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## Informal Order, Needs Analysis, and the EAP Curriculum

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## Informal Order, Needs Analysis, and the EAP Curriculum

### Abstract

The academic curriculum is developed through a systematic process whereby content is created through the alignment of needs to stakeholder or target group. This qualitative research study features a small-scale, English for academic purpose (EAP) needs analysis (NA) of three credit-bearing EAP programs and the corresponding departmental programs conducted at a Language Center at a higher education institution in Oman. Based on interview, observational and documentary data, the analysis showed divergences in academic literacy (writing and reading) between the EAP and content programs. Principally, the findings pointed to the presence and operation of a group of informal orders and the emergence of two interrelated stories: public and real. The public story purported to blame the learner's English language proficiency for unfavorable performance at EAP and Departmental levels, whereas the real story revealed that institutional factors were equally responsible. The paper ends by making a few conclusions about the importance of heeding informal order when carrying out needs analysis.

### Keywords

Assessment, Curriculum, EAP, Higher Education, Informal Order, Needs Analysis, Oman

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## Informal Order, Needs Analysis, and the EAP Curriculum

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*The academic curriculum is developed through a systematic process whereby content is created through the alignment of needs to stakeholder or target group. This qualitative research study features a small-scale, English for academic purpose (EAP) needs analysis (NA) of three credit-bearing EAP programs and the corresponding departmental programs conducted at a Language Center at a higher education institution in Oman. Based on interview, observational and documentary data, the analysis showed divergences in academic literacy (writing and reading) between the EAP and content programs. Principally, the findings pointed to the presence and operation of a group of informal orders and the emergence of two interrelated stories: public and real. The public story purported to blame the learner's English language proficiency for unfavorable performance at EAP and Departmental levels, whereas the real story revealed that institutional factors were equally responsible. The paper ends by making a few conclusions about the importance of heeding informal order when carrying out needs analysis. Keywords: Assessment, Curriculum, EAP, Higher Education, Informal Order, Needs Analysis, Oman*

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It is well-known that needs analysis (NA) is the foundational pillar for curriculum development and design. In their paper discussing current debates around the curriculum and why it is important today, Tedesco, Operti, and Amadio (2014) argue for the need to conduct a wider and more inclusive dialogue around the area of curriculum development and design. Because curriculum design entails “statements related to the underpinning principles and core values, general objectives, expectations for learning achievement, and guidelines for organising both the teaching and learning process and assessment methods—assessment of, for, and as learning” (pp. 535-536), it is important to consider the first step on the road to this goal, which is a sound needs analysis. The same could be said in syllabus design in relation to the field of foreign English language instruction, and perhaps more so here, because of the special characteristics of the learners who are enrolled in these programs.

The current study arises out of an overdue process for investigating the curriculum and assessment of three credit-bearing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs and their relationship with the three respective disciplinary departments in a Language Center (LC) in an English-medium higher education institution (HEI) in the Sultanate of Oman. As I had been an English language instructor in two of the three researched credit-bearing EAP programs a few years ago with no real affordances (i.e., opportunity and/or power) to conduct a proper needs analysis, we as ordinary instructors had to carry out our teaching based on superficial “needs analysis” in the form of transient meetings between the LC, in which these EAP programs were situated, and the corresponding disciplinary departments. The concomitant discourse in the setting generally laid the blame on the learner and the EAP programs in relation to the former's inadequate English language performance when students subsequently join the departments.

The three credit-bearing, science-based EAP programs, which existed to serve their three disciplinary departments, were under the umbrella of the LC which equally delivered pre-sessional English language foundation programs in addition to the in-sessional credit-bearing EAP programs in question. All in turn were housed hierarchically in the HEI. This multiple

hierarchy and layers sometimes added to and at other times fueled the dominant discourse. Therefore, when an opportunity presented itself in the form of institutional release time from the same institution and after taking institutional approval from the respective office, I took it with the view of conducting a proper needs analysis study.

It is renowned that “Needs analysis is the necessary point of departure for designing a syllabus, tasks and materials” (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p. 178) in general and specific English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs and that whilst “general English begins with the language,” academic purpose needs analysis “begins with the learner and the situation” (Hamp-Lyons, 2001, p. 126). It is also well-acknowledged that creating the defensible EAP curriculum requires a balance between the available teaching approaches and syllabuses in ELT and information obtained from various stakeholders (Brown, 2009).

A number of salient reasons determined the researcher’s choice of a critical approach to a traditional approach to needs analysis. First, a traditional NA is appropriate when insight into the complexities of domain-specific language use/discourse is required (e.g., Horowitz, 1986) and thus because of its descriptive nature traditional NA does not adequately focus on power relations inside institutional structures/borders (e.g., Helmer, 2013).

Second, a focus away from descriptive NA necessarily turns us away from the traditional deficit, present-situation-target-situation model of needs analysis which is narrowly focused on the learner’s wants, needs and lacks to a focus towards critical needs analysis which is premised on the perspective that “institutions are hierarchical and that those at the bottom are often entitled to more power than they have” (Benesch, 1996, p. 736). This type of analysis is therefore needed to highlight the prevalent discourse in the institution in question and to allow for uncovering the roles and influences of the key players in the context. As a result, as the present study is focused on examining the hierarchical and power differential existent in/around three EAP and respective disciplinary departments, a non-traditional approach to carrying out needs analysis was deemed necessary. Finally, an ethnographic focus through using means analysis (Holliday, 1992) added to the NA study both an empirical angle (through consideration and reconsideration of the design of the analysis) and ethnographic focus (enabling a lens at the researched programs and the host institution *writ large*). These two methodological options helped in the discovery of valid knowledge such as this embedded in the concept of informal order.

In this paper, I will discuss how attention to informal orders helped in fortifying the credibility of an academic purpose English language needs analysis. The findings pointed to the presence and operation of two stories: the public vs. the real with the overarching conclusion that English language proficiency is only one among factors that influence students’ English language performance with institutional factors playing an equally significant role.

