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Ethnographic Conversations: A Pedagogical Strategy to Promote Language, Content, and Intercultural Learning among Japanese and American University Students

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Biodata

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Abstract

Two sociologists and an Applied English professor developed an educational activity, coined ethnographic conversations, as a collaborative pedagogical strategy to enhance language, content, and intercultural learning. Japanese and American undergraduate students, matched as partners, scheduled four out-of-class meetings during which they discussed topics under study in their respective sociology courses. Similar to conversation partner programs employed by some EFL educators, this exercise had students dialogue in English as they exchanged cultural information about values, community, religion, and families. It also included the more rigorous practices associated with ethnographic interviews that involved the systematic questioning of their conversation partners and gathering of data, recorded as fieldnotes, for later sociological analysis in a reflection paper. In their dual roles as cultural informant and researcher, Japanese and American students shared their knowledge and experiences grounded in their upbringing in their native countries. One of the sociologists describes the conceptualization, implementation, and evaluation process that led us to conclude that ethnographic conversations represent a viable

educational method for promoting language, content, and intercultural learning among EFL students participating in a ten-month study abroad program in the United States.

Keywords: teaching methods, intercultural learning, content area teaching, second language learning, content and language integrated learning, collaborative education

Introduction

How can we provide EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students with meaningful and authentic intercultural experiences that also integrate language and content? Some educators, in response to this question, have adopted a communicative approach (Liaw, 2007) in which students use English to acquire knowledge of content and culture, thereby enhancing their understanding of the unfamiliar (LeSourd, 1992). Inspired by Angene Wilson's work (1979, 1982, 1993), we, a sociologist and Applied English professor, collaborated with one of our colleagues in the design of a project that combines elements of conversation partner, ethnographic interview, and experiential learning activities to engage Japanese and American university students in an authentic dialogue of cultures (Su, 2008), or what we refer to as an ethnographic conversation. To situate our efforts in their larger educational and social contexts, I, the sociologist, present a profile of the program in which Japanese students enrolled followed by a description of curricular goals, rationale for this educational exercise, implementation process, student and faculty evaluations, and suggestions for future improvements.

Program Profile

Approximately 100 Japanese EFL students travel to the United States annually to take part in a ten-month American Studies Program at Tokyo International University of America (TIUA). Established in 1989 through a partnership between Tokyo International University (TIU) in Kawagoe, Japan and Willamette University (WU) in Salem, Oregon, TIUA (located on the WU campus) offers Japanese sophomores and juniors a chance to pursue academic goals, increase intercultural awareness, and explore personal values and interests. In addition, students typically live with American roommates and participate with them and other American friends in the numerous residential, club, and recreational events sponsored by the WU Offices of Residence

Life and Student Activities. By immersing themselves in WU curricular and co-curricular programs, it is hoped that TIUA students make progress toward becoming internationally-minded, global citizens as envisioned by TIU founding father Taizo Kaneko.

The TIUA academic course calendar begins when Japanese students arrive in February with a 12 week intensive language and culture session under the supervision of Applied English faculty. During the six week summer session and fifteen week fall semester, students enroll concurrently in linked content and Applied English courses that complement each other through the development of mutually coordinated assignments (Snow & Brinton, 1988). Content courses, taught by WU professors, introduce students to a wide variety of subject areas such as American History, American Politics, Introduction to Linguistics, and Volunteerism.

American Society and its related Applied English course are one such pairing available during fall semester for interested TIUA students. Always keen to experiment with new pedagogical ideas, we, the sociologist and Applied English professor, were attracted to two strategies recommended by Wilson (1982, 1993): conversation partners as a way to expose students to on-campus intercultural experiences (Wilson, 1993) and cross-cultural experiential learning as a means to further global education (Wilson, 1982). We were also intrigued by the use of ethnographic interviews as an educational technique for students to practice English, apply content knowledge, and heighten intercultural awareness (Bateman, 2002; Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996; Su, 2008). In contemplating how to incorporate these ideas into our own curricula, we elected to design an activity whereby TIUA and WU students carried on ethnographic conversations that promoted dialogue, not one-way interviewing, so that both groups, through authentic talk in English, could systematically gather cultural information experientially for later sociological analysis. What follows is a more detailed account of our course goals.

Collegial Relationship and Language, Content, and Intercultural Curricular Goals

We, the sociologist and Applied English professor, have a long-standing partnership that extends over a 20 year period of time. Since our first meeting in 1990, we have taught together on at least 12 occasions and have forged close working ties that could be characterized as collaborative interdisciplinary team teaching (Stewart, Sagliano, & Sagliano, 2000) or creative co-construction

(Davison, 2006). In other words, we not only bring our expertise to course planning, teaching, and assessment, but we share responsibilities in content and language instruction (Stewart, Sagliano, & Sagliano, 2000). We have, as Davison (2006) describes, an agreed upon arrangement where teamwork has become normalized, roles have become interchangeable up to a certain point, achievements occur across the whole curriculum, and professional development has become an integral part of what we do. Given the nature of our collegial relationship, we brainstorm together how to achieve our main curricular goals that centered on TIUA students' acquisition of: language, content, and intercultural understanding.

In addressing the first two goals, we align ourselves with that group of educators who favor the integration of language and content (Blanton, 1992; Brumen, 1998; Chamot & O'Malley, 1987; Coyle, 2007; Crandall, 1993; Dong, 2002; Gibbons, 2003; Snow, 1998; Snow & Brinton, 1988; Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989; Swain, 2001). Whether we are talking about Content-based Language Instruction (Brumen, 1998; Snow, 1998), Whole Language Models (Blanton, 1992), Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987), Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Huang, 2004) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (Coyle, 2007; Gajo, 2007), we assume that a second language should not be taught in isolation or for its own sake (Blanton, 1992; Stewart, Sagliano, & Sagliano, 2000), but is best practiced in conjunction with authentic content (Snow & Brinton, 1988). Also, an integrated approach situated in a particular sociocultural context (Brooks, 1992; Nguyen & Kellogg, 2010) that draws upon students' background knowledge and experiences (Dong, 2002; Hansen-Thomas, 2008) potentially increases motivation to learn, inspires greater interest in academic success, creates opportunities for meaningful interaction, and facilitates the expression of ideas in English (Blanton, 1992). With such obvious advantages, we, in realizing these two key curricular goals, find coordination essential in determining how language and content will be incorporated into both courses.

Enhanced intercultural understanding represents our third goal. While Byram (1997, 2000) stresses the importance of intercultural competence in language learning, our objective is far more modest. Basically, we aim to expand students' comprehension of another culture's values, behaviors, and communication patterns while simultaneously raising awareness of their own (Bredella, 2003; Kaikkonen, 1997). Intercultural projects (Liaw, 2007) and cross-cultural

experiential exercises (Wilson, 1982) provide vehicles for the achievement of this goal as they depend upon a communicative approach in which language speakers gain insights into the target culture and their own culture through informational exchange (LeSourd, 1992; Liaw, 2007). Thus, they decenter themselves from existing communities and cultural mindsets (Scarino, 2008) as they extend knowledge obtained from textbooks, lectures, and other in-class activities to firsthand, person-to-person immersion experiences that make intercultural understanding possible (Cushner, 2007; Kramersch, 1983).

In the end, we advocate for the integration of language, content, and culture. From our perspective, these three goals are inseparable and cannot effectively be attained without due consideration given to all of them. In what follows, I explain the origins of and rationale for an intercultural project or comprehensive strategy of learning that we refer to as ethnographic conversations.

Rationale for Ethnographic Conversations

A perusal of the literature quickly reveals a wide range of language, content, and intercultural activities created by EFL professionals that include, to name a few, cultural informant presentations (Wilson, 1979), role-playing (Magos & Politi, 2008), classroom talk programs (Naicker & Balfour, 2009), video narratives (South, Gabbitas, & Merrill, 2008), and e-pal online collaboration (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; Liaw, 2007). Still others have chosen ethnographic interviews (Bateman, 2002; Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996; Su, 2008) as a way to promote not only enhanced language proficiency and application of content knowledge, but also greater intercultural awareness and understanding (Su, 2008).

For a sociologist, ethnographic interviews typically represent one method of data collection wherein an investigator asks semi-structured or unstructured questions of a study participant on a subject of professional interest. This usually, although not always, results in a one-sided encounter in which the interviewee responds to the inquiries of the researcher, but not vice versa. While some feminist sociologists argue for participatory models that emphasize dialogue and the sharing of biographies (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1983), mainstream social researchers still privilege monologue as they try to stay away from communicating and possibly clouding the information gathered with their own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

When designing our intercultural activity, we conceived of ethnographic interviews as a mutual sharing of cultural stories and experiences by EFL students and English-speaking students around a related series of topics. Essentially, both parties dialogue and interview each other with the intent of systematically collecting data that can be documented and critically interrogated orally and/or in writing by applying the sociological concepts acquired through content learning. Meetings are more than casual affairs, but structured to encourage conversation for academic and cultural purposes. Students serve as researchers and cultural informants for one another, thereby transforming their exchange into an ethnographic conversation.

