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## EVALUATION OF STUDY SKILLS INTEGRATION INTO OMANI SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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**Abstract.** *Study skills are considered critical in both the academic and professional life of a student. This study focusses on the extent to which secondary school students in Omani public schools possess study skills and how these are integrated into their English language textbook. The study explored i) the study skills profile of students in terms of college readiness, ii) the correlation between students' academic performance and study skills, and iii) the types of study skills embedded in the 'Engage with English' coursebook and workbook used in Grade 12. For this purpose, an adapted version of the pre-tested Study Skills Inventory developed by Dennis Congo was administered to 162 secondary school students. The results revealed that the students are relatively strong in the skills of memorising, test preparation, and concentration; however, most students lack fundamental study skills such as reading, critical and creative thinking, and time management skills. With respect to the correlation between study skills and academic performance, a bivariate correlation between the individual high school percentage and skills was performed using SPSS. The results showed a weak correlation between study skills and student performance for most of the skills except concentration which revealed a strong positive correlation with a Pearson value of 0.72. The document analysis of the textbook was conducted in alignment with the same inventory. The analysis revealed that although the textbook covers reading and memorising skills, other important skills including note-taking, test preparation, time management, and critical thinking skills are not targeted adequately. Although the student sample size is not large enough to generalise the findings of the study and only one textbook used by Grade 12 students was analysed, the authors conclude that there is an urgent need for the inclusion of study skills in the Omani public school curriculum to enhance students' transition to higher education and subsequently, their professional success. The curriculum designers and decision-makers should consider embedding study skills more extensively in the curriculum during the next review cycle.*

**Key words:** *study skills, academic performance, text book, curriculum*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the academic context, proficiency in learning, overall potential, and academic attainment are often credited to a set of skills, broadly called study skills (Nuthana & Yenagi, 2009). Study skills have been identified as the ability to systematically organize and encode information (Rafoth and DeFabo 1990). They are defined as effective techniques adopted to retain information and achieve the expected learning outcomes (Koruklu, 2010). Study skills encompass a range of transferrable skills comprising reading, notetaking, memorising, concentration, time-management, test preparation, and critical thinking.

At times even students who attain high scores in academic subjects, are not aware of effective study skills and therefore generally lack self-confidence and may even experience test anxiety (Piji Kucuk, 2010), frustration and failure (Arana & Furlan, 2016). On the contrary, those who have been exposed to a gamut of study strategies and are able to use them appropriately are typically higher achievers (Feraco, et al., 2007). Training students on study skills has shown improvement in self-efficacy, planning, and academic performance (Motevalli et al 2021). With the increasing demand for transferable skills and competencies, higher education institutions worldwide incorporate critical thinking and critical reading as primary course outcomes in their language syllabi (Spirovska,2022).

In the context of Oman, where the oil and gas sector is no longer the primary resource for revenue generation, the government's strategic direction and policies support the empowerment of human resources through quality education. In Oman, English is taught as a foreign language and numerous studies have reported low levels of English language proficiency among Omani students.

According to Danica Piršl, Popovska, and Stojković (2017), "University education requires students to take responsibility for their own learning, to be more self-directed, to make decisions about what they will focus on and how much time they will spend on learning both inside and outside the classroom" (p.603). However, the school education for the majority of students from public schools has not proved to be adequate in terms of producing students ready for higher education or the workplace. Therefore, most students entering tertiary education in Oman are required to complete a one-year foundation program which is designed to equip them with the study skills required for their undergraduate program. The Ministry of Education has initiated multidimensional reforms informed by consultation with a variety of stakeholders, including national symposiums and international organisations. As a result, the Basic Education system was introduced as an improvement over the General education system. Hosted in phases, the basic education system reached its optimal implementation in the academic year 2007-08. Among advanced teacher training, curriculum and assessment reforms, the new system concentrated on catering to individual learner differences, student-centric methodologies, and the development of study skills in the students. The revised English curriculum also led to the introduction of the new textbook series 'Engage with English'. However, in spite of these enormous efforts, students still lack study skills and have a very low level of proficiency in the English language placing Oman on the 58th position out of 70 based on an online-language assessment (English First, 2015). Among other notable factors, the textbook series itself has multiple limitations related to the content, the exercises, and the depth of coverage (Al-Mahrooqi et al.2014). The Ministry of Education has admitted the lack of stakeholder consultation in the development of these books and has encouraged

teachers with extensive experience to review and provide their inputs (Education in Oman: The Drive for Quality, 2012).

