence hinders progress for the individual student and the class and affects the offending student's grade.

- Attend class regularly and actively participate.
- Arrive to class on time.
  - Students arriving **eleven** minutes late to class may sit through the class if they enter without disrupting the class, but will be marked absent.
  - Three occasions of lateness (arriving less than eleven minutes after the course has begun) count as one absence.
- After a certain number of absences for any reason (there are no excused absences), students may be withdrawn from the course. Depending at what time during the semester the student accumulates these absences, the recorded grade on his or her transcript will be either a W or WF.
  - For classes meeting two times a week, a student may be withdrawn after **five** absences.
  - For classes meeting three times a week, a student may be withdrawn after **seven** absences.

In the event that a student misses a class, he or she remains responsible for the material covered in that class (announcements, handouts, assignments, etc.) and for preparation for the following class. It is the student's responsibility to find out what assignments were missed.

### **Preparedness**

Preparedness is essential. In order to have effective lectures and class discussions, students must come to class prepared.

- Students must complete all readings and assignments on time.
- As stated before, students who miss a class are responsible for finding out what material was covered, what homework was assigned, and come to the next class prepared.

### **Participation**

In addition to coming to class prepared, students are expected to be respectful and active listeners, listening carefully when others—both instructor and students—are talking. Students are expected to participate in classroom discussions, contribute to small group activities, and complete individual in-class assignments. An essential part of course participation is taking notes.

## **Written Assignments**

All formal drafts must be submitted following APA guidelines. When submitting final writing assignments, you must include all the work you have produced during the writing process; please organize this work appropriately and submit it in a clearly labeled file folder or envelope. Be sure to keep all returned assignments until the end of the semester.

## **Academic Policies**

### **Late Work**

All assignments are considered late if not turned in on time. If accepted, late work will be penalized.

### **Make-up Exams**

The university guidelines for make-up exams, as defined in the catalog, are as follows: “Instructors need not give substitute assignments or examinations to students who miss classes.”

### **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism, the act of using the work, ideas, images or words of someone else without giving proper credit, is a serious form of dishonesty. It is immoral and illegal and AUS does not tolerate it. All students need to read, sign, and abide by the plagiarism statement. This document will be kept on file by your instructor and will illustrate your understanding of plagiarism and the seriousness of it as an academic and ethical offense. This department follows a strict plagiarism policy.

## **Other Policies**

### **Mobile Phones**

All mobile phones must be on silent and put away at all times when in the classroom.

## **Additional Resources**

### **AUS Writing Center**

The AUS Writing Center is dedicated to helping students become better writers. Writing center consultants help students become independent, confident writers through an interactive approach to writing. The Writing Center offers one-on-one writing conferences by appointment or on a drop-in basis and is available to all students throughout the university. During conferences, students and tutors work together on various aspects of writing: thesis development, organization, outlining, paragraph development, vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar and mechanics. Students can visit the AUS Writing Center to work on their drafts, do research, or to work with a tutor on particular aspects of their writing. The Writing Center also offers workshops on a variety of writing topics throughout the academic year. You are strongly advised to make use of the AUS Writing Center. For your convenience the AUS Writing Center has two locations: LAN 002 and LIB 118

### **Internet/ Electronic Resources**

Many instructors use Blackboard or other Internet resources to enhance the learning opportunities for students enrolled in these courses. You will be expected to utilize this technology.

<b>A</b>	<b>Course Title &amp; Number</b> <b>WRI 101: Academic Writing</b>										
<b>B</b>	<b>Pre/Co-requisite(s)</b> Successful completion of WRI 001 or placement through the English Placement Test.										
<b>C</b>	<b>Number of credits</b> 3 - 0 - 3										
<b>D</b>	<b>Faculty Name</b>										
<b>E</b>	<b>Term/ Year</b>										
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<b>H</b>	<b>Course Description from Catalog</b> Challenges students to recognize, understand, and produce academic writing. Requires students to practice strategies for reading academic material by responding to texts in both formal and informal writing assignments and classroom discussion. Helps students enhance their writing skills through use of the writing process, and develop the necessary grammar and mechanical skills for written English proficiency through contextualized grammar instruction.										
<b>I</b>	<b>Course Learning Outcomes</b> Upon completion of WRI 101, the students will be able to <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. develop the ability to analyze and evaluate the various arguments of academic and professional texts.</li> <li>2. produce formal concise summaries &amp; paraphrases that indicate the understanding of complex concepts from various media and academic texts.</li> <li>3. compose coherent academic essays that have well-structured, articulate thesis statements located effectively in audience conscious introductions, and related topic sentences supported with logical, relevant and coherent evidence/examples.</li> <li>4. demonstrate complex idea development in writing essays utilizing a range of rhetorical strategies and modes including but not limited to persuasion.</li> <li>5. use basic APA documentation rules to avoid plagiarism.</li> </ol>										

