

Programme Identity in Academia: The Case of One EAP Unit in the Arabian Gulf

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Abstract

Researching the identity of language education programmes in academia is critical because of the pivotal role these programmes play to induct students into the academic communities of their disciplines. Despite this criticality, there is markedly very little research activity in the area. Viewed as remedial rather than academic and peripheral rather than central to university education, these programmes sit uncomfortably in today's higher education, and their identity is often in tension and in a state of conflict. Principally set to survey departmental faculty regarding English for Academic Purposes requirements using a needs analysis framework, this research partially reports on doctoral research regarding the identity of one English for Academic Purposes unit at one higher education institution in the Sultanate of Oman. Qualitative data were collected from interviews, programme and institutional document review, and observation of the setting. Using an ethnographic approach, the paper situates the identity of the EAP unit within historical and contemporary discourse which became most visible at a time of institutional change. The status of the EAP unit, constructed and mediated through power, was discernible in both discipline (i.e., that the language programmes are remedial in nature solely existing to cover language-related gaps reminiscent of school level) and enterprise (i.e., that teaching English is not characteristic of academia). The paper ends by offering future research on identity a possible model for researching language education programmes in higher education.

Keywords: EAP, higher education, identity, Oman, status

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Introduction

Research on the identity of English for academic purposes (EAP) as a field and as practice in higher education is not common. Perhaps the rapid development within EAP has led to a focus on the ‘doing’ rather than the ‘being’ and has delayed a treatment of programme identity. Hamp-Lyons (2011) characterizes the early beginnings of EAP as “grass roots, practical response to an immediate problem... [and] ad hoc, small-scale, quick fix” (pp.91-92). Theorization of EAP between pragmatism and critical theories is a recent trend. Additionally, Second Language Acquisition research, which applied linguistics has traditionally drawn from, has itself until recently been pursued from a purely psychological perspective (Menard-Warwick, 2005). Despite its criticality, the literature available on programme identity is anecdotal in nature, observational, purely theoretical or incidental (e.g., Al-Maamari, 2001; Daoud, 2000; Melles, Millar, Morton & Fegan, 2005).

The characterisation of EAP programme identity as incidental is premised on the fact that identity issues usually crop up in the treatment of other EAP areas. Such is the case in this paper, for issues of status and identity of language education programmes in a tertiary setting have come to the fore through a needs assessment study of three credit-bearing EAP programmes at one higher education institution in Oman. The study aimed to examine the assessment policies and practices in/around these EAP programmes. Therefore, in addition to this, in this paper the author further draws on more extensive documentary evidence to stress the importance of research into EAP programme identity. Such studies are timely especially as research in EAP makes the transition from the doing to the being.

While there are various frameworks for researching identity such as social identity theory, situated learning and community of practice and others (e.g., Gioia, Price, Hamilton & Thomas, 2010; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005), in this paper the author draws on social identity theory proposed by Tajfel (1978) and developed further by Hogg and Abrams (1998) as a theoretical and analytical basis to shed light on the identity of one EAP unit in tertiary education. This theory is appropriate as it defines identity in discursive terms, thus allowing the data to be seen through relations of power.

To the best of my knowledge, no research has explored the identity of EAP programmes or units, centres and institutes despite their criticality in preparing students for their academic studies. In the same way, the very few studies which exist (e.g., Daoud, 2000; Melles et al., 2005; Pennington, 1991) discussed the status of EAP programmes, but have not attempted to theorize identity in the studied programmes. The study featured here attempts to firstly shed light on the identity of an EAP unit in one tertiary setting in the Sultanate of Oman using a social identity theory perspective, and secondly propose a framework for researching identity informed by this perspective.

The paper is organized as follows. After a brief literature review of identity theory drawn from educational research, the paper proceeds with presenting the classic debates in EAP at theoretical and institutional levels as a way to document the modest progress made in the research on EAP programme identity. Next, the ethnographic study of a language education unit at one higher education institution (HEI) in Oman is presented. Here, the data are triangulated with a view to offering a model for researching identity of language education programmes in

HE. Finally, the author concludes by (a) drawing implications for language education programmes in academia and the people inhabiting them and (b) justifying the need to research programme identity explicitly and directly.

Theoretical Framework

Educational Theories of Identity

To date, research on programme identity relating to language education in academic settings (EAP) is lacking. To compensate for the lack of research in this area and to advance the argument of this paper, the extant literature on academic identity based on educational research is reviewed. The theoretical frameworks for understanding identity here are more advanced (Henkel, 2005; Varghese et al., 2005).

Henkel (2000, 2005) reviews two theories of identity construction. Essentialist and liberal individualist theories of identity consider the individual as the bearer of the community tradition primarily responsible for forming identity. Identity here is a reflexive activity wherein the individual internalizes their own identity through continuously comparing the self with the available images of significant others. Building on Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionist framework, Jenkins (1996) proposes an identity interface based on an "internal-external dialectic of identification" (p.20), a definitional synthesis of oneself (i.e., private sense of academic identity, or claimed identity) and that defined by others (i.e., a recognized public identity, or assigned identity). Communitarian and interactionist moral philosophies construe identity based on the social interaction within which the embedded individual interacts. One criticism against communitarian theories of identity however is that they do not factor power relation differential into the equation of identity construction.

