

# Empowering EFL Learners: A Multilayered Deep Learning Framework for EMI Universities

Aziz Thabit Saeed

Faculty of Language Studies (FLS), Arab Open University (AOU)-HQ, Kuwait

Hayat Al-Khatib

Faculty of Language Studies (FLS), Arab Open University (AOU), Lebanon

Kaldun Mohamednur Said

Faculty of Language Studies (FLS), Arab Open University (AOU), Kuwait

Ghada Abdel Hafeez\*

Faculty of Language Studies (FLS), Arab Open University (AOU), Bahrain

**Abstract**—The globalization of English has significantly impacted its teaching and learning enterprise at universities in the non-native context in an unprecedented proportion. However, concerns have been voiced that school exit levels in English competency do not match higher education entry requirements (Coleman et al., 2018). This research, conducted by the Faculty of Language Studies (FLS) at the Arab Open University (AOU), investigates the needs of new EFL entrants in higher education institutions that use English as the medium of instruction (EMI). It aims to identify effective teaching-learning methods that create favorable conditions for students' success. It also aims to integrate theories that anticipate challenges and propose solutions. The study collected data from 11298 EFL learners and 105 tutors across the University's campuses in eight Arab countries. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate a critical need for a tailored, multilayered EFL deep learning framework to tackle the intensity of the problem. To address this gap, the research team collaborated with the authors of the new C21 curriculum to incorporate the findings into the curriculum, thereby addressing the linguistic and extralinguistic challenges faced by students using the previous curriculum. The study concludes that implementing the proposed modifications can establish a progressive teaching and learning model tailored for EFL learners in higher education.

**Index Terms**—EFL learners, EMI institutions, eclectic multilayered, deep learning model

## I. INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in English is a prerequisite for enrollment in higher education institutions that implement English as their language of instruction. At these English-medium instruction (EMI) universities, prospective students must demonstrate competency in a range of English language skills before gaining admission. Macaro et al. (2018) highlighted a growing interest in assessing incoming students' readiness to meet the demands of English in higher education. Understanding students' academic English needs and identifying their proficiency levels significantly impact the teaching and learning process. This issue has sparked considerable discussion regarding the effectiveness of educational support interventions (Mezek et al., 2021) and whether these measures lead to measurable improvements in students' performance (Coneyworth et al., 2020). Macaro et al. (2018) underscored "the necessity for further research aimed at evaluating the impact of English language support initiatives on enhancing students' proficiency" (p. 69). Pecorari (2020) also acknowledged the need for studies that examined specific methods capable of creating favorable conditions for success in an EMI context.

McGrath et al. (2019) and Wingate (2018) have outlined the challenges EFL students face when using English as the medium of instruction at the university level. These challenges are most prominent in the area of academic writing (Cheng, 2008; Wingate, 2018; Yung & Fong, 2019), with secondary concerns regarding deficiencies in reading comprehension skills necessary for EFL students to effectively extract required information (Wingate, 2015). Additionally, EFL learners often struggle with synthesizing and appropriately paraphrasing information, which is essential for producing academic texts (Bailey, 2018; Lasagabaster, 2018; Mouhanna, 2016).

Despite the identified challenges, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the assessment of EFL students' progression from entry to exit through English language support courses. This includes identifying effective methodologies and theoretical frameworks that contribute to their development (Al-Hosni, 2014; Jafari & Ansari, 2012; IELTS, 2018). Rabab'ah (2005) remarked on the limited nature of existing research in this domain, which often consists of anecdotal evidence and superficial evaluations. Furthermore, Lasagabaster (2018) questioned the adequacy of current

---

\* Corresponding Author. Email: [ghada.abdelhafeez@aou.org.bh](mailto:ghada.abdelhafeez@aou.org.bh)

theories in anticipating and addressing the ongoing challenges encountered by EFL learners as they advance from initial entry levels to more advanced stages of academic enrollment.

This research aims to fill these gaps by providing a comprehensive examination of EFL students' educational journeys. It incorporates rigorous methodological approaches and robust theoretical underpinnings to elucidate effective strategies for their academic development.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

English language acquisition has attracted, throughout the years, a myriad of approaches and theoretical frames in order to account for the optimal situation of learning. According to behaviorists, frequent repetition of language drills leads to memorization, which is considered essential for learning. This approach posits that through consistent practice, learners can internalize and naturalize the target language, making it habitual and effortless. In his book *Language Teaching Research and Language Pedagogy* (2016), Ellis argues that repeated exposure and practice help learners automatize language skills, making them more proficient over time. In a similar vein, Gass and Mackey's *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition* (2012) review empirical studies that support the role of repetition in language acquisition, highlighting how systematic practice can lead to improved fluency and accuracy.

