

Academic Literacy Development and Identity Construction Interrelations: The Freshman Experience

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Biodata

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of academic literacy requirements of an English-medium American university on the identity construction of first-year students in the UAE. The participants are all non-native speakers of English and share the common desire to develop fluent control of the academic literacy practices that will ensure their success in their undergraduate careers. Informed by an interpretive research framework, the study explores the participants' experiences from their perspectives. The data were collected through frequent in-depth interviews conducted regularly with each participant during an entire academic year and document analysis. The findings indicate that the students' declining academic standing and the difficulties they face in building socio-academic relationships lead them to form an identity of deficiency and incompetence, standing in contrast to their former view of self. This emerging identity is partly constructed by the actual difficulties they face and, knowingly or unknowingly, consolidated by others in their new discourse community. Nonetheless, many of the participants could overcome this negative sense of self with the help of effectively designed literacy tasks that were accompanied with supporting collaborative activities and that they could personally relate to in content. These findings emphasize the significance of understanding the complex nature of challenges undergraduates face in their journey towards academic literacy and the problems with conventional approaches to academic literacy instruction.

Introduction

This research study has originated in questions which developed during my experiences as a writing professor at an American university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which like most universities with an English medium of instruction (EMI), provides a series of compulsory academic writing courses that seek to instil in students critical reading and writing skills. These courses are offered

by the Department of Writing Studies (DWS), where I have been working as a full-time professor since 2009.

It is not unusual to hear students note that they find the courses offered in the program very demanding, and that they feel overwhelmed with the number of reading and writing assignments they are expected to complete across the curriculum on a daily basis. In informal conversations I have with them, many students also note that they have difficulty in comprehending the written course material and/or expressing their ideas clearly, especially in written form. What seems to exacerbate the issue for students in the initial stages of their undergraduate careers is that the required academic writing courses are considered either pre-requisite or co-requisite for many of the other courses they have to take. This seems to exert a great pressure on many of them, sometimes leading to a loss of interest in their studies, feelings of disappointment, frustration, and self-doubt.

The picture outlined above is often attributed to the students' educational background, which has not provided them with essential reading and writing skills required at university level. The issue of underdeveloped literacy skills as well as the gap in educational standards between schools and universities in the UAE have been addressed in a number of research studies (Durham & Palubiski, 2007; Findlow, 2006; Gobert, 2009; Hatakka, 2014; Hatherly-Greene, 2012; Howell, 2008; Khoury & Duzgun, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2009) and are also frequently addressed in publications aimed at a more general readership in the UAE (e.g. "Education initiative", 2014; Hameli & Underwood, 2014; Naido, 2010; Salem & Swan, 2014). While concerned authorities, that is, universities, schools and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research are discussing ways to overcome the problem, the students who are trying hard to bridge the gap between their existing competencies and what is expected of them in their degree programs remains the party who suffer the consequences of the disparity.

As I continued to casually observe my students, I found myself wondering how I could help them to deal with this challenge. I understood that to be able to be of any assistance to them, first and foremost, I had to have an in-depth understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives, but most importantly, listen to their voices. I wanted to understand and then figure out ways to alleviate the tension and challenges most undergraduates encounter while trying to meet the academic literacy requirements they are expected to fulfil in the new discourse community they have entered. Given that students' academic literacy development is inevitably interwoven with their social, personal, and all other academic experiences, the main motivation behind this study is to uncover the interrelations between the students' academic literacy growth and identity construction, investigating the process students go through to create comfortable subject positions for themselves in their new discourse community.

It is crucial for educators and researchers to learn more about undergraduates' academic literacy development because a student's inability to manipulate academic literacy generally goes hand in hand with limited success in post-secondary education (Hirvela, 2004). Academic discourse, too often, serves a gatekeeping role, preventing students from progressing educationally (Farr, 1993). Despite being a common point of complaint among academics teaching at higher education institutions across the UAE, few research studies have examined the academic literacy development of undergraduates in this setting. While these studies contributed to our understanding of the significance of the issue, they adopted a narrow definition of academic literacy, focusing exclusively either on writing or reading skills, failing to acknowledge the interrelations between the two skills by design, and not taking into account the impact of the challenges faced on learners' identity construction. For instance, defining academic literacy as writing strategies, library research strategies, and general study skills, Hatakka (2014), investigated the academic socialization experiences of male Emirati students enrolled in an engineering program in the UAE. Other studies focused on the development of reading skills (Khoury & Duzgun, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2009) and general academic problems associated with the transition from school to university (Durham & Palubiski, 2007; Hatherly-Greene, 2012). Hence, the present study can contribute to the field by turning the attention to a group of learners whose experiences have yet to be documented adequately.

Based on Kachru's Three Circle Model¹ (Kachru, 1985), a great majority of the previous studies on academic literacy development of undergraduates have been conducted in inner-circle countries with participants who are native English-speaking (NES) students and, more recently, non-native English-speaking (NNES) students. The UAE, on the other hand, fits the definition of outer-circle countries, where English is not the native language but plays an important role as a lingua franca. The emergence of English as a lingua franca at all levels of the UAE society over the past fifty years has been the subject of some recent studies conducted locally (e.g. Boyle, 2012; Randall & Samimi, 2010). In a study which explores the higher education and "linguistic dualism" in the Arabian Gulf, Findlow (2006) pictures the UAE as a rapidly changing country where "people (especially young people at university) are exposed to 'otherness' in a way that their parents were not, local heritage is steeped in political struggle, official discourse endeavors to be eclectic and reconcile" contrasting world views (p.23). She goes on to describe

¹ According to Kachru's Three Circle Model, the Inner Circle represents countries where English is spoken as native language such as Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Outer Circle refers to countries such as India, Nigeria and Malaysia, where English is not the native language but has an important role as a lingua franca. Lastly, the Expanding Circle includes countries where English has no historical or governmental role, but is still broadly used as a medium of international communication.

the UAE as a country which was “transformed from a collection of materially poor and sparsely populated tribal homelands with no formal education system to a politically, economically and technologically sophisticated federation of seven states” (p. 23) over the final quarter of the twentieth century. These differences in the social and ideological contexts surrounding participants in previous research and this study can significantly influence their experiences.

Research Questions

My overarching research objective in this longitudinal study was to investigate the first-year students’ experiences in dealing with the challenges they face while attaining academic literacy requirements of an American university in the UAE, at a personal, social, and academic level. While the challenges encountered by the students and the coping strategies employed by them were reported elsewhere (Bilikozen, 2015), this paper focuses on the impact of going through these challenges on their identity development and seeks to answer the following research question:

How do first-year students’ experiences in dealing with the academic literacy requirements of an American university in the UAE influence their identity formation?

Academic Literacy and Identity: Intertwined Research Threads

The widespread use of the term “academic literacy” with reference to the teaching of academic reading and writing skills with a focus on grammar instruction and study skills is no longer compatible with recent developments in the field of language, literacy, and identity research, which emphasize that academic literacy should be understood as “the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community” (Wingate, 2015, p.6). My conceptualization of academic literacy draws on this perspective and *the academic literacies model*, which is “concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority” (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369) This model foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context and regards the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions, and social identities. Hence, academic literacy, as used in this study, refers to “the activity of interpretation and production of academic and discipline-based texts” (Leki, 2007, p. 3) in an academic *discourse community*. Gee (1989) believes “that any socially useful definition of literacy must be couched in terms of the notion of Discourse” (p. 9). He explains that although not all Discourses involve writing or reading, all writing and reading is embedded in a Discourse, emphasizing the social nature of literacy.

