

Emirati, Omani and Saudi students' Academic Literacy Socialization

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Abstract

The study investigated the academic literacy socialization of students at U.S. universities from the Gulf Region—Oman, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). International students were contacted and asked if they would participate in the project. Fifty three students responded to the survey and interview, 77% of the respondents were male and 23% were female. The results of the study found that the Gulf Coast students studying in the U.S. shared similar experiences in how they socialized academically, however, noticeable differences appeared between linguistic abilities and grammar challenges. When the students were asked if their linguistic abilities prevented them from participating in classroom discussion, the Saudi participants were the only group that said 'Never'. Likewise, when the researchers inquired about grammar challenges, an interesting dissimilarity revealed itself. The Saudi sample indicated it was very easy while the UAE participants specified that it was somewhat difficult and each group had the same percentage of respondents. Although differences between the students were observed, similarities were also revealed. For instance, all the students did not mind working academically with the opposite sex. The results of this study help in the understanding on how to help students from the Gulf Coast academically assimilate into the American educational system.

Keywords: Academic literacy, language proficiency, comparative study

1. Introduction

This research is to investigate the major factors affecting international students from the Gulf Coast, specifically Oman, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). The researcher will focus on whether or not they were successful in their western cultural adaptation leading into higher levels of English language proficiency and academic achievement: academic assimilation. International students from these countries were chosen to be the primary participants in the study because there is much to compare. Citizens of these countries differ from one another yet a broad pattern of resemblance can be expected when such differences are gathered in a foreign land in an academic context.

With the collapse of time and space, and the innovations in technology and globalization, citizens have greater mobility and access to information. In 2007, about 2.8 million international students were "mobile" that represents 1 million more than in 1999. In other words, every year there is an annual increase of 4.6 percent in the mobility of tertiary students (UNESCO, 2009). Out of the numerous populations of students, 20 percent of the internationally mobile student population is enrolled in higher education in the United States (ACE, 2009). Due to these demographic changes within the United States, researchers are interested in better understanding the dilemmas, choices, and challenges of various populations while in an academic institution.

Current literature on academic socialization within the United States context focuses on the experiences of minority students or International students; however, there is a lack of literature that examines whether the environment of the program or if the linguistic and cultural factors causes a greater effect on academic socialization. This comparison is particularly important in the context of undergraduate and graduate programs where the issue of institutional transition may be just as important or play a greater role than the linguistic and cultural background. Gulf Region students are expected to be active participants in their academic communities, and acculturate into the world of academia by building and producing academic knowledge, and social relationships. Therefore, the rigors and expectations applied to all Gulf Region students may be the triggers in the difficulties transitioning into the academic world. Furthermore the linguistic or cultural differences may only exacerbate the difficulties in academic socialization especially in literacy.

Academic literacy socialization is a process that students from one cultural and linguistic context undergo to acquire academic writing skills in another context and become legitimate participants in their academic disciplines. The process of acquiring academic competencies that account for successful performance at a U.S. university is complex and largely depends on the cultural background of the individuals in question. To better understand the similarities and differences in the academic literacy socialization process, the study explored the following questions: How does one acquire academic literacy in U.S. Universities? What kinds of social processes do 'newcomers' tend to experience during their academic socialization period? How "newcomers" from Gulf States acquire new sets of textual practices and socialize

into their discourse communities or disciplines in the context of higher education? And how the socialization processes look like?

2. Literature Review

Throughout the early history of education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), there was a general reluctance to teach English (Elyas and Picard, 2010). English was only included in the curriculum of all primary schools in KSA in 2003 and then only after considerable international pressure (Elyas, 2008a, b) and although English is generally accepted in KSA, debates still rage as to how it should be taught (Elyas and Picard, 2010). Academic reforms have, in the majority of Gulf countries, resulted in an uncritical adoption of Western (mainly American) university curricula, content and teaching practices which have not always met the needs of the learners (Mazawi, 2003). As a result, an Islamized English curriculum often ensues and thus learners experience a culture shock when studying in an American university since their English and western education is not equivalent to how the English language and western culture is in the America. Likewise, before the year 2000, Oman's educational system was not focused on academics. Bahgat (1999) wrote that Oman's male illiteracy rate was twice that of Saudi Arabia and three times as much as UAE. To help with this education shortfall more emphasis was placed on academic.

Although such learners may not possess an academic readiness and experience culture shock when traveling to the U.S. to pursue higher education, their motivation and enthusiasm to learn is deeply rooted in Arabic society. One famous Arabic proverb suggests:

من علمني حرفا صرت له عبدا

He who taught me a letter became my master

In addition, foreign knowledge and broader education is encouraged by the Prophet Mohammed who adjured his followers to search for knowledge. International graduate students have become an integral part of many major US universities and their adaptation to American academic and social cultures can be an arduous task (Gonzalez, 2004) but even with that said, international graduate students from the Gulf are actively pursuing education in America.

Kramsch (2002) proposes that language serves as a tool for gaining membership linguistically negotiated in a particular community of practice to immerse oneself into a community's beliefs, systems, social-cultural attitudes, and values. This is what participants in the study experience. International Gulf students have to immerse themselves into the American culture and diminish the culture shock that many of them face since those whose native language is not English have to negotiate their participation, struggle with gaining legitimacy, and membership in English medium academic discourse communities. Research and scholarly research in English for at least the last 25 years have indicated that effective thinking and learning are situated in students' language use, including experiences in writing, discussion, and interactive media (Langer, 2011).

According to Barnawi (2009), it can be a daunting task to academically assimilate into an academic community. The reason is that the socio-cognitive interactions complicate the enculturation in a classroom setting where there is a population of linguistically and culturally diverse students (Hirst, 2007). Consequently, the students' academic socialization and their linguistic and conceptual repertoires have been dampened since international graduate students are typically trained to use English-as-a-second-language for cognitive or academic functions within formal contexts only, but they may lack informal contact with the social use of the language in culturally appropriate manners within the American college culture (Gonzalez, 2004). Language difficulties cause a cascade of problems. For instance, informal, casually made remarks, the usage of slang and euphemisms, and a lack of English proficiency reduce the socio-academic acclimatization and non-domestic students often miss out on vital information.

