

**The Perceptions and Practices of First Year Students'  
Academic Writing at the Colleges  
of Applied Sciences in Oman**

By

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# **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my late father Saleh bin Qasim Al-Badwawi, who passed away on 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 2009. May Allah's mercy and forgiveness be upon his soul. Amen!

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## **Abstract**

This study is an investigation of students' writing in one college of the Colleges of Applied Sciences (CoAS) in the Sultanate of Oman. The focus of the study was on probing the views and the discursive practices of first year students, their EFL teachers, and disciplinary teachers in relation to academic writing. The aim of the study was to gain an insight into students' experience with the demands of academic writing in the college and the contextual factors that shaped this experience. Recent research has taken a social view to academic writing. Within this movement and theorising writing as a social practice, the present study adopts the academic literacies approach as the general framework for exploring students' experience with writing.

The data for the study comes from three main sources: (a) semi-structured interviews with teachers, (b) student focus group interviews, and (c) document analysis. Seven focus group interviews were conducted with first year students. Fifteen interviews were conducted with teachers in the English Language Department, the Communication Department, and the International Business Department. In addition, the Head of the English Language Department in the college and the Director of the English Language Programme at the Ministry of Higher Education were also interviewed.

The results suggested that first year students' writing in the context of the study is influenced by several factors that interact together to make students' writing experience a unique and contextually situated phenomenon. These factors are: a) the task requirements, b) the students' learning histories, c) the disciplinary context, and d) the institutional context. Within each of these broad categories, there are also sub-categories that further demonstrate the complexity of students' writing and the multitude of elements that shape students' writing in the college. The thesis concludes by presenting practical and theoretical implications for first year officials, teachers, and course designers based on the findings of the study.

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# List of Abbreviations

**CoAS** : Colleges of Applied Sciences

**CoP**: Communities of Practice

**EAP**: English for Academic Purposes

**EFL**: English as a Foreign Language

**ELT**: English Language Teaching

**ESL**: English as a Second Language

**FYP**: Foundation Year Programme

**MoE**: Ministry of Education

**MoHE**: Ministry of Higher Education

**NLS**: New Literacy Studies

**NZTEC**: New Zealand Tertiary Education Consortium

# 1 Chapter One: Background to the Study

## 1.1. Introduction

The aim of this introductory chapter is to establish the theoretical and the contextual background for the study. In the first part of this chapter, the significance of writing in higher education contexts is highlighted. The second part describes features of the Omani educational context with a particular focus on the importance of writing in the context of the Colleges of Applied Sciences (henceforth CoAS). This will be followed by the rationale for the study, the research questions, and finally the thesis outline.

## 1.2. Writing in Higher Education Context

Students entering colleges or universities enter a new culture with its own norms, demands, and conventional ways of meaning-making. First Year students have to learn new literacy practices that will enable them to function successfully in the context of higher education. These practices are related to both the college as a site of cultural and academic literacies, and to the sub-cultures of the individual disciplines within the college. Some of the practices that first year students are required to acquire are obvious since they relate to the four language skills of writing, reading, listening, and speaking; while others are less obvious, such as study skills, critical thinking skills and analytical skills. Lea and Street (1998: 158) state that

Learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge. Academic literacy practices-- reading and writing within disciplines-- constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study.

While not denying the importance of other literacy practices, it is sometimes argued that academic writing is *the* most important language-related ability that tertiary students have to master to succeed in their college studies (Leki and Carson, 1994,

Zhu, 2004, Krause, 2001, Lillis, 2001). That is because assessment in many academic disciplines is based, to a large extent, on students producing 'good' writing texts in the form of essays, assignments, term-papers, or dissertations. Several writers have stressed the dominant place of academic writing ability in higher education situations. For example, Thesen (2001: 133) states that

University-based practices carry a heavy formal, written language load. A combination of knowledge practices and the way in which physical and social distances shape discourse suggest that the ability to operate in academic language is arguably the action.

Studying in higher education is characterised by a strong emphasis on academic writing since learning is largely mediated through written language (Hyland, 2006: 39). Students acquire the knowledge of their disciplines, in large part, by reading the writings of others. They are then asked to produce good examples of academic texts showing their understanding and internalisation of this knowledge and their ability to synthesise and manipulate it. Students' success at tertiary level is measured by their competence in their discipline areas as shown by the production of written academic texts that conform to the norms and conventions valued by their discourse communities at the level of organisation and argumentation as well as at the surface level. Therefore, the ability to write well is highly valued and emphasised by academics in higher education institutions as a means for students' achieving academic success and for demonstrating this achievement.

It can be claimed that university practices, especially those related to the assessment requirements in many higher education courses, are directly responsible for giving academic writing its current significance in students' lives. That is because in many institutions, essay writing is the preferred method of assessment of students' academic attainment not only in Humanities and Social Sciences, but also in some theoretical courses in Medicine and Science (Lillis, 2001, Bacha, 2002, Krause, 2001).

Some researchers argue that writing can promote students' learning processes by helping them make sense of their experiences (Manchón and Larios, 2007, Lillis, 2001). Proponents of the writing-to-learn stance contend that writing can help

students in at least four regards. Firstly, it can aid them in learning the content of their subject courses (Ellis, 2004) in what is usually labelled as ‘Writing-across-the-curriculum’ in the American higher education context. In this tradition, writing is incorporated into the curriculum of the disciplines and is designed to suit the different subject areas as a means of promoting students’ learning of that subject. Secondly, writing can also be linked to thinking and the development of cognitive and intellectual abilities, such as critical thinking, reasoning and evaluation, in addition to developing writing skills, such as summarising and text organisation (Bacha, 2002). Thirdly, writing can help students improve their second language because during the process of writing, students are engaged in solving a linguistic problem (Manchón and Larios, 2007). Fourthly, learning to write is in itself an important goal since possessing good writing ability is considered a vital skill for students in many careers and also when they consider further studies.

Academic writing is fundamental to students' academic survival at tertiary level education, yet at the same time, it is the most difficult skill to master since it requires both disciplinary knowledge (knowledge of the subject-matter) and linguistic knowledge (knowledge of appropriate language use). Academic writing is not a given skill even for students whose first language is English. As although these students are highly competent in their linguistic abilities, they still need to learn and adhere to the specialised language and conventions of the academic discourse, and to interact with the several contextual factors that are found in their institutions. Discussing writing instruction in the American higher education context, Leki and Carson (1994) state that both native and non-native speakers of English are required to take a compulsory course of one or two terms of writing as an essential component of their degree study

University requirements implicitly support the notion that ability to write well is integral to academic success; often the single institutionally mandated course at university, for both L2 and NES students, is a term to a year of composition (Leki and Carson, 1994: 83).

In the case of ESL/EFL contexts, academic writing becomes an even more demanding skill because it requires that students have the knowledge of their disciplines, in addition to the linguistic competence to express this knowledge in a



manner appropriate to their disciplines' communities of practice. Normally, students in ESL/EFL contexts do not have native-like linguistic abilities; however, they are not only expected to learn the content of the subjects they are majoring in, but also the special ways of constructing an academic text according to the conventions of the individual disciplines. Given the importance of writing in students' success at the tertiary level and in the light of the above discussion, it is no wonder that ESL/EFL students face considerable challenges with regard to academic writing in their different disciplines.

### 1.3. The Current Study

Students' writing in Higher Education has been the subject of an increasing number of studies in the past two decades. In several of these studies, academics voiced their concern about the 'falling standards' of students' literacy practices, especially their academic writing abilities (Lea and Street, 1998). The perceived 'problem' of tertiary students' writing underlies a 'deficit' model of literacy (Lea and Stierer, 2000) that attributes students' difficulties in writing to their inability to acquire the required skills deemed necessary to become successful writers. According to this model, these deficiencies can be amended through conducting remedial classes or writing workshops aimed at teaching students the technical skills needed to master academic writing.

In this study, however, the focus is on investigating first year students' perceptions of academic writing by obtaining their emic perspective on their experience with academic writing in the college. An attempt is made to give students a 'voice' to talk about how they experienced the demands of college level writing, the assignment-related factors, and the contextual factors that negatively or positively shaped this experience. In addition, the study investigates the adequacy of the support that first year students received from their teachers during the writing process.

From the review of the literature on approaches to students' writing in higher education (to be presented in Chapter Two), the academic literacies approach seems to be the most appropriate approach to be used as the theoretical framework for the

present study. The main reason is that this model takes into account the impact of the contextual factors on students' writing. By adopting an academic literacies approach to writing, this study steers away from the skills-based approach and the associated deficit model that puts the main onus of blame for students' lack of adequate writing abilities on shortcomings in their linguistic repertoire. Instead, the academic literacies approach views students' writing as a social practice that is situated within a socio-cultural context in which the contextual factors shape students' practices and perceptions regarding writing (Street, 1984, Street, 2003, Lea and Street, 1998, Ivanic, 1998).

In order to accomplish the purpose of the study, the following two main aims are proposed:

- 1) to investigate the contextual factors that influence students' writing in CoAS from the perspective of the students, the EFL teachers and the subject teachers, and
- 2) to probe the adequacy of the support that students get in acquiring the requisite literacy practices in EFL academic writing.

These aims are explored within the context of First Year students' writing in one college of the CoAS in the Sultanate of Oman. These colleges offer Bachelor Degrees in Information Technology, Design, International Business Administration and Communication. The language of instruction in the CoAS is English. The students who participated in the study had completed a full year Foundation Year Programme (FYP) that aimed to raise their English language proficiency in preparation for studying their degree courses in English. These students are graduates of the Omani school system where Arabic is the language of instruction and in which English is taught as a compulsory subject starting from Grade One (Age 6 years) in the Basic Education System.

In the second part of this chapter, a detailed description of the Omani context where this study takes place is offered. Topics that are covered are the status of English Language in Oman, English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Omani educational system, ELT in the CoAS, and the importance of writing in the CoAS. This will be

followed by the rationale of the study, the research questions, and the structure of the rest of the thesis.

## 1.4. The Omani Context

### 1.4.1. Introduction to the Omani Context

The Sultanate of Oman is a developing, Arab country situated in southwest Asia on the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula. It occupies an important geographic position on the Arabian Gulf. Oman's northernmost region, the peninsula of Musandam, is strategically located at the mouth of the Arabian Gulf on the Strait of Hormuz through which, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, about 40% of the world's seaborne oil shipments, and 20% of all world oil shipments pass each day<sup>1</sup>. According to the latest estimates by the CIA, the population of the Sultanate is 3,418,085 which include 577,293 expatriates.<sup>2</sup> Arabic is the mother tongue of the majority of Omanis, the official language of the country, and the language of instruction in government schools. English is the only foreign language taught in Omani government schools.

Discussing the status of English language in Oman cannot be viewed in isolation of the global context of the role of English language in the world. As a result of the past colonial history and the ongoing globalisation movement, English has become a dominant lingua franca in the world. In today's world, English is the language of science, technology, banking industry, international diplomacy, international communication, international business, and the internet. Kachru (1992) proposes a model for the spread of the English language in the world consisting of three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. Crystal (1997) provides some widely cited estimations for the number of people who speak or use English in these three circles. According to Crystal, in the Inner Circle English is spoken as the native language of 320-380 million people in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In the Outer Circle, English has an official role in the country, and is considered a second

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.eia.gov/cabs/world\\_oil\\_transit\\_chokepoints/Full.html](http://www.eia.gov/cabs/world_oil_transit_chokepoints/Full.html)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mu.html>

language for approximately 150-300 million as it is, for example, the case in India, Nigeria, and Zambia. The Expanding Circle constitutes of countries where English is used as a foreign language by about 100-1000 million people.

Although the above cited figures are outdated since they are more than a decade old, their relevance to the current discussion still holds true. They demonstrate that English is spreading quickly outside its historic 'native' countries to the extent of some authors debating the very notion of 'nativeness' and the ownership of the English language (Widdowson, 1994). Instead, they argue in favour of plural 'Englishes' to highlight the equal status of some varieties of English spoken worldwide which have become more established (Kachru, 1990). This trend was recognised in academic circles by the establishment of a new journal entitled 'World Englishes' in 1981 dictated to promoting and disseminating research about the different varieties of English that exist in the world today, rather than advocating one 'standard' variety of the language.

Oman can be considered as an example of countries in the Expanding Circle. In Oman, English has the status of a foreign language; however, the government acknowledges its importance in the development of the country's economy since it is the tool for Omanisation, or the gradual replacement of skilled expatriate manpower by locals (Al-Issa, 2005). In addition, English has institutionalised domains, such as business, science, technology, education, and mass media. English teaching has been receiving considerable attention and legislative support from the government. The National English Language Policy of Oman stresses the importance of English language teaching, as evident in the following excerpt

The English language skills of the Omani nationals must be seen as an important resource for the countries continued development. It is this recognition of the importance of English as a resource for national development and the means for a wider communication within the international community that provides the rationale for the English curriculum (Nunan *et al*, 1987: 2 cited in Al-Issa, 2005)

The spread of English language brought with it an 'expansion in the cultural, economic and political influence of Britain and the USA or the "Centre" (Kachru,

1986) in the less developed countries or the “Periphery” (Kachru, 1986)’ (Al-Issa, 2006), thus initiating an ideological struggle that can still be found in many countries around the world. This is particularly true when the language policies of the country, as reflected in the official and the educational sectors, are thought to promote English at the expense of the national or local language(s) of the country. Adopting English as the medium of instruction in the higher education sectors in non-English speaking countries can be considered as an illustration of such controversial policies.

Language policies in any educational context reflect ideological beliefs that shape policy makers’ views about the assumed status and the function of the language in the sociocultural context. Woolard and Schieffelin (1994: 57) provide a synthesised definition of language ideologies as

sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use'; with a greater social emphasis as 'self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of the group'; and 'the cultural system of ideas and social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests"; and most broadly as 'shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world.

From this definition, it can be argued that language ideologies go beyond merely attitudes about language to include the “values, practices and beliefs associated with language use by speakers, and the discourse that constructs values and beliefs at state, institutional, national and global levels” (Blackledge, 2006: 25). In addition, language ideologies are social constructs as they are embodiments of the cultural identity of both the individual and the social group (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), and highlight the social and linguistic relationships between individuals within that particular context. These interactions are usually coloured by moral and political agendas that shape and define the relative relationships between the participants, or the ‘Symbolic Power’ (Bourdieu, 1989). Therefore, every instance of language use or language related policy reveals people’s language ideologies or their entrenched conceptualisations of the status or worth and the function, or the role of that language within the society.

In Oman, as is the case in many developing countries, the language policies take account of the demands made by the globalisation of the world economy and its pressure on human resource development which necessitate knowledge of English as the means of communication between the countries (Donn and Issan, 2007). This lingua franca enables people of various linguistic backgrounds in local workplace settings and across countries to communicate and interact successfully with each other. Al-Jadidi (2009: 21) highlights this role by maintaining that

English language is not just for trading purposes, but is also the means of communication within the country, the only tool or medium of communication between Omanis and foreigners/expatriates from all over the world who are working there. Increasingly there seems to be a need for a single language to enable people with different linguistic backgrounds to interact in a variety of settings, especially with the revolution of information technologies.

In addition, possessing good English language abilities is considered important in increasing the future employability of young Omanis and improving their competitiveness in the regional and international labour markets. This is especially significant in the government's commitment to manage and develop the human resources of the country as a direct response to the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), which Oman signed in 2002 (Donn and Issan, 2007).

#### **1.4.2. English Language Teaching in Omani Schools**

With the accession of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos to the throne and the beginning of the modern Omani renaissance in 1970, the modern educational system in the Sultanate of Oman also began. Since the early beginnings, English was an integral part of the curriculum in the government schools that were opened throughout the country as it is the only foreign language taught in the government schools.

The Omani educational system went through two developmental phases: General Education and Basic Education. The breakdown of the schooling years in the first phase (1970-1998) was: six years in elementary school, three years in preparatory school, and three years in secondary school. During the General Education phase, English was taught as a compulsory subject from Grade Four onwards. That is a total

of nine years of teaching or around 600 hours of English language instruction (Al-Hammami, 1999) cited in (Al-Lamki, 2009). In this period, the main purpose of teaching English as stated in the philosophy document of the English curriculum was to enable Omanis to communicate with both government and private organisations and establishments locally and internationally (MOE, 1987).

In the Basic Education (1998 – present), the number of schooling years is still twelve years, but they are broken down into two levels: ten years at Basic Education Level and two years at General Education Level. Within the Basic Education Level, there are two cycles: Cycle One covers Grades One to Four, and Cycle Two covers Grades Five to Ten. Since the Basic Education Reform, all Omani children start learning English as a compulsory school subject in Grade One and continue to study it throughout their formal twelve years of schooling, thus bringing the total number of hours of English language instruction to 1200 hours (Al-Hammami, 1999) cited in (Al-Lamki, 2009).

This increase in the number of instruction hours can be seen as a reflection of the change in the philosophy of English language teaching in Oman. Instead of being considered as merely a tool for communication, as it was in 1987, English is now recognised as a pre-requisite for the national development of the country faced by the demands and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Al-Lamki (2009: 12-13) summarises the changed view of English language in the new reform system by stating that

The education reform considers English to be crucial to the successful development of Oman in the twenty-first century. It has been recognised that the Sultanate is facing the challenge of preparing students for life and work in the conditions created by the modern global economy. These conditions require a high degree of adaptability and strong backgrounds in English in order to deal with rapidly changing technologies and developing international business opportunities.

The above view seems to emphasise the increasing global status of English in the economy of the modern world and more specifically the change in the role of English in the Omani society in particular. This change meant that English teaching has become a ‘strategic policy imperative’ (Al-Jadidi, 2009: 22) for the Omani government in its attempt to face the challenges of the global economy.

In addition to the public schools, there are also 132 private schools teaching English from KG1 and four bilingual schools where all science-based subjects are taught in English (Al-Issa, 2006). Most of these schools are located in the Capital, Muscat. Omanis who are financially capable prefer sending their children to be educated in English medium schools so that they acquire a native like linguistic competence and are better prepared to pursue higher education studies, whether in Oman or abroad. This preference may be considered as having an ideological element to it regarding the role of English in the society. Parents who choose to educate their children in these schools may perceive that the English language is more important than Arabic as an empowerment tool for their children’s future.

### 1.4.3. English Language Teaching at Higher Education Institutions

In 2008, it was estimated that the number of higher education institutions in Oman was more than 60 public and private institutions (Carroll *et al.*, 2009). These institutions are run by various governmental and non-governmental bodies (see Table 1.1, modified from (Al-Lamki, 2002, Al-Lamki, 2006). The governmental bodies in charge of providing and overseeing the public HE institutions are the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Manpower, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Defence, and the Central Bank of Oman.

**Table 1.1: Higher Education Governance in Oman**

<b>Governing Authority</b>	<b>Institutions</b>
Council of Higher Education	All institutions of higher education
University Council	Sultan Qaboos University
Ministry of Higher Education	Colleges of Applied Sciences & private institutions
Ministry of Health	Health Institutions & Nursing Institutions
Ministry of Manpower	Higher Colleges of Technology
Central Bank of Oman	College of Banking and Financial Studies
Ministry of Tourism	Oman Academy of Tourism & Hospitality
Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs	Institute of Islamic Studies



At tertiary level, English plays a major role in deciding Omani students' future since a large number of degree programmes are offered exclusively in English both in the government sector and in the private sector, as will be detailed below.

At Sultan Qaboos University, the only government university in the country, English is the language of instruction in the Colleges of Medicine & Health Sciences, Engineering, Science, Agriculture & Marine Sciences, and Commerce & Economics. English is also the medium of instruction in an English Language Teaching programme in the College of Education, a BA in English Language & Literature, and a BA in Translation in the College of Arts & Social Sciences.

English is also the language of instruction in other public higher education institutions, such as the Colleges of Applied Sciences (six campuses), the Higher Colleges of Technology (six campuses), Health Sciences Institutions (five campuses), Nursing Institutions (eleven campuses), College of Banking and Financial Studies (one campus), Royal Air Force of Oman Academy (one campus), International Marinetime College Oman (one campus), and Oman Academy of Tourism & Hospitality (one campus).

There are currently over 24 private colleges, university colleges, and universities offering first degrees, associate degrees, and diplomas in various majors. In almost all of these private institutions, the language of instruction is exclusively English. The only exception is Al-Zahra College for Girls in which Arabic is the medium of instruction. This college also runs BA programmes in ELT, Translation, and English Literature (Al-Issa, 2006, Al-Shmeli, 2009, Al-Lamki, 2006, Wilkinson and Hajry, 2007).

These realities of higher education landscape in the Sultanate of Oman mean that students' access to tertiary education and the chance of getting a good job in the above mentioned fields is, to a large extent, determined by possessing a strong command of English. For example, students with a good command of English are 'highly valued and accepted in the private sector, in oil companies in particular, where English is the only means of communication in that workplace' (Al-Jadidi, 2009: 21-22). In addition, the Ministry of Higher Education strongly encourages

students applying for post-graduate studies, whether government or self-sponsored, to study in English speaking countries (Al-Issa, 2007). Therefore, Omanis who aspire to pursue their graduate or post-graduate degrees in those countries need a high linguistic competence to fulfil the language requirements of their future institutions.

In addition to the above and outside the formal educational context, there are 15 private English Language Centres (Al-Issa, 2007) offering their services to Omanis who want to improve their English language. Alongside branches of international institutions, such as the British Council, the Centre for British Teachers Education Services, the English Language Services Centres (four centres in Muscat, Sohar, Sur, and Salalah), and Hawthorn English Language Centre, there are numerous other local centres all over the country supplying this important commodity to the people in Oman.

### 1.5. English Language Teaching at the CoAS

The Colleges of Applied Sciences were established in the year 2005. The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), based on a study of the local labour market needs, converted five teacher training colleges to applied colleges that offer degree programmes in Information Technology, Design, International Business Administration, and Communications Studies. To strengthen the future employability of the graduates, the MoHE decided that the language of instruction in these colleges should be English.

The decision to use English as the medium of instruction for the specialised BA degrees is an acknowledgment of the fact that these domains use English as the language of the profession (Kennedy, 2001:27) because of the international nature of their practices, consolidating the argument of the importance of English as the world's lingua franca. With the increase in the number of students whose first language is not English entering universities, either in their home countries or in English speaking countries, to major in one of the specialisations that use English as the language of the profession, or wanting to gain access to the knowledge which they can only understand if they have a good command of the language (Hyland and

Hamp-Lyons, 2002), a huge demand was made on the teaching of the English language in the world which resulted in the development of ESP and subsequently EAP (ibid). Kennedy (2001:31) maintains that

If individuals wish to enter the professional communities represented by the domains, they will need access to both the knowledge and the skills of the profession (content training) and the language and discourse through which those skills and knowledge are communicated, in this case English (carrier training).

English language instruction in the CoAS starts when students first enter college with the Foundation Year Programme (FYP) and then continues in the degree programme for two years. In the Foundation Year and the degree programme, English is taught as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which can be defined as “the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language” (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001: 8). As such, EAP is a highly practical course of study that is grounded on “the specific needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts” (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002: 2), and that the particular cognitive, social, and linguistic demands of the specific academic disciplines influence the instruction.

The focus in EAP is then on teaching students the English language in order to access the subject knowledge. Students in the CoAS need it as a means to learn their future professions. In this sense, English is considered the ‘carrier’ subject, while the academic disciplines that students will major in are the ‘content’ subjects (Kennedy: 2001:31). This view led to English being considered as a service for ‘academic’ subjects. For example, Leki and Carson (1994) maintain that the general underlying philosophy of EAP writing classes is to prepare students for writing in the different disciplines. The tension surrounding the role of the English department in college still exists in academia. I had a firsthand experience with when working as the coordinator of the Foundation Year at the college where the present study is taking place. In order to better understand this tension, the next section presents a description of the structure of the degree programmes in the CoAS and the place of English teaching within this structure.

### 1.5.1. The Structure of the Degree Programme

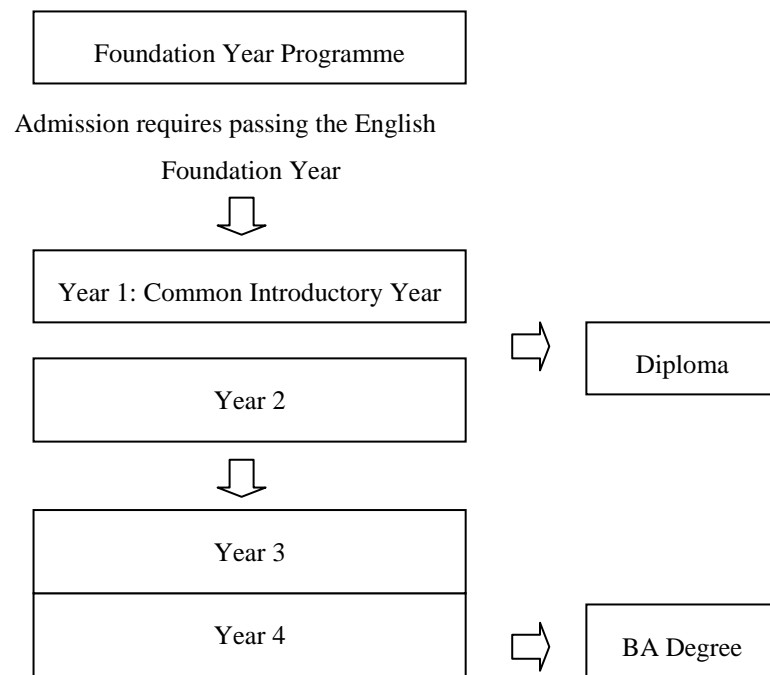
As mentioned above, the CoAS offer bachelor degrees in four specialisations, which are: Information Technology, Design, Communication Studies, and International Business Administration. There are a total of 14 different majors offered in these degree programmes as shown in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.2: The Majors Offered in the Degree Programme**

<b>The Degree</b>	<b>The Majors</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Communication Studies</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- International Communications</li><li>- Media Management</li><li>- Digital Media</li><li>- Journalism</li><li>- Public Relations</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Design</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Digital Design</li><li>- Graphic Design</li><li>- Spatial Design</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Information Technology</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Software Development</li><li>- Networking</li><li>- IT Security</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>International Business Administration</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- International Business</li><li>- Tourism Management</li><li>- Hospitality Management</li></ul>

Students are admitted into the Colleges of Applied Sciences based on their overall grades in the General Education Certificate Examination of which English is only a subject. Since there is no minimal language requirement for enrolling into these programmes, students with a low language proficiency level can be admitted, provided that they did well in the rest of the subjects. Because of the huge discrepancies in the language proficiency levels of the students entering the CoAS, students have to pass the Foundation Year Programme (FYP), which is an intensive English language instruction, before they can join their academic degrees. The foundation year is considered ‘year 0’ in the degree plan, which is not uncommon among higher education institutions because Foundation Year usually refers to a non-credited course of study that equips students with the necessary skills and knowledge needed for their higher degree studies.

The length of the study in the CoAS is five years. The BA is a four year degree programme; however, students have to pass a Foundation Year before they can start their degrees. All students are expected to get their degrees at the end of the five years; however, there is an optional mid-way exit point. After two years of study, students who do not want or cannot continue the degree programme based on their academic performance in the first two years as judged by their Grade Point Average (GPA) can graduate with a diploma (see Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1: The Structure of the Degree Programme**

The Foundation Year Programme (FYP) in the CoAS is comprised of English language, Numeracy, Computer Skills, and Study Skills with the overarching aims of:

- Raising the students' language proficiency to a level where they can commence professional studies in degree programmes that use English as the medium of instruction
- Preparing students for higher education by equipping them with other necessary non-linguistic skills, such as computer literacy, numeracy, and study skills

(Al-Jamoussi and Al-Badwawi, 2005)

From the above it can be claimed that the objective of the FYP is to prepare students to perform better and succeed in their future academic disciplines. In this sense, FYP is considered to be merely a springboard for the degree studies or a bridging course before students can start their 'real' studies. This view of English language seems to be in line with perceiving academic courses as 'content' and the English language as the 'carrier' needed to transfer this content to the students.

As can be seen in Figure (1.1) after passing the Foundation Year, students move to the degree programmes. In the first semester of the degree plan, all students have common introductory modules of the four programmes. These modules are: Business Fundamentals, Introduction to Communications, Design Fundamentals, and Information Technology Fundamentals. The purpose of these modules is to give students an idea about the four programmes so that they can make informed decisions when choosing their future specialisations. They also study a module from the English department called 'English for Communication'. In the second semester, students choose any two of the four programmes and study two further modules in each during the second semester. By the end of second semester, students have to decide on their specialisation. Students formally start their specialisms in the third semester where they start studying common modules in their chosen programme. Before the end of semester four, however, students again have to make a decision on a major within their specialisation. In the last two years of the degree plan, students study modules in their chosen major.

### **1.5.2. Writing at the CoAS**

During the Foundation Year, students study courses in the four language skills of: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. However, the number of hours allocated to each skill differs. Writing and reading were viewed to be more important than listening and speaking in determining students' success in academic studies; therefore, they were given more weight in the timetable. In the FYP, students' weekly timetable, therefore, comprises of: eight hours of writing, six hours of reading, three hours for listening, and three hours for speaking (MoHE, 2005).

The above figures seem to be an acknowledgment of the prominent place that writing has in students' preparation for study in the CoAS. The official FYP document (MoHE, 2005) also outlines the learning objectives for the writing module in the Foundation Year as:

- Write texts of a minimum 250 words, showing control of layout, organisation, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure grammar and vocabulary
- Produce a written report of minimum 500 words showing evidence of research, note-taking, review and revision of work, paraphrasing, summarising, use of quotations and use of references
- Write a text/report of three related paragraphs of 150 – 200 words using graphical or textual prompts to express description of a process, description of a structure, or an explanation (cause and effect)
- Write 150 -200 words of a range of text types, e.g. compare and contrast; cause and effect; expressing an opinion; transferring data from charts and graphs

The main competencies that students are expected to acquire are writing different types of texts of varying lengths, using textual or graphical information as prompts. There is also a concern with coherence and cohesion (i.e. using appropriate discourse markers) in the produced texts and on the writing processes of brainstorming, outlining, drafting, proof reading, and editing. Students' promotion to the academic programme is determined by their passing a standardised final year examination (see Appendix One for the complete list of learning objectives for the writing component in FYP).

Writing continues to be a major component of the English language module during the first year of the degree programme. In Semester One, students study 10 hours of English per week in the 'English Language and Communication Skills' module out of the total 24 teaching hours of the week in the semester. In Semester Two, students study 'English for Academic Purposes' module for 10 contact hour per week out of the weekly 22 contact hours. In both semesters, the English component carries a weight of four credit hours. This is higher than the specialised modules which carry

three credit hours each. The number of credit hours is significant in students' academic achievement as it determines the weight that a particular subject contributes towards their accumulative average grade.

In addition to the English module, students also study introductory courses in Information Technology, Design, International Business Administration, and Communication Studies. In these courses, writing plays an important role in the learning process and the assessment. As it is true in many higher education institutions around the world, writing is used as a tool for students' assessment in the CoAS for both English Language modules and the academic disciplines, as will be detailed in the subsequent sections.

In the English department, first year students study one module entitled 'English Language and Communication skills' in the first semester, and another course entitled 'English for Academic Purposes' in the second semester. As a part of the assessment scheme for the English module in the first semester, students are asked to write an assignment on one of three topics of: intelligence, comparison of cultures, or mass media (see Appendix Two for the instructions of the assignment). The assignment counts as 15% of the total mark of the year. The rest of the marks are divided as follows (MoHE, 2007):

- Midterm exam: 20%
- Oral presentation: 5%
- Vocabulary test: 5%
- Class participation: 5%
- Final exam: 50%

In the second semester, students are to write an essay on the topic of choosing their majors and the various factors that influenced this decision (see Appendix Three for the assignment's instructions). As a part of the gathering information for the assignment, students are asked to use external references and to interview some of their colleagues to learn about the problems that they faced in deciding their majors. In the second semester, the writing assignments counts as 20% of the total semester grade, while the rest of the marks are divided as follows (MoHE, 2008a):



- Language knowledge quizzes: 10% (Two LK quizzes during the semester 5% each)
- Listening and reading quiz: 10% (ONLY one listening and reading quiz)
- Oral presentations: 10% (Two oral presentations 5% each)
- Final Exam: 50%

The English language teachers are also provided with a rating scale for assessing students' writing (see Appendix Four). In this rating scale, the grades are allocated to six categories of:

- Organisation (introduction, body and conclusion),
- Content,
- Grammar and language use,
- Punctuation, spelling and mechanics,
- Vocabulary, style and quality of expression, and
- Process writing.

Under each of the above categories, more explanation is given to aid teachers in assigning marks from 10 to 0 to the assignments. Although the assessment of writing is subjective, the rating scale may be seen as an attempt to provide some consistency or standardisation for this process.

In the disciplinary departments, assignments are also used as a tool for assessment. For example, in the International Business Administration programme, for the Business Fundamentals Module students have to write two term papers with a total of 25% of the semester mark being allocated to these assignments. This is of course in addition to the writing that they have to do in the mid and final semester exams, which constitute 20% and 50% of the semester's result, respectively. The remaining 5% of the marks is allocated to attendance and class participation.

In the first assignment, which counts towards 10% of the semester grade, students are asked to write a group assignment about a business or an entrepreneurial work. In order to obtain ideas for their essays, students are required to interview a successful business person in their chosen field to gain practical advice on how to set up the

activity. In the interviews, students are to ask about the affect of the various aspects of the work environment on the business and the ways in which the interviewees deal with these influences (See Appendix Four for the detailed instructions). The second term assignment is worth 15% of the semester grade. In this assignment, students are required to use the information and the knowledge that they gathered during the process of writing the first assignment to prepare a detailed business plan for a future work that they want to start after finishing college (See Appendix Five for the instructions of the second term assignment).

In the same department and in the module Introduction to Tourism and Hospitality, the assessment is divided into the following:

- Mid semester exam: 30%
- Assignment: 15%
- Class participation: 5%
- Final Exam: 50%

For the assignment, students are required to write a 2000 words essay in the form of a proposal for developing tourism in their areas (see Appendix Six for the assignment instructions). The course outline mentions that the assignment should be well presented, address the question directly, and be free from spelling mistakes and grammatical errors (MoHE, 2008b).

In the Communication Department, for the Introduction to Media Studies Module, the assessment methods are divided into the following:

- Seminar presentation (5 minutes-due week 5 in class): 20%
- Research essay (500 words-due week 11): 20%
- Still photograph practical project (due week 8): 20%
- Final Examination: 40%

In the same department and in the course entitled Introduction to Popular Culture, there are two assignments in the module assessment tools. The first assignment is on theories of cultural studies and popular culture, which weighs 25% of the total course grade. The second assignment also constitutes 25% of the module mark and it is a

case study on media forms. In this course, half of the grades is allocated to the written essays that students have to produce during the term. This can be seen as an indication of the significance of writing in this particular module.

For ‘Introduction to Journalism’ module, one of the assessment tools is a news writing assignment in which students are required to write a news article using inverted pyramid structure taught in class. The assignment carries a weight of 20 marks towards the semester grade. The instructions specify that the assignment will be assessed on:

- The introduction
- Use of inverted pyramid structure
- Clear, concise writing
- Accuracy in all details, including correct grammar and spelling

In addition to the above, the midterm and the final exams of these subjects also have a variety of questions that require students to write answers ranging from short answers or short essays. For the academic disciplines, students are expected to master the skill of academic writing in English to the degree of being able to write term papers and assignments showing competence in both their linguistic abilities and subject area content.

## 1.6. Rationale for the Study

The above description of the role of writing in students’ lives in the CoAS is crucial for understanding the importance of the current study. Students coming from Arabic medium of instruction schools are faced with the demands of tertiary education where English is the language of instruction. These students are asked to perform complex literacy tasks relating to writing in the English department and in different disciplines under the competing or maybe sometimes conflicting demands from their different language and subject teachers.

Since the language of instruction in the CoAS is English, students find themselves in a new and challenging educational situation that demands a lot of writing starting

with taking notes of their lectures and ending with writing term papers and taking exams. Despite the 9 - 12 years of formal English language instruction that students have had, they still face difficulties in their writing after finishing school. From a personal experience as a lecturer at one of the CoAS and then as a Deputy Director of the English language programme in the MoHE, students and teachers alike always complain about the difficulties they encounter with regard to learning and teaching writing in the colleges.

Academic writing is a new experience for first year students as it is the first time that they have to produce an extended piece of writing based on their own research and conforming to the academic conventions, such as research organisation and referencing. In addition, when producing a piece of writing, students have to take into consideration the views and expectations of the various departments within the colleges. They have first to learn these demands and then conform to them if they want to be successful in their studies. That is because what is considered a good piece of academic writing can vary across these departments and sometimes even among teachers within the same department. During the first year of tertiary education, students' negotiation of academic writing can become especially confusing and frustrating as students are still in a transitional stage into academic study. They are still trying to make sense of all the demands placed on them from their various subjects, learning what is meant by 'academic writing', and what their teachers expect from their writing.

As mentioned earlier, in the first year of the degree programme at the CoAS, students study modules from the English department, in addition to modules from Communication Studies, International Business Administration, Design and Information Technology. With the exception of Design, where the focus of assessment is on students producing actual artefacts, students' assessment in the above mentioned modules is based on their writing whether in assignments, term papers, or in exams. Within this context, the likelihood of discrepancies between the perceptions and practices of students on one hand, and those of the EFL teachers and subject teachers on the other hand is real. This makes first year students' experience

with writing a topic worth studying, especially since writing is a major determiner of students' success in academia.

### 1.7. Aims of the Study and Research Questions

The present study problematises students' writing as a social practice rather than a technical skill; moving away from focusing attention on issues of formal grammatical features and surface errors (i.e. spelling, punctuation, text-organisation, etc) to broader concerns of the influence of a particular social cultural context on writing. It aims to contextualise students' EFL writing into the Omani socio-cultural context by investigating the demands and the functions of writing in the CoAS. Understanding writing as a social practice entails acknowledging that students write for the purpose of conveying a certain message (Ivanic, 1998) and that this practice is influenced by several discursive practices and contextual factors within the higher education institution.

In this study, there is an attempt to triangulate the perceptions and the practices of the students, EFL teachers, and disciplinary teachers regarding students' writing with the aim of understanding this complex phenomenon from the points of view of the people who are most concerned with its development. The study endeavoured to unveil what these three groups think is the nature of writing, what constitutes a 'good' academic essay, how teachers respond to students' writing, and how students react to teachers' feedback. As for the subject teachers, the focus was on discovering what they look for in students' texts, how they weigh the linguistic accuracy of students' written assignments, and how they react to the mistakes that students make.

In particular, the study is designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do the perceptions and practices of EFL teachers toward second language writing impact on first year students' experience with academic writing in the CoAS?
2. How do the perceptions and practices of subject teachers toward second language writing impact on first year students' experience with academic writing in the CoAS?

3. What are the contextual factors that students perceive as supporting or hindering them achieve success in academic writing?
4. How do students' understanding of second language writing influence their approach to writing tasks in English classes and in the disciplinary subjects?
5. How do students perceive the adequacy of the support that they get from their EFL teachers and subject teachers to improve their writing?

In the following table, the proposed data that will be gathered to answer the research questions are outlined:

**Table 1.3: Data Generating Methods**

<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Type(s) of data</b>
1. How do the perceptions and practices of EFL teachers toward second language writing impact on first year students' experience with academic writing in the CoAS?	- interviews with EFL teachers - analysis of course documents, syllabus and guidelines, and exams - students' focus group interviews
2. How do the perceptions and practices of subject teachers toward second language writing impact on first year students' experience with academic writing in the CoAS?	- interviews with subject teachers - analysis of course documents, syllabus and guidelines, and exams - students' focus group interviews
3. What are the contextual factors that students perceive as supporting or hindering them achieve success in academic writing?	- students' interviews
4. How do students' understanding of second language writing influence their approach to writing tasks in English classes and in the disciplinary subjects?	- students' interviews
5. How do students perceive the adequacy of the support that they get from their EFL teachers and subject teachers to improve their writing?	- students' interviews

Answering the research questions will hopefully provide useful insights to understanding the contextual factors that aid or hinder the development of students' academic writing in the colleges. It is also expected that such an understanding will assist course designers, writing teachers, and subject teachers to identify the practices

needed to best support students' negotiation of academic writing during transition to first year writing.

## 1.8. Thesis Outline

There are six chapters in this thesis. Following this introductory chapter, in Chapter Two, I present a literature review of related topics and theories. The aim in the literature review chapter is twofold. Firstly, the focus will be on discussing four approaches to students' writing, namely: skills-based approaches, text-based approaches, disciplinary socialisation, and academic literacies. The aim of this discussion is establishing the rationale for choosing the academic literacies approach as the theoretical underpinning of the study. Secondly, the literature review attempts to situate the present study within the wider context of research on EFL writing in other higher education contexts. In Chapter Three, I present and discuss the research design and methodology. The topics covered in this chapter are the rationale of the research design, the methods of data collection, description of the participants, the ethical considerations of the research, and the scope and limitations of the study. In Chapters Four and Five, I present the main findings of the study highlighting the key issues arising from the data analysis of the students' and the teachers' interviews. Chapter Six is the discussion of the findings. In the final chapter, I conclude the thesis with some theoretical and practical implications of the study and suggestions for further research.

## **2 Chapter Two: The Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to situate the study within the context of writing at higher education in general and in particular in the context of foreign language writing. The review is divided into two parts. The first part is a discussion of four widely written about approaches to students' writing in higher education contexts. These approaches are: the skills-based approach, the text-based approach, the disciplinary socialisation approach, and the academic literacies approach. In this part, the main premises underlying each approach will be presented with the aim of establishing the rationale behind adopting the academic literacies approach as the theoretical framework for the present study.

The second part of the literature review focuses on studies conducted in foreign language writing contexts since the present study is an example of these types of studies. There will be a review of a number of studies that investigated students' writing in English as a foreign language. Of particular interest are studies that specifically focused on first year students' experiences with academic writing and the challenges that they encounter when they attempt to write academic essays in the various departments.

### **2.2. Part One: Approaches to Students' Writing in Higher Education**

In Chapter One, the importance of writing in the lives of university students was discussed (see 1.2.). To reiterate, several researchers have argued that writing is the most significant contributing factor in students' academic success at tertiary level because of the heavy reliance on writing in college and university assessment requirements. This perceived importance of writing may explain the increasing interest in theorising the nature of academic writing and studying writing in various higher education settings. Research into academic writing has led to the development of several approaches or models to understand the nature of students' writing in higher education.



Approaches to students' writing differ with regard to their perspective on the nature of writing and the focus of teaching. Probably one of the factors that influenced the conceptualisation of writing in higher education is the changing views on the nature of literacy. The distinction is usually made between the autonomous and the ideological models of literacy (Street, 1984). The former views literacy as asocial, autonomous, de-contextualised skill located in the individual, while the later conceptualises literacy as 'social practices, culturally situated and ideologically constructed' (Ivanic, 2004: 221). The autonomous model of literacy focuses on the skills that the individual is required to possess in order to be academically successful. These skills are typically presented in a form of lists of functional competencies, which are considered necessary or prerequisite for academic success (Street, 1984). The ideological model of literacy, on the other hand, emphasises that literacy is a context-dependent, social practice imbedded in the discursive practices of the academic community and not merely an inventory of context-free skills (ibid).

Based on the above conceptualisation, several researchers have discussed various approaches to writing in higher education. For example, Baynham (2000) identifies three perspectives to theorization of academic writing, namely: the skills-based approach, the text-based approach, and the practice-based approach. Lea and Stierer (2000) and Lea and Street (1998) also classify models of understanding students writing into three categorisations of study-skills, disciplinary socialisation, and academic literacies. The following sections offer a detailed discussion of these different approaches, highlighting the main features and the drawbacks of each.