With regards to the strong connection between literacy and construction of identity, Egbo (2004) states that acquisition of literacy affects individuals' perceptions of their selves and social positioning, particularly in contexts with asymmetrical power relations and social inequalities. She adds that access to literacy is associated with life chances in many parts of the world and has implications for self-esteem, self-confidence and an overall sense of well-being. In fact, most researchers in the field of language and identity contend that "for some L2 students, learning itself may be less important than the construction and projection of a satisfying identity" (Leki, 2007, p. 263).

The interconnectedness of the concepts of literacy and identity has now been acknowledged and widely documented in literacy studies, which construe literacy as a social construct. Proponents of ideological models of literacy, the academic literacies model, new literacy studies (NLS), and critical English for academic purposes (EAP) agree that the ways in which people deal with reading and writing are themselves embedded in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. As Lave and Wenger (1991) note "Identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another" (p. 53). Similarly, Gee's definition of literacy (1989) as "mastery of or fluent control over a secondary Discourse" (p. 9) concurs with the NLS and the ideological model. Discourses, in Gee's words, are ways of being in the world. As Gee memorably puts it, a Discourse is "an 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize" (p. 7).

The focus on the learner and the view of literacy as a social construct in recent academic literacy studies marks a diversion from the history of research in SLA. Indeed, Candlin (2000) calls attention to this epistemological difference between the history of studies in SLA and that of another applied linguistics practice, literacy. He states that while the former can be characterized by "the consistent anonymising, if not the actual eclipsing of the learner", the latter by a "continuing and principled involvement of researchers in the literacy lives of individuals in their communities of practice, [. . .] and, stemming from this a reliance on the qualitative explanation of narratives of experience as a source of question and as a resource for explanation" (p. xiii).

Research on voice in writing and on multiliteracies has become increasingly prominent since the 1990s and early 2000s (Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008). The main theme in these studies is that both what and how one reads and writes can have an impact on the type of person one is recognized as being and on how one sees oneself (Baker & Freebody, 1989; Davies, 1989; Street, 1995). While this "identity turn" (p. 415) in literacy studies is crucial, "literacy-and-identity studies" (p. 416) have been criticized for oversimplifying the construct of identity (Moje, Luke, Davies & Street, 2009). As Ivanič (1998)

states, identity “is the everyday word for people’s sense of who they are” however, “it doesn’t automatically carry with it the connotations of social construction and constraint”. As a result, a number of “ways of talking about ‘identity’ that ‘foreground’” these connotations have been created by identity researchers (pp. 10-11). Subjectivity, subjectivities, positioning, possibilities for selfhood are Ivanič’s (1998) preferred terms, as they not only carry “the connotation that identity is socially constructed and that people are not free to take on any identity they choose” but also denote “a sense of multiplicity, hybridity, and fluidity” (as cited in Joseph, 2004, p10).

In a comprehensive review of literature, Moje, Luke, Davies and Street (2009) draw attention to how particular views of identity shape the way researchers construe literacy and, conversely, how the view of literacy taken by a researcher shapes meanings made about identity. They emphasize that subtle differences in identity theories have remarkably different implications for one’s understanding of how the constructs of literacy and identity interrelate and are important for one another. Using five metaphors for identity documented in the identity literature, the authors review various ways of conceptualizing identity. These metaphors –identity as difference, sense of self/subjectivity, mind or consciousness, narrative, and position– offer useful perspectives for understanding how identity and its relationship to literacy, learning, and teaching might be conceptualized. While the metaphors are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as from time to time they overlap in interesting ways, they show significant distinctions in focus and purpose. The following extended extract presents the identity-as-position metaphor, the most comprehensive of the five metaphors mentioned above, and its relationships with the other metaphors:

It [Identity-as-Position Metaphor] recognizes the subject as called into being, invited to stand in certain positions, to take up particular identities . . . Identity as position allows for people to tell stories about themselves, to represent themselves in narrative, but also to shift positions and tell new stories . . . Finally, positioning metaphors allow for the doing of identity -- or identity in activity -- to be as powerful a means of self-construction and representation as the narrativizing of identity because positioning metaphors require that the researcher follow people through different physical/ spatial and social/metaphorical positions of their lives, documenting activity, artifacts, and discursive productions simultaneously. (Moje, Luke, Davies & Street, 2009, p.431)

Despite some variations, a key point in all identity-and-literacy-as-position studies is that movement across time and space, relationships in particular spaces, as well as access to texts and other artifacts create identities and literate practices. The metaphor for identity I used in this study is *identity-as-position*, as it is the most compatible one with my understanding of identity and my conceptualization of academic literacy, which draws on the academic literacies model. Indeed, Moje, Luke, Davies, and Street (2009) stress that academic literacies research has a lot to offer literacy-and-identity studies

because it demonstrates how the development of literate practice depends on knowledge of self and on awareness of one's identity enactments, rather than only skill, knowledge of words and vocabulary, and organization.

Context

The present study was conducted at an English-medium American university located in the emirate of Sharjah. As indicated in its mission statement, while the university is based upon an American model of higher education, it is also grounded in the Arab culture of the region (Fast Facts, 2015). Students who receive below the minimum TOEFL/ IELTS score but who otherwise meet the university's admission standards are required to successfully complete a series of remedial language classes offered by the university's Achievement Academy Bridge Program (AABP). Having passed the AABP exit tests and scored 76 (540) on the TOEFL or 6.5 on the IELTS (minimum scores required), they are eligible to take the English Placement Test (EPT), a test developed and assessed by a group of professors in the Department of Writing Studies (DWS). Depending on their EPT score, students are placed in one of three academic writing courses offered by DWS: WRI 001, WRI 101, and WRI 102. All undergraduates are required to take these writing courses either as a pre-requisite or a co-requisite for a large number of discipline-specific courses.

Methodology

The present study is informed by the underlying principles of the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivists' choice of methodology is guided by their endeavour to understand the subjective world of human experience while retaining the integrity of phenomena being investigated (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Guided by my research purposes and question, the theoretical position I take in the present study predominantly draws on symbolic interactionism, one of the main schools of thought subsumed within the interpretive paradigm (O'Donoghue, 2007).

According to this theoretical position, human action can only be understood in a continuous stream of action, both explicit and implicit, influenced by ongoing decisions we take along that stream. These decisions are taken as a result of social interaction and interaction with self. The ongoing social interaction we have with others influences what we do in various situations and our identity is formed through a negotiation process that arises in interaction and our action is influenced by who we consider ourselves to be (Charon, 2009). In other words, as Goffman (1971) states, creating an identity is an active negotiation process between who others tell us we are and our continuous attempts to present who we think we are to others.

Symbolic interactionism, therefore, is a well-suited approach to this study as it seeks to understand how the participants create their academic identities in interaction with others and in interaction with self. Following this approach, I tried to capture the participants' definition of the situation and view of self, and the process by which they change through interaction with others (i.e. professors, fellow students, etc.) and with self. My choice of various qualitative research methods, namely, frequent in-depth interviews conducted regularly with each student participant and document analysis, reflects this theoretical framework.