The persistent evidence of students' struggles to cope with the demands of higher education due to their low level of English proficiency and the lack of study skills provided the impetus for this study. It sets out to investigate the integration of study skills in the 'Engage with English' textbook used at the secondary school level and also to evaluate the students' perception of their study skills supplemented by feedback from teachers.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The success of students' academic careers and, eventually, their professional lives is said to be greatly influenced by their study skills. This literature review focuses on research that has looked at the effect of study skills on students' academic achievement in high school and college. It also addresses the degree to which it is covered in EFL books and offers a method for integrating these abilities into the curriculum.

Khosravani (2014) cited communication, critical thinking, self-esteem, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving as crucial study skills. Biggs (2003) divided them into three categories: generic (such as taking notes, managing your time, giving presentations, and using technology for learning); subject-related (such as reading, summarizing, and writing essays); and metacognitive (such as self-evaluation, independent learning, and problem-solving).

Rahima et al. (2012) at University Selangor's (Unisel) in Malaysia, Megaloud (2019) at Cagayan State University in Lasam, Philippines, Haleh, et al. (2022) at Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences in Iran, and Jafari, et al. (2019), all found an intriguing correlation between students' academic performance and study skills. According to their study, students who had better time management, testing strategies, note-taking, analytical thinking, and problem-solving skills, as well as reading comprehension, had high levels of accomplishment in their academic courses.

Similar findings were made by Amponsah et al. (2020), Badau (2018), Fazal et al. (2012), and Abid et al. (2023) who noted a strong correlation between good study habits and academic success. They discovered that among the academically and emotionally successful students, study skills such as time management, concentration and memory, study aids and note-taking, test strategies and test anxiety, organizing and processing information, motivation and attitude, reading and selecting the main idea, and writing skills were highly prevalent. It is interesting to note that Feraco et al (2022) and Islam (2021) came to the same conclusion in their respective studies that soft skills are positively connected with life satisfaction as well as self-regulated learning, motivation, academic success and students' emotional wellness.

According to the research studies conducted by Rababa (2005), Al-Issa (2006), and Al-Brashdi (2002), in Gulf countries, including Oman, most school graduates and GFP students lack English language and study abilities. This is further supported by Muhammad (2013) and Naqvi et. al.'s studies at Omani university colleges.

The findings of these studies have been corroborated by Ebele and Paul (2017), Lambert and Nowacek (2006), and Elliot et al. (2000) conducted in non-Arab countries also revealed that a significant portion of school students did not develop acceptable study skills prior to entering high school. They argued that their poor study habits, rather than their incompetence and incapacity, were to blame for the poor results in their school

and college courses. Therefore, it was advised by these studies to provide students with collective assistance from instructors, counselors, and parents to promote good study habits. Also, according to Motevalli (2021) and Gilbert (2019), study skill training interventions have a significant positive effect on students' levels of motivation, self-efficacy, and other intangible aspects of academic performance.

Textbooks are essential in language classes at public schools, colleges, and language schools worldwide. According to Garinger (2001), Riazi (2003), Azizifar, Koosha, and Lotfi (2009) textbooks play a very important role in the field of language teaching and learning and are regarded as the next important aspect in the second/foreign language classroom after the teacher. In some situations, teachers have the freedom to select their own textbooks. Nonetheless, unfortunately most educators have textbooks recommended, prescribed, or given to them (Garinger, 2001).

The English textbooks currently being used in Omani classrooms, according to Al-Mahrooqi et al. (2014), are insufficient in nurturing students' capacity for critical thought. They argued for adding extra tasks to the textbooks in order to help pupils develop their capacity for higher-order thinking. Sobkowiak (2016) found a similar important flaw in the integration of study skills, specifically critical thinking abilities, in EFL textbooks. The study's main goal was to ascertain how well study skills, specifically critical thinking abilities, are supplied through textbooks in Polish schools. Similarly, Iranian academics like Khosravani, et. al., (2014) identified a serious lack of life skill development in Iranian EFL textbooks. They discovered that Iranian EFL textbooks do not assist students in acquiring the four metacognitive skills.

Based on the authors' observation at the research site, the majority of students join tertiary education without the necessary study skills which hinder their learning process. Yet, there is an obvious dearth of research studies on the incorporation of study skills into the curriculum and textbooks. Therefore, it is critical to examine and evaluate how study skills are incorporated into the EFL textbooks used in Omani schools and how well are the secondary school graduates equipped with the required study skills to take up the tertiary level programmes.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the types of study skills that are included in the 'Engage with English' (EWE) secondary school textbook?
2. To what extent are Omani secondary school graduates equipped with the study skills required for entering higher education?
  - a. Students' response to study skills inventory (self-rated)
  - b. Teacher perceptions
3. What is the correlation between study skills and academic performance among Omani secondary school graduates entering higher education?

### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted on 162 fresh high school graduates (95 females and 61 males) of the academic year 2020-21 from both Science (51) and Arts (112) streams. A combination of research methods was adopted to obtain insights into the level of study skills possessed by the students

To study the integration of study skills in the Omani high school grade 12 textbook, the 'Engage with English' coursebook was reviewed in light of seven study skills covered in the inventory discussed in the next paragraph. above. The coursebook comprises two sets each (textbook and workbook), A and B for two academic semesters in a year. A document analysis was performed as part of the textbook review. The skills covered in all ten units of coursebooks A and B were mapped against the seven study skills domains covered in the inventory discussed above. An additional column named 'other' for any other relevant skill which does not belong to the seven skills of the inventory was added to the table (refer to Table 1).

An adapted version of the study skills inventory, originally created by Dennis Congo, was used to assess the students' study skills (Naqvi et al., 2018). The original inventory comprised six domains: reading, note-taking, memory, test preparation, concentration, and time management. An additional domain, 'critical and creative thinking', was considered viable and was added later. Each domain carried five to ten questions. The adapted version was translated from English into Arabic, then uploaded on Google forms. The students self-rated themselves on a five-point frequency scale with the following interpretations: 1- almost never; 2- less than half of the time; 3- about half of the time; 4- more than half of the time; and 5- almost always. A benchmark score was allocated to each skill depending on the number of questions. For instance, the 'reading' skill was rated through 8 questions and a student getting 5 for each question might reach a total of 40 which is the rating for an exceptional student. A benchmark score of 30 was given for reading, indicating that if a student scored less than 30, there is a need to improve reading skills. The students' self-rated scores were added to get a collective total for each skill to verify whether they reach the required benchmark for each skill or not.

The teachers' perceptions of their students' study skills were studied using a section on study skills of a larger survey focusing on teacher perceptions on factors affecting language proficiency. The section on study skills comprised five questions on a five-point scale of frequency, similar to the one mentioned above. The focal areas include engagement in self-study, timely completion of homework, note-taking, time management, and study schedule preparation and adherence by the students. A total of 61 government school 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers (32 females and 29 males) responded to the online questionnaire.

SPSS was used to perform the data analysis of quantitative data. A descriptive analysis of the inventory data was performed to study the study skills profile of students. To study the correlation between study skills and academic performance, a bivariate correlation was performed between the individual high school percentage and the corresponding study skill scores of each student. Pearson coefficients were used to correlate the variables using a two-tailed significance.

The following section briefs the findings of the study.

## 5. FINDINGS

To respond to the first research question on the integration of study skills in EWE, document analysis was performed. The results are summarized in Table 1.

### 5.1. Textbook Analysis

Regarding the textbook analysis, detailed page-by-page document analysis was performed to study the integration of study skills. A comprehensive table comprising the details of each skill in all the units was generated after a thorough analysis of the textbook and corresponding workbook. However, due to the paucity of space, a condensed table with the frequency of occurrence of each skill is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Study Skills in English Coursebook and Workbook

Study Skill	Frequency	Details
Reading	15	Tips on skimming for key points, comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, summarizing, contextualizing through imagery are mentioned.
Note Taking	3	Tips on writing brief ideas, listening for details, and note-taking whilst listening are mentioned.
Memory	4	Tips like word grouping, writing keywords, extensive reading, goal setting, and practice are given.
Concentration	0	Not Applicable
Test Preparation	2	Tips on practicing multiple-choice questions are mentioned.
Time Management	1	Tip on time management while studying a language is mentioned.
Critical Thinking	3	Tips on predicting information, sequencing, the narration of a story, and brainstorming are mentioned.
Others	33	Tips on parts of speech, organizing ideas, essay writing, listening tips, suffixes, writing, conversations with extended answering, active listening, subjective/objective writing, quantity and quality writing, descriptive text, block and chain writing structure, referencing, summarizing, email/letter writing, formal/informal language, structuring reports, paragraph order planning, reasoning, listening unstressed words, discourse markers, intonations, common collocations, modifiers in speech.

