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in Arab Universities Should Focus on by Rahma Al Mahrooqi and Hooriya Al-Shihi

**Literature, Language or Linguistics? Student Perspectives on What
English Departments in Arab Universities Should Focus on**

Rahma Al Mahrooqi and Hooriya Al-Shihi

Bios:

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Abstract

As the requirements of the international job market grow, so also does the need for English language proficiency. Hence university English departments find themselves offering an expanding range of courses for Arts majors to meet this need. Faculty tends to emphasize course provision in literature and linguistics. But are their students benefiting from this emphasis? Though literature and linguistics are clearly important, they need to be balanced by language and translation courses. At Sultan Qaboos University's English Department the stress on literature and linguistics is failing to produce a proficiency in English among many of its students. Because this is causing negative attitudes towards the teaching program, the main purpose of this study was to discover which courses (literature, linguistics, or language skills) find most favor with students and are seen therefore as contributing most to their acquisition of English language skills. The findings show that students thought that literature, linguistics and language courses are all important and in varying degrees contribute to their language development, but that there are factors limiting benefit from some of them. Also, there was a greater preference for literature courses than for linguistics ones. A majority (90%) of the participants thought that language skills courses were too few in the study plan and wanted more of them. Sixteen per cent wanted more translation courses.



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Introduction

As globalization accelerates, there is a growing need for English as a language of communication. Across the Arab nations job market leaders are stressing English as a tool for gaining advantage in a world rife with competition (Zughoul, 2003). It is needed, they feel, as a platform for societal modernity and for the acquisition of advanced technology and high-quality education. Hence, on a large scale, governments have introduced English teaching into their schools and even, in many cases, as a medium of instruction in higher education. Yet research has repeatedly shown that Arab EFL learners lack proficiency and communicative ability in English (Moody, 2009, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a). Rabab'ah (2003) noted that Jordanian students face lexical problems in both written and spoken communication, while Sudanese students are found to make serious syntactical errors in verb and phrase use. Among Egyptians the most noted problems relate to pronunciation and Arab students broadly are found to struggle with reading (Cobb & Horst, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2010; Mourtaga, 2006; Shannon, 2003, Shmais, 2002; Mustafa, 2002, Al-Mahrooqi, 2012b; Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010). EFL reading difficulties are thought to arise from an absence of a reading culture, word recognition skills, and inadequate reading strategies (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012b). Poor language proficiency clearly obstructs reading comprehension, involvement and enjoyment (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012b; Zaghoul, 1986; Bouzenirh, 1991).

Reflecting on these problems, their causes, and possible solutions, English language scholars have examined what English Departments in the Arab World are offering their students (Obeidat, 1997; Zaghoul, 1987). Their findings have shown that the core of study plans comprises attention to linguistics, literature and language skills. Professors, however, divide into three factions: those strongly supporting literature, those advocating language and linguistics, and those convinced that English departments (while taking



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 student opinion into account) should strive to improve student language proficiency through all program courses.

Obeidat (1997) thinks that literature courses provide the best means of attaining English proficiency because in them students can and will improve the four central skills by listening to the teacher, writing notes, reading, and discussing issues arising from the text. Specific language skills and linguistics courses in his view are unnecessary and produce little language competence. He adds that literature is not just about teaching new words and vocabulary, which some researchers see as useless: it also exposes students to the cultures and traditions of other nations. Finally, he states that the main purpose of English departments should not be to graduate students merely with high language proficiency but students with also cultural knowledge. Sharing Obeidat's view, Mahmud Salih (1986) surveyed 118 Arab English majors and found that literature courses really did seem to develop and enhance the four core skills. In his words:

The student survey shows that language skills seem to develop through studying literature in English. The positive impact of literature in language skills is by no means novel, since students exercise or practice all of the skills in literature courses. During a literature class, they are required to listen to what an instructor is saying, they must jot down notes, they often ask or answer questions, and they are frequently required to read passages relevant to the idea(s) under consideration. (p. 25)

However, scholars advocating language and linguistics criticize English Departments in the Arab world for the dominance of literature courses in their study plans. They argue that teaching foreign literature in the Arab world conflicts with the students' cultural norms and hence should not be the focus on English Arts study plans. Zughoul (1986,



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Literature, Language or Linguistics? Student Perspectives on What English Departments in Arab Universities Should Focus on by Rahma Al Mahrooqi and Hooriya Al-Shihi (1987) laments the neglect of language and linguistics courses and states that this is responsible for Arab students' low English proficiency. He asserts that literary language is not the language used in daily communication and that English and American literatures are irrelevant for the current job market. He thus advocates language and linguistics courses as the basis of English Arts study plans. The language and linguistics school of thought is supported by other scholars, such as Bader (1992) and Makthari (2003; cited in Al-Kharabsheh, Al-Azzam and Obeidat, 2009).