### **2.2.1. Skills-based Perspectives on Writing**

Traditionally, approaches to student writing in higher education were embedded in skills-based perspectives (Lea and Stierer, 2000), which have their roots in the psychological model of literacy. This model defines literacy as the ability to read and write, or what Street (1984) labels as the 'autonomous model', which assumes that literacy is a psychological phenomenon related to individual cognitive skills and competencies (Maybin, 2007). Literacy is viewed as neutral ability which exists independently of any social context and its meanings (Mohamed and Banda,

2008:100). As such literacy is autonomous, context-free, neutral, value-free, and an apolitical concept (Street, 2003).

Proponents of the autonomous model believe that there are universalistic consequences of literacy, such as the development of logical thought and abstraction, which are the prerequisites for rationality, objectivity, and the possibility of science. This presupposition (or the Great Divide theory, as it is sometimes called) has tacit ethnocentric bias (Baynham, 1995:47) since the corresponding implication for this belief is that those without literacy lack these qualities (Street, 1984). Another problem with the autonomous view of literacy mentioned in Baynham (1995:47- 48) is that

proponents of the autonomous model try to naturalise and universalise the literacy practices of a particular dominant group; typically those who have successfully been through the school system, typically themselves.

Dominant literacies are those that are used by people who hold an elevated status in society, and thus are unequally distributed along lines of economic privilege and disempowerment (McKenna, 2004). Naturalising the literacy practices of the dominant group implies that these practices should be taken as given and are not to be contested or scrutinised, thus maintaining status quo in the society. This reflects the power or the authority of the literacy practices of the dominant group since they decide who can or cannot access the literate discourse community. In this sense, these literacies reflect and maintain the power structures within the institution (Street, 1993). In order to be accepted and succeed in academia, students entering university are usually required to abandon their previously learned literacy practices, and acquire new set of practices that are valued and encouraged within the new contexts.

In the skills-based approach, being able to write successfully depends entirely on students' linguistic abilities, or how competent they are in mastering the generic skills as identified by the rules of 'good' academic writing. Therefore, students' difficulties in this area are usually attributed to their deficiencies or inability to acquire the required skills to be successful writers (Lea & Stierer, 2000). This 'deficit model' emphasises what students cannot do instead of what they can do, Crowther, *et al*

(2001). This categorisation and labelling of students carries with it the stigma of being defined by a lack (Baynham, 1995). From this stance, the way to help students with academic writing is by conducting remedial classes or writing workshops aimed at teaching the technical skills that they need to master academic writing.

The main premise of the traditional skills-based approach to writing is the belief that there is a “generic set of skills and strategies that can be taught and then applied in particular disciplinary contexts” (Baynham, 1995: 19). According to this model, writing is seen as a technical ability of acquiring a set of de-contextualised skills such as ‘essay writing’, or ‘referencing’ (Baynham, 2000: 19). Other skills include grammar, spelling, text organisation, drafting, and editing. Once these skills are mastered, usually through separate de-contextualised exercises, they can be transferred from one context to another, both from outside and within the university (Lea & Stierer, 2000:11). Transferability of writing skills across disciplines assumes that the contexts of these disciplines are homogenous; a notion that many researchers have contested.

Researchers often argue that disciplines are not homogeneous and that discipline specific activities do not permit problem-free transfer of these itemised skills from one context to another (Baynham, 2000, Hyland, 2006). Discussing the results of his case-study of writing in nursing education, Baynham, (2000) states that the skills-based approach did not help students respond to the requirements of academic writing in the various disciplines that they are asked to write themselves into because of the differences that exist among these disciplines; thus undermining the notion of skills transferability.

In addition, literature on writing informs us that different genres of academic writing are associated with different disciplines depending on the particular ways of meaning making that are valued by the discipline's discourse community. Even when disciplines share the same genres, subtle differences can still be found, especially regarding disciplinary preferences in relation to the organisation of content and the register used in each discipline. Students are said to need more exposure and training in the types of genres that are normally associated with their particular subject-areas rather than being taught generic skills that may prove to be of little use for them in

their academic studies. As each discipline can be viewed as a separate culture (Zamel, 1998:187) with its own norms and practices regarding academic writing, researchers have argued that a more discipline-sensitive approach is needed to take into consideration the diversity of genres that exist in the target subject areas. This paved the way for the perspective of writing as a text approach.

### **2.2.2. Text-based Approaches to Writing**

The text-based approach views writing as a “textual product” (Hyland, 2002b:6) or “artifact of form and structure” (Candlin and Hyland, 1999). It focuses on the features and characteristics of the written text and its correct production. Methods of analysing texts from this perspective have been by examining either the tangible surface lexico-grammatical structures of texts, or by looking at the discourse structures (Hyland, 2002b: 5), or a combination of the two approaches.

In the first approach, texts are viewed as de-contextualised autonomous objects that are the result of “a coherent arrangement of elements structured according to a system of rules” (Hyland, 2002b: 6). Similar to the autonomous model of literacy, here the assumption is that texts are not related to the contexts of their production and interpretation, and that writing is a process of encoding meaning in a way that conforms to a set of rules. According to this approach, decoding of the written texts should not be a problem because the writer and the reader supposedly share common homogeneous practices which facilitate this process. Hyland (2002b) goes on to state that the main teaching method associated with this view was the 'guided composition' with its emphasis on training students in propositional explicitness and accuracy. In addition, teachers' feedback on students' writing usually tends to focus on surface errors related to the language system. The development of students' writing ability is measured by their use of syntactically accurate structures.

The second approach is analysing texts as discourse. Although there is no agreement on what the term ‘discourse’ means since it is used in a number of different ways by various linguists (Nunan, 1993), there have been some attempts to define it. For example, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) emphasise the importance of communicative intentions as a defining feature of discourse. According to them, discourse goes

beyond the surface structures to include the communicative purposes or functions of the texts. This view is based on the premise that language is used for communication so the text is examined in terms of how it is structured to achieve this function; looking at the textual features not as separate entities, but rather as meaningfully and purposefully connected units aiming to achieve a specific communicative purpose.

A number of approaches looked at texts as discourse; although different in focus, all of them share the common concern of exploring the ways in which writers manipulate the language options available to them to realise certain communicative functions within a given context. Discourse analysis also emphasises that the different language choices that writers make should create a coherent text with a specific communicative purpose, thus they cannot be taught in isolation. Central to the notion of discourse analysis is the idea that the forms writers choose to convey their meanings vary according to the contexts (Hyland, 2002b). This notion is the main underpinning of the Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by Halliday and his followers, which is concerned with studying the relationship between language and its function in social contexts (Hyland, 2002b: 15). Street and Leung (2010: 298) state that

The idea of ‘function’ is understood in terms of the relationship between meaning and linguistic form. In other words, what people mean to say is realised by the specific linguistic means and features they select to manifest their meaning.

The Systematic Functional Linguistics is based on the assumption that language is “the most important tool of communication, of expression of thoughts and feelings, and of getting things done” and on “a universal conception of language in use” (Jones, 2005: 3).

According to Street and Leung (2010), the perspectives of the SFL “informed the development of the genre theory approach to teaching school literacy” (ibid:301). The notion of genre is a way of conceptualising the relationship between the linguistic forms the writers decide to use and the features of their contexts. Swales (1990) provides a widely cited definition of genre. He states that

a genre comprises a class of communicative events the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. (ibid: 58)

In the above definition, Swales focuses on the communicative purposes that are common between the same classes of genres. According to him, the purpose of the texts is the defining feature that sets them apart from other types of texts (i.e. genres). These communicative purposes are important as they determine the schematic structure of the texts and their content in accordance with the expectations and the conventions of a particular discourse community. Johns (1997:22-37) states that people who share knowledge of the same genre also have in common a shared name of the genre, communicative purposes, knowledge of the roles of the participants, knowledge of context, knowledge of formal text features (conventions), knowledge of text content, knowledge of register, cultural values, and awareness of intertextuality.

In English language teaching, genre analysis was influential because it led to the advent of the genre approach in teaching writing skill. Badger and White (2000) argue that the genre approach views writing as predominantly linguistic, but it also stresses the fact that texts differ according to the social contexts of their production. The structure of the writing lesson in genre approach usually begins with a presentation and analysis of a model text, followed by either manipulation of some linguistic features of the text or a joint construction of a similar text by the students and the teachers. Finally, students independently produce a text showing their mastery of the target genre (Cope and Kalantzis, 1993, Dudley-Evans, 1997). The focus of this instruction seems to be on the imitation of model or exemplary texts that students need to master in their academic lives (Badger and White, 2000: 156). As mentioned above, these genres are conventionalised ways of presenting knowledge in the academy as approved and valued by the discipline's discourse community.

Although the genre approach to writing has a social element since it looks at the relationship between text and context, it is still largely linguistic in the sense that it

emphasises the internalisation of the linguistic forms and discourse structures that will lead to the production of accurate examples of the target genres.

The next approach to students' writing in higher education places the social aspect of writing at the heart of its theory and deals with various contextual factors that impact the process of academic writing.

### **2.2.3. Writing as a Social Practice**

The dissatisfaction with the autonomous view of literacy led to a movement that has come to be termed as the 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS). The main tenet of this movement is the notion that literacy is a social practice (Baynham, 1995; Lea & Street, 1998; Johns, 1997), and not merely the de-contextualised ability to encode and decode meaning. Baynham (1995: 2) defines social practices as "the way language operates to reproduce and maintain institutions and power bases as well as the ways that discourses and ideologies operate through language". In other words, literacy has a social function in society and this function is realised through language. Therefore, literacy needs to be understood within its socio-cultural context. Consequently, literacy is defined as "social practices that are complex, multifaceted and ideologically loaded" (ibid: 8). Based on the premises of NLS, writing is best understood when it is studied within its context since there are several social, political, and cultural factors that shape the production and interpretation of any written text.

As mentioned above and as an alternative to the 'autonomous model' of literacy, Street (1984) suggests an 'ideological model' of literacy. According to this model, any text is produced and interpreted within a specific socio-cultural context. Therefore, several factors influence both the production and the comprehension of the text. These factors include identity, power, and authority relations among individuals in the institution. For those reasons, it is argued that literacy can never be neutral or value-free and that it cannot be separated from the people and the contexts where it exists.

Street (2003:77-78) summarises the main premises of the ideological model by stating that

literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in the conceptions of knowledge, identity and being.

This alternative model of literacy is socially and culturally sensitive because the focus shifts from individual proficiencies or deficiencies to literacy practices that differ across contexts and cultures (Maybin, 2007:515). Instead of conceptualising literacy as the acquisition of discreet, transferable skills, it is viewed as a situated, socially constructed phenomenon (Henderson and Hirst, 2006: 2) taking place in a socio-cultural context that shapes the perceptions and the practices of the participants.

Proponents of the ideological model do not believe that literacy is a precondition for the development of abstraction, rationality, and science. Instead of a single monolithic conception of literacy/illiteracy, advocates of this model attempt to understand the effects of different contexts on literacy and support the existence of 'literacies' as situated social practices that need to be investigated within their own contexts (Street, 1984). By doing so, they acknowledge the multiple academic literacies that students must engage in during their learning process and that literacies in the context of higher education involve more than the ability to read and write. Academic literacies involve the ability to read and write in a particular way (or ways), which is valued by the academics since they are the ones who will assess and evaluate students' literacy development.

Writing as a social practice is ideological and involves a "shift away from writing skills as an individual possession, towards the notion of an individual engaged in socially situated action" (Lillis, 2001:31) with the focus on how students' understanding of socio-discursive contexts and their 'habits of meaning' shape their writing practices. Lillis (2001) draws the main distinctions between writing as skills-based and writing as social practice as follows:



**Table 2.1: Comparison of Skills Approach and Practice Approach to Writing**

A skills approach emphasises	A practices approach emphasises
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student writing as primarily an individual act</li> <li>• The individual as an autonomous, socially neutral, subject</li> <li>• Language as a transparent medium of communication</li> <li>• Literacy as autonomous and universal</li> <li>• The 'appropriateness' of essayist literacy in HE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student writing as a social act</li> <li>• Language as constructing meanings/identities</li> <li>• Literacies as numerous, varied and socially/institutionally situated</li> <li>• The socio-historically situated nature of essayist literacy</li> <li>• The privileged status of essayist literacy within academia</li> <li>• The contested nature of dominant academic conventions</li> </ul>

The skills approach views writing as an individual, autonomous, socially-neutral, and context-free activity that aims at transmission of information and encoding of meanings. The literacy practices of the dominant group are encouraged since they have the power and the privileged status in higher education institutions. One manifestation of this power is the prestigious status of essay as the default genre in higher education; a practice that has been labelled as the essayist literacy.

Schollon & Scollon (1981) argue that the mainstream Anglo-Canadian and American culture value essayist prose style as a model of literacy since it is compatible with their view of the world or 'modern consciousness'. Scribner & Cole (1981) also discuss the types of informal literacy practices that the Vai farmers community perform in their native language script and the essayist literacy practices encouraged in the government run formal schools. Street (1984), in his critique of the 'autonomous model' of literacy, states that essay-text literacy is prevalent in English schools and universities only because it is the preferred cultural way of making sense of the world of the mainstream middle and upper-class groups of the society.

Lillis (2001: 20) defines essayist literacy as the “institutionalised shorthand for a particular way of constructing knowledge which has come to be privileged within the academy”, and thus students’ inability to adhere to these practices is considered as a 'problem' (ibid: 21). She goes on to argue that writing is used as a gate keeping tool because it is the main (if not the only) method of assessment in many higher

education contexts. This resonates with the earlier discussion of the role of dominant literacies in maintaining the status of the different groups within higher education institutions (see 2.2.1). Writing as a practice, on the other hand, emphasises that students write for a social purpose through which they do not only construct meaning, but also construct their own identities. This approach takes a critical stance towards the nature of dominant academic literacy practices, including the essayist literacy, by exploring the contexts that led to the development of essayist literacy and not to take it at its face value as the ‘default genre’, or a taken-for-granted practice in education (Womack, 1993).

Two approaches to student writing emerged as a result of the development of the ideological views of literacy. Both the disciplinary socialisation approach and the academic literacies approach are entrenched in the notion that writing is a social practice which is governed by contextual factors. However, the former is characterised by a one-way process of students' acculturation into their academic subjects, while the latter can be seen as a two-way process that encourages the negotiation of conflicting literacy practices (Lea and Street, 2000a:34). That is because students interact actively in the process rather than being merely subjects of disciplinary acculturation. In the next two sections, a discussion of these two approaches to writing as a social practice is presented.

#### **2.2.4. Disciplinary Socialisation Approach**

The disciplinary socialisation approach is sometimes called academic socialisation (Lea and Stierer, 2000; Lea and Street, 1998). At the heart of this discipline-sensitive approach to writing is the premise that learning is a process of acculturation into new culture where students have to “understand the ways language forms and strategies work to construct and represent knowledge in particular fields” (Hyland, 2006: 19). Learning is not viewed as the acquisition of a series of de-contextualised technical skills, but rather as a social activity that takes place within a particular social and institutional context. The unique contextual features present at the institution shape the learning process and as the contexts where learning takes place differ, so do the literacy practices associated with these contexts. Becher and Trowler (2001) maintain that each discipline is considered an ‘academic tribe’ and that students are to acquire

the norms, discourses, and interaction rules to be able to participate in that discipline community.

According to this socialisation process model, learning takes place in the form of apprenticeship with students learning the requirements of the “university culture” (Paltridge, 2004: 90) from their teachers who are considered the experts in this context. Through ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991), students engage in the types of activities and practices associated with and accepted in their discipline areas; beginning as apprentices and slowly gaining full membership of their community of practice (CoP) through the support and the guidance that expert members provide them during this usually lengthy process. Students achieve full membership when they themselves are able to reproduce the accepted discourse types of their discipline.

In the case of academic writing, although there is room for individual differences among instructors, the ‘social practice’ (Hyland, 2003: 25) of the community context determines the general characteristics of good academic writing in that discipline. These practices not only determine the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of writing, but also how the text is interpreted and evaluated by the readers from that community. Therefore, the context of writing shapes students’ approaches towards writing as they are negotiating their way through the complexities of academic writing and, at the same time, keeping in mind the preferences of their discourse communities or what is valued and rewarded in their writing contexts.

According to Swales (1990: 25), there are six characteristics of a discourse community. He maintains that a discourse community

- has a broadly agreed set of common public goals (not just a shared object of study);
- has mechanisms of communication between members;
- uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback;
- uses, and thus produces, one or more genres in communication and to further its aims;

- has acquired some specific terminology (jargons and acronyms that may be puzzling to outsiders);
- has a ‘threshold level’ of members with suitable credentials (it needs to maintain a balance between novice and experts members to sustain itself).

It is worth mentioning here that students, especially those in the initial stages of their higher education studies, may not be fully aware of the distinctions between the different academic communities of practice. Even after studying in a department for some time and being exposed to the demands and requirements of that particular department and dealings with their teachers students’ understanding may not develop up to the point of them being considered full members of the community of practice of their specialisation.

Some writers may argue that communities of practice and discourse communities are very closely related terms to the extent of being used interchangeably; however there are some subtle differences between the two notions. Johns (1997:51-52) maintains that the term discourse communities focuses on texts and language that enable members throughout the world to maintain and regulate their membership, and communicate efficiently with one another. The term ‘communities of practice’ refers especially to the practices and values that hold communities together or separate them from one another.

Woodward-Kron (2004:141) states that discourse community is an important concept in understanding the development of students' writing from the disciplinary socialisation point of view because it provides a way of exploring the social practices and constraints that shape students' writing and for understanding acculturation process that students undergo in their disciplines. Johns (1997) also discusses the notion of academic communities arguing that in addition to their discipline-specific allegiances (i.e. discourse communities), academics also “share basic, generalisable linguistic, textual, and rhetorical rules that can apply for the entire academic community” (ibid:57) and that this shared language, knowledge, and values hold together a fairly heterogeneous group of academics from various disciplines.

Hoadley-Maidment (2000:167) maintains that in order for the students to gain full membership of their disciplines, linguistically they are expected to learn:

- The specialised language of their subject
- The conventions of academic writing as valued by the discipline
- The more general features of academic writing which makes it instantly recognizable

However, students learning the discipline-specific vocabularies, knowledge, and the structural and textual conventions of their academic discipline may not be sufficient to become full members of their disciplines. They also have to learn to function successfully within the discipline; learning the norms and the conventions of what is considered to be an accepted practice in the discipline (Henderson & Hirst, 2006). Students have to adapt to the institutional conventions of their contexts, especially with regard to what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, and how it can be talked or written about. Bartholomae's (1986) famous remark on students' acculturation is cited widely in the literature. He states that in order for a student to be initiated into the academic culture, he

has to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community (Bartholomae, 1986: 403)

The disciplinary socialisation approach involves students' acculturation into their disciplines which comes through adapting their literacy practices to those valued by the members of their discourse community. In this sense the disciplinary socialisation approach is a one-way process where students are asked to conform to norms governing the academic culture of their chosen discipline, which implicitly means that the literacy practices of that culture are taken as given and are not to be contested. This shows the power relations at play in the academy as the students are viewed as merely passive recipients of the dominant culture, or what their teachers perceive as accepted norms and values of the disciplines. The issues of power relations and students identity are addressed in the academic literacies approach, which is discussed below.

### **2.2.5. Academic Literacies Approach**

Similar to the disciplinary socialisation, the academic literacies approach views language learning as a social practice that is governed by the discourse and literacy practices of a particular socio-cultural context. However, the academic literacies approach also deals with the issue of students' experiences in the discipline, especially in relation to identity struggle, the unequal power relations in the academy (Hyland, 2006:21), and the contested nature of the writing process (Archer, 2006:451). On entering university, students are asked to take on new identities since they have to learn new ways of thinking and meaning making which can sometimes conflict with what they are used to.

In addition, the interdisciplinary nature of many university courses places an extra demand on students to switch between different identities required by different disciplines. Baynham (2000:17) illustrates the multitude of identities that students are required to alternate between by a case of a nursing student who is

hurrying from lecture to tutorial, backpack full of photocopied journal articles, notes and guidelines for an essay on the sociology of nursing, a clinical report, a case study, a reflective journal.

The above quotation seems to highlight the dilemma of students when attempting literacy tasks (in this case, academic writing) within a variety of academic contexts. This nursing student has to think and write as a sociologist, as a scientist, or as a reflective practitioner depending on the type of assignment at hand. In the same vein, Street (2009: 349) maintains that

From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriately to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. This emphasis on identities and social meanings draws attention to deep affective and ideological conflicts in such switching and use of the linguistic repertoire.

In the context of the present study, the same remarks can also pertain for the students because they are expected to write assignments for various departments and thus they are very likely to find themselves struggling with the demands and the expectations of their various disciplines. Therefore, students' practices in academic

writing are not homogeneous and thus cannot be transferable across disciplines or even across modules within the same discipline.

Barton and Hamilton (2000:8) discuss six propositions in their theory of literacy as a social practice. These propositions are intended to summarise the fundamental premises of the ideological view of literacy. They are:

- 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.

Adopting Barton and Hamilton's framework for conceptualising literacy, students' writing as a social practice can be said to entail the following. First, writing takes place within a particular socio-cultural context (in this case the higher education institution) and the culture, the values, and the practices of that context have an impact on students' writing (Lillis, 2001:3). The unequal power relations that exist in higher education institutions mean that students are socialised into 'proper' academic literacy usually without being critical of these practices (Ivanic, 1998). Furthermore, academic disciplines are not as homogenous as the traditional view of literacy seems to imply since the norms and conventions of making meaning differ considerably among disciplines. In the same vein, Baynham (1995:42), among others, questions the idea that there is one monolithic type of literacy and argues for using the term 'literacies' to reflect the ideological nature of literacy and the extreme diversity of literacy practices found in different contexts. This becomes particularly evident in academic settings where literacies are acquired in different ways and for different

purposes (Johns, 1997: 3). One area of difference between disciplines is the genres of academic writing that are typically associated with each discipline.

The third proposition by Barton and Hamilton (2000:8) states that “Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others”. Similarly, Hyland (2006) states that academic literacy practices are shaped by the social institutions and the power relationships that exist in that context. Understandably, certain literacy practices will be dominant as they are valued and encouraged by the members of the academic community. For this reason, socially powerful institutions, such as education, are sometimes seen as a means of fostering the dominant literacies in the society since they usually promote the literacy practices of the privileged group with the social and political power.

The ease or otherwise of students' adaptation into the literacy culture of higher education would arguably depend, to a large extent, on how close their local literacy practices are to the literacy practices valued and supported by their academic institutions. Students whose local literacy practices approximate those of dominant literacy practices would find it easier to integrate into the academic culture. On the other hand, students coming from less privileged literacy backgrounds would be forced to make a "cultural shift" (Hyland, 2006: 22) to become members of the academic discourse. Students' success in their new culture would depend on the extent to which they are willing to adapt their beliefs, norms, and identities to those valued by the academic institution.

The academic literacies approach takes a critical stance on the issue of contestation of the dominant academic literacy practices prevalent in universities and higher education institutions (Hyland, 2006: 22). It calls for a more reciprocal relationship between students and institutions. Instead of being the passive recipients of the academic acculturation process, students are encouraged to engage with and critique the academic discourse.

In the context of the current study, the notion of dominant versus local literacies can be discussed on two levels; the levels of practices and that of linguistics. On the level



of practices, academic EFL writing is new to Omani students entering higher education. They are not accustomed to the special ways or the conventions of academic writing in English. As was discussed above, even for students whose first language is English, academic writing is not a given skill, especially those coming from less privileged literacies or those literacies where the practices do not approximate the dominant literacies. On the linguistics level, there is always tension between the significance of Arabic and English for students' academic success. English is the medium of instruction that the students are required to master in order to access their respective disciplines. Within this context, possessing good skills in Arabic, their mother tongue and the official language of the country, is not a condition for success in the colleges.

As discussed in the context of the study, English in Oman has the status of a foreign language and access to higher education means that higher education institutions have to accommodate for their students lack of linguistics abilities in English by providing intensive language preparation courses prior to students commencing their formal degree studies. In the 2005 Yearbook issued by the Ministry of Higher Education, it was estimated that more than one third of students entering tertiary level go through a language foundation programme aimed at raising their linguistic competence in English before they can start their academic degrees. In the Colleges of Applied Sciences, students study a foundation language programme for one academic year and are required to pass it before they can start studying their academic disciplines. The fact that English is the language of instruction in the CoAS can be considered as one of the most influential contextual factors that affect all the literacy practices of the students entering the colleges.

#### **2.2.6. Summary of the Approaches to Writing**

In the literature, there are four main approaches for conceptualising the nature of academic writing in higher education contexts. In Table 2.2, a summary of the main features of each approach is presented.

In the skills-based approach, writing is taught as a technical or instrumental skill that requires acquiring a number of sub-skills, such as grammar, spelling, paragraph

organisation, etc. This approach does not seem to address the influence of the contexts on the processes of text production and interpretation (characteristic of the text-based approach as well as the academic socialisation and academic literacies approaches). Students' difficulties with writing are usually explained in the light of the 'deficit' model of literacy which attributes these difficulties to lacks or deficiencies in their knowledge, and that these can be amended by remedial instruction.

**Table 2.2: Summary of Approaches to Students' Writing in Higher Education**

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Main Premises</b>
Skills-based Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students' writing as a technical and instrumental skill</li> <li>- students' have to acquire atomised skills</li> <li>- Focus on the surface features of grammar, spelling etc.</li> <li>- 'deficit' model of literacy; 'fix-it' teaching instruction</li> </ul>
Text-based Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students' writing as a textual product</li> <li>- Mastery of the language forms and genres of disciplines</li> <li>- Imitation of models or exemplary texts</li> </ul>
Disciplinary socialisation Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students' writing as 'transparent medium of representation' (Street, 2009: 350)</li> <li>- Students are acculturated into their disciplines</li> <li>- Uncontested disciplinary practices</li> <li>- Homogenous academic culture</li> </ul>
Academic Literacies Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students' writing as 'constitutive and contested' (Street, 2009:350)</li> <li>- Writing as a social practice</li> <li>- Writing is shaped by the context, power relations, identity struggle and ideologies</li> <li>- Multiple disciplinary cultures and multiple literacies</li> </ul>

The Writing as a text-based approach perceives writing as a textual product. It aims to familiarise students with the linguistic forms, such as grammar, vocabulary, and the genres of their disciplines. In the genre instruction, writing classes consists of exercises that aim at the imitation and practice of model texts as examples of 'good' academic writing. Students are coached by the teacher through the consecutive cycles of analysing a model text, practicing some linguistic and vocabulary items, co-constructing texts, and finally independently constructing texts on their own.

The disciplinary socialisation approach views writing as a “transparent medium of representation” (Street, 2009: 350). The aim of this approach is to prepare students for the discipline-specific writing demands in the contexts where they will find themselves producing the academic texts. Disciplinary socialisation is based on the notion that writing is a social practice, and that students are acculturated into the specific ways and literacy practices accepted in their academic disciplines, which underlies an uncontested view of these practices. It also seems to assume that the academic culture is a relatively homogeneous entity.

The academic literacies approach conceptualises the nature of writing as a “constitutive and contested” (Street, 2009: 350) social practice that involves the ability to use the language purposefully and appropriately within the constraints of both the immediate context of place, time and participants, and the broader socio-cultural context of ideologies and power relations. Unlike, the disciplinary socialisation approach that seems to advocate a uniform view of the academic culture, the academic literacies approach supports the existence of multiple literacies reflecting the varying literacy practices that are found in different educational settings even within the same institution.

Although both the disciplinary socialisation and the academic literacies approaches conceptualise writing as a social practice, they differ with regard to their focus. In the case of disciplinary socialisation, the focus is on the acculturation of the students in their disciplines. Students are required to take on the values and adhere to the norms of their specialisations in order to be accepted as members of their discourse communities. The academic literacies approach, on the other hand, goes beyond acculturating students into their disciplines to view the effects of the social and contextual factors on the production of students' texts. It involves the study of the ideological aspects of academic writing and the issues of identity and the power struggle in shaping students' texts.

Before concluding this section it is worth stating that the conceptualisation of beliefs about the nature of students' writing into different approaches does not necessarily mean that these approaches are mutually exclusive (Lea and Street, 1998 and Ivanic,

2004). That is because in reality each model “incorporates the pedagogic practices of the one before, but adds something more to it” (Ivanic, 2004:222). Ivanic illustrates this by giving an example of the ‘academic socialisation’ approach which also contains the teaching of technical aspects of the language, but within the context of teaching different discipline specific textual and linguistic features. Following this line of argument, the academic literacies approach in a sense incorporates features from the previous approaches and adds the ideological perspective to it. By encapsulating the other approaches, the academic literacies approach can provide a “more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices, power relations and identities” (Lea and Street, 1998: 158). Therefore, it is a more appropriate approach to study the complexities of students’ writing in the context of the present study as will be explained in the discussion that follows.

### 2.3. Rationale for Adopting the Academic Literacies Approach

As was mentioned in the conclusion of the previous section, the academic literacies approach seems to be the most encompassing of the three approaches in exploring students’ experience with academic writing. That is because it views students’ texts as the product of the active, ideological interaction between several factors pertaining to both the students themselves and the contextual factors, such as the teachers and the culture of the institution, as well as the society as whole. The skill-based approach to writing totally isolates writing from its contexts and does not seem to address the complexities and the interrelated nature of students’ writing. The text-based approaches consider the relationship between writing and context which is reflected in the type of genres preferred by different disciplines. However, this interest seems to be focused narrowly on the immediate context of use and does not take into account the broader contextual factors that are outside this immediate context that may have an impact on writing. These two approaches do not seem to be appropriate for the purpose of present study because it aims to explore the complexities of students’ writing experience from the perspectives of the principal players involved in the teaching/learning process within a broader conceptualisation of context.

As was mentioned in the introductory chapter, this study aims to explore students' perception of the effects of the factors present in the contexts of the college on supporting or hindering the development of their writing skill. It also aims to solicit the views and practices of the EFL teachers and the subject teachers on the same topic, and the impact of these varying views on students' academic writing experience. The academic literacies approach underpinning this study acknowledges this multifaceted nature of students' writing in higher education and the impact of the contextual factors on students' practices.

Based on the theories of literacy as advocated by the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984 & 2003; Lea & Street, 1998, Ivanic, 1998), academic literacy views students' writing as a social practice situated within a socio-cultural context. It also takes into consideration the issues of students' identities and power relations in shaping the perceptions and practices of the students, the EFL, and subject teachers regarding students' writing in higher education. Lea & Stierer (2001:3) argue that adopting academic the literacies approach is a “powerful tool for understanding the experience of students and teaching staff, and for locating that experience in the wider context of higher education”. Researching the contextual factors influencing students and teachers' perceptions and practices would contribute to our understanding of this complex and multi-faceted phenomenon called academic writing.

In an extended definition of literacy, Johns (1997:2) emphasises the importance of the “social contexts in which a discourse is produced and the roles and communities of text readers and writers”. Following this definition, understanding students' writing involves understanding both the perceptions and the roles of both students and teachers regarding the writing process since they are the main players in the writing class. The wider culture of the higher education institution and the society at large is also a significant determinant of the literacy practices surrounding academic writing. Baynham (2000) stresses the importance of combing the text-based and practice-based approach to get a better understanding of students' writing in higher education. Therefore, one of the data sources for the present study will be to study some documentary materials such as modules' outlines, syllabi, writing guidelines, assessment guidelines, assignments' instructions, and exams.

## 2.4. Part Two: First Year Students' Experience

In the second part of this literature review, the focus is on first year students' experience. Firstly, the importance of the first year experience is discussed. This is followed by a review of some recent studies investigating first year students' academic writing.

### 2.4.1. Importance of First Year Experience

The literature has consistently shown that the first year at college is the most crucial period in students' academic lives. That is because it shapes their attitudes and approaches to learning and plays a significant role in determining students' persistence beyond the first year since it influences their drop-out rates (Pascarella, Terenzini and Wolfle, 1986, Trotter and Roberts, 2006, Tinto, 1988).

Oldham (1988) and Terenzini & Reason (2005) call the first year at college a 'make or break' year; highlighting its significance in students' lives. Reason *et al* (2006) state that the first college year is important for at least two reasons. The first is the development and gains in students' knowledge and cognitive skills which some researchers have estimated as high as two thirds of the total improvement in students' skills during the whole of their time in college. The second reason is that the first year experience determines to a large extent students' subsequent academic success and college retention.

Given the significance of first year experience for both students' retention rates and success at the academic life, several researchers have studied first year students' transition into college and the educational, institutional, social, and personal factors that contribute to the ease or difficulty of this process. Examples of such studies are Lowe and Cook (2003), Krause (2001), Kruse (2003), Marland (2003), McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001), Raymond and Parks (2002), Watkins (1982), Whitehead (2002), Peel (2000), Tinto (1998), and Keating *et al* (2006). Of a particular relevance to the current study is first year students' experience with the demands of academic writing and the influence of their perceptions of writing on their college experience, as going to be presented in the next section.

#### **2.4.2. First Year Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing**

Although until recently relatively little attention was given to investigating students' perceptions (Leki, 2006) and how they experience the teaching and learning process, particularly how they "perceive and experience the varying writing conditions they encounter" (Leki and Carson, 1997: 43); the past few years have witnessed an increased interest from researchers in this previously neglected area of study. Following is a review of some recent research into students' perceptions of academic writing.

Krause (2001) focused on first year students' perceptions of their initial academic writing experience when writing the first major university essay. The students in the study identified several challenges that they experienced during the process of completing the first essay. These challenges relate to the writing process and the university context. Examples of challenges within the university context are the differences between the school and the university context, lack of coordination between the departments, large class size, workload, and time pressure. In the writing process itself, students identified finding relevant references, deciding on the points to include in the essay, synthesising information from various references, and organising ideas into paragraphs among the most challenging tasks influencing their academic writing process.

Harklau's (2001) longitudinal study investigated the personal experience and perceptions of four students during their literate transition from high school to college, particularly their perceptions of reading and writing that they encountered during this process. The study suggested that the difficulties students encountered in college were not necessarily because college literacies are cognitively more complex or intellectually more demanding than those of high school. Instead, she argues that students' difficulties during transition can be better understood in the light of the social perspective of literacy which emphasises the existence of varying assumptions and values regarding writing and reading between high school and college. These in turn determine the appropriate and accepted literacy practices relating to reading and writing that students have to engage in, in these two contexts. This contextualised

‘cultural shift’ (ibid: 34) in the institutional assumptions about the nature of education and learning is what makes the transition process a challenge to students.

Ellis *et al* (2007) investigated students’ perceptions of writing and approaches to writing in an undergraduate biology course. The findings showed that students’ conception of and approaches to writing are influenced by prior writing experiences. When students have positive perceptions about the importance of writing in learning the subject and when they have a clear understanding of the goals of the writing program, this resulted in higher achievements in writing and a higher quality of the learning experience in general. They conclude by emphasising that teachers need to be aware of students’ conceptions and perceptions about writing in order to be fully effective in supporting students during their writing process.

Bacha and Bahous (2008) explored the views of business students and faculty members on students’ writing proficiency level and writing needs at the Lebanese American University. The findings of their study suggested that students had higher perceptions of the level of their writing proficiency than their teachers who maintained that students’ writing does not meet the requirements of the different university writing genres. However, business teachers and their students agreed on the point that developing students’ writing should be done in collaboration between the English language teachers and the business teachers since they both share the responsibility for improving students’ writing proficiency levels.

Kalikorha *et al* (2009) found, from their study of the perceptions of first year Malawian students of the essay writing process, that essay writing was very challenging for students especially because they lack training in essay writing. Students in this study indicated several sources of difficulty with writing, such as finding sufficient and relevant references, paraphrasing, summarising, and using appropriate academic style when writing.

The significance of these previous studies lies in providing further support for the academic literacies approach to students’ writing, which stresses the importance of the social context of the writing experience and the complexities surrounding students’ tertiary writing. In Krause’s study (2001), for example, the university



context presented several challenges for students' process of writing their first major essay, which combined with the specific writing-related challenges shaped students' first year experience and integration into academic life. Similarly, Harklau (2001) stressed that the varying demands, values, and assumptions regarding the nature and the role of writing in the university is what makes academic writing a challenge for the students rather than it being more cognitively demanding.

These findings consolidate the previously mentioned arguments against the deficit model of literacy (2.2.1). They highlight that students face difficulties in writing as a result of the cultural shift in the institutions' assumptions and expectations of their writing and not solely because they lack the basic literacy skills needed to write. The writing context is made more challenging for students, especially in the light of the lack of adequate prior training in academic writing, Kalikokha *et al* (2009). In order to facilitate students' writing experience, there is a need for proper training in the norms and practices of academic writing at the university. There is also a need for students to have a clear understanding of the goals of their writing, Ellis, *et al* (2007). This will result in them having more positive perceptions about their university writing experience.

#### **2.4.3. Students' Writing in EFL Writing Contexts**

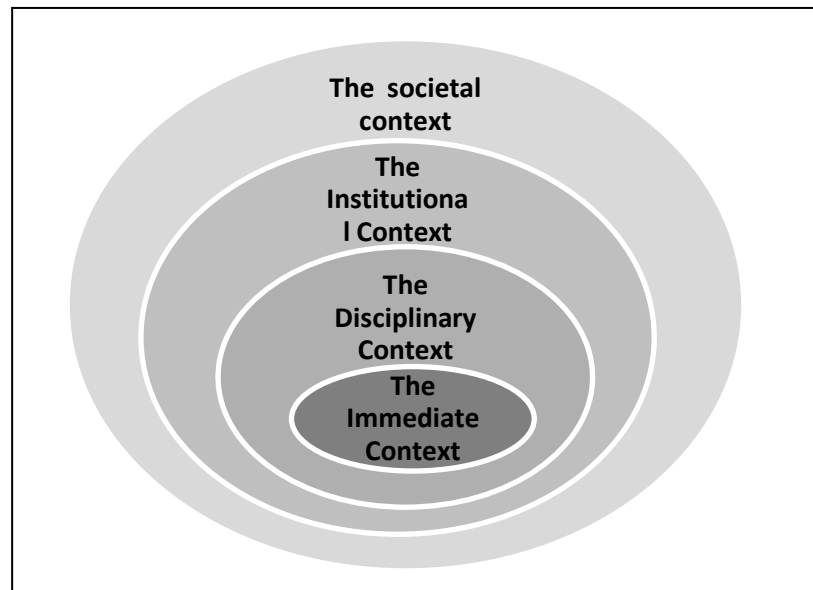
As mentioned above, academic writing is complex and challenging for students, especially those studying in foreign language contexts where English is the language of instruction. Several writers have argued that students' successful academic writing is the interplay of the conventions governing academic writing and the local context where these interactions are taking place (Lea and Street, 1998). There are different levels of context that can be looked at when discussing students' writing in higher education depending on how broadly one wants to define the term 'context'. In his study of Hong Kong undergraduates' writing, Yiu (2009) discusses three levels of contexts, which are: a) The immediate or the local context; b) the disciplinary context, and c) the institutional context.

The immediate context refers to the environment in which students' writing takes place, and the interactions that the students have with their teachers and peers in this

environment in the process of completing the assignment. The disciplinary context refers to the varying demands made on students' writing ability from the different departments which reflect that discipline's norms governing text production. Finally, the institutional context refers to the characteristics of the place or the institution which impact on students' writing. To the previous contexts, we can add yet another layer of context pertaining to the impact of the wider society outside the institution on students' negotiation of writing. These four levels or meanings of the writing context (as shown in the figure 2.1) interact to create a unique environment that shapes students' experience with academic writing in the college.

In this study, context of writing is limited to first three levels of immediate, disciplinary, and institutional contexts. At each one of these levels, research has shown that first year students are faced with various types of challenges that affect their writing process and development.

**Figure 2.1: The Levels of Context Influencing Students' Writing**



#### **2.4.4. Difficulties Students Face in Academic Writing**

Following the work of Krause (2001), the difficulties that students face in academic writing are divided into two categories: those related to the writing process itself and those related to the broader university context, as will be detailed in the next two sections.

#### **2.4.4.1. Difficulties Related to the Writing Process**

Leki and Carson (1994) categorised difficulties related to the writing process into four categories. They are: language skills, library research skills, text-managing skills, and time management skills. Regarding language skills difficulties, students writing in an EFL context are faced with the dual challenge of understanding the content of the subjects and expressing this understanding in a manner accepted by their teachers in the different disciplines. Needless to say that this is a very daunting task for students with limited English language proficiency which is reflected in their writing, whether by making several grammatical or spelling mistakes or lacking sufficient and appropriate vocabulary to express their ideas. For example, in Evans and Morrison's (2010) longitudinal study of undergraduate students' writing, the students identified grammar among the most problematic areas of academic writing.

Students also have library research difficulties, such as finding sufficient and relevant references for their academic essays. In Krause's (2001) study, students reported that the availability of appropriate reference sources is the most difficult writing-related task for them. A similar finding is also reported in Asaoka and Usui's (2003) study of first-year Japanese students' perceived problems in academic writing. In EFL contexts, students have the added task of not only finding relevant references, but also finding relevant references that they can understand; i.e., written at their linguistic level. Unless they are specifically written for EFL students, source materials and references, whether in books or on-line, do not usually accommodate for students with low language abilities. This makes it difficult for those students to find the required references to be included in their academic essays.

After finding relevant and linguistically appropriate information sources, students are faced with another set of difficulties related to the text-managing skills. They have to summarise and synthesise relevant information from several sources and write it in a proper manner using appropriate in-text and end-of-text referencing, a task that students in several studies found challenging (Krause, 2001, Bacha, 2002, Vardi, 2000). Students usually find it difficult to evaluate the significance of different pieces of information for the arguments that they are trying to make in their essays. Other text-management skills include generating and organising ideas, and employing a

writing style appropriate to the requirements of the different disciplines and the different teachers evaluating their writing.

The fourth challenge is related to the time available for completing a written essay. For example, students in Krause's (2001) study maintained that they could not make adequate time to write their essays because of the workload that they had, especially with lack of coordination of the assignment deadlines among the departments. This resulted in them not having enough time to submit multiple drafts to their tutors so that they could get feedback on their writing. Consequently, this affected the quality of their essays and the grades that they received for them.

#### **2.4.4.2. Difficulties Related to the University Context**

In addition to the above difficulties that students face related to the writing process itself, they are also faced with another set of difficulties related to the transition to university context. This context constitutes a new learning experience for students within which several factors interact to form a unique academic culture. Clerehan, Moore and Vance (2001) maintain that when joining tertiary education, students have to negotiate vertical and lateral transition. The former refers to transition from school environment to that of the university or college. The second dimension of transition is related to the variations in the discursive mode and demands of the different discipline specialism. First-year students find themselves in an unstructured and a self-dependent learning situation where they have to study several subjects from different departments usually with much less coordination than that of the school setting (Krause, 2001). In writing, students are faced with the new demands of writing in an academic style and adhering to the rules and norms governing this type of writing for which they usually did not receive any prior training before they joined university (Harklau, 2001, 2009). First-year students are also faced with the specific demands of the different disciplines within the university.

As mentioned above in the discussion of 'communities of practice' and 'discourse communities'(see 2.2.4), each discipline has its own set of norms governing the production of texts, thus restricting what information to include and the manner in which knowledge is both conveyed and evaluated in a given subject area. Several

researchers have explored the varying demands and expectations that different teaching staff require from students' writing, especially in the areas of "approach to content, thinking and expression of disciplinary concepts" (Vardi, 2003: 58). For example, Vardi (2000) investigated the writing requirements of first year writing in eight disciplines. She found out that as the writing requirements differ for each writing task so do the teachers' expectations of students' writing. Interestingly, teachers' expectations also differed for the same task within the same unit as in the case of the two lecturers co-teaching a module who set a joint writing task, but had different expectations for the structure of the analytical essay.