Table 1 shows how frequently different study techniques are embedded in EWE. The "Others" category has the most study skills suggestions, at 33. This broad category includes parts of speech, essay writing, listening, writing, and a variety of other abilities. The second most frequently mentioned study skill is "reading," and 15 pieces of advice are provided, including skimming for important information, comprehension, and vocabulary development. "Note Taking" is mentioned three times, with tips on writing brief ideas and listening for details. "Memory" is also mentioned four times, along with advice on word grouping and extensive reading. "Concentration" is not stated at all, which may imply that it is not explicitly mentioned. "Test Preparation" is mentioned twice, with tips on practicing multiple choice questions. Finally, "Critical Thinking" is mentioned only three times with tips on predicting information and brainstorming, which affirms the findings of earlier studies (e.g. Mahrooqi et al., 2014) underscoring the lack of critical thinking skills in English textbooks. The data shows that while reading is emphasized with 15 tips, skills such as concentration and time

management are given less attention with a frequency of 0 and 1, respectively. These are important life skills which were found missing in Iranian EFL Textbooks as well as pointed out by Khosravani, et al. (2014).

**5.2. Study Skills Profile**

To answer the second research question on the study skills profile of students, the results generated from SPSS are briefed below.

*5.2.1. Students’ Response to the Inventory*

Table 2 below shows the study skills profile where students rated themselves high, which surpassed the benchmark score, in concentration, memory, test preparation, and time management. This can be attributed to Omani EFL learners having a high level of perceived English self- concept (Alrajhi & Aldhafri, 2015). However, they appear to be lacking critical thinking, note-taking, and reading skills.

Table 2 Study Skills

Study Skill	Benchmark score	Mean	Std. Deviation
Concentration	35	38.1728	7.20298
Critical Thinking	20	18.1481	4.78640
Memory	30	36.0309	6.65701
Notetaking	20	19.1543	4.00089
Reading	30	29.8086	5.57672
Test Preparation	40	44.7593	8.45801
Time Management	20	20.9506	5.29127

*5.2.2 Teachers’ Perceptions of Students’ Study Skills*

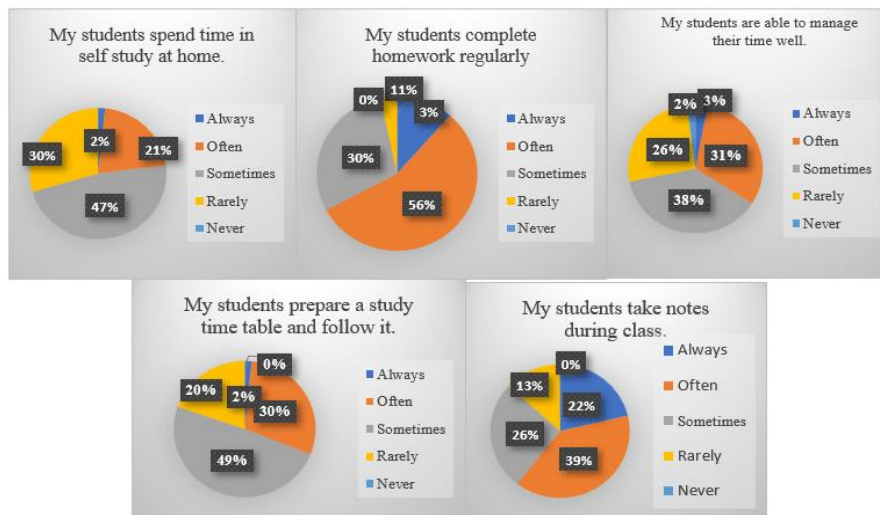


Fig. 1 Teacher’s Perceptions of Students’ Study skills

As shown in Figure 1, most of the teachers are not positive about students' skills. Only 2% believe that their students always spend time in self-study at home and 3% said that they always complete homework. Only 34% were positive about their time management skills (always-3%, often-31%) and 32 % mentioned that they followed a timetable with 2% reporting it as always ad 30% often. Note taking was reported to be slightly positive as compared to other skills where 22% reported that the students take notes 'always' and 39% 'often'. These findings reiterate the low confidence demonstrated by previous researchers in Omani students' study skills (e.g. Rababa (2005); Al-Issa (2006); and Al-Brashdi (2002); Muhammad (2013). Also, to be considered here is the observation by Jafari et al. (2019), that students with time management and note-taking skills (among others) had higher levels of academic achievement.