While conversation partner activities can accomplish this aim (Dooley, 2009; Olson, 2002; Purdy, 2008; Stoller, Hodges, & Kimbrough, 1995; Wilson, 1993; Zangari, 1998-1999), they may not possess the same degree of rigor in documenting and analyzing what students take away from these encounters. As such, ethnographic conversations allow knowledge to be communicated between collaborators who assume roles as open-minded representatives of their language communities and as individuals engaged in an authentic dialogue of cultures (Graman, 1988; Haneda & Wells, 2008; Pica, 1987; Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002).

The Implementation Process

To accomplish our three interrelated language, content, and intercultural curricular goals, we adopted an approach that embodies what Wilson (1982) terms cross-cultural experiential learning. As she maintains, students are more likely to learn from intercultural projects when they prepare for the experience, engage in educational activities during the experience, and carefully evaluate the significance of the experience (Wilson, 1982). While this model resembles the pre-task, during task, and post-task chronology of task-based teaching (Ellis, 2006), we opted to employ Wilson's (1982) categories of preparation, engagement, and reflection, because they logically fit with our planned lay out of the ethnographic conversations project.

Preparation

During spring semester 2009, I invited my colleague in sociology, who would be teaching our WU introductory course, to join us in this educational undertaking. She readily accepted our offer and participated with us in a series of planning meetings that started with deliberations over

the coordination of our course schedules. We intentionally arranged to hold American Society and her course called Navigating Social Worlds at the same time to afford us the opportunity to bring together TIUA and WU students during any given class period. Next, we carried out the following steps in readying both groups for their upcoming ethnographic conversations.

Step 1. We, the sociologist and Applied English professor, introduced this activity in our course syllabi and made explicit and enthusiastic mention of it on the first day of class. In this way, we could make TIUA students aware of as well as explain the rationale for this exciting opportunity to get to know and learn from WU students about American society.

Step 2. One week later TIUA and WU students completed an interest inventory about where they lived on campus, where they had traveled, what kinds of co-curricular activities they had been involved in, what they liked to do for fun, how they described themselves, etc. Based on this information, we matched students who seemed to be compatible.

Step 3. We, the three professors, met and used these interest inventories and what we knew about students so far to create conversation partner matches. Given the slight imbalance in class size (20 TIUA students and 24 WU students), some groups had one TIUA student and two WU students. We selected the more extroverted and confident TIUA students for these groupings with the hope that they would be less intimidated interacting with two native speakers.

Step 4. We filled out a “conversation partner match form” for every student in American Society and Navigating Social Worlds. Each form contained not only photographs of and contact information for her/his partner/s, but also detailed instructions about what should take place in their first 60 minute ethnographic conversation. For example, we advised TIUA students to: send an email reminder about the day, time, and location of their first meeting, bring a notebook, pen/pencil, and set of preliminary questions, take along photographs of families and friends and a map of where they lived in Japan or traveled in the United States to break the ice, develop the practice of jotting down notes during discussions, schedule the next meeting, and immediately write down what you and your partner said and did in the form of fieldnotes.

Step 5. With the distribution of “conversation partner match forms,” the sociologist and Applied English professor reviewed this handout with TIUA students on two separate occasions, giving them multiple chances to ask questions and seek clarification.

Step 6. We, the sociologist and Applied English professor, assigned two readings and developed a number of corresponding exercises to ready TIUA students for their in-class introductory meeting with their conversation partners. First, TIUA students studied a statement in English by TIU’s chancellor about that institution’s commitment to international education. Second, they examined an abbreviated version of Wilson’s 1993 article about conversation partners and its potential impact on their study abroad experience. Students then completed a written exercise in which they defined in their own words the four possible effects delineated in the latter reading. Next, we set aside several class sessions for them to orally share their definitions and to address any confusion regarding Wilson’s (1993) ideas.

Step 7. Prior to the in-class introductory session, TIUA students received intercultural training from the Applied English instructor that covered ice-breaker activities, American styles of talk, questioning techniques, methods to negotiate miscommunication, and note-taking practices. TIUA students also generated a list of conversation starters with the assistance of the Applied English professor should they need help in promoting interaction.

Step 8. In bringing the preparation phase to a close, TIUA students read about, saw examples of, and discussed how to write ethnographic fieldnotes that would expand upon the jottings they took during their actual conversations. We repeatedly stressed the vital importance of detailed ethnographic fieldnotes, since they would become the primary source of data for their final reflection paper. It was now time to engage.

Engagement

Among the 20 TIUA students and 24 WU students who engaged in these ethnographic conversations, the majority of them were females of sophomore class standing. Whereas TIUA students mainly studied language communication or international relations at TIU, their WU

counterparts chose majors in the social sciences or identified themselves as undecided. In terms of language proficiency, TIUA students had an average TOEFL score of 426 (range of 367-527) based on testing the previous June.

Being cognizant of the busy lives of TIUA and WU students, we had to be reasonable in the number of ethnographic conversations we asked them to arrange during the engagement phase. Besides an in-class introductory session, we called for 4-one hour meetings spaced two to three weeks apart that gave them a chance to draw upon newly acquired sociological knowledge in formulating questions pertaining to the topics of values, community, religion, and families. By finishing their conversations in early November, TIUA students had ample time to write a draft of their reflection paper and receive feedback from us before submitting their final version in mid-December. A summary of the engagement process follows that includes: the act of learning sociological content, the act of participating in ethnographic conversations, and the act of writing fieldnotes to describe what took place during their verbal exchanges.

Step 9. Instead of passively absorbing language, content, and intercultural knowledge provided by the sociologist and TIUA professor, students acted as collaborator learners who became actively involved in familiarizing themselves with the four topics (values, community, religion, and families) that framed their ethnographic conversations. For example, in their study of families, they interviewed WU students (not their conversation partners) about how they defined family, who they considered to be members of their family, and whether someone can be a family member without being related to you by blood or marriage. These results were compiled with the assistance of the Applied English professor and presented in the sociologist's class. They also viewed YouTube videos of different family types and showed the video and highlighted its mainpoints for other students in class based on a form prepared by the Applied English instructor. When TIUA faculty and staff came to class to talk about their intercultural marriages, it was the students who formulated the questions to be answered by these panelists. In these ways, they contributed to their own language, content, and intercultural learning at the same time it supplied them with a base of knowledge that they could draw upon in their ethnographic conversations.

Step 10. While we furnished the topics for TIUA and WU students to consider, we intentionally left the act of ethnographic conversations relatively unstructured. This stemmed from our desire to give students the flexibility to come up with questions that interested them and not what their instructors had directed them to ask. The one exception was the first conversation prior to which we distributed a list of 20 values and told them to circle the ones they perceived to be most important to Japanese and Americans. As they shared their answers and the reasoning behind these choices, TIUA and WU students could identify cultural misconceptions and talk about how their experiences led them to similar or different understandings of the values common in their native countries.

In the three remaining conversations, students determined how and what they would discuss. For instance, TIUA students could refer to sociological notions such as social groups, in-groups, out-groups, reference groups, communities, *Gemeinschaft*, *Gesellschaft*, and social capital in their exchanges about community. In the area of religion, they could draw upon ideas associated with the social functions of religion, spirituality, religiosity, rituals, and different forms of religion. With family, they could put together questions based on the changing family in the United States as it related to dating, marriage, and parenthood. These intriguing concepts presented rich possibilities for intercultural exchange.

Step 11. TIUA students were then instructed to act by writing detailed fieldnotes immediately after each meeting, so they could permanently record what had taken place during their conversations. Description not reflection or interpretation mattered most, since fieldnotes represented the data for later analysis. To insure that students provided usable information written in intelligible English, the Applied English professor designed a fieldnote feedback sheet divided into content focal points and language focal points. She filled out these sheets for the first two ethnographic conversations for 10 TIUA students while I evaluated the remaining 10 students. For the third and fourth conversations, we switched the 10 students whose fieldnotes we examined, so everyone could benefit from the comments made by both of us. Content criteria, scored as satisfactory, needs more information, or omitted, included: the heading with date, meeting time, and place, questions you asked and answers given, questions you were asked and answers you gave, level of detail used, and inclusion of sociological ideas. Language criteria

consisted of clear organization of fieldnotes, flow of information, and grammar marked as excellent, satisfactory, or needs more work. In addition to returning completed feedback sheets to TIUA students, we conferenced with them and reviewed drafts of their next set of fieldnotes if they asked us to do so.