Similarly, Zhu (2004) investigated the views of 10 business and engineering faculty members on the importance of academic writing, nature of academic writing, and their roles in responding to students' writings. The findings indicated the disparity of faculty views on the nature of writing and the role of writing as a result of the differences in faculty cultures. Leki (1995) found that the characteristics of good academic writing differ considerably between writing instructors and subject teachers. These studies also suggest that even within the same discipline, lecturers vary in their expectations of students' writing. This variation creates an additional challenge for the students since they do not only have to consider the writing requirements of the various disciplines, but also the individual teachers' preferences among disciplines and even within the same discipline.

Related to the varying demands of the disciplines, numerous studies have found that teachers and students do not usually share the same conceptualisations of academic writing and its requirements (Ivanic, 1998, Vardi, 2000, Krause, 2001, Lillis, 2001, Lea and Street, 1998, Prior, 1995, Hounsell, 1997, Leki, 1995, Bacha and Bahous, 2008). Some researchers argue that writing requirements are not always explained clearly to the students because lecturers may assume that students already know the requirements, therefore there is no need to clarify them further (Lea and Street, 1998, Lea and Street, 2000b). As a possible solution to bridge this gap in conceptualisation, Kajee (2006) recommends that academic writing expectations need to be explicitly communicated to the students who need to be supported by their teachers to internalise the academic discourse. However, Leki (1995) argues that lecturers may lack the ability to communicate to the students what is required of an academic piece

of writing, even though they know a good academic text when they see one. This miscommunication or lack of communication about the discipline requirements makes students' attempts to write academic essays even more challenging.

## 2.5. Summary and Implications for the Present Study

This chapter provides the theoretical underpinnings for the present study with regard to the nature of academic writing in higher education in general, in addition to situating the study within writing in EFL contexts in particular. In the first part, the decision to adopt the academic literacies approach to investigate students' writing was informed by the review of the four approaches of writing at tertiary level. From this review, it was established that academic literacies approach is the most suitable for this study because it encompasses the other approaches and takes into consideration the students related and context related factors influencing students' writing.

In the second part of this chapter, several studies exploring students' writing in EFL contexts were reviewed. The findings of these studies underscore the complexities of academic writing and the types of challenges that first year students face in attempting to write academic essays. Although each higher education context is different, and although students' experience with writing is far from being identical, these findings may provide a general insight into the factors that may influence students' perceptions of their writing experience and the types of challenges that students in the study might encounter when writing an academic essay.

The next chapter presents and discusses the methodological approach for data collection and data analysis adopted in this study.

## 3 Chapter Three: Research Methodology

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the research methodology of the study. It begins by discussing the qualitative research design, arguing that it is the most appropriate approach for the present study. Then the purpose and the contributions of the study will be presented. This will be followed by the rationale for choosing the research site and the description of the participants. Next the data collection methods, data generating process, and data analysis will be described. This is followed by consideration of the trustworthiness of the study. Finally, the ethical considerations, the scope, and limitations of the study are discussed.

### 3.2. Research Paradigm

Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 19) define a research paradigm as “the net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises”. The significance of a research paradigm is that it determines all aspects of the research process starting from the basic philosophical assumptions underlying the research to the selection of research tools, participants, and methods of data collection and analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The research paradigm is thus the overall interpretive framework within which all decisions about the research are taken providing consistency, coherence, and unity between the various aspects of the research process.

From the literature, two main research paradigms can be identified “positivist/post-positivist” and “constructivist-interpretive” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 22). Several researchers have discussed the nature and the differences between these two paradigms (Robson, 2002a, Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, Ponterotto, 2005, Richards, 2009). The two paradigms have varying assumptions regarding:

- the nature of knowledge or reality (ontology),
- how this knowledge can be studied or acquired (epistemology), and

- the relationship between the knower (the participant) and the would-be knower (the researcher).

The positivist/post-positivist school of thought believes in the existence of an objective, value-free reality or truth that can be attained through direct experience or observation. According to this paradigm, reality is “out there to be studied, captured, and understood” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 9). Advocates of this paradigm also argue that generalisations can be made from a representative sample to the universal population from which the sample was taken. For example, Cohen *et al* (2007: 10) maintain that in this research tradition “the end-product of investigations by social sciences can be formulated in terms parallel to those of natural sciences. This means that their analyses must be expressed in laws or law-like generalisations”. In this paradigm, reality is external to the participant and it is the responsibility of the researcher to discover this objective reality using experimental or quasi-experimental methods.

The constructivist/interpretive paradigm, on the other hand, advocates the notion of the interdependence of the social and affective factors in constructing people’s realities. Reality is believed to be is a subjective and socially constructed phenomenon (Mason, 2002). In other words, there is no single ‘truth’ that can generalised to other contexts, but rather multiple interpretations of the truth based on differences in people’s perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2009). Researchers working within this paradigm tend to use methods, such as interviews and observations that would enable them to understand these multiple interpretations and constructions of knowledge. The researcher’s role in this paradigm is to uncover the “insider view” of the participants (Mason, 2002: 56), while the research participant’s role is to help the researcher construct the subjective reality.

For this study, the constructivist/interpretive stance is adopted as the underlying research paradigm. Mason (2002) maintains that working within this paradigm, a researcher seeks to obtain information about how people perceive, interpret, and understand daily issues affecting them in their context. This understanding seems to fit the purpose of exploring students’ experience with academic writing in the context of the CoAS (see 3.3, below for further discussion of this issue). The



existence of multiple realities of this academic experience is acknowledged in the title by the use of the plural ‘perceptions’ rather than the singular form of the term, thus highlighting the subjectivity and multiplicity of students’ experiences.

Generally researchers agree that the constructivist/interpretive paradigm is more consistent with the qualitative research approach as will be detailed in the subsequent sections.

### 3.3. Qualitative Approach

This section discusses the theoretical assumptions underlying the qualitative approach and its appropriateness for the present research.

As explained in Chapter One, the aim of the study is to explore students’ experience with academic writing by obtaining an understanding of the perceptions and practices of teachers and students regarding this topic. This understanding can only be gained through the use of a qualitative research approach that will enable the participants to freely express and discuss their thoughts. Cohen *et al.* (2007) use the term ‘fitness for purpose’ to refer to the suitability of the research design to the type of data that need to be collected to answer the research questions. Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 10) explain the fitness of the qualitative research for the purpose of exploring students’ experiences when they state that

qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relation between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasise the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning

#### 3.3.1. Characteristics of Qualitative Approach

Creswell (2009:175-176) lists nine characteristics of qualitative research (see Table 3.1). The subsequent sections will focus on the alignment of these characteristics with the present research with the aim of establishing the appropriateness of the qualitative research design to investigate the topic of the students’ writing.

Qualitative research takes place in a *natural setting* as this approach studies “things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: 3). The present study takes place in a higher education institution where the topic of students’ academic writing is investigated in its natural context.

In qualitative studies, the *researcher is the key instrument of data collection* rather than depending on specialist tools and instruments, such as standardised tests or scales. The current research involves the researcher as the main data collection instrument through the use of multiple sources of data collection, such as document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus group interviews.

**Table 3.1: The Characteristics of Qualitative Research (Creswell, 2009)**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Natural setting</b>	Qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or the problem under study
<b>Researcher as key instrument</b>	Qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behaviour, or interviewing participants
<b>Multiple sources of data</b>	Qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source
<b>Inductive data analysis</b>	Qualitative researchers build their own patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up, by organising the data into increasingly more abstract units of information
<b>Participants' meaning</b>	In the entire qualitative research process, the researcher keeps focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or the issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers express in the literature
<b>Emergent design</b>	this means that the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and all phases of the process may change or shift after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data
<b>Theoretical lens</b>	Qualitative researchers often use lens to view their studies. Sometimes the study may be organised around identifying the social, political, or historical context of the problem under study.
<b>Interpretive</b>	Qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear and understand
<b>Holistic account</b>	Qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges

*Inductive data analysis* means that the researcher builds patterns and themes from the bottom up by establishing a coding system to organise the data into “increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell, 2009: 175). After transcribing the interviews, the researcher goes through the transcriptions assigning codes to the different segments of the data. These codes represent the general themes emerging from the data which will then be used in the discussion of the research findings.

Qualitative researchers try to use data collection methods, such as detailed interviews and observation that would enable them to probe people’s perceptions and capture the *participants’ meaning*. Qualitative research aims to understand the subjective world of the human experience (Cohen et al, 2007: 21). The underlying assumption here is that people’s perspectives are meaningful, knowable, and can be made explicit through verbal interaction (Patton, 2002). The nature of my study involves investigating participants’ personal perceptions and practices relating to academic writing in the CoAS; to capture their subjective meanings of the topic and see the world through their lens.

Since qualitative research takes place in the real world with all its unpredictabilities and uncertainties, even the most well-thought of design can be subject to modifications to accommodate for unforeseen contextual factors. Therefore, *emergent design* is an important feature of this type of research because the design is very likely to evolve during the actual study to correspond with the change of the research dynamics and as the researcher gains more practical knowledge in carrying out fieldwork. During the data collection stage of my study, the focus of the research shifted twice. Originally, the study was intended to explore the topic of academic writing from the points of view of first year students and their EFL teachers. After the pilot study, the design was expanded to include teachers from all the other four departments in the college because students reported that they are asked to write assignments in these subjects, too and not only in the English department. Given the centrality of assignment writing and students’ and teachers practices’ regarding this topic and since in the Information Technology and Design departments students are not asked to write assignments, during the actual data collection stage the design was modified again to include only first year teachers from the English, Communication, and International Business Administration departments.

Another feature of the qualitative design is the use of a *theoretical lens* to view the study. In the case of this study, the academic literacies model is the theoretical framework used to investigate students' writing within the social context of a higher education institution in Oman.

The qualitative design is labelled as *interpretive* since the researchers interpret the data and assigns subjective meanings to it. Through the data analysis, and based on their background and understanding, the researchers generate interpretive themes that would capture the significant or the main meanings found in the data gathered.

Finally, the focus of the study is *holistic* because it seeks to paint a picture of the complexities surrounding academic writing taking into account the perspectives of the teachers and the students and the contextual factors that impact on students' writing experience in the CoAS.

### **3.3.2. Limitations of Qualitative Approaches**

The main limitation that is usually associated with using qualitative methods is that the data is subjective which raises questions about the validity and reliability of the data. There are two sources of subjectivity in such research. First, qualitative methods are concerned with capturing the personal opinions and the subjective views of the participants on a particular issue. Secondly, the researcher is usually the main instrument of data collection and that makes the data gathered prone to the researcher's bias. However, triangulation, i.e. using multiple sources of data collection, is one way to strengthen the trustworthiness of the results of qualitative research (Flowerdew, 2002). This strategy allows the researcher to validate and cross-check the findings so that the strengths of one method of data collection compensate for the weaknesses of the other (Malderez, 2003). Patton (2002) discusses four basic kinds of triangulation:

- 1) data triangulation, the use of a variety of data sources in the study
- 2) investigator triangulation, the use of several different researchers or evaluators
- 3) theory triangulation, the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data

- 4) methodological triangulation, the use of multiple methods to study a single problem or programme

In this study triangulation is found at two levels: data sources and data methods. The data sources for the research come from the students, the EFL teachers, and subject teachers. The data collection methods will include interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary materials.

From the above discussion, I can conclude that the advantages and the appropriateness of the qualitative approach in answering the research questions outweigh the limitations usually associated with this type of research approach. In order to gain an understanding of students' experiences of academic writing, the use of qualitative tools, such as interviews and focus groups was essential in getting details of different parties' perceptions and practices regarding this issue. This would not be feasible with using quantitative instruments such as questionnaires, for example.

### 3.4. The Purpose of the Study

Robson (2002: 58) and Marshall & Rossman (1999: 33) classify the purposes of the research into four main categories: exploratory, explanatory, descriptive, and emancipatory. In an exploratory study the focus is on investigating a little-understood situation or phenomenon in order to gain insight, or to generate hypotheses. Explanatory research is concerned with explaining usually casual relationships between different aspects of a particular phenomenon. Documenting and portraying an accurate profile of a situation or a topic is the aim of the descriptive study. The last purpose of research is emancipatory in which creating opportunities for empowerment and engaging in a social action is seen as an important goal of the study.

According to the above classification, the present study is an exploratory study which seeks to explore the topic of academic writing from the participants' subjective points of view. In this type of research, the researcher is concerned with investigating a situation where little information is available or known about the phenomenon in question. It is also concerned with identifying important categories of meaning for

the participants and how these categories are related to each other. In this study, teachers' and students' subjective perceptions of academic writing are explored together with their practices related to the topic. It also studies the impact of various contextual factors on the experience that students have with academic writing in the college.

### 3.5. The Contribution of the Study

Like their colleagues in other higher education institutions, teachers in the CoAS are constantly complaining about the level of students' writing. Working as the deputy director of the English Language Department at the Ministry of Higher Education, I had the chance of travelling to the six colleges under the umbrella of CoAS only to hear the complaint echoed over and over again from the teachers. Therefore, understanding the difficulties of students' writing from students' own perspectives and that of their teachers' is the first step in the process of helping students improve their academic writing.

The contribution of this study will fall under three main categories:

- potential for theoretical generalisation,
- evaluating the relative appropriateness of the academic literacies as an approach to investigate students' writing in the context of the study, and
- practical insights for teaching writing in EFL contexts

The first contribution is theoretical. Understanding the disciplinary differences that exist between various academic subjects in the colleges and their impact on students' second language academic writing might provide useful insights for teachers and educators working in similar EFL contexts. In these contexts, students are usually struggling to meet the conflicting demands made on their academic writing abilities from the different disciplines that they might find themselves belonging to, in particular during the transition from generic foundation study into disciplinary study.

The second contribution is related to evaluating the appropriateness of the academic literacies as a framework for studying students' writing in the Colleges of Applied Sciences. The main question that I will try to answer in this regard is how suitable

was this approach in capturing the complexities and the multifaceted nature of academic writing that students find themselves engaged in.

The last contribution is a practical one as it is hoped that the research findings would provide some practical insights for students and teachers about the nature of academic writing and the social and contextual factors that aid or hinder the development of students' writing in the colleges.

### 3.6. Choosing the Site and the Participants

Sampling is defined by Mason (2002: 120) as “principles and procedures used to identify, choose, and gain access to relevant data sources from which you will generate data using your chosen methods”. She stresses that the process of sampling and choosing the participants has significant implications for the trustworthiness of the research findings. She goes on to suggest that deciding the sampling technique is guided by two sets of reasons. The first set relates to the practical and resource based issues, and the second is concerned with the focus of the research.

The present study adopts ‘purposeful sampling’ (Robson, 2002: 265) as a strategy to select the participants. In this type of sampling strategy, the researcher chooses the sample that will best meet the purpose of the study and that will provide rich information to answer the research questions. In this sense, the sampling strategy adopted for the present study is in accordance with Mason’s second criteria for choosing a sample, i.e., the research focus. The practical criteria is met by choosing the research site to be the college nearest to where I live, and where I am certain to gain access to facilities and assistance from the college’s administration to conduct the fieldwork.

Creswell (2007: 75) states that an important aspect of sampling in qualitative study is “to select cases that show different perspectives on the problem, process or event”. This was taken into consideration in the design of the study and choosing the participants who are first year students, their writing teachers, and subject teachers. The reason for this choice is to gain various perspectives on the research focus from the people who are mostly concerned with the topic under investigation.

Issues relating to the size of the sample are discussed widely in the literature on research methodology. Mason (2002: 134) maintains that for a qualitative researcher “whether or not the sample is big enough to be statistically representative of a total population is not your major concern”, since statistical representation is usually associated with quantitative research methods that seek generalisations of results to a wider population. Instead, she argues that the key question a qualitative researcher should ask is “whether your sample provides access to enough data, and with the right focus, to enable you to address your research questions” (ibid: 134). She states that the ideal sample size should be big enough to provide sufficient and relevant data to answer the research questions, and at the same time should not be too large as not to allow for a focused and in-depth analysis of the topic under study.

This view seems to be shared by Creswell (2007: 76) who argues that “the more cases an individual studies, the less the depth in any single case”. The number of participants in the current study is 40 first year students, eight EFL teachers, one Head of English Language Department, one English language programme director and seven subject teachers. The following sections provide details on the research site and profiles of the participants.

### **3.6.1. Research Site**

The study took place in one of the CoAS which is one of six equally suitable research sites. It is representative of the other colleges because the students’ and teachers’ profile in the colleges are similar, especially since the students are allocated to the colleges electronically through the Higher Education Admission Centre based on their grades in the General Certificate Examination. The first reason for choosing this college is practical as it is the closest to where I live, about 45 minutes drive.

The second reason is the familiarity with the context and ease of access to the required data. I worked as a lecturer in the college for three years and still have good relationships with the Dean of the college and the Head of the English Department which helped me gain access to the required people and the resources necessary to carry out the research. In choosing the research site, Burgess (1984: 59) maintains



that the representativeness of the site is not a big deal, what really matters is choosing a site with the optimal conditions for success of the study, such as the willingness of individuals to cooperate, the convenience of access to participants, and the logistics needed to carry out the research, and preferably where some contacts already exist. During the data collection phase, which lasted from February to June 2009, the college provided me with a private office with a computer, a printer and access to photocopying facilities, which facilitated the fieldwork and provided an ideal location for conducting the focus group interviews and the teachers' interviews.

### **3.6.2. Students**

The students in this study are graduates of the General Education System and had studied English as a school subject since Grade Four for a total of nine years. They are in the first year of their academic degrees. They had finished a year-long intensive language preparation programme which was aimed at improving their linguistic abilities and equipping them with the necessary academic skills to succeed in the degree programmes. Writing was a key element in this preparation, as was discussed in the contextual background of the study.

Another reason for choosing the students' sample from this group is that during this year, academic writing plays a crucial role in students' lives since they are assessed through the means of assignments in which they have to show their linguistic and discipline competencies. For first year students, possessing 'good' writing abilities is of utmost importance for their academic attainment. Because writing is a major part of the assessment battery, it is not unlikely that it also constitutes a major shaper of students' academic experience during Year One.

As mentioned in Chapter One (see 1.2.2 & 1.3.1), in Oman English is considered as a foreign language, and it is one of the subjects of the school curriculum. Students are enrolled in the CoAS based on their overall grades in the General Education Certificate Examination with no English language benchmark. This means that students entering the degree programme have a varied linguistic profile even after passing the Foundation Year Programme. It is not unusual that in the same group, students who are considered beginners or false beginners study alongside others who

can be considered as advanced language learners. Understandably, the linguistic abilities of the students would have an influence on their academic performance in the college since English is the medium of instruction and assessment. In writing in particular, students are to rely on their linguistic abilities as well as their disciplinary knowledge to fulfil the requirements of writing assignments for the various departments.

### **3.6.3. Teachers**

The teachers' sample consisted of the EFL teachers who teach writing skill in the first year and the subject teachers whose disciplines have writing as an assessment tool. In addition to the EFL teachers, the study also included the Head of the English Language Department in the college and the director of the English language programme at the Ministry's level. The reason for including these two participants is to obtain information on the departmental and ministerial policies regarding academic writing since these policies are determinant of students' college writing experience. Triangulating the views and the understandings of EFL teachers and subject teachers would hopefully provide useful insights to deepen our understanding of students' experience with writing in the different disciplinary subjects in the CoAS. Tables 3.2 & 3.3 present the profiles of the EFL teachers and officials, and subject teachers who participated in the study.

In the beginning of the study, the number of EFL teachers teaching Year One was fifteen. From the outset, one teacher refused to take part in the study and two were excluded because they took part in the pilot study that was carried out in September 2008. About three weeks into the study, one teacher was transferred to the Design Department and his group was redistributed. In addition, three teachers changed their minds after initially agreeing to participate. Out of those three, one teacher expressed his willingness to be interviewed, but refused to be observed in class. However, arranging an interview with him proved to be very difficult. This brought the total number of actual EFL teachers to eight. The majority of EFL teachers are native speakers of English, one teacher is Omani and one is Swedish. The teaching experiences ranged from two years to 19 years, during which teachers were involved in teaching a variety of subjects within EAP and ESP contexts.

For the subject teachers, the target number of teachers and the actual number that participated in study is the same. The whole Faculty of the International Business Department (three teachers) and the Communication Department (four teachers) teaching Year One agreed to take part in the study. A possible explanation for the excellent participation rate may be that participation for the subject teachers involved only interviews and no classroom observations were required. During my experience as Foundation Year Programme Coordinator and as Deputy Director of English Language Programme, I noticed that teachers generally do not welcome being observed since they see it as undermining their professionalism. Arabic is the mother tongue of four out of the total number of subject teachers. Two teachers stated that English is their first language and Malay is the first language of one teacher.

The disciplinary teachers have broad teaching experience ranging from 5 to 30 years. During the interviews, it was revealed that in the case of Arabic speaking teachers, most, if not all, of their teaching experience was in higher education institutions where Arabic is the language of instruction. This information may potentially be significant in determining these teachers' attitudes towards English as the medium of instruction and their competency in teaching their subject-matter in English.

**Table 3.2: English Teachers' & Officials' Profile**

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>First Language</b>	<b>Languages Spoken</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>Teaching Years</b>	<b>Course(s) Taught</b>
Eng PD	British	English	German, Polish, Colloquial Arabic (Sudan, Egypt, Oman)	BA (Hons), MA (Econ), M.Ed TESOL, Dip. TEO, RSA Advanced Diploma in ELT Management	27 years	–
HoD	Tunisian	Arabic	English, French, Italian	PhD in Translation Studies	20 years	EAP, Linguistics, syntax, translation studies, stylistics
Eng1	Omani	Arabic	English	MA in Applied Linguistics	2 years	EAP
Eng2	Swedish	Swedish	English, German, Danish, Norwegian, sign language	MA Education	19 years	General English, Literature
Eng3	South African	English	Afrikaans	MA in Postmodern Science Fiction, B.A. Hons(English),B.Paed (4 year degree in teaching)	8 years	General and Academic English
Eng4	American	English	Spanish, Japanese	MA in TESOL	5 years	EAP and ESP
Eng5	Irish	English, Irish	German, Korean, Russian	BA (Hons), MA in history, MA in Linguistics, PGDIP, CELTA	5years	EAP (all skills)
Eng6	American	English	Spanish	B.A. in Spanish and Studio Arts (photography & video)	6 years	EAP (all skills)
Eng7	Canadian	English	French, Chinese (intermediate),Spanish, Italian German, Arabic	B.Ed specialization in EFL	6 years	EAP (all skills)
Eng8	Canadian	English	French, Spanish	Bachelor of Arts Literature	6 years	EAP

**Table 3.3: Subject Teachers' Profile**

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>First Language</b>	<b>Languages Spoken</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>Teaching Years</b>	<b>Course(s) Taught</b>
IBA1	Sudanese	Arabic	English	Phd	15 years	Introduction to Tourism
IBA2	Indian	English	Hindi	M. Com; MBA, M.PHIL, Dip in Banking, Net Certified Programmer	15 YEARS	Accounting, Costing, Management, Strategic Management, Financial Services
IBA3	Canadian	Arabic	English, Russian and French	Ph.D. in Accounting & Financial Analysis	28 years,	Accounting, Management, and Business
COM1	Indian	English	Hindi, Kannada, Tulu, Konkani	PhD (Mass Communication)	5 years	image and sound, popular culture
COM2	Egyptian	Arabic	English, French	PhD and MA (Journalism & publishing); BA in Journalism	30 Years	Introduction to Journalism
COM3	Malaysian	Malay	English	M.Comm (Screen Studies)	4 years	Introduction to Sociology, Introduction to PR & Journalism
COM4	Iraqi	Arabic	English	PhD ( PR & communication)	16 years	Interpersonal Communication, Image and Sound

### 3.7. Methods of Data Collection

The main methods of data collection used in the study are: semi-structured interviews with teachers, focus group interviews with students, and the documentary materials. The first two instruments are examples of ethnographic methods that are based on watching and asking and that focus ‘on the context of production and reception of the text and not just on the text itself’ (Flowerdew, 2002: 237). In line with the discussion of the importance of the context in understanding students' writing, Flowerdew (ibid: 235) stresses the importance of studying language within the context of its production and reception. In the next sections, a detailed discussion of the data collection methods is presented.

#### 3.7.1. Interviews

Interviews are conversations with a purpose which involve a researcher asking questions and getting answers from the participants of the study (Robson, 2002:269). They are concerned with gaining information on the participant's perspectives and experiences of the world. Kvale (1996:1) states that the qualitative research interview aims to “understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations”.

There are several types of interviews varying across the dimensions of degree of structure in the interview, how deep the interview tries to go, and the degree to which the interview is standardised across different respondents and situations (Punch, 1998: 175). Based on the degree of standardisation of the interview, distinctions are commonly made between three kinds of interviews: fully-structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Robson, 2002) & (Cohen et al., 2007).

- The fully structured interview has predetermined questions with fixed wording, usually in a pre-set order.
- The semi-structured interview also has predetermined questions, but the order can be modified based on the interviewer's perception of what seems most appropriate.

- In the unstructured interview, the interviewer has a general area or topic of interest and concern, but lets the conversation develop within this general area.

Several researchers have discussed the advantages of interviews as methods of data collection (Robson, 2002; Cohen et al, 2007; Patton, 2002; Kvale, 1996). An important advantage of interviews is that the researcher can use them to learn things about the participants that cannot be observed directly, such as feelings, thoughts, experiences, and intentions. The qualitative interview gives the participants the chance to explain their personal perspectives on the topics of the research, thus providing useful insights into the ways they conceptualise and interpret their world.

In addition, interviews are a flexible and adaptable method of data collection since the researchers have the opportunity to alter their line of enquiry to follow up interesting responses made by the participants, or to explore unpredictable themes that emerged during the process of interviewing. In addition, the presence of the interviewer can be very useful to provide explanations or clarify any misunderstandings about the questions. Such a clarification will have a positive impact on the quality of the data gathered.

Robson (2002), Cohen *et al* (2007) and Mason (2002), among others, argue that interviews are time consuming during all four stages: preparation, actual interviewing, transcription, and the analysis of the results. In addition, several factors can affect the reliability of data obtained in interviews, such as interview's bias and respondents' untruthfulness in answering the questions posed during the interview.

Although these concerns are legitimate and worthy of careful consideration, interviews are appropriate for gathering data on people's perceptions and perspectives of the world that they live in. Since the present study aims to explore these topics, using this type of data collection was seen suitable for the research focus. As mentioned in the previous section, the use of triangulation of data sources and data methods was one measure to enhance the validity and reliability of the data. For example, in interviews teachers may report things that contradict their real

behaviours and actions (Robson, 2002: 310 & Patton, 2002: 263). This can be attributed to several reasons among which are memory deficiencies and the 'social desirability response bias', i.e. their wish to present themselves in a favourable light. Therefore, combing such data with data gathered through students' focus group interviews provided a cross-check for its truthfulness as the issues discussed with the teachers were validated during the students' interviews. The researcher's subjectivity was minimised during the data collection stage. While interviewing, I made sure not to ask any leading questions and tried not to influence participants' responses in any way. I also used a digital audio-recording device to record the interviews and transcribed the whole interview to ensure that the respondents' opinions and thoughts are retained as objectively as possible.

In this study, the semi-structured interviews were used to collect the required data on the English teachers, English officials', and subject teachers' perceptions of students' writing, mainly because of its flexibility. (see Appendix Eight for the teachers' interviews schedule, Appendix Nine for the Head of the English Department interview schedule, and Appendix Ten for the Director of the English Language Programme interview schedule). Although the semi-structured interview consists of several key questions that are focused on particular themes, the interviewer exhibits openness to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having ready-made categories and schemes of interpretation (Kvale, 1996). Unlike the structured interview which follows a rigid sequence of the predetermined set of questions, giving explanations when needed and following up interesting topics in the respondents' answers gives the teachers more freedom to express their thoughts and attitudes. This also allows for the discovery of interesting information that would provide using insights into the topic of the study.

### **3.7.2. Focus Group**

From the various definitions that exist in the literature, the main features of the focus group interview is that it is a carefully planned interview with a small group of people with similar backgrounds designed to gather perceptions, attitudes, ideas, and feelings about a specific topic in a permissive, non-threatening environment through the interaction between the participants (Patton, 2002; Krueger, 1994; Robson, 2002;



Cohen *et al*, 2007). Unlike group interviews where the interaction is between the interviewer and the participants, data in a focus group is generated through the interactions between the participants themselves and thus ‘the participants’ rather than the researcher’s agenda can predominate’ (Cohen et al, 2007: 376).

There are several advantages of focus group interviews. First, they are “socially oriented research procedure” (Krueger, 1994: 34) in which data is generated through the interactions between participants in natural, real-life situations. In a focus group, participants have the opportunity to listen and react to other's responses making comments beyond their original responses (Patton, 2002: 386), or reversing their original views altogether as a result of group discussions and dynamics (Krueger, 1994: 11). This interaction also enhances the data quality since participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other (Patton, 2002: 386), so that extreme views tend to be weeded out (Robson, 2002: 284).

Furthermore, focus groups are a relatively cost effective and efficient data collection method because they involve collecting data from several people at the same time. Another advantage is that it is flexible and allows the moderator to intervene exploring interesting, unanticipated issues that arise from the discussion (Krueger, 1994: 35), while at the same time making sure that the discussion stays focused on the main topic.

Using focus groups entails several limitations. The first limitation is a practical one because they can be difficult to assemble (Krueger, 1994: 37). Secondly, the procedure itself can be intimidating to shy people and discourage them from participating (Gibbs, 1997). Also people who realise that their opinion is a minority one may decide not to speak and risk negative reactions from the group (Patton, 2002: 387). Another limitation is that the number of questions that can be asked can be greatly restricted to no more than ten major questions in a one hour session to give all participants the opportunity to have their say (*ibid*).

As focus group interviews rely on group interactions and dynamics, it is not uncommon during such interviews for conflicts to arise among personalities or for

power struggle or for conflicts of status to occur within the group (Robson, 2002). The role of the moderator is crucial since conducting the focus group interview requires a considerable group process skill beyond simply asking questions (ibid). During the interview, the researcher has two tasks: that of the moderator to regulate the discussion to keep it focused on the topic and that of the facilitator to help the interview run smoothly.

Despite the above discussed shortcomings of focus group interviews, they are still used as a way of getting data on the perceptions and attitudes of people within a social context because of the strengths and the advantages associated with using them as a method of data collection. In this study, focus group interviews were used to collect data from the students on their perceptions and practices related to academic writing (see Appendix Eleven for the focus group interviews schedule).

### **3.7.3. Documents**

As mentioned earlier, the textual material for this study came from several sources. They included the Year One English Language course description, institutional guidelines on writing, assessment guidelines from the MoHE, disciplinary courses' outlines, assignment instructions, and exams. The institutional guides were a useful source of getting an idea of the underlying assumptions about the nature of academic writing and the expectations of the various departments and teachers from students' writing. One of the topics that was investigated during students' interviews was whether the students understood the demands of academic writing in the colleges and whether these demands were explained to them by their teachers. Examining the assessment guidelines gave an indication of the approach adopted by the departments to provide feedback on written texts and the importance placed on different aspects of the written text as was indicated by the marks allocated for each aspect of the assignment.

## 3.8. The Piloting Stage

### 3.8.1. Importance of the Piloting Stage

Piloting the research instruments is an important stage in the research design cycle. Kim (2010) define pilot studies as “small-scale versions of the planned study, trial runs of planned methods, or miniature versions of the anticipated research” (ibid: 2). The significance of the pilot study in the research plan stems from the fact that it can be used to test the data collection instruments, identify flaws in the research design, clarify any ambiguities in the instruments’ protocols or interviews’ schedules, test the feasibility of the research, and familiarise the researcher with fieldwork realities before the actual data collection (Kim, 2010, Beebe, 2007, Van Teijlingen *et al.*, 2001).

### 3.8.2. Procedures of the Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in September 2008. The aims of the pilot study were to

- test the instruments to be used for the data collection
- identify any potential technical or contextual problems/factors that would impact the data collection process
- get a firsthand experience of conducting interviews and focus group discussions
- modify the research questions based on the results of the piloting stage

The original research design was to investigate students’ academic writing from the points of view of First Year students and their EFL teachers. Therefore, the participants of the pilot study were taken from the same target population intended for the main study. The plan was to observe three writing classes, interview the EFL teachers and then conduct three focus group interviews with six students from each class observed. I was able to observe the target number of classes and interview the writing teachers as planned. As for the focus group interviews, however, one group did not show up on the day agreed upon for the interview because it was the week of the Eid (a religious celebration) and the students decided to take the whole week off. This meant that I only carried out two focus group interviews.

Originally, I wanted the focus group to be made up of students with varying levels of writing abilities so that comparisons could be made between the responses of students from varying linguistic levels. However, the pilot study was conducted during the second and third week of the first semester. At that time students had not handed in any written assignments yet, so it was difficult for their writing teachers to establish their linguistic competency level. Therefore, the only criterion for being in the focus group was student's willingness to participate in the pilot study.

### **3.8.3. Lessons Learned from the Pilot Study**

The piloting stage was critical for the study in the following ways:

- I gained firsthand experience with setting up a research study and dealing with the logistics involved in the fieldwork, such as obtaining official permission to conduct the research, ensuring access to the participants, getting their consent, and dealing with unexpected events in the field during the process.
- It gave me the opportunity to test the interviews' schedules which resulted in the modification of the original questions based on the responses that I got from the participants. These responses helped me refine the interviews' schedules and divide the questions into subthemes that I wanted to explore further during the main study. In the revised interview schedules, I also included additional prompt questions that I used to focus and guide the interviewing process.
- I familiarised myself with the procedures involved in conducting a research interview as it was the first time for me to carry out this type of interviews. This proved to be useful since I was able to modify my questioning strategies for the main study and avoid being sidetracked by teachers' questions and request for feedback or assistance with their teaching from me.
- During the focus group interviews I asked the students to talk in English, but I soon discovered that their language level may not permit them to freely

express their thoughts on the issues under study. Therefore, I decided to use Arabic for focus group interviews with the students to maximise their input and participation in the discussion.

- I was able to test the quality of the recordings and revealed the technical problems with my old audio recorder. For the main study I bought a new digital recorder that allowed direct transfer of audio files to the computer without the need of specialised software because I faced problems with this regard with the old device.
- From the pilot study, I realised that an optimal time for the interviews would be between 45 minutes to 1 hour since participants tend to get impatient and usually no new information can be obtained from them after that time. This time-frame would also mean that I must be careful with interview time and use strategies and prompts to ensure that the respondents do not deviate from the focus of the research and start talking about unrelated matters.
- Transcribing the interviews revealed to me the difficulties associated with transcription. These difficulties were related to the quality and clarity of the recordings and the time needed for completing a single interview, especially since I have decided to transcribe the whole interviews for the main study. This exercise also showed me the importance of starting the transcription process during the data collection stage and not leaving it until the end of the fieldwork.
- Based on the pilot study, I modified the research design to include the Head of the English Language Department, the Director of the English Language Programme, and the subject teachers from the other departments in the college in an attempt to triangulate the perceptions of these different groups and gain a better understanding of students' experience with academic writing not only in the English Department but also in other departments where they are assessed through the use of assignments and essay writing.

### 3.9. Data Collection Stage

The main data collection was conducted during the second semester of the first year from February to June 2009. The structure of the degree programme means that in the first semester of Year One students study four modules from the four specialisations of Information Technology, Design, Communication and International Business Administration. In addition, they have to study the English Language component. By the end of the first semester, students should have narrowed down their specialisation preferences to two out of the four mentioned above. During the second semester, they study five modules; two from each of their chosen specialisations and an English Language course. The reason for choosing Communication and the International Business departments to be included in the study is that in them and as part of the assessments scheme, students are required to write assignments. That is why it is important to examine these teachers' views of students' academic writing and not to limit this investigation to English Language teachers only. In the other academic departments (i.e., Information Technology and Design), writing is not a prominent element in the assessment scheme. Instead, students are required to produce artefacts for the Design modules, or write computer programmes or design web pages for the Information Technology modules.

A total of seventeen interviews were carried out. Fifteen interviews were conducted with teachers in three departments within the, in addition to the Head of the English Language Department in the college, and the Director of the English Language Programme in the Ministry of Higher Education. From the English Language Department, eight teachers were interviewed, one of whom is the Coordinator of the writing course for Year One. The remaining participants were from the Communication Department (four teachers) and the International Business Department (three teachers).

Seven focus group interviews were conducted with First Year students. Each of these interviews consisted of six students (three males and three females) with the exception of one group where only four students showed up for the interview. The interviews were conducted towards the end of the semester. That is because the questions aimed to capture several aspects of students' academic writing experience,

such as approach to assignments in English and in the other departments, students' perceptions of teachers' feedback, and their attitude towards English language as the medium of instruction. The interviews were conducted in Arabic since I realised during the pilot study that students' English proficiency was limited. My purpose was to get as much detail as possible from the students about their experience which could only be done by using their mother tongue so that they could express their ideas freely.

Arranging the focus group interviews, however, proved to be harder than I had expected and experienced during the piloting stage because of students' timetable. In accordance with the design of the study plan, in the first semester of the first year all students study four introductory courses from the four specialisations. This meant that all students in the group had the same timetable which was the reason I found it easier to arrange focus groups during the pilot study. In the second semester, however, students have different timetables because they start to narrow down their choice of majors to two out of the available four. In the same English group, there are students who are studying any combination of the four specialisations which meant that they have different timetables with the 10 hours of English instruction being the only common classes for the group. For this reason, students found it difficult to agree on a time for the interview and I had to wait for days or even weeks before conducting the interview.

In the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded about the aim of the study and their informed consent and approval for the interview to be recorded was obtained. They were also informed that they have the right not to answer questions that they do not want to answer and that they can withdraw from the study at any point. In addition, they were given assurances about protecting their confidentiality and the anonymity of their responses, which are to be used only for the purpose of my PhD research. More details about these ethical considerations are discussed in Section 3.12 of this chapter.

The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and were then downloaded onto computer and transcribed. All the audio files were saved onto my

computer and on two external hard drives to ensure against the possibility of data loss due any unforeseen technical problems.

### 3.10. Data Analysis Stage

Data analysis is a process that involves putting together, structuring, and interpreting the collected data (Marshall and Rossman, 1999: 150). Creswell (2007: 148) states that qualitative data analysis

consists of preparing and organising the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion.

This type of data analysis is a non-linear process since it involves the researcher going back and forth between the original data and the coding process to establish new codes, and test existing ones against the original data. Data analysis is also an integral part of the research and cannot be separated from it. In other words, data analysis is not a self-contained phase in its own that starts after data collection is finished. In fact, the whole research process is iterative in the sense that the researcher constantly moves between the different stages and phases of the research process.

The aim of the researcher at this stage is to recognize emerging patterns and themes, and to assign meanings or to interpret these patterns in line with the research questions. The comprehensive nature of the qualitative data that is usually gathered over a period of time asks for starting this process concurrently with the data collection. Cohen et al, (2007) argue that starting the analysis early reduces the problem of data overload and gives the researcher the opportunity to recognize significant themes that can be explored further in the remaining period of data collection, thus giving focus for the study. In the current study, I used thematic analysis as the analytic lens to interpret the data. Braun and Clarke (2006: 79) define thematic analysis as



a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently, it goes further than this and interprets various aspects of the research topic.

The data analysis process followed the guidelines set by Braun and Clarke (2006: 87) six phases of thematic analysis procedure that are depicted in the following table.

**Table 3.4: Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 87)**

Phase	Description of the Process
1. Familiarise yourself with your data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas</li> </ul>
2. Generate initial codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coding interesting features of the data in a systemic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code</li> </ul>
3. Searching for themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme</li> </ul>
4. Reviewing themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis</li> </ul>
5. Defining and naming themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme</li> </ul>
6. Producing the report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.</li> </ul>

In the remaining part of this section, a detailed description of the application of the above mentioned steps in the data analysis of my study will be presented.

### **3.10.1. Familiarising Myself with the Data**

The first stage in data analysis began with verbatim transcription of the teachers’ interviews and students’ focus group interviews. From the outset, I decided to

transcribe all the utterances recorded and not rely on making summaries of the interviews, or only considering the utterances which are related to the focus of the study at the time of transcription. During that early stage of data analysis, I was not sure about the importance of the different themes discussed in the interviews to the final study's arguments and I did not want to take chances. During the process of transcription, I also developed a thorough grasp of my data since I had transcribed it all myself.

The process of converting Arabic focus group interviews to English was not without challenges, both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, I had to make the decision whether to use 'literal' or 'free' translation. Honig (1997) cited in Birbili (2000) states that "a literal translation (word-by-word) could perhaps be seen as doing more justice to what participants have said and make one's readers understand the foreign mentality better". However, Birbili (2000) warns that using literal translation may impede understanding because it can reduce the readability of the text. For the purpose of this study, I decided to use free translation to achieve the aim of conveying the essence of the students' message in a clear and easy to read manner, while at the same time trying to be as faithful to their original intent as possible. See Appendix Twelve for a comparison between literal and free translation of an extract of students' focus group interview.

On the practical level, similar to Halai (2007) experience, I did not face a lot of difficulties regarding the linguistic and the grammatical aspects because my goal was not to achieve 'exact equivalence', but rather 'inexact equivalence' between the original and the translated text. However, there were problems in transcribing words which do not have true equivalent in English. Using a bilingual dictionary and online translators, I found several suggestions and then used the one that best conveys students meaning as I understand it. For example, when talking about English teachers marking their assignments, students used the word (يحاسب), which the dictionary translates as 'to hold accountable'. However, in the context of the interviews, the suggested translation is not appropriate because the Arabic word carries with it a negative connotation about teachers being very particular in marking. This added meaning is better captured by the words 'picky' or 'fussy'. Also during the interviews, students used several English words that they have picked up

during their studies, so I used the same words in the translation. For example, they used the term ‘copy paste’ to talk about the plagiarism problem and the short form ‘vocab’ instead of vocabulary, which I retained in the transcripts. In addition, students sometimes used second person when talking about their experience, so instead of saying ‘we are asked to write...’, they would say ‘you are asked to write...’. In these instances, I decided to use the second person in translation because students’ reference to themselves is obvious within the context.

After I finished transcribing the interviews, I began familiarising myself further with the data through reading and re-reading the transcripts. I also started the informal analysis by writing general notes and comments about initial thoughts and interesting issues that were emerging from the data.

### **3.10.2. Generating Initial Codes**

Robson (2002b: 477) defines a code as a “symbol applied to a section of a text to classify or categorise it”. The section of text or unit analysis can be a word, an abbreviation, a phrase, a colour, or a number that indicates the occurrences of patterns in the data. An important consideration in assigning a code to a segment of raw data is that this segment should be meaningful in relation to the phenomenon under study. In this study, the constant comparison method was used for developing and refining the codes.

Denscombe (2007: 99) maintains that constant comparison entails “comparing and contrasting new codes, categories and concepts as they emerge-constantly seeking to check out against existing versions”. In this sense, the process is an iterative one which requires that the researcher reads and re-reads the coded data, looking for similarities and differences in the interviews, combining existing codes into categories or adding new codes to accommodate for new pieces of information until all the data is saturated. Then similar codes are grouped together in categories from which concepts or themes can be derived and discussed in relation to the research questions.

In the same vein Creswell (2007: 148) describes the main steps in the coding process by stating that

central steps in coding data (reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments) , combing the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons in the data graphs, tables, or charts. These are the core elements of qualitative data analysis.

Firstly, I had to determine the ‘units of analysis’ which refers to the basic text unit that contains an idea relevant to the research question(s) (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). Instead of being concerned with a specific linguistic text unit, qualitative researchers usually chunk their data based on whether they represent distinctive meaningful segments which contain an issue of interest to the researcher (ibid). Therefore, a code can be assigned to any length of text such as a word, a phrase, or a sentence.