### **Informal Order**

Based on the extant literature, an institution’s informal order is key to understanding institutional cultures. Swales (1980) characterizes informal orders as what actually happens in an institution in contrast to what should happen. Coleman (1988) defines informal order as:

An intangible network of personal relationships, shared knowledge, unwritten conventions, ethnic rivalries and internal politics considerations ... [which] runs sometimes in parallel with and sometimes in conflict with the formal overt structure of the institution. (p. 157)

As such, there is contrast between the tangible vs. the intangible, the personal versus the institutional, shared vs. unshared, unwritten vs. written, formal vs. informal and overt vs. covert.

These classic distinctions can be also broadly found in Schön's (1983, 1987) espoused theories and theories in-use. Further, in her discussion of the ideology of tests, Shohamy's (1997, pp. 346-347) notion of two parallel systems where dichotomizations between the public vs. the real and the official vs. the unofficial appear is a case in point:

one manifested through the curriculum or policy documents; the other reflecting bureaucratic aspirations through tests. These two systems are often in contradiction to one another... Thus there is a public story and then a real story which is revealed by tests and pushed by bureaucrats and often not known to the public.

Informal order as obstacles in ELT project design is well-documented in the Arab world and southeastern countries (e.g., Andrews, 1984; Coleman, 1988; Cooke & Holliday, 1982; Holliday, 1992; Swales, 1980). Back in 1980, at Khartoum University, Swales faced an informal order situation. Designing a geology course for the students, he structured the course so that each of the laboratory report and the map drawing components took half of the score. Subsequently, upon Swales' investigation of students' declining attendance, he discovered an informal order. Apparently, due to the perceived complexity of the laboratory report requirements, the lecturers secretly arranged with their students to allocate 90% of the score to the map leaving only 10% for the report. Upon knowing the operating informal order, Swales was able to enter through negotiations in which the requirements for the laboratory report were simplified rather than totally eliminated.

At Damascus University, Cooke and Holliday (1982) were also faced with informal order practices where the consultancy visit which was instrumental in gathering informal data was in conflict with information gathered during the formal ESP project period. At Khartoum Polytechnic, Andrews (1984) related an incident where English was used less by college lecturers than it was officially stated. At Hasanuddin University in Indonesia, Coleman (1988) was made to believe in the high availability of books and readings lists provided by the lecturers only to discover that those were either unavailable or they were unused by the students and the lecturers because the books were deemed hard to read.

Finally, Holliday (1992) reported on the operation of informal orders in Egyptian faculties of education in the case of one ELT project. He found that although lecturers cooperated in the development of writing the new curriculum (where content was scheduled for two semesters of ten weeks each, and two to four contact hours per week), rarely was the case that this timing was actually available in practice. Timetabling, shortage of lecturers, commuting of lecturers, and poor classroom acoustics were amongst the factors that stealthily ate up the planned time.

From this discussion, two pertinent points are in order. Firstly, the literature on informal orders was documented with regard to ELT project management and innovation. The study described below did not come across informal orders in the context of project planning and implementation but in the context of a small-scale needs analysis, which was designed to study the EAP curriculum as documented in curricular documents and as perceived by language instructors in the EAP programs and the disciplinary professors from the corresponding departments through a focus on instructor and professor expectations of students in academic reading and writing in a Language Center in one Oman HEI.

Secondly, the presence and operation of informal orders are hidden from strangers or foreigners not because the stakeholders necessarily think that they are deficient, but that, according to Holliday (1992), they can happen because of the unsatisfactory formal channels between the project managers and the institutions (e.g., absence of documentation, outdated information). Additionally, the discovery of informal order requires persistent observation of

the institution and the collection of information from the grassroots and the dependence on more personal and in-depth interviewing rather than questionnaires or surveys (ibid, pp. 410-411). This qualitative insider research demonstrated that the adoption of a critical approach to NA revealed informal order as a socio-cultural phenomenon and identified how the EAP programs and corresponding departments.

### **The Study**

The study was carried out with the view to exploring EAP instructor and professor expectations of students' academic literacy in a Language Center at tertiary level in Oman. Since the springboard for this study was the discourse predominant in the context that students' inadequate performance is blamed on the learner's English language proficiency and the EAP programs, the research question was set to capture this angle: "What are the EAP instructor and departmental professors' expectations of students in academic reading and writing as revealed by the needs analysis study?"

A focus on the expectations as perceived in EAP and professor interviews (planned curriculum) and as revealed in curricular and assessment practices (taught/hidden curriculum) coupled with the author's experience of the programs and the departments will address both curricula in a balanced way because of the involvement of program and departmental perspectives, and in a way, such that the blame discourse will become visible for research scrutiny.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

To address the research question, a qualitative approach was the chosen methodology guiding this inquiry because of its potential in the examination of context, and in further allowing the researcher immersion into what is being researched "and to move into the culture or organization being studied and experience what it is like to be a part of it" (Krauss, 2005, pp. 759-760).

At first, a traditional ethnographic approach to data collection was considered but was found limited due to its focus on cultural and contextual aspects of the programs and the departments and ignorance of power relations which were deemed effectual in the setting. Therefore, a critical ethnographic approach was subsequently adopted as it provided focused, thick and rich description of the context under study and simultaneously highlighted the structural and power factors characterizing the EAP and the content programs. This theoretical position has therefore influenced the course of the study in three interrelated ways: (1) my invested interests in the betterment of the EAP programs and thus the quality of the undergraduate experience for the EAP students, (2) my years' long teaching experience in the LC and the credit-bearing EAP programs and the power differential between them and the departments (i.e., the aforementioned discourse), and (3) how (1) and (2) shaped my own subjectivities as an insider researcher. Therefore, the researcher's positionality with regard to the research and the participants should be considered from this specific stance. In practical terms, these all have affected the stance from which I set out, which is that the EAP programs and the Departments were equally but invariable institutional powers which had requirements in conflict with learner needs.