Examples of students' fieldnotes revealed their attempts to ground the details of their conversations in the language of sociology (Table 1). References to values, social groups, demographic data, and economic explanations illustrated how they applied content knowledge in understanding their everyday lives. Also, descriptions of the behaviors and practices of people in Japan and the United States provided evidence of intercultural comparisons being made. Although their writing contained mechanical errors, they managed to convey the substance of their interactions without confusion.

Reflection

For us, the clearest demonstration of the achievement of our curricular goals came in the form of the final reflection paper. It showed us how successfully TIUA students connected sociological ideas to the data, preserved as fieldnotes, obtained during their ethnographic conversations. Time was spent working with them and modeling how to use English to effectively communicate the intercultural knowledge acquired through sustained interactions with their partners. The process started with the distribution of paper instructions.

Step 12. TIUA students received a three part handout from me that covered basic paper requirements. In part one, I presented a list of the sociology vocabulary that they could draw from as they wrote. Second, I delineated the four focus areas to be included in the body of the paper: how they built a relationship with their conversation partner/s, how they characterized that relationship, what topics they discussed, and how they proposed to improve this activity if given the chance. Each focus area, with the exception of the last one, called for the incorporation of sociology terminology to explain and help them make sense of their intercultural experiences. Lastly, I laid out the guidelines for the organization of this paper.

Step 13. While I gave a brief overview of this assignment, the Applied English professor took

responsibility for leading TIUA students through a close inspection of the instructions word-for-word. She also shared with them examples of papers prepared by TIUA students who participated in an ethnographic conversation pilot program the year before. Together they carefully scrutinized the organization, sentence structure, grammar, and sociological vocabulary contained in these models.

Step 14. Writing took place in stages and resulted in separate sections of a paper that were assembled into a first draft that was subsequently turned into us for language and content review. Using the extensive written feedback provided by both professors, TIUA students made recommended changes before submitting their final version at semester's end.

A survey of reflection paper writing samples showed how TIUA students applied what they had learned sociologically and interculturally in analyzing their ethnographic conversations (Table 2). Student 4 noted how the relationship with her partner evolved over time to form what she categorized as a primary group that they maintained through virtual communication. Student 5 admitted her cultural misperceptions as well as her altered intercultural understanding that she attributed to her meetings with Beth. In the last example, Student 6 made clear how his sociological and cultural learning heightened his awareness of the behaviors, customs, and norms in his native country. Although the writing is not error-free, the mistakes, just like the fieldnote examples, did not detract from our grasp of the intended message.

Student and Professor Evaluations

We issued an open-ended invitation to TIUA students to tell us how we could improve this educational activity in the last part of their reflection paper. A qualitative content analysis of their remarks revealed three themes that coincided with our language, content, and intercultural curricular goals. The majority of them mentioned the positive effects of speaking English with their WU partners and the value of being called upon to communicate in a second language. One-half of the TIUA students noted that sociology, our content goal, became more meaningful to them through “real life” conversations. They appreciated how the concepts learned in class, such as primary groups or in-groups, could help them characterize their interactions with WU

students. Interculturally, they gained a better understanding of American culture from the information supplied by their partners. In fact, TIUA students believed that they could express their “real” opinions in ways that also fostered an increased awareness of their own culture. Moreover, conversations permitted them to confront their own stereotypes as they compared life in both countries. Through such exchanges, some of them reported an increased confidence when interacting with people different from themselves.

TIUA students also brought to our attention a number of problems and concerns. Even though we tried to be considerate of their busy schedules, some of them cited difficulties in finding a common time when they could get together with their conversation partners. They also noted their partners’ lack of responsiveness, at times, to their emails inquiries which delayed when they could meet. Perhaps, the most perceptive comment came from one TIUA student who pointed out that ethnographic conversation may give false impressions of American society, because they usually offered one, rather than multiple, perspectives on the topics being discussed.

In our own debriefing session, we, the sociologist and Applied English professor, arrived at a number of conclusions. While this activity may not have long-term language benefits, it did, at least, require students to read, write, speak, and listen in English for conversational and academic purposes. Additionally, it led to the integration and application of sociological knowledge as they tried to make sense of what they learned from their conversation partners. Moreover, it heightened TIUA students’ intercultural awareness concerning the similarities and differences in American and Japanese societies. It also connected them with friendly WU students who made them feel comfortable enough to ask sensitive questions without being shy. Yet, we agreed with the TIUA student who astutely observed that this assignment, as currently conceived, provided limited views of American society. As a result, certain changes must be made.

Suggested Improvements

Looking ahead to the future, we identified specific improvements we aim to institute starting with taking greater advantage of our collaboration with my colleague in sociology. If we continue to schedule our courses at the same time, we should first develop more in-class activities that have TIUA and WU students working together on joint writing assignments, oral presentations, and multi-media projects, thereby further advancing our three curricular goals.

Second, we could extend our outreach to our sister school, TIU, in Japan which offers an American Society pre-departure course for next year's cohort of TIUA students. Perhaps, ethnographic conversation groups could take one or two sociological concepts and prepare an intercultural lesson in English that could be podcast in the TIU American Society course. In this way, TIUA and WU students would teach and model the rich language, content, and intercultural learning opportunities that exist on campus.

Third, we need to symbolically acknowledge the collaboration and friendships that grew out of these rich ethnographic conversations. Whether these partnerships continue through Facebook, Instant Messaging, and email or end with the close of the semester, we should celebrate our time together by arranging, for example, a pizza party filled with music and casual conversation.

Fourth, we could design and administer pre- and post-conversation partner surveys to TIUA and WU students that attempt to measure the extent of our success in attaining our language, content, and intercultural curricular goals. While efforts to develop these instruments may be worthwhile, we still wonder if one semester would be sufficient time to discern significant change.

Lastly, we must address the TIUA student's concern about the false impressions created by talking with one WU conversation partner. He recommended that TIUA students should form small in-class discussion groups, so they could talk about what they learned from their conversation partners. This exchange with other TIUA students would then expose them to the diversity of opinions and experiences typifying American society. We heartily concur with his advice. In addition, we, the instructors, could call upon TIUA students during class sessions to report on knowledge obtained and recorded in their fieldnotes. As such, we would collectively generate socially shared knowledge instead of the individualistic knowledge promulgated by our current fieldnote and reflection paper assignments.

Conclusion

In closing, ethnographic conversations represent a pedagogical technique developed by two sociologists and one Applied English professor to engage TIUA and WU students in an educational project that attempts to actualize Wilson's ideas (1982) about cross-cultural experiential learning and authentic dialogue outside the classroom to achieve our curricular goals.

While we cannot claim that this particular activity has long-term consequences, it does, at minimum, give TIUA students the chance to practice English in a comfortable setting where they can pose questions about a way of life foreign to them and seek understanding of the answers provided to them through the lens of sociology. If our efforts do no more than to instill a greater curiosity about and appreciation of the world around them, we have begun the sensitizing process that may one day transform TIUA and WU students into the internationally-minded, global citizens dreamed of by TIU founding father Taizo Kaneko.

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Table 1

Writing Samples from TIUA Students' Fieldnotes

Student 1

Sarah said American people have iPods and love music. She meant it to connect to one American value, independence. I asked her how it connects because I didn't understand. She answered American people are independent if you see their music in iPod...I said cell phones which are made in Japan are very high quality...We think it is a Japanese value, technology.

Student 2

I asked about social group at first. Then, Jane said that social group is group that has common interests, same background and same value...She said that she is in a social group that she belongs to the cross-country team...They feel that they are kind of different from other Willamette students because their value is running and their core of life is also running...To me I'm in social group of TIUA now. Because we have same interests that we want to study English. And we study in same environment and I feel it's comfortable for me to study in the environment.

Student 3

Ann answered, "Yes, there are many parents who divorce in the U.S. And their children go to one parent for a week, and they go to the other parent in the next week. I could not believe it, because I think this is a difficult condition for children to live in"...Next, Ann asked me, "How many children do parents usually have in Japan? 2 or 3?" I answered, "Nowadays, people have 1 or 2. The birth rate is decreasing in Japan because of economic reasons. It becomes hard for a family to live with money from only one person's salary. That is why many parents do not want too many children..."

Table 2

Writing Samples from TIUA Students' Reflection Papers

Student

4

In our meetings, we talked about our family and hometown to know each other. It changed our relationship to primary groups from secondary groups...And, we became friends on Facebook and we always contact each other on Facebook. We use the virtual communities.