For the coding stage, I went through all the transcripts, assigning codes to chunks of data that were relevant to the general topics that I wanted to investigate in the study. These topics were:

- (1) students’ level in academic writing,
- (2) feedback to students’ writing,
- (3) support for academic writing, and
- (4) interdisciplinary issues.

These original broad categories were mainly based on the review of research on first year students’ academic writing in Chapter Two. However, as the data analysis progressed, I found myself modifying and revising the codes based on the interview data and my own personal understanding of these categories entail, as will be explained in the next section.

In the above extract, it can be noted that codes were assigned to data segments of varying length. In coding responses, one of the difficulties was that students mentioned more than one issue in the same response. Therefore, some responses were coded under several themes or sub-themes. For example, in the beginning of

the extract, student S2 mentioned several difficulties that she encounters in her writing. Therefore, the response was coded for all the difficulties that she mentioned.

Sometimes, the whole response revolved around a single issue which makes it easier to assign a code to the entire segment. For example, student S6 in the following excerpt

**S6:** In business, they don't focus a lot on grammar..the main thing is that the topic is clear.. the method or presentation and explanation

This whole response was coded as “the focus of subject teachers”.

During this stage, revision of the codes through grouping, discarding, merging, downgrading, or upgrading was carried out extensively throughout the data. In addition, I was able to reduce the amount of data by ‘banking’ irrelevant information which did not seem to fit the focus of the research.

I coded the interviews manually mainly because the training on relevant qualitative analysis programmes, such as Nvivo, was not readily available when I was ready to start the analysis. I undertook the Nvivo training later but by that time I was almost at the end of the analysis stage and I did not want to waste time transferring my files into the programme and repeating the coding process. The next table illustrates coding of an extract from one of the focus group interviews. (See Appendix 1 for the complete coded transcript).

**Table 3.5: Focus group extract with initial codes**

Focus group Transcript	Initial Codes
<p>S2: I had difficulty in the grammar and the spelling. The teacher commented: if you took this information from sources, why do you have spelling and grammar mistakes. Yes, I took the information from television and from interviews, but I did the translation myself. Even in the net, we don't find information about the assignment topic . It's impossible to find all information about our major, so we have to write it ourselves. That's why I have many spelling and grammar mistakes. I had more mistakes in the second draft than in the first, but I think we lose marks mainly because of the spelling and grammar.</p>	<p>Difficulties: grammar/spelling/ using their own words/ finding information/translating info</p>
<p>S1: I faced the same problem as my colleagues...I had problems with the reference and it's difficult to find the date for web pages ...I had several mistakes in referencing...also I have a big problem in grammar...my paper is all covered in red...the teachers' marking..and after I corrected the mistakes, it turned out to be ok</p>	<p>Difficulties: references/ grammar</p>
<p>HS: This is all for the assignments for the English, what about the assignments that you have to write for the other subjects?</p>	
<p>S6: Many students complain about the assignments of the communication..they asked us to write 2000 words and we have to apply the knowledge..with no mistakes..that's very very difficult</p>	<p>Number of words required in comm.. assign</p>
<p>S5: 2000 words...we don't have time...you have to write the English assignment ..assignment for ..</p>	
<p>S6: and it is all in the same time</p>	<p>Lack of time</p>
<p>S5: communication..IT...there is no time</p>	<p>Number of assignments</p>
<p>S6: for example, now we have four assignments in one semester</p>	
<p>Hs: What about the deadlines?</p>	<p>Assign. deadlines</p>
<p>Ss: too close and sometimes even on the same day</p>	
<p>HS: What about the other assignments, what's needed of you? For English, you said the difficulty was in grammar and vocab..What about the other assignments?</p>	<p>Focus of subject teachers</p>
<p>S6: In business, they don't focus a lot on grammar..the main thing is that the topic is clear.. the method or presentation and explanation</p>	
<p>Hs: Did the teachers tell you this?</p>	<p>Students deduced sub T's focus</p>
<p>S6: We deduced it when we saw the grades for the assignments.. it was ok</p>	
<p>S4: Also copy without changing anything is normal, but in English we have to change...in your own words</p>	<p>Sub. T's attitudes towards plagiarism</p>

### 3.10.3. Searching for Themes

This stage involves an iterative process of reading and rereading the codes generated in the previous step so that the researcher is immersed in the data in order to be able to identify significant recurring broader patterns or themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 89), searching for themes

involves sorting the different codes into potential themes, and collating all the relevant coded extracts within the identified themes. Essentially, you are starting to analyse your codes and consider how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme.

This process is labelled by Creswell (2007: 152) as ‘winnowing’ the data or “reducing them to a small, manageable set of themes to write into (the) final narrative”. This stage entails thinking about the relationships between the different codes, themes, and sub-themes and re-arranging and organising the coded extracts according to the new understanding. Grouping of the relevant code extracts under the corresponding theme helps the researcher see the broader ‘story’ of the data and how the different parts fit into this framework. I ended this stage, as Braun and Clarke (2006: 90) write with “a collection of candidate themes, and sub-themes, and all extracts of data that have been coded in relation to them”.

As was abovementioned, I started the data analysis with four major categories that I was interested in exploring. The first coding stage resulted in the formulation of an initial analysis framework, as can be in the next table:

**Table 3.6: Initial Analysis Framework**

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Views of students’ academic writing</li><li>• Mistakes students make in academic writing</li><li>• Reasons for students’ difficulties in academic writing<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Language-related reasons</li><li>○ Assignment-related reasons</li></ul></li><li>• Characteristics of good academic writing</li><li>• Teachers’ feedback on students’ writing</li><li>• Attitudes towards English<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Positive</li><li>○ negative</li></ul></li><li>• The structure of the degree programme</li><li>• Interdisciplinary issues</li></ul> |
|---|

#### **3.10.4. Reviewing Themes**

After developing candidate themes, the next process is evaluating and refining the emergent themes and exploring them through the data. Following Braun and Clarke's advice (2006:91), two main principles were taken into consideration during this refinement process. I made sure that "data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes", or what Patton (1990) labels as internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. During this stage, I followed the two level review described by Braun and Clarke (2006: 91-92). For the first level, I reviewed the extracts of coded data under each theme to evaluate their coherence and that they form a meaningful unit of analysis. The second level involved going back and reading the entire data set to judge that the candidate themes capture the contours of the data. Another aim of the second level review was to code new data segments or to re-code old ones in line with my refined understanding of the themes and sub-themes boundaries and properties.

#### **3.10.5. Defining and Naming Themes**

In the fifth step of the analysis, the aim is to "define and further refine the themes you will represent for your analysis, and analyse the data within them. (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 92). This was done by determining the essence of each of the themes and aspect(s) of data that each theme captures. Here again the coded data and their collated illustrative extracts were re-read and organised into a coherent and consistent 'story' identifying the significance of each extract in relation to the aim of the study and the research questions. As for naming the themes, the writer's advice that names should be "concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about" (ibid: 93). By the end of this stage, I had a coding scheme that consisted of ten higher order themes and twelve sub-themes as depicted in Table 3.4.



**Table 3.7: Final Coding Scheme**

- Views of students' academic writing
- Students' readiness for academic writing
- Difficulties students encounter in academic writing
  - Language skills
  - Research skills
  - Text-management skills
  - Time-management skills
- Characteristics of good academic writing
- Teachers' Feedback
  - Number of drafts
  - Focus of feedback
  - Students' response to feedback
- Attitudes towards English
  - English as a problem
  - English a resource
  - Impact of English on students' writing
- The structure of the degree programme
- Coordination between departments
- Writing in the disciplines
  - Relative importance of writing in disciplines
  - Students' awareness of varying writing demands
  - Subject teachers' involvement with students' writing

Table 3.5 illustrates the application of the final codes to the same focus group excerpt from section 3.10.2. It can be noted that the writing difficulties in the beginning of the example are now categorised the sub-themes of language skills, research skills, text-management or time-management skills.

**Table 3.8: Focus group extract with initial and final codes**

Focus group Transcript	Initial Codes	Final codes
<p><b>S2:</b> S2: I had difficulty in the grammar and the spelling. The teacher commented: if you took this information from sources, why do you have spelling and grammar mistakes. Yes, I took the information from television and from interviews, but I did the translation myself. Even in the net, we don't find information about the assignment topic . It's impossible to find all information about our major, so we have to write it ourselves. That's why I have many spelling and grammar mistakes. I had more mistakes in the second draft than in the first, but I think we lose marks mainly because of the spelling and grammar.</p>	<p>Difficulties: grammar/spelling/ using their own words/  finding information/references</p>	<p>Language skills  Research skills</p>
<p><b>S1:</b> I faced the same problem as my colleagues...I had problems with the reference and it's difficult to find the date for web pages ...I had several mistakes in referencing...also I have a big problem in grammar...my paper is all covered in red...the teachers' marking..and after I corrected the mistakes, it turned out to be ok</p>	<p>Difficulties: references/ grammar</p>	<p>Research skills/language skills</p>
<p><b>HS:</b> This is all for the assignments for the English, what about the assignments that you have to write for the other subjects?</p>	<p>number of words required in comm. assignment</p>	<p>Text-management skills</p>
<p><b>S6:</b> Many students complain about the assignments of the communication..they asked us to write 2000 words and we have to apply the knowledge..with no mistakes..that's very very difficult</p>	<p>Lack of time</p>	<p>Time-management skills</p>
<p><b>S5:</b> 2000 words...we don't have time...you have to write the English assignment ..assignment for ..</p>	<p>Number of assignments</p>	<p>Time-management skills</p>
<p><b>S6:</b> and it is all in the same time</p>	<p>Number of assignments</p>	<p>Time-management skills</p>
<p><b>S5:</b> communication..IT...there is no time</p>	<p>Number of assignments</p>	<p>Time-management skills</p>
<p><b>S6:</b> for example, now we have four assignments in one semester</p>	<p>Number of assignments</p>	<p>Time-management skills</p>
<p><b>Hs:</b> What about the deadlines?</p>	<p>Number of assignments</p>	<p>Time-management skills</p>
<p><b>Ss:</b> too close and sometimes even on the same day</p>	<p>Assign. deadlines</p>	<p>Time-management skills</p>

### 3.10.6. Producing the Report

Similar to Marshall and Rossman (1999), Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that writing the report of the qualitative research is an integral part of the analytic process. In trying to capture the complexities of the data, the researcher is actively and creatively engaged in an interpretive process to make sense of the mass of raw data gathered and present it in a manner and language understood by others. The aim of the researcher at this stage is to convince the reader of the validity of the analysis and the interpretations of the results. Therefore, providing sufficient evidence of the themes and embedding interesting illustrative extracts from the data in the analytic narrative is a key element of producing a qualitative report. I took these recommendations into account when writing the findings chapter of the study by trying to go beyond describing the data to include presenting an argument by interpreting the results obtained in the analysis.

### 3.11. Trustworthiness of the Research

Traditionally the terms validity, reliability, and objectivity have been associated with quantitative research. In the qualitative tradition, however, the use of these terms to establish the quality of the research is contested (Richards, 2009). Alternatively, adopting the ideas presented in Lincoln and Guba's seminal works in the 1980s, qualitative researchers argue for the use of the notion of 'trustworthiness' to refer to the quality of qualitative research. According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), trustworthiness of qualitative research entails the application of four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to evaluate the quality of research in accordance with the relativist-interpretivist paradigm (Morse *et al.*, 2008). Creswell and Miller (2000: 125-126) explain this view by stating that

constructivists believe in pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended, and contextualised (e.g. sensitive to place and situation) perspectives towards reality. The validity procedures reflected in this thinking present criteria with labels distinct from quantitative approaches, such as trustworthiness (i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability).

In the next sections, these concepts are discussed in relation to the current research's design and procedures.

### **3.11.1. Credibility**

Credibility of qualitative research is related to “the focus of the research and refers to confidence in how well the data and the processes of analysis address the intended focus” (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004: 109). Credibility is considered from the outset of the research in determining its focus, choosing the research site and participants, and selecting the methods of data collection.

One procedure of establishing the credibility of the research was by the use of triangulation, which Creswell and Miller (2000: 126) define as searching “for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study”. The significance of triangulation is that it provides “corroborating evidence collected through multiple methods...to locate major and minor themes” (ibid: 127) instead of relying on a single or an uncorroborated piece of evidence to identify themes and support the claims that the researcher wants to make. Triangulation in the study was done on two levels: the level of participants and the level of methods. The data was generated from three sources: students, EFL teachers and officials, and subject teachers to ensure that I obtained different perspectives of students’ experiences with writing (see section 3.3). At the level of data collection methods, I employed semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis to generate data.

Prolonged engagement in the field is another credibility establishing procedure since “the longer (the constructivists) stay in the field, the more the pluralistic perspective will be heard from participants and the better the understanding of the context of participant views” (Creswell and Miller, 2000: 128). Although there is no set duration for fieldwork, a range from 4 months to a year is mentioned by the authors. I spent more than 4 months in the college for the data collection purpose, which can be considered a prolonged engagement in the field.

### **3.11.2. Transferability**

Transferability refers to the application or the relevance of the research findings to other contexts (Richards, 2009). A more common term is the generalisability of

research findings which is a highly controversial issue in qualitative research. Creswell (2007: 74) states that “as a general rule, qualitative researchers are reluctant to generalise from one case to another because the contexts of the cases differ.” In the same vein, Thomas (2010) asserts that generalisability should not be the aim nor the concern of qualitative researchers.

Flowerdew (2002: 283) argues that different contexts have different socio-cultural factors that influence the production and interpretation of the text, thus making generalisability of study results difficult or even impossible. The data gathered through the use of qualitative methods is usually comprehensive in nature, which while gives thick descriptions of the topic under study, is characteristically limited in scope. This can be considered by some researchers as an advantage and as a disadvantage by others. It can be considered an advantage since it provides a detailed picture of the topic of research within a given context. It can be viewed as a disadvantage from the point of proponents of statistical generalisability of the findings.

In research findings, distinctions are usually made between two types of generalisability: external and internal (Maxwell, 1996 cited in Robson, 2000). External (also known as statistical) generalisability refers to generalising the results of the study beyond the setting to a wider population; while internal generalisability is generalising the findings within the situation studied. The latter type is sometimes labelled as analytic or theoretical generalisability since it is concerned with gaining theoretical insights that would help understanding similar situations.

The findings of this study can be classified under the second type of generalisations. Understandably, in the Omani context, the results of this study will provide useful insights into other higher education institutions where academic writing is a valued skill for students' success. There is also potential for analytic generalisation beyond Oman as educators working in similar EFL situations can evaluate the findings of the study and gain insights that would help them understand and appreciate the complexities students' writing in their own contexts.

The evaluation of the generalisability of the findings from the study would depend entirely on the perception of the reader as “the authors can give suggestions about

transferability, but it is the reader's decision whether or not the findings are transferable to another context" (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004: 110). This view is also shared by Shenton (2004: 70), who maintains that the researcher being acquainted only with the 'sending context' cannot make any inferences concerning the transferability of his/her findings which must be determined by the readers.

### **3.11.3. Dependability**

Dependability in qualitative research " involves an interrogation of the context and the methods used to derive the data" (Richards, 2009: 159). Richards argues that such interrogation should include providing details on linking the methodology to the purpose of the study, discussing the methods of data collection, how they were actually used to generate the data, and the process of data analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) use the term ' inquiry audit' to refer to this notion.

Creswell and Miller (2000: 128) use the term 'thick description', which they define after Denzin (1989) as "deep, dense, detailed accounts" of the research process which entails providing as much detail as possible so that readers can make informed decisions about the relevance and the applicability of the current research findings to their own contexts. Another purpose of such in-depth coverage of the various research procedures is to enable other researchers to repeat the same research in other contexts (Shenton, 2004).

In the previous chapters of this thesis, I have provided a 'thick description' of the research process starting with presenting the Omani context and the rationale of the study in Chapter One. In Chapter Two, I have elaborated on the theoretical model used in the study, i.e. the academic literacies, and highlighted its appropriateness for investigating students' experience with writing. In the preceding sections of this chapter details were provided on the methodological considerations of the study from choosing the research paradigm and its appropriacy in accordance with the focus of the research, and then moving to the methods and procedures of data generation, and ending with the stages of the data analysis process.

#### **3.11.4. Confirmability**

Richards (2009: 160) states that “confirmability in qualitative research depends on making the data available to the reader and this in turn depends on the transparency of representation”. One way of ensuring the confirmability of research is by providing “richer representations, with participants’ voices and perspectives emerging clearly”. This step helps to ensure that the results reported in the research are direct thoughts and experiences of the research participants rather than being influenced by the bias of the researcher (Shenton, 2004).

This understanding of the term is in line with the aim of my research. As the topic is students’ experiences, it is necessary to allow their various perspectives to emerge during the study so that the research “reflect(s) the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the people who participate in our research” (Lietz, Langer and Furman, 2006: 444). The presentation and discussion of the findings of the study consider the centrality of students’ experience and acknowledges it as the overarching or unifying theme connecting all the arguments, as will be highlighted in the next two chapters.

### **3.12. Ethical Considerations**

The main areas of ethical considerations that need to be addressed by the researcher are access and acceptance, informed consent, anonymity of participants, and confidentiality. In the subsequent sections details are provided on how these ethical considerations were addressed in the present study.

#### **3.12.1. Access and Acceptance**

Access and acceptance are important ethical issues in the research (Cohen et al., 2000). It refers to the researcher gaining access to the site of the study and being accepted by the organization to carry out the fieldwork required. This usually requires official permission from the authorities that run the institution.

For my research and in order to obtain the official permission to conduct the study, I sent a letter explaining the nature of the research and the types of data required to the Director General of the Colleges of Applied Sciences in the Ministry of Higher

Education. Before starting the data collection, I received the official letter of approval and a copy of it was sent by the DG of the Colleges of Applied Sciences to the Dean of the college in question. The Dean in turn forwarded the letter to the Heads of the different academic departments to provide the necessary cooperation and assistance in conducting the study (see Appendix Thirteen for the research authorisation letter). Having worked in the college for several years and the good relationships with the Dean of the college and the Head of the English Language Department aided my access and the acceptance to the study site and the participants.

### **3.12.2. Informed Consent**

Informed consent means people's agreement to take part in the research after being informed of the facts and information that are likely to affect their decisions (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). According to Patton (2002: 407), gaining informed consent involves providing the participants with information on the purpose of the research, the party for whom the data is being gathered, the use of the data, the questions to be asked, and the risks and/or benefits for the person being interviewed. Before the beginning of this study, the required information about the research was provided to the participants to seek their formal, written agreement to take part in the study. I told them that participating in the research was voluntary and that they were free to walk out of the research at any point. (See Appendices fourteen and fifteen for teachers' and students' consent forms, respectively).

### **3.12.3. Anonymity of Participants**

Cohen *et al.* (2007) identify anonymity of participants as one of the ethical considerations that a researcher must take into account while conducting the study. In this study, the participants were assured that there will be no mention of their names or of their college in the thesis. For the data analysis, I gave each teacher participating in the study a unique symbol instead of names. Each symbol consists of two parts, i.e. ENG5, COM3, to identify the department the teacher belongs to and his/her order in the interview plan. I have decided to include an indication of the department so that comparisons between teachers' responses can be made. This



strategy meant that the results are reported anonymously with no reference to names of the respondents.

#### **3.12.4. Confidentiality**

Confidentiality involves disguising the identities of the participants to ensure that their privacy and anonymity is protected (Patton, 2002: 411). In this study, the participants were assured that they would not be identified by name in reporting the findings of the study, so that they would remain anonymous. They were also informed that the data gathered would strictly be used for the research purpose and would not be revealed to anyone outside this framework.

#### **3.12.5. Avoidance of Harm**

I currently work as the Deputy Director of the English Language programmes in the MoHE which is responsible for overseeing and supervising the work of the CoAS. Being regarded as a Ministry Official may have a negative influence on the participants. They may be reluctant to explicitly express their views about issues they consider sensitive. Teachers, for example, may withhold negative opinions about college or ministerial policies and practices for fear of being harmed by such revelations. Therefore, it was imperative to assure them that no harm would be inflicted on them as a result of taking part in the study and that their anonymous responses would only be used to answer the research questions with no future consequences on their job prospects at the college.

### **3.13. Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The study focuses on students' writing experience in one higher education institution in Oman. The focus here is on only investigating the literacy practices related to the writing skill, although academic literacy encompasses the four language skills of writing, listening, reading, and speaking, in addition to critical thinking skills, reasoning and study skills. Focusing on students' writing may give the false impression that academic literacy practices are mutually exclusive or separable entities while in reality they are not.

Another limitation is that the development of academic writing is a continuous process and the best way to understand it is conducting longitudinal studies (Leki, 2007). Although, the data collection lasted for over four months, a longer engagement in the context of study is needed before the full dimensions of students' writing can be understood. In addition, for logistical reasons the data for the current study comes only from one college of the six colleges under the scheme of the CoAS. Therefore, future longitudinal studies that explore a wider range of students' literacy practices in several CoAS colleges are needed.

### 3.14. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined and discussed the methodological underpinnings and the design of the study. To summarise, the present study follows the constructivist-interpretive research paradigm that stresses the subjectivity and multiplicity of people's construction of their experiences. Through the use of qualitative research methods of semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews, this study generated rich data from students, EFL teachers and subject teachers with the aim of obtaining multiple perspectives on the topic of students' writing from the key players directly involved in the issue. The data analysis followed the steps explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), which I have depended on quite heavily to guide me through the lengthy process. In this chapter, I have discussed how the trustworthiness of the study was established through addressing the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In addition, I have explained the measures that were taken to address the ethical considerations of acceptance and access, informed consent, avoidance of harm, anonymity, and confidentiality of participants. Finally, the scope and limitation of the study were outlined.

## 4 Chapter Four: Assignment-Related Factors and Students' Writing

### 4.1. Introduction

In this chapter and the next, I present the findings of the study. In the last section of the Literature Review (2.4.3), the difficulties facing students writing academic essays were categorised into difficulties related to the writing process itself and those pertaining to the wider college or university context. The findings chapters will follow a similar structure. In this chapter, the assignment-related factors will be presented, while the next chapter will focus on the factors found in the college context and their influence on students' academic writing.

This chapter discusses the findings under five main themes, which are:

- views of students' academic writing,
- Students' readiness for Academic writing,
- difficulties students encounter in academic writing,
- characteristics of good academic essay, and
- teachers' feedback.

The following table explains the symbols used to indicate the sources of citations in the findings chapters.

**Table 4.1: Symbols Used to Indicate the Sources of Citations**

Eng 1,2,3,4,5,6,7	English language teachers interviews
Eng HoD	English Head of Department
Eng PD	English Programme Director
Com 1,2,3,4	Communication Teachers interviews
IBA 1,2,3	International Business Administration Teachers interviews
FG 1,2, 7, 8,10, 13,14	Students Focus Group Interviews
S1, S2, .....	Student 1, Student 2, .....
Ss	All Students
HS	The researcher

## 4.2. Views of Students' Academic Writing

The first section of the students' and teachers' interviews was concerned with exploring views of students' experience with academic writing and the perceived level of students' writing in Year One.

In response to the question about their general experience with assignment writing in Year One, the students reported that it is the most difficult skill for them. In the elaboration to this response, the first reason students mention is that it is totally different than the writing that they were used to do in Foundation Year Programme (FYP) as the student states in the following excerpt

**S4:** This (assignment writing) was in this year not in the foundation ... it was supposed to be in the foundation ... in foundation we wrote no assignments ... only paragraphs... so this year from the beginning of the semester we had to write assignments ... so it was difficult ... if they taught us from foundation, it would have been easier.

**(FG8)**

To understand the reasons that led this student to make the previous observation, there is a need to examine the nature of writing in the FYP and in Year One. In FYP, students studied English language courses totalling 10 weekly teaching hours, in addition to two hours of numeracy and two hours of computer and study skills. In the writing component of the syllabus, students were trained to write paragraphs on topics that they are familiar with or for which the input is provided for them in the form of charts or tables, similar to Task One of the IELTS exam. Writing in FYP did not usually require research or the use of references.

In Year One, students are enrolled in five departments and in at least three of these departments; they are required to write assignments for assessment purposes. Transition to First Year involves a change in the type, the requirements, and the length of the writing tasks students are asked to produce. In addition to writing short paragraphs as classroom tasks or in response to exam questions, preparing presentations, writing summaries and articles, especially for the students majoring in Communication, first year students are required to write longer researched pieces of writing called assignments, or what is sometimes called term papers in other higher

education settings. These academic essays, which range in length from 300 to 2000 words, are a significant element of students' assessment criteria in Year One.

In the English department, for example, the writing assignment comprises 20% of the total semester grade. In the other subject courses, there is also reliance on assignment writing in the evaluation process. In the module, 'An Introduction to Media Studies', students are to write a 500 words essay that constitutes 20% of the semester grade. The assessment in the module 'An Introduction to Public Culture' is heavily writing oriented as 50% of the semester marks are allocated to the two semester assignments with 25% for each one. In the first assignment, which is due in Week 3, students have to write an essay on theories of cultural studies and popular culture. For the second assignment, students have to write a 2000 words case study on media forms. In 'Introduction to Tourism' students are asked to write an assignment about the tourist attractions in their region taking into consideration the issues studied in the module.

When writing assignments, the students are expected to adhere to the rules of academic writing, use references, and show ability to paraphrase, summarise, and integrate information from multiple sources to support their arguments. The students faced difficulty in assignment writing related to how they respond to and accommodate the new writing requirements where they are asked to produce more complex written texts for which they had little or no previous training. Although, the students had training in research as a part of their schooling programme, this experience may not be very relevant to their writing in the college for at least two reasons.

Firstly, in schools students carry out their research in Arabic. Because their linguistic ability in Arabic is more advanced than in English, students face more difficulties in researching in English. The second reason is that literacy practices are culturally situated practices, and as such one cannot assume that students would transfer the Arabic literacy practices and apply them successfully when conducting a piece of academic research in English.

The mismatch between the writing requirements in FYP and in Year One, the new types of abilities required to complete the assignments and the apparent absence of

systematic training meant that assignment writing became a highly challenging task for the students with low linguistic proficiency who are just beginning their academic studies as the next excerpt highlights

**S1:** We faced a big difficulty especially the teacher noticed that we took a lot of time to hand in the assignment ... maybe there was no time for us to know how to write ... in foundation we only wrote paragraphs ... so students rarely wrote essays or go deeply into an idea...(...).. i don't know..in the beginning we didn't know how to handle the assignment especially that the teacher didn't give us any background before asking us to write the assignment ... he only gave us the paper saying this the assignment and these are the topics..

**(FG8)**

The student in this quotation reported that he and his colleagues 'didn't know how to handle the assignment' mainly because they are not familiar with this new type of writing. In addition, in this group the teacher's practices negatively influenced students' writing. The teacher gave students the assignment instructions seemingly without further support with acquainting them with the requirements of academic writing, or giving them practice in writing mock assignments before they started writing the assessed semester assignment. This resulted in students requiring more time to finish writing and led to a state of frustration among them. That is because they were asked to produce assignments for evaluation purposes without first being trained in how to write researched academic texts.

When asked about their views on students' level of writing, all interviewed teachers acknowledged the existence of a problem in students' writing. One English teacher had the following to say about students' level in writing

I go to class with the expectations that they have a good foundation at least in grammar because this is an essential component for the writing thing so when I go to class, I'm really disappointed because their grammar is really weak and their spelling is really weak and they have to establish another foundation for grammar and for writing um which wasn't really established.

**(Eng1)**

The above quotation indicates that the students' writing ability is below the expectations of writing at the tertiary level; therefore, the students may not be able to meet the demands placed on their writing abilities in their departments. The teacher in the above example is not alone in expressing his disappointment regarding the

level of first year students' writing. Subject teachers also share the opinion that students' writing is generally weak and riddled with linguistic mistakes. In the next excerpt, a teacher from the Communication Department echoes the above views stated by the English teacher when responding to the question about students' level in writing. She maintains that

It (writing) is not good ... you know..students are always making mistakes in grammars and spelling (..) we were suffering from this problem because the level of language or teaching language for students is not good so they are always making mistakes in grammar and in spelling and they are not able to express or to write what they are thinking or to express their opinion. They find it difficulty how to write and express themselves

**(COM2)**

It is not surprising that both teachers cite the linguistic problems in students' texts and them making mistakes in grammar and spelling to illustrate their low level in writing. This is a point that was mentioned by almost all the teachers in the sample regardless of the department they belong to. However, it is interesting to note that in the case of the disciplinary teachers, this observation seems to be in conflict with their stated practice when giving feedback. Subject teachers reported that they focus on the content of the essays rather than on the language aspects when assessing students' writing because they believe that improving students' language is the duty of the English teachers.

#### 4.3. Students' Readiness for Academic Writing

Students' perception of under-preparedness for academic writing can be linked to the lack of systematic training in academic writing prior to writing the first academic assignment. This view is reflected in students' response to the question about their readiness for academic writing when they joined the degree programme in which almost all the interviewed students stated that they are not prepared for the writing tasks of Year One. There are two main reasons for this observation. Firstly, there are differences in the writing requirements and the conditions under which students are completing their writing tasks in the FYP and in Year One. The second reason is that, although there are variations in the writing requirements and the expectations from students' writing, there seems to be no provision made to train students on the new

functions of writing, the research skills needed for gathering information for the essays, and the role that references should play in their texts.

Teachers also acknowledge the influence of the absence of training on students' under-readiness for the writing demands of the first year. Most of the interviewed teachers state that after finishing foundation year, students are not ready yet for the types of writing that they are asked to do, whether in the English department or in their degree programmes. In addition to stating the obvious that students' linguistic abilities are low, teachers also acknowledged that moving from writing paragraphs in foundation to writing researched essays in Year One proved to be a difficult transition for most students since they first need to be taught basic research skills in English. Talking about English assignments in the first semester of Year One, this English language teacher states that

We've had assignments where we had required a lot of research from the students and we never gave them, I think, a fair chance of learning how to do a researched project because there was never any time or focus on research skills, on paraphrasing or using quotations, proper referencing etc. So I think we dug our own grave a little bit because we asked the students to do something that they couldn't.

**(ENG2)**

By stating that 'we dug our own grave', this teacher acknowledges the responsibility of the syllabus designers and the teachers in the difficulties students are facing with writing in Year One. The nature of the writing task requires research skills, such as paraphrasing and using proper in-text and end of text referencing; however, there was no provision made to train students in these skills before they start writing their first assignment. In the next excerpt, another teacher also comments on the disjuncture between what students are taught and the types of skills required for completing the assignments. She says

Quotations ... uh ... when they talk to the parents, they're asked to write quotations. I said, "How do ask them to do that? We haven't taught them dialogue". It's ... there are a lot of native speakers who have no idea how to write dialogue. And you can't do that without giving them questions on that. Now during the class, do you want us to focus on what we need to teach for the assignment or do you want us to focus on, you know, what's in the books to teach them.

**(ENG7)**



The teacher here mentions another example of the influence of the assignments' requirements on students' writing. She voices her disapproval about asking students to include direct quotations or speech in their essays without previous training.

As the stated aim of the FYP is to prepare students for their subsequent studies in the degree programmes and given the importance that writing plays in students' academic lives in Year One, it is not totally unrealistic to assume that attention would be given to create more parallelism and continuity between the writing syllabus in FYP and the First Year and to provide students with adequate practice, so that they are better prepared for the demands of assignment writing when they join their majors. In the absence of such conditions, it is not surprising that there was a convergence in the opinions of both the students and teachers regarding the difficulty of the writing and the under-preparedness of first year students for academic writing.

#### 4.4. Difficulties Students Encounter in Academic Writing

After presenting students' views on their experience with academic writing and teachers' views on first year students' level of writing, the subsequent sections will present specific difficulties that students encountered during the process of writing assignments in Year One. Adapting the categorisation put forward by Leki and Carson (1994), these difficulties will be discussed under the four major sections of: language skills, research skills, text-managing skills, and time management skills.

##### 4.4.1. Language Skills

There is a convergence in the views of the teachers and students regarding the language-related difficulties in students' writing. Both groups stated that spelling and grammar are the areas where students commit most of the mistakes. In the last part of section 4.2, teachers from both the English department and the disciplinary departments exemplified students' unsatisfactory level in writing by the existence of numerous language related errors in their texts. The main reason that most of the teachers mention as causing students' difficulties in writing is their low language level, which prevents them from expressing their ideas clearly when writing assignments. This opinion is illustrated by the following excerpt from a

Communication teacher in response to the question about the level of students' writing. Teachers maintained that

Ok ... to say it in a very broad or general term ... I think they have ... they aren't able to express themselves well. What they have in mind and what they want to write. There is some kind of a barrier which is coming across ... and because the level of English is not up to what they want to express.

**(Com1)**

In commenting on the students' level in writing, almost all teachers maintained that the main problems students have are in grammar and spelling. Teachers also mentioned specific types of grammatical mistakes that students make while writing. These mistakes range from the word level to the sentence and the whole essay level. Examples of the grammatical mistakes that the students' make are mistakes in sentence formation, punctuation, verb tenses, the verb "to be", plurals, and pronouns. Other problems include lack of vocabulary, especially technical or academic vocabulary, using informal conversational language, inability to organise ideas in a logical manner, and using memorised expressions that do not necessarily serve the purpose of their writing. In the next example, a teacher from the English department expresses her opinion about students' writing by maintaining that

grammar mistakes ... um ... very concentrated in terms of their writing. Every line you'd find some mistake for the students ... I find the structuring of their writing. They're not very aware, you know, inserting basic things like paragraphs between ideas, so these things I have to consistently remind them about ... and other mistakes ... a lot of students make mistakes with first and second person and third person pronouns when they're writing. They confused all the different sides, you know, how to speak in their writing and a lot of them write the way they speak, you know, not changing the tense or the language to suit a paper or a print ... um, you know

**(Eng3)**

Not surprisingly, when I asked the students to specify the problems that they face with writing, all of them mentioned grammar and spelling as the major areas of difficulties. In the following excerpt, the student is commenting on her writing experience by saying

**S6:** We were required to write about 800 words ... more than 800 ... so we have to write it ourselves ... so we faced more difficulties ... but in the first semester, it was somewhat easier ... in the second semester we faced problems mostly in grammar and the same thing in spelling ... because we

have to write on our own ... not to copy paste from a web site ... so it was more difficult ... so we have more difficulties in spelling and in grammar in the second semester.

**(FG13)**

Students perceived that grammar is important in improving their writing and felt that the practice of explicitly teaching grammar in Foundation Year helped them improve their writing. In Year One, however, instead of a grammar textbook, there are short sections dealing with grammatical points in the writing textbook. Students and teachers alike felt that this lack of focus on grammar teaching is one of the reasons for the grammatical mistakes that students have in their writing in Year One. Next are two excerpts from the focus group interviews. In the first one, the student praised a former teacher for teaching them grammatical rules which they still find useful in writing the assignment. In the second example, all the students in Focus Group 13 unanimously stated that they needed more grammar in order to develop their academic writing.

**S1:** In the last semester, we had a good teacher who gave us a lot of grammar which helped us in our writing and until now we use it in writing the essay.

**(FG1)**

**Hs:** What do you think you need the most to improve your writing? What is missing?

**Ss:** grammar.

**(FG13)**

Students wanted more focus on language skills to ease their language related difficulties in Year One writing. The same opinion is voiced by the next teacher who believes that there should be more focus given to grammar teaching in the college in order to improve students' assignment writing. He states that

I believe that they don't spend enough time on grammar in the college ... in foundation, they only spent two ... two hours a week on grammar. If that was up to four or six hours, they wouldn't be having these problems in Year One. I think grammar is very crucial and it needs to be taught from an earlier stage.

**(ENG5)**

Another language-related difficulty that students mentioned is vocabulary. Students reported that during FYP, they relied on the vocabulary learned in the school and used ‘simple words’ in their writing. In Year One, however, there is a huge shift as students are required to use vocabulary items from the academic word list which they are taught. Students expressed the following opinion regarding the choice of vocabulary for their assignments

**S6:** In the foundation, the choice of the words was less and most of the time, we used the words we learned in the school and simple words but this year, there is a huge difference in the vocab. The vocab ... we always use the words that the instructor chooses and there is a problem in the grammar. Now, I feel that there is a shortage in the rules (of grammar). In the foundation, teaching grammar was more and better.

**(FG10)**

Students’ low proficiency in English may be a crucial factor influencing how much knowledge they have or can understand about the topic of the assignment. In the current findings, students and teachers argued that the topics of some of the assignments were very challenging to students. For example, the assignment for the English module in semester one required students to write about one of the three topics of intelligence, technology, or comparison of cultures. This choice of topics was thought to be an impossible task even by teachers as illustrated by the following quotation from one of the English language teachers who maintains that

this semester the writing assignment has been tuned back a lot so it’s much easier writing assignment ... and I do think that with what they’re asked to do this semester is something they can manage ... last semester, I thought, was an impossible task ... they had to write 800 to 1000 words research paper about intelligence, or cultures in comparing cultures ... it was really a bit ... a lot of research and far too much information ... they weren’t ready to write 800 words yet ... whereas this semester, they’re supposed to write about 500 words and they’re supposed to write about why they chose their major, so it’s a topic that they know about, they should have background information about it ... they don’t need to do a lot of research ... um ... so I do think that this semester’s topic was appropriate and the length was appropriate for, you know, a three months project ... but last semester was (laughs) was really difficult **(Eng6)**

The teacher in the above example mentioned that in the first semester the reasons for the difficulties First Year students faced with writing the English assignments were mainly in relation to the number of required words, and may be more importantly the topics of the assignments. She thought that it was a difficult or even an impossible

task for students to write a long essay about a topic that they have little or no background information about. In comparison, the length and the topic in the second semester assignment was appropriate since students are required to write a shorter essay about 'why they chose their major', a topic that students have background information about and as such they do not need to research.

Students also share similar concerns about not having sufficient background knowledge about the topics to be able to complete the assignment. Reiterating previously mentioned difficulties in grammar and vocabulary, in the following example, the student also mentions that background knowledge facilitates assignment writing. She maintains that

**S3:** if you have information and background knowledge about the topic, you'll be able to write about it ... and the grammar is very essential thing ... if you don't know the rules, how can you connect between the vocab?  
**(FG14)**

Students' struggle with the writing task as a direct result of lack of familiarity with the topic is exacerbated in the case of the Communication assignment in which they have to produce a 2000 word essay on any topic related to media. One difficulty facing students in completing this task was the sparse background knowledge that they possess on the topic. Students reported that even with researching the topic after few hundred words, they ran out of ideas to write about and find themselves faced with the daunting task of coming up with more than 1000 words to reach the word requirement of the assignment. Student 3 from Focus Group 14 is not alone in expressing his anxiety about having to write an assignment on a topic that he knows very little about. He states that

**S3:** The problem that I'm facing now is in the media ... in the research, they want 2000 words and it's very difficult

**Hs:** What's the topic about?

**S3:** About anything related to media ... my research is about newspaper ... I searched for information and found references and the maximum number of words that I got was 700 and until now I can't reach 1000 words ... so it's really difficult.

**(FG 14)**

The references that students need to read in order to gather information for the assignments are usually written in a language higher than their competency level.

Because of their low language proficiency, some students resorted to translation from L1 to write the assignment. Students reported that they carry out the research in Arabic and then translate the information to English using some web services, such as Google translator. This can be seen as a compensation strategy for their language deficiencies when searching for information from source materials.

The writing textbook was mentioned as a factor that impedes the development of students' language skills needed to complete the assignments. There were three main concerns that the English teachers have with the writing textbook. Firstly, teachers believe that there is not enough attention given to grammar teaching which teachers believe is the foundation of good writing. As mentioned before, the main reasons that the respondents gave for students' difficulties in grammar were the lack of focus on grammar teaching in Foundation Year and in Year One programme. Secondly, the teacher maintains that there seems to be more emphasis on reading and analysing texts rather than actual writing exercises.

Finally, the order of topics taught in the textbook does not help students' efforts in responding to the assignment requirements. That is because there are some skills that the students need to learn for the assignments which are not introduced until late in the course. The assignment guidelines are given to students in the beginning of the semester and they are asked to submit the final drafts before they actually get the chance to learn some of the important information that they need in their writing. In the next quotation, the teacher expresses his and his colleagues' reservations against the textbooks used for teaching writing in the first two years of the degree programme by maintaining that

We don't like the textbooks we're using ... none of the teachers like the textbooks that we're using in Year One and Year Two (...) There is a big disconnect between what we're teaching in class and what's assessed in the exams and I also think that's true with the assignment. And I spend maybe proportionally, I think, I spend too much time preparing for the assignments in class but if I don't, then it's really a waste of exercise for them because they're totally unprepared for it so we do end up probably spending ... I end up spending a disproportionate amount of time in the writing classes just working towards that assignment.

**(ENG6)**

The teachers seem to be not quite sure as how to solve the dilemma of the disjuncture between assignment requirements and the writing syllabus. On one hand, they want to help students acquire the necessary knowledge in order to write the assignment successfully. However, if they do that, then they will find themselves not teaching the syllabus and straying away from the aims and objectives of the writing course. When deciding to teach what students' need, teachers see that their position is justifiable given the importance of the assignment in students' academic attainment, the weight given to it in the continuous assessment scheme, and under preparation of students. This makes this teacher concerned about the washback effect of the writing assignment on the writing course. In other words, teachers spend too much time in class specifically preparing students to write the required assignment rather than focusing on improving their writing abilities in general.

The teachers also stated that textbooks used in the subject courses are linguistically demanding for the students. They have a very low readability factor since they were meant for students with a higher level of language proficiency level than that of the students in the CoAS. Therefore, students find difficulty in obtaining information to be incorporated in the assignments from these textbooks. Instead, first year students relied on the lecture handouts and their own notes for exam revision. For assignment preparation, the students reported that they use other sources of information, such as external references and websites. Since these were not written with EFL students in mind, the issue of language difficulty was also a determining factor impacting on students' comprehension of the information found in the references.

#### **4.4.2. Research Skills**

In Year One, possessing good research ability is considered as a prerequisite for completing the assignments since, as was discussed earlier, students are required to incorporate information from references to argue their points of view. However, without previous training in research skills, first year students were at a disadvantage when researching the topics of the assignments and attempting to use appropriate information in their academic writing. In addition, students were confused because of the seemingly contradictions between the topic of some of the assignments and the requirement of using references.

For example, for the second semester assignment in the English department, the students were asked to write about choosing their majors and the reasons that made them decide to study this particular specialisation in the college. From the students' point of view, this assignment is considered a personal essay; students writing about a topic that they are very familiar with. Therefore, students did not seem to understand the reason for requiring the use references to write about their experience in choosing their majors. The student in the next quotation questions this requirement by saying

**S5:** The reason for the difficulties is that in the last assignment, we were asked to write about our majors ... which means that we write about ourselves ... so why do we have to use references to write about ourselves? ... He said that you have to use three references so from where will we get these references? ... We conducted two interviews but from where can we get the third reference? ... He said you should use books ... so from where can you get books to write about yourself?

**(FG14)**

The second category of assignment-related difficulties is research skills. Under this heading, students raised their concerns about the several issues related to referencing. These difficulties are linked to different stages of the research process, which are:

- Locating references
- Understanding references
- Using references

#### **4.4.2.1. Locating References**

Finding references was mentioned by the students as one of their main concerns with regard to the research skills difficulties. In the next excerpt, the students summarise most of the worries that first year students have concerning using source materials by maintaining that

**S2:** The problem was in the resources ... finding resources is difficult ... summarising from the net, doing interviews, making summaries of them and then writing it in our own words ... this was difficult in the assignment.