Table 1 lays out a prototype research design that was implemented consistently across the three programs/departments under study.

Table 1. Prototype Research Design for Departments X, Y, Z

	<b>Interviewed participants</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Documents</b>	<b>Observation</b>
Department N	Program Leader (1) 3 (2 professors + 1 HOD)	Departments' requirements with regards to reading and writing  Professor evaluation of students' proficiency and academic language skills  The range of writing and reading assignments required by the departments  Departmental assessment policies and practices	A range of continuous and end of semester departmental exams (online vs. offline)  Curriculum/assessment policies/specifications at the LC	Researcher as instructor in the context  Informal talks

Total of Program Leader (3); Total of Departmental Professors (9); Total number of participants (12)

*The Disciplinary Departments: X, Y & Z.* The departments I selected to include in the study were three sampled out of the five existing science-based departments in the English-medium higher education institution. They co-existed with four other arts-based departments. After students satisfy the requirements of the pre-sessional foundation English program, students proceed to study in the department in which they have been admitted and simultaneously take the credit-bearing EAP program corresponding to their chosen specialization.

*The EAP Programs: X, Y & Z.* The sampled EAP programs corresponded to the departments X, Y & Z. The LC oversees the EAP programs, and though the programs are housed within the LC, the Departments have a very influential role in their continuation or otherwise. The students enrol in the program corresponding to their major only after they satisfy the requirements of the general English language foundation program, they at the same time co-enrol in their subject-matter courses in the departments. Those English language programs are run in multiple sections, and are 6-hour-a-week courses, offer English specific language and skills-related components, and particularly aim to equip students with sub-technical vocabulary, specific academic reading skills and laboratory report and summary writing.

### **Data Collection and Methods**

Holliday (1992, pp. 411- 412) argues that the investigation of the informal order can be done through a systematic *means analysis*, which involves a continual search of appropriate

methods and sources and heightened sensitivity to the micro, meso, and macro cultures of institutions by forging an ethnographic existence in the setting. As such, for this study open interviewing, document review and observation in the wider sense with an ethnographic element (Holliday, 1992) were utilized to achieve the set goal. As an insider researcher, I accumulated a great deal of experience by being in the setting for a considerable amount of time prior to the data collection and through teaching two of the three EAP programs. The dataset (i.e., interviewing Departmental faculty and LC administrators about the Departments' academic requirements for students, and examining the Departmental programs' curricula and assessment specifications) formed the needs analysis, on which the findings of this study are based.

*Observation.* Staying in situ. In this study, observation is not used in the normal sense such as in classroom observation where the researcher is bracketed by the classroom walls. On the contrary, observation was employed mainly as a strategy to direct the progress of the study—to construct a “primary record” of the events and processes in the sites under study (Carspecken, 1996, p. 41). For example, staying in situ helped me locate and access whatever practice, past and real quizzes were available in the virtual domain, which some departmental programs kept in addition to the traditional paper-based assessments. I used observation to produce a series of “focused descriptions” (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999, p. 50). Those constructions made use of the informal talks which I conducted with other stakeholders either during my visits to the departments (i.e., senior departmental administrators), or during my stay in the LC when gathering data (i.e., colleagues) and generally involved discussion of pertinent issues with fellow colleagues outside the original sample group. All of this helped me gain further insight into the “social relations” (ibid, p. 42) in the site. Fundamental to the selection of these methods and approaches was the research design goal to approximate the classic distinctions reviewed above (Schön, 1983, 1987; Shohamy, 1997).

*Interviews.* The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to identify the EAP program instructors and departmental professors' expectations of learners in terms of reading and writing as they see it in their social world, and “to get a sense of how the apparently straightforward is actually more complicated, of how the ‘surface appearances’ may be quite misleading about ‘depth realities’” (Wengraf, 2001, p. 6). Reflecting my general approach to interviewing, both interviewee groups were invited to *critically* examine their teaching and assessment practices in the sense of how their practices oscillated along the learner vs. institutional requirements continuum.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the departmental professors (n=9), and simultaneously studied the assessment materials in the form of tests, quizzes and examinations. Initially, in the process of recruiting participants from the Departments, I was given by the gatekeepers a list of names, which corresponded to professors holding Head of Department positions (n=3). However, I subsequently contacted individual practitioners (professors not holding HoD positions) personally for concerns of data sufficiency and validity (n=6). This proved to be important subsequently in providing insights from the grassroots, information I later found often in conflict with the views held by the HoDs, thus giving way to the discovery of informal order. I interviewed professors in their offices and interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. During the interviews, I sought demographic information from the departmental professors (n=9). The professors had been lecturing at the departments for an average of 11 years (ranging from 2 to 19 years), and they were full-time tenured professors with a PhD in their respective specialized disciplines. All professors' L1 was a language other than English, where some (n=5) had Arabic as their native language and the others (n=4) spoke a different language. One professor from each Department was an academic administrator who held a HoD position (Hisham, Department X; Riley, Department Y & Freddi, Department Z), whilst the other six (two from each Department) did not hold any other administrative position.



Interview questions included the departments' requirements with regards to reading and writing, their assessment of students' proficiency and academic language skills, the range of writing and reading assignments required by the departments, and the departmental assessment policies and practices. Further, the expectations expressed in the interviews were compared to reflections made by the observer and the analysis of the curriculum and assessment practices.

I further interviewed policy makers at the EAP programs' level (n=3 program leaders) as opposed to instructors holding teaching positions only, since the former had a more informed perspective on the status of their programs and how (well) they were serving the Departments. These interviews invariably took 90 minutes and were all conducted in English. Demographic information obtained from the program leaders (n=3) during the interviews indicated that they had been managing and teaching in the EAP programs for an average of 6 years (2, 5 & 10 years) and had spent an average of 9 years teaching at the LC level (5, 10, 12 years). The leaders were full-time instructors, held MA in TESOL degrees, had English as L1, and had teaching assignments in the program equal to six hours a week. The overall LC program manager was an Omani who also held a PhD in curriculum studies, and had been in the post of overseeing the curriculum-related issues of the LC programs for an average of 6 years. For the purposes of this paper, no data is included from interviewing the LC overall program manager as it was found that he/she had little role in the supervision of the credit-bearing EAP programs.