The third group represents a moderate view and Madeline Haggan is one of its prominent representatives. She (1999) argues that the emphasis should simply be on promoting a high level of language proficiency through all offered courses. In her opinion, English professors can be too narrow-minded. Linguistics, language, and literature are all important aspects of the English curriculum, with different aims for developing and enhancing language learning, and each one of them with its own tools and methodology. She states:

The objective of teaching literature is surely to develop in the student the basics of aesthetic appreciation of the literature produced in a given language, while that of linguistics is to enable the student to see something of the intricate beauty of linguistic systems and the wonder of man's adeptness vis-a-vis this complexity (para. 5).

She also suggests that English departments should look again at their roles and policies, perhaps allowing literature or linguistics to be students' 'chosen specialization', according to their interests, as this might increase the possibility of producing more professional graduates. Also, there should be an emphasis on language courses before allowing students to study more specialized ones. English departments should also emphasize work in translation, which would offer a chance to connect literature, linguistics, and practical training. Haggan conducted a study which showed that students'



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purpose in joining an English department is based on their love of the English language and their desire to improve their proficiency in it not on their love of literature or linguistics. Job prospects were their second main consideration. In Haggan's words:

students overwhelmingly gave the wish to perfect their language or their love of the English language as their aim in joining the English department. Closely following this was the idea that studying English would get them a good job. Neither the love of literature nor linguistics figured significantly in their responses (para. 22).

Meanwhile, Haggan's work apart, very little research has asked what students think and prefer. Work carried out by Al-Kharabsheh, Al-Azzam and Obeidat (2009) was a rare example. They surveyed 75 Jordanian undergraduate English majors to investigate their course preferences and participants wrote essays expressing their opinions. They concluded that "some students prefer language/linguistics; some literature; and others translation for reasons that have varied from future expectations, to market demands, to personal likings" (p. 968).

Since the debate has now reached Oman in its spread, where relevant studies have not yet appeared, it was felt that the present study was timely.

The aim of the study

The study's main purpose was to discover which of the courses (literature, linguistics, or language skills) are most favored by students. It also aimed to investigate student opinions on which of these courses contribute most to their English language proficiency.

Participants

The participants, numbering 31, were students in SQU's English Department and their majors were Arts (23), Translation (4), and Education (4). All were in their third or fourth year of study and thus aware of the various courses on offer (linguistics, literature,



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Literature, Language or Linguistics? Student Perspectives on What English Departments in Arab Universities Should Focus on by Rahma Al Mahrooqi and Hooriya Al-Shihi and language skills). All were females, since no males volunteered to participate, with ages ranging from 18-23.

Instrument

The instrument used was a questionnaire comprising 12 questions. Eleven required open-ended answers while the last was a multiple choice one. The first question asked which courses students preferred the most. The second asked which courses they felt were the most important in the English curriculum and the third asked what were the important features they found in a course they considered good. The fourth question examined student attitudes towards the courses offered in their overall study plans while the fifth concentrated on the courses they thought contributed most to their language proficiency. The sixth question asked about courses that contributed little to language proficiency. The seventh and the eighth questions sought to determine student views on which courses in their study plan seemed to be given most emphasis and which should receive more attention. The ninth question asked about the importance of language skills courses and which of the skills should receive special emphasis in them. The eleventh question simply asked which courses students preferred to study - literature, language or linguistics - and the last sought their comments on a set of statements taken from Marrwan M. Obeidat's (1997) article "Literature vs. Linguistics in English Departments in the Arab World."

Procedures

After distributing the questionnaire students were given a week to submit their answers and were encouraged to be as frank as possible. The data was then analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.