Interviews

In order to fully understand the participants' perspectives, I prepared a semi-structured interview guide consisting of a set of data collection questions that had the potential to engage the participants in conversations across as wide a range of areas as possible on the phenomenon under investigation, that is, academic literacy. As the study unfolded, some data collection questions that did not prove to be helpful were eliminated while others that emerged in the course of interviewing and kept the conversation moving, even in unexpected directions, added to or replaced the pre-established questions. The final interview guide included questions on the students' background (i.e. demographic information, prior educational life, socio-cultural and linguistic background, family life, attitudes towards reading and writing in the family, etc.), some routine questions that I asked each focal student on their coursework in progress, as well as some questions to be asked at the start and end of each semester. The students were asked questions on their academic objectives, course readings and study habits, reading and writing assignments across the curriculum, reading and writing strategies, and socio-academic relationships and their view of self. (See Appendix B: Interview Guide for a full list of questions asked.)

Document Analysis

Another method of data collection used in this study was document analysis. By document analysis, I am referring to examination of documents related to the participants' course work, such as course syllabi, class notes, writing assignments, drafts of papers, copies of exams, and the other similar course materials. The students' answers to many of the interview questions either mentioned or focused on these documents, which I decided to collect and examine in order to have a holistic understanding of each participant's experiences. Having access to these materials during the interviews helped the participants explain the challenges they faced and their general thought of them more clearly and easily. It was also helpful to me, as through this method, I was able to create a detailed list of the reading and writing requirements the focal students were expected to meet in the academic year of 2011-2012 and understand the assignments the students brought up during the interviews better (see Appendix C).

Participants

Six students, who were Arab L2 speakers of English, participated in the study. (Please see Appendix A for further information on the participants' prior educational life, cultural and linguistic background, and other demographic details.) They were selected based on the criteria of purposiveness and accessibility (Silverman, 2000). In accordance with the purposes of the study, my aim was to access first year students who were non-native speakers of English and found it difficult to cope with the academic literacy requirements of the new academic institution they had entered, that is, an American university in the UAE, of which medium of instruction is English.

Procedures

The data collection for this study lasted two academic semesters, starting in the fall semester of the 2011-12 academic year. The interview guide had been piloted before the data collection with the assistance of two colleagues who had extensive experience in qualitative research methods as well as four freshman students who shared similar cultural and educational backgrounds with the participants of the study. They volunteered to take the time to listen to and answer the interview questions and then provide comments on the clarity of these. With the help of this process, the wording and ordering of several questions in the interview guides were changed to make them clearer, easier to understand, more focused, and objective.

I conducted three to four interviews, each of which lasted between thirty to ninety minutes, with each participant in Fall 2011. I followed the same interview schedule in Spring 2012 and managed to conduct three to four interviews with each participant again. The duration of the interviews was the same as in the previous semester. Hence, I conducted six to eight interviews with each student throughout the whole academic year, which resulted in a total of forty-six interviews.

Data Analysis

All of the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Following Radnor's (2002) approach to analysing semi-structured interviews in interpretive research, I prepared the data for analysis first by reading the whole transcribed data several times and noting down the topics that emerged from the data. Radnor (2002) calls this stage topic ordering. I made a list of the topics, giving a name and a code (abbreviation) to each. I then read the transcripts very carefully one more time to draw out the categories within each topic. I listed these categories under each topic as sub-headings. The next step was reading the transcripts for content, that is, going through the text one more time to highlight and

code the main quotes that go under each category (see Appendix D: Topics, codes, and categories identified in the data and an extract from coded interview transcript).

During the analysis of the semi-structured interviews, I also used the strategy of constant comparison of different data sources (i.e. complementary data sources such as the interview log that includes the notes I took after each interview, as well as all the documents I collected regarding the primary participants’ course work, such as course syllabi, course notes, class texts, writing assignments, drafts of papers, copies of exams, and the like) and member validation to consolidate and adjust my interpretations where relevant and necessary. In support of this approach, Richards (2003) notes that the relationship between the interview data and other data sources should never be ignored and that it is “incumbent on the researcher to make use of all available data sources in order to get the best possible fix on the information that is presented in the interviews” (p. 92).

Results

The data, collected through frequent semi-structured interviews with each participant throughout the full academic year, revealed a sense of discomfort in the students mainly due to the discrepancy between the ways they positioned themselves and the way they were positioned in their new educational institution in various ways. This discrepancy was most visible when the students talked about their declining academic standing as a result of their weak academic literacy skills, and their socio-academic relationships, which were two of the three salient themes that emerged from the data. The third was literacy practices that had a positive impact on the students’ view of self.

Table 1: The impact of the students’ experiences on their identity construction

Theme	Example	Number of mentions
Declining academic standing and view of self	Zeina: Here I’m monkey. I was more confident in high school and like I was more popular. Like I used to teach my friend, now my friend teach me. (Int. 3)	42
Socio-academic life and view of self	Saif: “I don’t like feel comfortable talking to her [the professor].” (Int. 3)	35
Literacy practices that had a positive impact on the students’ view of self	Osama: “I ended up with a C- again. But writing the essay, I actually enjoyed it more, because I wanted to write about this.” (Int. 6)	19

Declining Academic Standing and View of Self

The students' accounts of how they viewed themselves as an individual and a student in their prior educational life, as well as the academic and professional goals they set for themselves at the beginning of the academic year showed, that they all used to have a more positive self-image before starting their academic life at university.

For instance, Khairea, an international transfer student who had previously studied Architecture at a French-medium university in Algeria for three years, often sounded very proud of the quality of work she produced while talking about her academic experiences in her previous university. She stressed that she was not a “nerd”, but she had never been below average in terms of her academic standing—neither at school, nor at university. She was very disappointed not only about not receiving any transfer credit for the courses she successfully completed in her previous university and having to start from scratch, but also about the sudden decline in her GPA, which she mostly attributed to her weak English skills. Despite these issues, she often noted that becoming an architect was her “biggest dream” and that she was determined to work hard to realize it. She sounded very committed when she noted:

I have big *volonté* [will power] but my capacities in English didn't allow me a little bit in this university. I'm not nerd but I'm not stupid also. But I have the *volonté*. I want to be architecture. Because I like what I'm doing, I really focus about that. (Int. 2)

Likewise, the way Noura and Zeina viewed themselves as an individual and student changed dramatically as a result of the challenges they faced while adapting to English as a new medium of instruction. Both described themselves as successful students in high school, who always worked hard and received above average grades. Having studied in Arabic-medium schools all their lives, they stated that they felt an intense academic pressure as soon as they stepped in their new academic environment as it was overwhelming for them to use their recently acquired English language skills in an academic setting. The following extract from an interview I had with Zeina shows the dramatic change in her view of self.

Zeina: Here I'm monkey. I was more confident in high school and like I was more popular. Like I used to teach my friend, now my friend teach me.

Researcher: How do you feel about all these changes?

Zeina: It's not fine. I think about my father and my mother, so I want to be successful. Sometimes when I get low grade they say “why?” I say “because sometimes I don't understand well”. They say “Try , try!”. (Int. 3)

This also shows how failing to maintain the excellent academic standing she used to have at high school caused Zeina to fear that she would disappoint her parents. Before matriculating into their majors, both Noura and Zeina had studied at the Academic Bridge Program for a full academic year to improve their

language skills in English and achieve the necessary TOEFL score. Passing TOEFL was an impressive achievement for both, especially Noura, who often mentioned how her parents were very proud that she could finally start taking classes in her major, Civil Engineering. The feeling that they were inferior to their peers in terms of their linguistic proficiency caused Noura and Zeina to take on a more passive role in pair and group work as well as class discussions that accompanied reading and writing assignments due to the fear of having their “weak” English on display.

