Understanding Omani students' (University) English Language Problems

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the survey details conducted among the students of an Engineering college in Oman, relating to the students' learning difficulties, where the medium of instruction is English. In most of the Omani schools, English is learnt as a language and is not a medium of instruction. The students' familiarity with English is therefore limited. At the professional college level, when the medium of instruction itself is English, the students' comprehensive understanding of the subject is doubtful. A bridging course in the form of foundation program is offered to prepare the students for the Engineering programs. Nevertheless, even after such foundation program training, it is observed that the students are not comfortable in classes taught in English, as medium of Instruction. This is reflected in their understanding of the modules, class participation, exam preparation and their overall performance and study experience. This is revealed in the survey conducted and it shows, that language barrier, does affect the performance of the students due to their lack of proficiency in English language. An attempt is also made to understand the teaching staffs' attitude towards such students English language difficulties.

Keywords: Oman; English; Language barrier

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1. Introduction

According to Salha and Nariman[1] in the paper 'Post Basic Education Reforms in Oman', a strategic plan has been initiated in 2001 to ensure that the students will be adequately prepared for the requirements of higher education. As per the authors, teaching English from Grade 1 was included as one of the educational reforms initiated in 2001 – but, the reforms are not fully implemented, and both the new and the old systems are coexisting. The present generation of students at the college level has not had the privilege of learning English language from the primary level. This is perhaps one of the reasons that the present batches of college students find learning in English, an uphill task in higher education. Pendergrass[2] is of the view that integrating English into Engineering, Science and Math courses is an effective way to improve the performance of engineering students in oral and written communication. It follows that Omani students' 'academic performance' in engineering programs hinges on their ability to learn the program through English language. In many of the professional institutes, one of the key performance indicators is the employability of students. It is the effectiveness of teaching that is translated into the skills that the students gain, and in turn is reflected as the employability of the students. There in, emerges, the medium of instruction as one of the factors that dictate the effectiveness of teaching and learning, according to Salha and Nariman[1]Khan[3] , in his research paper 'Learning difficulties in English : Diagnosis and pedagogy in Saudi Arabia' is of the view that despite a sound planning, purposive curriculum, suitable textbooks, qualified teachers and effective administration, the teaching-learning process sometimes, seems to be ineffective. Even with the best of facilities, it is possible that the students still do not assimilate the lectures delivered in English language. As per the study conducted by Issac et al.[4] that in general, the ESL (English as a second language) results confirm that students who do not consider English to be their primary language experience more difficulty in passing the writing examination, therefore, reducing the overall pass rate for their major. The authors go on to state that, from the data they have collected, it is clear that the lack of facility with the English language does impose additional hurdles for those students within the ESL (English as a second language) category. This supports the present survey carried out in an Engineering college in Oman that the majority of Omani students have difficulty in understanding the engineering subjects, as English is a second language to all these students. A study made by Gallahar[5] focuses on the learning difficulties of Arab students in a medical college in Saudi Arabia. The author mentions that the difficulties of medical students in coping with English were protean, pervasive and persistent. Jewels &Albon[6] rightly point out that many university teachers assume that there is a correlation between language competency and success at a university; though, it is probably inconsiderate to believe that the language competency alone leads to better learning outcomes. However, it becomes a real concern, when the native students have to fully comprehend the concepts in a professional college taught in a non native language and later on have to practice them in the field. The language deficiency, at the learning stage, is a major performance hurdle. With respect to Omani students in a private Engineering college in Oman, it is noted that, while the teachers are aware of the lack of English language competency in general, among the students, they are not aware of the degree of effectiveness of their lectures. The students may not clarify their doubts in class for fear of expressing themselves correctly in English. Hence, the teachers may assume that their teaching had clarity and had reached all the students. It is in this context the survey was done among the students. The primary objective of the study is to find out the percentage of students who do not understand the lectures delivered in the class. With this objective, a survey was done among 132 students of an Engineering College in Oman. The questionnaire was put on the college website and the students, voluntarily, filled in their response. As such it is believed that the response is without any external bias or influence. Though the number of students, who have participated in the survey, is not large, it still reflects effectively the English language difficulties of the overall population of the students of the college, as viewed by the Acting Dean of the college.