Innatists, on the other hand, believe that learning is hardwired in a human. Second or foreign language learners acquire the additional language in much the same way that native language learners do. According to Innatist theorists, language acquisition happens subconsciously when comprehensible input is presented. Learners pick up the new language in a natural order similar to that of the first language, and the monitor edits their language performance. However, this natural order is strained when anxiety is present, according to Krashen's (1985) comprehensible input theory.

The cognitivists' perspectives on language learning emphasize active engagement and meaningful processing of language structures and vocabulary. According to cognitivists, learning involves learners noticing patterns and rules in the language and applying these effectively in communicative contexts. Making knowledge meaningful is crucial as it enhances retention and application of language skills. In *Second Language Task Complexity: Researching the Cognition Hypothesis of Language Learning and Performance*, Robinson (2011) argues that meaningful engagement with language tasks promotes deeper learning and retention of language structures.

Interactionists believe learning happens when learners interact with proficient language speakers. This perspective, rooted in theories like Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Swain's Output Hypothesis, asserts that learners benefit from interacting in the target language to internalize linguistic structures and improve communicative competence (Moll, 1990; Swain, 1985). Finally, the sociocultural model underlines that social and cultural interactions in EFL settings contribute to EFL acquisition and performance (Kong & Wei, 2019; López-Gopar et al., 2021).

The above theoretical frames have given rise to numerous approaches that described and prescribed the teaching and learning processes in non-native contexts, leading to numerous studies indicating that pre-tertiary English education often fails to achieve proficiency levels sufficient for university admission standards. In a study conducted in China, McKinley et al. (2021) report that transnational universities and EMI programmes in China aim to internationalize education, balancing English proficiency with academic goals through robust support and immersive environments. The findings indicated that transnational universities were more inclined to provide language support to their students and implement language policies regulating language use. Overall, the results highlight a variety of benefits and challenges linked to each institution's contextualized policy-making, resulting in both facilitation and conflict for EMI stakeholders. In another study that took place in Hong Kong on newly admitted EFL learners to an English medium of instruction university, Yung and Fong (2019), underline the presence of several challenges that face first year undergraduate students in learning English for Academic Purposes (EAP). They argue that the 9 participants they followed were high ESL secondary school examination scorers who should have had a smoother sailing at an English medium of instruction (EMI) university. Their study identified a gap in English language transition from high school to university.

Trenkic and Warmington (2019) investigated English language and literacy skills of 63 Chinese first language bilingual learners pursuing higher education in English and argue that the lower attainment of international students at EMI universities is still poorly understood. EFL students continue to experience a systematic disadvantage in English at university level despite the preparations they undergo throughout their years of secondary education. The aforementioned studies indicate that there is substantial evidence suggesting that high school graduates are inadequately prepared to cope with English as the medium of instruction in higher education. EFL students aspiring for international advanced education, better employability or immigration opportunities are channeled towards universities that offer education through the medium of English (Dearden, 2014). However, the growing diversity of student intake has placed a bigger burden on the academic institutions to apply the appropriate filtering.

Lasagabaster (2018) has noted that higher education institutions must assess incoming students' educational backgrounds rigorously to determine their academic needs and place them appropriately in suitable programmes. Hence, the use of English placement tests has become the main source in evaluating applicants' readiness for higher education. The importance of placement tests is that they reflect applicants' abilities to cope with the language demands that they will encounter in an English higher education medium of instruction and the typical reading, writing and analytic requirements they are likely to face. However, Mačiulskienė and Zutkienė (2024) question whether the English proficiency level is always reflected in the placement tests. They raise concerns related to test design, cultural bias, test

conditions, teaching to the test, and the dynamic nature of language abilities that affect the validity and reliability of these tests in truly capturing a student's language abilities. To improve accuracy, they suggest regularly updating test content and adopting a more holistic approach to language assessment, and taking into account the various factors that can influence test performance.

These recent studies collectively reinforce the argument that pre-tertiary English teaching often falls short in preparing students adequately for the linguistic demands of university admission requirements.

### III. STUDY METHODOLOGY

This section of the paper addresses the study methodology, which covers the research questions, participants, instruments and data collection procedures.