Student 5

The most interesting topic for me is religion...Before I met Beth, I had an image that American people are very religious and go to church every Sunday and read a Bible. But she was not a religious person. She does not believe in God. I don't believe in God, either...I think it is very interesting that there are various kinds of people in the world and not all American people believe in God or believe to a religion.

Student 6

Talking with him about sociological topics such as family, religion and culture were really challenging for me...It took me a long time to put my idea into English. Not only have I learned lots of things from my conversation partner, but I have seen my own culture, custom and norm through my conversation partner's eyes... In actuality, I don't pay much attention to my behavior, customs and norms in daily life...those things come almost naturally. Yet, my conversation partner likes people having different custom and culture and wonders why do you do so and why do you think so...We can both consider our culture from two angles with cooperation.

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Reading Literature in English: Challenges Facing Omani College Students

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Biodata

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Abstract

Reading is a complex process. It involves interaction between reader and text characteristics, which work on each other to form meaning. Given such diverse factors as linguistic ability, cultural knowledge, attitude and motivation, reading in a second or foreign language is markedly more challenging than L1 reading. For learners in a society known for its orality and lack of a reading culture, reading in a foreign language might be a truly formidable task. Research has shown how Arab students struggle with reading (Cobb & Horst, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2010; Shannon, 2003; Mustafa, 2002; Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; Mourtaga, 2006), problems being encountered with both bottom-up and top-down processes. Hence, these students are not only slow readers due to lack of automaticity; they are also inefficient and unskilled in terms of comprehension. While much research is devoted to reading *per se*, little is available on reading literature and the challenges Arab students face when doing this. Hence the importance of this study which, by using a semi-structured interview, investigates the issue within the context of an Omani higher education institution. The findings reveal that students perceive vocabulary as the

major problem, followed by writing style, sentence structure, genre and textual characteristics. Based on the findings, the paper offers recommendations for classroom practice and further research.

Keywords: Reading process, literature, Omani students, challenges

Introduction

Reading is a central skill for second or foreign language acquisition. It is the skill that nurtures all the other language skills and is vital for learners' academic success (Alderson, 1984; Al-Samadani, 2008).

A most complex cognitive skill, reading is neither a mere decoding process that depends on identifying linguistic signs on the page (Eckert, 2008; Iser, 2000), nor is it a linear process (Goodman, 1996). It is an interaction between reader and text in a process of meaning making (Grabe, 1991). Just as every text has its own ideological and social underpinning, so each reader has his own culture and background knowledge. Together these interact to produce the message the reader gleans from the text. Bottom-up processing is involved in extracting meaning from the message embedded in the text and top-down processing uses the reader's background knowledge and other characteristics to formulate the overall message he receives from interacting with the written word. Grabe and Stoller (2002, p. 17) describe fluent reading as:

1. A rapid process
2. An efficient process
3. An interactive process
4. A strategic process
5. A flexible process
6. An evaluating process
7. A purposeful process
8. A comprehending process
9. A learning process
10. A linguistic process

Poor L1 readers were found to have weak word recognition skills, inadequate knowledge sources, and they employ ineffective reading strategies all of which cause them to be slow and inefficient. Poor L2 and FL readers, for their part, must grapple with multiple factors when operating in the target language because of meager linguistic competence (i.e. knowledge of vocabulary and syntax) (Matsumura, 2010; Lin, 2002; Zhang, 2001) and the gap between their general and cultural knowledge and that found in the authentic text (Bensoussan, 1998; Zhang, 2001). Poor EFL language proficiency was found to undermine the "activation of the effective

and global [reading] strategies” used by more proficient readers (Zhang, 2001, p. 270). Hence, Zhang concludes, poor EFL readers tend to use more text-bound, local strategies. They are also less aware of their reading strategy preference and what strategies they possessed or lacked (Lou, 2010; Malcolm, 2009).

Arab EFL students in particular have been found to experience great difficulty with reading (Bell, 2001; Cobb & Horst, 2001; Shmais, 2002). This stems from such factors as the absence of a reading culture, low English proficiency, a paucity of vocabulary, lack or ineffective use of reading strategies, and poor teaching all of which interact and contribute to Arab student’ weak reading skills. Al-Melhi (cited in Lou, 2010) found that Saudi college students’ English proficiency influenced their use of reading strategies. Since the reading skill is vital for academic success in specializations taught in English, there is now:

a wider recognition of the need for a broader approach to reading skills for Arab students. This entails recognition of the unique problems these learners face in their English reading and the use of a combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies to help them develop reading proficiency. (O’Sullivan, 2010, para. 22)

As mentioned, research has investigated Arab students’ reading problems in general. However, the researcher knows of very little research on the particular problems students face when reading literature although Shmais (2002, p. 634) claims that for many Arab students, “reading in English is difficult and very demanding, especially reading literary texts.” Hence the present study is unique in that, while using a semi-structured interview with Omani students, it investigates what the main problems with this kind of reading are felt to be by the students’ themselves. Eliciting students’ perceptions is important as it would offer a window into their metacognition; i.e. whether they are aware of the challenges or problems they face and the strategies they use to counteract them. This can help teachers design significant interventions (Robert, 1999) through adopting new methodologies or choosing materials suitable to students’ levels. Also, it would reveal how teachers can establish a dialog between them and students regarding their challenges, how they deal with them, and suggest ways or strategies to improve them.

As this study is part of a larger study, more than one data collection instrument was used to triangulate the findings. However, for the sake of economy and brevity the findings in this study

are strictly drawn from the semi-structured interview. The participants are mature third-year students majoring in English (Arts and Education), who have a substantial background in English language learning and literature. The study investigates in some detail their profiles as readers in order to determine the factors affecting their reading skills and their comprehension of literature.

Reading, Literature and Arab Students

Cobb (1999) found that reading was Omani college freshmen's weakest English language skill and that a poor vocabulary was the main culprit - a deficiency whose importance various researchers have stressed in its relationship to reading comprehension. According to Hirsh and Nation (1992), we must know 95% of an authentic text's vocabulary to understand it. Vocabulary sufficiency facilitates word recognition and thus increases reading's automaticity, which in turn increases reading speed and comprehension.

Arab students are slow readers of English and suffer from poor comprehension - related deficiencies (Bell, 2001) caused by inadequate linguistic skills. Slow reading comes from hesitant word recognition, which is a direct result of minimal reading and a poor vocabulary (Stott, 2001). For such learners word recognition is not automatic: hence their attention and cognitive ability are focused on a bottom-up process, leaving little concentration on comprehension and higher order skills.

Arab English readers are also overly dependent on textual information and find difficulty in locating main ideas in a passage. While imperfect linguistic ability plays a part in this, low levels of general and specific cultural knowledge play a part too (Mourtaga, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2010; Cobb, 1999). Underlying all these problems, however, is the absence of a reading culture in most Arab societies (Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2010; Bouzenirh, 1991; Shannon, 2003). Because of this, even student reading in Arabic is underdeveloped, which makes a positive transfer of learning into English almost impossible. According to Cummins (cited in Scott, Bell and McCallum, 2009, p. 31), first and second language skills are interdependent, "allowing for indirect or direct language transfer". Hence, Cummins states research has confirmed that learners experiencing difficulty in mastering a skill in their mother tongue will also find it difficult to master the same skill in a second or foreign language.

Though perhaps encouraged to practice extensive reading in English, learners lack motivation

to do this because they connect all kinds of reading with academic study. Hence they find no pleasure in reading and this prevents a transfer of skills from one language to the other (Wurr, 2003). Writing about UAE students, O'Sullivan says:

Learners viewing English reading as purely for narrow academic and professional purposes may be less inclined to read for anything other than these restricted reasons. We can observe this very 'applied' view of English reading among HCT students. Students are not interested in reading (DWC 2001) and at best are only instrumentally motivated to read for very 'narrow' purposes and do not do a lot of recreational reading (CD 3 AXA Students DWC 1999) (para. 6).

O'Sullivan also notes that, "when it comes to HCT [UAE Higher College of Technology] students and reading there is evidence of poor attitudes, limited strategies and below average performance in both Arabic and English." (para. 13). Studying Palestinian students in the Gaza strip, Mourtaga (2006) says: "our students find reading English a very complicated skill, and therefore they have many problems with it." He attributes this to four main reasons: instructors' teaching methods, which demonstrate their misunderstanding of the reading process; students' paltry language proficiency; differences between their mother tongue (Arabic) and English; and a lack of correspondence between English's deep orthographic structure and its pronunciation, which is so different from Arabic's shallow orthographic structure.