<p><b>J</b>     <b>Textbook and other Instructional Material and Resources</b></p>	<p>Shine, A., Abusalim, A., Sayed, S., McArdle, J., John, M., Brown, M., &amp; Frederick, D. (Eds). (2012). <i>Majlis of the ‘Others’</i> (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Pearson Education Limited</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>And</b></p> <p>Abusalim, A. &amp; Shine, A. (Eds). (2012). <i>Y'allah Let's Write: A Handbook for Writers in</i> New York: McGraw Hill.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>DWS Reader</i></li> <li>➤ A paperback college level English dictionary of the student's choice</li> </ul>																																												
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<p><b>M</b>     <b>Explanation of Assessments</b></p>	<p>Assessment is based upon the following: two or three essays using one or more rhetorical modes, such as narration, description, comparison and contrast, cause and effect or definition; one persuasive essay; critical reviews including one review that involves more than one reading; quizzes focusing on reading comprehension; vocabulary building; graded summaries and paraphrases; midterm and final exam.</p>																																												
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- Inappropriate Collaboration
- Inappropriate Proxy
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- Work Completed for One Course and Submitted to Another
- Deliberate Falsification of Data
- Interference with Other Students' Work
- Copyright Violations
- Complicity in Academic Dishonesty

**Students MUST read the Student Academic Integrity Code outlined in the AUS Catalog and agree to abide by the standards for academic conduct, students' rights and responsibilities and procedures for handling allegations of academic dishonesty.**

## **Performance Expectations**

### **Attendance**

Attendance and participation in all class meetings is essential to the process of education at the American University of Sharjah. Students benefit from the lectures and discussions with their instructors and fellow students. For this reason, students are expected to attend class regularly.

Lateness or absence hinders progress for the individual student and the class and affects the offending student's grade.

- Attend class regularly and actively participate.
- Arrive to class on time.
  - Students arriving **eleven** minutes late to class may sit through the class if they enter without disrupting the class, but will be marked absent.
  - Three occasions of lateness (arriving less than eleven minutes after the course has begun) count as one absence.
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In addition to coming to class prepared, students are expected to be respectful and active listeners, listening carefully when others—both instructor and students—are talking. Students are expected to participate in classroom discussions, contribute to small group activities, and complete individual in-class assignments. An essential part of course participation is taking notes.

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All formal drafts must be submitted following APA guidelines. When submitting final writing assignments, you must include all the work you have produced during the writing process; please organize this work appropriately and submit it in a clearly labeled file folder or envelope. Be sure to keep all returned assignments until the end of the semester.

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The university guidelines for make up exams, as defined in the catalog, are as follows: “Instructors need not give substitute assignments or examinations to students who miss classes.”

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Plagiarism, the act of using the work, ideas, images or words of someone else without giving proper credit, is a serious form of dishonesty. It is immoral and illegal and AUS does not tolerate it. All students need to read, sign, and abide by the plagiarism statement. This document will be kept on file by your instructor and will illustrate your understanding of plagiarism and the seriousness of it as an academic and ethical offense. This department follows a strict plagiarism policy.

## **Other Policies**

### **Mobile Phones**

All mobile phones must be on silent and put away at all times when in the classroom.

## **Additional Resources**

### **AUS Writing Center**

The AUS Writing Center is dedicated to helping students become better writers. Writing center consultants help students become independent, confident writers through an interactive approach to writing. The Writing Center offers one-on-one writing conferences by appointment or on a drop-in basis and is available to all students throughout the university. During conferences, students and tutors work together on various aspects of writing: thesis development, organization, outlining, paragraph development, vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar and mechanics. Students can visit the AUS Writing Center to work on their drafts, do research, or to work with a tutor on particular aspects of their writing. The Writing Center also offers workshops on a variety of writing topics throughout the academic year. You are strongly advised to make use of the AUS Writing Center. For your convenience the AUS Writing Center has two locations: LAN 002 and LIB 118

### **Internet/ Electronic Resources**

Many instructors use Blackboard or other Internet resources to enhance the learning opportunities for students enrolled in these courses. You will be expected to utilize this technology.