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Research findings

The findings of the study are displayed for the three main areas of literature, linguistics, and language skills.

Literature

The results revealed that 42% of the participants prefer to study literature courses and that 55% would select literature courses if they had a chance to choose the courses for their study plan. However, only 3% (one person) thought that literature courses were the most important components of the study plan. On the other hand, the results also showed that 20% of the participants thought that literature courses contributed most to their language proficiency. Although 55% said that literature courses received the most emphasis in their study plan, 10% thought that they should get more emphasis.

Linguistics

Data analysis showed that 26% of the participants liked linguistics more than literature or language skills courses and that 32% would choose them if they could select the courses for their study plan. It also revealed that only 6% (2 respondents) considered linguistics courses as the most important in their study plan and 23% that they contributed most to their language proficiency. Twenty-three percent of the participants thought that linguistics courses received more emphasis in the study plan than literature or language skills courses, while 3% (one respondent only) thought that they should get more emphasis.

Language skills

Data analysis showed that 26% of the participants prefer to study language skills courses, 66% thought they were the most important courses in the study plan, and 65% thought they contribute the most to their language proficiency. It also showed that 19% of the



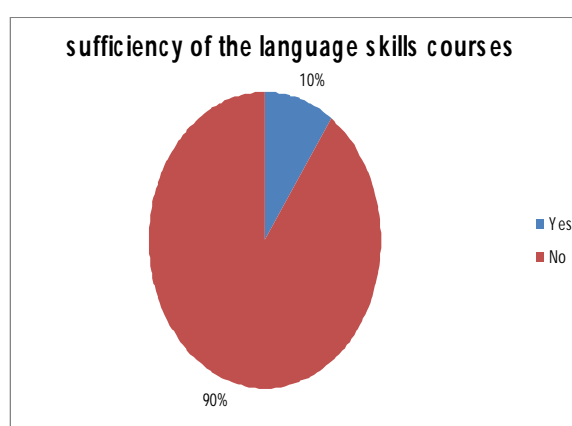
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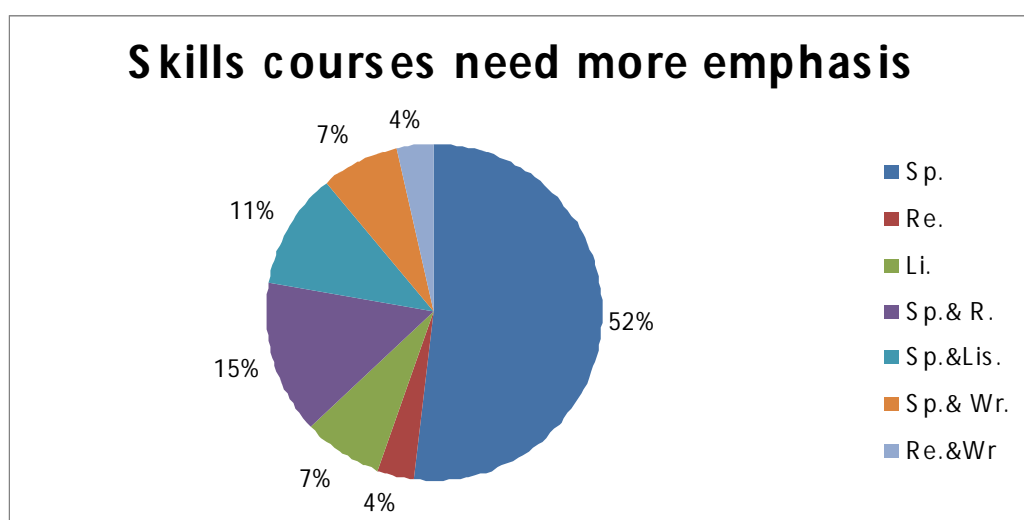
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participants thought that language skills courses received most emphasis in the study plan and 52% said that they should get more emphasis. The results also revealed that 90% of the participants felt that language skills courses were too few in number and that 10% of them said that they were sufficient, as shown in the diagram below:



The data also showed that 52% of the participants wanted more speaking courses and 15% said there should be more courses in both speaking and reading. Eleven percent suggested that speaking and listening should get more courses. Other courses were included but they got lower percentages, as shown in the diagram below:





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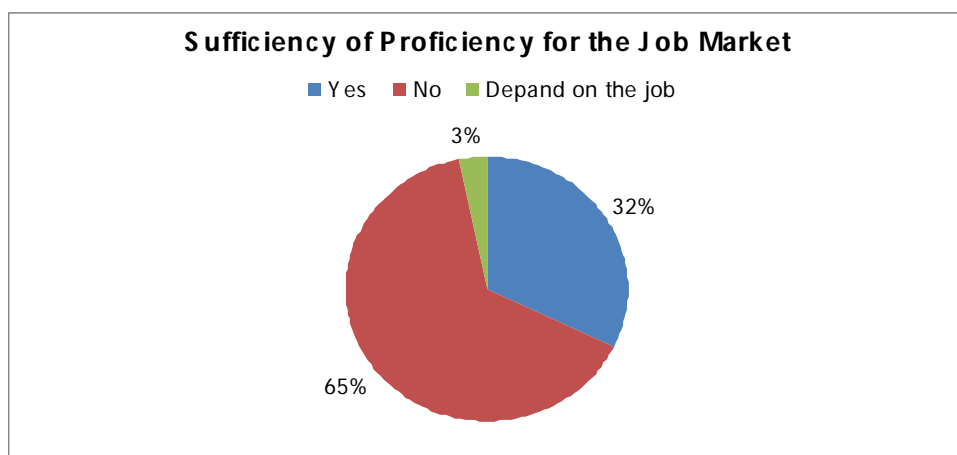
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Sp. (speaking), Re. (reading), Li. (listening), Wr. (writing).

Other results

Data analysis revealed other results, showing, for example, that 16% of the students believed that translation courses should be given more emphasis and that 3% (one student only) would choose them if they could select the courses for their study plan. It also showed that most participants were not ready to enter the job market. This can be seen from the diagram (3) below:

Diagram (3): In the last years of your study, do you think you are proficient enough to enter the job market?



The diagram shows that 65% of the participants said they were not proficient enough to enter the job market; 32% said they were, and 3% (one participant only) said it depended on the job.

Analysis also showed that most participants thought there was no need to study the entire study plan's courses, a view shown in diagram (4):

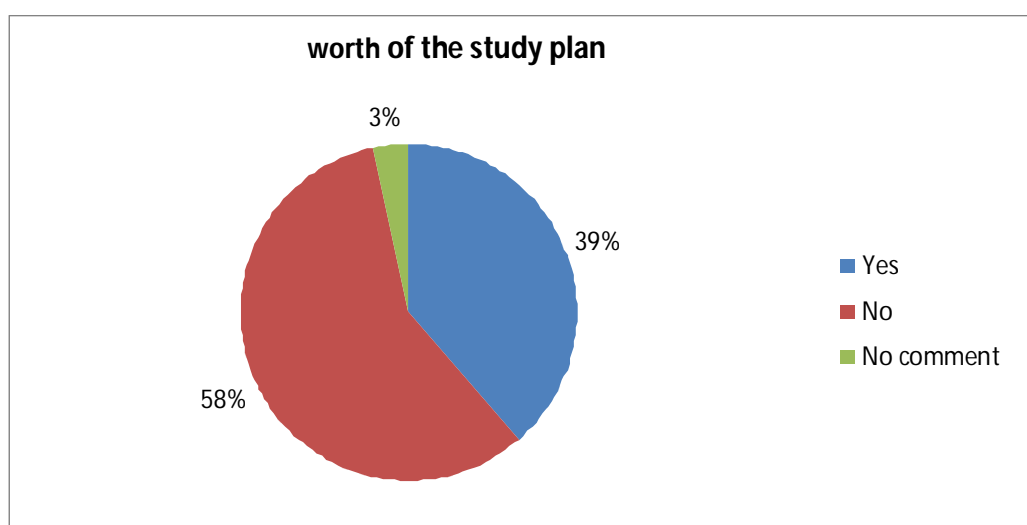


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Diagram (4)



The diagram shows that 58% of the participants thought there was no need to study all the study plan's courses and that 39% thought it was indeed worth studying them all. Participants also showed that a good teacher, interesting and varied materials, and effective methodology were features of a good course. They also liked courses to be related to their culture. The results further revealed that 52% of the participants thought that all their study plan's courses were useful, while 45% said that some were useless and did not advance their language proficiency. These included some courses in literature, linguistics, academic writing, Arabic, and translation.

