

## FOUNDATION PROGRAM STUDENT'S PROFILE: WRITING, STUDY AND COMPUTER SKILLS

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**Abstract.** *This paper reports the results of a one-semester long research project conducted among exit level Foundation Program English Language (FPEL) students at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman. The study aimed at evaluating FPEL students' computer, course-specific writing and study skills, in order to establish the profile of an average FPEL student with regards to the writing and study skills course learning outcomes stated in the Curriculum Document. In addition, the study tried to investigate the possibility of a consistent integration of online tasks and discussions in the writing course to facilitate the 500-word report writing process and promote students' computer skills. An online survey and an end-of-term reflection form were devised in line with the aims of the study. The findings of the study demonstrate that FPEL students' computer skills are not adequate to cope with the 500-word report. Also, the findings indicate that consistent engagement in online tasks and discussions can promote students' computer literacy skills and facilitate the report writing process. Plausible suggestions were made to help FPEL students not only better achieve the learning outcomes for the writing course but also improve their computer skills which are vital in this era of technological advances.*

**Key words:** *study skills, computer skills, writing skills, Sultan Qaboos University, foundation program, Oman*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of information and communication technologies (ICT) made computers an essential tool for teaching and learning. Consequently, students are expected to have sufficient computer literacy skills to be able to cope with their studies. Computer literacy skills are also known as computer literacy and have been defined by researchers in multiple ways. However, the proposed definitions share many similarities. Adeyinka and Mutala (2008) describe computer literacy as knowing some basics using the computer, such as opening and saving a file, using a word processing program, sending and receiving e-mail, etc. Idowu (2004, as cited in Oladunjoye & Benwari, 2014) defines computer literacy as the ability to make use of the computer to create documents, analyze data, develop small computer programs, browse the internet and install software. Similarly, Kay (2003) relates computer literacy to computer experience and use, programming skills and ability to use software. In sum, computer literacy means feeling comfortable using computers in daily life and studies.

The role of computer knowledge in student life is great since current trends in teaching and learning involve the use of computers to a large extent. Generally, students come to university immediately after high school and to many of them, college is a completely new environment that is different from school and requires adequate computer and study skills to be able to cope with their studies. At university, most information is published online and students are directed to course documents such as timetables and course outlines, and web sites for their courses or degree plans. Most courses also include an e-learning component which runs through the campus learning management systems. This e-learning component has significantly reshaped the traditional curriculum by making it possible to keep students engaged outside the classroom through an online discussion board. According to Smith (2001), well-designed and appropriately facilitated online discussions can create a learning environment for learners to immediately apply new information in life. What is more, in contrast to face-to-face communication, online forums are more flexible since they allow time for reflection and thinking by giving equal chances to both introverted and extroverted students to participate in online discussions. Another advantage of well-structured online discussions is that they offer students extensive practice in writing. This type of writing is authentic and can be a meaningful supplement to the writing curriculum (Pauley 2001, as cited in Kaur, 2011).

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) has largely integrated technology in teaching and learning, and amended the curriculum accordingly. The university offers foundation and post-foundation programs. The foundation program (FP) consists of three components: English, Mathematics and Computing. These courses are considered as pathways for Omani students into their future academic studies and they are aimed at developing their literacy, numeracy, computing and learning skills (Carrol et al., 2009, p.10). The English component is called the Foundation Program English Language (FPEL) and is offered by the Language Center (LC). It has a learning outcome-oriented curriculum which focuses exclusively on skills and competencies that students should develop by the end of the courses and apply extensively in the post-foundation program. At the beginning of the academic year, incoming students take a placement test and based on their test results, they are placed in six English language proficiency courses. Every year more than 3500 students join the FPEL to gain essential skills and competencies needed for their undergraduate study in their degree programs.