While Noura was initially upset about her peers’ lack of appreciation for her contribution in group work, soon she accepted her new role and adapted to it quickly as she thought it saved her time and effort. She usually emphasized that since she had a lot to learn from her peers, she chose to take on the role of “listener” in most literacy practices to be completed in pairs and small groups, including the tutoring sessions at the Writing Center. She was not comfortable when the tutors expected her to take on a more active role in the revision process of one of her essays rather than identifying and correcting her mistakes.

Interestingly, the way Noura positioned herself in group/pair work at university stood in contrast to the way she positioned herself in her non-academic writing activities that she brought up a few times in interviews. In her accounts of how she worked with a close friend to create a Manga-style comic book, she revealed the disagreements and the heated discussions she and her friend had about the topic selection and language to be used; while Noura wanted to write in Arabic, her friend argued for English. The way she positioned herself in this non-academic literacy practice was far from being just the “listener”, which shows how her socio-academic interactions and definition of situation in her new academic community changed the way she viewed and positioned herself.

Despite all the difficulties mentioned above, Noura, Zeina, Khairea, and Saif managed to have a positive perspective regarding their overall academic literacy development and the way they viewed themselves towards the end of the spring semester, reminding themselves of the magnitude of the progress they had made since the beginning of the academic year. Reflecting on her level of English at the beginning, more specifically her vocabulary, Noura commented:

Last time I was speaking with a friend I was with in my Bridge Program, I was laughing with her and I was telling her, “Do you remember the first time when we enter university? We don’t even know what “admission” mean! We don’t even know what architecture mean!” And stuff like that; you know, the really basic English, and we were laughing at each other. You know, like we didn’t know many things what they mean. I don’t know how to explain it, but you can really see the difference. (Int. 7)

This positive perspective was not fully shared by Mahmoud and Osama. What had a significant impact on the way they viewed and defined their situation was being placed on probation in the spring

semester. Due to their low GPA and probation status, they were required to take an additional course called UPA 200: University Preparation for Non-Bridge Students, a non-credit remedial course graded as pass/fail. Both were upset that they were required to take this course and thus positioned as students who needed remedial classes. As noted in the syllabus, the main purposes of UPA 200 were “developing a positive attitude towards study at university and providing the skills necessary for success in all classes”, with a focus on practicing “goal setting, time management, and specific study skills such as note-taking and accessing the library for research purposes”. According to the university’s academic policy, in order to be removed from probation, a student must pass the University Preparation class and raise his/her GPA to at least 2.0 out of 4.0. Failing the course would cause the students’ registration for next semester to be blocked. Despite the institutional importance given to this course, Mahmoud and Osama found this course completely unnecessary as they thought it took so much of their time with extra reading and writing requirements, while the biggest reason they were on probation was lack of time. Mahmoud expressed the strength of his feelings about this course as follows:

I think it’s a waste of time. I don’t know why university brought it anyway. It’s just a waste of my time. If they really care about the students, okay, let the course be for one week, or make it like a review session, just like slides, and give the students a quick view but not like do the presentation, writing critiques etc. This is a waste of time. They need to focus on their courses in order to get out of the probation, not to be doing this course and this stuff. If there was a credit definitely it could help me with my GPA. It’s a zero credit, pass/fail course. I went like 12 weeks going to classes wasting my time instead of studying and focusing on my other courses. (Int. 7)

Mahmoud ironically failed this course due to his excessive number of absences. Osama was just as upset as Mahmoud about having to take the additional course and was equally critical:

Actually, having to take it is really ridiculous because it is a waste of time. Monday, Wednesday one hour and fifteen minutes. It’s a waste of time because if it had credit on it, because it’s zero credit. It’s more like a punishment. Big time! It just wastes your time and makes you go back and you’re back from the other people. It’s so stupid. (Int. 6)

Socio-academic Life and View of Self

The students’ socio-academic relationships with their professors and peers emerged as an important factor that determined and revealed the ways they positioned themselves in their new academic community.

To start with, while talking about the difficulties she faced during her adaptation to her new academic life, Khairea often mentioned the differences in the way students were treated in her previous and current university. She complained that the professors treated her like a “kid” now – an uncomfortable subject position for Khairea, who was engaged to be married soon and who worked at

several part-time jobs to help her father pay her tuition. Moreover, in an interview I had with her in the spring, she brought up a conversation she had with one of her professors from her college, which had deeply demoralized her. After seeing a few examples of her written English, the professor had told her: “I hope you are not planning to work at an international company after you graduate; `cause your English is terrible” (Int. 8). Khairea was very upset as she thought this comment was out of place and had nothing to do with her skills and knowledge as a future architect or the course this professor was teaching.

Being reduced to her L2 skills in several incidents such as the above stood in contrast to Khairea’s “imagined identity” (Norton, 2011), which was a future architect. As a result of these experiences, her quest for a comfortable subject position in her new academic community got more complicated. In addition, she had difficulties in communicating and socializing with her peers on campus for various reasons, but most importantly a lack of common language for her to express herself as she wanted to. Having a tight schedule that she devoted to studying and her part-time jobs, she was also unable to enjoy any of her hobbies, such as playing chess, which, she noted, added to her feelings of stress and loneliness.

Like Khairea, other participants barely found any time to practice any of their hobbies or socialize during the entire data collection process, which they also often brought up as a reason for feeling isolated and stressed. Noura mentioned working on a project with a friend of hers to create a Manga style comic book in English or Arabic, of which she spoke very enthusiastically; however, towards the end of the academic year, she noted that she had given up on this project as she needed to concentrate on her studies. Osama, who was a player in the university’s volleyball team and a member of the dance club, had to give up his hobbies as he was unable to attend the practice sessions. He was quite demoralized as he was expelled from the volleyball team due to his absences in training sessions.

Receiving any kind of recognition from their professors was very important for all participants, which, in a sense, was indicative of their need and/or search for a comfortable subject position in their new educational context. To illustrate, when I asked Mahmoud about his relationship with his professors, he sounded pleased that his WRI 101: Academic Writing professor knew his name, although she recalled him as the student who “always comes late”. He said:

My relationship with professors is actually good. For example, Ms. [X] knows me, she knows my name and she is good. Cause I’m the first student in the list. So, yeah and she said I always come late; I came after the class for like four minutes, three minutes. My friend told me that when I was on the way coming, she said that this student always comes late. (Int. 3)

On the other hand, the participants showed an unwillingness to talk to their professors about what they saw as a personal and academic shortcoming, which can be viewed as a face-saving strategy. Some

of the participants stated that they felt disappointed when they were unable to understand a subject despite investing a lot of time and effort in reading the related course materials. They thought they “should” have understood the subject on their own using the provided sources such as the assigned readings and textbook chapters, without the need to ask for further help. When asked if they ever considered asking for help or feedback from their professors when faced with a challenging issue on any given course, some of them stressed that they were not the “only” students who found that specific part of the course challenging. Osama even added that he was not “that stupid”, as seen in the excerpt below. Hence, partly to maintain a good student image, they avoided discussing what they found confusing in the course with their professors unless they received a very low grade on an assignment or exam. To them, asking for help was equal to revealing an academic shortcoming to their professor. For example, Saif did not want to make use of his professors’ office hours as he thought the course lectures and other course materials should have been enough for him to understand what he found confusing on a given subject. While talking about the challenges he faced in Pre-Calculus, he noted that he did not feel comfortable visiting the professor:

I don’t know, I don’t like feel comfortable talking to her. Usually I refer to the book and the book it’s like the math book; it give us each and every step. Like by reading the book, I should understand. After that, it’s okay, if I didn’t understand, maybe friends or someone to get help before like seeing her. (Int. 3)

The implication is that asking for feedback or help from his professor was something he could consider only after exhausting all other options he had for academic support. Like Saif, Osama said he did not consider asking for help from his professors as a helpful strategy. While talking about the challenges he faced in Physics, he said he had never talked to his professor about the problems he had been having in understanding the course concepts, offering this justification:

Osama: It’s something that you have to understand. And, I’m not understanding the whole thing. Actually everyone is doing bad, but I have to understand something. I’m not that stupid, maybe I don’t understand that part. I don’t enjoy anything I can’t understand. Even though I’m doing well in the quizzes, but like in the midterm I didn’t do well at all. I got nine out of twenty. Lately I skipped a lot of classes, cause I’m thinking ninety per cent I’m gonna drop, `cause I’m not understanding.