Further, while identity may be viewed through various theoretical frameworks such as Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning and Simon's (1995) concept of image-text (Varghese et al., 2005), this paper utilizes Tajfel's social identity theory (1978) to study the identity of EAP. Social theory sees identity through the structure of social categories (i.e., nationality, gender, status, etc.), which are relational in power and status, thus depicting identity in positivist, dichotomous 'either or' categorizations. Though using this framework to research identity is limiting in the sense that it merely offers a cross-sectional and static picture rather than a longitudinal and dynamic evolution of identity, social identity theory is appropriate when an emphasis needs to be placed on the "concrete way of conceptualizing the hegemony—that is, unequal power and status relations—inherent in conflicting identities" (Varghese et al., 2005, p.37). In this regard, Bernstein (1996) argues that "the social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationships", thus forming a legitimizing mechanism by which disciplines "extend and rationalise their domination" (pp.7-8). Similarly, in second language education, quoting Mansfield (2000) Morgan and Clarke (2011) differentiate between identity theories which see identity as a 'thing' to be discovered, and theories of Foucauldian power which see identity as written by and legitimized through discourse and power.

Identity construction can be strengthened proportional to the degree of acquisition of social (e.g., editorial boards) and cultural (e.g., prestige) forces. Also, power differential (i.e., in the form of the institutional and academic freedom and sense of professionalism) contributes to

the construction of strong identities. Further, the interaction between discipline and enterprise happens as follows:

The discipline and the enterprise modes of linkage converge in the basic operating units—the department ... or the institute is simultaneously a part of the discipline and a part of the enterprise, melding the two and drawing strength from the combination(Clark,1983,p.23).

This article focuses on the academic identity of an EAP unit as a case bounded in a particular context. The context is EAP teaching in a country where English is taught as a foreign language. Further, the author argues that both discipline (i.e., in the tangible forms of the unit or department or the curriculum) and the enterprise or HEI are fertile communities or contexts for the construction and manifestation of academic identities (Clark, 1983; Henkel, 2005).

EAP: Theory and Discourses

EAP as discipline and practice is a function of internal and external, political dynamics. The field has been characterised by a scarce body of literature and the absence of a solidly integrated body of research. Pennington (1991) and Melles et al. (2005) identify the challenge of the EAP field internally (theoretical tensions within the field) and externally (institutional challenges). Specifically, drawing on the work of John Swales (1988, 1990), Melles et al. (2005) identify the absence of (a) “a common disciplinary paradigm” and (b) “institutional skepticism” as impeding “a credible view of the [EAP] discipline” (p.296).

With regard to (a), the philosophical or conceptual nature of EAP as a field demonstrates the abundance of debate and dispute in its theories, discourses and practices—adding to the view of EAP as a growing yet an incoherent discipline of inquiry and practice. The debates are premised on arguments regarding the objectification of language (separation between language and content), the concept of remediation, and the polarized view of EAP as principally humanistic or pragmatic. With regard to (b), the institutional discourse also parallels and confirms the conceptual view—(a) above—by highlighting the secondary place and uncertain status of EAP within the academy. The paper will take (a) and (b) in turn.

Theoretical Discourse

Internally, EAP faces tension amongst its community of practitioners/researchers divided by debates between humanistic, ethical and critical approaches, and pragmatist and efficient approaches. The tension refers to the epistemological dichotomization between pragmatism and critical realism in EAP. Santos (2001) characterises this dichotomization as one between “an ideological approach to teaching, with its goal of sociopolitical transformation”, and “a pragmatic approach, with its goal of socializing students into the academy” (p.177). This dichotomization defines the concomitant discourse—a discourse characterised by different and often conflicting conceptions, and different agendas, on how to conceptualise EAP and how to elevate the status of EAP within the academy.

Based on the taken stance about the nature of EAP (curriculum), the differences between pragmatist general and specific advocates also reflect different beliefs on ways to raise the status of EAP programmes in HEIs, where these normally reside. EAP generalists see education as

concerned with teaching grammar, rhetoric and culture as an option to elevate the status of the field (Raimes, 1991) in what is called “the butler’s stance”, a position which “overvalues service to other disciplines” and seconds them to marginal EAP units (p.420). In contrast, those advocating increased specificity in EAP focus on inducting learners into the community practices of the disciplines, thus overturning the generalists’ argument:

In fact the opposite is true. The notion of a common core assumes there is a single overarching literacy and that the language used in university study is only slightly different from that found in the home and school. ... EAP then becomes a Band-aid measure to fix up deficiencies. (Hyland, 2006, p.12)

Critical EAP theorists have a different conception of how to elevate the status of EAP units in HEIs. Benesch (1993) suggests that the “normative” discourse characterising pragmatist ideology is responsible for the marginalisation of the ESL curriculum. For this reason, Pennycook (1997) claims that “the conservative” pragmatic approach to EAP is not helpful:

If one of the difficulties faced by EAP practitioners is marginalisation and displacement into a secondary role compared to the other disciplines, this problem cannot be overcome by accepting a role as a service department providing what other departments feel they need. (p.263)

In summary, these differences have implications on the resulting curricular orientations and their view of the identity and status of EAP as a field with the pragmatists, based on their accentuation of either language or content, at times seeing a focus on language and skills as the basis for the discipline and its identity, and at times seeing it in the investment in the discursive practices of the disciplines. By contrast, critical theorists, regardless of content type and form, reject the subordination of EAP to discipline subjects, thus highlighting the unbalance in the *status quo* and seeking a rebalance by fighting inequalities.

Institutional Discourse

The status of EAP generally and its programmes specifically inside institutional borders, or enterprise, which belongs to what Melles et al. (2005) dub “institutional skepticism” (p.296), is uncertain. Bolton (1990, as cited in Melles et al., 2005) claims that institutions view ESL/EAP as ‘pre-college’ instruction, (p.284), where any association with it is perceived to lower academic standards of the disciplines. Turner (1999) studied the institutional meta-discursive conceptualisation of EAP, where notions of “service”, “remediation”, “language training” and “support” predominated (pp.64-65). This skepticism can be tracked to varying views of language teaching, one seeing it as a “preparatory or subsidiary activity for truly academic studies” and the other regarding it a “legitimate academic pursuit in its own right which can co-exist on equal terms alongside other aspects of professional preparation” (Malcolm, 1993, p.3). The *status quo* of EAP programmes or ESL Centres in HEIs is best described by Allison (1992):

Such units—even though they may be called “centres”—typically occupy the periphery of university life, especially when it comes to wider curricular questions. Once a remedial brief has been accepted, such a state of affairs appears normal and

right to many people, since remedial teaching, however laudable, is not what universities are for. (p.16)

Daoud (2000) states that ESP provision in North Africa suffers from “a status problem” (p.81). He contends that “current ESP/LSP practice is largely *ad-hoc*, lacking in course design, teacher training, sufficient instruction time, and proper evaluation” (p.77). This is attributed to three major factors: central control, institutional inertia, and resistance to the spread of English in an originally French-dominant educational and economic system. With regard to centralised control, Daoud (2000) writes:

the agencies in charge of curriculum planning have a top-down approach. They do not listen to the practitioners in the field, allocate too little time for ESP instruction, and set common examination criteria that are at odds with the nature of ESP practice. (p.81)

Further, Melles et al. (2005) present a historical case study of one discipline-specific credit-bearing EAP programme at an Australian university, and “trace some of the discourses and practices that influenced its development” (p.291), showing its ebb and flow within the institution. The year 2000 saw the first discipline specific credit-bearing EAP programme, called *Introduction to Architectural Studies*, which was designed and taught by the Centre for Communication Skills and ESL staff. The name of the programme reflected the faculty’s concern against a potential perception of the programme being seen as remedial. However, in 2003, because of a subject review, the programme extended its audience to other engineering students who were deemed in need of ESL instruction, and the name was changed to *Introduction to Built Environment Studies*, reflecting its broader nature and wider audience. Consequently, the content had to be retailored to more generic language and communication skills. Melles et al. pointed that the collaboration between the EAP staff and engineering faculty and its residence within the Faculty of Engineering were key to the success of the programme. One example of collaboration between the EAP and engineering faculty was feedback given by ESL staff on the lecturer’s teaching style. However, cooperation was not unanimous across faculty and the predominant discourse at the University was not positive:

Concerns about the subject have been voiced at various times in terms of ... the compromising of Faculty standards, the status of the subject as a core versus an elective, and epistemological issues relating to whether language and communication skills are valued sufficiently in the Faculty to warrant a subject. (Melles et al., 2005, p.295)

In the end, the programme was abolished because some academics resisted the attempt by ESL staff to embed academic literacies in the curriculum coupled by the existence of double standards, with some staff employed as academics and others as general support staff. Further, because the CCS&ESL unit was dismantled, the programme was moved under another academic unit.

Pennington (1991) examines the image of the ELT profession in tertiary education from outside, and internally. Externally, she argues that the field is characterized by the abundance of acronyms/abbreviations (e.g., EFL, ESL, etc.). Further, Pennington points out that because of

ELT units' incongruence in terms of academic practice and scholarship compared to the disciplines, their location within the academic structure of organisations is variable and uncertain and is characterised by paradox; while like other disciplines they are interested in issues of instruction and curriculum, they generally perform a service function and do not count towards graduation or degree credits (Williams, 1995). Lastly, people and academicians do not perceive ELT and by interpolation the concomitant discourse about teachers and learners to comprise a specialised field of study—a position further facilitated by practitioners “mak[ing] it seem to others that the work we perform is natural, usual, and effortless” and by the absence of articulation of a statement “to codify what it is that we know and what it is that we do in ELT” (pp.12-13).