The goal of present-day English education, by and large, is to develop a literate and cultured populous that has a deep knowledge of literary traditions as well as the ability to read with ease, write fluently, think deeply, and communicate effectively (Langer, 2011) and although universities offer, if not require, graduates to take one to four semesters of course work in writing, they usually do not offer courses in reading, note taking, speaking, pronunciation, working in groups, making presentations, negotiating relations with faculty and peers, specific-purpose writing, and the host of other language-related topics that might make university studies easier (Leki, 2007).

Brayfield et al., (1990) argued that students are not equally exposed to the same cultural information: therefore, they have differing levels of cultural literacy. The unequal exposure can be quite problematic and which leads to the research question of how "newcomers" from Gulf States acquire new sets of textual practices and socialize into their discourse communities or disciplines in the context of higher education. Part of the struggle for linguistic minorities entails the move towards being heard as an 'insider' in a particular context (Miller, 1999).

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate the major factors affecting international students from the Gulf Coast Regions, specifically Oman, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). The researcher will focus on whether or not they were successful in their western cultural adaptation leading into higher levels of English language proficiency and academic achievement.

This study utilized a quantitative research method. Data was collected through a survey with both closed and open ended questions and was electronically administered to 53 international students from the Gulf Coast Region. Figure 16 shows the conceptual framework for this project.

The following research questions were developed to guide the survey:

How does one acquire academic literacy in U.S. Universities?

What kinds of social processes do ‘newcomers’ tend to experience during their academic socialization period?

How do “newcomers” from Gulf States acquire new sets of textual practices and socialize into their discourse communities or disciplines in the context of higher education? How does the socialization process look like?

Gulf Region students are expected to be active participants in their academic communities, and acculturate into the world of academia by building and producing academic knowledge, and social relationships. Therefore, the rigors and expectations applied to all Gulf Region students may be the triggers in the difficulties transitioning into the academic world.

A survey was conducted through email using the Qualtrics survey system. The survey was sent to 90 Gulf region students in different U.S. Universities. The selection of the sample was based on the following: 1) all participants were native speakers of Arabic; 2) all have resided in the US for a period of no longer than seven years. The international students were from different Gulf countries UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and other countries. From the 90 individuals surveyed, 53 responses were returned. The respondents were 12 female and 41 male. Table 1 shows a demographic breakdown of the respondents by gender and country.

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents

Gender	Country				Total
	Oman	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Other	
Male	5	15	17	4	41
Female	1	4	3	4	12
Total	6	19	20	8	53

The survey consisted of 17 items that were multiple choice questions, Likert-scale questions, and demographic questions. The multiple choice questions asked the participants to choose as many of the choices given. The Likert questions are based on a 4 or 5-point scale. Aside from demographic information, the researcher asked respondents on their access to information, academic socialization, language socialization, expertise/power relations, gender, and classroom socialization. These survey items were constructed to cover themes found from the findings in the literature.

4. Results and Findings

In questioning the participants concerning their access to information, the questions pertain to who the respondents freely communicate and work with during their classes. Do they work and communicate freely with Native American students or prefer to work with students from the same region or even the same gender as themselves? The researchers also focused on expertise and power relations which can come hand in hand and are dependent usually on one another. Often, the person with greater expertise has greater power over another.

Therefore, expertise and power relations were examined through two measures; one is with knowledge, and the other, on explicit, socially constructed hierarchical systems. Knowledge test items deal with the ideas of expertise. The researcher focuses on the perception respondents have concerning some factors: lack of academic knowledge or having cultural knowledge, and professors’ perception of student. When asked how comfortable they were in discussing their challenges with their professors, 60% of the participants selected “very comfortable” or “comfortable”. However, 40 % of the participants were uncomfortable in sharing their difficulties with their professors.

The academic socialization period was also studied. Questions related to classroom socialization asked students about their comfort level and their expectations with class work. Specifically, in this study, the researcher examined whether there were specific target populations or their loyalty to a membership group that affected their decision making on who they work with in classroom activities. A Likert-scale question was asked to obtain information on classroom socialization. In terms of comfort level of working with students, the majority of the Gulf region students felt much more comfortable working with students from the same region. 25% of the respondents emphasized that the students’ region was not a factor in choosing which type of students they preferred to work with. Only 4 students expressed their uncomfortable feelings with communicating with the same regional peers, as shown in Table 2, Figures 1, 2, and 3 below.

Table 2. Comfort level working with Students from the Same Region

Question: I feel _____ working with students from the same region I am from?

Answer Choices	Response	Percentage
Very Comfortable	11	21%
Comfortable	19	36%
Less comfortable	6	11%
Uncomfortable	4	8%
It does not matter	13	25%
Total	53	100%