<b>A</b>	<b>Course Title &amp; Number</b>	<b>WRI 102: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum</b>													
<b>B</b>	<b>Pre/Co-requisite(s)</b>	Successful completion of WRI 101 or placement through the English Placement Test.													
<b>C</b>	<b>Number of credits</b>	3 - 0 - 3													
<b>D</b>	<b>Faculty Name</b>														
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<b>H</b>	<b>Course Description from Catalog</b>	Builds on the reading and writing skills acquired in WRI 101. Strengthens students' reasoning skills and understanding of the various rhetorical strategies available to them in the writing process as they produce competently organized argumentative essays. Requires students to practice ethical, basic integration and documentation of sources. Hones students' linguistic proficiency.													
<b>I</b>	<b>Course Learning Outcomes</b>	<p>Upon completion of WRI 102, the students will be able to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. demonstrate the ability to write a structured and logical critical analysis of an academic text</li> <li>2. demonstrate the ability to write lucid and cogent prose in a fully developed, audience conscious, academic argumentative essay (approximately 3-5 pages) that demonstrates logical development and arrangement of arguments, counterarguments and refutations</li> <li>3. compose an audience conscious, academic argumentative essay (approximately 5-6 pages) that incorporates synthesis of multiple sources</li> <li>4. demonstrate knowledge of library technology by using key words and data bases to find pertinent sources for integration into essays</li> <li>5. locate, synthesize, and integrate information using APA documentation guidelines correctly</li> </ol>													
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<p><b>other Instructional Material and Resources</b></p>	<p>Abusalim, A., Bilikozen, N., Ismail, T., &amp; Sayed, S. (Eds.) (2012). <i>Where I Stand: The Center and the Periphery</i>. London: Pearson Education Limited.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>And</b></p> <p>Abusalim, A. &amp; Shine, A. (Eds). (2012). <i>Y'allah Let's Write: A Handbook for Writers in DWS</i>. New York: McGraw Hill.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>DWS Reader</i></li> <li>➤ A paperback college level English dictionary of the student's choice</li> </ul>																																																			
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## Appendix B: Background of the primary participants of the study

Student	Gender	Age	Nationality	Major	Languages	Prior education
Khairea	Female	23	Algerian	Architecture	Arabic- First language French- Second language English- Third language	Public school system in French in Algeria
Noura	Female	18	Emirati	Civil engineering	Arabic- First language English- Second language	Public school system in Arabic in the UAE
Zeina	Female	19	Yemeni	Computer science	Arabic- First language English- Second language	Public school system in Arabic in the UAE
Osama	Male	18	Egyptian	Electrical engineering	Arabic- First language English- Second language	Private school system in Arabic and English in Egypt and the UAE
Saif	Male	18	Emirati	Civil engineering	Arabic- First language English- Second language	Public school system in English in the UAE
Mahmoud	Male	19	Saudi	Finance	Arabic- First language English- Second language	Public school system in Arabic in Saudi Arabia



## **Appendix C: Interview Guide for the Focal Students**

### **I. Background questions**

1. How would you describe your personal background?
2. Can you tell me about your previous educational experiences?
3. Can you tell me about your previous reading and writing experiences?
4. What is the role of your family or previous education, if any, in these experiences?
5. What languages do you speak? How did you learn each?

### **II. Beginning of the semester questions**

1. How are you feeling about your major? What are you looking forward to? Is there anything you are worried about?
2. What are your aims with regards to your academic reading and writing development this semester? Why?
3. Why do these aims matter for you?
4. What strategies are you using or planning to use in order to realize your aims? Why?
5. How important are the required academic reading and writing skills for your life at university and after your graduation?
6. What outcomes do you expect from pursuing your objectives regarding your academic reading and writing skills? Why?
7. How would you describe yourself as a person?
8. How would you describe yourself as a student?
9. What was your general academic standing like in your previous educational life? Were you content with it?
10. What is your general academic standing like at this university?
11. Are you content with your academic standing now? What makes you feel like that?

12. What do you think of your level of academic reading and writing skills in English? What makes you think that?
13. Does your level of academic reading and writing skills in English affect how you view yourself as a student at this university?

### **III. Routine questions asked on the courses in progress each semester**

#### General questions asked about each course at every interview

1. What did you think about the last few weeks of classes? What stands out for you? What has concerned you? What concerns you about the next few weeks?
2. How do you feel about your overall standing in each class you are taking?

#### Writing assignments

1. What are you working on now or what will you be working on in the next few weeks in each of your courses?
2. Why do you think your teacher gave you this particular kind of an assignment to do? (What is the professor's purpose in assigning it? What does the professor want you to learn from it or get out of it?)
3. What did you learn from doing this assignment? How useful was it for you to do this assignment? (Trying to get at whether what they got out of doing it was worth the effort.)
4. How did you do this assignment? (Did you do it at one sitting, revise a lot, receive any help?)
5. What kinds of problems did you have with this assignment? How did you deal with it/solve it?
6. If you went to the writing center, what did you work on there? How many times did you go and for how long?
7. How did you figure out how to do the assignment? (Did you ask the professor or classmates; were you provided with explicit guidelines [if so, get copy] or a sample students essay of some kind?)
8. What do you have to do to do well in this assignment? What is your teacher looking for in assigning a grade?

9. How does this assignment compare to other assignments you have done? How useful was it to you in helping you learn about the subject or about how to do something in the subject area?
10. Was there anything that you turned in and that was turned to you since the last interview? Exams, quizzes, essays, papers, lab reports, project reports?
11. If so, have you received any feedback on any of these?
12. What comments did your professor make on your assignment?
13. What do you think about these comments? (Do you understand the comments? Are they helpful or not? Why?)

