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

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Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

English-medium instruction in Lebanon dates back to the 19th century with the establishment of missionary schools and universities. In the period of the French colonization (1920-1943) and after independence, English continued to penetrate, permeate and expand in the Lebanese educational system and is currently taught as a second or third language in all public and private schools in Lebanon. In addition to the historical roots, the major factors that led to the dominance of foreign languages in education are the weakness of the Lebanese state
intervention in the educational system coupled with the freedom of education that is granted by the Lebanese constitution. This policy has given freedom to the private sector to lead in the promotion of foreign languages in education. 25 out of the 28 new private universities that mushroomed after the civil war (1990-till now) have adopted English as a medium of instruction. In addition, French is increasingly being replaced by English in both secondary schools and tertiary education.

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

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

Transfer of L2 writing

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

From the students’ point of view, it is argued that students’ receptiveness to learning is influenced strongly by what they perceive to be important (Leki & Carson, 1994). Consequently, emphasis on effectual communication skill in all courses outside of the communication courses themselves could lead to the nurturing of these skills by emphasizing the importance of the communication skills. Bahous and Nabhani (2011) report that students,
in a context very similar to the context of this research and also located in Lebanon, are not motivated to enhance their writing skill in their L2 (English), because of unclear links between the skills learned in their English courses and their major courses as well as to their future careers. Some research also reports that students claim that if they knew the way of thinking in their discipline before they were required to write in the discipline, they would be more confident in their ability to do so (Hunter, 2013). The students in Hunter’s (2013) study, who are native speakers of English, realized that to think of writing as separate from their discipline was to create a “false dichotomy” (p. 102). The link between the way of thinking and how one should express that thinking in writing needed to be made explicit.

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

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

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

The emergence of cultural studies programs initially was to question and challenge disciplinary borders, connect teaching and learning with form and content (Giroux, 1993). Giroux (1993) even says one of the initial issues that served to direct the advent of cultural studies programs was “the refusal to accept the limitations of established academic boundaries and power structures” (p.15). In other words, a primary goal of these programs is to empower students to learn and to acquire necessary skills. In an L2 environment, such skills include acquiring cultural and critical literacy in the L2 including the ability to communicate complex ideas in the target language in writing as well as to critically question and think beyond everyday assumptions.
As a “peripheral” English speaking country (Cangaragah, 2002), Lebanon belongs to the “outer circle” of English (Nicolas & Annous, 2013). In such a context, the Lebanese private universities often uncritically replicate and benchmark the American system of education in order to promote their programs. The university at the center of this inquiry could be such an example. In light of this, our paper investigates the views and perceptions of students and content teachers in the University of Balamand, a Lebanese English-medium private university, regarding the transfer of English communication skills to the cultural studies courses.

Context of the study

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

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

Methodology

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

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

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

Data analysis

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

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

Findings

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Primary finding 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The methodology of the cultural studies courses does not promote skill/literacy enhancement, explicitly or implicitly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Inconsistent and ineffective group work”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Lack of research designed activities”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Use of L1 in class”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Uneven or ineffectual feedback given to students”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Primary finding 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Neither students nor teachers believe these courses serve to nurture English language skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Instructor’s academic role”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Purpose of CS is not language skill acquisition”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Purpose of the courses is to develop critical thinking”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Content courses/content coverage as the primary ILO”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

**Primary finding 3**

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

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

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

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

**Discussion**

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

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

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

“In small groups they could take the discussion anywhere. I want the discussion to be purposeful.” P3
“Rarely use group work because there is a lot of material to cover – lecture and class discussion.” P1
“No group work-sometimes discussion but not always.” P4
“All lecture and discussion.” P5
“Sometimes group work and they prepare 6-8 questions in pairs or groups of three.” P6
“What happens in class depends on the “doctor” if there is group work or lecture.” FG
Cooperative learning strategies can serve to engage students in the class. Student to student interaction has long been a tenet of the liberal arts and a catalyst for the development of “intellectual arts and habits of mind” (Seifert, Goodman, Lindsay, Jorgensen, Wolniak, Pascarella, & Blaich, 2008, p.110). The data reveal that in these required courses, students do not always feel engaged in the content as expressed below:

“How interesting the course is really depends on who’s teaching it.” FG
“I like the discussions; I feel the discussions are the most important part.” FG

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

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

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

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

“Arabic is allowed in group work but they must present in English.” P6
“When they do [speak in Arabic] I ask them to say it in English. Their English translation is not usually accurate. They have more depth in their Arabic.” P4
“Sometimes I will give an Arabic word if I want to be sure they understand an English word.” P7

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

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

Methodological strategies for skill development would importantly include the use of feedback on student production. However, the students reported that they did not receive any useful feedback. There was an unbalanced response from the professors concerning feedback, which, along with the data from the focus group, gave rise to the theme of “uneven or ineffectual feedback given to students”. Students even claimed that they would be given their exams to look over for five minutes or so and then have to return them to the instructors without understanding why they lost points. The following excerpts/data strands point to that:
“I tried to do what the teacher wanted me to on the next exam but I got the same grade.” FG
“We don’t know how grades are arrived at and how we can improve.” FG
“Some professors just want length so you can write a recipe in the middle of your answer and they’ll never know since they don’t read closely anyway.” FG
“Instructors are interested in content; how much we know. They should ask us direct questions and we give direct answers (not require essay answers on exams).” FG
“I give feedback on speech and writing.” P2
“I offer feedback on short assignments and presentations.” P3
“Why do I have to worry about their English skills? Do I have to become an English teacher?” P1
“I will underline language errors.” P4
“I have a reputation for pointing out mistakes.” P5
“I give group feedback after the first exam and then I mark the language pretty extensively.” P7

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

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

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

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

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

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

“... after all this is CS and not English.” P7
“We can’t become English teachers!” P1
“I know it’s not an English class and I respect that some concepts are difficult for them so
allow the Arabic when discussing with each other.” P6
“Writing on midterm and final is more than enough. It’s not English class” P8
“… communication skills need to be learned in high school; they can’t be learned in the short time at university.” FG
“… it’s not CS instructors’ job to teach us English.” FG

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

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

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

“We are interested in educating them in opinions and ideas and history.” P7
“Critical thinking is the absolute objective.” P5.
“Critical thinking is an ILO and is measured by how they engage with the text.” P6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The students in the focus group claimed that the Lebanese do not read and those in the group that said they enjoyed reading said they began reading in university once they became a bit passionate about something. This claim corroborates research that reports that students in EFL contexts change their notions of their reading in L2 for the positive when they begin reading academic, content-based material (Ohata & Fukao, 2014). The focus group students claimed that throughout their high school years they were not required or encouraged to read.
Their comments support a widely held belief that this particular culture does not value or promote reading neither as a leisurely pastime nor as a means to knowledge acquisition.

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

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

“I even wonder if they understand the text we ask them to read.” P5
“The texts are very complex (philosophical) and someone like Nietzsche requires you to read between the lines and they can’t do that.” P3
“We should have students read less of these difficult texts and them more interesting, short texts.” P2
“Some admit to not reading the assignments because they are too difficult and resort to Spark Notes.” FG
“These are not major courses so we can’t give the readings as much time as they need.” FG

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

Conclusion

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

Top-down attempts to incorporate writing across the curriculum strategies are doomed to failure particularly in contexts that have inbuilt resistance. The context of this study subscribes to a traditional tertiary format that strengthens subject disciplines’ territorial borders (Annous & Nicolas, 2015). Clughen and Connell (2012) suggest that in such resistant heavy
contexts creative approaches be developed that respect discipline specificities rather than “import ready-made initiatives” (p. 343). In this context in particular, as King (2002) warns, the reasons behind adopting an EMI model need to be made clear and explicit. The uncritical adoption of the model for the prestige factor discussed above can create a chaotic pedagogical situation that impedes rather than facilitates the ultimate intended student outcomes.

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

**Recommendations**

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

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

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


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