2. Methodology:

The research design used is Descriptive Design. Data collection was done using a questionnaire uploaded in college website, using Survey Monkey. The students were requested to participate in the survey on a voluntary basis. The questionnaire covered aspects such as class room participation, exam preparation, their own inclination to improve their English knowledge and their utilization of technical facility like Blackboard. The responses were collected on a three point scale namely Agree, Disagree and Neutral. The survey was taken by 132 students from out of approximately 2000 students. The response, it is believed, reflects the local students' perception on the difficulties they face, when the medium of instruction is English. The survey was answered by two groups of students. Students

who have been directly admitted in to Engineering programs based on their good performance in the admission tests as well as by the students who have gone through foundation program of the college –as a result of their below par performance in the college admission tests. However, both the groups have cleared the necessary minimum qualifications that are a pass in ThanawiyaAmma (secondary school leaving certificate) or equivalent exams at the school finals. The staff members of the college were also requested to partake in the survey to find out their attitude towards the students learning abilities when the medium of instruction is English. Out of a total of 85 staff members, 55 participated in the survey using the Survey Monkey. Only two questions were posted to them and their response is also considered in this article.

3. The questionnaire for the students' survey:

The questionnaire survey comprised of three broad groups of total eight questions and one general question making up to nine questions in all; Class room behavior, exam and tests preparation/response and the students' attitude towards practice of English language. The list is as given below:

Group 1 question:

3.1 Class room behavior of the students: (4 Questions):

The intention is to find out, from the students' perspective the extent of understanding of the class lecture, delivered in English.

3.1.1. Do you fully understand the class lecture delivered in English?

3.1.2. Do you take part in class discussions?

3.1.3. Do you think your teachers help you with your understanding of the subject, if you don't understand the language?

3.1.4. If you do not understand any words /terms do you ask your teacher for its meaning?

Group 2 questions (2 Questions)

3.2 Exam and tests preparation/response

3.2.1What is the different study materials used for preparing for exams?

The students are given a text book, course materials to facilitate understanding and for further studies. They also have access to library books and many students are encouraged to take class notes during the lecture. The purpose of the question is to find out if the students are comfortable in referring other books while preparing for the exams /tests.

3.2.2. In class tests and final exams, when you know the answer, are you able to write and answer well?

Group 3 questions: (2 Questions)

3.3Students' attitude towards practice of English language

3.3.1Are you prepared to attend extra classes and put in extra efforts for improving your English language ability?

3.3.2Do you read any other English books on your own as a hobby or as a matter of interest?

General question (One Question)

3.4Utilization of a teaching aid 'Blackboard by students

3.4.1 Do you use of Blackboard facilities of the college?

The responses from the students are listed graphically as well as in terms of percentages in Appendix 1 for each of the questions listed.

4. Findings and interpretations:

The responses received for the first group of questions relating to the class room behavior of the students, indicate that 45% of the students do not completely understand the full lecture delivered in English. In a mixed class of direct entry and foundation students this percentage is 33% .This means that one third of the class are not able to understand the full lecture delivered by the teaching staff. The figures that come out for class participation is encouraging as 52% of the students mentioned that they take part in class discussions. It was also noticed that one fourth of the class students do not ask doubts due to their lack of fluency in English language.(Reference to question 3.1.4). Ghaleb [7] observed that the students find it difficult to communicate their doubts or express their ideas clearly in English. When engaged in authentic communicative situations, they often lack the necessary vocabulary they need to get their meaning across. As a result, they cannot keep the interaction going for an extended period of time. In respect of the teachers' helpfulness for clarifications on English language doubts (mainly relating to the meanings of words) 56% of the students responded that the teachers are 'somewhat helpful'. This comment is predominantly from Foundation group as 64% felt that way. However 37% of the students felt the staff members are very helpful. When read with the staff survey, it could mean that these students (37%) are exposed to the staff members who are totally helpful to the students .The staff survey, helped us to categorize the staff into three types – those who are totally helpful (62%), second group who would help but focus on delivery of the subject (32%) and the third group who are totally not helpful. (6%).This (6%) group of staff members (as per the survey conducted among 55 of 85 teaching staff members) feel that the students at this level, after gaining admission in to the professional college, should have the ability to understand the lectures delivered in English. However 62% of staff members take care to explain to the students, if the students do not understand certain English terms /words used in the class. For the second group of questions that relates to exam/test preparations, it is seen that all the students rely on the course work materials given in the class. This could lead one to wonder if providing course work materials stand in their way of referring other books from resources like college library. In the college, where this survey was done, during the month of March'13, 234 students have taken books from the college library. This is about 8% of the college students' population. The data only substantiates the survey findings, in terms of the students' dependence on the course handouts and materials given in the class. In respect of the query, about their extent of comprehension of questions and answering in English, 34% of the students mentioned that they do not fully understand the questions asked in the exams.7% of the students mentioned that they do not understand the questions at all. In all 41% of the students are not able to write in detail because of 'English language' problems. This point is aptly brought out by Harrasi [8] who opines that the learners usually tend to make their writing simple only because they are unfamiliar or unsure of how some words are spelt and this prevents them from expressing their thoughts and ideas more accurately and academically. The next type of questions relate to the students attitude to putting extra efforts to improve their English fluency. The student responses revealed that only 44% of the students showed interest in putting extra efforts to develop proficiency in English language. 32% are not interested in putting extra efforts to improve their English language abilities. On analysis of the data, it was found that 50% of the foundation students are ready for extra classes and efforts where as in direct entry category, one third of the students are interested. It means that higher proportion of foundation students look for additional help in English language compared to direct entry students. This can be an indication that the foundation students' English language proficiency is weaker compared to direct entry students, in spite of the bridging course in the beginning of their program. Further, from the responses, it is also noted that one third of the students lack the motivation to improve their language and it is really disconcerting. The lack of interest or motivation can also be ascribed to the need to communicate in a society in a language other than their own (Arabic). In the case of the Arab world, Arab learners have little opportunities to use the foreign language in their society. As a result, many problems occur when they study at a university where the medium of instruction is a foreign language like English as per author Al-Khasawneh [9].However, FroilanVB [10] has a different take on the subject. The author mentions that the Arab learners'