#### A. Research Questions

The research study examines how the Faculty of Language Studies (FLS) at the Arab Open University (AOU) engaged in the debate from an exploratory approach that adopted the contemporary research concerns, which were framed into the following study questions:

What are the needs of EFL new entrants in a higher education institution using English as the medium of instruction, and do they change with different EFL proficiency levels?

Which teaching methods create preconditions for success for new entrants in a higher education institution using English as the medium of instruction?

Which theories can project the potential challenges and appraise solutions, along the protracted path of learning EFL in a higher education institution using English as the medium of instruction?

#### B. Participants

The participants in this study are 11298 EFL learners who were placed at one of the communication skills courses (EL097, EL098, EL099, EL111 and EL112) that are offered by the Faculty of Language Studies (FLS) at the Arab Open University (AOU) eight campuses. Also, the population of the study consists of 105 tutors across the University's campuses.

#### C. Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

The present study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The statistical data obtained from entry-level placement scores are triangulated with quantitative and qualitative data obtained from English teaching staff at AOU.

The FLS is entrusted with entry level assessment exams for all potential candidates wishing to join any of the British validated programmes offered by the Faculty of Computer Studies (FCS), the Faculty of Business Studies (FBS), and the Faculty of Language Studies (FLS) as part of a joint award with the Open University in the United Kingdom (OU-UK). Every semester, students take the Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT) to determine their English competency level, and they are placed accordingly based on their entrance exam scores. They are allocated in the compatible level of English ranging from intensive communication skills courses EL097, EL098, EL099 to the intermediate EL111 and the more advanced EL112 communication skills courses. The OOPT exam is intended to provide an accurate measurement of a candidate's English language ability on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale (2022).

The OOPT consists of two sections: Language Use and Listening. The 'Use of English section,' assesses students' competence through standard grammar, lexis and listening questions. The test focuses on meaning beyond the sentence, including implied meaning. The structure and focus are produced in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1  
OOPT TEST STRUCTURE, SECTIONS & FOCUS

Section	Part	Test Focus
Use of English	1	Grammatical form and meaning
	2	Implied meaning
	3	Reading
Listening	1	Five short dialogues
	2	Five longer dialogues
	3	Five short monologues

Students' allocated grades are available immediately and are reported as CEFR band (Pre-A1 to C2) as well as in a standardized score format (0-120) on the OOPT scale. OOPT scores and their mapping into CEFR levels and scores are produced in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2  
OOPT SCORES MAPPED AGAINST CEFR LEVELS

OOPT Score	CEFR Level
0	Less than A1
1-20	A1
20-40	A2
40-60	B1
60-80	B2
80-100	C1
100-120	C2

The CEFR levels delineate three primary categorizations of English proficiency. Progression through the level descriptors evolves from assessing candidates' capacity to comprehend familiar texts, to identifying main ideas alongside supporting details, and utilizing everyday expressions at a basic proficiency level. At the independent user level, candidates are expected to deal with texts that they are likely to encounter in higher education and demonstrate ability to understand words and discourse indications of different genres. At the more proficient level, candidates are expected to identify and track academic arguments, understand the information presented numerically and visually, engage in spontaneous interactions, extrapolate and draw inferences and conclusions.

At AOU, the OOPT attained scores correspond to exemption criteria that parallel a progressive set of offered communication skills courses. The exemption criteria are shown in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3  
OOPT ATTAINED SCORES AND PARALLEL EXEMPTION CRITERIA AT THE AOU ENGLISH LANGUAGE UNIT

OOPT Score	Exemption Criteria
0-20	EL097
21-40	EL098
41-58	EL099
59-79	EL111
80-120	EL112

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Fall 2022-2023, 15840 new applicants sat for the OOPT entrance exam across the eight (8) branches of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Bahrain, Jordan, Oman and Sudan. Figure 1 below provides admission proportions.