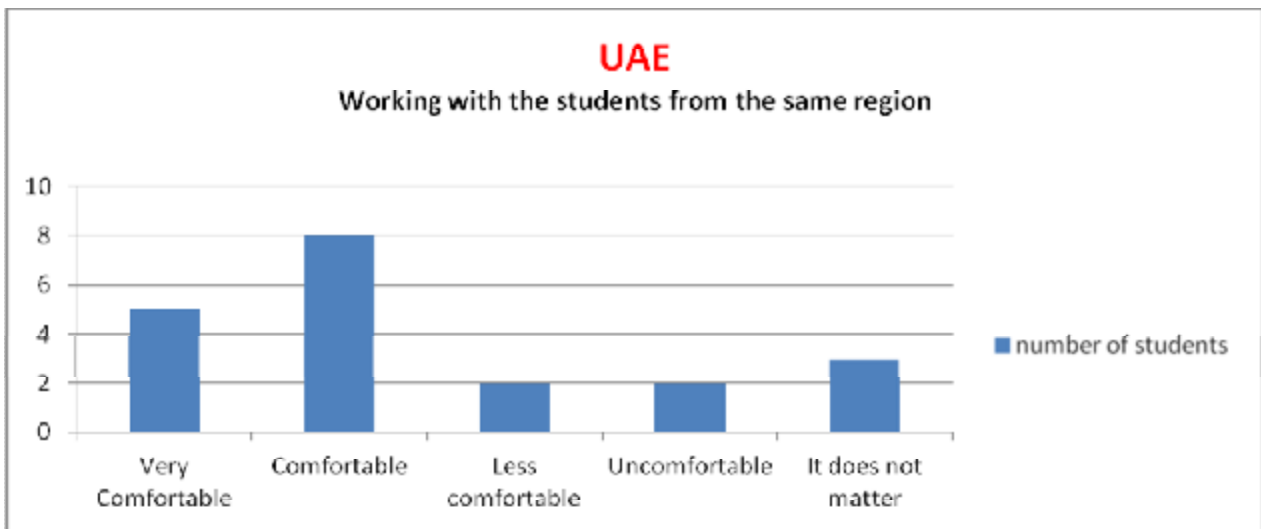


Figure1. Working with students from the same region- Emirati students

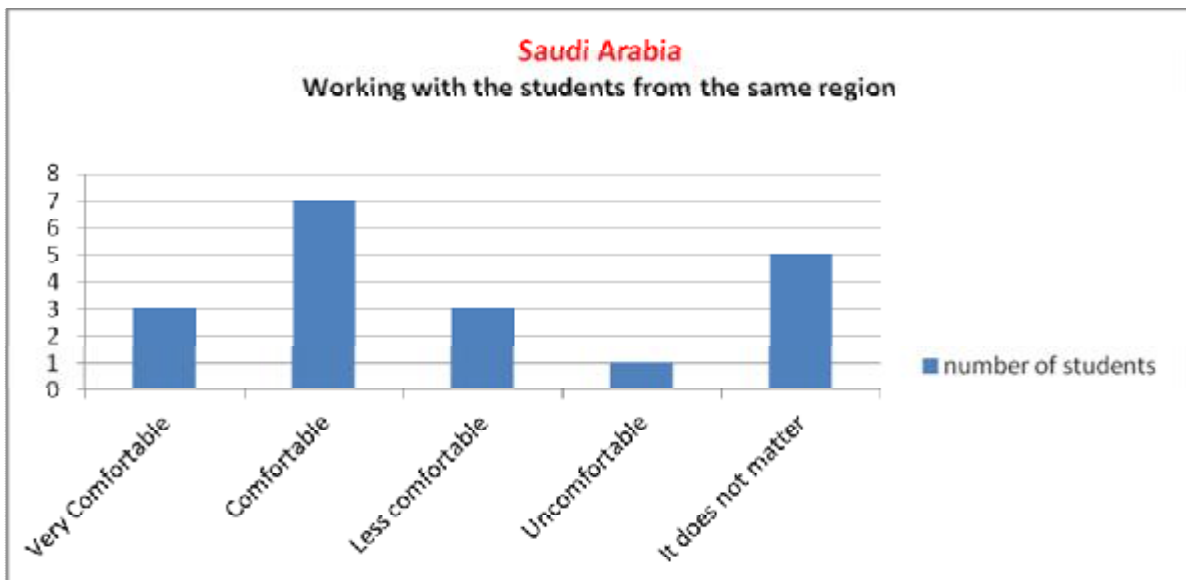


Figure 2. Working with the students from the same region- Saudi students

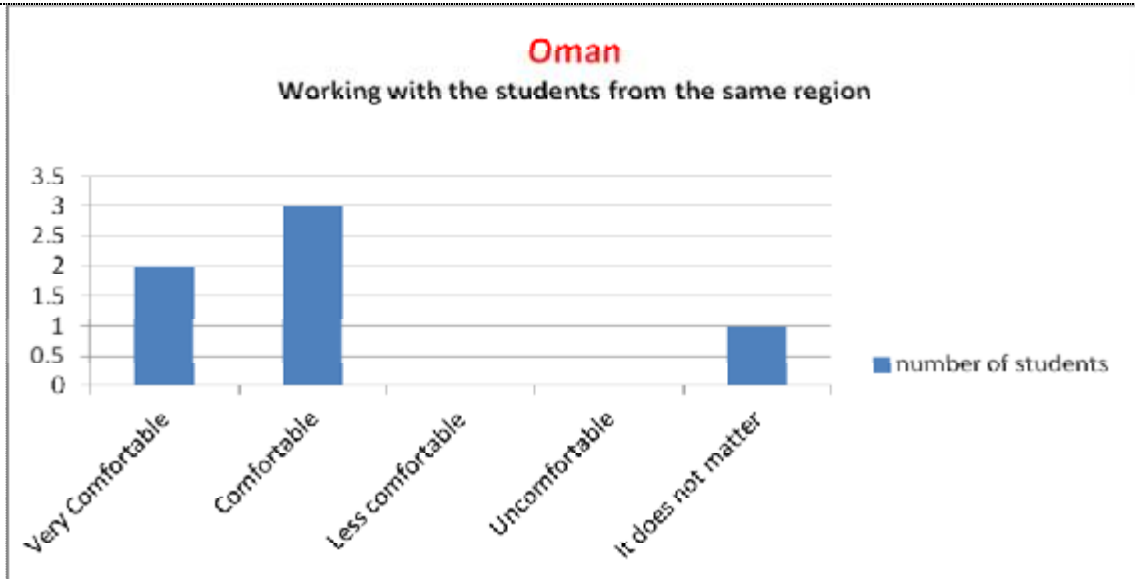


Figure 3. Working with the students from the same region- Omani students

Other Likert-scale questions were asked to obtain information on classroom socialization. In terms of comfort level in participating in classroom activities such as the large and small group discussions, the results show that not one of the Gulf region students chose the option “comfortable” to indicate their level of comfort in participating in a large or small group discussion. This implies that Gulf region students’ perception of spontaneous speech was a challenge in classroom activities. However, the majority of students implied that participation in small or large group discussion was not an issue; the issue was their comfort level (See Figures 4, 5,6,7,8 and 9 below)