Language weakness is manifestly a deterrent to reading comprehension and literary appreciation (Bouzenirh, 1991; Zaghoul, 1986). Zaghoul holds that:

...it can be safely generalized that the linguistic competence of the incoming student – and for that matter, even the graduate of a Third World university – does not enable him to make sense of a literary piece, let alone appreciate it. The student usually ends up glossing vocabulary items rather than studying literature for appreciation and analysis (cited in Bouzenirh, 1991, p.59).

Because of their lack problems, students might simply be unready for literature and, if exposed to it prematurely, might show no appreciation for it. Zaghoul also mentions that this has been found to be so among Iranian, Moroccan and Chinese students. Such students, unsurprisingly, suffer from an inability logically and sufficiently to analyze a literary work. They are usually unable to argue their points or support them with suitable quotations from the text. In addition, Zaghoul states that they often cannot perceive the significance of events in the stories or novels

they read, which causes them to overlook major themes and concentrate only on the story line. A significant point is that Arab societies, with their heavily oral traditions, emphasize memorization and spoken language. Given an immensely rich tradition of storytelling behind them, it is perhaps unsurprising that modern learners focus merely on events in the plot rather than on either their personal response to them or on the significance of them for the basic meaning of the whole story.

Literature teaching methods are another source of difficulty. They tend to be outmoded and teacher-centered, focusing on interpretation and received meanings (Mustafa, 2002). According to Widdowson:

Literary studies (even in British Universities) have not been structured to develop such a sensitivity [appreciation for literature]. What is taught is critical orthodoxy, a set of ready-made judgments for rote learning rather than strategies of understanding which can be transferred to other unknown literary works (cited in Bouzenirh, 1991, p. 61).

This could demotivate and frustrate students as they tend to feel sidelined and uninvolved in the interpretation, a task reserved only for the teacher. Literature teachers sometimes focus only on the text's ideas, as though it is merely an intellectual rather than an aesthetic pursuit. Some, on the other hand, focus dryly on the text's language (grammar and lexis) and thus reduce it to its component parts, which are less than the whole. The result is that students develop no feel for the text and hence miss the full picture. Since they are not involved in creating and recreating textual meaning, they lose confidence in their own ability to critically analyze and interpret, and so resort to memorizing the meaning and new vocabulary items pointed out by the instructor. Tests and exams of course encourage memorization and the regurgitation of teachers' opinions and interpretations. Widdowson further mentions that in recent times advocates have called for using a more integrated approach to the teaching of literature.

The Study

Twenty three third year college female students majoring in English (Education and Arts) took part in the study. None of the male students volunteered to participate. Third year students were targeted because they had taken literature courses at both SQU's Language Centre and the English Department. The study's instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview, containing

general prompts to encourage students to speak about their backgrounds as readers and the challenges or factors affecting their reading and comprehension of literature.

Fettermann (1989) states that interviews have the potential to generate more information since people tend to talk more freely than when they write. This is true when the subjects' native language is used as a medium of conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee. Therefore, the researcher used the Arabic language to conduct the interviews. Using Arabic freed the participants from any difficulties posed by lack of proficiency in English and encouraged them to talk more about their perceptions.

One major advantage of interviews is their adaptability. A researcher can follow up on ideas or responses, probe new responses and further investigate motives, attitudes and feelings, something questionnaires cannot do. Bell (1987) holds that the way in which a response is made, such as the tone of voice of the respondent or his/her facial expressions, can provide the researcher with hints that written responses cannot provide. Comparing interview responses to questionnaire responses, Bell (1987) states that, "Questionnaire responses have to be taken at face value, but response in an interview can be developed and clarified" (p. 71).

The format of the interview conducted ranged between being informal and semi-structured. Best and Kahn (1998) describe the informal conversational interviews as ones where questions are not pre-determined but rather emerge from the context and are asked in the natural course of the conversation. Gay (1979) favors semi-structured interviews because of their flexibility and their ability to yield more honest and accurate information because they give the interviewer the chance to explain and clarify without losing focus. Merriam (1988a & b) asserts that data gleaned from semi-structured interviews fare well when compared with other data collection techniques in terms of the validity of the responses obtained because the opportunity to follow up and to probe clarification is among its advantages. Hence, for researchers seeking qualitative knowledge, semi-structured interviews are a good choice.

The main two questions asked were, "Tell me about yourself as a reader?" and "What challenges do you face when reading literature?" The questions were sometimes paraphrased in order to elicit more information. Prompts such as, "Can you give me an example?" or "Can you clarify that?" were used whenever appropriate. New questions emerged as a result of the conversation. These questions were asked because they provided follow up to the responses and

helped the researcher to better understand the perceptions of the respondents. Sometimes, some of the pre-determined questions were not asked because their answers were already integrated in answers or elaborations for other questions. Some questions were altered to fit the course of the interview.

Procedures

Each student was met individually for the interview, which had no time limit to allow the participants to speak as much as they wanted. The average interview time was 35 minutes. The interviews were all transcribed and later analyzed and categorized. The profiles of the participants as readers were drawn from their background factors and the challenges were categorized according to themes or factors affecting participants' reading of literature. The following section presents the qualitative analysis of the data while discussing the findings at the same time.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the results of the study. First, it presents the profiles of the learners as readers as this gives an insight about the participants' backgrounds and socio-cultural context, which could affect their reading ability and habits, which in turn would have an effect on how they approach reading literature in English. The challenges are discussed next and a connection between them and participants' background factors are going to be clarified.

Profiles of the Participants as English Language Learners and as Readers

Since all the participants in the present study were Omani female students, they spoke Arabic. Two participants also spoke some Swahili. None was from Muscat, the capital, and due to this, they all resided in the female students' dormitory to be close to the university and their classrooms. All the participants were educated in public schools and began learning English in the fourth grade. Only one of the participants visited an English-speaking country, spending in it two months visiting a medical student cousin in the United States.

Opportunities to speak English outside the classroom are quite limited for the participants. Indeed the very attempt by English majors to use English among themselves in the dorm is met

with ridicule from non-English specialists who see this as showing off their knowledge of another language, thus breaking local culture rules that require learned individuals to show humility and consideration to less educated counterparts. After a few minutes of English conversation students usually switch to Arabic because they face a vocabulary gridlock and Arabic seems an easier and handier choice. Dissent over whether or not to speak in English sometimes emerges among the English Majors themselves, some of whom are weary of their classes and do not wish to be further bothered with English. Due to that the enthusiasts and advocates of “practicing your English” feel that they lack the motivation to speak English outside the classroom. They also indicated that they sometimes feel embarrassed and discouraged if they do because their attempts are not welcome by the people around them.

There are other circumstances that present students with valuable opportunities to speak English inside the university precincts. They can speak English with English professors, with workers in the dorm or the students’ canteen or cafeteria and when they go shopping. One of the participants (No. 20) indicated that she was a member of the English Society, an active student body which organized fairs, presentations in English and showed English films for interested students interested. Participant 20 said that she participates in this society’s activities and speaks English with the group members hoping to improve her language skills. She remarked that she found that extremely helpful for her as a language learner.

Outside the university precincts and inside their homes, most participants find even fewer opportunities to speak the language. Only three out of the twenty-three participants indicated that they speak English sometimes at home either due to the presence of a family member who is interested in listening to and learning English or to the presence of a family member who already knows the language. Two participants (Nos. 7& 11) had sisters who were nurses and they spoke to them in English. Participant 7 had a brother who majored in English and who always encouraged and urged her to use the language. Participant 8 had a brother who had studied in Britain and whose family, especially her father, encouraged her to learn English, though she neither liked to speak in English at home nor to read in it.

Brought up in areas of varying degrees of distance from the capital Muscat, most participants grew up disadvantaged in the sense that they lacked access to books. All but four participants (8, 18, 25, 26) indicated that books- - Arabic let alone English- - were a rare commodity in their

communities, save for their school textbooks. Participant 8 had books available to her but did not like to read them. She asserted that she liked to listen more than to read and that she learned more this way. Participant 18 had books available at home too, but read only sometimes depending on her spare time and mood.

Thus, very few participants were nurtured readers and so very few now presented themselves as avid readers of Arabic or English. No more than five participants said that they loved reading and spent more than two hours doing extra reading every day besides reading for their assignments. Some indicated that they liked to read but that preparation for course work and assignments took most of their time, leaving no time for extensive reading outside their study areas. During summer vacations, all participants reported that they did at least some reading. In fact, some believed that they did more extensive reading in English during the summer because they borrowed books from the university main library or from their professors or because they bought books from bookshops. More than half of the participants indicated that they now read mostly in English. A few said they still read in Arabic more than in English.