Researcher: Have you talked to your professor about this?

Osama: No, the thing is that I don’t think he would really help me.

Researcher: Why not?

Osama: `Cause I don’t understand. Actually, he always sends us emails. If you want something, just come. But, I can’t most of the times it’s also because of the timings.

Zeina’s response to the same question also showed a reluctance to approach the professor. She mentioned that it had been much easier for her to understand Chemistry when she took it in Arabic in high school

as she was familiar with the vocabulary. However, when I asked her if she had ever considered asking her professor for help, she immediately responded as follows:

No. Actually I'm not the only student in class face this problem. So there is another girl talk about this problem. Also she tell me that she also find this material easier in the school.

The examples in this section show the ways the students' socio-academic interactions complicated their search for a satisfying subject position in their new educational context. Nevertheless, certain literacy practices the students were involved in helped them view their academic identity in a more positive light, which will be explained in the next section.

Literacy Practices that Had a Positive Impact on the Students' View of Self

While the participants often noted that they felt helpless when faced with reading and writing assignments that they found unfamiliar, difficult to relate to, or beyond their linguistic proficiency, they showed more engagement in assignments that they were able to personally relate to in terms of content and those that were accompanied with class discussions, small group activities, peer reviews, debates and group presentations that preceded or followed the assigned work. These activities seemed to motivate them, support their reading comprehension and assist them in writing assignments, and eventually gave them a sense of confidence, even pride and accomplishment in the midst of their quest for a comfortable subject position in their new academic community.

Zeina, Noura, Khairea, Saif, and Osama sounded relatively more confident of their performance in a summary writing assignment that they had to complete in teams in WRI 101 in fall. Khairea explained why she felt confident:

It was really good, I will get a good mark. Because when I did the summary, I have some points and when we did the group I was like I mentioned points that someone else didn't mention, and someone else mentioned some points and like we are sharing information, we exchange informations. It was really helpful. I noticed that I did some mistake and they corrected me. (Int. 3)

Writing about familiar topics, real-life issues, or topics that they could relate to was also a factor that increased the students' sense of self-confidence and ownership of their work. Saif explained why he expected a high mark in the WRI 101: Academic Writing final examination, which required him to write a causal analysis essay on anger management: "Because I found the topic interesting. I had more points about the topic to write about". Similarly, when left free to choose a topic for his research paper in WRI 102, Osama chose to write about "stress in universities and colleges". Sounding in control and confident of his progress in the assignment, he added:

To prove my point I wrote my thesis that although it's easy to blame the students or the young generation for doing everything but the fault lies with the university and stressful environment. And then one of the things I found because I needed an attention grabber in the beginning about a guy who committed suicide. (Int. 6)

Although this was a challenging assignment that required Osama to cite eight academic sources from the library, he stated that he enjoyed working on it as he could relate to the subject due to his personal experiences dealing with stress. Despite the barely passing grade he received at the end, his involvement in the assignment seemed to have reduced his preoccupation with the grade he scored. He said:

I ended up with a C- again. But writing the essay, I actually enjoyed it more, because I wanted to write about this. (Int. 6)

All of the participants, even Noura and Zeina, who preferred to take on the "listener" role in most group activities, were eager to take part in group presentations in courses such as WRI 101: Academic Writing and NGN 110: Introduction to Engineering and Computing as they were more "comfortable" in expressing their opinions in English after practicing and rehearsing a few times at home. Not only did these activities give the participants a sense of pride and accomplishment, but they also seemed to enhance their understanding of the reading or writing assignment in question. Taking part in a debate on their persuasive essay topics in WRI 101 had a similar impact on the students. Noura said:

After the debate, you know, we kind of understood, what points were kind of strong; what points to write in my essay. And our team win; the class chose our team. We couldn't believe. We were saying to each other, see we could win. (Int. 4)

Despite her fear of having her weak English skills on display, taking part in debates and presentations related to her writing assignments had also a positive impact on Khairea's self-confidence, which she brought up in interviews I had with her both semesters.

Another literacy practice that engaged all of the participants studying engineering (i.e. Osama, Zeina, Noura, and Saif) was the NGN 110 presentation, which was a requirement that accompanied their written project, completed in groups of five. Despite encountering some challenges in teamwork, such as team members not showing up at meetings or not doing their part of the job, all of the participants sounded excited about the presentation, as they believed presenting projects would be part of their jobs as future engineers. Zeina, whose team got the fourth place in the competition mentioned previously, expressed how pleased she was about presenting their project as she thought working in teams and presentation skills were important for her future career:

I think he asked us to work, like in teams 'cause engineers work in groups. So, he said they also have to present their project. So, he asked us to do presentation. The presentation, I think it was good, but not perfect. It was good practice for us, like for our

career. And then in the competition the fourth winner was us. So I was really happy. Because I remember when the competition has started, I told them, my group, I want to be one of the winner. They told me “No, no, we can’t be! We just wanna pass.” I told “No, we can, we can!” “Then, like my dream became true. (Int. 7)

The literacy practices shown as examples above were the highlights of the academic year for the participants in terms of their academic literacy development. They shared a few common characteristics such as engaging the students in real-life issues or topics that they could relate to, as well as improving skills that they considered important for their present or future selves. These literacy practices gave the students a sense of accomplishment, pride, and confidence, which seemed to help them see their academic identity in a more positive light.

Discussion

As a result of the sudden drop in their grades despite their hard work, and the changes in their socio-academic life, the students all reported going through a sense of helplessness, confusion, and frustration. Mostly as a result of their perceived weaknesses in English reading and writing skills in comparison to other students, they developed an identity of deficiency and incompetence. This identity was partly constructed by real difficulties they faced, but also reinforced by their peers, who did not seem to be interested in their contribution to group projects, and also some professors, as in the case of Khaireia, who was discouraged from seeking future career opportunities in international companies due to her “terrible” English. These findings concur with insights provided by other studies that report on the ways international students develop identities of deficiency co-constructed by the students’ self-perception and behaviours of other members of the discourse community (Morita, 2004; 2009; Fotovatian, 2012).