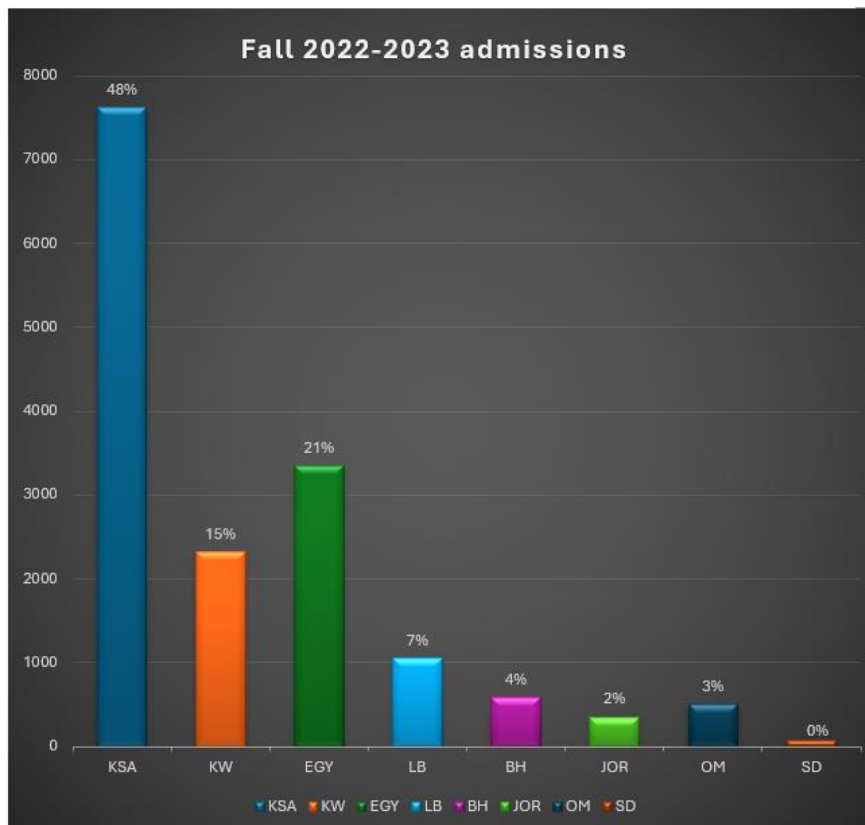


Figure 1. Fall 2022-2023 Admission Proportions Across AOU 8 Branches

New entrants based on campus were distributed as follows: from KSA 7619, from Egypt 3342, from Kuwait 2315, from Lebanon 1055, Bahrain 580, Oman 502, Jordan 352 and Sudan 75. The incoming students joined AOU in Fall 2022-2023. Figure 2 below shows the study sample distributed across the aspired fields of specialization:

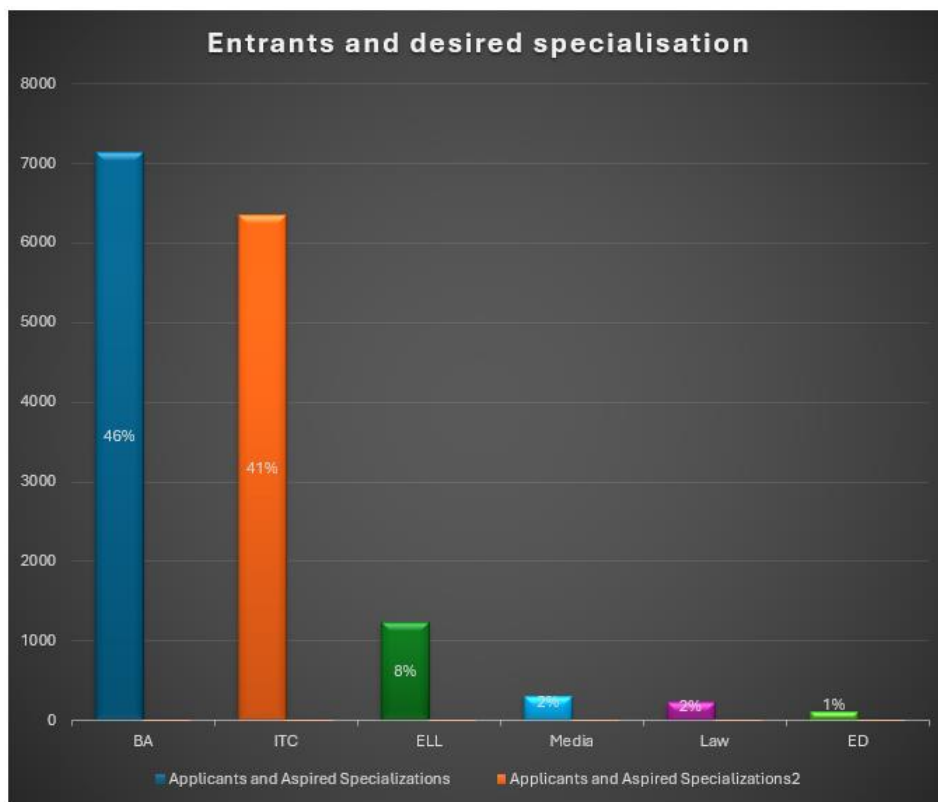


Figure 2. Entrants and Desired Specializations

Out of the total 15840, 4542 were not placed at any of the communication skills courses because they were either exempted based on the score they attained, or their destination was non-degree or non-MEI majors, both of which do not require English as one of the admission requirements. These 4542 students will not be targeted in our study since the focus is to assess incoming students' readiness to cope with the demands of English in higher education, understand students' academic English needs, assess the type and value of support they receive and relate these to the theoretical constructs of teaching and learning English. Our focus will, therefore, be on the 11298 students who were placed according to their placement scores in communication skills courses based on the OOPT score presented in Figure 3 below.

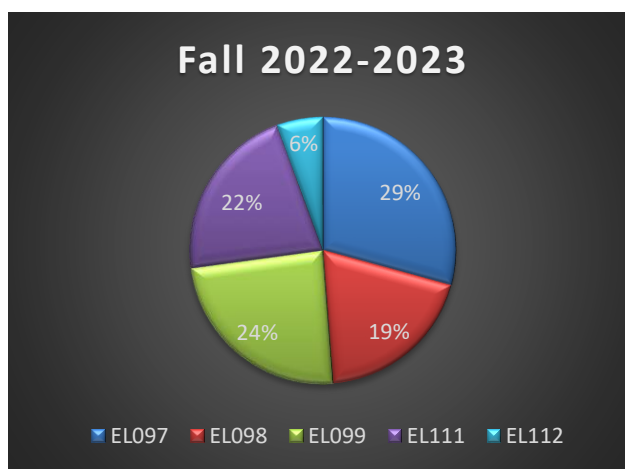


Figure 3. Distribution of Incoming Students Across Communication Skills Courses

The placement scores of the 11298-study sample provided information on their levels of academic literacy in English and implications on how they will cope with English at a university that uses it as the medium of instruction. Figure 4

provides the entry levels attained by the study sample through OOPT entry exams.

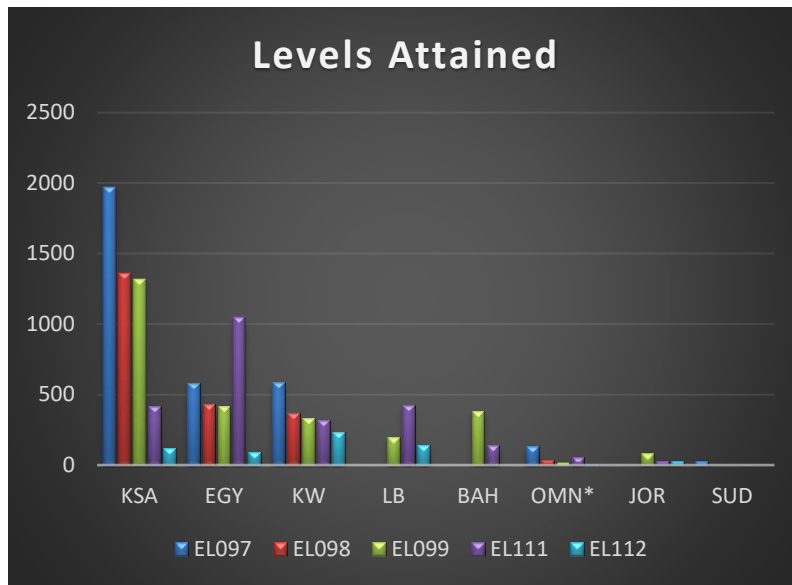


Figure 4. Study Sample Entry-Level Attainment  
 \* Oman adopts alternative codes for EL097 (EF001), EL098 (EF002) & EL099 (EF003)

Figure 4 above confirmed that the majority of incoming students scored within EL097 tier, which is quite surprising given the fact that students in most Arab countries, including the ones that host AOU, teach English from grade one. These intriguing results mean that the quality of learning and teaching English at the school level is not up to the standard required to gain access to higher education, despite the long years of exposure. This conforms to the propositions that schools exit levels in English proficiency do not match university entry level requirements (Coleman et al., 2018; Yung & Fong, 2019; Trenkic & Warmington, 2019).