The FPEL curriculum highlights the importance of writing and study skills in the learning of English and therefore, employs a combination of approaches to teaching writing. In the exit-level FPEL courses, the writing curriculum includes the rhetorical functions of comparison/contrast and cause/effect to equip students with the skills needed for dealing with academic writing tasks in their respective colleges (English Foundation Programme Document, 2014-2015). One of the highlights of the exit-level writing course is the 500-word research report which encompasses specific writing, study and computer skills. Students are required to research a topic, annotate, summarize and paraphrase relevant information from at least three sources. Apart from doing research and publishing their work, students are also expected to deliver a short presentation on the topic of their research report. Thus, the whole process involves intense application of specific course-related writing, study and computer skills. Therefore, students are introduced to a wide range of resources and toolkits as well as a set of specific study skills and paraphrasing strategies to cope with the task. However, despite the enhanced curriculum to meet the writing and study skills learning outcomes (LOs), students' first word-processed drafts clearly show that students' computer skills are not adequate and should be better addressed to help

them do better on the report. Although many students manage to score satisfactorily on their reports, it seems obvious that a great number of them still fall short of the required standards for academic writing, study and basic computer skills.

This leads to a hypothesis that perhaps there is a need for more integration of technology-based tasks and activities in the writing course to help students better achieve the course-specific LOs as well as promote their computer skills. Also, it is worth evaluating to what extent students achieve the writing and study LOs and determine the level of students' computer literacy in relation to the 500-word report. Consistent integration of information and computer technology in the writing classes could facilitate the report writing process and provide students with ample opportunities to apply their computer skills when doing research and publishing their work. The platform that would best fit in the context of this research could be Moodle which is the e-learning component of each FPEL course and has been used effectively for many years. This e-learning platform has a multipurpose function called the discussion forum, an online discussion board which can be used for posting discussion topics, opinions and comments. The discussion board is available in different types, such as a single simple discussion, a standard forum for general use, a question and answer forum, a standard forum presented in blog format, etc., which can be used for a number of innovative purposes like writing posts, reading posts arranged by threads, communicating online using texts and other media, commenting on a given topic, asking and answering questions, etc. (Managing a Moodle course, n.d.). The type of discussion used in this study was a single simple discussion which would serve as an open platform for sharing information and opinions.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study began as an attempt to evaluate to what extent exit level FPEL students achieve the writing and study skills LOs, as well as determine the level of actual computer skills in order to establish the profile of an average exit-level FPEL student. The study also explored the opportunity of integrating online tasks and activities into the report writing preparation to help students perform better on the 500-word report.

Hence, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) To what extent do exit-level FPEL students achieve the course-specific writing and study skills LOs? What are the actual computer skills of an average 0560 FPEL student?
- 2) How can online discussions and tasks be effectively integrated into writing and study skills course to promote students' writing, study and computer skills?

Thus, the framework was driven by the relevant strategy of investigation determined by the research questions which led to an exploratory study that stemmed from the need to uncover the relationship between the achieved writing and study skills LOs and actual competencies of students in relation to the 500-word report.

The study was constructed within the framework of the mixed methods research which is viewed in research as a natural complement to traditional qualitative and quantitative research (Burke & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) and allows the study to use more than one sampling strategy and multiple types of data (Patton, 2002). Moreover, when used separately, the traditional research methods have many limitations which hinder the process of detailed exploration of the phenomena in question.

The research participants are 0560 Science FPEL section 180 students. The rationale behind was the fact that in this course, students are exposed to Academic English and in the Writing and Study Skills Course students are engaged in writing a 500-word report which involves research and study skills. To draw an accurate sample or group that is representative of the FPEL 0560 student population, random sampling was used in this study. It was decided to select the section which would be taught by the teacher-researcher who teaches the course. This sampling strategy would ensure that all members of the FPEL 0560 student population have equal chances of being selected. Thus, section 180 was chosen because this was the section taught by one of the researchers.