### 5.3. Correlation between Academic Performance and Study Skills

Table 3 below shows a matrix of the correlations between the high school percentage and each of the individual study skills. It is evident that concentration is one skill that showed a strong positive significance with the high-school scores of the student with a Pearson value of 0.72. However, the significance of the correlation was deemed insignificant on the basis of the 2-tailed significance criteria. The rest of the study skills showed a weaker correlation as per the Pearson results and some showed negative correlation such as time-management and critical thinking. However, the significance of these correlations was deemed inconclusive due to their *P-value* results. These finding are an anomaly to those studies conducted on non-Arab students, which found a strong positive correlation between students' academic performance and study skills (e.g. Rahima and Meon (2012) at University Selangor's (Unisel) in Malaysia, Megaloud (2019) at Cagayan State University in Lasam, Philippines, Haleh et al. (2022) at Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences in Iran, and Jafari, et al. (2019) except a few including Naqvi et.al. (2018).

It may hence be argued that these results support the findings of studies of Rababa (2005), Al-Issa (2006), Al-Brashdi (2002) and Muhammad (2019), who found that most school graduates and GFP students lack the study skills required for success in higher education.

Table 3 Bivariate Correlation Analysis of the Study Skills Inventory

		Correlations							
		HighSchoolPer centage	TimeManagem ent	Concentration	CriticalThinking	Memory	Notetaking	Reading	TestPreparatio n
HighSchoolPercentage	Pearson Correlation	1	-.005	.072	-.061	.063	.002	.060	.081
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.950	.363	.439	.428	.984	.451	.305
	N	162	162	162	162	162	162	162	162
TimeManagement	Pearson Correlation	-.005	1	.532**	.592**	.587**	.602**	.460**	.595**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.950		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	162	162	162	162	162	162	162	162
Concentration	Pearson Correlation	.072	.532**	1	.484**	.564**	.493**	.494**	.547**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.363	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	162	162	162	162	162	162	162	162
CriticalThinking	Pearson Correlation	-.061	.592**	.484**	1	.617**	.505**	.409**	.561**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.439	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	162	162	162	162	162	162	162	162
Memory	Pearson Correlation	.063	.587**	.564**	.617**	1	.686**	.540**	.748**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.428	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	162	162	162	162	162	162	162	162
Notetaking	Pearson Correlation	.002	.602**	.493**	.505**	.686**	1	.529**	.611**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.984	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001
	N	162	162	162	162	162	162	162	162
Reading	Pearson Correlation	.060	.460**	.494**	.409**	.540**	.529**	1	.602**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.451	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	
	N	162	162	162	162	162	162	162	162
TestPreparation	Pearson Correlation	.081	.595**	.547**	.561**	.748**	.611**	.602**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.305	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	162	162	162	162	162	162	162	162

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



## 6. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the primary limitations of this study is that only one secondary school textbook and its workbook were analysed. Hence the findings are specific to this book and cannot be applied to the entire spectrum of English language books used in public schools. It will be worthwhile to analyse another textbook in tandem with this one, to derive a comparison. Another major limitation is the use of a self-reported instrument where the students responded to the inventory themselves, and their answers are all to their own understanding and evaluation of their academic achievement and level of study skills. Hence, future research can consider a deeper analysis by cross-verification of the students' grades, since most of them reported very good high school percentages which contradicts the understanding that there is still a deficiency of the necessary study skills.

Therefore, in light of the aforementioned limitations, it is evident why the results of this study appear to contradict the myriad of earlier studies that report the existence of a positive correlation between academic performance and study skills. It is recommended that further studies be conducted on the study skills integration into the curriculum. Additionally, the use of a larger sample size and repeated administration of the inventory, before the students enter GFP and after they exit it, would help provide more accurate results. Future studies could also probe deeper into the issue by gathering more comprehensive qualitative feedback from teachers and students.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study provides insights into the incorporation of study skills in the secondary school curriculum, and the analysis of the high school graduates' study skills based on Dennis Congo's study skills inventory. The document analysis of the EWE textbook confirmed that most of the critical life skills such as time management, note-taking, and critical thinking are not sufficiently covered in the textbook. The results gathered from the inventory analysis revealed that some of the essential skills such as reading, note-taking, critical and creative thinking, and time management skills were either beneath the benchmark score, or borderline. The other skills of concentration, memory and test preparation surpassed the benchmark score. Moreover, the analysis of the inventory results showed a weak correlation between the study skills and academic achievement of the students. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that there should be more explicit integration of study skills into the curriculum, and students must be provided more intensive support to ensure that they develop the necessary study skills as they progress in the levels of their education so that they are fully equipped to enter their disciplinary courses without the need of a preparatory Foundation Programme.

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