The 105 English tutors teaching different entry-level communication skills English courses, EL097, EL098, EL099, EL111 and EL112, provided their views on the results of the OOPT and the challenges that entry-level students face upon enrolment in an English medium of Instruction University in the non-native context. Their feedback also included assessment on the skill that needed most support in each level and the type of teaching and learning support that were applied throughout their tutorials. Figure 5 below displays tutors' perceptions on the skill that required the most support in their classes. The figure combines tutors' perception from all communication skills courses.

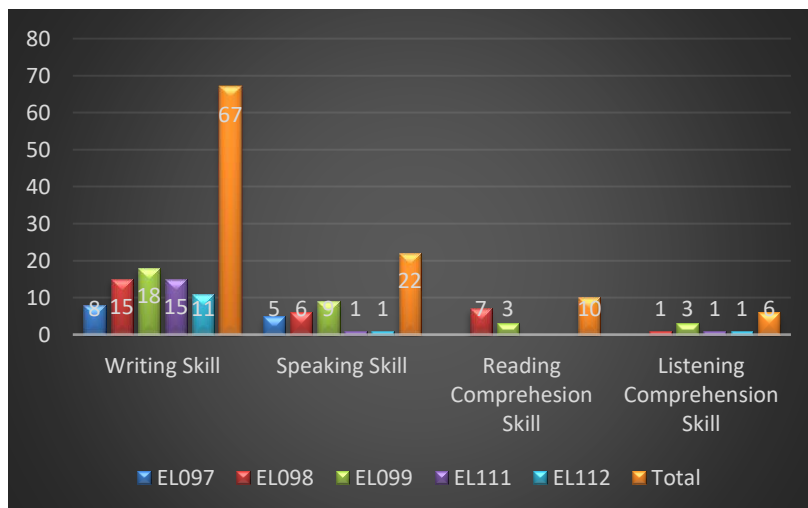


Figure 5. Tutors' Perceptions on Skills Requiring Support

Among the 105 respondents surveyed, 67 (64%) identified writing skills as the area requiring the most support; followed by the speaking skills perceived by 22 respondents as the most skill requiring support (21%). Reading comprehension is ranked third, with 10 respondents regarding it as the skill requiring most support from entry level to exit in communication skills courses (9.5%). Finally, listening comprehension was perceived as requiring the most support by 6 respondents (5.5%). Figure (6) below displays tutors' perceptions vis-à-vis the skills requiring support.

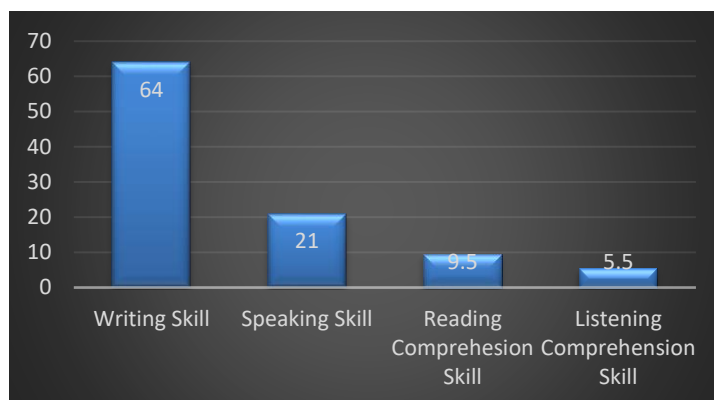


Figure 6. Tutors' Perceptions vis-À-vis the Skills Requiring Support

It follows from Figure 6 above that the receptive skills were deemed as the least requiring support while the productive ones were perceived as the most skills requiring support by the English communication skills tutors. The globalisation of English and its availability in media forums may have contributed to this outcome. Students may have encountered texts and audio-visual products in English and have been able to comprehend the content at an easier rate than the ability to produce it. When it comes to productive skills, active application, and proficiency in generating coherent language output is highly required. This disparity underscores the nuanced nature of language acquisition, where receptive skills benefit from extensive exposure and passive engagement, productive skills require deliberate practice and application to achieve proficiency.

In what follows, the researchers will discuss the views expressed by the sample tutors teaching in the English foundation programme who were invited to reflect on the salient difficulties encountered by the learners in the receptive and productive skills in the five levels targeted in the study, i.e., EL097, EL098, EL099, EL111 and EL112.