Two types of data were collected for the study: an online survey for students and students' end-of-term reflections on the Writing and Study Skills course. The online survey investigated four main areas of the study: students' general computer skills, general study skills, writing skills, and course specific study skills. The areas of the investigation were drawn from the list of the writing and study skills LOs for the FPEL 0560 course which is also known as the exit-level FPEL course, and a set of general and study skills closely related to the 500-word report. Even though general computer and study skills are not on the list of the course-specific LOs, it would be essential to learn about the students' computer literacy level and study habits in regard to the writing component of the course in order to identify the weak areas that could account for inadequate performance. The aim of the survey was twofold. On the one hand, it aimed at getting a clear picture of an average FPEL 0560 student in terms of attainment of the set of the LOs prescribed for the course and level of their actual computer literacy to establish the FPEL 0560 Course learner profile. On the other hand, the survey aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of using online discussions in the report writing process. The survey was validated by the Language Center Research Committee and further revised based on the given feedback to allow for closer investigation of the participants' views, competencies and experiences. The revised survey was then piloted among three Language Centre teachers and five students for the clarity and language difficulty level as well as for the time needed for the completion of the survey and further revised. Finally, the link to the final version of the survey was sent to the students in the last teaching week when all students are expected to have achieved the specified LOs. Students' consent was acquired through a letter that they were asked to read before completing the questionnaire. It should be noted that the consent letter was both in English and Arabic to ensure the students understand the content.

The second research instrument was the end-of-term reflection on the Writing and Study Skills course which aimed at getting information about students' views and experiences of participating in online discussions in the writing course. Towards the completion of the course, the students were asked to respond to a set of guided questions by reflecting on the whole report preparation process and participation in online discussions. It should be noted that throughout the semester parallel to the in-class preparation for the 500-word report, the students were engaged in online Moodle discussions and tasks closely linked to the report writing process. The discussion topics were developed by the teacher and posted on the online discussion board on a weekly basis. The students were invited to participate in the discussion or start their own discussion if they wanted to. The reason behind this was to constantly engage students in meaningful communication. This would provide them with further opportunities to use their language and communication skills as well as study and computer skills. Throughout the course, the students participated in 26 discussions and shared their experiences by responding to weekly discussion topics.

Eventually, this discussion board became a space for sharing experiences, voicing concerns, seeking and providing help, giving and receiving feedback on a regular basis. In fact, there were 268 posts in 14 weeks and this demonstrates that the online discussions were favored by the students.

Data analysis was the next stage of the study. The quantitative data collected were computed and arranged in one table representing the students' responses. The questionnaire items were grouped into four categories, namely, general computer efficacy, general study skills, writing and study skills. A special feature on Google forms was used to analyze the collected data, the variables were defined and corresponding graphs and charts were created. The results were arranged into quartiles since the upper quartile responses (rated between 75% and 100%) and lower quartile responses (rated between 0% - 25%) are statistically significant in making inferences, drawing conclusions or making recommendations (Brown, 1994). Individual comments in the survey were grouped, listed, analyzed and compared against the corresponding comments made by the students in their reflections. Cross-validating statements were separated and combined into one table and their relationships were validated.

### 3. MAIN FINDINGS

The student sample population was fairly representative with a high turnout of responses (22 responses) since all the students completed the survey. Despite the fact that only one section, with 22 students, was selected for this study, which is considered a major limitation, some generalizations can be made based on some cross-validating survey statements and comments made by the students. Overall, the results of the survey tended to support the information collected from students' end-of-term reflections and generated a number of valuable findings. The synthesis of the results is presented below:

#### 3.1. FPEL 0560 learner profile

The responses to the LO-based questions revealed that an average FPEL student is an 18-19-year-old adult who has finished public school in a region in Oman, such as Al Bathinah, Al Sharqiyah and Al Dhahira governorates. Interestingly enough, only two students were from Muscat governorate, even though Sultan Qaboos University is based in the governorate of Muscat. Most of the students surveyed are computer literate since 78 % of them strongly agree that they can use most functions of MS Word, 95% can create new files on MS Word, 77% can word process documents, 82% can use PowerPoint, 73% can create effective slides and 78% can participate in discussion forums. These are the computer skills needed for the work on the 500-word report. However, only half of the respondents could format their writing using correct punctuation marks, 63% can spell-check their writings, 64% can use available resources in Moodle, 21 % can create tables and graphs.