**S6:** When they give us the assignment ... we study IT and other subjects ... so it's difficult for me to go and search for information in the net and other sources ... this is it ... the references are the most difficult thing for me ... I don't have time to go and search ... this is the difficulty

**(FG13)**

The first student mentioned the tasks that they have to carry out in order to fulfil the requirement of using references. For him the difficulties were in finding the resources, summarising the information and then using their own language to write the assignment. The second student states that because of the heavy timetable and course workload associated with studying five subjects, she does not have the time to go and search for references for the assignment.

Related to the difficulty of finding references, the students mentioned that they do not find the books that they need in the Language Resource Centre in the college. Sometimes students use their own textbooks, or lecture notes as sources of information. Furthermore, this lack of references made students rely on the internet, which created other set of difficulties for them. Students complained that the number of computers in the college's computer labs is not sufficient in proportion to the number of the students, especially since most of the students use the college computing facilities to search the net. Another problem is the slow internet connection in the college which means that downloading an article or a web page can take a long time. In the next quotation, the teacher disagrees with students' above stated observation that there are no reference books in the college's library; however, he supports their complaint about the slow speed of the internet in the college. He says that

We do have reference library both in English and in Arabic. There are a number of books and journals and so on. There are enough computers for students to use, but what brings down the research aspect is the speed of the internet. If you start loading a website and go have lunch, come back and still it's not finished, then there is something wrong, yeah. So we need to have dedicated lines for students' labs, for teachers etc and before that happens, research is going to be a very very minor detail in the college.

**(ENG2)**

To overcome this problem, the teacher puts forward the suggestion of dedicating separate internet lines for students' labs from the lines assigned to the rest of the college so that the speed increases and students would not have to wait for an hour to

download an article. Despite the difficulties of understanding the language of the web pages and the slow internet connection, the students reported that the internet is their preferred source of information.

#### **4.4.2.2. Understanding References**

Another research difficulty for first year students is understanding the language of the references. When researching for their essays, EFL students have the dual task of finding sources and finding relevant sources written at their level of language proficiency. Because the language of the references is linguistically challenging, students may not be able to comprehend what they are reading. This consequently makes it difficult for them to evaluate its relevance to the assignment and to summarise segments of the reading material to be included in the writing. In the next excerpt, the student mentioned that their low level in English made it difficult to understand the materials that they located for the assignment in the first semester. She states that

**S3:** For me the first semester was more difficult because it (the assignment) was on intelligence and we have to use more websites ... and we faced difficulties with the websites because our level is weak in English.

**(FG13)**

#### **4.4.2.3. Using References**

Another difficulty that students encounter under the research skills is using proper referencing mechanisms to incorporate quotations in their texts and to complete the final reference page. Students acknowledged that they were given handouts explaining the appropriate use of in-text referencing and the details needed for the bibliography page. The students reported that they encountered difficulties in writing in-text referencing because they were not trained on how to incorporate references into the different sections of the assignment, as the next quotation illustrates.

**S5:** writing is difficult ... because it's lengthy and we have to write an introduction, a conclusion and references ... the most difficult thing that we face is how to incorporate the references in the sentences and organise them with the introduction and the conclusion (...) we see that writing is very difficult ... we didn't learn in schools ... we didn't learn in

foundation ... in the last assignment we faced a lot of difficulty ... we interviewed some people in Arabic and then we had to translate it to English and it was difficult for us

**(FG8)**

With end of text referencing, the difficulty was in finding all the required information, especially when using the web pages as the student explains in the following example.

**S6:** There are many requirements in it ... for example the references ... for example they want the full details of the references such as the name and the dates ... but if we took something from the internet, we don't know the date ... we have only the web address but the teacher doesn't accept this and wants everything in detail.

**(FG14)**

Finding all the required information to complete the reference page seems to be easier for the students had they used books as references, but when using the internet, the students find difficulty in locating all the necessary fields.

#### **4.4.3. Text-management Skills**

Paraphrasing and summarising featured highly on students' list of difficulties immediately after grammar and spelling, and sometimes jointly with them for some students. These difficulties can be seen as the result of both students' low language level and absence of training since in the writing tasks in FYP did not require the use of references and multiple sources of information. In Year One, however, these skills were of a crucial importance to students in their preparation of the essays since they are required to synthesise information from different sources into a coherent assignment. In the following excerpt, the student attributes the problems that she is facing with these text-management skills to the difficulty of the language of the references. She reports that

**S4:** I faced difficulties in the first semester ... when I was writing an assignment on intelligence, I used an article from the internet and I wanted to write the whole article in the essay, but the teacher said that I can't do that...you have to summarise it ... so I faced difficulties in summarising the article.

**HS:** Why did you face difficulty in summarising?

**S4:** The language was difficult ... you have to understand the whole thing and summarise it in your own words ... I faced difficulty in writing but I wrote it but I didn't get a good mark in it.

**(FG14)**

The students also reported that they were not trained on how to summarise and paraphrase information, although a few teachers stated that they did provide some in-class training for their students. A plausible explanation may be that, it was a personal initiative from these teachers which may not be a standardised practice among all the teachers in the college. This may explain the discrepancies in the teachers and students' views regarding this issue.

In addition to difficulties with summarising and paraphrasing, students mentioned other text-management skills, such as the organisation of the assignment and the information to be included in each section, as the next excerpt highlights.

**S4:** I think the main mistakes that we lose marks for in the assignment are in the organisation and the conclusion ..we have to write certain things in the conclusion and if we don't do it, we will lose marks..the body and of course the references.

**S3:** The assignments has to have several things ... the teacher gave us several questions and the answers to these questions have to be included in the assignment ... if they weren't included, we'll lose marks ... also grammar, spelling ... ur ... organisation of the topic ... in addition, the coherence between all parts of the assignment ... of course the references ... also the introduction and the conclusion.

**(FG14)**

An academic assignment consists of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion in which students are required to make coherent arguments in response to the assignment question or topic. Moving from writing single paragraphs in FYP to writing long researched essays in Year One proved to be a huge stretch of students' linguistic abilities. Without training and practice, first year students approached their assignments with a great deal of uncertainty and bewilderment.

#### **4.4.4. Time-management Skills**

The last category of difficulties is related to time management. Students in the study reported that they are under pressure because of the structure of the study plan in the

CoAS. That is because they study courses from five departments in the first semester, and from three departments in the second semester. This structure of the study plan meant that students are required to manage the competing demands placed on their in-college and out-of-college time from the different departments. The students in the study reported that they were under constant pressure throughout the semester because of the numerous course work, exams, and other assessed tasks that they have to complete for the subjects. In the next excerpts, students explain why time pressure seems to be a common element in first students' experience in the college. The students state that

**S2:** It is especially as we have more than one ... we have homework, in addition to the assignments, in addition to the pressure of the study and the mid-term exams and other things ... so we are really stressed.

**(FG1)**

**S4:** the pressure of five courses is not a little thing ... so in the communication now they took out the midterm and replaced it with a third assignment, so each subject has three assignments ... three assignments ... and all of them are written and we have presentation so in communication, we have three assignments ... first a story, then magazine articles, and then we write the campaign

**S3:** and also interview

**S4:** Sometimes the pressure from the subjects, reduces your revision of the other subject ... each one wants their projects on the deadline

**(FG8)**

Students were presented with the topics of their first assignments two weeks into the first semester. Although they were given about two months to submit the final assignments, managing the workload from all of these departments was difficult for them. In the English department, students were asked to submit at least two drafts before the final submission, which comes towards the end of the semester. In the last few weeks before the final exam, all the assignments and other assessed course work is due. Students have to complete the assignments, prepare and give oral presentations, and revise for the final examinations during the same period of time. One teacher explains this disproportionate distribution of students' course workload by stating that

We've talked many times about using blackboard and so on as a way of splitting up the work load for the students because right now, they have nothing to do for the first nine weeks of the semester and then everything comes in the last six weeks and we have to realise that we're by giving this huge workload at the end of the semester (...) they aren't going to produce as well as they could if we give them a more balanced workload. I mean we ask students to balance their responsibilities with college and home and friends but we don't make it easier for them. We just give them more and more and more. (ENG2)

The teacher recognises that because of the current situation in the college where all the assessed work is due towards the end of the semester, students are not solely to be blamed when they are not able to hand in their essays, or other assessed work on time, or when the quality of their assignments is not satisfactory. The departments also share the responsibility because they are not making it easy for the students to fulfil the numerous assessment requirements due within a short period of time.

In the light of the apparent lack of coordination between the departments, students' time-management skills were tested to the limit. In the following excerpt students complain about the number of assignments that they have write in the semester by maintaining that

**S6:** Many students complain about the assignments of the communication ... they asked us to write 2000 words and we have to apply the knowledge ... with no mistakes ... that's very very difficult

**S5:** 2000 words ... we don't have time...you have to write the English assignment ... assignment for..

**S6:** and it is all in the same time

**S5:** communication ... IT ... there is no time

**S6:** For example, now we have four assignments in one semester

**HS:** What about the deadlines?

**Ss:** too close and sometimes even on the same day

(FG 14)

Students also reported that they sometimes had to resort to plagiarism because they do not find the time to write and learn from the experience of writing academic assignments as the student in the next example explains

**S5:** We do copy paste because of lack of time ... we want to write to learn but we don't have time ... same as last semester ... we studied four specialisations, English and math ... so it's impossible to get good marks.  
**(FG14)**

The above quotation and similar ones that were echoed by all focus groups, mean that students may not appreciate the importance of writing to their learning. They see the assignments as merely a series of hoops that they have to jump through without fully realising that these assignments are designed to develop their understanding of the content matter, as was stated in the course outlines.

Added to the problem of time-management is the fact that sometimes the assignment's guidelines change during the semester which means that students have to revise their essays in alignment with the new guidelines. Understandably, this adds yet another burden on students' who are already stretched for time. The students expressed their reactions to the change in the assignment' guidelines by maintaining that

**S6:** ... the problem is that we have to hand in one assignment next week and then we have more than three weeks. Yesterday, they give us new guidelines that we have to follow so all our work is wrong and we have to do it again because they didn't give us these guidelines from the beginning..

**S5:** You have three weeks, we have one day only  
**(FG10)**

Teachers' practices can also aggravate the difficulties that students have with regard to managing their time to complete the assignments and meet their deadlines. Students maintained that some teachers are considerate towards them and can allow changing or postponing the submission of some work, especially if the whole group asked for it. Other teachers, on the other hand, are stricter with the deadlines and are not open for negotiation about submission dates. The students explained teachers' different reaction to their requests for more time by saying that

**S1:** The assignments ... they give us limited time and we can tell them during that time that we have three assignments so it's a little bit difficult ... for example, a teacher in the English department ... we had to submit in the beginning of this week but the students didn't finish the first draft, so they told him and he said no problem ... till next week ... they are considerate but there is no coordination between the departments

**S3:** Some teachers are considerate but others... if they give you a long time, it's impossible ... they say today ... it means today

**HS:** For example, you know that in three weeks time, you have to hand in these assignments, is it possible to ask some teachers to postpone the deadline for his assignments or..

**S5:** In the English department, they can delay or postpone but the rest of the departments no ... even if it was for a short time

**(FG10)**

As a way of overcoming some of the difficulties that they have in time-management skills, and in agreement with the above mentioned opinion of teacher ENG2, students pleaded for more coordination and cooperation between the different departments in the college in setting reasonable deadlines, so that the students are more likely to submit their assessed work on time and to benefit from completing their work. They maintained that

**S2:** We need more cooperation between the departments in assignments deadlines and exams, presentations because the students are under pressure from the four departments ... we don't benefit..

**(FG10)**

To avoid being under pressure throughout the semester because of numerous course related tasks and the conflicting deadlines, the students in this study clearly indicated that they wanted more coordination between the departments, especially with regard to the exam dates and the assignments' deadlines.

#### 4.5. Characteristics of Good Academic Essay

Analysis of teachers' interviews revealed that they have different views of the characteristics of good academic writing, as we are going to see below.

The first thing that stands off of me is structure ... it's the first thing that anybody looks at is structure, punctuation is important also and the use of language is also essential so these are three things I'd say are important to academic writing..

**(Eng5)**

This teacher cites structure as her first criterion for judging successful writing and claims that this is the first element anybody looks at in an assignment. This teacher also includes punctuation and the use of language as important elements for academic writing. This teacher's criteria seem to be all connected to the surface



features of the essay. Teacher Eng1 mentioned organisation as the first criterion for judging successful writing but in his elaboration of this point, he talked about surface features such as the consistency of the font used throughout the assignment and the breakdown of the assignment into paragraphs. Other criteria that this teacher mentioned are the relevance of the content, the use of a neat language (i.e. few grammatical mistakes), the use of academic terminologies, and the originality or the authenticity of the writing, in that order.

Teacher Eng6 also has organisation as the first characteristic of good academic writing as can be seen in following excerpt

So I focus more on organising ideas, on using appropriate vocabulary for the assignment and then on the actual sentences structure, ordering of the words because to me those are the three most important things in making your ideas clear. And then the other things yes they're important but I put them at a more minor level.

**(Eng6)**

However, in contrast to the opinion of the previous teacher, by organisation this teacher means the logical organisation of the writing starting with presenting the topic and then giving the supporting details and revealing the ideas in a logical manner that would make understanding the essay easier for the reader. Also vocabulary features on this teacher's list, but he does not mean using complex academic words but rather using appropriate vocabulary that would be most effective in conveying the message of the text to the reader. The third criterion is the sentence structure because, as he puts it, not having the words in the correct order confuses the reader as to the meaning of the sentence. This teacher seems to be focused more on the communicative purpose of the essay and that may explain why all the criteria of good academic writing revolve around getting the ideas across to the reader in a clear, logical way. Another teacher who also seems to be more interested in message of the essay rather than the linguistic accuracy is Teacher Eng2 who maintains that

I want to read something with adjectives, with descriptions, where the students show me that they have an opinion about something (...) spelling mistakes and so on I'm not that bothered with as long as I can understand it. Grammar mistakes they're more difficult because you have to make sure that you have clear understanding of what's going on so they can't be any misunderstandings but for me successful writing showing that I've been thinking about this. I have an opinion, uh I'm going to describe it for you. That's when a student is successful in his writing **(Eng2)**

This teachers' idea of a good academic writing is using descriptive language and a lot of adjectives which came as a result of his involvement with teaching creative writing courses in his native country. Teacher Eng2 does not mind spelling mistakes that do not impede comprehension. Like Teacher Eng6, this teacher seems to be focusing more on the communicative aim of the writing and whether students were able to fulfil this aim or not. Teacher Eng4 states his opinion about good academic writing by saying

We focus on grammar and the issues surrounding grammar but I think often you can still be expressing your idea and the reader will understand what you mean even if you're using the wrong verb tense.

**(Eng4)**

This seems to be in line with the views of teacher Eng2 in regarding grammar as a minor issue in determining how successful students' writing is. For this teacher, when it comes to determining the success of the essay, the organisation of the assignment, the use of appropriate vocabulary, and the actual structuring of the sentences are more crucial than the accuracy of the language used.

As was the case with teachers from the English department, subject teachers have diverse views about features of good academic writing. Grammar and spelling feature highly on some teachers' lists (i.e. Com1); while others (i.e. IBA 1) focus more on the message of the writing being clear and that students are able to convey it successfully in their writing. Teacher Com3 states that he considers three elements in judging successful writing which are the content or the ideas, the word structure, and grammatical accuracy of the sentence. Another teacher who shares the focus on the ideas of the essay is Teacher IBA1 who states

Well, as a teacher truly I concentrate on the general ideas that the student is trying to convey to me. I don't really bother myself about the spelling or even about ... I just look at the construction ... a sentence with a period with a comma that give me a piece of information that the student wants to tell me this. When I find this, (...) I say this is a good writing

**(IBA1)**

For this teacher, conveying the general idea of the writing in a clear manner is the only criterion determining good writing. He does not consider any linguistic aspects, such as spelling or grammar. Not all subject teachers agree with Teacher IBA1 in disregarding grammar and spelling when judging good writing. For teachers IBA2

and Com1, linguistic accuracy both at the sentence level and at the paragraph level is an important criteria in evaluating how successful the writing is. Also the head of the communication department (Com4) mentions that a good assignment should first be written in 'good English' meaning that it should have no or a few grammatical and spelling mistakes. He also mentioned two additional criteria which are having clear organisation and addressing the main topic of the assignment, in that order. This is the only time that addressing the topic was mentioned as a feature of good assignment writing.

The above analysis of teachers' interviews revealed significance differences in the conceptualisation of what good academic writing is and showed difference in the importance given to the various constructs; with some teachers focusing on language accuracy and stylistic features; while others are more concerned about the communicative function of the essay. Communicative function means the ability of the essay to communicate to the reader the ideas in a clear and logical manner. We saw above that when teachers were asked to identify the characteristics of good academic writing, most mentioned grammar and spelling as the main features. Other teachers, however, placed grammar at a lesser degree of importance when compared to the clarity of the ideas, the structure of sentences, and the organisation of the text as a whole.

#### 4.6. Teachers' Feedback

Feedback is an important feature of teachers' discursive practices. Numerous studies dealt with feedback on student writing, especially from the perspective of comparing the effectiveness of various types of feedback in improving student writing and change in students writing as a result of feedback. Although the effectiveness of feedback in improving written texts is a key aspect in the writing instruction, it is not the focus of this study. My interest in feedback can be summarised in the following. As the study is interpretive in nature, I am interested in investigating students' experience with and their reaction to teacher feedback, rather than measuring the impact of using this type of feedback or the other on the development of students' written outcomes.

In the focus group interviews students, mentioned several issues related to feedback that highlight the differences between teachers' practices in the English department and the disciplinary departments. These practices are:

- (1) Number of drafts,
- (2) The focus of teacher feedback,
- (3) Effects of feedback on students, and
- (4) Students' strategies to respond to the feedback.

Next is a presentation of the findings in each of these aspects followed by the discussion of their significance in relation to students' experience with academic writing in the college.

#### **4.6.1. Number of Drafts**

The analysis of the interviews revealed that students operate within two distinct systems with respect to the number of assignment drafts required from them. In the English department, students work in a multiple drafts context where they are asked to submit at least two drafts before the final assignment is handed in. A point worth mentioning here is that individual teachers' practices differ regarding the total number of drafts that they can accept. Students reported that some teachers allow them to submit up to five drafts, especially when they misunderstand the topic of the assignment or have a lot of mistakes. Other teachers, however, follow the official maximum of two drafts policy and refuse to look at any additional drafts.

In the International Business Administration and Communication Departments; however, teachers generally only ask for the final draft of the assignments and students are not required to submit multiple drafts to get informative feedback. One disciplinary teacher justifies this position by saying

Yeah, we just ask them to give the final draft. We ... trying ... doing first draft second draft and all of that, but then what happens is that it becomes a chance for them to keep making amendments and becomes a kind of headache for us ... because first of all we are having severe shortage of staff and as it is ... we are overloaded with class hours and assignments and things like that so this would only add on and what happens we'll not be able to give whatever quality we are giving now **(COM1)**

This teacher maintains that the reason for not asking students to submit multiple drafts is the shortage of staff in the department and that requiring multiple drafts will mean adding extra burden onto teachers' already overloaded schedule. This teacher goes on to say that by doing this, they will jeopardise the quality of teaching in the departments. There is another plausible explanation that is not directly mentioned by subject teachers but which can be deduced from later discussion of their involvement of in the development of students' writing. Subject teachers do not see themselves as responsible for the improvement of students' writing. This may explain why they are not interested in spending time looking at assignment drafts in which the main focus of the marking is indicating the mistakes that students have and suggesting ways for improving the quality of the writing.

In the interviews, students maintained that they prefer having to submit multiple drafts, even if it means more work for them. That is because they perceive this practice as extremely beneficial for the development and improvement of their writing, and thus it helps them score higher grades as indicated in the following extract

**HS:** Is this the second or the last draft?

**S6:** This is the second ... he helped us because he doesn't want us to lose marks and if there is a chance, he will return it back to us for a third draft..

**S2:** We have three drafts

**HS:** Is it all the teachers or only this teacher?

**S2:** It depends on the teachers ... some have only two

**S5:** It depends on ... it depends on the teacher ... today I'll submit the second and we have the deadline on the 22 ... he will return it back to me on Wednesday and I'll do the corrections ... I saw former students of Mr. (...) coming to him to correct their essays because their teacher only marks two drafts for them ... of course, they will lose marks

**(FG14)**

In addition to the focus on getting high scores as a result of the feedback that they get from the teachers on previous drafts, in the previous excerpt students consolidated the point mentioned above about the variations in the teachers' practices regarding the number of drafts that they allow their students to hand in before the final submission. They stated that their teacher wants them to get good marks by allowing them to submit more than three drafts, while other teachers stick to the official

guidelines of two drafts and do not allow their students to exceed it. These disadvantaged students sometimes may seek assistance from other teachers to read their assignments before they submit them for final marking.

This practice in itself is not without problems because teachers, who are approached by students, reported that although they want to help, they do not want to create tension between them and their colleagues teaching these students or to seem to be “stepping on anybody’s toes” by agreeing to read these students’ drafts when their teachers refused to do so. These variations in teachers’ practices regarding the number of drafts also raise issues about the standardisation of students’ experience in the college. This consolidates a point mentioned in the previous chapter that far from being a standardised and a homogeneous experience for all students, writing practices in the college are highly characterised by a strong influence of individual tutors’ practices. This situation of inequality in the number of opportunities given to students to revise and rewrite the assignment before it being marked by the teachers has far reaching consequences on students’ academic lives. To begin with, it has a significant bearing on the grades that students receive for the assignment which in turn affect students’ GPA. As there is a limited number of available seats per each subject department, the GPA is used as a criterion for allocating students into the specialisations in the college.

In the International Business Administration and Communication departments and as a consequence of not having teacher feedback on their drafts, students complained that they do not benefit from writing the assignments. Students do not get to know their mistakes since the assignment are not returned back to them. They also do not know the grades that they scored for their writing until the end of the semester as illustrated by the next quotation.

**S2:** In the other subjects, there are no drafts ... we just give the assignment to her and we don’t know whether or not it has mistakes ... we don’t benefit and the same thing in communication ... we already handed in several assignments but they don’t give us anything back ... we don’t even know the grades..

**HS:** when do u know the grades?

**S2:** at the end of the semester

**(FG2)**

Despite the fact that in the English department students have the chance to revise the assignment more than once before the final submission, a situation which is absent in the subject departments, students reported that generally they score higher marks in the subject assignments than in the English assignments for the reasons that will be explained in the next section dealing with the focus of the English and subject teachers when marking the assignments.

#### **4.6.2. The Focus of Teacher Feedback**

The analysis of the interviews showed that English and subject teachers have different focus when marking students' assignments. In the previous section, we learned that in English department, students submit several drafts for feedback. Teachers reported that their focus in these consecutive drafts and the amount of feedback differs in agreement with the purpose of the feedback.

The purpose of first draft is to diagnose students 'problems'. Keeping in mind the existence of variations in the amount of feedback that teachers give, several teachers maintained that since the first draft is returned back to students for revision and corrections, they are very thorough since they spend a lot of time going through the whole assignment, underlining each and every mistake, indicating its type, and how the students are supposed to correct it.

In the last draft, however, the focus is more on assessing the assignment and giving a mark in accordance with the assessment rubrics used in the English department. Therefore, the feedback given in the final draft serves as a justification for the marks given so that students would know why they got the mark that they got rather than providing suggestions for further improvement. Teacher Eng2 summarises the typical practices of English teachers when giving feedback on the first draft by stating that

usually what happens the first draft, we become so critical of it. Personally I become very critical and try to analysis every bits and pieces of it because draft number one will go back to the student and the student needs to know what his/her mistakes and because of that, they will go through the mistakes and they will produce expectedly better draft than the first one so I have to spend a lot of time on draft number one.  
**(ENG2)**

In the second draft and since the purpose shifts to assessment, the feedback practices change to reflect this. In the next quotation, the same teacher explains his practice when marking the second draft of students' assignments

I focus more on assessing; how to assess it rather than giving feedback because most of the time the second draft doesn't go back to the students most of the time but still they can see it, though. So I focus more on how to assess; how much they deserve in the content, how much they deserve in the organization, how much they deserve in the language use and the discussion. Is it really authentic? Is it original? So focus on on the criteria, you know, the writing rubrics and we come up with a mark ... so this is the main focus of the second or the final draft rather than giving a feedback but still I need to underline, I need to give notes to myself because sometimes they see the mark and they're not happy with it, they come and argue ... they need to find what is the problem in the written assignment.

**(ENG2)**

The writing practices in the subject departments do not include the submission of drafts so students do not obtain any formative feedback from their disciplinary teachers. However, in responding to a question about their focus when marking the assignments, subject teachers said that they are mainly concerned with the content of the assignments, rather than the quality of language that the assignments are written in. Some teachers maintained that they may comment on the students' language by writing 'your language is poor' or 'improve your language', but this has no great bearing on the grades that students receive for the assignments. This concern is exemplified by a statement from the head of the Communications Department response to a question about his focus in marking students' assignments. He maintains that

**HS:** in marking, does the marking of students' assignments reflect this concern? I mean do you have..

**COM4:** Yes, of course ... If you may I do pay attention to the content rather than the writing skills

**HS:** What about the marks? If students have a lot of spelling mistakes, do you deduct marks from them?

**COM4:** it is not that much because again I'm not an English teacher so I'm not going to test their English ... I'm I'm only trying to test their knowledge ... their learning outcomes about the communication ... this is my main objective ... because if I'm going to concentrate on the ... I have to teach them and I have to correct their spelling for them, or what's the best way to write the sentence and then it might be at the expense of communication.



The above quotation restates that the main objective of the marking in the subject departments is evaluating students' comprehension of the content rather than assessing their linguistic abilities by indicating the language mistakes and suggesting ways to correct these mistakes to improve the written product. The reason that this teacher gives for this practice is that assessing students' language ability is the duty of the English language teachers and that it is not his job to help students overcome their linguistic problems. Echoing the concern of teacher Com1 in the previous section, this teacher also maintains that by focusing on students' language and linguistic proficiency, subject teachers may risk undermining the quality of their teaching because any involvement with the language may be at the expense of the content of their subject courses.

The subject teachers seem to be interested in the final product and that students have an assignment to hand in on the assigned date of submission, they are not interested in how the students produced this assignment, how did they arrive at this finished product, the process of writing itself and the stages that the students went through to arrive at this final draft. There seems to be less focus on the language itself and whether the students are using their own words in the assignment as the following example illustrates

language we don't go to look at the language because I told you there only ... it's information already ... it's already there in front of them so like you see this information is already there in front of them ... like these are from various magazines like tourism magazines ... information is there, they will read the article and maybe get part of it ... so they're not writing anything on their own, they're just you know, reading and collecting and putting it that's what's required for the course

**(IBA2)**

Students showed an awareness of the varying focus of the teachers in the English department and those in the disciplinary departments with regard to their main concern when providing feedback, or when marking in the case of the disciplinary teachers. In the following excerpt the students summarised the main differences by stating that

**S1:** In the English assignment, they focus on the language ... grammar is an essential thing more than the assignments of other subjects

**S2:** for example, if you write an assignment in tourism, it's impossible that you'll be judged on grammar and the like. They will be happy that I wrote it myself. The most important thing for them is that it's not copied

**S3:** for me, my marks in the English are higher than the major assignments

**HS:** generally do you feel that the subject teachers focus on the linguistic mistakes?

**SS:** no, they don't

**HS:** what's the most important thing for them?

**S4:** the information and that it is not copied

**S3:** and that you understand the topic you are writing about

**(FG1)**

Students realised that there are differences in teachers' focus between teachers with English teachers generally focusing on the language and subject teachers being more concerned about the content of the assignment rather than the linguistic accuracy of the text. They also reported that English teachers focus on everything in the assignments. As a result of that, students stated that they usually get lower marks in the assignments written for the English department than those written for the subject departments, despite the fact that they spent more time and effort writing and revising the English assignments. This may make students somewhat disheartened when it comes to writing and may affect their attitude towards learning in general.

It is interesting to note that in the subject departments, students reported that generally they are not told the focus of the teachers when assessing the assignments. Students maintained that they have figured it themselves either by looking at the assignments feedback (if they were handed back to them), or by comparing the marks they get for the English assignment and for the subject assignments. The following comments made by Student 5 in the next quotation are reverberated by several students in the focus groups. The student says

**S5:** yes, but their focus on grammar and the spelling is less because it's not their specialty to focus on these things. As for the English, they focus a lot on spelling ... they (subject teachers) don't focus ... they focus on the ideas and topics required from us whether they are there or not

**HS:** You said that in business they focus more on the content and ideas rather than grammar and the spelling. Did the teachers tell you this directly?

**S5:** We see it. We see it

**HS:** how?

**S5:** last semester, in business they gave us back our assignments and we could see. They didn't focus on grammar and spelling; they focused more on the ideas. We lost marks on the ideas not on spelling.

**(FG 13)**

Students' awareness about the varying teachers' focus when marking affects their assignment writing process by influencing what students focus on when writing and how much effort they pay to get their language correct. Although there was no conclusive evidence from the data that students are aware of the existence of specific disciplinary differences between the specialisations, there is enough evidence, however, to suggest that their approach to writing differs when writing for the different disciplines, as illustrated by the next excerpt

**S4:** I wrote two assignments in ... in the English assignments, I focused very much on the grammar and the vocabulary ... so that I don't lose any marks, but in the business assignment, we wrote it as a group of 5 and we didn't follow the rules that we followed in English ... so the business assignment was different

**S6:** It depends on the students ... some students care only about the grades ... if they can get high marks with a mediocre assignment, they will not spend too much effort doing a better one ... in English, for example, I need to spend a lot of effort to get high marks but in the other subjects, I don't need to do this to get good marks...

**S3:** when I start writing a topic I try to make it complete ... but in English I focus on grammar and these things but in the other subjects I won't pay as much attention because I know it's OK ... this will not affect my marks so in English I focus more (on grammar and spelling)

**(FG 14)**

Not surprisingly, students reported that they modified their writing practices according to their understanding of the teachers' focus in the different departments. When writing assignments for the English department, they are more concerned with getting the grammatical aspects of their essays correctly because English teachers consider these aspects more when marking. However, when writing assignments in the subject departments, students maintained that their concern with the grammar is

less because they know that subject teachers focus on the ideas and the content more than the language.

An important issue related to feedback is teachers' attitudes towards plagiarism. The analysis of teachers' interviews illustrated that interdisciplinary differences come into play at this topic, especially with regard to teachers' conceptualisation of what counts as plagiarism and how tolerant teachers are towards the phenomenon.

Firstly, the concept of plagiarism itself seems to be confined in the subject teachers' mind to copying from their friends' assignments. They do not seem to mind students lifting materials from the internet, or from other sources without changing anything. In the next lengthy excerpt in response to the question about plagiarism, the teacher explains the department's expectations from students' writing regarding the use of external source materials by stating that

no, copy and paste ... this is not from other assignments, that's from the web and which they're supposed to do because we don't expect them to, you know, do their own ... go to what they call, Singapore.. go to one of those amusement parks ... ok, they got very good amusement parks, look at it and cut paste and put over here (.....) I think what they will be doing is all from the net and then just copy paste ... cut paste from here ... cut paste from there and get Ministry of Tourism information and they present it ... what little bit of word they'll be writing on their own is why they want tourism in their region ... in the Al-Batinah region? What's so special in Al-Batinah Region ... it's the only thing that they're going to write in their own words ... the rest ... everything is copy paste, so they'll do very well in the assignments ... the assignment is done in such a way that they should be able to ... it's not a difficult assignment ... they should be able to do it so they're comfortable with the assignment

**(IBA2)**

This teacher states that students are not expected to write anything on their own, but rather they are only to collect information on tourism from several sources (websites, books and magazines) and put them on paper. The teacher in the above example indicates that in preparing the assignments, students are expected to copy information directly from sources or references, seemingly without being required to use summarising or paraphrasing. For this teacher, assignment writing seems to be merely an information gathering exercise in which students are to gather a certain amount of information from various sources and put them together to reach the word

limit required for each one, rather than it being a process that involves critically integrating information to form, or to support an argument. There seems to be no emphasis on the process of critically evaluating the information gathered.

Secondly, subject teachers seem to be more lenient in dealing with students' plagiarism than the teachers in the English department. In the following excerpt, an IBA teacher expresses his reaction to students plagiarising in their writing assignment by stating that

I told them please I don't mind copy paste but you have to study.. to read what you have wrote ... to sit with your colleague from where you get to let them explain to you what you did. I don't need you just to write to me. I need you to have some knowledge

**(IBA3)**

This very low expectation of students' writing expressed by this teacher can be problematic as it is not very helpful for students who are trying to learn how to write successfully in their academic disciplines. Knowing that the teacher does not expect much from their writing may lead students to only do what the teacher is expecting them to do and approach the assignment in the same way intended by the teacher, i.e. collect or in the teachers' own words "copy paste" information from different sources and present it as their own work. Thus the strategy that students use in going to be the one that is aligned with teachers' expectations and which will in turn result in them getting good marks for the assignment since they followed the instructions of the teacher.

**S4:** the assignment in the specialisation is easier than the assignment in English ... in the organisation and the requirements ... in English, there is a lot of detailed requirements ... quotations and so on and so forth ... and summarising

**Hs:** in the specialisations ... they don't give u such requirements?

**S4:** no ... in the specialization, just bring the assignment ... there are no special requirements ... only the parts the introduction, the conclusion but not the details ... research, summarising and so on ... there are no any restrictions ... general

(...)

**S3:** just copy paste ... they themselves give us this advice ... copy paste and give us the assignment ... there is no.. **(FG2)**

Students in another focus group also reported the same practice from the subject teachers regarding copying

**S4:** also copying without changing anything is OK but in English we have to change ... in your own words

(...)

**S4:** I did an assignment on tourism and I took everything from the net and the teacher said no problem that you took all from the net

**(FG14)**

The somewhat leniency of the subject teachers in dealing with plagiarism is noticed by teachers in the English department. Due to teacher shortage in the Communication Department, Teacher Engl had a chance to teach an introductory communication course to first year students. He made the following remark in comparing between the students' approach to writing in the English department and in the communication department

I feel that the students are more strict and more cautious in the English courses when they are asked to write an assignment because maybe we focus more on that thing but the other departments, no. They don't really focus upon the writing skills among the students and they just receive it, evaluate and give a mark for that. They're not doing exactly what we are doing because our job is, you know, to treat the problem, to solve the problem, to diagnose and ... and to improve them. That's the thing. **(ENG1)**

What the above excerpt highlights is that students' discursive practices are influenced by those of the teachers' and the attitude that they have towards writing. In the English department, there is more focus on the originality of the assignments, that students use their own language when writing, and that they appropriately reference all the information used in the assignment. Whether all the students are able to do is another issue. In the subject departments, however, students do not seem to feel the same pressure and therefore, they are more liberal with their "borrowings" from the internet or from other sources.

There seems to be less focus on the language itself and whether the students are using their own words in the assignment. In addition, subject teachers do not normally return the assignments back to the students after marking. The only feedback that students get from teachers is the grade or the mark for the assignment

and no comments on the actual content of the assignment. One possible justification for this may be that teachers believe that the assignments have served their purposes, i.e. assessment, and that there is no need to return them to the students or to give students feedback on their writing.

#### **4.6.3. Effects of Feedback on Students' Writing**

Teacher feedback can have both a positive and a negative impact on students' writing practices and attitudes. On the positive side, some students reported that they improved their writing based on the feedback given by the teachers. They are motivated to exert more effort by looking new words up in an English-English dictionary or researching a particular grammatical point in a reference book. This improvement in style is then reflected in scoring high marks when they submit the final draft for assessment. They also state that they learn from these mistakes and do not repeat the same mistakes again as the following example highlights

**S3:** In English we feel that we benefit ... we learn from our mistakes so that we don't repeat them but in the other subjects we don't know what wrong or whether the teacher marked the essay ... we don't see it afterwards ... we only know the marks ... and we don't know what's right and what's wrong

**HS:** Do you feel that the feedback that you get from the teachers is useful or not?

**S5:** We benefit from the mistakes and we don't repeat them

**HS:** Do you correct the mistakes yourselves?

**S5:** Yes. How else are we going to benefit from our mistakes?

**(FG14)**

Teachers, on the other hand, challenged students' assertion by maintaining that even after feedback, students still repeat the same mistakes in subsequent texts. That is because giving feedback does not necessarily mean that it will be accepted and acted upon by the students. Students may not understand it, or they may regard it as useless or misunderstand it all together.

While some students welcomed getting feedback from teachers on every aspect of their writing, others are discouraged by this practice, especially when they see that the whole assignment is covered with red ink. This can be a depressing experience

for students in their first year of the degree study who are still learning to operate within a new academic context. For example, a student in group fourteen said that after correcting of all the mistakes indicated by the teacher in the first draft, he was surprised when in the second draft there were even more mistakes than in the first draft.

#### **4.6.4. Students' Strategies to Respond to the Feedback**

The findings revealed that there are three strategies that students employed to respond to teacher feedback on their writing. These strategies are:

- . Accepting the feedback and revising their assignments
- Accepting the feedback, but not knowing how to revise the mistake so they delete problematic sentences
- Ignoring feedback and re-producing the same essay without any revision or change

##### **4.6.4.1. Accepting Feedback**

The first strategy that students use is to accept the feedback that the teacher provided on their essay and revise their writing in accordance with the teachers' feedback. In the following quotation, the student indicates that teacher feedback is useful because students learn from the process of correcting their mistakes. He maintains that

**S6:** The feedback is very useful for the students ... because we learn from our mistakes and we correct them ... either alone or with the help from someone else ... the most important thing is to correct the mistakes ... the student will learn from the mistakes and will not repeat them again ... this helps students a lot

**(FG14)**

In the process of revising the essay, students reported that they first try to correct the mistakes by themselves, and then seek help from other people, especially their teacher. Other people from whom students seek assistance with error revision are their colleagues and family members.



#### 4.6.4.2. Deleting Problematic Sentences

Sometimes, students do not know the mistake in what the teacher has underlined, either because of their low language level, or lack of any indication from the teacher regarding the type of mistake or how to correct it. The teachers are given a correction symbol sheet that they are to give to their students to help them in revising their assignments after getting feedback. When marking students' writing, teachers are to use these symbols to indicate the type of mistakes in students' texts. However, not all teachers do so. Students reported that sometimes teachers underline words or sentences without indicating the problem in what is underlined, as the next example illustrates

**S3:** When we were in the first semester, the teacher didn't indicate what's wrong ... he just underlines the word ... and we don't know whether it's grammar or something else ... he only underlines it

**S4:** he didn't tell us what is missing

**HS:** and you had to go and figure it out?

**Ss:** yeah

**(FG2)**

In response to this, students reported that they sometimes delete the problematic sentences from the next draft to avoid losing marks.

#### 4.6.4.3. Ignoring Feedback

Some students reject the feedback and ignore it altogether. For example, a student in focus group seven was very indifferent towards correcting mistakes. She reported that she does not correct any of her mistakes and just copies that same assignment again with all its mistakes and hands it in. She maintained that

**S1:** Even if I get the feedback from the teacher, I don't do any corrections ... I copy it again as it is and give it back

**HS:** why?

**S1:** just like that ... I wrote something once and I don't want to rewrite it again

**HS:** even if it was wrong?

**S1:** even if it was wrong

**HS:** even if it will affect your marks?

**S1:** I'm interested in how much effort I spent in writing it; marks are not important.. **(FG7)**

## 4.7. Conclusion

In this chapter the first part of the findings of the study was presented. The chapter was divided into the five main sections of: (1) views on students' academic writing, (2) students' readiness for academic writing, (3) difficulties students face in academic writing, (4) characteristics of good essay, and (5) teacher feedback.

Regarding students' level in assignment writing, there was a consensus among the teachers and the students that it was the most difficult skill for students to master and that their writing proficiency is lower than the expected level of tertiary students writing. Not denying the impact of students' low linguistic level in the difficulty of writing, the study suggests that the absence of adequate training in academic writing combined with the changing nature of the writing that students were used to do in the FYP and the writing that they are required to do in Year One, negatively impacted students' readiness to college level writing.

The study also revealed that there are basically four categories of assignment-related difficulties that students are faced with in writing academic essays for their different departments. These categories are: language skills, resource skills, text-management skills, and time-management skills.

The findings also indicated that teachers have varying conceptualisations about the characteristics of a good essay by focusing of different aspects of the students' texts. The same is also true about teachers' focus when marking students' assignments. However, generally English teachers reported that they focus on improving students' language, while the subject teachers are more interested in the content of the writing.

The findings revealed that students used several strategies in response to feedback. Some of these strategies are positive, such as accepting the feedback and revising their essays accordingly. The negative strategies were deleting wrong sentences, or ignoring the feedback.

## **5 Chapter Five: College Context Factors and Students' Writing**

### **5.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter presented the difficulties first year students are facing in academic writing due to assignment-related factors. In this second chapter of the study findings, the college context factors that influence students' writing will be presented.

The college is the place where students' initiation into the higher education environment takes place; therefore, the college context influences all aspects of students' lives including their academic writing experience. The contextual factors relate to both the general college culture and the specific sub-cultures of individual disciplines within the college. The data analysis revealed three major contextual factors that had an impact on first year students' experience in writing. They are: English as the medium of instruction, the structure of the degree programme, and writing in the disciplines.

### **5.2. English as the Medium of Instruction**

The decision stipulating English as the medium of instruction for the new specialisations can be seen as the single most significant contextual factor influencing students' college experience. That is because it is the main shaper of students' linguistic practices and has far-reaching consequences on the academic experience of students with the types of literacy practices that students are engaged in. It is often argued that literacy practices are language specific, which means that students studying in English medium institutions are required to learn new literacy and academic practices that are aligned with the language of instruction. In the case of the CoAS, students have to simultaneously acquire the language of instruction and the literacy practices associated with studying a degree in English. In this section on the medium of instruction, first the attitudes that students and teachers reported about

English will be presented and then the influence of the language of instruction on students' experience with academic writing will be discussed.

### **5.2.1. Attitudes towards English as the Medium of Instruction**

Teacher Eng1, who also teaches in the Communication Department, maintains that the medium of instruction is a

very controversial point because some of them they're happy about studying and squeezing another language into their mental lexicon. Another they say that if we study the subjects in Arabic , we're going to do a fantastic job and maybe this was one of the issues that has been raised with the minister herself in Majlis Al-Shura<sup>3</sup> meeting. Based on my experience teaching a communication course, I felt the students they really understand the content but they have a problem in putting that content in a language. See there is a communication breakdown because of the mean of communication, the language.

**(ENG1)**

The above response demonstrates the ongoing controversy regarding the decision that stipulates English as the Medium of Instruction both at the college level (the students and the teachers) and at the wider level of the nation. Because of the significance of this debate, it was one of the central issues that prevailed during the questioning of the Minister of Higher Education during the Consultative Council meeting, which is an advisory body for the Sultan constituting of elected representatives from all the regions of the country.

Similar to the above observation that this teacher made, the analysis of the interviews showed that first year students and their teachers have two conceptualisations about the medium of instruction: English as a problem and English as a resource. Following is an explanation of these two stances about the Medium of Instruction found in the data of the study.

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<sup>3</sup> Majlis Al-Shura (Consultative Council) is an elected council of 83 members representing all regions of the Sultanate. The council reviews economic and social legislations prepared by service ministries, and makes recommendations about them. Service ministers can also be summoned before the council for questioning. (<http://www.omanet.om/english/government/shura.asp>)

### **5.2.1.1. English as a Problem**

The first group of teachers and students who view English as a problem maintain that it impedes students' comprehension of the content of the academic courses; thus hindering their academic attainment. The majority of teachers who perceive English as a problem also believe that using Arabic as the medium of instruction would increase students' comprehension of the content and would make revising for the exams and completing the other assessment tasks easier and more meaningful for the students. There is yet a small group of teachers and students who are with the notion of teaching in both languages so that students would benefit from English language teaching and at the same time they would better understand the content of the subject courses.