The Present Study

This paper forms a part of a PhD research study (Al-Maamari, 2011) which documented and critiqued the assessment policy and practices in and around three credit-bearing non-foundation EAP programmes at one English language centre (ELC) in a HEI in the Sultanate of Oman. This paper presents the needs assessment (NA) of that larger study from the perspective of departmental faculty, but further draws on more extensive data from the foundation English programmes to shed light on the identity of the language education unit as a whole. The main research question guiding the NA was:

What are the departmental faculty requirements of the EAP programmes with regard to reading and writing?

Research Context: Situating the Language Unit

The ELC where this research was situated was a language unit, which was separate from the disciplinary departments such as engineering, science, medicine, and others, which it existed to serve. The ELC offered both foundation (pre-sessional and non-credit-bearing) and non-foundation (in-sessional and credit bearing) English language programmes for the students enrolled in those departments. Upon entry to any HEI in the country, including the one under research, the students sit for a placement English language examination, where they are subsequently placed in one level of instruction in the English foundation programme (EFP). After completing the EFP or passing the Exit exam, the students then enroll in the credit language and subject programmes. While instruction for the credit-bearing EAP programmes was provided by ELT staff from the ELC, these programmes are part of departmental degree requirements, and so the departments are the commander in chief in determining their (dis)-continuation. Based on the data, identity issues permeated the English foundation and non-foundation programmes in the ELC. This is significant in that the foundation programme is much bigger than the non-foundation programme as defined by volume and student course registration, and it usually takes over two thirds of the ELC's resources directed at staffing, curriculum development, testing, etc. This predominance has resonance for the transferability of the findings and far-reaching implications for the identity of the ELC *writ large*. Therefore, the study's applicability to other English language centres with foundation and/or non-foundation English language programmes becomes more certain.

Research Methodology

Ethnography seemed an appropriate approach to study the identity of the language education unit (ELC) in relation to its institutional context from a cultural perspective. The

ethnographic approach allows us to focus our attention on the unit's cultural understandings, examine contextual practice, and explore multiple points of view (Watson-Gegeo, 1988).

Data Collection

Taking an ethnographic stance made it easier for the researcher to participate in various settings, and devote the amount of time required by an ethnographic study. Here, the affordances or the "distinctive assets and liabilities" (Merton, 1972, p.33) of this position of insidership (Mercer, 2007) are teased to show how it helped the data gathering and analysis process in several ways: (1) access to and membership in a community of practice, (2) the nature of participant observation, and (3) the use of multi-methods for gathering data.

As this is an example of insider research, the researcher did not enter the research site "in a mindless fashion" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.302). The data collection happened when he was a language instructor in that institution, and time was therefore devoted fully to the research. Though during the time of research author had no teaching assignments as was the case before embarking on the study, he was a regular participant in the sense that he attended regularly, and participated in all public events that happened during the time he was in the site.

Further, being part of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) helped me stay in situ for four complete months. This insidership enabled me to explore "the movement, instantiations, and effects of symbolic and material forms in various places" (Eisenhart, 2001, p.22) which involved the engagement in a series of "small talks", and witness firsthand major institutional meetings/events as will be delineated further below. These all helped me gather observational field notes, collect archival data, zero in on the dynamics of this setting and sharpen the focus of the interviews. Although such data were not of direct relevance to my research focus on assessment at the time, they helped me locate my understanding within "the interrelationships of factors" (Morrison, 1993, p.88), which would become important subsequently.

Not only physical presence, but ever since the fieldwork-proper ended, the researcher remained in the loop via electronic email, and various other communication means. Similar incidents to the one which were recorded and witnessed in the field relating to the status of the unit in the mother institution were repeated in November 2010, in the form of what was called 'The Great Debate between the Block System vs. the Semester System'. These helped me understand the "social relations" (Carspecken, 1996, p.42) taking place and reinforced my understanding of my data, long after leaving the field. At that stage, the researcher already matured into understanding my theoretical lens (Creswell, 2009), and sought to participate in the discussion unfolding in the ELC.

Further, the participant observation undertaken was more focused on observing the whole setting of the ELC as institution and the surrounding ecology, akin to the immersion called for by Morrison (1993). Therefore, my presence in the site was normal, though such membership further required that field notes could not sometimes be written as simultaneously as observation was carried out. Instead, those were recorded in my notebook or in the computer subsequently.

In addition to participant observation, the study utilized face-to-face interviewing, researcher reflection/journaling and analysis of archival records (Appendix A). The latter involved the collection of programme and departmental documents, and the review of institutional reports and handbooks. For the interviews, a total of nine department professors participated. Those were equally sampled from three Departments, some of whom held head of department positions (HoD). Recruitment of the professors for the interviews was initially done through the Administration of the Departments. Later however, individuals were contacted personally for concerns of data sufficiency and validity. During participant recruitment, participants were briefed about the research study where each signed a consent form, they were informed about the general research area, and they were sent the themes making up the interviews. Participants were also promised confidentiality and anonymity. The audio-recorded interviews, lasting approximately 30 minutes, were all conducted in English. The interviews aimed to “understand the shared experiences, practices, and beliefs that arise from shared cultural perspectives” (Brenner, 2006, p.358). In this sense, a major focus was firstly the faculty assessment of the students’ overall ability in English, and secondly the departmental requirements of the EAP programmes with regards to reading and writing (See interview schedule in Appendix B).