*Document Review.* To further triangulate the data, I collected and analyzed a range of continuous and end of semester departmental exams, which were either stored with the professors or were released in the public domain. I further studied the assessment policies in the form of curriculum, and assessment specifications at the LC. In tandem with the general approach adopted, Shohamy's (2006, p. 54) warning about the search for the location of policy documents was heeded where the search was not:

limited to the examination of declared and official statements. Rather, the real policy is executed through a variety of mechanisms that determine de facto practices. There is a need, therefore, to examine the use of the mechanisms and study their consequences and effects on de facto LP, as it is through the mechanisms that de facto language policy [LP] is created and manifested.

This was facilitated by my membership in this community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in the milieu of the LC and the HEI at large, as was explained above.

## **Data Analysis**

It would be unfair to claim that the analysis commenced at the conclusion of the data collection stage. Given the nature of the study, as recommended by Holliday's (1992) means analysis numerous attempts were considered for the formulation and testing of hypotheses throughout the data-gathering stage. This was considered necessary to the provision of explanatory as opposed to descriptive data. I used hypothesizing as a method for the needs analysis to learn from itself (procedural) in order to determine the direction of the NA (e.g., in the sense of who to interview and where next to look for information). Additionally, various hypotheses were generated at various stages of the research process based on my interpretation of the gathered evidence at any one point in time (substantive). For example, at one point I formulated a hypothesis that the overemphasis on the multiple-choice question was epistemologically bound in the sense that the subject-matter was unfavorably biased against other forms of assessment. Subsequently and given additional evidence—that is, when assessment in more theoretical courses (biology as opposed to calculus was based on the multiple choice question format)—this hypothesis was disconfirmed and substituted with an

alternative hypothesis (i.e., the multiple choice question format was used to save assessors' time), and so forth.

The interviews were transcribed and then coded through a process of pattern-coding as well as increasing attention was paid to discrepant and different case analysis through a cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, when a professor not holding a HoD position presented different information regarding why students were not reading their textbooks to the information presented by a HoD professor, I decided, as was earlier noted, to recruit more practitioners for the research. A qualitative content analysis was also utilized to identify the main trends in the curricular and assessment documents such as the identification of question types, and the study of their quantity, proportion and specific properties. The constructed accounts made through being in situ and engaging in informal talks proved to be the most informative method of information as they formed co-constructed sense-making using different sources and methods triangulated to facilitate "squaring the finding with others it needs be squared with" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 267). Abundant interview data are presented here to preserve the original context of the utterance. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and names were selected to reflect the nationality of the participants (Arab vs. non-Arab).

### **Key Findings**

The needs analysis derived from EAP program and departmental faculty interviews and curriculum and assessment specifications/documentations showed very significant findings.

The qualitative-driven study was able to reveal the presence and operation of informal order in two key literacy areas relating to the short answer and multiple choice questions and reading the standard textbook. Not only was the needs analysis able to reveal the public story which purported to blame the learner English language proficiency for unfavourable performance at EAP and Departmental levels but it was also able to go underneath the surface by uncovering the real story that institutional factors were equally responsible for this unfavourable performance.

### **The Classic Multiple-Choice and Short Answer Questions**

In what follows on the short answer question (SAQ), I show that the public story which purported to blame the learner English language proficiency for the Departments' overemphasis on multiple-choice questions as the chosen tool for assessment was not totally accurate, but that this overemphasis was rather driven by other motivations (the real story). Moreover, I demonstrate that the claim that the Departments' use of the short-answer question was because of the learner's low English ability (the public story) was in fact an instance of enforcement by accreditation agencies, and not a departmental choice (the real story). The effect of this latter finding was complicated by the fact that the EAP instructors had a different conception of the SAQ to that understood and practiced by the professors, and they equally did not believe in its legitimacy as a form of assessment, as it was used by departmental faculty.

The departments. From the needs analysis, almost all faculty across Departments complained about the accuracy of the students' writing productions after they leave the LC. Some complained very explicitly and in very direct ways about their dissatisfaction with the quality of the students' writing, and went to question the time that their students spent at the LC. Hisham from Department X stated:

even though they spent one semester or two semesters [at the LC], their standard of English I can only describe it as POOR, POOR. I don't know what they are

doing in the department of English here in the Department, but when they come to us they can hardly put a sentence together. [Interviews/Hisham]

Indeed, some departmental faculty's disenchantment of the LC practices by holding a negative image (Pennington & Hoekje, 2010) of the LC was not uncommon, even going to the extreme as requesting an "independent, international evaluation of the final output from your Center" (Interviews/Department Y/Riley). At the time of recruiting participants for this research, one of the assistant deans narrated an incident which aimed to demonstrate that the testing mechanism at the LC was not reliable<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, at the accuracy level, Riley's comments spoke for the whole faculty in Department Y:

There's a very general complaint. It's not only writing. It's a very poor [level] of English. It's not only our department. All other departments suffer from the same problem. The general level of English is inadequate. This is a Full stop! So this is a uniform opinion of all departments and most faculty here. [Interviews/Riley]