#### A. *The Writing Skill Requiring the Most Support*

When requested to elaborate on why they think that writing is the skill that requires most support, tutors of the five levels gave different explanations capitalizing on their teaching of these levels and their observations of the constant difficulties that students encounter. Although certain problems tend to surface and persist in the five levels, some difficulties tend to be characteristic of one level more than the other ones. For instance, while the students in EL097, the lowest entry level, are observed, according to their tutors' reports, to exhibit weak grammar background, lack of paragraph writing basics, inability to differentiate phonologically between similar graphemes, as in b & d, spelling mistakes, incorrect sentence structure, and wrong sentence connection, the students in EL098 exhibit some of these problems and a few others that characterize this level of learning. Problems observed at this level include limited lexis, misspellings, inadequacy in grammar, flaws in composing topic sentences and supporting sentences, poor connections and organization.

Tutors of EL099, the third lowest entry level, mentioned several problems that they observe in their classes, including poor grammar, insufficient content lexis, subject-verb agreement problems, as well as problems in mechanics and meaningful sentences.

Tutors of EL111, the first credited entry level, reported many problems encountered by students at this level, some of which resemble the ones observed but at a different level of difficulty. For instance, while the difficulty in EL097 is on formulating a grammatically correct sentence, at this level, this grammatical difficulty is on felicitously connecting short sentences to make well-connected, more effective extended ones. Thus, difficulties reported here comprise students' inability to compose a fairly well-written paragraph, structural inadequacy, vocabulary shortage, and mixing speaking and writing norms. As is the case with tutors in all levels, tutors here allude to non-linguistic reasons that tend to be partially conducive to these difficulties including insufficient writing practice, online exams, insufficient time for learning and practicing in class and huge class numbers, among other factors.

The points raised by EL112 tutors, the second credited entry level, are not very different from the ones pointed out by tutors of EL111. The tutors here stressed that students at this level mix speaking and reading norms with writing ones, which obviously result in inadequate use. They also indicate that even at this level students commit spelling mistakes, exhibit punctuation problems, use limited short sentences, find it difficult to develop sentences into error free paragraphs and essays, etc. Again, they think that insufficient writing practice in class and outside class is a cogently strong reason. This aligns with the findings of the study conducted in Japan which explores the correlation between Japanese undergraduate students' English language proficiency and the challenges they encounter while studying an international business course taught in English (Aizawa et al., 2023). The research revealed that students encountered significant difficulties with academic writing due to limited proficiency and insufficient practice. These difficulties were further compounded by a lack of exposure to complex writing tasks and inadequate feedback mechanisms.

The following chart recapitulates the prominent points pertinent to students' writing difficulties as reported by the tutors of the five levels.