#### Course readings and study habits

1. How are you studying for this course? How much time do you spend on this course per day? What are you doing? When do you study for this course?
2. What about the reading for this course? How is it related to the lectures/classes?
3. Why do you think your teacher assigned this particular reading for you to do?
4. How well do you have to learn what you read? Do you have to do all the reading, understand it, and know the information from the reading in order to do well in the course?
5. If you aren't reading everything that is assigned, how do you decide what is not important, what you can skip? What have the consequences been of not reading everything assigned?

#### Reading and writing assignments to be completed through group work

1. Are you involved in any group work or do you have any study partners this semester? In which classes?
2. If you have study partners, how do you help each other? Can you give a specific example or show me a specific assignment you did with the help of a peer? Describe how you did this assignment.
3. If you are involved in a group project, did you get to choose the group or was it assigned?

4. What kind of project is the group working on? How do you divide up the work? Can you show me an example of an assignment you have done/ are doing in a group? Which part did you do/work on?
5. When, where, how did you meet to work on the project?
6. Do you ever have problems communicating with study partners or group project members? If so, describe.

#### Social life

1. How do you feel about your social life?. How much time do you spend doing things other than studying? When do you relax? With whom? What do you do? Do you feel you have a lot of friends?
2. What do you do besides studying and relaxing? How much time do you spend on those other activities (family responsibilities, work, etc.) How do you feel about these other activities?

#### **IV. End of the semester questions**

1. How are you feeling about your major now? What are you looking forward to? Is there anything you are worried about?
2. Have you accomplished your aims with regards to your academic reading and writing development this semester? Why?
3. What strategies have you used in order to realize your aims?
4. Which of these strategies have been helpful? Which ones have been ineffective? Why
5. What is your general academic standing like now?
6. Are you content with your academic standing now? What makes you feel like that?
7. Having completed your studies this semester, what do you think of your level of academic reading and writing skills in English now? What makes you think that?
8. Having completed your studies this semester, what do you think about the role of required academic reading and writing skills in your life at university and after your graduation?

9. Have your experiences this semester had any impact on how you view yourself as a person and a student? If so, in what ways?

## **Appendix D: Interview Guide for Professors**

### **I. Focal Students**

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

### **II. About the course in general**

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

### **III. The role of writing**

1. How important is the writing assigned for this course? Why?
2. What kind of writing assignments do you give?
3. What is your goal in giving these writing assignments?
4. What strategies do you use in order to realize these objectives? Why?
5. What difficulties or problems do they seem to have in doing the assignments?
6. To what degree are these writing assignments like writing they might do as professionals?

7. How do the students know how to do these assignments? What other resources do you expect them to draw on?
8. What do you look for in evaluating this writing?
9. What kinds of comments, if any, do you find yourself making on the papers?

#### **IV. The role of reading**

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

#### **V. Group work**

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

## Appendix E: Topics, codes, and categories identified in the data

Research Question 1		
Topic	Code	Categories
Perspectives at the outset	PO	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Significance of grades</li> <li>2. Perceived weakness in reading and writing skills</li> <li>3. Doubts about the contribution of academic literacy requirements to academic and professional growth</li> </ol>
Challenges faced by the students	CHL	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of time</li> <li>2. Transition to EMI</li> <li>3. Adapting to the changing requirements of academic reading and writing practices</li> <li>4. Using the sources in the library and doing research</li> <li>5. Building social and academic relationships</li> <li>6. Accessing university services that offer support for academic writing</li> </ol>
Coping strategies	CS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Excessive studying</li> <li>2. Corner-cutting strategies</li> <li>3. Seeking help and developing assignment-specific study habits</li> </ol>
Perspectives at the end	PE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increased questioning</li> <li>2. Effective strategy use</li> </ol>

Research Question 2		
Topic	Code	Categories
The impact of the students' experiences on their identity construction	ID	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Declining academic standing and view of self</li> <li>2. Socio-academic life and view of self</li> <li>3. Literacy practices that had a positive impact on the students' view of self</li> </ol>

Research Question 3		
Topic	Code	Categories
Professors' perspectives on the role of academic literacy skills for success in their courses	PP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Incomplete reading assignments</li> <li>2. Lack of analytical and critical reading skills</li> <li>3. Following written instructions and understanding questions in exams and assignments</li> <li>4. Assumptions about students' prior educational experiences</li> <li>5. Lack of organization</li> <li>6. Weak arguments and critical thinking skills</li> <li>7. Group work as a facilitating tool</li> </ol>



## Appendix F: Extract from coded interview transcript

An extract from interview #3 with Zeina, one of the focal students.

Date: December 22, 2011

The notes in the margin show the code and category number, which is followed by a letter (A-Z) to differentiate between all quotes that go under the same category. For instance, PO 2E indicates that the text highlighted is the 5<sup>th</sup> quote under that specific category.