As an example of teachers who view English as a problem, in the next excerpt teacher COM4 explains his position by stating that

Well, for me I found it ... it's very difficult because the students are ... and the teachers are facing a dilemma ... neither the students are having good skills in writing in English nor in Arabic so it seems that the students have lost those two different (opportunities?) ... because their preparation is not enough to make them command their English skills in the right ways and by the way again at the expense of improving their writing skills in Arabic so it seems to be their preparation for the students in the foundation year is not enough.

**(COM4)**

This teacher believes that the language of instruction placed both teachers and students in a dilemma because due to this policy, students who are linguistically incompetent in English find academic writing in English difficult. He states that the English language instruction that students had in Foundation Year was inadequate in preparing them for their studies in Year One of the degree programmes. Teacher Com2 has identical views to teacher Com4 in regarding English as a problem because students 'did not study it since they were young', and that 'they took one year at the foundation year'. Another disciplinary teacher, IBA1 also shares the same opinion as Com4 and Com2 in regarding English as a problem and preferring to teach the subjects in Arabic instead. He maintains that

If our objective is to teach students and give them a degree in business, let's teach them in Arabic to be able to convey the management and business that we want to teach them because we want to give them a degree in that. We don't want to give them a degree in English. Our primary concern is to give them a degree in international business. Let's teach them international business in whatever language they can understand ... ok ... but now we are mixing issues. We're trying to teach them business ... to give them a degree in business using English and in most cases we end up not doing both things in the right way. We end up finishing 50%, not grasping the English; not grasping the international business ... just moving in between.

**(IBA1)**

In this excerpt the teacher voices his concerns about students' academic attainment and comprehension of the content of the subject matter. Like the previous teacher, he maintains that using English as the Medium of Instruction resulted in students who grasp neither the content nor the language fully. He states his belief that the mother tongue is the best language of instruction if the objective is to teach students the content in a manner that they can understand. Focusing on understanding the content is also what drives the views of the next subject teacher who responded to the question of the Medium of Instruction by saying

I'm teaching them in English but based on my experience again here either we let them English there're nobody can ignore it's useful in the business life but again the content still much useful so in this case we have to focus them to learn the content, the knowledge, the science but in that way which they can understand it. Now if you're asking me so if we are going to teach them in Arabic, in this case we will lose; they can't speak, talk or follow any new system in English. In this case, we can solve that problem also to give them some courses in English; not all courses or to build their level English to very strong to let them.

**(IBA3)**

However, unlike the previously mentioned disciplinary teachers who prefer that the language of instruction in the specialisations should be exclusively Arabic, this teacher supports teaching students some subject courses in English so that they are able to keep up to date with the new developments in their subject areas which are usually published in English.

The analysis revealed that the overwhelming majority of the students viewed English as a resource with a very small group of students with negative attitudes towards the Medium of Instruction. Those students who oppose the language policy believe that

Arabic should be used to teach the subject courses since this would increase their comprehension of the content. They question the practice of being taught in English and graduating with a degree without understanding the content of the specialisations, as this student explains.

**S5:** I disagree with all of them in that studying in English is better ... there are people who graduate but they don't understand the subject of their specialisation in the first place ... but they studied in English and they know that their specialisation is IT but what's IT? They don't know ... so if we study in Arabic and English is subject as it is now taught to us; this is ok ... in this way, they will improve their language and they will know their specialisation ... so that when they go to the companies, they know English and they know the subjects that they studied.

**(FG 8)**

In the above example, the student seems to consolidate the subject teachers' views that English obstructs students' comprehension so that they graduate without fully grasping the contents of their course. Instead of being taught in English, this student prefers Arabic to be language of instruction and English to be taught as a subject so that students have both the knowledge of the language and the knowledge of the content matter.

#### **5.2.1.2.English as a Resource**

The second group views English as a resource for students since they can add another language to their linguistic profile, keep up-to-date with the development in their fields of study, and increase their local and regional employability opportunities. The first quotation comes from a veteran English language teacher who has witnessed the transformation of the colleges from teacher training colleges to the CoAS and thus has experienced the shift in students' attitudes towards English as a result of the introduction of the new specialisations. He states that

there's been a huge change in the college and I've here long enough to actually have seen it (..) now with business and networking etc most of the course material available in the world is written in English so there is a much deeper sense of understanding why they need English (..) so I think in the last three years, they stopped questioning why they need English and they now understand it's a..it's a road to becoming successful in whatever job they chose (..) and also these students who are now 18 19 years old, in just the few years that I've here they changed. They now watch more movies in English, they use the internet more.

Most of them have computers at home. They play games, they use playstation and everything and there the medium is English and they're picking up vocabulary and grammar from chatting on the internet or reading manuals or playing games and so on ... if it's good or bad, I don't know but their level of English is increasing.

**(ENG2)**

The teacher asserts that the students have a better understanding of the importance of English in their lives for at least two reasons. The first and more immediate reason is that the new materials related specialisations' course are available mostly in English, which means that students need English to access these materials and consolidate their knowledge of their chosen majors. Secondly, students seem to realise that securing a good future job is dependent on having a good knowledge of English since it is now a prerequisite in the Omani labour market. He also links this change in students' attitudes towards English as the medium of instruction to the change in students' use of English in their everyday lives. As is true for many teenagers around the world, these 18 or 19 year old students have the chance to use English for entertainment purposes or for social networking which means that their acquisition and use of the language is not confined within the college boundaries.

Although they stated that studying their specialisations in English is harder than studying them in Arabic, the majority of students in the sample preferred English as the medium of instruction. The reasons they provide mainly revolve around English being an international language and in order to secure better future employment perspectives. In response to the question regarding their preferred language of instruction, students answered by saying

**S2:** English ... when you go to look for a job, you must have English as the second language more than Arabic ... so to get a job, you need to know English ... most important ... also everything now is in English ... even if we have business, we have to deal with international companies and the in dealing with them the official language is English..

(...)

**S5:** even if it is more difficult ... because in this time English is a must ... you must have English language in everything ... for example, travelling abroad, you need English ... you need it in everything and the same in work ... you need English because it's the language of the world these days..

**(FG13)**



The above response supports the language policy of the colleges. These students stated that studying in Arabic is easier and they are aware of the drawbacks associated with studying a degree in English as they need to work harder and exert more effort in learning, writing the assignments and revising for their examinations. However, they do not seem to mind going through all of that to graduate with a specialised degree in English.

### **5.2.1.3. Subject Teachers' Practices**

From the findings it can be concluded that generally Arab subject teachers believe that English constitutes a problem for students because it hinders their understanding of the subject content. For this reason, they prefer that Arabic is used as the Medium of Instruction in the college with English being taught either as a subject or teaching courses in both languages to ensure students' understanding of the content and at the same time not to deprive them from the benefits of learning English as a second or foreign language. This attitude towards English may explain the phenomenon that the English programme director complained about by saying that

We do have a large number of Arabic speaking subject staff in the colleges who when faced with students with low level of English, tend to feel I've got my objectives to get through, I don't have time to painstakingly reduce my level of English to the level of these people; I'm going to switch into Arabic which means the objectives are covered in terms of content but of course it's a content defined, discussed and negotiated in Arabic not in English and if we want students to develop an English language academic literacy because academic literacies are always specific to languages ; Arabic academic literacies and English academic literacies, they all specified by language and subject; this is not very helpful.

**(Eng PD)**

Because of their concern about getting the content across to students, subject teachers may resort to teaching in Arabic, rather than abiding by the language policy of the colleges and teaching in English. However, some Arab subject teachers claim that they do teach in Arabic because the students themselves want and expect them to do so, as illustrated by the next excerpt.

When the students meet some Arabic teacher, they prefer because they're waiting from him or from her to explain them at least 5 till 15 percentage in Arabic (...) in general they always prefer to teach just in Arabic because they say from one side they're right, they say we are in hurry following you to catch two things; English and content but at the end of the day, we don't catch anyone of them because our background in English not strong enough to let us understand you.. all what you're speaking especially when we're talking about any special course (...) I have daily new terminologies. Those terminologies they can't understand it by itself unless they know what's the meanings in Arabic. That was what they asking so from another side if there is a teacher he can't explain to them, they feel they are not (inaudible) so in general they prefer to explain them as much as the teacher can in Arabic.

**(IBA3)**

This teacher views English as a problem or a barrier that negatively effects students' academic attainment and believes that using Arabic would eliminate this problem. The previous quotation also illustrates that the language ideology that this subject teacher has towards English mediates his teaching practices and classroom interactions with the students. He justifies his discursive practices of using Arabic for teaching by saying that students expect Arab teachers to explain to them in Arabic so that they comprehend the new content. Some students, however, do not seem to agree with this justification and state that subject teachers use Arabic because they themselves are linguistically challenged. In one of the focus group interviews students reported that they told one of their Arab teachers not to use Arabic in teaching and to use English language so that they improve their English linguistic ability. Students also raised the same issue with the dean of the college.

Students are not alone in questioning the linguistic abilities of the subject teachers. In addition to the English programme director in the above quotation, some teachers both from the subject departments and from the English department also voiced their doubts about the ability of Arab subject teachers to use English as the medium of instruction. For example, teacher Eng1 reported that most of the complaints that he receives from students are about their subject teachers' lack of competence in English. Teacher IBA1 is also of the opinion that before we ask whether students prefer being taught the specialisations in Arabic or in English, we should question whether the subject teachers are linguistically competent to teach in English, especially as for the majority of them English is not their first language.

#### **5.2.1.4. Students' Practices**

The findings also showed contradictions between students' attitudes towards English as medium of instruction and their practices. The majority of interviewed students supported the language policy regarding the medium of instruction and stated that being taught the specialisations in English improves their language competence so that they are better equipped for the linguistic demands of the labour market. However, most of the students reported that they do not use English outside the classroom to communicate with each other and that they do not read anything in English not even materials related to their specialisations. In addition, they do not read the textbooks assigned by the ministry and are satisfied with reading teachers' handouts and the lecture notes as a preparation for the examinations. Although the low readability is a significant factors that hinders students' access to the textbooks, with such strong positive views about English, one would expect that they would be more proactive in their approach towards learning the language by exerting more effort and looking for opportunities to use the language and utilise the resources that they have to improve their linguistic competence. In this case, the linguistic practices of the students did not reflect their views about the language.

A plausible explanation may be that students have an institutionalised view about English, i.e., they use it only inside the classroom, and that it has no place in their everyday life and communication with others. This also may be related to the general view regarding English in the Omani cultural context. The status of being a foreign language means that although people and policy maker acknowledge the importance of English, it still has very limited use in the wider society outside its perceived institutionalised function, such as teaching at higher education, for example. That may also explain why students in the college maintained that they are reluctant to use English in their communications once they leave the classroom as their own colleagues, being a product of the wider culture, would look down at them or even scorn them for doing so thinking that they are showing off.

#### **5.2.1.5. The Impact of Language of Instruction on Students' Writing**

In the previous chapter, all teachers maintained that students' level in writing is low because they have difficulties with English. For example, in section (4.3.1.), students

and teachers indicated that when writing assignments, the students faced problems mostly in language related areas. First Year students in this study had the multiple task of learning the language, studying content courses in English, and learning to write academic essays and research papers. Difficulties with grammar, spelling, and vocabulary were mentioned by almost all the respondents as the most difficult aspect of academic writing to master.

In addition, students faced difficulties with understanding the textbooks set for the specialisation since the books were intended for students with higher language proficiency. This meant that the textbooks were not utilised by the students neither for revision purposes nor for assignment preparation purposes. The courses that students study are designed by New Zealand Tertiary Education Consortium (NZTEC) and they are meant to be a very close approximation of the degree programmes offered in the universities that are members of this consortium. Those programmes are intended for students with at least 6 or 6.5 IELTS score. The textbooks which were assigned by NZTEC for the modules are also linguistically challenging for the students, an issue which was highlighted by the Director of the English language programme who states that

we've done analysis of transcripts of subjects classes and ok some of the lexis is from the academic word list that we've covered but there's an awful lot of stuff that we didn't have time to cover and all of this is being introduced at the beginning of Year One, you know, some poor little person from foundation with English at IELTS 4.5 in the first couple of weeks of Year One, he's had 20 more hours of English is suddenly faced with stuff from the you know the two thousand most common words from the academic word list; it's a ridiculous change.

**(Eng PD)**

Another way in which language influenced students' writing is that English made it more difficult for the students to conduct the research needed for the assignments. Students stated that they faced challenges in comprehending, paraphrasing and summarising the source materials due to the difficulty of the language of these sources.

### 5.3. The Structure of the Degree Programme

In the context of this study, the structure of the degree plan was explained in section (1.3.1). To recapitulate, in the first semester of Year One, students study four introductory modules from the four specialisations, in addition to a module from the English department. In the second semester, they also study five subjects but from three departments as they have narrowed down their preferences to two out of the four available specialisations. In this section, the findings related to the structure of the degree programme will be discussed in relation to two aspects: the coordination between the departments and its effects on students' writing.

#### 5.3.1. Coordination Between the Departments

Although all teachers without exception state that coordination between the departments is important, in reality, however, the practices of the teachers do not seem to reflect this view. All students and teachers reported that there is no coordination between the departments, especially regarding students' writing and the deadlines for assignments' submission and exam dates. Some of the responses that I got with this respect are "there is no connection whatsoever, absolutely no connection", (**Eng7**) and "there is basically no communication" (**Eng4**), and "there is no correlation to the other departments" (**Eng2**). In the words of Eng2, each department is a separate island; not knowing about what the other departments in the college are doing.

In addition to that, English and subject teachers do not know the type of writing students are asked to do or the kinds of assignments that they are required to submit in the other departments. For example, teacher Eng8 reported that he did not know that students are required to hand in written assignments in the other departments, too. He thought that the only writing students do is in the English departments.

I didn't really know that they had a lot of written assignments to do in their other courses until they actually ... it's was today ... no, I realised just earlier but today one of my students said I do have another written assignment in in one of his classes and you know I was thinking that how is he going to do this ... ok it's hard for him to write an essay obviously in English but you know in the English class and now he has to be you know topic specific about this course and use words that are so foreign to him I think that's gonna be very difficult for him. (**Eng8**)

There seems to be an absence of any formal or systematic procedure for providing feedback about what the students are doing in the various departments with regard either to writing or the teaching in general. Teachers reported that they “do not have a clue” about what students are doing in the other departments. Some of them said that it is not their job to do so. For example, teacher IBA1 stated that “I don’t know specifically what do they do, that one I don’t know and I don’t feel that I have to get into that details because it’s none of my business”.

Other teachers acknowledged the importance of learning about what students study in the other departments, but complained that they do not have enough time in their busy timetables to do so. As an illustration of the later opinion, teacher Eng3 justifies the lack of cooperation between the departments and the lack of feedback given to the English teachers about how well students are writing in the other departments by saying that

I think to some extent departments are busy doing their own work, trying to get the course material done, trying to get marks sorted out so you don’t really blame individual lecturers for their load, you know, load of the work but there could be maybe just once a week if we could arrange like a workshop where teachers meet and discuss writing problems in general or people that lecture particular major like communication or business, you know, give the English teachers feedback ... the lecturers’ feedback about how the students are writing in their subjects and in their project work and what would they like to see improved and this would be a good feedback for the English teachers.

**(Eng3)**

Sometimes cooperation seems to be done on an informal personal level as teacher Eng6 explains in her response to the question about coordination between the various departments. She states that

No not really... I think, you know, at odd occasions teachers might have an interest in that department and might, you know, go and talk with a teacher there but I think in general no, there isn’t. I mean I have an art background ... I love art and design ... this semester my Year Two students are the design majors so it so great in that way ... I did go and chat with the design people to find out what they’re learning about and which vocabulary they need and what skills they need to work on more and so I’ve been trying to add a little bit of that.

**(Eng6)**

This teacher has a background in arts. That is why she is interested in learning about what students are doing in the design department and what projects they are currently working on. She also she tries to gather from the subject teachers and the students information about the courses and projects so that she teaches them the required vocabulary and skills needed in the subject departments.

The only formal attempt to forge some correlation between the teaching in the departments was a personal initiative from the former coordinator of Year One who started by collecting from the various departments a list of the most important academic and technical words that students would need when they start their degrees. The idea was that the English teachers would incorporate these words into their teaching so that students are familiar with them before they join the degree programmes. There is no way of judging how successful this attempt was in bridging the gap between the departments.

Students also commented that the structure of the degree plan affected the communication and the coordination between the departments. They commented that the lack of coordination is expected since it is extremely difficult to coordinate the work of all of these departments regarding what to teach and the timings for the exams and deadlines for the assignments and the projects. Students have the following to say about the lack of coordination between the departments

**S4:** There is no coordination ... for example, during the exams period, we had two exams on the same day and even at the same time ... both teachers didn't agree to change the time and then we had to see the Vice Dean..

**S6:** We had exams at the same time ... the date was changed one day before the final exam and students were asking their friends about the timetable

**S4:** So our grades are low because they changed the date of the exam ... for the whole week I was studying accounting and on the night of the exam I studied for data base so my grade was low... it causes confusion for the students ... first they told us choose the subject that you want to be tested in ... you have two subjects but you have to choose one ... there is no coordination

**S3:** there is no coordination among the teachers ... each teacher sets his own timetable ... the admission should take care of this so that the students will have to organise their time when to study and when to revise for the exams **(FG 14)**

In the above excerpt, students describe an extreme case of the consequences of lack of coordination among the departments, but it is by no means restricted to this group only. Students in the other focus groups also mentioned similar instances, whether regarding exam dates, dates for submitting projects or assignments, or dates for giving presentations as a part of the assessment process. Teachers do not want to lose teaching time by having students do the presentations during the class time, especially as they are struggling to finish the syllabus and cover the learning objectives on time. For that reason, they usually set any assessment tasks either between 12 and 2 on Mondays, the hours allocated for extracurricular activities or from 2 to 4 on Wednesdays as officially students are not to have classes after 2 on Wednesday, which is the last day of the working week. This means that teachers are competing for these times. It also means that students are deprived from any chance of participating in college activities throughout the semester. For those students who are living in hostels, this also means a late journey home for the weekend.

Most of the students in the focus groups think that not being admitted into the specialisations from the beginning is the biggest mistake in the colleges. They claimed that they did not benefit from studying the introductory modules. Students also scored low marks in the first semester which placed many of them under academic probation and would continue to affect their GPAs until they graduate from the colleges. The students mentioned several reasons pertaining to the degree structure for getting low grades in semester one, such as the workload, time pressure, and lack of coordination between the five departments regarding timings of the exams, assignments, and projects

Students believed that the coordination problem would be alleviated if the structure of the degree programme were one in which students started the specialisations from the first day in college. In that case, the students would study in one or two departments (counting the English department), rather than having to study courses across the five departments in the college. The students prefer that

**S2:** from the start, each student should study his specialisation so that in business all the departments are together the whole time and in the same office ... now the teachers of communication, design, IT and business don't know each other ... the mistake is from the start ... they confuse us ... we first studied four subjects and accounting and then this specialization (**FG1**)



In students' opinion, being from the same department and staying 'in the same office' would result in more coordination between the teachers which would in turn impact positively on their experience in the college and reduce the confusion they are experiencing as a consequence of the studying in departments that do not know about the each other's work and that do not coordinate or communicate with each other.

### **5.3.2. The Impact of the Degree Structure on Students' Writing**

The findings indicated that the structure of the degree plan has influenced students' academic writing in several ways. The first is related to the time management difficulties that were discussed in the previous chapter (see section 4.3.4). Students complained that managing the competing demands on their time and effort from all the departments affected the quality of their assignments, especially since there was no coordination between the departments in spacing out the submission dates evenly throughout the term which resulted in all assessed course work being due towards the end of the semester.

The structure of the degree programme also determined the type of English that students studied in the Foundation Year and in the first year of the programme. Currently, students study English for academic purposes. However, most of the students feel that they would be better prepared for writing in the specialisations had they studied English for specific purposes, as the following excerpt illustrates

**S1:** We wished that we know the specialisations from the foundation ... that we are grouped into majors ... business students study business terms ... academic business ... the words that they are going to face in the specialisations ... at least we are prepared in case we are asked to write an essay or an assignment that we are really ready to write a 2000 word assignment ... we learned general English in the school so we should start our specialisation and have English for that specialisation. **(FG1)**

Although students may not be aware of the notion of ESP, their discussion of the issue of English teaching in the Foundation Year and in Year One indicates that they support being taught English for Specific Purposes that is related to the specialisations they want to major in. Students maintain that by studying ESP, they would be equipped with the required vocabulary knowledge to understand the

content of their courses and would be more prepared for writing the assignments and completing the other tasks demanded by the subject teachers.

Another influence of the structure on students' writing is that the students are exposed to the various writing demands from departments that do not necessarily share the same conceptualisations about the nature of writing and what constitutes a good academic writing. Teachers in these departments also had various focus when responding to students' writing and in how much feedback do they provide to students. Although students showed some degree of awareness of the varying nature of writing in the disciplines, at the time when students are beginning their academic studies, these varying demands confused them and did little to facilitate their negotiation with assignment writing in Year One.

#### 5.4. Writing in the Disciplines

This section deals with students' experience with writing in the different disciplines. Issues that will be covered in the subsequent sections are:

- The relative importance of writing in the different disciplines,
- students' awareness of the varying writing demands in the disciplines, and
- Subject teachers' involvement with students' writing.

##### 5.4.1. The Relative Importance of Writing in the Disciplines

Students in the study stated that writing is generally a useful way of developing their language skills. They also seem to perceive the relevance of writing in relation to the different majors; i.e. the significance of writing differs according to the courses as in some courses it is more important in their assessment than in others. For example, students mentioned that writing is important for studying in the Communication Department, as the student next quotation maintains

**S1:** The assignments are good to improve our language especially if we want to major in communication because in communication the student must have good skill in writing... **(FG1)**

One reason for this perceived importance could be that students are asked to write more frequently in Communication than in other disciplines such as IBA, Design,

and IT. Communication teachers also stressed the importance of students possessing good writing skills to be able to function successfully in their professional lives. The following excerpts are from two Communication teachers highlighting the importance of writing in their discipline:

We do advise them ... we do advise them that they need to improve their writing skills, not everything that I have in mind the other person will be able to understand unless I speak or write it ... and as a communication professional, one has to have at least if not very good, at least a presentable communication skills where he or she can at least say what they want to communicate so at least the basic minimum one needs to have.

**(COM2)**

For communication we are dealing with writing, create and preparing the messages should be send across to the audience and then in this case communication it needs a lot of preparation, it needs a lot of good skills of writing and presenting the ideas so I think for the communication students should have more mature discussions and sessions to enhance the teaching process.

**(COM3)**

The Communication teachers in the previous quotation assert that communication students need to improve their writing skills so that they are able to convey the intended message clearly to their audience to avoid miscommunication.

In the course plan for the course entitled Introduction to Tourism and Hospitality from the IBA department (MoHE, 2008b: 4-5) , the following is written as to the purpose of the assignment

The purpose of the assignment is to broaden your scope of the course and provide self-learning. You will be expected to write an assignment on a topic (given to you by your lecturer) relating to principles studied in the course and drawing on additional readings that you have done, or examples you have learned.

From the above we can say that in theory the purpose of the assignment in this module is learning the subject content as judged by the phrase 'broaden your scope of the course'. In their interview, the IBA teachers stated that in marking the assignment they are looking for evidence that students have understood the course material and that they are able to relate what they have learned in class to the topics assigned for

their writing. In response to the questions about his focus when marking students' writing, Teacher IBA1 maintained that

I do consider the content more than the sophistication of the language because my business is to teach them content not English. So I test while they write for me things ... I test their understanding of the things I taught ... not of the English language that they use, whether it's poor or good.  
**(IBA1)**

The teacher in the above excerpt states that he is concerned about the content of the assignment and students' comprehension of what has been taught rather than the language. This comment also has an implication on the extent of subject teachers' involvement with students' writing, as will be discussed below in section 5.4.3.

#### **5.4.2. Students' Awareness of the Varying Writing Demands in the Disciplines**

The issue that I wanted to investigate under this section is students' awareness of the different writing demands in the disciplines. I was interested in whether students are familiar with the existence of varying disciplinary requirements for assignments writing and the role of the teachers with this regard. Here I asked them whether they approach assignments that they are asked to write for the different departments in the same way or differently. The findings from the students' focus group regarding this aspect showed a divided opinion among the students with this regard topic even within the same group, as illustrated by the next quotation

**S4:** Of course each department has its own way. In communication, for example, teachers have their own requirements that they tell us about and which are different from the English department such as double spacing and margins

**S6:** Of course each teacher ... when we write an assignment about business, the information has to contain information about business and the ... communication and media ... these are the differences

**S2:** I don't think that there are differences unless if the teacher asked for it. For example, in communication, we were asked to write a report which doesn't have a conclusion or an introduction. But if we are asked to write an assignment in all departments, as far as I know, you need introduction, body and conclusion. Maybe, as my colleague mentioned, the information is different but we use the same requirements for the assignments.

**(FG 10)**

Student 4 seems to be aware that there are differences in the writing demands among the departments. However, the examples that this student gave to illustrate these differences revolve around the technical requirements regarding the format of the assignments, such as the double spacing and the margins. The second student believes that the content of the assignment that differs according to the specialisation is what distinguishes the assignments written for the different departments. The third student states that the writing demands are the same in all departments except when the teacher clearly asked for something else as in the case of writing a report for the communication course without an introduction or a conclusion. The last remark also raises questions about the consistency of the students' writing practices not as result of the varying disciplinary demands, but rather as a result of teachers' individual preferences. Another issue that can be gleaned from the above example is that students do not seem to be fully aware of the discipline-specific writing demands. Such an understanding is important for producing successful academic texts that conform to the requirements of the discipline and the expectations of the subject teachers.

In the next excerpt, students seem to have a better awareness of the general disciplinary demands of the academic departments. They indicate that English teachers usually give more attention to students' language; whereas, the teachers in the other departments are more concerned with the content of the assignments.

**S1:** In the English assignment, they focus on the language ... grammar is an essential thing more than the assignments of other subjects

**S2:** For example, if you write an assignment in tourism, it's very unlikely that you'll be judged on grammar and the like. They will be happy that I wrote it myself. The most important thing for them is that it's not copied

**HS:** Generally do you feel that the subject teachers focus on the linguistic mistakes?

**Ss:** no, they don't.

**HS:** What's the most important thing for them?

**S4:** The information and that it is not copied

**S3:** and that you understand the topic you are writing about

**(FG1)**

The students in the second excerpt are able to mention some specific considerations that they perceive as the distinguishing features between assignments written in the various disciplines. Examples of such concerns are the focus on the grammatical aspects of the writing in the English department versus the focus on the content of the assignment written for the subject courses. Students stated that subject teachers are more concerned about their understanding of the topic and that the assignment is not copied more than the linguistic mistakes in the assignment. This assertion seems to be in contrast to the views expressed earlier on subject teachers' tolerance and leniency regarding plagiarism (see section 4.6.2).

Another topic I was interested in shedding light on regarding students' awareness of the differences in writing demands is teachers' role in familiarising students with the specific demands of their subject areas. I asked students whether teachers inform them about the elements that they are looking for in an assignment. Here again there was a divided opinion over the issue. However, there is somewhat a consensus among students that generally English teachers pay more attention to acquainting students with what is expected from them when writing an assignment for the English department. This is done through giving students handouts containing the guidelines for the assignment and the assessment criteria and explaining the requirements in details to them. As for the subject courses, students claimed that they are not informed about the requirements of assignments or the assessment criteria. This claim is in contrast to the subject teachers' assertion that they do provide writing guidelines and explain them before students start writing.

### **5.4.3. Subject Teachers' Involvement with Students' Writing**

Despite the strong assertion that subject teachers showed in the previous section about the importance of writing in their disciplines, either as a preparation for future profession or as a manner of broadening or testing students' knowledge of the subject matter, they do not see that they are responsible for improving students' writing. Subject teachers are mainly concerned with teaching their subjects and content material. They state that the English department should be responsible for the development of students' writing. Teacher Com2 and Teacher IBA1 seem to summarise the views of the subject teachers when they state that

I'm not an English teacher, so my concern is not about the language.. about 90% of my concern is about how to convey the management and economics concepts to the students ok and to ask them about it and to read the answers that they convey to me in that regard so I do consider the content more than the sophistication of the language because my business is to teach them content not English.

**(IBA1)**

We don't have time to correct their language because we have material we have to give them so I'm you know ... if you look at our materials, you'll find a very big load so if I'm going to teach them language, I'm not going to explain my lessons you know so it's difficult for us to improve their English.

**(COM2)**

Disciplinary teachers do not see students' language as their primary concern. They view teaching subject courses in English as a separate entity from the language that these courses are taught in. They maintained that their job is to teach the syllabus of their subjects and not the language. The teachers in the above quotation mentioned two main sets of reasons for this attitude. Firstly, some subject teachers believe that focusing on students' language and improving students' writing should be the task of the English language teachers since they are linguistically more qualified to do so. There are some subject teachers, on the other hand, who stated that it is difficult for them to focus on students' language because of the heavy teaching load and the amount of material that they are required to teach in their disciplines. Therefore, they are more inclined to spend the class time to teach their subject-matter rather than spending it revising and correcting students' language.

**IBA1:** when we talk about the English language and I'm teaching business, I see it as a deviation from what I'm doing truly speaking. In most cases, I don't have room to accommodate issues of talking about how to improve the English language and to nag about it and devote time to it ... otherwise I'll finish just 50% of my course ... the rest I'll be devoting it to teaching English.

The attitude that subject teachers have towards their responsibility towards students' language led some subject teachers to ask their students to go and seek assistance from the English teachers if they were struggling with some linguistic difficulties. In the next example, teacher COM1 states that

**COM1:** when it comes to their assignments, when their language is very poor and they are not writing well as expected, then we do mention that they have to improve on their language and give more importance to that but keep track of whether they go to an English teacher and ask for help, we were not able to keep track of this

English teachers, on the other hand, did not welcome this and although some did help students with their writing, others were reluctant to give feedback to students doing assignments for other departments. The reason that they gave is that since the language of instruction is English, subject teachers must have enough linguistic competence to assist their students when they have difficulties with the language, as the next quotation illustrates

I wasn't too happy about it to be honest because if the medium is English at the colleges, then we need to make sure that the teachers who teach they know spelling and grammar of English without being English teachers. Most of the staff members we have did their PhD's or MA's in English anyway so they should be able to do it.

**(Eng2)**

In addition to the reasons that the subject teachers gave for not perceiving themselves as responsible for students language and thus not responsible for helping students with their linguistic difficulties, a comment made by Teacher Eng1 may add a new perspective on this issue. In his elaboration on the difficulties that the students reported facing, he explains that

Most of the of the complaints I heard it's about ... the teachers' competency in the language. They do have a problem because they're not dealing with teaching the language; they're dealing with teaching the content ,ok, they need to deliver the content instead of the language but sometimes the language is is ah a mean of communication. If it's not really understandable then they will be communication breakdown ah so this one of the common problems I heard the students talking about it ... the teachers not being competent linguistically.

**(ENG1)**

This point is also consolidated by the focus group interviews as several students mentioned that their subject teachers taught them in Arabic instead of English which may be attributed to teachers' lack of linguistic proficiency necessary to teach their content in English.



## 5.5. Conclusion

This chapter presented the study findings that are related to the wider college context and their influence on first year students' writing. The first factor, the medium of instruction, was seen as both a problem and a resource. Some teachers perceived it as a problem that is hindering students' acquisition of the content of their academic disciplines and being responsible for their low level in academic writing since most of students' difficulties are language related. Others, however, see English as an asset that can strengthen students' linguistic ability to be up-to-date with the developments in their chosen field of study and that can aid them in their pursuit of a future career.

The structure of the degree programme and the lack of coordination between the college departments resulted in students struggling to meet the numerous, uncoordinated demands placed on their time in and outside the college. This was seen as a negative factor that affected the quality of students' writing since students stated that they do not have sufficient time to produce good quality assignments. First Year students are studying courses from various departments so inevitably they are faced with varying writing demands. The findings show that students may not be fully aware of the specificities involved in producing writing texts in their departments. When asked about their approach in writing assignments, their response was either citing variations in the formatting or the surface layout of the assignment or a general observation that in English they focus on the grammatical aspect of the writing. For the academic disciplines, on the other hand, they are more concerned with the content of the essays. Although subject teachers participating in the study generally perceive that writing is important for students in their courses, they disclaim the responsibility to improve students' writing.

The next chapter summarises the main themes that emerged from the findings of this study and discusses their implications in relation to answering the research questions within the available literature on students' writing.

## **6 Chapter Six: Discussion**

### **6.1. Introduction**

This chapter discusses the key findings of the study. The themes that were identified through the analysis of the data in the previous chapters are discussed in relation to the aims of the study and the available literature on students' writing in foreign language contexts. To reiterate, the study was designed to explore first year students' academic writing experience in the context of an English medium college offering BA degrees in Applied Sciences. Specifically, it was undertaken to accomplish two main aims:

- 1) To investigate the contextual factors that influence students' writing in CoAS from the perspective of the students, the EFL teachers and the subject teachers
- 2) To probe the adequacy of the support that students get in acquiring the requisite literacy practices in EFL academic writing

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the contextual factors influencing students' academic writing that were identified from the data analysis in Chapters Four and Five. The second part discusses the adequacy of the support that the students get to develop their academic writing ability.

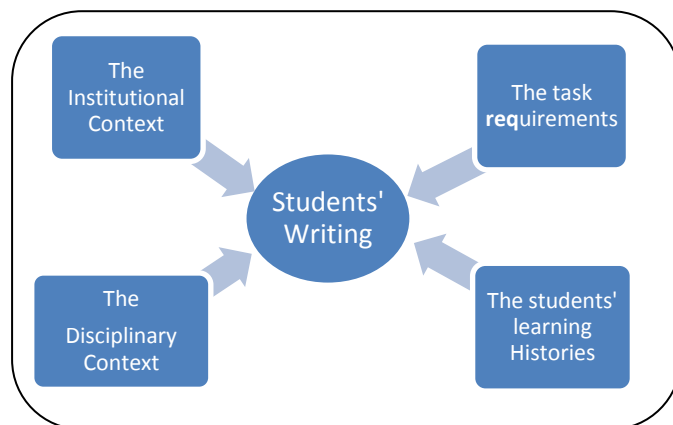
### **6.2. Contextual Factors that Influence Students' Writing**

The aim of this section is to explore the complexities surrounding students' negotiating of academic writing within the context of the study. It begins by presenting the framework which was developed based on the analysis of the data and the literature review. The proposed framework attempts to capture the interconnectedness of various contextual factors affecting students' initial experience with writing in the college. This will be followed by discussing the influence of each element on students' perception of their writing experience during the first year of the degree programme.

The academic literacies approach views students' writing as a social practice that is situated within a socio-cultural context which shapes students' practices and perceptions regarding writing (Street, 1984, Street, 2003, Lea and Street, 1998, Ivanic, 1998). In alignment with the academic literacies approach, students' writing experience is thus contextually situated because it is the product of the interplay between the students, their writing experience and the features of the immediate, disciplinary, and institutional context where this experience is taking place (see 2.3.4).

The analysis of the findings of the current study suggests that the factors influencing students' writing in the CoAS can be classified under four themes: 1) task requirements, 2) the students' learning histories, 3) the disciplinary context, and 4) the institutional context, as depicted in the figure below.

## 6: Factors Affecting First Year Students' Writing Experience



In the subsequent sections, the findings of the study are interpreted according to the above framework. The themes that emerged through the analysis of the results are presented focusing primarily on how students conceptualise their writing experience and the effects of the above factors in shaping this experience.

### 6.2.1. The Task Requirements

Vardi (2002) attests that the difficulties the students in her study have with college writing appear to be the result of the differences between the writing task

requirements in the school context and the tertiary context rather than a lack of basic writing skills on the part of the students. One of the findings of my study is that students' transition to first year entails a change in the genre, the requirements, the length of the writing tasks, and the conditions under which they are supposed to complete their assignments (see 4.2). A number of the difficulties that students have with assignment writing can be traced back to the differences between the writing tasks that students were exposed to during the FYP and those that they are expected to write in Year One. These differences can be categorised into differences in: genre, information source, topic difficulty, length of the required text, varying disciplinary requirements, and time-constraints, as will explained below.

#### **6.2.1.1. Genre**

Several researchers maintain that the essay genre is the most common type of writing in academic institutions (Moore and Morton, 2005, Lillis, 2001). Therefore, the main focus of the study was on students' experience with writing academic essays, which was a new genre type introduced in Year One of the degree programme and for which students had no prior training in the Foundation Year. Participants of the study reported that most of the writing students performed in FYP was in the form of paragraph writing. In fact lack of resemblance between the writing genres in the first year and in the Foundation was the reason that most students provided to explain their general difficulties with assignment writing.

#### **6.2.1.2. Information Source**

The second area of difference between writing in Year One and in Foundation is related to the source of information that students have to use to complete the writing task. In the FYP, students relied either on prior knowledge; drawing on their own "pre-existing knowledge, experiences, beliefs, intuitions and the like" (Moore and Morton, 2005: 52), or on information provided to them in the form of graphs, tables, or notes. Therefore, in Foundation Year students were not trained in research skills simply because writing did not require search for information. However, assignments in Year One involve the use of external sources usually in the form of references, i.e. secondary sources of information. In other words, completing first year assignments

entails some degree of research on the part of the students to gather the required information to be incorporated into their essays. In addition to the use of references, some assignments also required students to obtain information from interviews or questionnaires. Students in the study faced a shift from writing paragraphs based on their personal experiences and observations in the FYP to writing academically-oriented essays that require using sources, carrying out library and internet research, and summarising and paraphrasing key points from their readings for the essays.

### **6.2.1.3. Topic Difficulty**

Writing research has indicated that topic difficulty and how much background knowledge students have about it are significant variables influencing the writing process, the length, and the quality of the finished text. Not surprisingly, research findings illustrated that the more students know about the topic, the easier it becomes to write about it. For example, Kellogg (1987: 258) states that

Conceivably, the better one knows the writing topic, the less effort might be needed to plan, translate, and review text (...) Topic knowledge is directly tied to generating and organising ideas.

Content knowledge or knowledge of what to write facilitates generating ideas and planning the organisation of these ideas in a coherent manner thus making the general writing process easier for the students. In the same vein, McCutchen (1986) concluded from his study that writers with high knowledge of the topic generally wrote more coherent and longer texts on topics that they know a lot about. The findings of this study highlight an agreement between the teachers and the students that the topics of some first year assignments were very challenging, which resulted in students requiring longer time to complete the assignment since they needed more time to research the topics and find sufficient and relevant source materials. Examples of such topics were intelligence, technology, and the comparison of cultures in the English department and media in the Communication Department.

### **6.2.1.4. Length of the Required Text**

Another factor that is closely linked to familiarity with the writing topic is the length of the assignments. As mentioned above, there seems to be a positive correlation

between how much students know about a topic and the amount of ideas that they can generate for the writing task. Conversely, low knowledge of the topic would make generating ideas more difficult. With fewer ideas to write about, students in this study faced difficulty reaching the specified word requirements for the essays, which ranged from 500 to 2000 words. Even after researching and incorporating information from references, students reported that they ran out of ideas after couple of hundred of words and have to struggle to generate additional ideas in order to meet the word target of the essays. In the Foundation Year, students had shorter writing tasks which were usually based on familiar personal topics (such as describing a person or an event) or with the information provided to them; therefore, they did not report having difficulties with generating ideas and writing the required number of words.

#### **6.2.1.5. Variations in the Task Requirements**

Disciplinary variations in task requirements are the next dimension of differences. In FYP, students were only taught in the English department. When they move to Year One, they are enrolled in five departments concurrently and they are required to produce assignments for the different academic disciplines. Vardi (2002: 680) maintains that when writing for different disciplines, students are “confronted with a variety of writing requirements. This variety reflects differing purposes, cultures, disciplines and ways of thinking”. In the findings of my study, students showed a somewhat general awareness of the varying writing demands in the disciplines which shaped their approach when completing the assignments. In response to the question about their focus when writing the assignments, students stated that they focus on the linguistic aspect of the essays in the English department, while focusing on the content when writing for the subject departments (see 5.4.2). This difference in focus reflects what the teachers in these departments are more concerned with when marking the essays.

#### **6.2.1.6. Time Constraints**

Finally, First Year students in the study have to complete several assignments simultaneously under tight time-constraints, especially as all the assessed course

work is due at the end of the semester. This is the case in almost all tertiary contexts and the current context is not an exception. However, if we take all of the above discussed factors related to the task requirements in addition to the fact that students are struggling with their time-management skills (see 4.3.4), we can begin to appreciate the impact of having to work under time-pressure on students' writing experience in the college. Students did not perceive that the assignments can play a role in their subject learning and viewed them as a burden to be completed so that the next one can be tackled. Again, this view is not unusual among undergraduate students. The question to be addressed here is how teachers and course designers can modify this negative attitude towards assignment writing. What can be changed in the structure of the degree plan, the task requirements, and the submission deadlines to foster a more favourable perception about assignment writing in Year One? These are some of the questions to be addressed in the implications of this study.

### **6.2.2. Students' Learning Histories**

The second set of contextual factors is students' learning experiences. First year students come to the college with a package of diverse experiences that have resulted from their past language learning experiences. These learning histories influence students' perceptions, expectations, and attitudes towards the new learning situation and shape their subsequent academic experiences as several writers have emphasised. For example, Vardi (2003: 89-90) argues that when attempting a new academic activity or task, students rely on the insights that they gained through their prior knowledge and experience with similar tasks.

In the same vein, Rinnert and Kobayashi (2009: 39) conclude that students' previous writing experience and training has an impact on the development of their writing and on their attitudes and perceptions of writing in general. In his study of the factors that cause negative writing affect in Egyptian EFL students, Abdel Latif (2007) found that 'poor history of writing achievement' was one of the factors that hugely influenced students' writing apprehension. He stated that students who scored high marks in previous writing assignments had lower writing apprehension when faced with a new writing situation compared to those who scored low marks, which resulted in the later group having a 'frustrating experience' with writing in English .

In the current study, students' previous experience was one of the issues that emerged as a contributing factor influencing their experience with writing in the first Year. In an elaboration on their response that writing is the most difficult skill, the first reason students mention was that it is totally different than the type of writing that they were asked to do in FYP. This finding resonates with findings of other studies of first year students' writing in acknowledging the influence of students' prior educational background on their attitudes towards writing in college.

Kalikorha (2008: 93) concluded from the study of the perceptions of First Year undergraduate Malawian students of the essay writing process that

The students' education background may have influenced their negative attitude towards essay writing. At that early stage of tertiary education, most students tend to compare the learning style at university with that of secondary school, and some students tend to get frustrated when they are confronted with wholly new learning situations, such as instructors' ways of teaching writing. Students also get frustrated when they receive grades that they were not expecting, especially considering that at secondary school most of these students were performing excellently. The result is that some students lose interest in learning academic writing as well as the writing process during this transition period.

Not denying the influence of students' language proficiency on their writing, from the discussion in the previous section (see 6.2.1), it can be claimed that several of students' difficulties with assignment writing can be traced back to the disjuncture between their past writing experiences in the FYP and in Year One. Students were not trained on how to write essays in Foundation Year. However, in Year One, essay writing was the main form of assessment in several departments as was explained in Chapter Four. Talking about the problems that they face in assignment, difficulties with referencing, paraphrasing, and summarising featured highly on students' lists immediately after grammar and spelling difficulties and sometimes jointly with them for some students.