The identity of deficiency and incompetence has been most noticeable throughout the whole study in the case of two students, Osama and Mahmoud, who were required to take a non-credit remedial course in spring. As noted before, the course was found too demanding, “time-consuming” and “worthless” by both students. This finding concurs with past research which highlights the ineffectiveness of the common approach to enhancing student learning through separate study skills courses, called the “bolt-on” approach (Wingate, 2006, p. 457). These remedial courses, which usually address the skills of time management, essay writing, grammar, presentation, note taking and revising for exams, are viewed ineffective mainly because they separate study skills from the process and content of learning (Thomas, 2002; Wingate, 2006, 2015). This approach arises from the study skills model of academic literacy, which views student inability to write successfully at undergraduate level as a deficit (Lea & Street, 1998) that merely requires a quick fix (Turner, 2004). Previous research also underlines

that such courses often suffer from low attendance (Durkin & Main, 2002) and that students do not view them as relevant to their subject (Drummonds et al., 1998; Durkin & Main, 2002), echoing the experiences of Osama and Mahmoud, the two students who were required to take a similar remedial class in this study. In contrast to the study-skills model, an academic literacies approach, argues that the learning of academic literacies should take place over the long-term, and be fully integrated into content courses (Lea and Street, 1998; Lea, 2004; Wingate 2006, Wingate, 2015), whether taught by subject specialists, or EAP specialists working alongside subject specialists.

Moreover, the findings of this study regarding the impact of socio-academic relationships on L2 learners' learning and identity concur with the results of another study (Skyrme, 2010) which reports on one-to-one interactions between Chinese undergraduates and teaching staff during office hours at a New Zealand university, an aspect of socio-academic relations that has not been widely studied in the literature. The study shows the students' "fear of revealing to those with the power to judge them that their English was inadequate or that the questions they were asking were 'dumb and inappropriate'" (p. 211). These concerns are very similar to those reported about the students in the present study, as noted before.

While the challenges the students encountered caused them to form a negative assessment of their academic identity, this perspective seemed to have disappeared, or at least subsided, when they talked about their engagement in certain academic literacy practices such as reading and writing assignments that they could relate to and were motivated to voice their opinions on, or reading and writing assignments that were supported by instructional activities in the form of pair and group work that facilitated their understanding and/or performance, thereby alleviating their sense of inadequacy and their negative sense of self. With respect to the first type of literacy practices, the importance of topics that students could relate to has been underlined in previous research in the academic literacy development of L2 undergraduates, with specific suggestions for assignment topics that would give students an opportunity to address the various "limit situations" confronting them in their new discourse community (Benesch, 2001, p. 50 ; Leki, 2007, p. 285). As for the second type of literacy practices, the importance of identity as group membership in learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Johnson, 2003; Hyland, 2005), more specifically in the acquisition of academic literacy skills of undergraduates (eg Duff, 2010; Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Leki, 2007; Wingate, 2015) and identity as a social construct (Charon, 2009) has been widely documented and highlighted in past research. In fact, as Leki (2007) memorably puts it, "for some L2 users, learning itself may be less important than the construction and projection of a satisfying identity" (p.263); students may seek interactions with knowledgeable others

not only to learn, but maybe more importantly, to be seen as a particular type of person, maybe even only to be noticed. The experiences of the students reported in this study support these statements; especially the case of Mahmoud, who stated how glad he was to be recalled by one of his professors by his name despite being remembered as the student who “always comes late”.

Both Norton’s sociological construct of investment (2011) and Dörnyei’s “L2 Motivational Self System” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) offer helpful frameworks to make sense of the complex connections between academic literacy development and identity construction. Based on Norton’s theory, the students’ investment in improving their academic literacy skills can be viewed as a sign of their expectations for higher grades and eventually a more satisfying sense of self, closer to their *imagined identity*. When most of their expectations did not come true despite their investment, the students’ state of confusion, self-doubt, and frustration got intensified. The problem was that, especially at the outset of the study, they did not really know *what* to do or *how* to achieve their goals and resorted to using ineffective strategies, which gave them a sense of incompetence. Their frustration and confusion increased when they realized they were unable to achieve their goals despite the amount of time and effort they invested. Norton views learners’ investment in the target language at particular times and in particular settings as an indication of their belief that “they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p.240), which will enhance their cultural capital. As the value of their cultural capital increases, they reassess their sense of themselves and their desires for the future. In this respect, a learner’s investment in the target language can be viewed as an investment in the learner’s own identity. Based on this theory, the students’ investment in improving their academic literacy skills could be seen as a sign of their expectations in terms of higher grades and eventually a more satisfying sense of self. While the focal students in the present study positioned themselves as “weak” learners with regards to their academic literacy skills at the beginning, they expected that they could overcome these problems with what they perceived as hard work. When their expectations did not come true, their state of confusion, self-doubt, and frustration increased.

Drawing on Dörnyei’s theory of L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009), it can also be argued that the perspective of the students in this study was mainly underpinned by “ought-to L2 self”, which concerns attributes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes, such as failing a course or disappointing parents, rather than “ideal L2 self”, absence of which is seen as a major source of lack of L2 motivation in general (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 33). The participants’ answers to questions about their aims/intentions with regards to their academic literacy development mostly focused on short term instrumental motives, which represent aspects of the participants ought-to-

self, such as scoring high grades to avoid disappointing their parents or losing their scholarship and also relatively long-term motives such as utilizing the new skills they learned in their fields of study or later on in their professional lives, which can be seen as part of the participants' ideal L2 self. Referring to a number of research studies (Miller & Brickman, 2004; Pizzolato, 2006), Dörnyei (2009) underlines that because future self-guides specify distant goals, learners have to create specific, proximal guides themselves, setting concrete courses of action that will help them reach their long-term goals. He adds that there are certain conditions that can enhance or hinder the motivational impact of the ideal and ought-to-selves, one of which is procedural strategies. As mentioned above, the students in this study were all highly invested in improving their academic literacy skills; the problem was they did not quite know what to do or how to achieve their goals especially at the beginning, which gave them a sense of incompetence and eventually intensified their frustration and confusion. When interpreted from Dörnyei's perspective, the problem here is caused by the students' lack of knowledge of "procedural strategies", one of the conditions that has to be met for successful goal accomplishment. Without a clear roadmap of tasks and strategies to follow in order to approximate the ideal self, one cannot realize their goals no matter how motivated they are.

Looking at the students' experiences from these complementary perspectives brings to the fore the inadequacy of an approach that only focuses on problems observed at a surface level, that is students' poor performance in assigned reading and writing tasks, while overlooking other fundamental issues. The impact of going through these aforementioned challenges on the students' identity is likely to go unnoticed when the process of academic literacy acquisition is examined within the frameworks of study skills and academic socialization models (Lea & Street, 2006). Such approaches are likely to lead to narrow-sighted, ineffective solutions that can exacerbate the students' existing problems, as in the case of a required remedial course that two of the participants had to take as a result of being placed on probation in the spring semester. These approaches view student difficulties with academic reading and writing as arising from surface level, structural errors and socialization issues, overlooking the complex interplay between linguistic practices, meaning systems, as well as the changing socio-cultural dynamics and power relationships in both the disciplines and institutions students are studying in. An academic literacies approach, on the other hand, takes into account the interplay of all these factors and addresses the acquisition of academic literacy at the level of epistemology and identity, drawing attention to the relationship between academic literacy development and the construction of self (Turner, 2004; Jones, Turner and Street, 1999).

Conclusion

Based on the findings summarized above and their implications, the following recommendations can be formulated for this specific research context.

Helping students to build effective socio-academic relations and positive identities

The findings of the present study have also shed light on the critical role of socio-academic relations with professors and peers on students' academic literacy development and identity construction. Such relationships can play a critical role in scaffolding their learning process and help them build positive identities. Hence, students, particularly freshmen, should be encouraged and guided to make use of the academic assistance available to them. Considering the participants' reservations about seeking help from knowledgeable others in this study (i.e. Writing Center tutors and professors) and even communicating with their fellows, I believe a complementary program including both hierarchical and peer mentoring could help them settle into their new discourse community more easily, which would possibly increase student retention rates in the long run.