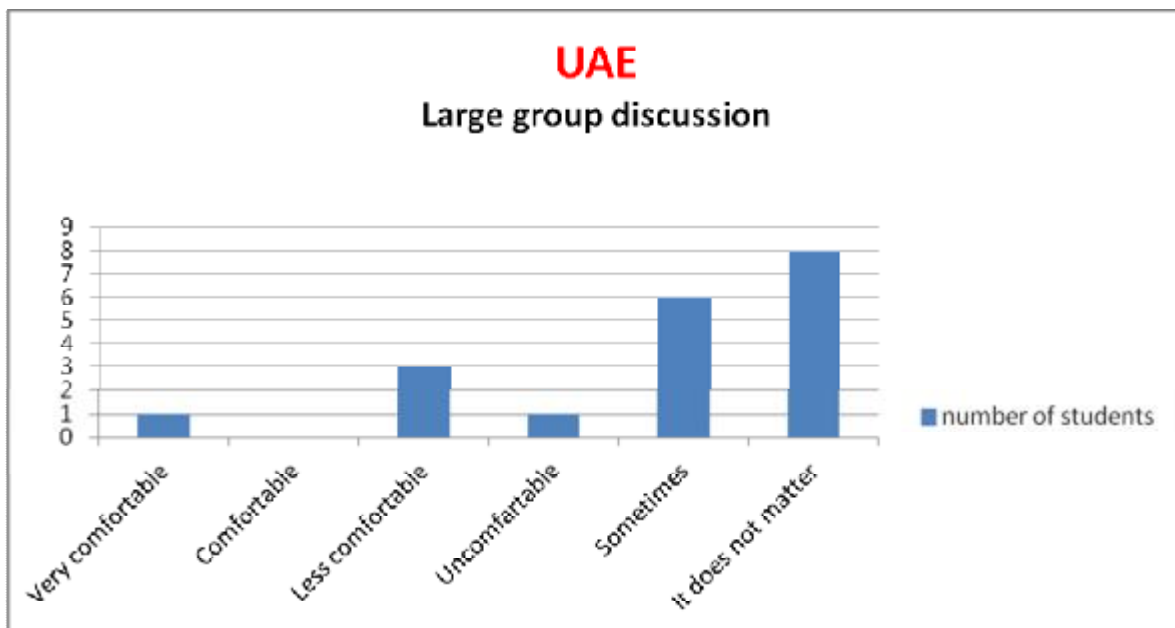


Figure 4. Large group discussion- Emirati students

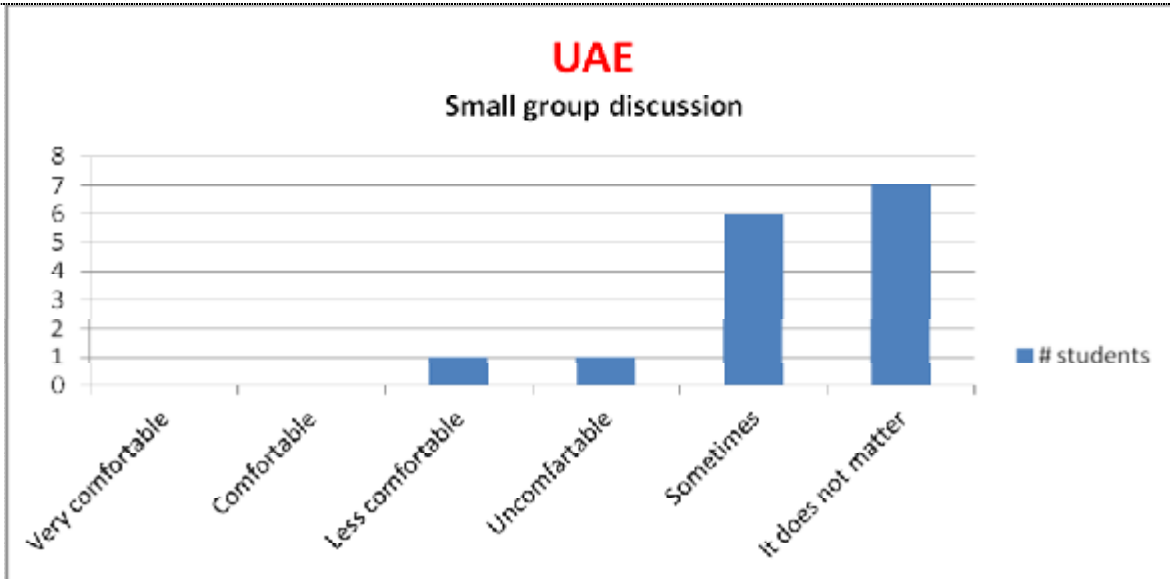


Figure 5. Small group discussion- Emirati students

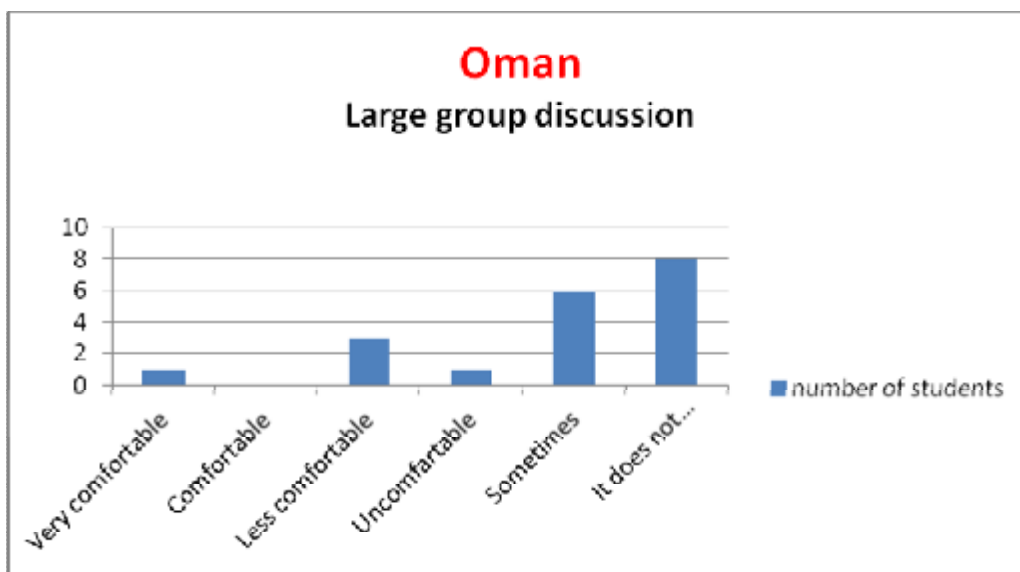


Figure 6. Large group discussion- Omani students

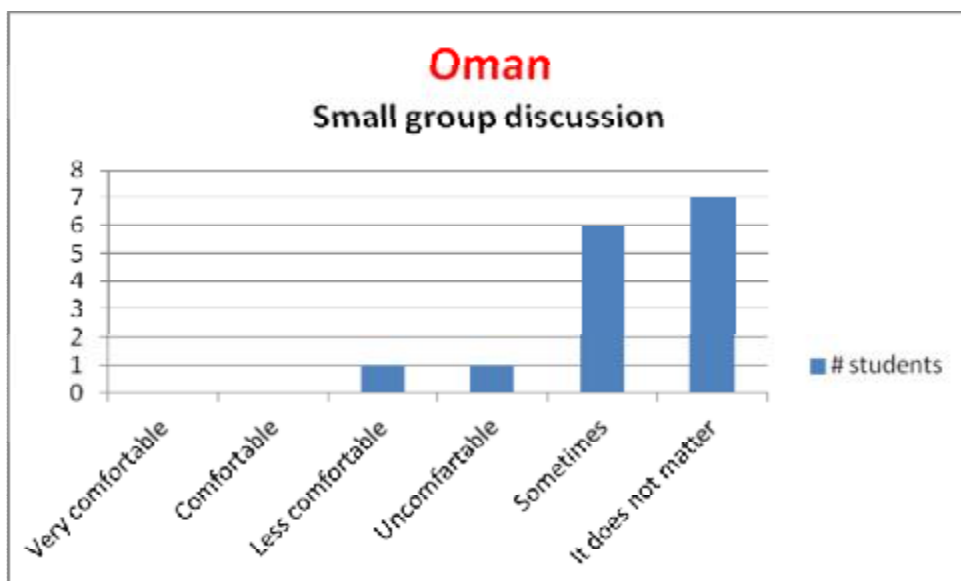


Figure 7. Small group discussion- Omani students

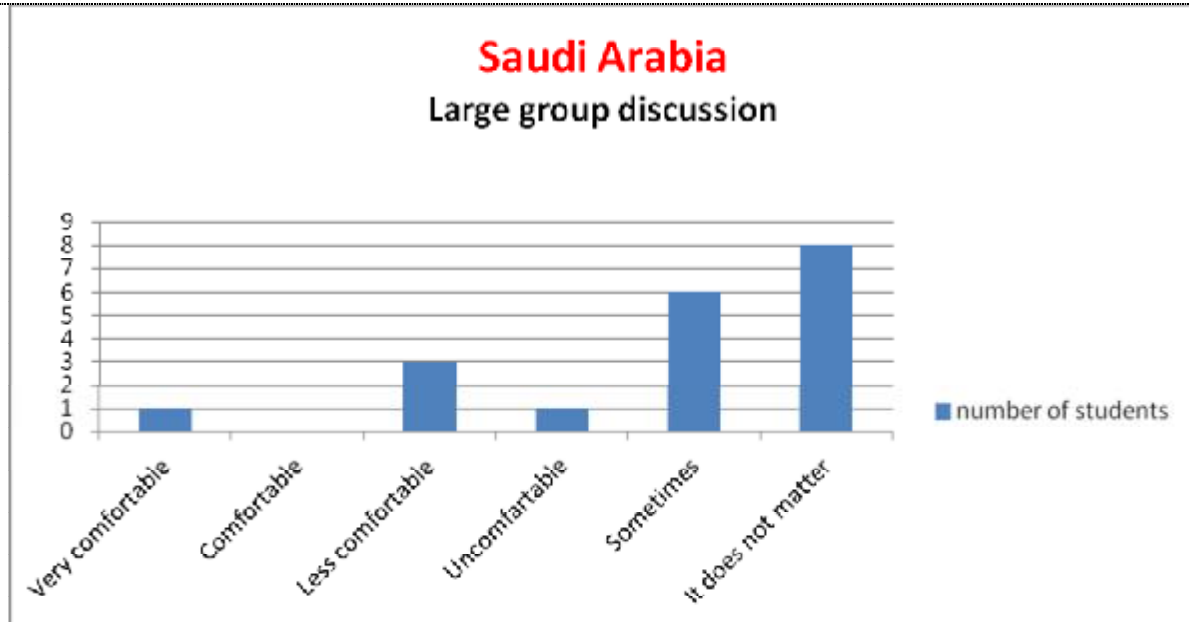


Figure 8. Large group discussion- Saudi students

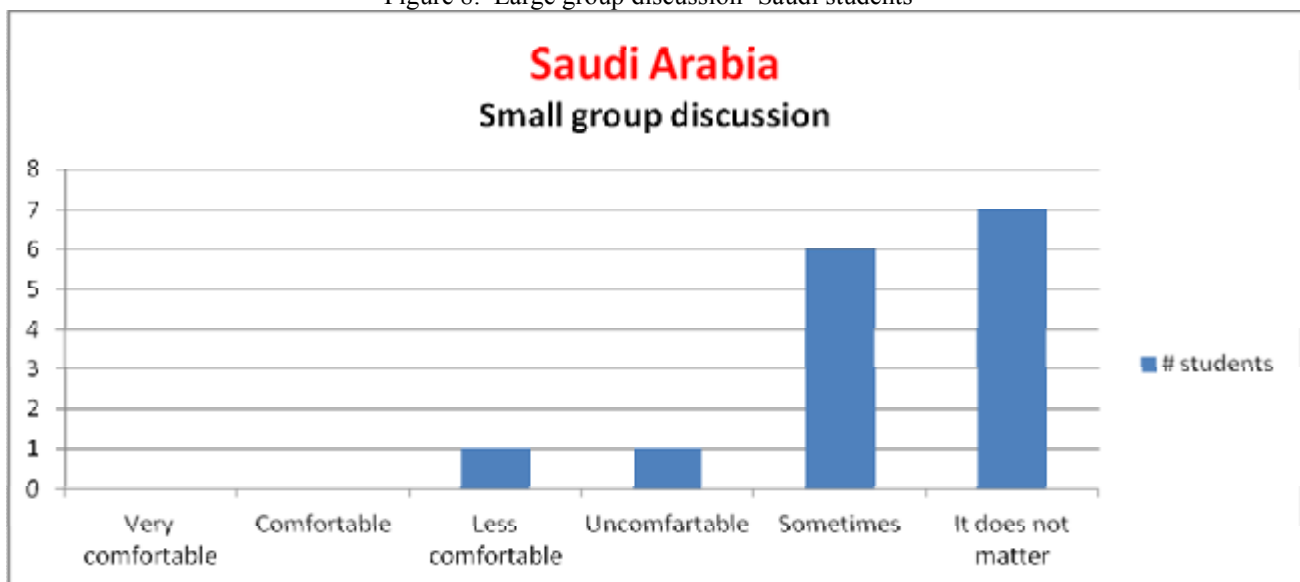


Figure 9. Small group discussion- Saudi students