Data Analysis: The Analysis Grid

The path pursued to develop the analysis was a marriage between ethnographic and critical realist approaches in the sense that different data methods were allowed to consolidate one another. The research saw the role of ethnography in constructing observations and producing a number of thick and “focused descriptions” (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999, p.50) in order to build a “primary record” of the events and processes in the site under study (Carspecken, 1996, p.41), but also in focusing the analysis on the power of discourse.

Though focused on assessment of learner writing and reading needs as perceived by academic faculty, data were examined as social practice in order to investigate needs critically (Shohamy, 2001), by focusing the analyses onto power differential evident in the discourse in both the verbal and written data. A central principle guiding the analysis was the excavation of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the data. The horizontal (i.e., historical) dimension “refers to description of events and behaviors as they evolve over time” whereas the vertical dimension “refers to factors which influence behaviors and interactions at the time at which they occur” (Nunan, 1992, p.58). The research has attempted to highlight both the historical factors that shaped the discourse related to the ELC and the local factors that were being influential at the time of the research.

With these principles in mind, the analysis proceeded as follows. Upon transcription of the interviews, the entire dataset (including the field notes and all retrieved archival records) was transported onto NVivo 8, which is a program manager with the capability of storing, retrieving and analyzing qualitative data. In this program, the data were coded inductively over a long period of time and involved writing nodes and then categorizing them. Nodes were not pre-determined, but were grounded into and emerged from the data. As staying in situ focused the interviews initially, it was normal that the field notes were first coded. This involved singling out “critical incidents” (Tripp, 1993) and then providing focused descriptions based on their criticality in highlighting “the justification, the significance, and the meaning given to them”

(Angelides, 2001, p.431). Incidents are critical in the sense that when interpreted, any taken social action leads “in particular directions, and they end up having implications for identity” (Measor, 1985, p.61). Subsequently, the gathered records were examined for similar meanings. Finally, the interviews with the professors were coded selectively with the aim of highlighting identity in power and status terms. For each method, the process proceeded in creating free nodes (i.e., meaningful chunks of data), tree nodes (i.e., a collection of free nodes akin to categories), and themes. This horizontal move (from free nodes to tree nodes to themes) complemented with the vertical move (from field notes to documentary evidence to interview data) made up the analysis grid (See Appendix C).

Findings

The main findings of the study cut across three types of discourse, based on the analysis grid described above, and though themes are presented in solo in the forthcoming sections for reasons of presentation, in actuality these three discursive triodes collectively make up, as well as offer a preliminary framework for researching, the identity of language education programmes in academia:

- (a) *Discourse of status*—Records of the lower status of ELC in which the EAP programmes resided relative to the Departments.
- (b) *Discourse of being*—Perceptions by the departmental professors related to the practice and importance of language education programmes in the academic setting.
- (c) *Discourse of change*—At times of institutional change, attempts by the powers to be in the setting to abolish the foundation and non-foundation EAP programmes.

The term ‘discourse’ signals the fact that power relations did construct and reinforce marked identities in the environment where the ELC resided. Also, these discourse types related to instances where the EAP programmes’ identity became visible with regard to discipline and enterprise, the former in the sense that they could not compete with content courses in the disciplinary departments, and the latter in the sense that they did not belong in HEIs.

Discourse of Status—Through Documentation

In the context researched, the status meta-language (See Turner, 1999) has been long institutionalized, which was discernable in both discipline and enterprise. In the HEI Website, the ELC in question was classed under “Support Centres” in contrast to “Research Centres” and “Departments”. Formal correspondence (i.e., memoranda, letters, circulars) relating to academic teaching matters often saw the ELC separated from the Departments. In the Executive Bylaws of the Institution (2009), the ELC was treated under “support centres” with regard to its administration, despite these centres not performing a teaching function, and although the Bylaws made exception in this pedagogical area, this did not seem to be enough to elevate it to an academic unit. Remediation as well as so called “accelerated courses” formed part of the discourse within the ELC. With the national staff, who formed a minority, there was a sense of disappointment regarding inequity in academic treatment with regard to promotions and status in comparison to academic faculty within the various Departments and amongst senior Omanis within the ELC.