Unfortunately, in this era of advanced technologies, the computer does not seem to be an integral part of FPEL students' life. The data analysis revealed that a relatively small number of students (64%) use the computer in their academic studies very often, 45% use Moodle in their academic studies very often and about half of the students use word processing programs. A more significant number in the lower percentile confirms the finding that students do not apply their computer and internet skills extensively: only 14% of the respondents write emails frequently. With regard to students' choice of online reference material, only 19% of the respondents use online dictionaries, while 83% opt

for online translators. These are alarming findings for English teachers since students seem to look for easier ways of doing their tasks instead of developing their dictionary skills. Apparently, students write their paragraphs in Arabic and get them translated through online translators instead of summarizing and synthesizing the information from original English sources.

As far as the writing skills are concerned, very few strong claims can be made since the numbers are spread across the continuum and are not statistically significant. Sixty four percent of the respondents can create detailed and organized notes, 77% can make a detailed outline for writing tasks, 72% can write essays with an introduction, body and conclusion, 85% can write a good topic sentence, 57% can support ideas with examples, 69% can write a good introduction, 86% can write a good thesis statement, 68% can write a good conclusion, 59% can establish coherence within and between paragraphs, 69% can use different transition signals for better coherence, 62% can write texts of minimum 250 words. These numbers clearly show that students do not successfully achieve the writing LOs by the end of the course. A further analysis revealed that FPEL Science students cannot summarize science-related texts which is an essential skill needed for college studies. Only 18% of the respondents claimed that they had mastered the skill of summarizing. This lower-quartile response indicates a need for more focus on the development of this skill.

Similar to writing skills, it was difficult to make generalizations about students' study skills since the numbers are statistically insignificant and spread across the continuum. Forty five percent of the students surveyed can combine pieces of information from different sources, 41% can paraphrase information using different techniques, 46% can interpret information from tables and graphs, 68% can find specific information on the Internet, 45% can use a library catalogue, 50% can use the contents page to find information they need, 63% can skim, 68% can select relevant and reliable information, 53% can find relevant illustration to support ideas, 46% can use in-text citations and 68% can write up a reference list. A more statistically significant finding is that students cannot reject or select a source based on difficulty level, relevance and currency since only lower-percentile 23% of the respondents claimed to be able to do this. On a more positive note, most students (82%) acknowledged the fact that they can write the first draft, a similar number (81%) can write the second draft by reviewing and revising the previous draft, and almost all (91%) students can organize a project file. These upper-percentile numbers clearly indicate that there is continuity in the overall FPEL writing curriculum since students learn these skills at lower levels and carry them along to higher courses as they move up through levels.

### **3.2. Students' experiences of participating in online discussions**

Most of the respondents (91%) found online discussions useful in relation to writing and study skills. This finding is further supported by most students' comments that posting on the discussion board was both interesting and useful because it is a different way of learning and helps them improve their writing and study skills since they need to think carefully before posting their comments and to avoid mistakes they referred to dictionaries or consulted friends. This finding is in line with Smith's (2001) claim that online forums allow time for reflection and thinking. One student said, "... I am careful about my writing because everybody reads it." Some students also commented that online discussions gave them details about the work related to the report. Another point that is worth mentioning here is that most students found discussion forums useful because they could post any time at their convenience.

Most of the respondents (91%) found discussion forums interesting because this was a new way of learning, helping and sharing. The students liked the idea of asking, responding, suggesting and recommending online. This finding corroborates the claim in research that online discussions or forums can be used for many innovative reasons (Managing a Moodle course, n.d.). In their reflection papers, most students found discussion forums very beneficial because in this way they are exposed to a new way of learning and sharing.