Literature was what participants asserted they read most in their free time due in part maybe to their specialization in English. Most read English short stories (fiction and nonfiction), some English novels and very few English poetry. Many said that they found poetry in English hard to comprehend. Many also said that they had little experience with it and that they still had not developed a taste or an appreciation for it. They also indicated that it is different from traditional and standard Arabic poetry due to its often lack of rhyme and its multiple layers of meanings. New vocabulary forms the main obstacle standing in the way of comprehending poetry written in English. The use of imagery and description of nature is another hurdle obstructing comprehension and involvement. Many participants related to the researcher their negative preconceptions about poetry written in English. Prior to their studying poetry, the majority thought that poetry written in English was naïve, deprived of meaning and message and that it was really impossible to understand. However, after taking poetry in one of their courses, they discovered that English poetry did have meaning and message and that there were some beautiful poems out there for them to read. Despite that, vocabulary difficulty – the most formidable of all problems to them – still seemed the main problem preventing or at least diminishing their involvement in and comprehension of English poetry. Therefore, many participants said that

they continued to read Arabic poetry instead and that even if an Arabic poem contained new words they could still manage to understand its meaning and relish the experience of merely reading it.

Purposes for reading varied among students. During the school year, most participants read for the sake of finding information regarding their academic courses. They searched the Internet to find information on writers, pieces of writing (especially short stories and poems) or on other topics assigned to them to write about or discuss. Participants who did extra-reading read for different reasons too. Some read for sheer pleasure just because a title had seized their attention. Some read to improve their linguistic skills as well as their reading skills focusing their attention on what and how characters address and speak to each other and under what circumstances. Some focused on the cultural knowledge present in short stories and novels. Some read for the sake of gaining new vocabulary which they could later use in their writing or when speaking. Some tried to read aloud to practice their pronunciation and to get used to reading aloud. Of course, there were many participants who read for a combination of reasons and who might have benefited from reading in ways they themselves were sometimes not aware of.

When asked to rate their ability in reading English, almost all participants described themselves as good readers. However, they qualified that by saying that they were good readers if they were reading at their own level or maybe at slightly higher than their level. Passages and stories that contained much new vocabulary from their very outset were the main de-motivators for participants. Usually participants just gave up reading these. If they persisted they read these passages very slowly and carefully, sometimes thinking of Arabic equivalents and sometimes using the dictionary to look up keywords. However, all participants indicated that they relied on translation and vocabulary to a lesser degree now than they had done when they first began their major.

When requested to give an evaluation of their English reading speed, they all indicated that they were relatively slow, that they read every word of the passage in order to construct meaning from the text. Many indicated that they sometimes had to read a story or a section of a story more than once to find some meaning in it. Many also admitted that they had difficulty grasping the meaning of short stories and that usually the meaning they arrived at was not the same one their professor had in store for them. They attributed that to the difference between the Omani

culture and the culture portrayed in the story or to the complexity and complications of the style in which the story was written. Although all the participants, except one, said that they watched English and American films (and to a lesser degree English programs and news), they indicated that there were many dimensions of Western culture (including the American or British) that they were not aware of. To them, movies or films presented just a biased segment of the culture when they deal with social issues and sometimes these are far removed from any culture when they are science fiction. Most students felt that their knowledge of the totality of the human experience in Western cultures was lost to them and thus their knowledge of those cultures was at best rudimentary, confused and fragmented.

Participants also commented that English movies could have been more helpful to them in terms of language had they not been translated into Arabic. The translation appeared on the screen and usually the participants, as viewers, focused on reading the translation. Some, however, said that they sometimes tried not to concentrate too much on the translation and focused more on what was being said in the movie and some said that they compared the translation with what was being said. All participants thought that watching these movies was somehow beneficial linguistically and culturally as participants listened to accents and pronunciation of words, expressions, slang words and learned about social issues and lifestyles in the English-speaking world.

The Perceptions of the Participants on the Challenges they encounter when Reading literature:

The data obtained from the interview with the participants made clear the intertwined connection between language and culture. In pondering the questions about the challenges they thought affected their comprehension and response to literature, the students pointed out that linguistic and cultural factors sometimes interwove into each other causing them difficulty in comprehension and preventing their involvement in the literary work they read. This section will present the linguistic as well as the cultural factors that affect the participants' understanding of and involvement in the literary texts they read in the pattern and order in which these participants mentioned them. The researcher will point out the connections between the two sets of factors (linguistic and cultural) the participants notably mentioned.

Linguistic factors: Vocabulary as a challenge

Since none of the participants viewed herself as a proficient English language reader, they focused on a variety of linguistic factors which they perceived as stumbling blocks in the way of their reading comprehension and involvement. The most notable of these factors was vocabulary. All participants, without exception, mentioned vocabulary as the biggest hindrance to their comprehension and involvement, hence echoing former findings by Cobb (1999). If faced with a text dense with new vocabulary, the participants reported that they would neither understand nor enjoy reading. Almost all, except for two participants, reported that they would leave the story and stop reading it. Participant 15 reported that when she first majored in English (during her first year) she would go to the library to read English stories. However, since her knowledge of vocabulary was very basic and rudimentary, she would find herself unable to understand anything, which usually prompted her to leave the stories after spending just a few minutes reading them. If the text was not very dense with new words but still contained a good many of them, the participants said that this affected their reading speed making it very slow. To put it in participant 19's words, "Facing a lot of new words makes me slow. I try to pronounce the words and look them up in the dictionary to see how they are pronounced and what they mean. When I try to pronounce the words, this takes a lot of time." Participant 2 also maintained that it was not only the novelty of the words as semantic entities that caused her slow rate of reading but also her lack of pronunciation knowledge. Thus, pronunciation of new words appeared to exacerbate the participants' already unskilled reading speed. This also shows that students vocalize and subvocalize while reading, a tendency which slows the reading process and decreases its efficiency (Mourtaga, 2006).

New vocabulary also affected the participants' comprehension, leading them to erroneous interpretations in cases when they guessed a key word wrongly (Participant 16). Many (e.g. participants 4, 15, 18) reported that confronting many new words in one passage confused them and psychologically hindered their involvement.

Idioms, proverbs and slang as challenges

Vocabulary words are not only linguistic elements, but are also cultural too. Since there are culture specific elements (abstract or concrete) in every society, there are semantic ways to

communicate them. The participants understood that perfectly. Idioms, proverbs, slang, colloquial language and dialects are among the elements that the students talked about constantly while discussing the factors that affected their understanding and involvement in literature. These elements can be viewed as cultural linguistic artifacts that can either have equivalents or no equivalents in another culture. Speaking about idioms, participant 9 mentioned that one of her professors presented their class with English idioms at the beginning of every class. The students sometimes had no idea what the idioms meant and their discussions would sometimes become so heated that the whole class seemed to be engaged in a big quarrel! The participants gave examples of idioms they struggled with at some point or other during their study. Participant 2 reported that once she read in a story the idiom “That is not your cup of tea” and she did not know the meaning of it, and thus she misinterpreted the story she was reading due to that. Another participant mentioned that in “The story of an Hour” she could not tell what the idiom “she let down her hair” meant, and therefore, could not tell how significant that phrase was to the description of Mrs. Mallard’s (the main character) inner and true feeling about her husband’s death.

Using slang, dialects and colloquial language was another hurdle an overwhelming majority of the participants mentioned. Participant 12 related an incident when her class was studying a poem entitled “The Man He Killed.” She reported that the poet used the word ‘foe’ instead of ‘enemy’. Since the students did not know what the word ‘foe’ meant they had difficulty interpreting the poem until the professor told them that ‘foe’ is another, but less frequently used, word meaning ‘enemy’. Participant 2 reported that she once started reading a story but could not finish it because it had slang in it. Similar comments about the use of old English in literary masterpieces were echoed by a great number of the participants in the study. The participants all mentioned that reading the original works of Shakespeare or works integrating older versions of English was problematic due to their lack of familiarity with those older forms.

Some participants remarked that they sometimes intentionally read very slowly in order to learn new words, idioms and expressions from the text. Participant 15 enthusiastically mentioned her will to improve her English language proficiency saying that she sometimes read the passage several times until she memorized what the characters said and how they said it. She told the researcher about how she read ‘The First Confession’ by John Steinbeck and how she focused on what Nora said to Jackie (children in the novel).

Sometimes I read the story once then I go back to it because I want to walk away with something out of the text like idioms, some words and the way language is used. In the 'First Confession, I remember two children (Nora and Jackie)-normal children. Jackie was younger than Nora. She was naughty. She hit Jackie. When she took him to church, she told him, 'you will make a bad confession, my dear. My heart goes for you.'