The importance of building positive identities in language learning has been emphasized by both Norton and Dörnyei. As Norton (2001) notes, a teacher who is unaware of learners' "imagined communities" and "imagined identities" cannot build learning activities that learners can invest in. Similarly, Dörnyei (2009) emphasizes the significance of the concept of "ideal L2 self" in language learning and provides a set of guidelines for promoting it by creating a language learning vision and imagery enhancement. He states that igniting the vision includes raising students' awareness about the importance of ideal selves, guiding them through a number of possible selves that they have entertained in their minds in the past, and presenting powerful role models. However, he reminds that possible selves are only effective inasmuch as the individual sees them as realistic within their particular circumstances. If the learners, as in the case of some of the participants of the present study, are convinced that they cannot succeed no matter how hard they try, they are unlikely to invest effort in the particular task. One way of making the goals more realistic is to create a set of concrete action plans, which Dörnyei calls "procedural strategies". He also emphasizes the role of "ought-to L2 self", which concerns attributes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes, such as failing a course or disappointing parents. One's ideal-self, Dörnyei suggests, should be counterbalanced by the feared self. I believe all these strategies and the power of imagination, emphasized by both Dörnyei and Norton, could be used to create a realistic ideal self or imagined identity that could help L2 learners who may be discouraged by the challenges they face during their academic literacy development.

Eliminating non-credit, remedial course requirements

The findings of the study highlighted the ineffectiveness of a remedial course that two of the participants had to take as a result of being placed on probation in the spring semester. Already time stricken, both participants found the required course ineffective, irrelevant, and useless. Indeed, one was so upset that he refused to attend the class and eventually failed the course due to his excessive number of absences.

The ineffectiveness of this remedial approach, which is often introduced in universities as a quick-fix solution to support student learning, has been revealed in a number of studies. Wingate (2006, 2015) explains that this approach originates from the previous highly selective admission system in which all students were expected to have adequate skills to study effectively at university with the exception of a few ‘at risk’ students, who were then sent outside the department for help in dedicated learning support centres. The skills most commonly addressed in these generic courses would be time management, essay writing, presentation, note taking and revising for exams, similar to the content of the remedial course the two participants had to take in the present study. This general advice would be also available in web sites or course materials, such as student handbooks but usually not embedded in subject-specific courses. This approach is problematic for several reasons: firstly, students do not see generic courses as relevant to their subject (Drummonds et al., 1998; Durkin & Main, 2002). Furthermore, it is not feasible for students who are already overburdened with the amount of reading in their subject area to read through lengthy guidelines or take additional courses on study skills and transfer them to their particular context. Another troubling aspect of this approach is that it inevitably encourages the epistemological belief that knowledge is an “external, objective body of facts” (Gamache, 2002, p. 277) which can be acquired with certain tricks and techniques taught on these remedial courses. While the skills taught in such courses are necessary for academic success, it is doubtful if the students can learn these skills without the specific academic content (Wingate, 2006). All these drawbacks call for an approach in which the teaching of academic literacy is not separated from the student’s study programme.

More Effective Reading and Writing Assignments Fostering Positive Academic Identities

Based on the findings of the study and relevant research, another important recommendation is that professors, whether teaching academic writing courses or other discipline specific courses, should consider the purpose, content, design, and relevance of reading and writing assignments they give more carefully. The findings of the study have shown that the participants showed more engagement in reading and writing assignments that they were able to relate to in terms of content, and those that were accompanied by class discussions, small group activities, peer reviews, debates and group presentations

that preceded or followed the assigned work as opposed to assignments that they found unfamiliar, difficult to relate to, or beyond their linguistic proficiency. The assignments the students showed more interest in seemed to motivate them, supported their reading comprehension and assisted them in writing assignments, and eventually gave them a sense of confidence, even pride and accomplishment in the midst of their quest for a comfortable subject position in their new academic community. Cumming (2013), too, recommends that academic literacy activities should be devised in a way that “encourage, model, scaffold and facilitate” (p. 145) multilingual students’ learning processes, allowing them to express their identity with regards to their new discourse community, and to foster their self-confidence and engagement in the literacy tasks for self-development.

Challenges, Limitations and Future Research Directions

The biggest challenge I encountered while conducting this study was my dual role and responsibilities as a researcher and as teacher of one academic writing class the participants took in their first semester of undergraduate education. I struggled to detach myself from my role as their teacher while conducting the interviews at first. Addressing this issue, Radnor (2002) notes that “The researcher cannot remove her way of seeing from the process, but she can engage in reflexively in the process and be aware of her interpretive framework” (p.31). Following this insight, I made a conscious effort to become aware of my own assumptions and biases that may impact the research in any possible way. This constant endeavour to become aware of all these reality filters helped me have a critical distance from the data, listen to what the participants said with a more objective stance and fair mind. Moreover, I came to realize that my dual role benefitted the research process as it allowed me to have close knowledge of the primary participants’ academic literacy skills at the outset, to get to know them better, and to build the needed rapport with each one before the study began.

While every effort was made to minimize the limitations of the study, certain compromises from the ideal research plan had to be made due to restrictions in time and access to data sources. These limitations can be taken as suggestions for future research. It would be interesting to see the students’ process of academic literacy development and identity construction throughout their entire academic career, not only the first year. Moreover, while I worked towards portraying the participants’ experiences from their perspectives as thoroughly as possible, I was not able to use an additional qualitative research tool, such as class observations. Observing the primary students in a number of classes they take across the curriculum would have given a more holistic view of their experiences and increased the rigour of the study.

Informed by an interpretive approach to research, this study does not have any claims of generalizability. However, I hope the findings can be inspiring for academicians who find themselves in similar education settings. With the insights it provides, the study may serve a useful purpose with curriculum development and instructional practices and contribute to the development of strategies to facilitate students' acquisition of academic literacy. This would help students not only to overcome most of the challenges described above, but also to avoid the identity adjustments brought about by those challenges.

Appendices

Appendix A: Background of the primary participants of the study

Student	Gender	Age	Nationality	Major	Languages	Prior education
Khairea	Female	23	Algerian	Architecture	Arabic- First language French- Second language English- Third language	Public school system in French in Algeria
Noura	Female	18	Emirati	Civil engineering	Arabic- First language English- Second language	Public school system in Arabic in the UAE
Zeina	Female	19	Yemeni	Computer science	Arabic- First language English- Second language	Public school system in Arabic in the UAE
Osama	Male	18	Egyptian	Electrical engineering	Arabic- First language English- Second language	Private school system in Arabic and English in Egypt and the UAE
Saif	Male	18	Emirati	Civil engineering	Arabic- First language English- Second language	Public school system in English in the UAE
Mahmoud	Male	19	Saudi	Finance	Arabic- First language English- Second language	Public school system in Arabic in Saudi Arabia

Appendix B: Interview Guide

I. Background questions

1. How would you describe your personal background?
2. Can you tell me about your previous educational experiences?
3. Can you tell me about your previous reading and writing experiences?
4. What is the role of your family or previous education, if any, in these experiences?
5. What languages do you speak? How did you learn each?