Because of this "low" ability of the students to write, the lecturers stated that they resorted to other easier forms of assessment. This was the first information I was faced with from the interviews as well as from my presence *in situ* through talking to high-ranking Departmental administrators. For example, a high ranking administrator at Department X expressed that because of the poor level of English of the students, the Department policy resorted to testing the students using Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQs) thus reducing the quantity of writing in assessments. Indeed, this belief was subsequently confirmed from the interviews with some faculty and the use of MCQs was confirmed from the interviews as well as from the assessment specifications. Hisham's words here spoke for all (notice the direct associations between English difficulties and Department's X decision):

their standard in English is NOT to the standard of a tertiary level. That's I think is ABSOLUTELY CLEAR. ... And one of the reasons is that again the Department because of the difficulties with English they are not giving them assessments as far as the essays are concerned. All the assessments are either MCQs, or short notes, not even short notes, filling in gaps, matching statements, some VERY PRIMITIVE way. So the assessment is not guiding them even within the Department. [Interviews/Hisham]

This was also common in other Departments (See Freddie of Department Z in which he utilised a True/False Question type naming it a MCQ type to encourage (force) students to read from the textbook). Another further interesting example of the overemphasis on MCQs as assessment tool was one document supplied by a student from Department Z through a student's blog in which this student attached a document of "old quizzes" (655 pages; 44 Chapters; 2620 MCQs). Further, this dependence on MCQs was evident by examining the questions in the Departments' assessments, where in addition to the MCQs-proper question

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<sup>1</sup> The incident related to the transfer of students from a private College in Muscat to the Higher Education Institution (HEI) in question. The Assistant Dean spoke of the college in very high terms. He wanted to make the point that students deliberately failed themselves in the HEI's LC Challenge Test because they wanted to take the LC Foundation English Program "as a ride." I was also faced with the same argument during the interviews with a few other lecturers. However, when I asked my research debriefer who happened to be the academic director of this College at one time about this point, he stated that the current Head of the College 'has downgraded the standards of the department' (Researcher notes).

type, other questions which were declared explicitly as fill-in-the-gap questions were in fact MCQs (See same point further below on Freddie from Department Z). Below is an example from a quiz from Department Y:

2. Fill in the blanks.

- a) In eutrophic river, maximum DO concentration is likely to occur -----  
- mid-day. (at/ after/ before)
- b) Long term trends in water quality cannot usually be determined for less than  
---- years of monitoring. (five/ twenty/ ten/ thirty)
- c) Maximum depletion of Dissolved oxygen in rivers occurs due to disposal of  
untreated organic waste at ----- of disposal. (upstream/ downstream/ point)

For some lecturers, however, they used other questions such as the short answer question. During the interviews, at least four of the interviewees—Riley and Fahad (Department Y); Raed (Department Z); Mason (Department X)—presented me during the interviews with their students' exam papers and scripts. This was also a very popular form of assessment in most of their quizzes and exams.

With regard to the SAQ, two faculty members from Department Y (Fahad and Laila) and one from Department X (Mason) stated problems which their students had when writing and which they themselves faced when marking the responses for these SAQs. Fahad explained:

If I try to judge or grade the way I am supposed to grade, looking in the answers, looking at the grammar, looking at the spelling you'll find it sometimes I'll end up giving Zero. I find the information is there on the paper, but the way it was put is in VERY disorganised sentences. [Interviews/Fahad]

Examples of these questions from Department Y appearing in the Public Domain are following:

Answer briefly the following questions 17X6 points = 102 points

What are the reasons for conducting a preliminary survey?

Differentiate between time-proportional and flow-proportional sampling of water.

List hydrological information collected during water quality assessment of rivers, lakes and groundwaters.

Explain how mixing of two types of groundwater can be detected using trilinear diagram.

In addition to the very popular WH questions generally, the Departments' SAQs frequently used specialised words similar to those identified by Bloom's (1956) cognitive and psychomotor taxonomy (e.g., see also Dunworth's 2008 task-based analysis of undergraduate assessment). Examples of these Command words which I saw in the corpora of assessments at the Departments were: Explain, Draw, Identify, Classify, Give an Example, List, Differentiate, Compare, and Discuss. For these question types, usually a response at the paragraph level was required, and in all their assessments (i.e., quizzes, tests, exams) a space was always left in the question paper for the students' responses.

Mason, of Department X, directly requested that the LC EAP programs attend to these by specifying what he believed as a major problem facing students in the SAQs: this related specifically to the students' not knowing the functions of these questions as a result of not knowing the Command vocabulary words which introduced these questions, thus not

foregrounding the reductionist English language proficiency argument advocated by other faculty as a scapegoat for what is essentially institutional (EAP programs and Departments) requirements (e.g., Hisham, Freddie, & Riley):

if the Language Center will be familiar with the kind of questions we ask, and then they would train the students on ways of when it says “list,” it requires you to list 1, 2, 3, 4. When it says “briefly” it means “briefly.” But secondly, I think, if the students would be familiar with what it means to say “discuss,” what it means to say “describe,” what it means to say “compare.” Because then if they understand these terms because we use them a lot and then you find students not sure whether to list or to give a long story! [Interviews/Mason]

However, these lecturers (Laila and Fahad from Department Y and Mason from Department X) pointed out that the issue was not primarily the poor proficiency of the students which other faculty claimed was responsible but there were other issues. In fact, these lecturers saw that the students were generally capable. For this research, the problem however can be defined at two levels. Firstly, there was a gap here to do with the absence of teaching and assessing the Short Answer Question, SAQ, from the EAP programs and its popularity in the Departments (See further below). Secondly, other data pointed that wrong practices at the Department policy level and by the lecturers were responsible for this, and not primarily/solely the function of the LC or the quality of the credit-bearing EAP programs, as it might have appeared at first to be (See further below).