Further, drawing on the researcher's review of HEIs websites and the accompanying discourse, it is clear that the great variations on the type of job titles held by/given to teachers engaged in teaching students in EAP settings reflect the uncertain status and the unstable identity of EAP in the country. In some institutions, teachers are listed under "Staff" as opposed to "Academic Faculty". In others, they are treated on equal planes with academics and are given academic titles on the professorship scale. Still in others, academic titles are given based on qualifications so that PhD holders are given academic titles. In the ELC in question teachers including PhD holders were designated as "Staff" and followed a general scale in the sense that they were not given professorial titles. Further, examining the General Foundation Programme (GFP) Document reveals a significant difference about the manner by which these English language GFPs are perceived. Conducting a cross-comparison on the minimum academic qualifications required for teaching in the three areas of GFP (i.e., mathematics, IT and English) shows that while in Maths and IT the minimum qualification is a BA in mathematics or IT or a relevant subject and a teaching qualification, for English this is set to "a Bachelor's degree (in a relevant subject and taught and assessed in English) and a qualification in English Language Teaching (ELT) (e.g., CELTA, Trinity TEFL certificate)" (p.10). Further, in the Oman Institutional Classification Framework (2004), which is a classificatory framework of types of HEIs in Oman, it is stated clearly that GFPs are not part of higher education (p.28).

Discourse of Being—Through Interviews

Interview data with disciplinary professors revealed three important points related to their perception of the importance of language (teaching) as discipline and at the enterprise, or the HEI: (a) Teaching English is a school rather than a university business, (b) Study in the Departments as opposed to study in the language unit is the 'real world', and (c) Learning (teaching) English should be done at a very early age. One of the professors commented, thus

English is learned at a very early stage, and I think trying to remedy English at the age of 18 is not working ... My own children learned both languages at the age of 5. And by the time they were 16 and they went to finish from school, they speak perfect English and they speak perfect Arabic, and they can write both.

Another professor drew a distinction between learning English at the ELC and the learning that happens in the Department, and directly contrasted the inadequate proficiency level of the medical students after leaving the ELC and the improvement at the Department level:

In the years students spend in our Department, they mature in the language, and in the confidence with the speech, so obviously there is a lot of language learning in the Department informally in our discussion with the students. ... the students come to us [from the ELC] really hardly able to say two sentences continuously.

There was also skepticism from the Departments' faculty on the period of instruction that students spend learning English in the language unit, and skepticism about methods appropriate for teaching English at the ELC, specifically suspecting its assessment mechanisms. One professor stated:

My suggestion, I already expressed it to your colleagues from the [ELC], is that you need independent, international evaluation of the final output from your centre

[such as] TOEFL and IELTS exams. So, if a student passes through these international exams, then that's the best criteria.

These data reiterate comments often made in the literature, which see the purpose of language education programmes in HE as remedial in nature with the mission of covering the gap in English skills produced by the school system rather than see it as a field in its own right. Further, they regurgitate the conception that English is a school subject rather than an inseparable part of academic preparation.

Discourse of change—Through Observation

As was indicated at the outset of the paper, the original research sought to explore the assessment practices in and around non-foundation English language credit bearing EAP programmes. The historical review below relating to the major events incidentally coinciding with the data-collection period happened at a time of institutional change, and show tension in both discipline and enterprise.

During data collection in 2009, a discourse of change in the ELC was evident. This saw the abolishment of one of the two medical EAP programmes, both of which were offered by the ELC to satisfy the requirements of the department of Medicine. This left one single medical EAP programme struggling to maintain the original two programmes' standards. The whole medical EAP programme was upset by this change, as the medical department circumvented any consultative processes with them or the ELC *writ large*. Following Pillay (2004, p.132) on her investigation of the micropolitics of educational change, micropolitics can also manifest itself in 'silence', in this case the quietness of the medical department on the motivation of this change. Paradoxically, the interviews with the professors from the Department revealed that either the decision was the direct outcome of an external medical curriculum evaluation or that the change was not known to them. Ironically also, as evinced from the research, the Department faculty were still complaining about the students' language proficiency.

The ambiguity of the rationale for this restructuring was possibly contributed to by the pseudocompliant collaboration between the EAP medical programmes at the ELC and the various departments (Davison, 2006). This happened when the EAP programme was left to carry out the needs assessment on which to base the new programme with little contribution of data from the Department. This ended in a classic catch-22 situation: While research writing existed in the original EAP programme before abolition and non-existent in the Department, the reverse was true after the abolition. In other words, at the time, the EAP medical on-credit programme did not teach and assess the researched essay genre, and the new curriculum in the medical Department more recently emphasized research writing in its curricula.

In the case of the potential abolition of the engineering credit-bearing EAP programme, it was the direct result of the General Foundation Programme Standards (GFPS), which aimed (a) to prepare GFPs for national accreditation by the Oman Accreditation Council, and (b) to achieve minimal threshold quality benchmarks in FPs across the country. A discourse of apprehension in an already charged, volatile ELC was unmistakable. The heightened activity between the credit language engineering programme and representatives from the respective Department culminated in the scheduling of a high-ranking meeting attended by policy makers

from both sides. The end outcome was that the engineering EAP programmes were allowed to continue, as they still do at the time of writing this paper. However, while the situation regarding the Department's perception of the importance of these credit-bearing EAP programmes may be far from resolved for good, the volatile situation pre-meeting best captures the accelerating tension between the language programmes and the envoys from the Engineering Department.