Community or discipline socialization was also targeted in this study. Using the survey items, the researchers attempted to investigate the effects of language proficiency in the students' participation in classroom discussion and their socialization process in general. Gulf region students from UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman did not see language proficiency as a deterrent in classroom participation (See Figure 10). Since language proficiency did not hinder the student's academic socialization, the investigation studied the participants' writing challenges.

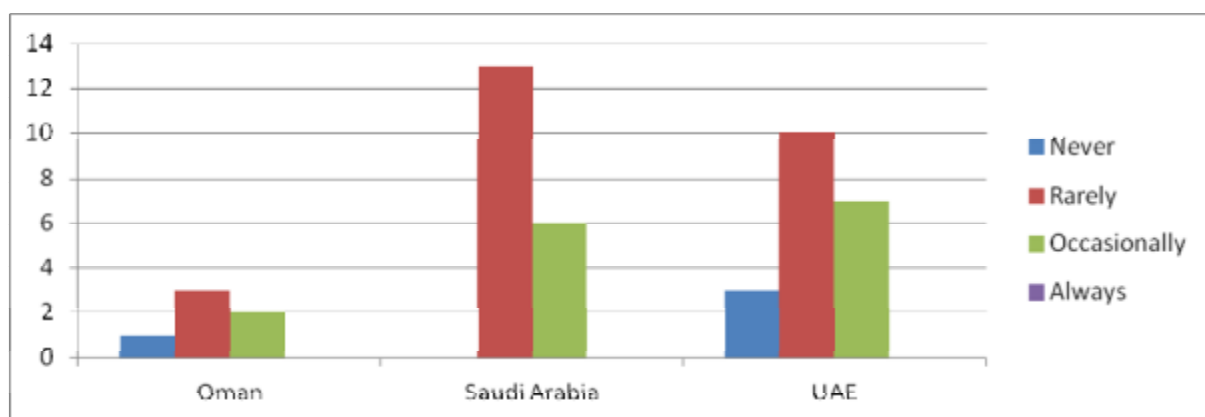


Figure 10. The effect of Linguistics Abilities on participation in classroom