NB: Hello [Zeina]. How are you since our last meeting?

Zeina: Fine Alhamdulillah.

NB: What did you think about the last few weeks of classes regarding the reading and writing requirements? Any progress made? Any concerns?

Zeina: You know the long questions that I told you about?

NB: Oh, the ones that you couldn't understand. In Physics or Calculus?

Zeina: Both. Questions that use like cases, not like just formula. Like in the last classes we took a new lesson, the new lesson is about like questions, but in the form of a reading questions, you know. So I faced some difficulties in these questions. For example, like I don't have question, but like they are applications from our life, cases. Like, "read, think and put a formula for this". But sometimes I can't understand the case like my friends. Maybe because I come from to Arabic school.

PO  
2E  
CHL  
2F

NB: Yeah?

Zeina: In the calculus midterm, I did not do well. When I don't understand something I feel nervous, and like I will not solve it. In this question, I didn't even try actually. Here, it says "Flies a kite", [shows the question on the midterm, which she brought along a printed copy of] this I don't know the meaning of "kite". The rest is OK.

PO  
2F  
CHL  
2D

NB: Any other questions you weren't able to understand?

Zeina: Not in the midterm. But you know in the quiz, there's like three questions and I must solve only two questions. I skipped the long question. Because it's so complicated, some words like "beam" or "spotlight" I don't know.

PO  
2G

NB: Did you look up the words afterwards?

Zeina: Yes, I checked in the dictionary, now I know. Actually, the question that was in the midterm yesterday, I think it was easy

CS  
3B

but for me to understand what I read is hard, the vocabulary is hard.

NB: Was skipping the question the only solution you thought of?

PO  
2H

Zeina: I wanted to ask the professor but I think he will not tell me or something [laughs].

NB: You thought he wouldn't respond?

Zeina: I think questions are not allowed in the exam.

NB: So you felt it wouldn't be right to...

Zeina: [interrupts] yeah but in Physics, once I asked the Professor

NB: And?

Zeina: He responded me but I still couldn't answer...

NB: What was the question that you asked?

Zeina: In the Physics like for the power, what power should I find... I don't know like they wrote something, actually I don't remember now. But when I asked him he told me. I showed you last interview.

NB: Oh yeah, now I remember.

Zeina: Yeah, I got a bad grade, 3 out of ten on it.

NB: Hope, you will do better on the next one.

Zeina: Yeah, I hope so. Like, I'm worried about the GPA.

NB: If you don't have anything else to add on your performance in Physics and Calculus, can we talk about WRI 101?

Zeina: No, can I add if I remember anything later?

NB: Sure, any time. What are you working on WRI 101 now?

Zeina: Just finished the 2<sup>nd</sup> essay.

NB: Have you faced any challenges?

Zeina: I worked hard. It took so much time. Like whenever I did not have any other assignment I worked on it weekdays, weekends.

CS  
3C

PO  
1D

CS  
1C

Challenges I have ...[pauses to think] maybe in grammar and also when I write

CHL  
2E

sentences, I don't think like in academic way. Like I said before, this is all new for me... because I am from Arabic system.

NB: In what ways is it different?

Zeina: The style is different. Like maybe the reason is I don't know enough words, or for example same words for the usual words, not more academic, other words.

PO  
2I

NB: Can you think of any ways to fix this issue?

Zeina: I am trying.

NB: To be more specific, in what ways?

CS  
3D

Zeina: Like, I worked much more than the first one. The first one, I did it, but I didn't check it or read it but this one... I worked so hard.

NB: What did you differently?

Zeina: I visited the Writing Centre two times. I came to ask you questions.

NB: Yes, that's right. Compared to the time you devoted to studying your other courses, how much time do you spend working on assignments given in WRI 101? Equal? Less? More?

Zeina: Like in WRI 101, each session we have an assignment or something to do. Writing a draft, peer review, and like even a small introduction. Like I do it more than Calculus and Physics if I don't have quizzes. Like, in the usual if I don't have quizzes or midterms, I don't study or I study little. But for writing [referring to WRI 101], even if we have a small assignment or even like a small introduction, conclusion, I think it's a problem and I have to focus on it.

CHL  
3B

NB: I see.

Zeina: When you are announce us to read some articles in our book I read them, but sometimes I don't understand them, like I need to translate each word, like more than one word in one line, but then I can understand. But it takes a lot of time, I keep working on it and still cannot finish on time. And like sometimes I don't understand which is the, what is the main idea for the article. I need much more time than my friends for improving because I went to Arabic school. Like I think writing is my big problem because like I think I don't know much more vocabularies and also the grammar I face problems so I need much more time on writing and improving my writing.

PO  
2J

CS  
1D

CHL  
1C

NB: What makes you think that you need more time than your friends.

Zinab: I think from class discussions they understand more. And I see them in class. When we do in-class work.