As a response to this culture of assessing students through MCQs predominantly, other faculty (Mason from Department X, and Fahad and Laila from Department Y, and Humaid from Department Z) did not approve of this practice, and attempted to include short-answer questions and essay questions, but their reflection on their colleagues’ practices is quite telling and important here:

For me I am going the other way ‘round. ... I don't give up on my students ... but they [the students] are complaining, “Your quiz is not any big difference to the midterm.” And I said “Absolutely. The content will judge the difference between the two.” The midterm will be heavy, but we will be having two pages in a normal quiz. I know my colleagues just say, “10 minutes, multiple choice. It's easier for me, if it's multiple choice, I'll be happy, I have like 30 40 students, I just enjoy my life.” But despite all these problems, I still go to make sure for many reasons I've got essay questions, and short answers and definitions. [Interviews/Fahad]

Therefore, in addition to the faculty attempting to reduce assessment overload, from Department X Mason further did not think that the overdependence on assessing students’ knowledge through MCQs was the result of students’ poor proficiency level, but was rather motivated by reducing workload demands on the lecturer and issues of the subjectivity inherent in open questions:

It [assessing using more open questions] is more of an issue of having the capacity to do it. If you don't have enough feet to conduct this assessment, then you have to depend on the easiest one which is just to do an exam, whether it is multiple choice, largely multiple choice that you can assess very quickly. That is one. Two is in most of these other forms of assessment there will be some

subjective element introduced to that, and then you open yourself to: why did I get 5 and the other one got 3? [Interviews/Mason]

However, from the interview data, although the short answer question was an exception to the predominant MCQ, it was externally imposed on the Department by accreditation rather than by conviction to help students have space to write and assess differently and it was a recent occurrence:

In the beginning, LARGELY in the past we've been using objective testing, and then in the end of the program in addition to objective testing, they do written exams. Over the past one or two years, we have re-introduced what we call short answer questions where the students will be required to write a very brief description of an answer. This we've started doing in the past 1 or 2 years because of the suggestion by an external examiner session. [Interviews/Mason]

This notion of external demands drove Department X to assess differently (i.e., in this case using the SAQ), in the same way the accreditation agency did drive Department Z faculty—according to Khalfan of Department Z—to assess the Final Year Projects (FYPs)<sup>2</sup>, but not assess the laboratory reports where a whole EAP program (Program Z) existed for this purpose. Neither was driven by the students' needs but by the institution mission for accountability.

The EAP programs. In the LC, by contrast, based on the interview data, the SAQs in the form presented by the Departments were not familiar to instructors, and did not appear in any of their assessments. However, the notion of SAQs in EAP programs was different. Examples of SAQs as appearing in one of the assessments in EAP Program Y follow:

**Write short answers in your own words-do not copy directly from the text (2 x 1)<sup>3</sup>**

- 8 How do \*\*\*\*\* try to control the spread of \*\*\*\*\*? .....
- 9 How do \*\*\*\*\* sometimes improve the \*\*\*\*\*? .....

That was as far as the space required for the students' response. Moreover, the wh-questions were a constant feature. Similarly, when faced with this expressed need and the popularity of this question type at Department level during the interviews, the program leaders either (1) thought that they did satisfy this need by including SAQs in their assessment (with a conception of the SAQ as that shown above), or (2) that they taught these Command words in their textbooks as part of their focus on academic vocabulary, or (3) that they did not believe in the benefit for students and for them to include such questions. Courtney, from EAP Program X, explained:

Researcher: And one thing that they [Departmental faculty] require the students to write on was a short answer question, which is a very specific question saying like "identify the function of ...," and the students were asked to write at the paragraph level,

<sup>2</sup> This is another area where informal orders are operating. However, those are not included within this article for space constraints.

<sup>3</sup> I am substituting asterisks for key words in the questions so as not to divulge the contents of the reading passage or the questions on account of promised confidentiality.

Courtney: And they'll always be able to memorise that, so wouldn't they?

Researcher: And one of the heads of departments whom I interviewed suggested that the Language Center medicine program incorporate that kind of task, in their curriculum,

Courtney: Having to write a short paragraph to answer a specific question?

Researcher: A specific question,

Courtney: So I hope we do that in this. I suppose in this kind of reading skills 2 exam, where they have to refer to something in the text, and explain something in their own words, yeah.

The data above indicate clearly that the issue of students' problems in writing and specifically responding to SAQs could not be understood simplistically to be primarily the result of low students' English proficiency, but partially because students were not trained to deal with this question type at the level of the LC EAP programs. Other reasons responsible were found at the Department level. Whilst there are differences between the language programs and content programs in function, one way by which the EAP programs can bridge this gap is by shifting the current practices from asking students to write a general summary to writing a summary with a leading, focused question. Similarly, the Departments should be more balanced in their policies and practices regarding their assessment.

Summarily, while some faculty hung the problem of overemphasis on the MCQ as an assessment tool on the students' poor proficiency level peg, principally blaming the LC (Hisham, Hussein, Riley, Freddie), other faculty (Mason, Raed, Laila and Fahad, and Khalfan) as well as this research pointed to the wrong practices by some lecturers (i.e., relying on MCQs to reduce assessment overload/conflicts) as responsible. Further, it was shown that the trend to use SAQs was enforced by external bodies (i.e., accreditation agencies) rather than what was best for the students.

### **Reading the Standard Textbook**

I note at the outset that I use "the textbook" for convenience rather than to indicate a uniform or common subject-matter or book shared by the Departments' and the EAP programs. In the former, the textbook embodied standalone subject-specific content and was a standard reading material, whereas in the latter the textbook was the package for the program contents, and followed either a skills or theme-based syllabus. In this section, I present the public story apparent in some faculty's claim that because of attitudinal or proficiency reasons students did not read or that they had a very low reading level in comparison to the real story where the predominance of note-taking and testing from professor notes established a persistent culture against reading the textbook.