Question: In class, my linguistic abilities prevent me from participating in classroom discussion.

Regarding the emphasis and challenge in relation to the English writing styles, concepts, theories, grammar, word choice, sentence construction and organization, and their level of difficulty, it was revealed that the majority of students

focused on both writing style and the content. Only one student from UAE emphasized the importance of content in the writing and half of the Saudi Arabia students indicated the importance of content (See Figure 11).

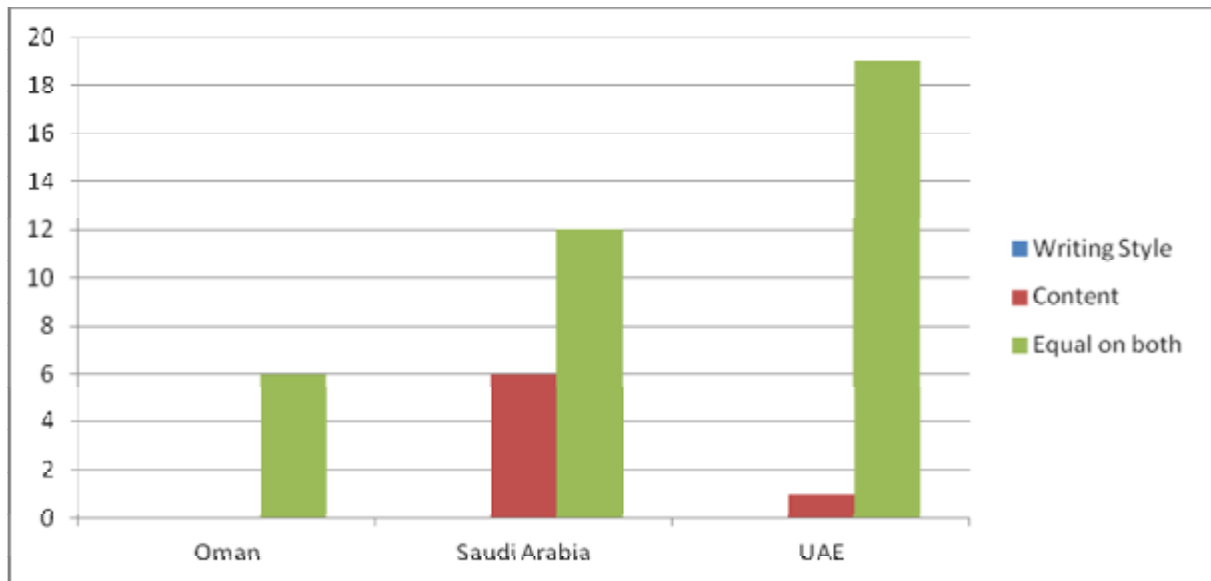


Figure 11. Writing emphasis
Question: Where do you put your emphasis in your writing?