The third example took place *post hoc* data collection-proper, and it was also the direct result of the GFPS. The first signs of change to the EFP (English Foundation Programme) at the HEI surfaced one semester after the implementation of the whole foundation programme, which saw the institutionalisation of Maths and IT foundation programmes side by side the EFP. To this end, a discussion Forum was established by the ELC Administration to debate the possibility of the EFP change from a Block system (i.e., 8 week-long) to a Semester system (i.e., 16 weeks). From the proposal, the teachers read that the EFP was asked to align, similar to Hargreaves' (1983) "administrative convenience", with the Maths and IT foundation programmes, which were a recent arrival compared to the twenty-five-year-old English foundation programme. A sample of a few positional responses from a number of teachers, including the researcher, is presented below for illustration:

The drive for many institutional changes is largely administrative yet there is little attention paid to the long-term, and sometimes even short-term, consequences which affect the real stakeholders, in this case the students themselves. [Participant 1, Omani EFL teacher]

We should keep our students, especially our weak students, in mind when considering making a major change. Timetabling convenience should not determine how we operate. [Participant 2, one of the policy makers in one of the researched credit EAP programmes]

If we can establish that the Block system isn't helping our students to succeed in English, then we as EFL practitioners are primarily responsible to seek to advance change. [Researcher]

Based on the ELC recommendations, the Institution's Council approved the EFP movement to a semi-semester system effective Fall 2011, wherein instead of students' sitting for final examination after an eight-week period, they now only sit for one final examination on two combined levels. This also meant that the EFP was now 'successfully' made to align with the Maths and IT foundation programmes. The consequences of this change, which will have profound pedagogical and assessment implications, remain to be seen.

Parallel evidence to the above can be drawn from the Symposium on National Programmes in Higher Education convened in 2004 at Sultan Qaboos University. The symposium aimed to outline a national policy on the placement of EAP in the enterprise, or the country's HE map. The proposal originated from SQU, as the leading HEI in the country, and was originally meant to solicit support for the displacement of English language centres/units from HEIs to fall outside the latter's borders. A group of ELT scholars, educationalists and practitioners met for two days over discussions and sessions. In the end, there was an almost unanimous consensus against this movement, as the participants saw in it an attempted threat to marginalise these units from the academy.

Discussion

The social identity theory of Hogg and Abrams (1998) offers a rich understanding of identity in contexts characterized by marked power relations. In this research, the identity of language education programmes is defined using the comparative category of status in relation to disciplinary programmes. Status, constructed and mediated through power, has achieved the highest visibility in both discipline (i.e., that the language programmes are remedial in nature whose sole purpose is to cover language-related gaps created at school level) and enterprise (i.e., that teaching English is not what universities are for). The case of the EAP unit in this context depicts an attempted or actual change in the structure and contents of the EAP programmes, fed from a perception by the institutional powers that these programmes are easily malleable as far as discipline and enterprise.

Varghese et al. (2005) identified three themes prevalent in research on identity. These are: (a) identity is multiple, shifting and in conflict, (b) identity is related to the social, cultural and political context, and (c) identity is constructed, maintained, and negotiated primarily through discourse (p.35). Though the absence of a cross-site comparison, by virtue of the longitudinal design of the study, the identity of the EAP programmes as multiple and shifting obtained; also, the conflict between the two entities (language & disciplinary programmes) has been captured in interview, observational and documentary evidence.

The social context of the HEI at the time of institutional changes and the political context in the shape of the introduction of the Oman Academic Standards for Foundation Programmes (OASFP), a form of state intervention (Levin, 1999), have produced this contrast and high visibility in discipline and enterprise between the language education and the content programmes. The prevalent discourse brought about by OASFP at the HEI sparked a discourse of EAP credit programmes' redundancy (Al-Maamari & Al-Sabti, 2013). The propensity of hastening to do away with these EAP programmes was pre-emptive, as OASFP do not on their own promise the improved quality of the curricula of the English language foundation programme or the increased proficiency of the students. In so assuming, the Engineering and Medicine Departments seem to have conflated potential change for actual or on-the-ground change, but this move has uncovered their conception of how remedial and redundant they perceived those EAP programmes to be (J. Swales, 1990).

Additionally, these meanings were embedded, preserved, and shared through discourse and did thus define the identity of the EAP unit. These discourses can be summarised in the following three-tier model:

(a). Epistemological discourse (e.g., Pennington, 1991): uncertain academic status of ESL/EAP staff, skepticism with regard to the worth of the language content or its use to faculty through embedding academic literacies, related perception of compromising discipline standards, and lack of data on effectiveness/quality of language programmes;

(b). Institutional restructuring discourse (e.g., Melles et al., 2005): structural and subject reviews and evaluations affect the institutionalisation of subject-specific EAP programmes and their sponsoring units or centres, turning them into generic programmes before eventually abolishing them, and changing the units and centres to “service” departments; and

(c). Policy and planning discourse (e.g., Daoud, 2000): top down policies ignore the special academic requirements of EAP programmes and ignore practitioners; the scarcity of resources renders increased professionalism for programme self-improvement unachievable.