The students were also asked to give reasons why they participated in online discussions. Although it was difficult to group the common reasons, the following trends were observed. Half of the students surveyed (45%) claimed posting on forums to seek help from peers and the teacher, some students (27%) posted to respond to the teacher's posts and one student posted to improve his/her typing skills and spelling. Some students' comments confirm this, e.g., "I posted when I have a problem....", "...because our teacher told use to do that and complete my task.", "...help me to improve my skills in typing". There were two students who rarely or never participated in discussions: one student did not have a computer while the other did not have time to post. This claim is in line with the shared view that discussions are useful because they can post at their convenience by using their personal computer. Thus, students who do not have a computer and internet access will be reluctant to participate in online discussions.

Finally, the students were also asked whether online discussions helped them to improve their writing and study skills and comment on the ways the improvement had been observed. Most students were of the opinion that using discussion forums helped them ask questions and ask for help. This shows that online discussions contribute to the enhancement of communication skills. Some students were convinced that by using discussion forums they write with fewer mistakes while other claimed that they learnt how to write good essays and a good report. This seems to support the claim that well-structured online discussions offer students extensive practice in authentic writing (Pauley, 2001, as cited in Kaur, 2011). Some comments in students' reflections support this, "Discussions help me how can discus with other student about some topic", "Now I can ask good questions.", and "I learn new vocab". Some students said that they learnt to help and share by searching for good sources for themselves and their peers. There was a comment from one student who claimed learning the skill of sending messages through discussion forums, "Also, I can find information for my friends and share." Most students acknowledged the help their received from their teacher and peers.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study had an overall aim to explore a new method of improving students' writing, study and computer skills. It sought to establish a general description of an FPEL student who is about to begin the post-foundation program. The study tried to determine to what extent students achieve writing and study skills and what their actual computer skills are. The conclusions drawn from this study helped to make some recommendations that would amend the curriculum by focusing on the skills and competencies that need more intense attention.

It is recommended that an online diagnostic writing and study skills survey be administered at the beginning of the term to determine students' current course-specific competencies and identify the LOs which should be more intensely addressed during the course. The survey should include not only course-specific study skills but also basic

computer skills essential for the 500-word report. A similar survey should be administered at the end of the term to evaluate to what extent the LOs have been achieved.

The results indicate that FPEL students seem to have adequate computer skills (75%) but they do not use the computer frequently in their studies which is so crucial in college life. According to Adeyinka and Mutala (2008), computer literacy refers to some basics of using the computer, such as opening and saving a file, using a word processing program, sending and receiving e-mail, etc. These skills were rated higher than 75% in the study while course-specific study skills were rated below 75%. Thus, the curriculum should include more tasks and activities that would require consistent application of computer and study skills.

Another important finding is that an e-learning culture is not developed among FPEL students. The courses should integrate a set of online tasks linked to the course work to provide students with ample opportunities to apply their internet and computer skills. Courses should include tasks and activities that involve researching, writing, asking, responding, sharing and reflecting. This practice would not only help students to better handle the 500-word report but also be better prepared for their further studies in their colleges. Also, this type of practice would raise students' computer literacy level.

Even though considerable progress has been made in applying technology in teaching and learning at the LC, additional focus is necessary on giving a reasonable choice and effective use of online language learning resources or applications. On the other hand, awareness should be raised among FPEL students about inaccuracies and deviant language generated by online translators and potential benefits of using online dictionaries in language learning. This type of practice will contribute to the enhancement of students' study and computer skills.

In sum, these results and recommendations represent a good step towards amending the writing and study skills syllabus for exit level FPEL writing course on a small scale. More positive effects of this small change would be reflected on the curriculum in the long run.

## 5. LIMITATIONS

Two major limitations could be identified in this study. First, the study focused only on one section (22 students) of the FPEL 0560 students and will not be extended beyond its scope, which means the results of the study would not be generalizable to all exit level FPEL courses at the LC. Second, since the respondents' eagerness to disclose their opinions cannot be fully measured, some psychological factors may present a typical limitation. To guard against this limitation to a certain extent, the survey was anonymous to assure the respondents that their responses would not affect their course marks.

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