In short, 7 UAE students indicated that grammar was difficult; however, the same number of students from Saudi Arabia emphasized the ease of using English grammar. Similarly, Omani students emphasized that grammar was not an issue when completing school assignments in English (See Figure 12). The researcher assumed that the UAE students’ perceived grammar as a challenge because they used to learn English by memorizing grammar. The teachers in the UAE schools and universities used to focus on grammar using the grammar translation method in teaching English.

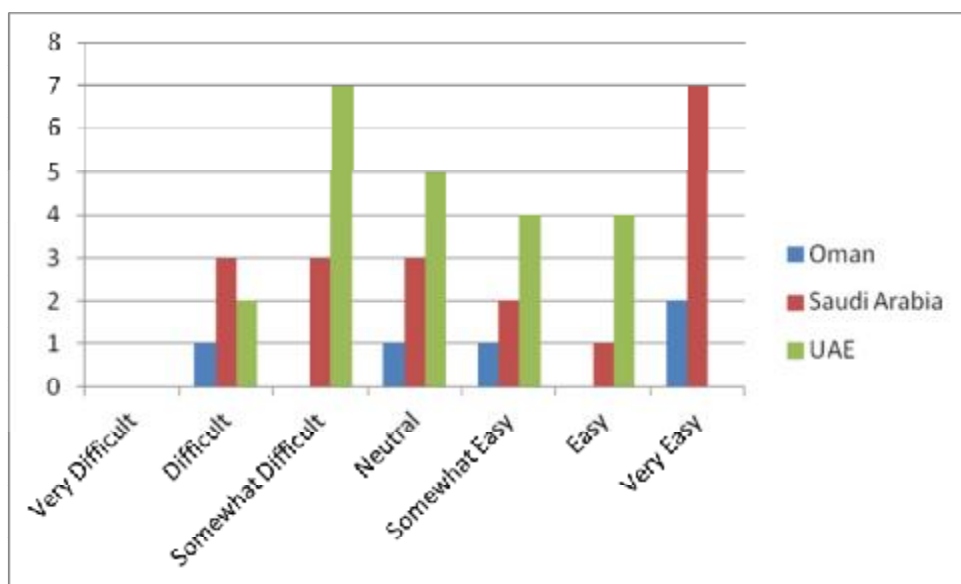


Figure 12. Grammar
Question: To what extent the grammar is difficult in your writing process?

Regarding the sentence construction challenge in writing papers, the majority of UAE students indicated that the level of difficulty in terms of sentence construction was not challenging or difficult but rather neutral and most the Saudi Arabia students emphasized that it was somewhat easy while Omani students mentioned that sentence construction was very easy (see Figure 13). The assumption here to draw is that the Gulf region students have learnt the basics of English language such as the sentence construction for many years over and over so, if the researcher asks any student from the Gulf region about the sentence construction, he/she will immediately give us a right response but, he/she might not produce it accurately in their utterances. Gulf region students went through traditional methodologies of teaching English especially in public schools which based on teaching grammar with memorization without understanding the functions and use of grammatical points.

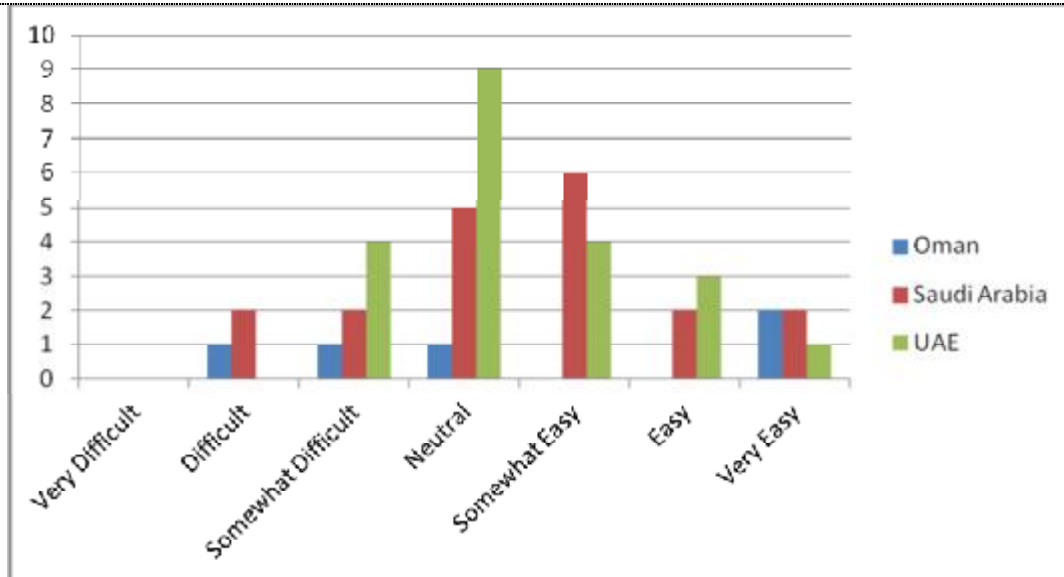


Figure 13. Sentence construction

Question: To what extent the sentence construction is difficult in your writing process?

Furthermore, most of the Gulf region students indicated the level of difficulty in the vocabulary choice as neutral. The majority of UAE students specified that word choice was somewhat difficult; however, Saudi Arabia and Omani students indicated the easiness of word choice (See Figure 14). The grammar, sentence construction, and vocabulary areas in the investigation revealed dissimilar notions of how the sampled groups linguistically and mentally portrayed their levels of difficulties and comfortableness.