The departments. With regard to the textbook in the Departments, it is the standard assigned reading for students either for lecture preparation or for assessment purposes. Hisham from Department X explained:

we give them textbooks, and we expect that the students should be able to read the textbook. So, these all are scientific books, and ultimately by the time they graduate in 6 years, they should be able to read their textbooks in surgery, in medicine, ... [Interviews/Hisham]

However, across the board there was an almost unanimous concern by the lecturers that their students were not reading the textbooks. The reasons for this varied however from one lecturer to another. Some linked this to the students' poor competency in English or their

overall attitude (Hisham from Department X, and Riley from Department Y memorable statements that “their reading habits on standard scale are on D level” and “if students read two pages of the textbook they are heroes”); others attributed it to students’ lack of know-how skills for reading the textbooks (Laila & Fahad from Department Y); others identified the bulky textbooks as the possible reason (Laila from Department Y & Mason from Department Z). Laila stated

they [the students] see a big book like that [pointing to a width of 5cm], they don’t know what to do with that book, how do I read that book, or what do I grasp from that book is very difficult. [Interviews/Laila]

However, although Riley and Hisham attributed this problem to students’ attitude generally or to poor language proficiency, clearly there were other factors responsible for students’ not reading assigned work on textbooks at two levels: at the level of the EAP programs not teaching this skill (see further section), and at the level of the Departments where there were wrong practices encouraging students not to read.

At the departmental level, from the interviews, there seemed to be practices whether at the Administration level or at the lecturer’s level to encourage (force) the students to read from the textbook. With regard to the policy level, Riley (Department Y) espoused that lecture notes were not permitted to be distributed to students if the course was accompanied with a textbook:

In the last 5 years, the policy changed. In the past, it was almost compulsory for the faculty to prepare lecture notes, handouts, like a brief description of what is presented in standard textbooks. Each course in our Department has a standard textbook, sometimes even two textbooks. And students in the past were not forced to read the textbooks because the lecture notes were a convenient tool to comprehend the materials. But about 5 years ago, the policy changed. And now it's NOT ALLOWED. [Interviews/Riley]

However, despite such espoused policies, according to Laila and Fahad (Department Y), lecturers still do give lecture notes. Fahad especially presented the struggle with which he himself tried to conduct a professional dialogue at the level of his Department to reduce the amount of lecture note-giving he saw common, but his proposal was rejected on claims of “academic freedom”:

Let's take it to the departmental level to start with which is a small network that you feel that it's controllable. With a few people in the department, I did raise once in a meeting ... So instead of judging my colleagues, I said, "Let's throw the cards on the table. And ask them exactly what can we do about this?" It was a mixed feeling. And everything was put as an umbrella, which to me is a sort of disappointment ... because most of them said "we need handouts. We need handouts." And I said, if you need more handouts, it means it's a sign that we give in and go away from the book ... but it was rejected that academics should be given FREEDOM. [Interviews/Fahad]

At the departmental level for example, Fahad from Department Y and Mason from Department X identified the wrong practices as responsible for this difficulty in that the habit by the lecturers generally to give out handouts, lecture notes or power point slides established a culture difficult to abolish and was partly responsible for this lack of students’ reading. Mason explained:



the students were given textbooks, and we've just had a Department retreat, and the students themselves were saying "Most of us do not read the textbooks." So what the students were saying is that you give us textbooks and we hardly read them for two reasons. One is, I am here speculating, that possibly they find the books too bulky, or the text is too difficult, but secondly, which is equally important, is because they feel that the questions are coming from the power point presentations that the tutors provide, so they don't read the textbook. [Interviews/Mason]

Faced with this problem, lecturers attempted to alleviate the severity of this problem by adopting different "tricks." Two lecturers—Laila (Department Y) and Freddie (Department Z)—included questions from the textbook to encourage (force) students to read. Freddie explained:

For me to encourage them to go and read the textbook apart from the lecture, I've got a section in my exam [which] always I do it as multiple choice questions, where they have to state whether it's true or false. And always I try to take it from the textbook, and rephrase it, word it. Then they realise, I tell them I got it from that textbook, a way of encouraging them to read the textbook. [Interviews/Freddie]

This was a common and persistent notion deeply embedded in practice also in Department Y as was pointed by Laila because as she said she "actually sometimes ask[s] them the NAME of the textbook, and they don't know that." Further examining their assessment documents revealed this exact specific practice on a quiz based on one of the programs:

2. Fill in the blanks: 3 points

Course code of this course:

Name of the course:

Title of the text book:

Author (editor) of the text book:

3. Name the method used to identify location of point sources of pollution? 1 point

A colleague of mine at the LC whom I used to share with her some of my observations and findings narrated two incidents of visiting professors who had a clash with the practices of the Departments (Both incidents took place in Departments which were not part of my research). One incident was about an Australian visiting professor who had a clash with the practices that were present in the faculty. She was giving a lecture with the expectation that the students would write their own notes. However, the students did not like this, and they complained to one of the faculty about this. The visiting professor stated, "These are my notes; they should write their own notes."

In a nutshell, neither the policies set by the Administration Departments nor the attempts by the faculty to include questions in their assessments based on the textbook seemed to be working against an established culture, where the students conjectured that the assessments were eventually derived from the lecturers' notes. This means that their unwillingness to read cannot be explained fully by their English proficiency level.

The EAP programs. At the EAP credit-based programs at the LC, no training on any aspects of textbooks was evident. Therefore, as was demonstrated above, whereas the textbook

was the assigned genre for reading in the Departments, in the LC EAP programs, the textbook, or the course book, packaged the program the language materials. Most assessment readings were taken from the Internet to be simplified either so that they would be accessible to the students or so that they could be accessible to the instructors teaching in the program. In Department Y EAP program, Emily stated how the readings selected for assessment were simplified for students' sake: "Our readings are sort of taken from the internet or Wikipedia and they're very lay people. I simplify them, so I think the reading level is sort of usually around Grade 12<sup>4</sup> reading level, something like that" [Interviews/Emily].

Summarily, although students' proficiency level was often quoted to be responsible for students' not reading the textbook by a few professors, informal orders (Swales, 1980)—i.e., giving lecture notes, and relying on these for the assessment by the lecturers—established this culture of non-reading. Further, the absence of teaching this component at the LC EAP programs also did not address students' needs as defined by the Departments.