Discussion

Since 74% of the participants were Arts students, it was not surprising that the majority preferred to study literature courses. Another reason for this was the varied materials in these courses (novels, poetry, short stories etc), which made the lectures interesting. Literature courses also reveal the cultures and traditions of the different countries the



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texts come from. However, in some of these courses students sometimes do not participate much, or else there is no discussion between the teacher and students, which makes them ineffective for improving language skills, a finding echoing Al-Mahrooqi's (2012c) study results. In comparison with linguistics, however, many students think literature is more exciting and interesting. Some students prefer linguistics courses simply because they think that they are important or because they deal with pronunciation, which helps them in their speaking.

Language courses are seen as very important because they deal with the four skills (speaking, reading, writing, listening), and help students to improve them. The kind of methodology used in them, however, and their teachers may make them uninteresting so that students sometimes get minimal benefit from them. Most students express a desire for more speaking courses. They take just one in the department, which, in their opinion, is insufficient, while in other courses there may not be much interaction, thus providing little hope of improving this speaking skill. The English Department, it is felt, should increase the number of speaking courses.

Results also revealed that some students believe that translation courses, which connect theoretical study in the curriculum with practice, are an effective preparation for the job market. The English Department, they feel, should increase these courses, not only for translation majors but also for Arts and Education students.

Findings clearly show that many students think they are not ready to enter the job market, perhaps because most courses are theoretical and because students do not receive extensive practical training. The English Department could offer more training for third and fourth-year students in order to prepare them for the work environment.



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Conclusion

This study, on English Department courses and student perception of them, revealed that literature, linguistics, and language skills courses are all seen as important by students, but that the greatest preference is for literature courses. Also, more language courses are requested by students, and sixteen per cent of the participants wanted more translation courses. A more extensive study might compare teachers' and students' views and use more than one instrument for data collection. This is an important area of research as the language proficiency of English majors hinges upon it. Deciding what courses an English Language Arts study plan should include is a critical question and essential for any effective attempt to evaluate and restructure these study plans and even English Departments as a whole.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

This is a questionnaire that investigates students' preference regarding which courses (literature, linguistics, or language skills) contribute most to their English language proficiency. Kindly spend a few minutes of your time answering the following questions. Please be assured that your answers will stay confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

Age:	18 - 20	21 - 23	
Gender:	male	female	
Major:	Art	Translation	Education

The questions:

1. Which of the following do you prefer to study: language courses, literature or linguistics?

.....



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2. In your opinion, which of the following courses do you consider the most important: language courses, literature courses, or linguistics courses?

.....

3. In your opinion, what are the features of a good course?

.....

4. In your opinion, is it worth it to study the entire study plan's subjects?

.....

5. In your opinion, which of the following courses contributes most to your language proficiency: language skills courses, literature courses, or linguistics courses?

.....

6. In your opinion, are there any courses that do not add anything to your English proficiency? If yes, then what are these courses?

.....

7. In your opinion, which courses have been given the most emphasis in your study plan?

.....

8. In your opinion, which courses must have more attention in your study plan?

.....

9. In your opinion, are the language courses in your study plan enough to improve the four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking)? If not, which skills should have more emphasis?

.....

10. In the last years of your study, do you think that you are proficient enough to enter the job market?

.....



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11. If you have a choice to select the courses that you can study (literature, or linguistics), which ones will you choose? Why?

.....

12. Please shade the circle in the blank that reflects your opinion about the following statements:

1. Strongly agree 2. Agree 3. Disagree 4. Strongly disagree

Statement	1	2	3	4
1. The study plan fulfills all sides of your learning of the English language.				
2. Students can improve the four skills through literature courses.				
3. Students can improve the four skills through linguistics courses.				
4. Literature courses impede students' progress in language learning.				
5. Literature courses help students become more proficient in English.				
6. The language skills component dominates the English Department at SQU.				
7. The linguistics component dominates the English Department at SQU.				
8. The linguistic competence of graduate students alone prepares them to take a job that meets the needs of their Arab community.				