Guessing the meaning of new words from context is facilitated by certain conditions. Familiar content and context are the major facilitators reported by the participants. Naturally, content and context are either culture or discipline bound. Jargon words related to science, philosophy or other disciplines unfamiliar to the participants were designated by them as harder to grasp than words that are related to education and language fields. A number of participants gave an example of a course they took called the 'Foundation of Education' which contained an abundance of new words. However, students were able to guess these words from context due to their familiarity with the topics discussed, which were mainly Islamic and Arabic in essence. Here the interaction between culture, discipline and vocabulary is very clear and emphatic. The more familiar the culture or discipline, the more able are the learners to acquire the new vocabulary as well as to comprehend the text.

Another condition that facilitated vocabulary acquisition, which some participants also mentioned, was the frequency with which a new word is used in the text they read. If words are repeated several times throughout the text, then guessing their meaning and remembering them or retaining them even after the reading ends with is much easier.

Vocabulary acquisition and retention were related to the interestingness of the story too. If the story was interesting, it also facilitated their vocabulary acquisition. They defined an interesting story as one that relied more on conversation than description in narrating the events. In addition, an interesting story was one that was not far removed from their experiences and knowledge. While they showed great enthusiasm for encountering novelty in a story, they insisted that it should not be too outlandish or illogical or unrealistic to believe.

The writing style as a challenge

In the paragraph above, it was mentioned that conversation was an element related to the style a writer chose to present his story. In addition to conversation, the participants mentioned a host

of other comments about the effect of style on their reading comprehension and involvement. Writing styles that are “not straightforward” (as some participants put it) make understanding the story very hard. Participants mentioned that some writers opt to scramble events, not organizing them in a chronological order. In stories that lacked progression or a logical sequence of events or stories that failed to include enough textual clues to mark the change in the time of events, participants reported finding themselves lost and confused. Ambiguity and symbolism were among the stylistic features that participants struggled with. They found descriptions of nature in stories, which often had symbolic meaning for what was going on in the story, hard to interpret. Since most of the Arabic texts they read in school contained very little description of nature or symbolism, the participants commented that no matter how long they spent contemplating a description, they often arrived at the wrong interpretation. In fact, at the outset of their experience with literature written in English, they used to gloss through the description of nature regarding it as useless or unimportant. After taking some literature courses, most participants reported that their professors showed them that description of nature or any type of description in the story could be symbolic of something else. It could tell them many meaningful things about the characters, their state of being, their intentions and personalities. Now, those participants have been trying to look into descriptions, but unfortunately their efforts have often been met with little success.

A significant number of participants mentioned the structural features of sentences as part of the style of writing. To the participants, styles that ignore establishing connections between ideas or sentences to the degree that cohesion and coherence are forsaken form another barrier obstructing comprehension and involvement from taking place. Participants complained that long sentences that had new content and that were void of connections were hard to follow and thus understanding them was quite impossible. Participants remarked that they sometimes had to read long sentences more than once to keep track of what they were saying. Thus, coherence at the content level, cohesion at the structure level, and the logical progression of events appear to be factors that have some effect on understanding and involvement.

Interaction between style and culture and content as a challenge

A great many participants regarded style as something related to culture too. They remarked that

Arabic writings had less description of nature and less symbolism, save for new trends in short story writing and poetry which seemed even more ambiguous and meaningless to the participants than some English writing.

Participants also related style to content so far as that an easy style can be understood in light of the content it conveys. If the content of a literary work the participants are reading was totally new to them, they reported that they had difficulty reading it swiftly and understanding it at the same time. “A new culture is hard to predict,” more than half of the participants said, “Therefore, it needs more time to read.” It was interesting to hear many participants mention that it was hard for them to conceptualize events and settings that were unfamiliar to them because they lacked knowledge of what was expected of people in terms of manner and conduct in a culture foreign to them. Research on schema has focused on the ability to conceptualize new content too, and differences between the mental and propositional models are nothing but the difference between being able to conceptualize in the former but failing to do so in the latter (Al-Arfaj, 1996; Malik, 1990; Pritchard, 1990; Scott, 2001; Steffensen, Joag-Dev & Anderson, 1979)

Many participants said that they did not know how they were supposed to react to a certain element in the story due to their lack of appropriate background knowledge or schema. Three of the participants gave examples of incidents in their classes where they failed to realize the hilarity of an event or a description in a poem. Participants 13 and 15, for example, reported reading a scene in ‘The First Confession’, which was supposed to be funny according to the parameters of the American culture. However, since they and all the other class members did not know what was a normal parameter for conduct and what was eccentric behavior, they read it without feeling or knowing how humorous it was. The scene had to do with one of the characters entering the church and approaching the altar in a way that was perceived by the teacher as funny. It was only after the teacher explained the difference between what happened in the story and what was supposed to happen according to normal customs that the students began to laugh. Participants 11 and 3 mentioned that sometimes they would read about an element in a short story that they could not understand and thus they would think that the reason might be that that element existed in the American culture while it did not exist in the Omani culture. The elements pertinent to the American culture which the participants thought they knew something about included slavery and the struggle between the Whites and Blacks in America, the

depression period and some very general ideas about democracy. The participants regarded themselves as lacking knowledge of the historical, social, political and economic context. They expressed a sincere desire to learn about these but not at the expense of learning about or considering the parameters sanctioned by their own culture.

Reading a text about a new culture appears to require a significantly longer time than time spent reading a text about the participants' own culture. The participants reported that the more distant the content from their own culture, the more difficult, and more time consuming they find the text. Another element related to culture is the attitudes of students towards what they read. Many reported their reservation about writings that contained inappropriate material totally unacceptable in their culture especially if it were related to religion. Some students expressed their dismay at the selections of English short stories they were required to read, many regarding them as "void of any objective" and they remarked that they could not understand or be involved with many of the stories they were required to read, since they were not related to their experiences and culture.

Genre as a challenge

Following vocabulary, style and content comes genre. Most participants mentioned that they much preferred to read non-fiction than fiction. They reported that they understood non-fictional short stories better because they contained less symbolism and ambiguity. They liked novels too. However, the longer the short story, the harder it was for them to understand, finish, or be involved in it. Fiction required analysis and interpretation of symbolic language, which did not come easily to the participants, and consequently, they liked it less. Excerpts and short stories that provided no background on the story or the setting and stories with open endings were regarded as more difficult than complete stories with defined beginnings and ends. Stories that had clear themes about which the students had some background were more enjoyable and easier to understand. The participants all seemed to agree that if the content of the story or literary text was sensitive to their culture, they liked it better and understood it better. Content extremely inappropriate to their culture and religious beliefs discouraged their reading and involvement. Participants reported that discussing intimate relationships in class was something out of the question. If a story referred to any culturally inappropriate aspects, participants said that it

should never be discussed in class. Stories that involved universal issues important to all humanity (such as stories about some social problems excluding those related to sex) were favored by all participants. The participants also indicated that reading about new events in a story intrigued them and encouraged them to continue reading so long as these events were not outside the normal or logical situations, which their minds could accept as possible. Science fiction stories were considered difficult by many participants due to the terminology that might be used and because some of the events were hard to fathom or believe.

However, all the participants preferred stories of any type to poetry. Since the participants had little experience of English poetry, they found interpreting poetry and getting involved in it difficult. They regarded articles and essays as more straightforward but less interesting than stories. They surmised that comprehension of an article or an essay depends on the topic it was discussing and the level of language complexity it was written in.

Linguistic challenges and language proficiency

The above linguistic factors (vocabulary, style and structure, genre and text characteristics) are turned into difficulties only when viewed from the perspective of language proficiency. The participants, as formerly mentioned in discussing their profiles, were not proficient or skilled English readers. Their lack of proficiency was a product of difference in culture and language. They were slow readers. When faced with linguistic and cultural difficulty their reading rate was very slow indeed. They resorted to translation in such cases. Some reported that they still thought in Arabic when reading or writing in English or during exams, even if they were not experiencing difficulty. Participant 10 commented that if the text reminded her of an incident that happened to her in her society, she recalled that in Arabic. Not more than three participants said that they liked to view English as a separate language from Arabic and thus thought in English whenever they encountered a situation involving English, except in cases where they looked up new words in the dictionary. Thus, with such a level of language proficiency and with cultural unfamiliarity, students seemed to sometimes struggle with their readings unless they were well chosen for them and unless there was a negotiated discourse between the culture of the students and that of the text.