What this research offers is the above model informed by and grounded into social identity theory. The model can be considered a possible framework for researching identity of language education programmes in HE from a power perspective.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper, the identity of language education programmes in academia, is a by-product of PhD research which investigated the assessment policy and practices in and around three credit-bearing EAP programmes at one Omani HEI. Utilizing ethnographic and critical analysis techniques, it has become evident that identity issues characterized the foundation and non-foundation English language programmes in marked difference to disciplinary programmes in the Departments.

To conclude the paper, two important points are highly important to state. The first is to do with the legitimacy of these credit and foundation language programmes to exist as part of HEIs. We as insiders (i.e., EAP practitioners) *believe* in the pivotal role of our programmes in helping students succeed in academia and inducting them into the academic disciplines of their specializations. In addition to the immense work with which we usually engage in materials development and testing, we also need to pay attention to the quality of learning opportunities that these programmes purport to offer to EFL students.

The second is to do with researching EAP identity directly and explicitly rather than rely on incidental evidence, theoretical philosophizing, or anecdotal observation. This presupposes an identification of a research programme with EAP programme identity as an important research dimension. Up to now, most research on the identity of ELT has restricted itself to researching learners and teachers (e.g., Norton, 2000; Pennington & Richards, 2016); the identity of language education programmes or institutions has not been seriously studied. Researching identity directly with maximal capitalization on both breadth and depth research designs is timely. Such studies can recruit participants who are high in the administration ladder in HEIs, henceforth affording an in-depth exploration of further venues, spaces and discourses.

Postscript

The research study including this paper write up was completed in 2011; subsequently, the manuscript underwent several reviews before it finally made its way to publication. This is the right time: The English language unit in question has been changed by force more recently, and has lost its long-earned name. Instead, it is now assigned a new generic label, once more depriving it from its core identity as a unit with an English language teaching mission, and reiterating once again the validity of the arguments presented in the above study.

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Appendix A Data Sources

List of fieldwork critical incidents

- General foundation programme standards (GFPSs) meetings (Language Programmes with corresponding Departments)
- GFPSs discussion board (Block vs. Semester System Debate)
- ELC orientation to disciplinary Departments
- Institutional Meeting with ELC & Departments to discuss GFPSs
- Symposium on National Programmes in Higher education

List of retrieved archival data

- HEI website
- Letters of formal correspondence
- Executive bylaws of institution
- Staff and programme policy documents at ELC
- General Foundation Programme Document
- Oman Institutional Classification Framework

Interviews (See schedule in Appendix B below)

Appendix B Interview schedule for departmental professors

(a). Faculty assessment of students' English level

(b). Coordination between Language Unit & Department

- Department knowledge about Language Programme related to Department

(c). Needs Analysis

- Writing/Reading requirements by the Department

- Opinions about tasks which students do when they join Department

- Departmental variation/expectations

(d). Progress/changes

Students' progress over the years at Department and their language skills

Appendix C Analysis Grid: methods vis-a-vis analysis paths

NVivo free nodes	Tree nodes	Theme
* Medical EAP programme not informed about rationale for change * Little cooperation about earlier needs assessment from Department	Communication issues	Discourse of Change
* Scheduling of meeting by engineering Department to talk about need for programme * ELC called upon to explain role to whole institution * ELC called upon to explain programmes in relation to GFPSs	Call to meeting	
* Apparent (announced) aim of set-up discussion board * Actual (interpreted) aim of set-up discussion board (administrative, timetabling convenience, not owning change) * Aim of Symposium on National Programmes in Higher Education	Apparent vs. actual aims	
* Attendance not good * ELC staff speakers, and Departments' staff listeners * Monologue, not much discussion as anticipated * Meeting of language professionals from all around the country for Symposium	Ensuing discourse	
* One medical EAP programme abolished * Final outcome of symposium: rejection of proposal * English FP aligned with Maths/IT FP	Final outcome	

NVivo free nodes	Tree nodes	Theme
* Two divisions in HEI Website: Centres vs. Departments	Hierarchical	2 0 0 4

* ELC under Support Centres * ELC subordinate to Departments in order of reference in formal correspondence	status	
* Titles & promotion in ELC intermediary between administrative and academic status * Inconsistent titles given to staff teaching in these language programmes	Lower title & promotion status	
* ELC separated in teaching matters compared to other support centres in Bylaws * Academic requirements for teaching in English FP less than in Maths/IT FP * In Classification Framework of Oman’s Institutions: FPs not part of HE	Lower academic status	

NVivo free nodes	Tree nodes	Theme
* English is a school, not university, business * Language learning happens at Departments in a transformative way * Language learning happens at Department informally successfully * Departmental study is the real world * Based on faculty education experience, there is no need for ELC. Study at the Department is the reality	View of language (learning)	Discourse of Being
* Example of faculty children learning English when they are at a very young age * I learnt English through memorizing lots of words * Learning English should be done at a very early age	Schooling perception	
* The faculty questions the time the students spend in the ELC without language improvement * The faculty does not think the students’ English benefit in the ELC	Role & perceptions of ELC	