The above observation can be explained by contrasting the writing requirements in the first year and in Foundation Year. As the writing tasks in FYP writing did not require students to use multiple sources of information, there was no training in



research skills. In Year One, however, research skills were of a crucial importance to students in completing the essays since they are required to obtain information from external sources and synthesis them into a coherent assignment. Students were required to use secondary sources of information in which they were required to “engage with and incorporate in their writing works of an interpretative nature—monographs, research articles and so on” (Moore and Morton, 2005: 52). In order to be able to successfully use external resources, students needed training in essential research skills, such as defining the topic of the essay, developing a list of relevant key words and phrases, locating resources in library/internet, evaluating the appropriateness of information, paraphrasing and summarising relevant information, and completing the reference list.

Students’ perception of disjuncture between FYP and Year One potentially has significant consequences for their readiness for academic writing, their perception of the relevance of previous studies, the possibility of transfer of literacy practices, and their transition to tertiary writing. Students and teachers in this study acknowledged the influence of lack of resemblance between the writing tasks and requirements between FYP and in Year One and the lack of training in essential research skills on students’ under-preparedness for essay writing when they start their degree programme. Students reported that when they join their degree studies, they are not ready yet to write researched academic assignments because they are unfamiliar with writing essays and did not have training in the prerequisite skills. Because of that, students also felt that their learning experience in FYP was not relevant to their studies in Year One since it did not prepare them to handle the assignment writing process successfully.

Another consequence is related to the notion of transfer of learning. Inconsistencies between the two writing experiences may make it difficult for students to transfer their previous learning experiences to new situations and thus risk undermining the very rationale for having a Foundation Year Programme in the first place. Leki (2007) reported that transfer is more likely to occur when the contexts of learning are highly similar and when this condition is absent, transfer is more likely to fail. Since the students in this study regard their experiences in FYP and Year One as totally different, there seems to be little chance that they would transfer the academic skills

that they acquired during the preparatory year to the new writing contexts in Year One as they are trying to complete the writing tasks required by the different departments.

Finally, this perception can adversely affect students' transition to tertiary level writing adding another impeding factor to the obvious low language ability. The difficulty of transition to college writing in this case is related to how students respond and accommodate the new requirements of the first year context where they are asked to write more complex pieces of writing for which they had no previous training.

### **6.2.3. The Disciplinary Context**

This section discusses the third factor from the diagram. Disciplinary variation in task requirements was discussed as a sub section of the task requirement (see section 6.2.1). In this section, a more detailed discussion will be offered explaining how the disciplinary context in the college impacted on first year students' writing experience.

Transition to college writing entails, among other things, handling the varying and sometimes even contradicting requirements from the different academic departments that the students belong to (see section 2.4.3.2). That is due to the existence of specific ways of meaning making and presenting meaning in a manner accepted by the different subject groups within the academia (Lea and Street, 1998, Zamel and Spack, 2004, Carter, 2007). College disciplines constitute different discourse communities each with their unique set of expectations about writers' text and language which enables the members of that particular discourse community to communicate effectively with each other (Johns, 1997). Emphasising the role of the disciplines in shaping writing, Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996: 29) state that

Each discipline constitutes its own "culture" in the sense that each has its own conventions and rules regarding what characterises effective and appropriate writing for that discipline. Each uses and writes the English language differently, for different purposes, about different things, in different formats.

The findings of this study suggest that there are several factors pertaining to the disciplinary context that are significant in students' writing experience in the college. These factors are:

- the focus of subject and language teachers when marking students' assignments,
- teachers' attitudes towards plagiarism,
- teachers' role in acquainting students with the requirements of writing in the disciplines,
- teachers' perceptions about the responsibility for improving students' writing, and
- teachers' perceptions about good academic writing.

#### **6.2.3.1. The Focus of Subject and Language Teachers when Marking Students' Assignments**

The focus of language teachers and subject is one area of difference between writing in the English department and writing in the academic departments. One of the findings of the current study is that English language teachers generally pay more attention to the linguistic aspect of students' writing, while the subject teachers are more concerned with the content of the writing. Examples of other studies that have reported similar findings are (Leki, 1995, Vardi, 2003, Zhu, 2004, Raymond and Parks, 2002, Leki, 2007, Evans and Morrison, 2010). The significance of these finding is that students' awareness of the varying foci of their teachers influences their approach to assignment writing in the different disciplines and for different teachers. In their study of students' writing experiences in an EAP class and an MBA class, Raymond and Parks (2002: 162) maintain that

all students perceived differences in the way they carried out the written assignments in the EAP and MBA contexts. In this regard, most students (9 out of 13) associated writing in these two contexts with different underlying purposes. When doing the EAP assignment, students stressed they had to pay attention to language and format. By contrast, in the MBA program, what was emphasised was accuracy of content.

Similarly, students in my study reflected the focus of the teachers when completing their essays in the same way as the students in the previous study did. Students

maintained that in order to get good marks, they took into consideration the teacher's focus and wrote their assignments in accordance with that teacher's preferred style or requirements. Generally, students maintained that they paid more attention to the linguistic aspects of their writing when writing for the English department, while focusing more on the clarity of the content when writing assignments in the disciplines.

Students modifying their approach to writing for the various disciplines can be seen as an indication of their consideration of audience of their texts, in this case the teacher-audience assessing their assignments. Students' awareness about who will read and assess their writing and their response to this awareness influences their writing process. That's because students are not writing in a vacuum, but rather they are writing with a specific reader in mind so that their written texts would match the reader's expectation of that text. The first step towards producing successful academic texts should then be having a clear understanding of the audience and his/her expectations and needs so that these issues are taken into consideration during the writing process (Kalikokha, 2008, Krause, 2001). Here the role of the teacher becomes of great importance in familiarising the students with the requirements of writing academic texts for the various disciplines (see below section 6.2.3.3).

### **6.2.3.2. Teachers' Attitudes Towards plagiarism**

In addition to the above and maybe more seriously, student's knowledge of the audience seems to influence their attitudes regarding plagiarism. As was described in the findings (see section 4.4.4.), subject teachers seem to be more lenient in their attitude towards plagiarism and some even expected students to copy from references without changing anything, a practice which is penalised in the English Department. Students realised these variations in the practice regarding plagiarism in the departments and reported that they were more liberal with their "borrowings" from references when they were writing for the subject courses. When completing the English assignment, however, they were very careful not to be accused of plagiarism and used paraphrasing and summarising.

### **6.2.3.3. Teachers' Role in Acquainting Students with the Requirements of Writing in the Disciplines**

First Year students' awareness of audience although important in shaping students' practices, may not be an accurate reflection of what teachers really want from students' texts. In the case of this study, the above observation is more applicable in the case of writing in the subject areas, as will be explained below.

In the findings, it was noted that the language teachers appear to be more concerned with acquainting students with the requirements of writing an assignment for the English department (see 5.4.2). Before students were asked to write their essays, English teachers provided written instructions which were explained to students over several classes. They also explained to the students the criteria that will be used to evaluate their writing and welcomed their questions and requests for further explanations during office hours. This is of course in addition to providing students with feedback on multiple drafts before the final submission date. It can be claimed that by doing that, the language teachers provided a clearer perception of the audience to the students, which would facilitate their understanding of the requirements and expectations of producing a good assignment for the English department.

In the subject departments, however, teachers seem to be less concerned with clarifying the requirements of disciplinary writing to their students. An interesting finding related to the disciplinary demands is that students did not appear to have an adequate understanding of discipline-specific writing requirements because subject teachers did not spend time familiarising them with these demands (see 5.4.3). There may be several plausible explanations for this observation. Disciplinary teachers may possess tacit knowledge of the specific requirements for producing a good essay in their subjects and thus may not be able to explain it to the students.

This is in line with findings of other studies, which argue that content teachers can recognise a good assignment, but find it difficult to explicitly articulate how to write one (Lea and Street, 2000b, Leki, 1995). One of the findings of this study was that subject teachers do not seem to be aware of the existence of discipline-specific writing requirements. This can be gleaned from subject teachers' interviews in which

they stated that developing students' writing is the duty of the English department. The underlying assumption here is that writing is a generic skill that can be learned in the English department and then applied to writing in the disciplines.

#### **6.2.3.4. Teachers' Perceptions about the Responsibility for Improving Students' Writing**

Subject teachers in the current study do not see themselves as responsible for developing students' writing and perceive it as a deviation from their main concern of teaching the subject content. Therefore, they are less willing to spend time to familiarise students with writing in their disciplines and to provide students with adequate training and support needed to acquire appropriate disciplinary writing knowledge. The comment 'I'm not English teacher' was repeated by several disciplinary teachers when responding to the question about their role in improving students' writing and their focus when providing feedback on students' written work. Because of this attitude from the subject teachers, when students have problems in their writing for the disciplines, they were referred back to the English Department to fix these problems (see 5.4.3). (Further implications of subject teachers' view about their responsibility towards students' writing are discussed below in the adequacy of support section 6.3.1).

Street (2004) discusses two approaches to teaching writing: a generic approach and an embedded approach. The generic view is similar to the 'study skills' model of writing. In other words, students learn generic writing skill in language classes and then transfer this knowledge to writing in the disciplinary courses. When a problem occurs in students' writing, subject teachers send students to the language teachers to 'fix' the problem. Instead of the generic approach that treats writing as a uniform skill, Street argues for an embedded approach which focuses on teaching the students the specific type of writing required for a particular discipline since writing practices vary across disciplines. In the embedded approach, it is the responsibility of the subject teachers to train the students and support them in acquiring the writing genres specific to their discipline. Street (2004: 16) argues his view by stating that

(T)he conventions and interactional rules of a discipline help to differentiate it from other disciplines, but writing is still seen as somehow outside of this process, not subject to rules of rhetoric. So writing, whilst actually helping to constitute the very definition of a given discipline, remains taught in non-disciplinary, generic classes that treat it as a uniform skill (...) what constitutes a discipline and its ways of thinking and knowing are actually embedded in that discipline's writing process, its norms and conventions - what the ethnography of communication tradition would recognise as 'communicative competence'.

English teachers' involvement with students' writing can be seen in at least two aspects of their discursive practices. The first aspect, which was discussed in the preceding section, is their role in acquainting students with the writing requirements. The second aspect is related to providing feedback on students' texts. Leki (1990) states that in responding to student writing, the writing teacher has a schizophrenic role in that he has to simultaneously play three parts: a reader, a coach, and an evaluator. For the first role, the teacher has to interact with student writing as a genuine reader would do with a text of a personal selection. Leki (1990: 59) challenges this view by stating that

given the unequal power inherent in the roles of the teacher and student, it is unrealistic to pretend that teachers can read students' text in the same way as we read texts we select for ourselves

As for the second role, the teacher is required to provide students with suggestions and options that would help them revise and improve their writing; thus focusing on the correctness of the writing rather than on the meaning as in the first role. The third role or that of the evaluator is the one that according to Zamel (1985), most the ESL teachers perform as they act more as judges of the standard of the writing rather than providers of feedback. From the analysis of English teachers' interview, we can see that they have a schizophrenic role, especially when they are providing feedback on the assignment drafts. In the first draft, they seem to act more as coaches by indicating to students the mistakes in their assignments for them to revise and correct these mistakes. In the last draft, the focus is on evaluating the assignment and assigning a grade to it. Therefore, the feedback and the comments that are provided serve as justification for teacher's decision so that students would know why they got this mark for the assignment.

### **6.2.3.5. Teachers' Perceptions about Good Academic Writing**

The analysis of the interviews revealed a wide range of characteristics that teachers associate with good academic writing (see section 4.4.3). This is a recurrent phenomenon in the literature of academic writing since

What 'counts' as 'good writing' is...partly a matter of the individual preferences of teaching staff, or the individual interpretation by teaching staff of the ostensibly 'given' rules of good writing. (Lea and Stierer, 2000:4)

Lack of consistency among teachers regarding features of good academic writing is not surprising as several studies found that academics entertain very dissimilar criteria for judging students writing (Lea and Street, 1998, Johns, 1997, Akerlind and Jenkins, 1998, Leki, 1995, Hyland, 2002b). Even when such consensus exists, there were discrepancies in the recognition of the existence of these criteria in students' essays. The application of the agreed upon criteria to a specific text may see teachers' disagreement even among those from the same discipline. In the case of teachers from different subject areas these discrepancies can be even greater because the focus of the discipline and the weight given to the various aspects of students' writing may vary reflecting the value that each subject associates with different features of writing.

As mentioned above, the findings of this study highlighted that the subject teachers stated that they judge students' assignments by the content and ignore the linguistic aspect of students' writing. Focusing solely on the ideas of students' writing and disregarding the language in which these ideas are expressed underlines the assumption that language and content are separate entities and that meaning exists independently from the medium through which it is expressed. This assumption was contested by several researchers who maintain that language and meaning are inseparable and thus cannot be viewed in isolation of each other (Eggins, 2004, Christie, 2005). Subject teachers' lack of awareness of discipline-specific discourse can also be noticed in their conceptualisation of good academic writing.

Although there were individual differences among teachers, generally most disciplinary teachers mention that they assess students' writing based on accuracy of the sentences and clarity of the ideas. Although the first criterion seems to be a



contradiction of teachers' previous claim of not being interested in students' language, "accuracy of sentences and clarity of ideas" can also be seen as generic characteristics which can apply to any subject. Interestingly, there was no reference to any specific disciplinary-related criteria for assessing students' writing in the content areas.

In the absence of a monolithic definition of good academic writing, teachers need to realise that how they perceive good academic writing rather than being a universal agreed upon conceptualisation is a personal and individual view that is not necessarily shared by all teachers in that context. This is significant since having multiple and varying views on an issue which constitutes a major aspect of students' academic lives can be very confusing for students and could undermine their efforts to learn academic writing (Kalikokha, 2008, Toh and Hocking, 2010). For this reason, teachers, especially from the same department need to aspire to reach a consistency in their criteria for assessing students writing both across the different modules and across the semesters so that what students learn in the first year will be relevant in the subsequent degree years. By doing this, students would get several opportunities for internalising the requirements of academic writing which would hopefully help improving their writing.

#### **6.2.4. The Institutional Context**

In the previous sections of this chapter, the discussion was focused on the first three contextual factors of the task requirements, students' learning histories, and the disciplinary context and how they affected students' writing. In this section, the attention will be directed towards the impact of the institutional context on First Year students' writing. In order to understand the academic and social interactions that influence students' experience, it is imperative to consider the college context where these interactions occur. That is because the unique characteristics of the place shape these interactions and determine what can or cannot be done and what is accepted within that context which thus reflects on students' educational and social experience in the institution.

Perhaps the most significant factor in the institutional context is the language policy stipulating English as the medium of instruction (see 1.3 & 5.2) because this decision has far-reaching consequences on students' experience in the colleges. The inherent ideological debate surrounding English as the medium of instruction is not unique to the Omani context as it also pertains true to several HE contexts where policy makers are struggling to meet the demands of globalisation in which English is the default language of several disciplines and at the same time reassuring opponents that this practice will not undermine the importance of local languages. This on-going debate was reflected in students' and teachers' attitudes towards English in the CoAS in which the opinions were divided between perceiving English as a problem and perceiving it as a resource (see 5.2.1.1 & 5.2.1.2).

The findings of this study suggest that students are aware of the importance of English, especially for increasing their future employability chances; however, they also stated that having English as the medium of instruction made their college experience more difficult. This attitude is understandable since students not only have to study a specialised disciplinary content in a foreign language which they are not fully competent in, but also they are required to demonstrate academic attainment and growth using assessment methods (such as essay writing) that they are not accustomed to and which emphasises different literacy practices than those associated with their first language. The language of instruction being English meant that students L1 linguistic practices were unrewarded and may be viewed as a hindrance to their acquisition of academic writing as in the case of some teachers in this study reporting that translation from L1 was a source for many mistakes that students make in their assignments.

Subject teachers' perceptions about English can also be considered as a factor in the students' college experience since these perceptions were reflected in teachers' classroom practices. In a direct contradiction to the language policy directives, some teachers taught the subject matter in Arabic rather than in English (see 5.2.2). This finding seems to be recurrent in EFL contexts as several studies have reported similar results regarding content teaching (Shukri, 2009, Murphey, 1997). When probing the underlying beliefs that led teachers to resort to this practice, several reasons were generated both from the subject teachers and the English teachers. Subject teachers

maintained that students' language proficiency is weak; therefore, they cannot understand the subject-matter in English. They also contended that the students themselves expect and demand Arab teachers explain the content using Arabic, rather than the official medium of instruction as the language policy of the CoAS specifies. Some English teachers and the Director of the English Language Programme on the other hand raised issues concerning the English proficiency of some subject teachers and their ability to teach in English. The suggestion here is that teachers conduct their classes in Arabic because they are not competent enough to use English.

In this study, subject teachers have certain content and learning objectives to cover during the class time and may think that they have two options to choose from. They may either spend precious classroom time improving students' language, which they do not think it is their duty, so that students can comprehend the content of their lectures. The other option is to switch to Arabic in the classroom, thus attain their objectives even if it was at the expense of students' English language academic literacies. This is especially worrying since in the First Year the foundations are supposed to be laid for students' subsequent academic success in their degree studies (Reason, Terenzini and Domingo, 2006).

By opting to teach in Arabic, the subject teachers may be successful in the short term (i.e. finishing the assigned syllabus), but in the long term, they are doing their students a huge disfavoured. Students may feel that they do not need to improve their English proficiency to be able to study the specialisations since they could always rely on teachers teaching them in L1. An alternative teaching strategy that would enable the teachers to accomplish their objectives without undermining students' academic development is for them to adjust their language level and message when teaching the content. This adjustment would facilitate students' comprehension of the disciplinary concepts and enable them to follow the instruction in English.

### 6.3. The Adequacy of Support for Academic Writing

As was detailed in the previous sections of this chapter, students' experience with academic writing in the context of the current study is the result of the interplay of

several contextual factors which are: the task requirements, students' learning histories, the disciplinary context, and the institutional context. Writing is a highly complex ability and producing a piece of written text can encompass numerous reasons for frustration for both students and teachers, especially during the early stages of students' tertiary experience. Teachers' awareness of the complexity of academic writing and the support that students get from their teachers are crucial in determining students' confidence in writing, which in turn is closely linked to their self-esteem and attitudes towards writing or even learning in general (Hyland, 1998, Lea, 1994). First year students need a standardised and uniform support from the various departments so that they can learn and put in practice the requirements of producing well-written assignments in the different departments.

In this second part of the chapter, the discussion will be directed towards the second aim of the study, which is to probe the adequacy of the support the students get in acquiring the requisite literacy practices in EFL academic writing in the context of the college under study.

Teachers' dissatisfaction with tertiary students' level of literacy abilities is widely documented in the literature. It is argued that the cause of this is the existence of a large gap between students' literacy practices and those expected by their academic community (Spack, 1988). Like their counterparts in similar educational contexts, the teachers in this study perceived that First Year students have lower writing abilities than what is expected from college students and that students are not ready yet to write researched assignments in English. As was described in the findings, teachers generally tend to blame students' previous schooling, language proficiency, and lack of adequate training for the difficulties that students face in academic writing. By doing this, the teachers distance themselves and disregard their role in influencing students' literacy practices and improving their writing skills.

However, instead of placing the blame entirely on students' lack of readiness for tertiary education, it is also legitimate to question the ways in which other contextual factors aggravate the difficulties students face in transition to college level writing, in addition to the readiness and willingness of the teachers themselves to support students' negotiation of the academic discourse in Year One. That is because

students' readiness is closely associated with the availability of support mechanisms that facilitate their transition to higher education studies. Thomas (2002:426) defines academic preparedness as "the extent to which students feel they are ready to study at HE level, and the ways in which the institution provides academic support if it is needed". The remaining section of this part is devoted to discussing the adequacy of support that is provided to students from the different departments in the college.

The first topic to be discussed under the support for writing is the responsibility for developing students' writing which was introduced briefly in 6.2.3.4. The findings suggest that the support students receive to develop their academic writing seems to be closely linked to the department for which they are writing the assignment. Generally, English teachers were more involved with students' writing during all the stages of the writing process through explaining writing instructions, giving students several chances to submit drafts, and providing feedback on texts. Similar support seems to be lacking in the disciplinary departments.

The subject teachers in this study maintained that their duty is to teach the content of their disciplines and that teaching academic writing is the duty of the language teachers. Similar to the findings of Carter (2007), subject teachers in my study argued that focusing on students' writing would result in them not having sufficient time to finish the course content. This perception is significant for at least two reasons. Firstly, it underlies a view that form and meaning are separate and thus should be taught in isolation of each other. Secondly, subject teachers' assertion that English teachers are responsible for students' writing may be explained in line with the study skills approach which views writing as a generic skill that once learned in the English department can then be transferred to writing in the disciplines. However, as was discussed previously in the disciplinary context and widely in the writing literature, academic disciplines vary in their requirements of students' texts and what constitutes good writing.

In the same vein, it is argued that early assignments that students are asked to write in the discipline are considered as great opportunity for the students to learn and to put into practice the requirements of writing a piece of academic writing in that discipline and get effective feedback from the teachers. This would aid their learning

the discipline-specific writing demands, which would in turn assist them with future assignment writing and general college integration and transition (Krause, 2001). Another benefit that students can get from writing assignments in their disciplines is to deepen their understanding of the subject content because while writing, they are supposed to engage with the reading and be able to critically evaluate the information and integrate data from several sources in their assignment writing (Hounsell, 1997).

Carter (2007: 408) argues that subject teachers are responsible for teaching “the ways of knowing and doing in their disciplines”, which also pertains true for writing. Students are supposed to acquire the appropriate discursive knowledge and practices associated with their different disciplines through their subject teachers since they are considered the experts of discipline-specific knowledge. Failing to acknowledge their role in training students in the disciplinary genres, may be taken as an indication of teachers’ lack of awareness of these genres in the first place.

The above discussion inevitably leads to another important issue regarding the ability of EAP courses to prepare students for studying in their academic courses, which is the stated objective of pre-college language preparation programmes including the FYP in the CoAS. The assumption underlying many EAP writing courses is “that what is taught and learned in these classes will help ESL students function well in their writing tasks across the curriculum” (Leki and Carson, 1994: 81). Similarly, Cummings *et al* (2006:51) state that the goal of writing instruction in pre-sessional language courses is “to prepare students for and to complement the goals, pedagogy, and writing tasks that the students might encounter in university courses the following year”.

In the case of the current study, students questioned the relevance of the FYP to First Year writing both in the English Department and in the subject departments. The differences in the task requirements between the writing that the students were exposed to in the Foundation Year and those under which they are expected to write their assignments in Year One (see 6.2.1.1. to 6.2.1.6.) clearly indicate that FYP did not prepare students for writing at the college level. A number of students’ difficulties with academic writing can be explained in relation to these differences. When elaborating on their answer that writing is the most difficult skill, students

expressed their frustration about the mismatch between the writing in the two years and the lack of training in essay writing (see 4.2).

In order for EAP instruction to better prepare students for the writing demands of their academic departments, some researchers argue that writing classes need to teach students the type of writing that they would encounter in the first year of their academic studies, i.e. “teach students discipline-specific writing conventions, in order to make them aware of what ‘good’ writing means beyond the writing class” (Baratta, 2008:1). However, usually pre-sessional language courses are generic since usually they are discipline-free courses with no provisions made to incorporate discipline-specific discourse or terminologies. This made several writers question the effectiveness of EAP instruction to help students respond to the demands of discipline-specific writing beyond the foundation course (Yiu, 2009, Spack, 1988, Leki and Carson, 1997, Zhu, 2004, Evans and Morrison, 2010). It also contributed to the debate surrounding how specific the EAP instruction should be (Hyland, 2002a, Spack, 1988). Ferris (2001: 300) states that

One of the most persistent and controversial issues in L2 writing is the debate over the purpose of EAP writing classes. Should teachers aim to develop generalised academic writing skills in their students, hoping that these skills and strategies will transfer to subsequent writing tasks across the curriculum? Or should they focus instead on teaching students how to analyse and imitate the norms of the specific discourse communities to which students hope to gain admission?

An additional issue in this debate is the responsibility for developing students’ academic writing. The controversial question here is whether English teachers are solely responsible for improving students’ writing since they are language specialists, or whether the responsibility extends to the disciplinary teachers since students are required to write essays for the different departments.

Some writers argue that since the aim of language courses is to prepare students for success in their academic subject, English language teachers need to teach the discipline specific writing needs of their students. However, Spack (1988), among others, opposes this stance and maintains that this task should be left to the teachers of those disciplines. Similarly, Leki (1995:237) observes that

an EAP course cannot legitimately teach discipline specific discourse but rather would seek to determine what might best prepare students to acquire discipline-specific discourse.

However, English teachers determining students' discipline-specific needs may not be an easy task. It is often argued that language teachers may not be able to accurately predict students' writing needs when they join their disciplines since there is usually very little, if any, interaction between the EAP department and the subject departments in HE contexts. In addition, English teachers may not be able to provide effective disciplinary support because they lack control over both the content of the subject courses and the genres of the disciplines. English teachers have specialist knowledge of the target language, but no specialised knowledge of the academic disciplines; therefore, they may not be able to provide helpful and meaningful discipline-specific writing instruction.

On a practical consideration, Hirvela (1997) mentions that the heterogeneous nature of ESL classes is another problem facing language teachers attempting to teach discipline specific writing. EAP classrooms usually consist of students from several departments which makes it difficult to cater for the specific writing needs of all students in the class. Other researchers have questioned the notion of transfer of learning from generalised EAP writing to the disciplines. For example, Hooper and Butler (2008) maintain that

Knowledge and skills gained in one context do not automatically transfer unless the gap between contexts is narrow with extensive overlap between the original learning context and the new one (Perkins & Salomon, 1988). Opening a social work textbook, for example, may automatically trigger reading habits acquired elsewhere, but expecting students to transfer writing and thinking skills gained in English composition courses to social work writing assignments may require more than reflexive automaticity.

As a possible solution for this divide, several researchers discussed the idea of collaboration between the English teachers and teachers from the subject departments (Elton, 2010, Vardi, 2002, Bacha and Bahous, 2008, Dudley-Evans, 2001, Donato, 2004). That is because EAP teachers have the knowledge of the



language and the subject teachers have the content knowledge and the subject genre knowledge, which are both needed for good writing.

In the same vein, Shukri (2009) puts forward the concept of teacher collaboration based on the Vygotskyian sociocultural theory particularly the notion that learning takes place through social interactions and that learners need scaffolding to reach their learning potential. However, instead of the interactions between teachers and students, she argues for collaboration between teachers from different disciplines in order to improve students' writing by stating that

When teachers from different departments cooperate, they are exchanging and constructing new knowledge. Through social interaction, if the MB (Medical Biology) teacher is scaffolding the ESP teacher with relevant content and in return the ESP teacher communicates the essential language awareness to the MB teacher, they should be able to build relevant new knowledge that is available to all students (Shukri, 2009: 3).

In the light of the apparent inadequacy of FYP to ease students' transition to college writing, Year One teachers are faced with the crucial task of providing students with the support needed to acquire the required academic writing literacies.

In order to write successful essay, first year students need to have an understanding of the audience and to take the expectations of the intended readership into consideration during the writing process (see 6.2.3.1 and 6.2.3.2). One of the important issues that teachers can help students with is explicitly stating their expectations of academic writing so that students are consciously aware of them rather than depending on their own invention of the university (Bartholomae, 1986). In this study, students stated that some teachers did not discuss the criteria for judging the assignments but rather they deduce the teacher's focus when the marked assignments are returned back to them in the case of the English teachers as almost all of the mistakes that are indicated by the teachers are usually spelling and grammar mistakes. In the case of the subject teachers, students noticed that they usually get higher marks in the assignments which led them to conclude that the disciplinary teachers do not focus on the language of the assignment unlike the English teachers.

Related to the issue of audience expectations is the question of what constitutes good academic writing in the various disciplines. Leki (1995: 24) states that in the official settings of higher education institutions good writing runs the risk of becoming

almost monolithic, an absolute category of performance apparently readily recognisable to the initiated, in this case, to the members of the discourse community.

However, in reality, both from practical experience and from research, educators argue that this is not the case. In other words, what constitutes good academic writing is not a single, uncontroversial, and unquestionable category that all teachers recognise and can readily apply when assessing students' texts, thus making them reach a consensus when rating students' essays. Therefore, unsurprisingly in this research, teachers had different opinions of what good writing is and the features that they focus on when assessing how successful students were in their attempts to produce academic texts.

These differences are not separated by discipline boundaries (i.e. they are not discipline specific) because the analysis showed that even teachers within the same department may have very dissimilar conceptions of good writing. This phenomenon is not totally unheard of in the literature as several writers reported a wide variation in expectations even among lecturers of the same discipline (Lea and Street, 1998, Johns, 1997). In order to reduce students' confusion with this regard, teachers from the same department need to agree on the criteria that they are going to use to assess students' assignments. Preferably, these criteria are to be used in all modules in the same year and throughout the degree programme so that students would have a sense of consistency and would get several opportunities to internalise these requirements.

To support students becoming more acquainted with their audience, teachers teaching in the First Year programme, need to clarify to students what constitutes good academic writing in their respective disciplines and the criteria upon which their writing is going to be assessed. By doing this, teachers would demystify the conventions of academic writing requirements for the novice writers. This can be accomplished through providing information in handouts that students keep and use as a reference when they are writing. Teachers also can help by allocating time

during the lessons to explain the assignment instructions and the guidelines that students have to follow. In the findings, students reported that they found this type of practice from the English teachers very useful. However, there may be a danger in presenting students with guidelines and criteria in a vacuum; i.e. not in relation to a particular text. One reason for this is that different teachers have different conceptualisations of good writing even when there is a consensus on the criteria themselves (see 6.2.3.5).

Another reason is that teachers may have well-defined knowledge about components of good writing, but may be unable to describe them to their students (Elton, 2010, Lillis and Turner, 2001, Lea and Street, 2000b). For example, teachers may agree that a good assignment should present a critical argument. However, they may not agree on the elements that constitute ‘critical argument’, nor be able to explicitly explain them in class.

Lillis and Turner (2001) argue that the ‘discourse of transparency’ in which language is treated as though it were transparent and autonomous can be a misleading and simplistic view. In their study, students reported that the terminologies that teachers use in writing guidelines and in providing feedback are opaque and do not provide sufficient guidance to students in their attempt to acquire the conventions of academic writing. Terms like ‘avoid plagiarism’ and ‘write an introduction’ are not common sense or context-free terms that can be understood by everybody in all situations equally well. According to Lillis and Turner (2001: 61), writing conventions rather than being ‘unitary text phenomenon’, are an intersection of at least three factors: disciplinary knowledge, departmental practices, and individual tutor expectations.

Similarly, Lillis (2001) states that usually guidelines on essay writing presuppose that language itself is transparent and that “meaning resides in the wordings of the question” (ibid: 56). She challenges this notion of transparency by giving an example of the directive ‘be explicit’, which is a very common comment both in written and spoken feedback on students’ writing. On a further analysis of what ‘be explicit’ can mean, this apparently simple directive proves to be not as straightforward as it seemed to be at first glance. Another presupposition is that the essay writing rules

can easily be taught by teachers telling students how to write essays and students internalising these guidelines, and when in doubt, asking the teacher for any necessary clarifications. This in turn presupposes that the teachers themselves can articulate the writing conventions in a way that students can comprehend.

Therefore, rather than students relying just on words (whether written or spoken) to grasp abstract notions that are “almost Delphic in their obscurity” (Elton, 2010:156), they would benefit more by being exposed to models illustrating how these abstract guidelines are actually reflected in an example of good writing. By seeing how previous students successfully negotiated assignment writing and having the opportunity to study models exemplifying the expected outcomes of their essays, first year students would have concrete exemplars to aid their comprehension of the academic writing criteria.

After explaining the guidelines and the assessment criteria and presenting model assignments, comes the important stage of giving students opportunities to practice writing essays and providing them with feedback on their writing. Developing academic writing is a lengthy process since it entails the acquisition of several skills that need time to be mastered fully. It is only through regular cycles of practice and feedback that students can learn to integrate the various sub-skills required to complete the assignments (Kalikokha, 2008).

First year students in this study operate within two different systems regarding how much practice is offered to them in the departments. In the English department, they are required to submit several drafts of their essays before the final submission date. However, in the subject departments, they do not have the chance of submitting drafts. Although teachers’ feedback is crucial to students at every stage of their schooling, it is particularly important to first year students “during the early stages of their transition to university study, when they are unsure of what is required” (Storch and Tapper, 2000: 338).

Teachers’ feedback is a key factor in First Year students’ acquisition of academic writing. That’s because through feedback teachers can communicate the requirements of academic essay writing to the students for them to internalise these

requirements and apply them when writing. Through feedback, students can also learn how successful their assignments are in relation to the accepted conventions of academic writing in their disciplines. The constructive feedback that students receive from teachers can assist their attempt to approximate the accepted academic writing at tertiary level. Furthermore, providing feedback can be seen as an indication of how involved teachers are in improving students' writing. How detailed the feedback is and its type signals whether the teacher is interested in improving students' writing, or whether the interest lays solely in assessing the essays and assigning grades.

The findings indicate that in the English department, students have the opportunity to revise several drafts based on the teachers' feedback. This practice can be of crucial importance to students as it would help them crystallise the abstract requirements and put into actual practice the guidelines and instructions of writing an assignment for the English Department. In the subject departments, however, this support is almost non-existent because students do not receive any feedback from the teachers on their writing. Students expect and want their teachers to provide feedback on their writing as we saw when discussing the section on the importance of feedback; however, this expectation is not met by the subject teachers who neither allow students to submit multiple drafts, nor return the assignment after marking them. Students only know the grades of the assignments at the end of the semester. However, they do not know why they got these grades, how well is their writing aligned with the requirements of discipline-specific writing, or what they can do to improve their future writing in the subject courses. This practice from the subject teachers raises the question of how can students learn the specific demands of writing in these departments without teachers' feedback on their texts.

Another form of support that the teachers can provide to students is through out-of-classroom interactions. These interactions are assignment related that occurs between students and teachers during the stages of completing the writing assignment from researching the topic and searching for information to the final submission of the completed assignment.

Student-teacher interactions are considered a primary agent in the college culture that shapes students' attitudes and interests towards their educational experience and

determines their academic success, Pascarella *et al* (1986). Although most of the student-teacher interactions take place inside the classroom, several studies have showed that out-of-classroom interactions are also important in students' academic achievement as they increase their motivation and active engagement in the learning process (Komarraju *et al*, 2010).

From the findings of my study, we can conclude that most of the student-teacher out-of-classroom interactions can be classified under what Cox and Orehovec (2007) label as 'functional interaction' or academic-related interactions, which in the case of the current study are related to the assignment writing process. During this process, interactions happen at three stages: clarification stage, data-gathering stage, and revising stage. In the initial stage and in addition to the guidelines that are given inside the classroom, students can seek further clarifications of the assignment question and requirements during teacher's office hours.

In the data-gathering stage, students approach teachers to ask for support with obtaining information for the assignment, either by teachers identifying sources of information such as books, magazines or web pages, or by agreeing to be interviewed by the students if the assignment requirements specify interviews as a source of information. The revision stage occurs when students receive the feedback on early drafts and ask for teachers' help with correcting the mistakes before the final submission of the assignment. Throughout the previous stages, these "functional interactions" provide a well-needed support and scaffolding for students who are faced with the challenges of academic writing. This is particularly true in the case of the teachers in the English department since the findings suggest that practices, such as multiple drafts and providing feedback are not among the established practices of teachers in the disciplinary departments.

The above discussion of the support for writing indicates the discrepancies that exist in the college regarding this issue. It also highlights the need for more effort to be exerted, especially by the subject teachers towards providing discipline-specific guidance and support to First Year students. Disciplinary teachers need to realise that academic writing is discipline-dependent; therefore, improving students' writing is not solely the duty of the language teachers. If they want students to produce well-

written assignments in their departments, subject teachers have to be more involved with students' writing and take responsibility for teaching students the genres and audience expectations of good academic writing in their disciplines.

#### 6.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, the main findings of the research were discussed in the light of the research aims, the literature review and the particular contextual factors in the college. First Year students had a difficult experience with writing researched assignments because of the multiple factors that interact to shape it, thus affecting students' initial stages of transition to college which in turn would have an impact on their subsequent educational experiences and their overall approach to the teaching/learning process at tertiary level.

This chapter attempted to discuss the complexities associated with students' academic writing in the context of the current study. In the first part of the chapter, and based on the analysis of the results and the literature review, an explanatory framework was proposed which attempted to depict the influence of four factors on students' transition to First Year writing. These factors are: the task requirements, students' learning histories, the disciplinary context and the institutional context. In the second part of the chapter, the support for academic writing was discussed highlighting the teachers' actual practices and how the support can be improved to facilitate students' acquisition of academic writing.

In the next chapter, the practical and theoretical implications of findings will be presented.

## 7 Chapter Seven: Conclusion

### 7.1. Introduction

This chapter draws together conclusions and implications of the research findings. It starts by presenting a brief overview of the research aim and the methodology used for the data collection. Then a summary of the main findings is provided. This is followed by the implications of the results for theory and practice. Finally, the limitations of the study are discussed together with suggestions for further research.

### 7.2. Summary of the Main Findings

This study was conducted to investigate the experience of First Year Omani college students with academic writing in English. Of a particular interest, was exploring the contextual factors that shape their experience and the adequacy of support that they receive in the transition to tertiary level writing. The study was interested in obtaining students' perspectives about how they perceive their writing ability and the difficulties they face in writing the assignments since they constitute a substantial aspect of Year One assessment criteria.

In order to provide a detailed and rich account of students' writing in Year One in a natural setting, a qualitative research design was adopted in the study. The data comes from multiple sources. These sources are: (1) seven focus group interviews with First Year students, (2) eight interviews with English teachers, (3) an interview with the Head of the English Language Department in the college, (4) an interview with the Director of the English Language programme in the MoHE, (5) three interviews with teachers from the International Business Department, (6) four interviews with teachers from the Communication department, and (7) various documents related to assignment writing, such as course outlines, assignment guidelines, and assessment rubrics.

The main findings of this study have shown that students' transition to First Year writing was a difficult and complex process which was influenced by a multitude of



interrelated contextual factors. Understandably, some of these factors are linked to students' own characteristics, such as level of English language proficiency and past writing experiences. The results also highlighted that the writing task requirements, the disciplinary, and the institutional contexts where students' writing takes place contributed to shaping their writing experience.

First Year students' main writing difficulties seem to be the result of discrepancies between the writing instruction in FYP and the demands of writing assignments in Year One. As it is true for most pre-sessional language courses in similar contexts, the FYP in the college is designed to improve students' linguistic competency, prepare them for their academic studies, and ease their transition from Arabic medium of instruction schooling system to English medium of instruction higher education context. However, the results seem to suggest that students and teachers are not satisfied with the adequacy of preparation that students received in the Foundation Year, especially with regard to writing instruction. As was detailed in the discussion chapter, the writing task requirements in these years differ hugely with regard to: (1) the preferred genre, (2) information source, (3) topic difficulty, (4) length of the required text, (5) disciplinary variations, and (6) time-constraints under which students complete their essays. These closely-intertwined aspects of the task requirements further complicated students' negotiation with the assessed assignments that they were asked to write in the different departments.

The disciplinary context is an important layer of the context in the current study because of the effect of the subject related factors on students' writing. Examples of these factors are: teachers' focus when marking students' texts or providing feedback, their attitudes towards plagiarism, their role in familiarising students with the discipline-specific requirements, their perceptions about responsibility for improving students' writing, and their perceptions about good academic writing. The current results indicate the existence of variations mainly between the subject teachers and English teachers regarding the above mentioned issues which were reflected in students' approach to writing for the different disciplines.

The findings also highlighted the influence of the medium of instruction on students' writing. Transition to college level writing is a daunting experience for every

undergraduate. This experience becomes even more challenging for EFL students studying in English medium institutions. These students are expected to show academic attainment and comprehension of the content of their subject courses in a language that they are not fully competent in using new forms of literacy practices (e.g. essays) that they are not familiar with. In other words, EFL students are faced with the triple task of acquiring the language, the content, and the literacy practices of studying at an English medium of instruction higher education institution.

In addition, data from the research revealed variations in the adequacy of support that students received to improve their writing and facilitate the completion of the assignments. It was noted that teachers from the English departments generally provided more assistance to students during the writing process through clarifications of the essay instructions, providing feedback on drafts, and consultation during office hours. However, this type of scaffolding for writing was not reported in the case of the subject teachers. This practice from the disciplinary teachers is likely to make the writing process even more complicated and confusing for the students. That is because students need to be made consciously aware of the disciplinary-specific writing genres and requirements for them to write good essays in the disciplines. In addition, students' written products need to meet the expectations of their teacher-audience in order to get good grades. Without a clear understanding of the disciplinary requirements and teachers' expectations, it is very unlikely that students will develop the writing literacy practices necessary for producing successful texts in their subject areas.

Related to the issue of teacher's support discussed in the preceding paragraph, this study also indicates that subject teachers refrained from admitting responsibility for students' writing and distanced themselves from this issue by insisting that as subject specialists, their focus is mainly directed towards delivering the content of their courses and that improving students' writing should be left to the language teachers since it is their speciality. This view has the potential of undermining students' acquisition of disciplinary discursive knowledge and practices because they are subject-dependent embedded in the special ways of knowing and doing in the disciplines.

### 7.3. Implications of the Study

Whilst acknowledging the limitations of the research, I think the current study can be regarded as an addition to the ever growing body of research in undergraduate EFL students' experience with writing academic essays in their various disciplinary departments. The findings that were generated in the study can also provide valuable insights for disciplinary teachers, EAP teachers, and policy makers in charge of designing college programmes to better response to the concerns that first year students have in order to ease their transition to tertiary studies. The next sections focus on the implications of the study, which are presented under two sub-headings: implications for the understanding of academic writing and implications for practice.

#### **7.3.1. Implications for the Understanding of Academic Writing**

The main implication of the current findings for the study of academic writing in EFL higher education contexts relates to the conceptualisation of academic writing. The findings seems to support suggestions that attempting to describe academic writing using a study-skills model may not be very helpful in capturing the complex nature of students' experience with writing at tertiary level (Lea and Street, 1998, Baynham, 2000). That is because this model assumes that writing can be acquired through mastering a set of sub-skills, such as surface features, grammar and spelling, which once are learned can be transferred unproblematically to other contexts (Lea and Street, 1998). Students' problems in writing are seen as an indication of lacks or deficits in their writing skills. Therefore, the focus of the writing instruction is on 'fixing' students' problems by providing training on these atomised skills. The study-skills model does not consider the influence of the context or purposes of writing on students' texts.

Instead of the above over-simplistic view of writing, the current findings seem to support a more complex perspective on academic writing, which takes into consideration a multitude of interrelated factors that shape first year students' college writing experience. Moving away from "educational judgement about good and bad writing" (Street, 2004:15) and instead of attributing students' writing difficulties to deficiencies in the linguistic or skills repertoire, the findings of the current study seem to suggest a more situated view of students' writing experience. This

perspective acknowledges the influence of students' characteristics and the context of writing on students' perceptions and practices regarding academic writing in the college. The model of the factors affecting students' writing experience, which was presented in the discussion chapter (see Figure 6.1), can be seen as addition to the understanding of students' academic writing and the impact of the contextual factors in shaping this experience.

The academic literacies model adopted as the theoretical framework for the study seems to be an appropriate choice for investigating academic writing. That is because it places the context at the heart of students' writing experience. This model acknowledges that writing is inseparable from the particularities of the context and that the interactions between the various contextual factors ultimately shape the overall writing experience. Thus this model appears to offer a more comprehensive understanding of students' writing experience and its shapers within a particular higher education context.