Challenges while reading Arabic literature

While new vocabulary was the major stumbling block in the participants' English reading ability, style was the major obstacle for them in Arabic reading. Although a condition of diglossia exists in the Arabic language (there are three forms of Arabic: classical Arabic or the language of the Koran, which is the old form of standard Arabic, modern standard Arabic which is the language of literacy, and colloquial Arabic which is the spoken form of Arabic), none of the participants designated vocabulary as their major problem. They all commented that they understood the three forms without major difficulty. They attributed that to the fact that they had studied Arabic for twelve long years while in school and that they had all read the Koran from a very early age. One participant mentioned that her sister was an Arabic teacher who always used standard Arabic in her fourth grade and seventh grade classes. The participant mentioned that sometimes the young students in those classes experienced difficulty with standard Arabic. When they read classical Arabic poetry such as the poetry called "Al-Mualaqat", long poems that were praised for their eloquence and literary Arabic style and were hung on the walls of Al-Kaabah (the most revered holy mosque of Muslims in Mecca) prior to the Islamic era, some participants acknowledged that they sometimes had difficulty with vocabulary. However, the rhythm of the poetry itself made them appreciate it and enjoy reading it.

Philosophical as well as analytical styles were those most detested by most of the participants. These styles, even though the language of writing was Arabic, were described as confusing and thus tedious to read. A significant number of participants gave the Arabic novel *The Genius of Khalid*, which they studied in high school, as an example of a novel that uses a difficult writing style. The author, Al-Aqad, who was one of the most prominent Arabic writers, wrote in a very analytical manner. He used philosophy, history and religion to support his points. The analysis often separated events and branched into different directions, and then the writer returned to his main point or event to show how it progressed in the story line. A few participants said that they had no difficulty understanding the story as it was. A couple attributed that to having had a good teacher who explained and simplified the novel for them.

The writing style followed by most recent writers of short stories or the new form of Arabic poetry (free poetry) was not favored by any of the participants. They viewed most of what has been written according to the new trend as ambiguous at best and meaningless at least. Modern

writers use symbolism to the extent that no or very little meaning can be derived from their obscure texts. Many participants recalled reading modern Arabic short stories and failing to understand them. The participants indicated that understanding is a necessary condition or prerequisite for involvement even in short stories. Arabic poetry, composed using the traditional rhythms, could be enjoyed but modern free poetry is not composed according to these rhythms and thus is hard to enjoy, especially if it is ambiguous.

Few participants compared analytical novels with novels that contained no analysis but which went about telling the story through narration and conversation. They gave the novel *Wa Islamah*, a novel written by the famous Egyptian writer Ali Bakatheer, as an example of the narration-conversation style novel that they understood without any complications in comparison with Al- Aqad's *The Genius of Khalid*, which was analytical and philosophical. Additionally, as with English reading, the participants also indicated that they favored styles that used conversation rather than just analysis or narration in laying out the events of the story.

The content of the Arabic literary work and familiarity or lack of familiarity with it came in the second position after style as the second factor affecting the participants' understanding of and involvement with Arabic texts. "Familiar content facilitates prediction," a majority of the participants commented. Participant 3 held that when reading about the Arab culture, "I know the culture, so I can predict how events will develop and what course they will take." Participant 20 remarked that in the context of reading about Arabic culture, even if there were elements new to her, she would still understand them because she was familiar with the total context and with what was acceptable and what was not acceptable, what was likely and what was not likely to happen.

In terms of the time needed to read something familiar, the participants reported that they read Arabic stories discussing Arabic culture fairly quickly and with ease. If the culture had been new, they said they would definitely have needed more time to read and comprehend. Among many other participants, participant 9 mentioned that she fell back on her cultural knowledge and perspective when dealing with cultural content foreign to her. She maintained that she used her cultural point of view and religion to interpret and look upon events and characters in the story.

The Arabic stories the participants reported they enjoyed most were the ones that discussed social issues present in their own society. They liked stories that discussed universal human

aspects or concerns. Thus, the participants liked to read Arabic and English stories on similar themes. As Arabic readers, the participants rated themselves between excellent and very good. As English readers, the participants rated themselves between average, good or very good. All said in general that their Arabic reading skill (provided the content was familiar to them) was much better than their English reading skill. As Arabic readers they were fast and efficient, but they were not so fast or efficient when reading in English. Many said that their reading experience was still limited and that they would still need to read a great deal in order to improve.

Conclusion

As asserted at the beginning of the paper, reading is a very complex process in which many factors interact to shape the meaning the reader gets from the text, an assertion that can be gleaned from the findings of this study. To clarify, the present study has revealed the interaction of different factors, such as language proficiency, writing style, sentence structure, genre and textual characteristics including culture, content and context – three interrelated elements – can determine whether a foreign language student will continue reading the literary piece or just give up and quit. Echoing findings of previous research, this study revealed that participants perceived vocabulary as the biggest hurdle in reading literature. While previous literature often viewed vocabulary as related to language proficiency (Mourtaga, 2006; Cobb, 1999), the participants linked it to culture, context and content. When the latter three were new to participants, the vocabulary used would almost certainly contain new words, phrases and expressions that they did not know. Repetition of the same new word in the text could help in guessing its meaning and unlocking the text. Familiarity of text content or culture were reported as main facilitators of comprehension and involvement. Interest in the topic of the story was another element that facilitates involvement in it, and motivated readers to continue reading it, provided the vocabulary was not too hard for them.

Participants' indicated that their reading speed was facilitated by text familiarity. However, they said that sometimes they read slowly on purpose, especially if they were trying to notice the language and learn how ideas are conveyed or when trying to learn information from the text they read. They preferred to read non-fiction short stories and novels to reading poetry. Prior to

studying poetry, the participants had negative perceptions about it, but their perceptions improved after studying it. Still, they liked it less than short stories and novels.

When faced with a difficult text, participants said they read slowly, vocalized words, used context to guess the meaning of new words or used a dictionary if there were not many new words and the text was interesting. In cases when it was not, they just lost interest and abandoned the reading. Sometimes, participants resorted to thinking about the Arabic meaning of the text. For example, if the text reminded them of a past experience, they recalled the experience in Arabic.

The background of the participants and their profiles as readers appeared to have a direct influence on their reading of literature and comprehension of it. They had little tolerance for ambiguity because texts with multiple meanings were not part of their Arabic or English school education. They were unable to perceive symbolism or grasp the symbolic meaning of nature description in texts because of the same reason.

When asked to rate their reading ability in Arabic, they all indicated that it ranges from very good to excellent, while they indicated that their English reading proficiency was merely good. This is understandable given the fact that they are foreign language learners. However, it highlights the importance of helping them to improve their proficiency since they were already finishing their third year at university and one year of college education was remaining for them. Since after their fourth year, they would be looking for employment in fields using English, it is necessary to equip them with the skills necessary for their success, proficient reading being one of the most important, if not the most important of them all. Therefore, to help students to improve their English language proficiency, professors have to select level appropriate materials for them, considering their abilities, needs, and interests. While it is important to expose students to authentic literature, it is also important to choose readings that are interesting and involving for students. Gradual introduction of authentic materials from the less difficult and more familiar to the more demanding and less familiar can help in this regard. Students can be consulted on the topics they would like to read about. This study revealed that students liked topics on issues related to humanity, but disliked ones that go counter to their religion and culture. This could be investigated further by the teachers to find out what topics in particular could be interesting for them. Further research in the Omani context could also investigate in

depth, using different data collection procedures, the reading strategies employed by students to overcome the challenges they face. The present study showed that students were metacognitively aware of the challenges they face while reading literature, and it shed light on some of the strategies they used to combat these challenges. However, its real focus was not on the strategies but on the challenges. Therefore, researching reading strategies in depth could be another area of study for future research. In addition, longitudinal studies can be conducted at schools and colleges to find out the factors that contribute in shaping students' attitudes towards reading. Oman still suffers from an absence of a reading culture, a phenomena shared by most Arab Gulf countries. Therefore, it is important to dedicate much attention to exploring this area, be it reading in Arabic or reading in English because reading is an essential life skill that is vital for success in most professions.

This study can be considered an exploratory one, since it reports on data obtained from one data collection instrument and since it uses a small sample of 23 female students. For more solid and generalizable results, future research has to report on findings triangulated by several data collection instruments, and using a larger sample.

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Appendix

Questions for the semi-structured interviews:

1. Please, tell me about yourself as a reader?
2. As a child, did you read much; were you read to?
3. How available were books in the place where you grew up?
4. How often do you read now?
5. How often do you read in English?
6. What do you read in English?
7. How often do you read in Arabic?
8. What do you read in Arabic?
9. What was your perception about English literature before taking literature courses?
10. What challenges do you face while reading literature in English? Can you give me examples?
11. What challenges do you face while reading Arabic literature? Can you give me examples?
12. What is the biggest challenge for you while reading in literature English?
13. What is the biggest challenge for you while reading Arabic literature?
14. Can you order for me the challenges?
15. Do you consider yourself a proficient reader in English?
16. Do you consider yourself a proficient reader in Arabic?
17. Would you like to add anything about you as a reader?