CHL  
2F

NB: How is your social life these days? Do you see classmates outside of class?

Zeina: Social life? I like don't have enough time. No social life in AUS! Studying for all courses take all of my time. Still, like sometimes I don't finish it.

CHL  
1D  
CHL  
5B

NB: I see.

Zeina: Here I'm monkey. I was more confident in high school and like I was more popular. Like I used to teach my friend, now my friend teach me.

ID  
1B

Researcher: How do you feel about all these changes?

Zeina: It's not fine. I think about my father and my mother, so I want to be successful. Sometimes when I get low grade they say "why?" I say "because sometimes I don't understand well". They say "Try , try!".

NB: They want you to do well.

Zeina: Yes, like it's so hard. I want to make them proud.

NB: Other than making your parents proud, do you have any other goals?

PO  
3A

Zeina: Yeah, sometimes I think like this, for example sometimes some assignments in English... Sometimes, I say "What is the benefit from the writing course while I am engineering?" But then some people say to me "You will be more expert then in writing and you need it in writing reports and something like that". Of course my friends in [X] University, they don't have writing courses. I think like this sometimes, when I bother from writing. But, when I'm thinking carefully it is good... Because I think now English is in everywhere. I think you will need it.

**Appendix G: Reading and writing requirements the focal students were expected to meet in the academic year of 2011-2012**

List of reading and writing requirements for Khairea in the College of Architecture, Art and Design/Fall 2011		
Course Name	Graded Writing Assignments	Required Reading
DES 121: Introduction to Architecture and Design History	note taking during lectures for success in exams	book chapters assigned for each class, about 15 to 30 pages long each; filling vocabulary cards for each reading, 5 unannounced drop quizzes on the readings assigned
DES 111: Descriptive Drawing I	critique of a drawing done by the student, at least 100 words or above	handouts from various sources
DES 131: Design Foundations	a written midterm exam requiring clear and well-organized explanation	handouts from various sources, articles of various length (usually 3 to 5 pages long) from current periodicals, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned
WRI 101: Academic Writing	summaries, 3 academic essays which require integration of 2 to 3 outside sources that are documented following APA style; with multiple drafts; 2 to 3 pages long written response to readings final examination: a five paragraph academic essay that requires APA documentation	book chapters (about 10 to 20 pages); readings (essays, articles, etc.) of various length (about 3 to 10 pages) from the text book, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned, reading to write

List of reading and writing requirements for Khairea in the College of Architecture, Art and Design/Spring 2012

Course Name	Graded Writing Assignments	Required Reading
DES 122: Modern Developments in Architecture and Design	note taking during lectures for success in exams	book chapters assigned for each class, about 11 pages long each; filling vocabulary cards for each reading, 5 unannounced drop quizzes on the readings assigned
DES 112: Descriptive Drawing II	N/A	handouts from various sources
DES 132: Design Foundations II	N/A	handouts from various sources, articles of various length (usually 3 to 5 pages long) from current periodicals, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned
WRI 102: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum	3 academic essays which require integration of 3 to 5 outside sources that are documented following APA style; with multiple drafts; 3 to 5 pages long written response to readings final examination: a five paragraph academic essay that requires APA documentation	book chapters (about 10 to 20 pages); readings (essays, articles, etc.) of various length (about 3 to 10 pages) from the text book, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned, reading to write
MTH 111: Mathematics for Architects	N/A	book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions

List of reading and writing requirements for Noura, Zeina, Osama and Saif in the College of Engineering /Fall 2011

Course Name	Graded Writing Assignments	Required Reading
WRI 101: Academic Writing	summaries; 3 academic essays which must be 2 to 3 pages long and which require integration of 2 to 3 outside sources that are documented following APA style final examination: a five paragraph academic essay that requires APA documentation	book chapters (about 10 to 20 pages); readings (essays, articles, etc.) of various length (about 3 to 10 pages) from the text book, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned, reading to write
NGN 110: Introduction to Engineering and Computing	6 lab reports, about 4-8 pages long each final project: progress report and final report, about 10 pages long	book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
CHM 101: General Chemistry I	N/A	handouts and course book
MTH 103: Calculus I	N/A	book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
PHY 101: General Physics I	N/A	book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
PHY 101 L: General Physics Laboratory I	weekly lab reports, about 2 pages long each	book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions

List of reading and writing requirements for Noura, Zeina, Osama and Saif in the College of Engineering /Spring 2012		
Course Name	Graded Writing Assignments	Required Reading
WRI 102: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum	3 academic essays which require integration of 3 to 5 outside sources that are documented following APA style; with multiple drafts; 3 to 5 pages long final examination: a five paragraph academic essay that requires APA documentation	book chapters (about 10 to 20 pages); readings (essays, articles, etc.) of various length (about 3 to 10 pages) from the text book, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned, reading to write book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
PHY 102: General Physics II		book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
PHY 102 L: General Physics Laboratory II	weekly lab reports, about 2 pages long each	handouts and PowerPoint slides, book chapters
NGN 111: Introduction to Statistical Analysis (for Noura, Osama, Saif)		book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
CMP 120: Introduction to Computer Science I (for Zeina)		book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students	2-3 summaries, 2-3 response to articles, paraphrasing, 2 short essays	handouts, PowerPoint slides, shorts essays and article (1-2 page long)
MTH 104: Calculus II		book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions



List of reading and writing requirements for Mahmoud in the School of Business Administration /Fall 2011

Course Name	Graded Writing Assignments	Required Reading
WRI 101: Academic Writing	summaries; 3 academic essays which must be 2 to 3 pages long and which require integration of 2 to 3 outside sources that are documented following APA style final examination: a five paragraph academic essay that requires APA documentation	book chapters (about 10 to 20 pages); readings (essays, articles, etc.) of various length (about 3 to 10 pages) from the text book, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned, reading to write
MTH 002: Prep Business Mathematics	N/A	book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
BIS 101: Business Information Systems	10 case discussions: providing solutions to various cases of business problems	book chapters and handouts, PowerPoint slides, instructions and questions, library and internet research to build an Excel program
CHM 105: Chemistry and the Environment	a research paper	book chapters and handouts, PowerPoint slides, instructions and questions, library and internet research to write a research project

List of reading and writing requirements for Mahmoud in the School of Business Administration /Spring 2012

Course Name	Graded Writing Assignments	Required Reading
WRI 102: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum	3 academic essays which require integration of 2 to 3 outside sources that are documented following APA style; with multiple drafts; 3 to 5 pages long  final examination: a five paragraph academic essay that requires APA documentation	book chapters (about 10 to 20 pages); readings (essays, articles, etc.) of various length (about 3 to 10 pages) from the text book, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned, reading to write
ECO 202: Principles of Macroeconomics	a research project of 5 to 8 pages	book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
MIS 201: Fundamentals of MIS	case discussions: providing solutions to various cases of business problems a written report of 10 pages	book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
MTH 002: Prep Business Mathematics (REPEAT)	N/A	book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions
UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students (for students on academic probation only)	2-3 summaries, 2- 3 response to articles, paraphrasing, 2 short essays	handouts, PowerPoint slides, shorts essays and article (1-2 page long)

**Appendix H: List of courses taught professors interviewed and the focal students enrolled in these courses**

<b>Professor</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Focal student(s) taking the course</b>
1. Lynda	WRI 102	Zeina Mahmoud
2. Sarah	WRI 102	Khairea
3. Mike	WRI 102	Saif
4. Lyndsay	WRI 102	Osama
5. Rabia	UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students	Mahmoud
6. Mona	UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students	Mahmoud
7. Loren	UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students	Osama
8. Noman	Physics PHY 101: General Physics I	Osama
9. Robert	DES 112: Descriptive Drawing II	Khairea
10. Sami	NGN 110: Introduction to Engineering and Computing	Osama, Saif, Zeina, Noura
11. Fuad	Mathematics MTH 103: Calculus I	Zeina, Noura
12. Ibrahim	PHY 101 L: General Physics Laboratory I	Zeina
13. Michael	DES 122: Modern Developments in Architecture and Design	Khairea

## Appendix I: The Certificate of Ethical Research Approval Form

STUDENT HIGHER-LEVEL RESEARCH



Graduate School of Education

### Certificate of ethical research approval

#### STUDENT RESEARCH/FIELDWORK/CASEWORK AND DISSERTATION/THESIS

You will need to complete this certificate when you undertake a piece of higher-level research (e.g. Masters, PhD, EdD level).

To activate this certificate you need to first sign it yourself, and then have it signed by your supervisor and finally by the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee.

For further information on ethical educational research access the guidelines on the BERA web site: <http://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/category/publications/guidelines/> and view the School's statement on the "Student Documents" web site.

**READ THIS FORM CAREFULLY AND THEN COMPLETE IT ON YOUR COMPUTER** (the form will expand to contain the text you enter). **DO NOT COMPLETE BY HAND**

Your name: Neslihan Bilikozen

Your student no: 580044212

Return address for this certificate: American University of Sharjah, College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Writing Studies, PO Box 26666, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Degree/Programme of Study: EdD in TESOL in Dubai; School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Project Supervisor(s): Susan Riley

Your email address: [nb289@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:nb289@exeter.ac.uk); [nbilikozen@aus.edu](mailto:nbilikozen@aus.edu)

Tel: 00971502289025

I hereby certify that I will abide by the details given overleaf and that I undertake in my thesis to respect the dignity and privacy of those participating in this research.

I confirm that if my research should change radically, I will complete a further form.