There seems to be four areas of convergence between the premises of the Academic literacies approach to students' writing and the findings of the current study. These areas are related to (a) the importance of understanding students' perceptions, (b) writing as a situated activity, (c) the multiple layers of the writing context in the college, and (d) the variations in the writing requirements among disciplines.

According to Lea and Street (1998), students' and teachers' interpretations of students' writing are significant in understanding the academic literacies experience of that particular group of students. Therefore, research into academic literacies tends to use qualitative methods that would enable the researcher to explore these subjective points of view (*ibid*). In the current study, there is a focus on understanding students' perceptions of their own writing by placing students' experience at the heart of its design. The students were given the opportunity to speak about their experience in completing the required assignments in the different disciplines and how they negotiated the writing demands of the first year in their degree programme.

Secondly, the findings of this study have consolidated the insight that writing is a situated activity since the context in which the students are to perform the writing task influences students' perceptions and practices. As was detailed in the findings chapters, the particularities of academic context and how students negotiate the various contextual factors influenced their writing experience. This finding is in line with Prior's (2004) assertion that writing is a contextually situated activity and that in order to understand students' writing, there is a need to look "broadly at the contexts as well as closely at specific situated activity" (Prior, 2004: 172).

In the findings of this study, first year students' writing perceptions and practices were found to be the result of the interaction of several factors inherent in the context where they are attempting the writing task. Therefore, the role of the specific writing context with its multiple layers (Samraj, 2002), how these elements of context relate to each other, and how they impact on students' texts are shown to be necessarily a prominent part of any account of students' acquisition of academic literacies in higher education contexts.

The findings of the current study also suggest that there are at least three contexts within which first year students in this study operate. They are: the immediate context, the disciplinary context, and the institutional context. The immediate context relates to the classroom practices, the various teachers' requirements, and the demands of the writing task itself. The disciplinary contexts relates to the varying writing requirements in the different subjects. Finally, the institutional context refers to the factors at the wider college level that influence students' writing, such as the medium of instruction and the availability of resources.

The final area of convergence between the findings of this study and the academic literacies model relates specifically to students' experience in writing for the different subjects in Year One. As was discussed in the section entitled 'writing in the disciplines' (see section 5.4), first year students were faced with varying writing requirements when completing assignments for the various subjects. In addition, English language teachers and subject teachers were found to have different foci and expectations when marking students' texts. These findings seem to support the

argument that academic disciplines are not homogenous, especially with regard to students' writing which constitutes additional challenges for first year students.

### **7.3.2. Implications for Practice in the Context of the Study**

The findings of the study have provided insights into the challenging nature of First Year essay writing in the context of the CoAS. The educational significance of this study is that it provided a personal account of the academic writing experience from the students' own perspectives. In order to better prepare students for meeting the demands of writing in Year One, the following suggestions for practice are offered to the Ministry of Higher Education in Oman.

- The findings have shown a wide spread dissatisfaction among both teachers and students regarding the current FYP in the college mainly because what they see it a failure to prepare students for the writing that is expected from them in Year One. Therefore, there is a need to align the writing instruction provided in the FYP with the task requirements and the conditions under which students are expected to write in their degree programmes.
- To overcome the practical problem of catering for the future writing needs of students from several disciplines in EAP courses, it is suggested that students FYP are streamed into groups according to their future majors thus making the provision of subject-specific writing instruction more feasible.
- It would be more helpful for students to be introduced to essay writing in the Foundation Year. Of course, students would not be expected to produce well-written essays from the start, but with gradually challenging tasks and feedback, they would be more prepared for writing the required assignments when they join their academic departments.
- Students need to be trained in integrating source texts in their writing from the beginning of their college studies. Research skills training should include training in identifying the topic of the writing, preparing a list of related words to be researched, conducting library and internet search, locating

suitable source materials, and summarising and paraphrasing relevant information into a cogent text.

- When attempting to complete the assignments, students need all the support that they can get from their teachers during all stages of the writing process. In the pre-writing stage, students need a clear awareness of the audience and his/her expectations of the text. They also need to know precisely what are they expected to write (the topic) and how are they supposed to present it (the organisation). In the writing stage, students need scaffolding from their teachers mainly in the form informative feedback on drafts of their assignments. Effective feedback needs to be timely and indicates to students the ways in which their mistakes can be corrected. In post-writing stage, students need to know how well did they do in the writing task and areas for further improvements.
- Subject teacher need to acknowledge their responsibility for facilitating students writing in their respective disciplines and not rely entirely on the training that students' have in the EAP courses. Even with the best material and teaching available, any EAP course can only attempt to teach the generic aspects of academic writing. However, the practicalities of discipline writing are beyond the scope of such courses and thus should be taught by disciplinary teachers.
- To lessen students' confusion regarding essay writing, teachers within each department should come to a consensus regarding their conceptualisations of good writing. This consistency is important so that students are not faced with new sets of requirements every time they change classes or move from one year to the next.
- There should be a mechanism put in place to facilitate communication between the various departments in the college and provide feedback on students' writing across the departments and across the years. For example, FYP teachers need to know the genres and the requirements of writing in Year One and try to incorporate them in their writing. Teachers in the English and the subject department need to have open discussions about writing in

their departments and how it can be made more meaningful learning experiences for students. One way of doing this, can be through spacing out the deadlines for the submission of assessed coursework so that students would have time to work on their essays and would hopefully benefit from completing them.

#### 7.4. Limitations of the Study

The study was useful as it provided data about the academic writing experience of First Year students in the context of the research site and the factors that bear on this experience. However, the study is not without limitations, some of which are acknowledged below.

- Firstly, the sample comes from one college of the six Colleges of Applied Sciences under the umbrella of MoHE in Oman. Although the relevance of the current findings for the other five colleges is conceivable given the similarities in some aspects of these institutions (i.e. they have the same catchment population, use the same textbooks and syllabi...etc), the results of this investigation may not be an accurate representation of the experiences of the other cohorts of first year students. That is because, as was emphasised throughout the thesis, the context plays a crucial role in students' academic writing. As no two contexts are exactly identical, findings obtained in one contexts may not necessary pertain true for the other colleges.
- Related to the first point is the notion of the generalasibility of the findings from the present study. As was discussed in the methodology chapter (section 3.11.2), qualitative research generates rich and comprehensive data about the case study under investigation, but the generalasibility of these results to other case studies can be very difficult or even impossible which may be considered as a limitation.
- The main research methods used in the study are focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews which have some limitations associated with in their use for data collection purposes (see section 3.7.1. & 3.7.2.). The data



generated from these research methods is entirely self-reported which can raise questions about the reliability of the data.

- In addition, the data collected for the study was based on a “one-off” inquiry into the experience of writing which may not give a complete picture of the process of the development of college students’ academic writing. That is because academic writing experience is an on-going process that students start when they first join college and which continues to be modified throughout their college studies.

Based on the above discussion of the limitations of the study, a number of suggestions for further research were identified. These are presented in the next section.

### 7.5. Suggestions for Future Research

From the discussion of the study findings and the above limitations that were identified in the design of the present study, some suggestions can be made for future research into students’ academic writing experience.

- Similar research needs to be carried out in the other Colleges of Applied Sciences in the Sultanate so as to obtain a comprehensive picture of various students’ groups’ negotiations with academic writing in the contexts of the remaining colleges.
- Development of academic writing is a lengthy process since students need time to acquire the required literacy knowledge and practices necessary to write successful texts that meet the expectations of tertiary level writing. Therefore, more longitudinal studies are needed in order to illuminate the writing experience of undergraduate students during the whole degree journey.
- In addition, expectations of students’ texts differ as they move from one year of study to the next. As students progress in their degrees, understandably they are expected to write more specialised genre types than the ones they

wrote in their first year. Therefore, it not sufficient to only research the writing experiences of Year One students in the college. Further studies that explore how students experience these differences in the writing demands are required.

- Research that incorporates samples of students' assignments with teachers' feedback is also needed. One reason for this inclusion is for triangulation purposes. In the current study, there were some discrepancies between the reports from some students and teachers regarding teacher feedback. Some subject teachers maintained that they do provide feedback on students' written work but students disagreed with these statements. Another benefit of looking at students' assignments is to investigate the impact of teachers' feedback and students' awareness of the disciplinary requirements on their approach to writing in the different departments.

## 7.6. Concluding Remarks

After a long process that spanned over the past three and a half years of my life, here I come to the end of the course of my research. Incidentally, the topic of my study is EFL students' experience with academic writing which now upon reflection is relevant to my own personal journey during the PhD period.

During the process of writing this thesis, I began to identify with the issues and difficulties associated with academic writing that the students discussed during their interviews. Like them, I am an EFL student who embarked on a route of completing a novel genre of writing for which I had no previous training and the outcome of which would determine my academic success. The doctoral dissertation is considered the most acclaimed yet the most challenging genre of writing in academia even for the native speakers. EFL PhD candidates, like myself, are faced with the added challenge of producing a 100,000 word long well-researched academic thesis in a language which is not our mother tongue, adhering to unfamiliar requirements and writing styles that are different from those we acquired through our L1 literacy practices. Similar to the findings of my study, the support that I received from my supervisors throughout the PhD period facilitated my writing development and

helped me during the reiterative stages of completing the various sections of the dissertation.

The process of completing the PhD was a great learning experience for me on a professional level and on personal level. Professionally, I gained theoretical knowledge and practices regarding several issues associated with conducting a research project within social studies context using qualitative methods of inquiry. Furthermore, the findings of the study and the extensive reading about first year students' academic writing gave me insights that I would attempt to implement when I return back to my job as the deputy director of the English Language programmes at the MoHE.

On the personal dimension, I experienced a kaleidoscope of emotions and challenges during the past three years. Dealing with these worries, anxieties, and concerns through discussion with supervisors, or friends or senior colleagues or by reading about how other people overcame similar challenges added to my personal development. I have learned self-management and self-discipline by setting targets with deadlines that are conveyed to the supervisors as a measure of ensuring that I would meet my set objectives within the agreed time-frame.

Finally, for me completing the PhD draws into a conclusion a highly informative and rewarding learning experience. As any profound experience, it had its fair share of the lows and the highs, and like any life changing experience, its effects would still be felt long after it is finished. Was it really worth the trouble? Yes.

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# Appendices

## Appendix One: Writing Learning Objectives in the Foundation Year Programme

### General:

- Students should keep a writing file which is checked by the teacher twice a semester
- Editing should concentrate on key grammar items for the level; avoid correcting all errors, especially at lower levels
- Encourage peer editing as a classroom activity at all levels
- Encourage students to note down, correct and keep a log of their errors

### Learning Objectives:

1. write texts of a minimum 250 words, showing control of layout, organization, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure grammar and vocabulary
2. Produce a written report of minimum 500 words showing evidence of research, note-taking, review and revision of work, paraphrasing, summarising, use of quotations and use of references.
3. produce a coherent, edited text
4. write a first and second draft
5. write a text/report of three related paragraphs of 150 – 200 words using graphical or textual prompts to express description of a process, description of a structure, or an explanation (cause and effect)
6. cite sources in line with academic conventions
7. create detailed, organized notes from research materials
8. use discourse markers to indicate result ( thus; accordingly; as a results, consequently, etc)
9. use a range of discourse markers to express listing/ chronology/ sequence/ addition/exemplification/result
10. write 150 -200 words of a range of text types, e.g. compare and contrast; cause and effect; expressing an opinion; transferring data from charts and graphs
11. Interpret and describe graphical information, e.g. graphs, tables, etc.



12. write paragraphs of around 100 – 150 words, using some guidelines, e.g. notes taken from a text (written or spoken)
13. establish coherence between paragraphs: introduction, body and conclusion
14. use appropriate links and transition signals
15. produce paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting points
16. write a topic sentence and a concluding sentence
17. organize ideas in an outline
18. write sentences using conjunctions of comparison and contrast
19. compose a text comparing two things/places
20. compose a text describing an event or invention
21. compose a text describing a routine
22. compose a short text describing a graph or table
23. proof read and edit one's own text
24. convert notes into a text
25. establish a link between the topic sentence and the next sentence
26. use simple linking devices
27. compose a text on expressing an opinion
28. produce a short, edited text
29. write a first draft
30. make a brief outline for a text
31. select and order ideas
32. develop a focusing / topic sentence for a text
33. write sentences using simple present in the active voice using the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular
34. write simple sentences using simple present in the active voice using 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular
35. write simple sentences with the time markers (first, second, next, after that, then, finally)
36. write compound sentences using cohesive markers (and, but, so)
37. write complex sentences using "because"
38. write simple sentences with the correct SVO / SVC order
39. identify basic sentence structure SVO / SVC
40. brainstorm ideas based on stimulus material.

## Appendix Two: English 1111 Writing Assignment, Semester One

Choose **ONLY** one of the following topics to write an academic essay for your writing assignment:

### **Topic One:**

According to the findings of modern psychology, there are many different types of intelligence. Investigate at least three of the types. Describe and consider their potential for education, both generally and in your own learning. Base your essay on topics discussed in class as well as your own experience and additional sources.

#### **In your essay you should:**

1. Briefly introduce the topic, referring to the study of intelligence and the issue of its different types.
2. Choose at least three types of intelligence to describe.
3. Comment on the usefulness of each and discuss their potential for education both generally and in your own learning.
4. Use different ways of gathering and presenting information (survey, diagram etc.).
5. Conclude by referring again to the issue outlined in the essay and summarising your ideas.

### **Topic Two:**

Every culture has a unique design style. Compare and contrast two different cultures e.g. Middle Eastern and European. Consider their differences in terms of architecture, jewellery and clothing ...etc. make use of your Design Coursework Book as well as a variety of additional sources such as the internet, magazines, and journals.

#### **In your essay you should:**

1. Introduce your topic. ( a general definition of design)
2. Choose and introduce the cultures of your choice.
3. Discuss the first culture's designs.
4. Discuss the second culture's designs.
5. Compare and contrast the differences between them.
6. Use different ways of presenting information such as diagrams, fact files, photos...etc.
7. Conclude by providing a personal opinion as to which culture you prefer, and briefly summarize why.

### **Topic Three:**

In the massive growing era of mass media, the world has been connected with various channels of communication such as the internet, TV, radio, telephone, press, etc. these various methods of communication have contributed significantly to facilitate the process of conveying information to the public on different scale and influenced the lifestyle in general.

In your writing assignment, choose one of those communication channels and write an academic essay describing the following:

1. Introduce briefly the area of your investigation.
2. What is the significance of this communication channel to the public compared to the rest?
3. What is impact does it leave on the public?
4. How fast and how accurate it is in conveying the information?
5. How reliable the information being communicated?
6. How does the mainstream respond to it in terms of likeability?
7. Is it a growing channel among the public these days?
8. How is the lifestyle been influenced by it?

These are few questions that can help you out in brainstorming your ideas and keep your topic focused. You can think of other points that can be pretty much relevant though.

### **Due Dates:**

Plan	Week 3	
First draft:	15 <sup>th</sup> of October 2008	The last day of week 6
Final assignment:	12 <sup>th</sup> of November 2008	The last day of week 10

**Word length:** between 500 to 800 words

### **Marks towards final grade: 15%**

You will be marked on the content of your essay, its structure, the accuracy of your English and on the correct use of referencing.

### **Sources:**

You should summarise, paraphrase or quote from at least 3 different sources. Possible sources of information are books, journals, newspapers, the Internet, television programmes, videos or DVDs. You must use at least one source that is not “on-line”.

✓	<b>Format Requirements for all drafts:</b>
	Use A4 paper
	Write or type on only one side of each page
	Use double spacing
	Leave a 4cm margin on the left-hand side of each page
	Number each page
	Include a cover page
	Underline all quotations and paraphrases
	Include an in-text reference for each quotation and paraphrase
	Put your list of references on a separate sheet at the end of your essay
	Put a word count on your cover page

When handing in your final assignment, you need to hand in the plan, the first draft (again) and the final assignment so that the teacher can assess the writing process.

## Appendix Three: English 1222 Writing Assignment, Semester Two

### **Topic:**

Year One students have to choose their major by the end of the year. Different factors affect their choice and these include interest in the subject, job prospects, positive or negative influence from the family and friends etc. what is your chosen major and what are some of the factors influencing you?

In your persuasive essay you should:

1. Briefly describe your major and say what you think your studies will involve.
2. Explain the reasons for your choice and name the sources of information that helped you make the decision, including internet sources or magazines as well as people you talked to.
3. Describe any problems you had in making your choice.
4. Have other students had the same experiences in making their choice? Interview at least two students and report their findings.
5. Include articles you have read that deal with the problems students have in deciding the subject of their studies.
6. Conclude by referring again to the issue outlined in the essay and summarising your ideas.

Due dates:

First Introduced	Week 2
First draft:	Week 6, on the 4 <sup>th</sup> of March 2009
Final assignment	Week 13, on the 22 <sup>nd</sup> of April 2009

**Word length:** 800 words

**Marks towards final grade:** 20%

You will be marked on the content of your essay, its structure, the accuracy of your English and on the correct use of referencing.

### **Sources:**

You should summarise, paraphrase or quote from at least 3 different sources. Possible sources of information are books, journals, newspapers, the Internet, television programmes, videos or DVDs. You must use at least one source that is not “on-line”.

✓	<b>Format Requirements for all drafts:</b>
	Use A4 paper
	Write or type on only one side of each page
	Use double spacing
	Leave a 4cm margin on the left-hand side of each page
	Number each page
	Include a cover page
	Underline all quotations and paraphrases
	Include an in-text reference for each quotation and paraphrase
	Put your list of references on a separate sheet at the end of your essay
	Put a word count on your cover page

When handing in your final assignment, you need to hand in the plan, the first draft (again) and the final assignment so that the teacher can assess the writing process.

## Appendix Four: Rating Scale for Assessing Writing

<b>Colleges of Applied Sciences Rating Scale for Assessing Writing</b>					
	Excellent 9-10	Good 7-8	Fair 5-6	Weak 3-4	Very Poor 0-1-2
<b>ORGANISATION</b> <b>Intro, body and Conclusion</b>	Appropriate title, effective intro paragraph, topic is stated, leads to body; conclusion logical and complete	Adequate title, intro and conclusion; body acceptable though some ideas not fully develop	Mediocre/scant intro or conclusion; problems with the order of ideas in the body	Shaky or minimally recognizable intro; organization can barely be seen; severe lack of ordering ideas; conclusion weak or illogical	Absence of intro or conclusion; no apparent organization of body
<b>CONTENT</b>	Addresses assigned topic; covers all required points/stages/info	Addresses issues but misses some points	Somewhat off the topic, lacks detail, inadequate development of topic	Ideas incomplete, little substance, major gaps or pointless repetition	Answer bears almost no relation to task. Completely inadequate
<b>GRAMMAR &amp; LANGUAGE USE</b>	Few systematic errors - none interfere with meaning; good range & control of complex structures	Systematic, minor grammar problems don't impede communication; attempts complex structures but difficulties apparent	Ideas getting through to reader but grammar problems are apparent	Lacks logical sequencing and development; major problems in simple constructions, meaning confused or obscured	Reader can't understand what writer is trying to say; virtually no mastery of sentence construction rules

**CONT: Rating Scale for Assessing Writing**

<p><b>PUNCTUATION SPELLING AND MECHANICS</b></p>	<p>Mastery of conventions; few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitilization, paragraphing</p>	<p>Occasional spelling, punctuation but meaning not obscured</p>	<p>Frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, poor handwriting, meaning confused or obscured</p>	<p>Dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing; not legible in parts</p>	<p>No mastery of writing conventions; paper illegible ;obvious capitals missing; no margins; severe spelling problems</p>
<p><b>VOCABULARY, STYLE AND QUALITY OF EXPRESSION</b></p>	<p>Precise, effective vocab usage; appropriate register</p>	<p>Attempts variety; adequate range of vocab; occasional errors of word/idiom form</p>	<p>Limited range, some vocab misused; lacks awareness of register; frequent errors obscure meaning</p>	<p>Poor expression of ideas; lacks variety of vocab and sentence structure; meaning often obscured</p>	<p>Vocab inadequate even for basic communication; no concept of register or sentence variety</p>
<p><b>PROCESS WRITING</b></p>	<p>Evidence of effective independent revision. Most sources used are integrated and cited well</p>	<p>Some evidence of independent revision. Uses teacher feedback from first draft. Using some sources well, but needs more work on referencing and citation</p>	<p>Some attention to spelling, grammar, vocab evident but parts of writing still cause confusion in final draft.</p>	<p>Little significant change to content, organization and language between first and final draft</p>	<p>No evidence of revision. No evidence of sources or mastery of conventions.</p>



## Appendix Five: Business Fundamental (BUSN1400) Mid Term Assignment

You and your friends are planning to do a business/entrepreneurial work after college- after your degree program. You are not sure what to do to make sure you succeed in your group business plans/activities:

Your task/work:

1. Ask/Have an interview with a successful business person/entrepreneur on how to do business. He/she can be a manager, supervisor, or owner of any business/company of your choice. Choose someone who has been in business for at least three years so that you will get rich, diverse, and comprehensive information or practical stories.
2. In the interview, find out how the various business environments ( technical, political, economic, business, and socio-cultural) are influencing/affecting his/her business activities and what he/she does to deal with these influences.

*Note: If there are five members in a group, each member can focus his/her interview on one aspect of the business environment.*

3. Ask what problems/challenges he/she faced in business and how he/she solved those problems/challenges.
4. Discuss his/her strategies/methods in order to remain competitive and make the business operational or sustainable.
5. You can ask other questions that you feel relevant, interesting, and useful.
6. Summarise, in your words, what your group has learned from this interview/conversation. You can also make some suggestions for improvement.
7. Include brief information (e.g., name, company, job title, location of business) about the person you interviewed, including his contact number/s.

*Reminder: Each member must contribute in the interview process and the preparation of the written report.*

**Format of Written Report:**

1. Type in A4 paper, single space; font type and size = Arial 12; margin = 1 inch for all sides
2. Include your complete name and student number in the cover page.
3. Be original. Make your own analyses. Write ideas in your own words.
4. Include any references if some ideas were taken from books, magazines, or the internet.
5. Number of pages ( excluding the cover page): between 5-10
6. Date of submission: on or before Week 8

**Evaluation of Written Report:**

- A. Depth and comprehensiveness of the interview = 5%
- B. Relevance of questions asked and report = 3%
- C. Summary and suggestions for improvement = 25

Total Marks: 10%

## Appendix Six: Business Fundamental (BUSN1400) Final Term Assignment

You have decided to go into business. One of the first things that need to do is to prepare a business plan. Your task:

1. Choose two or three of your classmates/colleagues to work with
2. Think of a specific business that you want to be involved in (such as restaurant, design shop, travel agent, bakery, IT shop, car rental... etc)
3. Make a business plan
4. Suggested format of your business plan

### **A. Executive Summary**

This should be about one page long. Describe the business in general.

### **B. Overview**

Your mission. What do you want to achieve, where are you going and why do you think it will work.

### **C. Introduction**

- Purpose- explain in detail where you want to go with this
- History- a summary of important development highlights
- Critical Success Factors-what's going to make it work?

### **D. Business Environment**

- Market- this is where your market research results go
- Problem and possible solutions
- Competitions
- Expansion Potential

### **E. Description of Product or service**

- Unique selling points
- Benefits to the customer
- Current problems and possible solutions
- Patents, Licences, copyright ...etc.
- Production

### ***Evaluation of written work***

- A. Quality of the report = 6%
- B. Feasibility of the business plan= 5%
- C. Creativity and originality= 4%

Total Marks= 15%

## Appendix Seven: Introduction to Tourism and Hospitality (TUHS 1401) Writing Assignment

### **Outline of the Assignment**

You are working in a tourism consulting company; the Ministry of Tourism in the Sultanate of Oman wants you (Oman Consulting Services) to help them formulating a proposal for developing in your area that will help to attract both overseas as well local customers who will ultimately help to boost up the economy.

### **Tasks:**

1. Research the Sultanate of Oman and your area (area of your choice) in general specifying the significance of tourism.
2. Conduct an assessment of tourism development possibilities in the selected area.
3. Draw a tourism plan for the area of your choice.
4. Explain how you will attract the tourists to this area. Specify your target market, image you wish to present to prospective tourists, marketing and promotional tools for attracting the tourists.
5. All outside material used must be fully referenced at the end of your report. Referencing begins with the author, year of publication, title, publisher, and finally the page numbers.  
If correct referencing is not given, it will be considered an act of plagiarism and an act of cheating.
6. People caught cheating will receive a grade of zero.
7. Give a 10-minute presentation of your report.

### **Submission Date:**

1. This assignment is due on Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2009 by 12.00 noon.
2. The presentation will take place throughout the next week.
3. Those not appearing for the presentation or who do not take part will receive no marks.

### **Learning Outcomes**

- To show the ability to describe and apply the concepts of Tourism, Hospitality, Management, Planning, Marketing, Research, Strategic Analysis and Critical Thinking.
- To show the ability to define, state in writing, and analyse problems using the models taught in class.

- To show the ability to gather, interpret and illustrate data and information to specific situation.
- To implement the information gathered to achieve the organisation's aims.
- To analyze critically, state and agree upon findings, reach conclusions, and generate recommendations.
- To show the ability to use correct words, construct effective sentences and tie paragraphs.
- To reflect the ability to apply a well structured coherent plan.

### **General instructions for Assignment:**

- Check spelling and ensure consistency of layout, headings, timesteps and sizes:
- Font should be Times New Roman, 12
- Assignment should be 1.5 line spacing
- Main Headings- size 16, Capital and Bold
- Sub-Headings: size 14, Underlined and Bold
- Page Margins: 1.25" on all sides
- Produce a Cover Page, which should have the College Name, department Name, and Assignment Title, your full name and ID number and instructor's name. Border the whole page.
- Add a table of contents.
- All inside pages should include your student number at the bottom left of each page and a page number on the bottom right. No header and footer should appear in the Cover Page and the Table of Contents Page.

### **Some Guidelines on Assignment Writing**

1. **Plagiarism:** Do not plagiarise – plagiarised coursework could result in a no grade being awarded for the subject.  
Work which is submitted for assessment must be your own work. You must recognise and reference any material from books, articles or website that you have incorporate into your assignment. References should be listed alphabetically by author surname at the end of the assignment as follows: Surname of author, year, Title of the book or article/Journal name, Publisher, Page reference.  
E.g. Sloman, J. (1999), Economics, Prentice Hall Europe, page 102.
2. **Structure:** Many students commence writing without planning their assignment structure; firstly plan a logical structure for your assignments and then start writing. A rough plan with clear sections, which flow from the introduction to the conclusion, should be made in order to focus your assignment on the main requirements.

3. **Readability:** If you have problems expressing yourself in writing, it is a good idea to ask a friend to read over your assignment before you hand it in. Always use spell-check. Read sections out loud to yourself to see if it sounds OK.
  
4. **Development of Argument:** Once you have investigated the topic and read up on it, you will start to form opinions on the issues involved. Make sure any arguments you put forward in your assignments are backed up with evidence of an understanding of these issue.
  
5. **Focus and Balance:** Make sure your assignments remains focused on the subject and that you devote enough time to discussion on the key points.

**Methods of Assessment:**

- This piece of work will be assessed by means of a presentation (10 minutes) and a 2000 word report.
- This assignment has a weight of 15% of your final mark for this unit.

**Assessment Guide:**

Grade	Criteria
A	An excellent answer. Shows evidence of relevant reading, illustrates and applies appropriate examples, constructs logical analysis and argument; draws to an appropriate conclusion.
B	As for A grade but lacks in comparison, either in terms of depth of argument, the appropriateness of examples, or the logic and conclusion; evidence of relevant reading must be shown.
C	Demonstrates good knowledge of some of the principles and theories involved. Limited analysis, evaluation and research.
D	Worthy of a pass but is weaker in terms of depth, logic and conclusion to the argument used; no/poor examples and illustrations; tends to be more descriptive rather than analytical; limited evidence of relevant reading.
F	Not worthy of a pass but does contain some relevant argument; tends to be descriptive.

## Appendix Eight: ELT & Subject Teachers Interview Schedule

**Note:** the first two sections of the interview schedule will be the same for all teachers in order to gather compatible data; however, the last section will differ as it aims to solicit teachers' opinions on interdisciplinary issues.

### **Section One: Demographic data**

1. What is your qualification?
2. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
3. How many years of teaching experience do you have in Oman?
4. Did you teach in another Arab country before?

### **Section Two: General Concerns**

#### **1. Students' Level in L2 Writing Practices**

- 1.1. Tell me about your students' level in academic writing.
- 1.2. How does it compare to the level of students that you had in the past?
- 1.3. How would you judge successful or unsuccessful writing?
- 1.4. Can you think of a student whose writing really impresses you? What was it about their writing that impressed you?
- 1.5. How do you think students better learn the writing demands of your class?
- 1.6. How do you address problems of students' academic writing practices?
- 1.7. Are these measures your own preferences or a departmental policy?
- 1.8. What is your sense of students' writing development in this semester?
- 1.9. How do you monitor students' progress in writing?

#### **2. Feedback to Students' Writing**

- 2.1. What is your purpose in giving feedback?
- 2.2. What sort of feedback do you usually provide to students?
- 2.3. In marking students' assignments, what do you usually look for?
- 2.4. Do you comment on everything? What are the main issues that you focus on when giving feedback?
- 2.5. Do you have any departmental policy guidelines regarding the assessment of students' writing? Are students familiar with these guidelines?

#### **3. Support for Academic Writing**

- 3.1. Can you tell me about the support that students get from the English department and the other departments to improve their academic writing
- 3.2. What sort of guidance do you provide for students to show them the rules of academic writing (explicit instruction, model essays...etc)?

- 3.3. Is there a departmental policy regarding this issue or is it your own initiative?
- 3.4. For the assignments, how do you make sure that the students understand what is expected from them?
- 3.5. What do you think students' need to improve their writing?

## **Section Two: Interdisciplinary Issues**

### **4.1. For EFL teachers**

- 4.1.1. Do you know what kinds of tasks students are asked to write in their subject courses?
- 4.1.2. How would you describe the relationship between the writing that students do in the English department and that they are asked to do in the subject courses?
- 4.1.3. Do your students ask you for help with their content/subject course assignments?
- 4.1.4. How do you feel about subject teachers referring students to you if they have problems with their academic writing? How do you deal with it?

### **4.2. For Subject Teachers**

- 4.2.1. Do you know what kinds of tasks students are asked to write in their English course?
- 4.2.2. How relevant are the writing tasks of the English course to the types of writing that the students do in your subject?
- 4.2.3. If your students have serious language problems, do you ask them to get help from their writing teacher?
- 4.2.4. Do you help them yourself? If so, how?
- 4.2.5. How best could you and your department be involved in improving students' academic writing skills?



## Appendix Nine: Head of the English Department Interview schedule

### **Section One: Demographic Data**

1. What are your qualifications?
2. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
3. How long have you worked as head of the English department?

### **Section Two: General concerns**

- Can you tell me about the English courses that the students have to take during their degree study? How many modules do they study? What sort of modules are they, i.e. general courses or ESP courses? How many contact hours?
- More specifically now about Year One, What do you think about the English course being allocated ten contact hours in Year One? Do you think that is it a justifiable decision? Is this enough to support all students? Some subject teachers say that there is a lot of focus on the English language at the expense of the discipline, how would you answer to that?
- Can you tell me more about the current format of the English module for Year One? How was it designed, why?
- What about the textbooks, who decides what textbooks to be used and what are the stages of choosing them?
- As the head of department, are you able to influence the delivery of the curriculum?
- Some subject teachers claim that the English course in its current format does not prepare students for their future specializations, how would you answer to that?
- What do you think about the writing component of the Year One course? What approach to teaching writing is used ? Is it an adequate preparation for achieving success in writing in the academic courses?
- If you had the chance, what would you like to see changed in the current English course and especially in the writing component for Year One?
- Tell me about Year One students. How do they perform in writing, What do you make of students' level in academic writing in general? How would you judge it?
- What difficulties do they have, how does the module try to address them?
- Do you think that the students finishing foundation are ready for the type of assignments that they are required to write when they start semester one?
- Who decides the topics for the assignments and how is it done?
- What feedback do you get from the Year One and the writing coordinators on teachers' and students' reactions on the topics of the assignments in semester one and in semester two?

- Can you tell me about the assessment criteria used for the writing assignments.
- How much weight is given to the writing assignment in year one?
- How much weight is given to the writing question of the final exam?
- How was the format of the final exam agreed upon?
- What support does the English department provide for the students to improve their language skills especially writing? Can you think of ways to improve students writing?
- What support does the college provide for students to develop their academic writing skills? In the college network? In the LRC?

### **Section Three: relationship with the Director of the English programme**

- How do you characterize your relationship with the programme director?
- You have assigned coordinators for each level as well as coordinators for each skill within each level, so can you tell me more about this arrangement and how does it work (i.e. what is your role in this hierarchy?) ?
- What are the duties of the writing coordinator?
- Can you describe the final exam arrangements and the marking procedures followed in the college.
- As far as you know, are these procedures standardized across the colleges?
- Are you with or against the issue of standardizing procedures and marking across the six colleges?
- In your opinion, how useful are the moderation sessions in standardizing marking within the college and across the six colleges?

### **Section Four: relation with college administration and other departments**

- Can you tell me about the relationship between the English department and the other academic departments in the college?
- Is there any collaboration work between the English department and the other departments regarding assignment topics , deadlines for students' handing-in work, exam dates... etc?
- Do they get feedback from the academic departments about student performance in writing? What do they know about the assessment requirements of the academic courses? Have they tried to link the writing assessment of the foundation to the academic courses? Do they think this is feasible?
- Do you have an idea about the sort of assignments that the students are asked to write in the subject departments? Do you get feedback from the academic departments on how their opinion on the preparation that students get from the English department before they join their specializations?
- How would you describe the relationship between the English department and the college administration?
- How would you describe the relationship between the English department and the other non-academic departments in the college?

## Appendix Ten: Director of the English Language Programme Interview Schedule

### **Section One: Demographic Data**

4. What are your qualifications?
5. Tell me about your previous practical experience
6. How long have you worked as director of the English language programme?

### **Section Two: General concerns**

- Can you tell about the job of the director of the English programme? What are the duties that you are asked to perform?
- What are the biggest challenges that you face in your job?
- How do usually communicate with the English staff in the colleges?
- In the meetings that you call with the English HoDs, do they have an input in the agenda of the meetings?
- How would you characterize your relationship with the English HoDs in the colleges?
- How are you able to influence the delivery of the curriculum?

### **Section Three: Writing in Year One**

- Can you tell me about the Year One English course?
- How was the course designed and set up? What approach to teaching writing? How was the curriculum established?
- What is your understanding of the difficulties the students on the course face with writing?
- Can you think of any ways of improving the teaching of writing
- Can you describe the stages/process of choosing textbooks for the colleges?
- How do you feel about the fact that the English course is allocated 10 contact hours in Year One? Is it a justifiable decision?
- What do you think about the current format of the English course? Is it fit for purpose? What would you like to see changed?
- Some subject teachers claim that the English course in its current format does not prepare students for their future specializations, how would you answer to that?
- What do you think about the writing component of the Year one course? Is it adequate preparation for achieving in the academic subjects?
- Do you have an idea about the general level of students' academic writing in the colleges?
- Do you think that the students finishing the foundation course are ready for the type of assignments that they are required to write in Year one?

- Who decides the topics for the assignments and how is it done?
- What feedback do you get from the English Hods on teachers' and students' reaction on the writing assignments in semester one and in semester two?
- Can you tell me about the assessment criteria used for the writing assignments.
- How much weigh is given to the assignment in year one?
- How much weigh is given to the writing section of the final exam?
- How was the format of the final exam agreed upon?
- How useful are the moderation sessions in standardizing marking of the writing question across the six colleges?

**Section Three: the relationship with other programme directors**

- Can you tell me about the relationship between you and the other programme directors
- Is there any cooperation between you and the other programme directors regarding assignment topics , deadlines for students' handing-in work, exam dates...etc?
- How easy is it to get things done in the colleges especially if it needs decision from the DG or the minister?
- Do you ever get feedback from other Directors about writing performance of students on the courses they are responsible for?

## Appendix Eleven: Students' Focus Group Interview Schedule

### **1. Students' Academic ESL writing Practices**

- 1.1. Tell me about your experience with academic writing this year.
- 1.2. What kinds of assignments are you asked to write in your English classes?
- 1.3. What kinds of assignments are you asked to write in the subject courses?
- 1.4. Do you feel that you have to write assignments in the same or different ways in English and the subject courses?
- 1.5. Can you tell me about the stages that you go through from receiving the assignments' topic until you hand in the final draft?
- 1.6. Are the stages the same for the assignments from the English department and the subject departments?

### **2. Teachers' Feedback**

- 2.1. How do your teachers provide feedback on your writing?
- 2.2. What do English teachers usually comment on when assessing your assignments?
- 2.3. What types of mistakes do your subject teachers usually focus on when giving feedback?
- 2.4. Do your subject teachers' include language aspects in the assessment of your writing?
- 2.5. After getting the marked assignment with teachers' feedback, what do you usually do?
- 2.6. How useful is your teacher's feedback in improving your writing? What else do you want to see in your teachers' feedback?

### **3. Support for Academic writing**

- 3.1. Can you tell about the support that you get from the English department, the subject departments and the college to develop your writing.
- 3.2. What sorts of resources can you find in the LRC that would help you improve your writing?
- 3.3. How are the rules of academic writing explained to you by your writing teachers? How are these rules and your subject teachers?
- 3.4. What are factors that you think help you improve your writing? What are the factors that you think hinder your writing development?

### **4. Interdisciplinary Issues**

- 4.1. Are there any clashes between the deadlines set for handing in the writing assignments from the different departments in the college?

- 4.2 If you have problems with your writing, do your subject teachers refer you to your writing instructor?
- 4.3 When you need specialised help or information in your assignments, can you ask your subject teachers for assistance?
- 4.4 Do you find the writing tasks that you do in the English course useful and relevant to you in the writing that you have to do in the subject courses?

## **5. Attitudes towards English language**

- 5.1. How do you feel about having English as the language of instruction in the College?
- 5.2. How comfortable are you in using English in your classes?
- 5.3. When do you use English outside the classroom?
- 5.4. In case of writing problems, do you think that the situation would be better if Arabic was the language of instruction?

## Appendix Twelve: Literal vs Free Translation

### Arabic Transcript:

**ط2:** أنا كانت عندي صعوبة في هذا الأساينمانت في الجرامر و السبلنج حتى المستر كاتب لي إذا أنتي ماخذة هالمعلومات من مصادر، ليش السبلنج و الجرامر خطأ؟ يعني أنا صح خذته من التلفزيون...خذته من مقابلة مع البنات لكن أنا اللي ترجمته بروحي..أساساً الموضوع هذا يعني حتى لو نختار من النت ما نحصل عنه موضوعات...يعني مستحيل يطلع لنا شسمه عن المايجور وما أعرف شو...لازم أحنا بروحنا نكتب عن أنفسنا عشان كذا كل السبلنج و هذا خطأ..حتي السكيند درافت كان فيه أغلاط عندي أكثر من الأول..بس أعتقد الجرامر و السبلنج هو اللي يضيع علينا أكثر شي

### (Literal Translation)

S2: I had a difficulty in this assignment in the grammar and the spelling even the mister wrote to me: if you took this information from sources, why the spelling and the grammar wrong? Yes, it's true I took it from the television ...took it from interview with girls but I translated it myself..basically this subject even if we choose from the net, we don't find topics..it's impossible something would appear to us about the major and I don't know what..it's a must we ourselves write about ourselves... for this all the spelling and this wrong..even the second draft had mistakes more than the first but I think the grammar and the spelling is what makes us lose

### (Free Translation)

S2: I had difficulty in the grammar and the spelling. The teacher commented: if you took this information from sources, why do you have spelling and grammar mistakes. Yes, I took the information from television and from interviews, but I did the translation myself. Even in the net, we don't find information about the assignment topic . It's impossible to find all information about our major, so we have to write it ourselves. That's why I have many spelling and grammar mistakes. I had more mistakes in the second draft than in the first, but I think we lose marks mainly because of the spelling and grammar.

## Appendix Thirteen: Research Authorisation Letter

Sultanate of Oman  
Ministry of Higher Education  
Directorate General For  
The Colleges of Applied Sciences



سلطنة عُمان  
وزارة التعليم العالي  
المديرية العامة لكليات العلوم التطبيقية

No. : .....

Date : .....

الرقم : ٤٤٤ / ١١٥ / ٨٤٤  
التاريخ :  
الموافق : ٢٠١٩

المحترم

الدكتور /  
عميد كلية العلوم التطبيقية  
السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته، وبعد

الموضوع : تسهيل مهمة الباحثة حليلة بنت صالح البدواوية

إشارة إلى ابتعاث الفاضلة / حليلة بنت صالح البدواوية لنيل درجة الدكتوراه في المملكة المتحدة، فإننا نرجو تكرمكم بتسهيل مهمة المذكورة في سبيل إنجاز متطلبات الدراسة المتمثلة في الدراسة المعنونة بـ:

**Investigating the Perceptions and Practices of Students'  
Writing at the Colleges of Applied Sciences in Oman:  
An Academic Literacies Approach**

وتتضمن مهمة الباحثة بعض المقابلات والمشاهدات والزيارات الفصلية.  
شاكرين لكم دوام تعاونكم.

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام.

الرسالة  
د. سعيد بن حمد الربيعي  
مدير عام كليات العلوم التطبيقية



سلطنة عمان، ص.ب : ٨٢ روي - الرمز البريدي : ١١٢ - هاتف : ٢٤٤٨٦٣٣٣ - فاكس : ٢٤٤٨٥٣٧٨  
Sultanate of Oman, P.O. Box : 82 Ruwi, Postal Code : 112, Tel. : 24486333, Fax : 24485378  
E-mail : colleges@omantel.net.om



## Appendix Fourteen: Teachers' Consent Form

Dear Colleague

My name is Halima Al-Badwawi. I am a PhD student at the University of Leeds, the United Kingdom. I would appreciate your participation in my research entitled:

**“The Perceptions and Practices of First Year Students’ Academic Writing in the Colleges of Applied Sciences in Oman”**. The study aims at indentifying first year students’ difficulties with academic writing in Year One and the contextual factors that influence their academic writing experience in the college.

The research involves a 45 minutes to 1 hour long interview and one classroom observation (English Teachers ONLY). Participation in the research is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the research at any point without giving any reasons. During the interview, you have the right to decline answering any question that you do not wish to answer.

The data and the information collected will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. No names will be linked to the research materials or be used in reporting the results of the research. The data collected will be used in the current research project and in future research and publications.

If you have any questions or would like further information, please do not hesitate to contact me. My phone number is 99324889, or you can send me an email to: [halima999@hotmail.com](mailto:halima999@hotmail.com).

I agree to participate in the above study as explained to me.

Name: .....

Signature: .....

## Appendix Fifteen: Students' Consent Form

Dear Student

My name is Halima Al-Badwawi. I am a PhD student at the University of Leeds, the United Kingdom. I would appreciate your participation in my research entitled:

**“The Perceptions and Practices of First Year Students’ Academic Writing in the Colleges of Applied Sciences in Oman”**. The study aims at indentifying first year students’ difficulties with academic writing in Year One and the contextual factors that influence their academic writing experience in the college.

The research involves a 45 minutes to 1 hour long group interview. Participation in the research is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the research at any point without giving any reasons. During the interview, you have the right to decline answering any question that you do not wish to answer.

The data and the information collected will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. No names will be linked to the research materials or be used in reporting the results of the research. The data collected will be used in the current research project and in future research and publications.

If you have any questions or would like further information, please do not hesitate to contact me. My phone number is 99324889, or you can send me an email to: [halima999@hotmail.com](mailto:halima999@hotmail.com).

I agree to participate in the above study as explained to me.

Name: .....

Signature: .....