preference to speak in their mother tongue should not be the sole reason, as to why they have slow communicative development in English. According to the author, the ineffective teaching and learning process also contribute to this general problem. In perspective, if a student spends four years are more in a professional college, where the medium of instruction is English, and still, if their English language ability is much to be desired, then the authors' notion, definitely needs a closer second look. In respect of students' lack of motivation to improve their English language, Kassim[11] examined the motivation of 180 university-bound Lebanese students to learn English as a foreign language (EFL). His findings revealed that female students were more motivated than their male counterparts in improving their English language. However, the findings did not show a significant effect on motivation related to either students' first foreign language or university major. While the authors' observation about the influence of gender on the Lebanese students' interest to learn English is noted, our survey here was focused generally on the overall inclination of the students to improve their English language abilities. Questions should arise now, as to how to tap and rejuvenate the interest in learning the English language among the Arab learners. The survey also revealed that 90% of the students utilized the college Blackboard facility. This is a pointer that shows, when, Blackboard facility is a part of the teaching aid, with course work and assignments blended into it, the students develop the habit of accessing it. There is perhaps an unseen idea here. If the majority of students take up a teaching aid like Blackboard, is it not possible to plant a technology oriented teaching aid on English learning in Blackboard or in the students' mobile phones. For instance, English learning software that is available as a mobile learning device could, perhaps, reduce the English fluency divide among the Arab students. A study conducted by Abdurrahman [12] in UAE, investigated the effect of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) on elementary-prep school students' improvement in English as a foreign language (EFL). According to the study, students had a positive attitude toward CALL, perceived its utility for helping them learn EFL, and had a strong intention to use it in the future. Although this study is done among much younger group, it is to be noted here, that such learning software had a positive influence on their learning ability. RahmaAM [13] adds a different dimension to the issue in a study conducted on English Department courses and students' perception of them. According to the study, more language courses are requested by students, and sixteen per cent of the participants wanted more translation courses. The underlying theme here is that the students' perspective should also be given due importance while designing language support classes to enhance their English Language abilities.
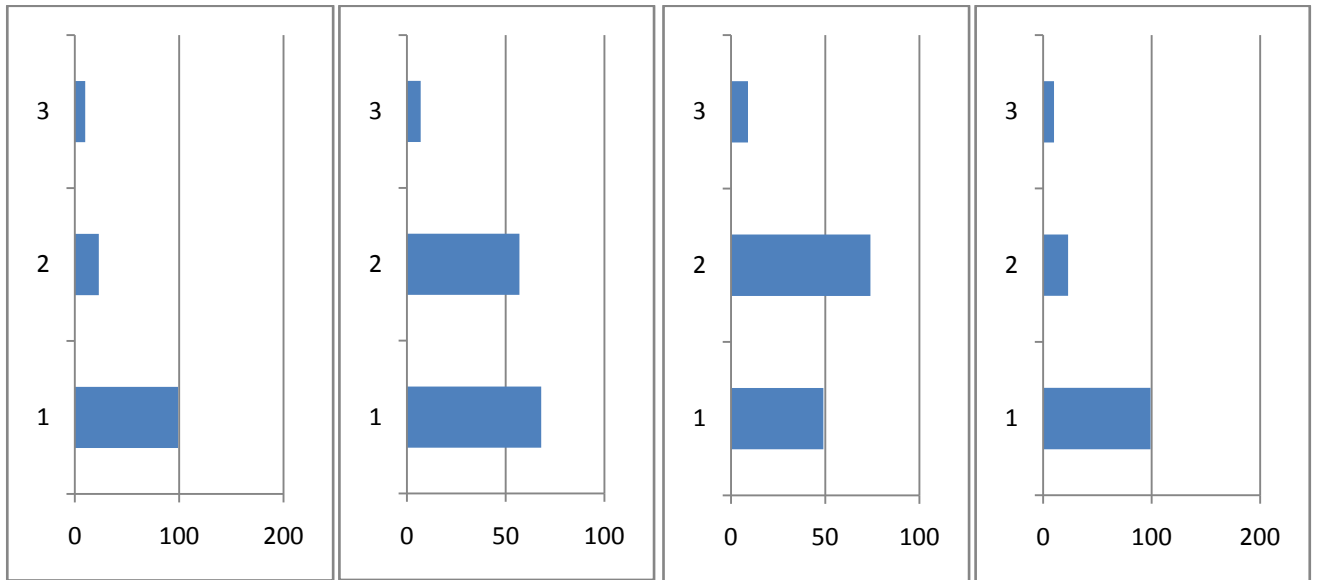
5. Constraints:

The survey was a voluntary one and hence only 132 students took part. This may not be a substantial response considering that the total student strength is 2000.Students' not being exposed to such surveys conducted with the help of 'Survey Monkey' software, could be a factor for such muted response. Further, the survey being conducted in English could be another factor for not getting an overwhelming response from the student population.
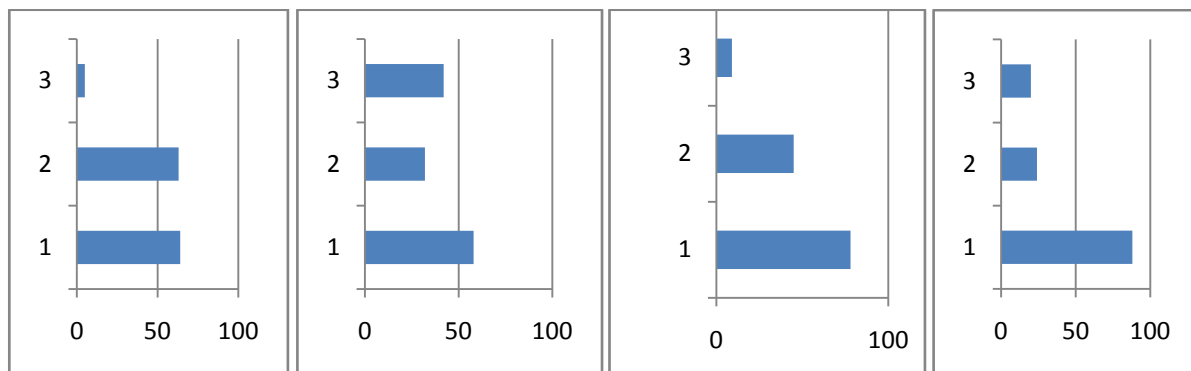
6. Conclusions:

Arab students face a lot of difficulties in learning the English language. Most of them are due to the basic structural differences between Arabic and English languages as per Bughio Q &ShabbirB [14] . The problem is compounded when they are learning some other academic subject in English. The scene that emerges after this survey is that a considerable percentage of the students do not understand the classes delivered in English and this can present a major problem, especially in professional colleges where the students are to exhibit their understanding of fundamental technical concepts in the fields. The teachers have a major role to play in making the students understand the technical subjects. Motivating the students to participate in the class discussions and providing additional examples that suit the Omani context should make them understand the concepts better. The college in which the survey was done has the necessary infrastructure, like foundation programs and has instituted compulsory credits for employability and professional skills development courses. In spite of these factors, the students still lack English language communication skills. It is imperative that innovative schemes are introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education and college authorities to motivate the students so that they willingly take the journey to become more proficient in English language**.**

Appendix 1 – Questionnaire survey graphical analysis: Number of students surveyed:132Group 1 questionnaire and responses:

Group 2 and 3 questionnaires and responses:

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3.2.1 What are the different study materials used for preparing for exams?	3.2.2 In class tests and final exams, when you know the answer, are you able to write and answer well?	3.3.1 Are you prepared to attend extra classes and put in extra efforts for improving your English language ability?	3.3.2 Do you read any other English books on your own as a hobby or as a matter of interest?
1. Course materials, text books and class notes –64(48%) 2. Course materials and class notes –63(48%) 3. Course materials only -5(04%)	1. We are able to write well -78(59%) 2. Not able to write completely because of English language writing problems -45(34%) 3. Omit questions that calls for detailed answer -9(07%)	1. Interested in attending extra classes –58(44%) 2. Not immediately interested -32(24%) 3. Not at all interested -42(32%)	**1-**Students reading other books as a matter of interest 88(67%) 2-Students do not read other English books because they do not understand them well 24 (18%) 3Not interested in reading other English books (15%)

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