II. Beginning of the semester questions

1. How are you feeling about your major? What are you looking forward to? Is there anything you are worried about?
2. What are your aims with regards to your academic reading and writing development this semester? Why?
3. Why do these aims matter for you?
4. What strategies are you using or planning to use in order to realize your aims? Why?
5. How important are the required academic reading and writing skills for your life at university and after your graduation?
6. What outcomes do you expect from pursuing your objectives regarding your academic reading and writing skills? Why?
7. How would you describe yourself as a person?
8. How would you describe yourself as a student?
9. What was your general academic standing like in your previous educational life? Were you content with it?
10. What is your general academic standing like at this university?
11. Are you content with your academic standing now? What makes you feel like that?
12. What do you think of your level of academic reading and writing skills in English? What makes you think that?
13. Does your level of academic reading and writing skills in English affect how you view yourself as a student at this university?

III. Routine questions asked on the courses in progress each semester

General questions asked about each course at every interview

1. What did you think about the last few weeks of classes? What stands out for you? What has concerned you? Do you have any concerns about the next few weeks?
2. How do you feel about your overall standing in each class you are taking?

Writing assignments

1. What writing assignments are you working on now in each of your courses? What will you be working on in the next few weeks?
2. Why do you think your teacher gave you this particular kind of an assignment to do?
3. What did you learn from doing this assignment? How useful was it for you to do this assignment?
4. How did you do this assignment? (Did you do it at one sitting, revise a lot, and receive any help?)
5. What kinds of problems did you have with this assignment? How did you deal with it/solve it?
6. If you went to the writing center, what did you work on there? How many times did you go and for how long?
7. How did you figure out how to do the assignment?
8. What do you have to do to do well in this assignment? What is your teacher looking for in assigning a grade?
9. How does this assignment compare to other assignments you have done? How useful was it to you in helping you learn about the subject or about how to do something in the subject area?

10. Was there anything that you turned in and that was turned to you since the last interview? Exams, quizzes, essays, papers, lab reports, project reports?
11. If so, have you received any feedback on any of these? What comments did your professor make on your assignment?
12. Do you understand the comments? Are they helpful or not? Why?

Course readings and study habits

1. How are you studying for this course? (How much time do you spend on this course per day? When do you study for this course?)
2. How is the reading assigned for this course related to the lectures/classes?
3. Why do you think your teacher assigned this particular reading for you to do?
4. How well do you have to learn what you read? (Do you have to do all the reading and understand everything in order to do well in the course?)
5. If you aren't reading everything that is assigned, how do you decide what is not important and what you can skip? What are the consequences of not reading everything assigned?

Reading and writing assignments to be completed through group work

1. Are you involved in any group work or do you have any study partners this semester? In which classes?
2. If you have study partners, how do you help each other? Can you give a specific example or show me a specific assignment you did with the help of a peer? Describe how you did this assignment.
3. If you are involved in a group project, did you get to choose the group or was it assigned?
4. What kind of project is the group working on? How do you divide up the work? Can you show me an example of an assignment you have done/ are doing in a group? Which part did you do/work on?
5. When, where, how did you meet to work on the project?
6. Do you ever have problems communicating with study partners or group project members? If so, describe.

Social life

1. How do you feel about your social life?. How much time do you spend doing things other than studying? When do you relax? With whom? What do you do? Do you feel you have a lot of friends?
2. What do you do besides studying and relaxing? How much time do you spend on those other activities (family responsibilities, work, etc.) How do you feel about these other activities?

IV. End of the semester questions

1. How are you feeling about your major now? What are you looking forward to? Is there anything you are worried about?
2. Have you accomplished your aims with regards to your academic reading and writing development this semester? Why?
3. What strategies have you used in order to realize your aims?
4. Which of these strategies have been helpful? Which ones have been ineffective? Why?
5. What is your general academic standing like now?
6. Are you content with your academic standing now? What makes you feel like that?
7. Having completed your studies this semester, what do you think of your level of academic reading and writing skills in English now? What makes you think that?
8. Having completed your studies this semester, what do you think about the role of required academic reading and writing skills in your life at university and after your graduation?
9. Have your experiences this semester had any impact on how you view yourself as a person and a student? If so, in what ways?

Appendix C: An example of list of reading and writing requirements the focal students were expected to meet in the academic year of 2011-2012

List of reading and writing requirements for Khairea in the College of Architecture, Art and Design/Fall 2011		
Course Name	Graded Writing Assignments	Required Reading
DES 121: Introduction to Architecture and Design History	note taking during lectures for success in exams	book chapters assigned for each class, about 15 to 30 pages long each; filling vocabulary cards for each reading, 5 unannounced drop quizzes on the readings assigned
DES 111: Descriptive Drawing I	critique of a drawing done by the student, at least 100 words or above	handouts from various sources
DES 131: Design Foundations	a written midterm exam requiring clear and well-organized explanation	handouts from various sources, articles of various length (usually 3 to 5 pages long) from current periodicals, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned
WRI 101: Academic Writing	summaries, 3 academic essays which require integration of 2 to 3 outside sources that are documented following APA style; with multiple drafts; 2 to 3 pages long written response to readings final examination: a five paragraph academic essay that requires APA documentation	book chapters (about 10 to 20 pages); readings (essays, articles, etc.) of various length (about 3 to 10 pages) from the text book, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned, reading to write

List of reading and writing requirements for Khairea in the College of Architecture, Art and Design/Spring 2012

Course Name	Graded Writing Assignments	Required Reading
DES 122: Modern Developments in Architecture and Design	note taking during lectures for success in exams	book chapters assigned for each class, about 11 pages long each; filling vocabulary cards for each reading, 5 unannounced drop quizzes on the readings assigned
DES 112: Descriptive Drawing II	N/A	handouts from various sources
DES 132: Design Foundations II	N/A	handouts from various sources, articles of various length (usually 3 to 5 pages long) from current periodicals, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned
WRI 102: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum	3 academic essays which require integration of 3 to 5 outside sources that are documented following APA style; with multiple drafts; 3 to 5 pages long written response to readings final examination: a five paragraph academic essay that requires APA documentation	book chapters (about 10 to 20 pages); readings (essays, articles, etc.) of various length (about 3 to 10 pages) from the text book, follow-up class discussions on the readings assigned, reading to write
MTH 111: Mathematics for Architects	N/A	book chapters and handouts, instructions and questions

Appendix D: Topics, codes, and categories identified in the data and an extract from coded interview transcript

Topic	Code	Categories
The impact of the students' experiences on their identity construction	ID	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Declining academic standing and view of self 2. Socio-academic life and view of self 3. Literacy practices that had a positive impact on the students' view of self

An extract from interview #3 with Zeina, one of the focal students.

The notes in the margin show the code and category number, which is followed by a letter (A-Z) to differentiate between all quotes that go under the same category. For instance, ID 1B indicates that the text highlighted is the 2nd quote under that specific category.

NB: How is your social life these days? Do you see classmates outside of class?

Zeina: Social life? I like don't have enough time. No social life in AUS! Studying for all courses take all of my time. Still, like sometimes I don't finish it.

| CHL
1D
CHL
5B

NB: I see.

Zeina: Here I'm monkey. I was more confident in high school and like I was more popular. Like I used to teach my friend, now my friend teach me.

| ID
1B

Researcher: How do you feel about all these changes?

Zeina: It's not fine. I think about my father and my mother, so I want to be successful. Sometimes when I get low grade they say "why?" I say "because sometimes I don't understand well". They say "Try, try!"

NB: They want you to do well.

Zeina: Yes, like it's so hard. I want to make them proud.

| PO
3A

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