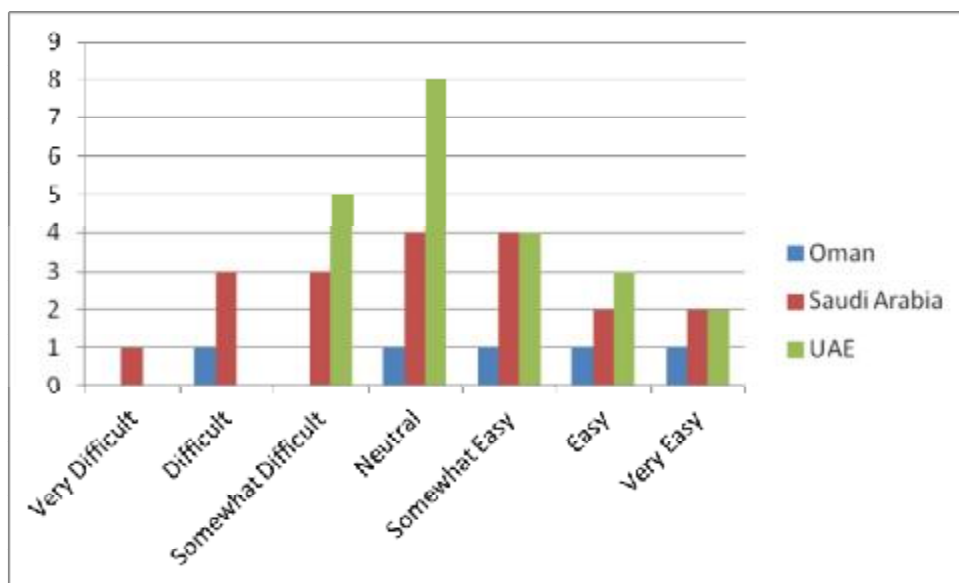


Figure 14. Word choice

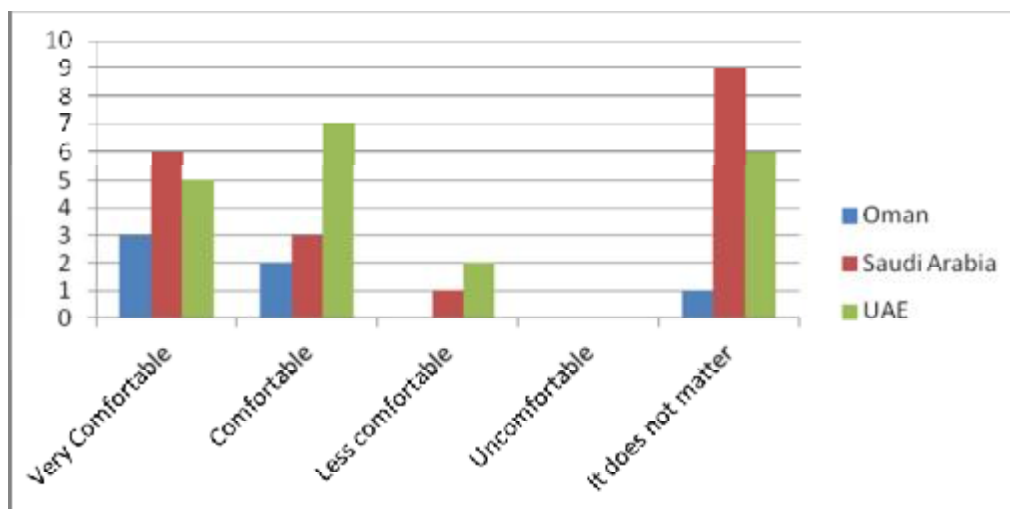
Question: To what extent the word choice is difficult in your writing process?

As table 3 and Figure 15 indicate, when the sample was questioned about gender, the majority said that the gender did not matter. It is important to note that only Saudi Arabian and UAE students were less comfortable while Omani participants were very comfortable working with the same gender. Results from survey item asking for the perception of the Gulf region students' preference and their comfort level on working with the same gender, the results indicated that the majority of Saudi Arabia students' perceptions were not different towards gender preference. The UAE students indicated their comfort with working with the same gender. Similarly, Omani students indicated that working with the same gender was more preferable.

Table 3. Comfort level working with the Same Gender

Question: I feel most comfortable working with the same gender?

Answer	Response	Percentage
Very Comfortable	15	28%
Comfortable	13	25%
Less comfortable	5	9%
Uncomfortable	0	0%
It does not matter	20	38%
Total	53	100%

Figure 15. Working with the same gender
Question: I feel most comfortable working with the same gender?

5. Conclusion

Through quantitative analysis, this study found that the students from the Gulf States of Oman, Saudi Arabia and UAE had similarities in their academic literacy, socialization, and assimilation in the U.S. academic context. The sampled participants were very comfortable or comfortable working academically with students from the same region or working with students of the same gender. It is important to note that none of sample groups felt uncomfortable working with students of the same gender. Other similar findings were the large and small group discussion results. The sample did not highlight feeling comfortable working in small group discussions and occasionally felt their linguistic abilities prohibited them from fully participating in class activities. Another similarity between participants was their writing styles. They all emphasized that content and writing style was equally important when writing an assignment.

Although there were more similarities between the sample groups, a few differences emerged from the investigation. For instance, when questioned about if grammar is difficult in their writing process the respondents were split. A large majority either answered that grammar was very easy or very difficult. Another area where respondents showed dissimilar answers is their word choice. When asked to what extend the word choice is difficult in their writing process, the answers were split across the board. Some felt the word choice was very easy or difficult. Overall, respondents shared similar responses when it came to acquiring their linguistic abilities and academic socialization and although some dissimilar responses were found, there is not a high enough percentage of different responses to indicate that the sample groups are very different from each other.

In writing this report, it was found that conducting a small focus group of the respondents would have been beneficial. This would have allowed the researchers to ask clarifying and follow up questions. In addition to the focus group, another limitation of the survey was the design of the Likert-scales. In the majority of the Likert-scale questions and answers, the participants highlighted neutral. If neutral was removed, respondents would have had to make a judgment instead of picking the middle ground. It can be assumed that this skewed the results and if neutral was removed from the answer choices, the findings would have been more significant. Future efforts will be concentrated on increasing the sample size and validating the results of this research.

The data collected can only adequately speak on the difference between Gulf region students who are from UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman concerning their experiences on academic socialization, especially in literacy. However, this study

can act as a platform for future research. For example, researchers can potentially look at the Gulf region student's educational background in their native countries which could influence their transition to the new academic community or discipline in the USA. Another angle that can be used is to further examine the impact of the student's different disciplines in their academic literacy socialization. Lastly, researchers can also study the effect of mentoring process on the Gulf region student's success in their Academic disciplines.

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