### **Discussion**

In this study, I set out to present a critical needs analysis in an academic English purpose language setting in the Sultanate of Oman with three EAP programs at a Language Center and the respective departments. The paper documented the presence and operation of a group of informal orders which were not instantly evident at the Departmental level—classic tension between espoused and in-action policies and practices. Specifically, whilst the public story purported to blame the learner English language proficiency and sometimes the EAP programs for unfavourable performance at EAP and Departmental levels, the real story revealed that institutional factors were equally involved.

For example, although students' proficiency level was often quoted to be responsible for students' not reading the textbook by some departmental lecturers, other factors were responsible in establishing this culture of non-reading. First, the fact that there was a culture of notes-giving by the lecturers in the form of handouts and presentation slides instilled in the students a culture of dependence on the notes. Secondly, the fact that the lecturers depended almost totally on their lecture notes to base their assessment meant that the students, despite a few lecturers' in-vain attempts to encourage (force) students to read from the textbook, were neither encouraged to write notes, nor were they expected to study from the textbook. Further, the absence of teaching this component at the LC EAP programs did not address students' needs as defined by the Departments. The difference between this study and Coleman's (1988) study at Hasanuddin University in Indonesia is that the latter study identified the informal order for the reading skill as either the unavailability of textbooks or the difficulty of their substance (but see his reassessment of this in Coleman (1992) as the lack of encouragement by teachers). In this Oman HEI, textbooks were readily available, but the issue was a more complex network of informal orders starting with the perceived difficulty of the reading content to the abundance of alternative content in the form of lecturers' handouts and notes, and the culture of examining from these notes.

Further, whilst most departmental faculty did hang the problems with students writing accurate English (i.e., writing reports and exam responses) on the poor English proficiency level of the students and the LC and its EAP programs more generally, the research managed to problematize this notion, and track it further to the wrong practices at the level of the Department. By emphasising the Multiple Choice Question as the predominant form of

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<sup>4</sup> Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level is a common readability measure employed to judge the readability of the reading and listening texts in the LC programs. It is important to note that the level stated in the extract corresponds to the reading and listening texts in the highest level in the English foundation Program.

assessment, thus situating themselves in a “testing culture” as opposed to “assessment culture” (e.g., Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Shepard, 2000), the assessment policy and practice within the Departments did not allow opportunities for the students to express themselves in writing. Even when the introduction of the Short Answer Question in assessment would seem to result from the Departments themselves or the lecturers in general being aware of the shortcomings of the MCQ, the research showed that the introduction and use of this SAQ was the result of external pressures by accrediting agencies for reasons of accountability.

Secondly, by contrasting two stories (the public vs. the real) revealed by the informal order, the needs analysis indicated that English language proficiency is only one among factors that influence performance with institutional factors playing a significant role.

### Conclusion

To conclude, the study was able to problematize the prevalent discourse purporting to totally lay the blame on the learner’s low English language proficiency and the EAP programs for the students’ unsatisfactory performance at the departmental level, and made visible the existence and operation of a public story and a real one, with the latter indicating that both the departments and EAP programs have yet to work more closely to streamline the existing curriculum so that students are smoothly prepared for and transitioned into their academic studies. Additionally, the paper has shown that capturing informal order can potentially contribute a great deal towards a wider and more inclusive dialogue (Tedesco et al., 2014) between the language programs and the departments around EAP curriculum issues. The study is limited in two ways: Little use of student interview was made and the inability of the research to advance action or propose a change agenda other than dialogic discussion of these issues between the programs and the departments in order to redress this imbalance. Also, even though this research study is specific of, and relevant to, NA for the academic curriculum for foreign language instruction, it still has implications to NA in general education, and there are a number of valuable conclusions.

Informal orders such as those discussed above are not easy to detect. Andrews (1984) feels that the information he was able to collect, despite its operational usefulness, was “at best sketchy and impressionistic” (p. 176). Similarly, Coleman (1988) states that collecting information about the informal order is such a subjective affair that it could only “be tackled by a novelist” (p. 158). In spite of this, it is clear from this paper that the investigation of the informal order can be captured through attention to and a reorientation towards the detail of the NA itself, and particularly to informal order.

Informal orders may happen due to any number of reasons. First, variation in participants’ perceptions may be induced by departmental differences which in themselves may be evoked by the underlying epistemology of their subject-matter. For example, the subject-matter embodied in a calculus textbook does not presuppose the same approach to reading as the subject-matter found in biology textbooks, and therefore perceptions anchored in either position will naturally vary. Second, participant role will determine participants’ perceptions of needs, and such variation often results in a classic disjuncture between policy and practice. For example, participants who are located at the management level and are usually accredited with setting the policies are more likely to reveal different perceptions to those participants who are found at the practitioner end, those who are close to the nitty-gritty practices so to speak and are responsible for implementing those policies.

Finally, appearances or first impressions may not be indicative of true practices. Also, a couple of meetings or reliance on anecdotal data will not take us far enough. First encounters, transient meetings and/or opportunistic talks should not be conveniently accepted as representative of needs. Similarly, seemingly complex and/or reductionist arguments (example

from the setting is the case of summing up unfavorable performance of students in the language proficiency argument) should not be accepted as is, simplistically, superficially and naively. Instead, these need to be foregrounded and deconstructed in order to discuss their credibility in the open. Insider needs analysts should be cognizant of the subjectivities that their insider position affords them. Holliday (1992) points out that the difficulty with collecting reliable information of the informal order culture intensifies for the outsider. He argues that outsiders may operate from a different cultural vantage point with “cultural bias” (ibid, p. 410). By the same token, I contend that the insider researcher may operate from the same cultural bias. Though insider researchers “are familiar with the organisational culture, the routines and the scripts of the workplaces” (Hannabus, 2000, p. 103), the danger lurks in that too much attachment to and intimacy with the culture of the native might result in not noticing the significance of the unmarked, not posing the obvious question, not raising the sensitive topic, not discussing the common experiences, and not challenging the held assumptions (Mercer, 2007, p. 6) leading to the over-explanation of contexts.

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