Signed:  date: Nov 15, 2011

*NB: For Masters dissertations, which are marked blind, this first page must not be included in your work. It can be kept for your records.*

Chair of the School's Ethics Committee:  
last updated: August 2009

# Certificate of ethical research approval

Your student no: 580044212

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**Title of your project:** Literacy Development and Identity Construction of Undergraduates at an American University in the UAE

**Brief description of your research project:** Informed by an interpretive framework of research, this study regards the individual to be the centre of any understanding of social reality. Drawing on exploratory ethnographic research, it explores the challenges encountered by six focal students enrolled at an American university in the UAE, who share the common desire to develop fluent control of the academic literacy practices that will ensure their success in their undergraduate careers. The study strives to give students a voice in expressing the tensions, challenges and complexities embedded in their academic literacy development. Given that students' academic literacy development is inevitably interwoven with their social, personal, and other academic experiences, in addition to investigating the nature of challenges students experience while acquiring the demanded academic literacy skills, this study also seeks to uncover the process students go through to create comfortable subject positions for themselves in the context of studying at an American university in the UAE; in other words, the nature of relationship between the students' academic literacy growth and their academic identity formation.

**Give details of the participants in this research (giving ages of any children and/or young people involved):** The participants will be AUS (American University of Sharjah) students and professors who volunteer to take part in this study. The students are all above 18.

**Give details regarding the ethical issues of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (with special reference to any children or those with special needs)**

A consent form will be obtained from each participant prior to data collection. Records of when, how and from whom consent was obtained, will be kept. Essentially, informed consent will be an ongoing process throughout the research. Participants will be reminded that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any given time and that data related to them will be destroyed. Records of the data collected (including transcripts and any audio recordings) will be stored in a secure and safe place. Electronic information will only be accessed by the researcher with their username and password. This information will be stored on a secure system with recognized virus protection. Electronic and paper information will be locked in a secure building. Information will also be coded to ensure anonymity. This will remain anonymous in the write up of the research. Collected written information will be destroyed by shredding and securely disposing when it is no longer required. Any audio recording will also be disposed of digitally.

**Give details of the methods to be used for data collection and analysis and how you would ensure they do not cause any harm, detriment or unreasonable stress:**

I will conduct in-depth interviews with the participants who volunteered to take part in the study. These interviews will be conducted periodically in fall 2011, and spring 2012. In addition to the interviews, I will ask the students to keep a weekly journal of their experiences regarding the reading and writing requirements of each course they take, which will, hopefully, help me get a more complete picture.

I will also interview the teachers of all courses that require evaluated writing assignments – those who teach academic writing courses and those who teach courses in students' academic disciplines. The purpose of the interviews with the teachers is to investigate the nature of reading and writing assignments they give, the objectives of these assignments, and their views about students' responses to these assignments.

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Chair of the School's Ethics Committee  
last updated: August 2009

To understand the nature of students' coursework in relation to the reading and writing assignments, I will also examine samples of writing assignments, drafts of papers, graded writing assignments, copies of exams, syllabi, and the like.

The purpose of the study will be explained to all participants and they will be ensured that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any given time. The views of participants will be of paramount importance to this study. I will ensure that these are listened to, respected, and represented objectively.

Give details of any other ethical issues which may arise from this project (e.g. secure storage of videos/recorded interviews/photos/completed questionnaires or special arrangements made for participants with special needs etc.):

Records of the data collected (including transcripts and any audio recordings) will be stored in a secure and safe place. Electronic information will only be accessed by the researcher with their username and password. This information will be stored on a secure system with recognized virus protection. Electronic and paper information will be locked in a secure building. Information will also be coded to ensure anonymity. This will remain anonymous in the write up of the research. Collected written information will be destroyed by shredding and securely disposing when it is no longer required. Any audio recording will also be disposed of digitally.

Give details of any exceptional factors, which may raise ethical issues (e.g. potential political or ideological conflicts which may pose danger or harm to participants):

There are no exceptional factors, which may raise ethical issues anticipated by the researcher.

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*This form should now be printed out, signed by you on the first page and sent to your supervisor to sign. Your supervisor will forward this document to the School's Research Support Office for the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee to countersign. A unique approval reference will be added and this certificate will be returned to you to be included at the back of your dissertation/thesis.*

*N.B. You should not start the fieldwork part of the project until you have the signature of your supervisor*

---

This project has been approved for the period: 21st November 2011 until: 31st July 2012

By (above mentioned supervisor's signature): S.M. Bailey date: 15th November 2011

*N.B. To Supervisor: Please ensure that ethical issues are addressed annually in your report and if any changes in the research occurs a further form is completed.*

---

SELL unique approval reference: D/11/12/14

Signed: Saleh Saleh date: 21/11/2011  
Chair of the School's Ethics Committee

---

This form is available from <http://education.exeter.ac.uk/students/>

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Chair of the School's Ethics Committee  
last updated: August 2009