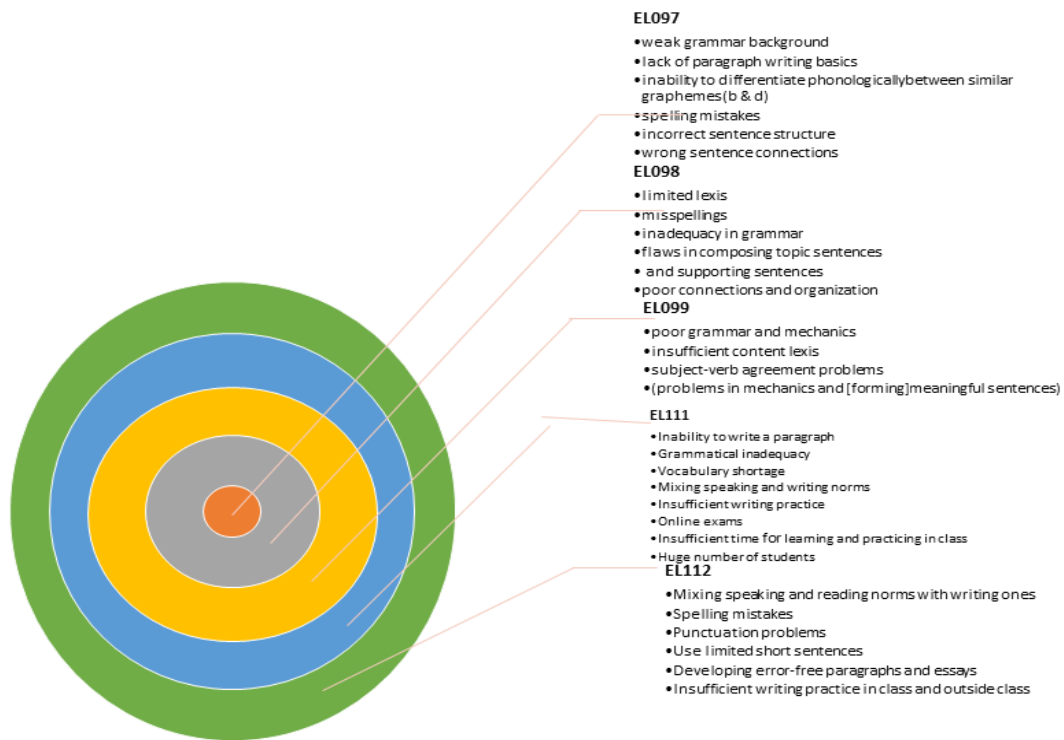


Figure 7. Students' Writing Difficulties

The chart emphasizes that difficulties observed at lower levels often reoccur at higher levels in more complex forms, mirroring the educational demands characteristic of these instructional levels. In addition, the chart supports the researchers' stance to adopt a multilayered approach of instruction wherein the input at one level glides into and impacts the instruction of the subsequent levels.

### B. The Speaking Skill Requiring the Most Support

Interestingly, tutors who perceived the speaking skill as the second skill meriting most support were limited to the first three lower entry level of intensive courses. Tutors teaching the credited regular entry level courses (EL111 and EL112) did not mark the speaking skill as needing support. In examining the linguistic and non-linguistic reasons put forward by the tutors of the three elementary levels, i.e., EL097, EL098 and EL099, one observes that the same problems persist at these levels in different calibers (see Appendices 3-A-C). In scrutinizing their responses that motivate their stance that the speaking skill requires most support, tutors of EL097 gave many reasons including lack of vocabulary, pronunciation problems and insufficient knowledge of grammar rules relevant to this level of learning. They also mentioned certain non-linguistic reasons such as lack of practice and lack of relevant resources. These issues closely resemble those identified by tutors of EL098 who observed that the linguistic difficulties that students encounter in speaking relate to mispronunciation, inability to pronounce new words, weakness in the basics that help initiate or contribute to a conversation and lack of previous practice. The views of the tutors of EL099 exhibited notable similarities to those expressed by EL097 and EL098 tutors. Here tutors highlighted linguistic challenges encountered by students in speaking, including difficulties in selecting appropriate vocabulary and lacking confidence in pronunciation, occasionally resulting in the use of Arabic during English conversations. The tutors' feedback and comments on the students' speaking skills resonate with the findings of the paper "Challenges of English-Medium Higher Education: The First-Year Experience in Hong Kong Revisited a Decade Later" (Shepard & Morrison, 2021) which highlights how EMI environments in Hong Kong universities can hinder students' speaking abilities due to the students' limited exposure to spoken English, their fear of making mistakes. Similar to the current research, the study conducted in Hong Kong implies that universities need to find ways to encourage participation and create opportunities for spoken English practice in EMI classrooms.

### C. Reading Comprehension as the Skill Requiring the Most Support

Again, an interesting observation emerges when looking at the data from English communication skills courses; tutors who identified the reading comprehension skill as the one requiring most support are the tutors teaching the two intensive courses EL098 and EL099. Contact with EL097 tutors revealed that they were more concerned with building blocks of lexis and grammar before moving on to consider reading comprehension. When asked to elaborate on why they think the reading comprehension skill is the skill that requires most support, tutors of EL098, mentioned many points including students' inability to understand relations between parts of the text, inability to separate essential from non-essential

information, lack of comprehension, etc. As for tutors of EL099, they attributed students' weak reading skills to inability to understand opaque metaphorical expressions, inability to understand the communicative function of the sentences and inability to extrapolate, apply or infer meaning.

The challenges identified by EL098 and EL099 tutors in reading comprehension go in line with a study conducted in Vietnam in which the authors reported that there are factors affecting students' reading comprehension in EMI classrooms which include limited vocabulary, difficulties in understanding complex academic texts with intricate sentence structures and technical vocabulary, and the fast-paced nature of lectures and reading material (Tran et al., 2020). Overall, the research findings are similar to the observations made by EL098 and EL099 tutors.

#### *D. Listening Comprehension as the Skill Requiring the Most Support*

In the current study, listening comprehension emerged last as the area requiring the most support, as noted by tutors across EL097, EL098, EL099, EL111, and EL112. EL097 tutors indicated prioritizing other language skills essential for course success. At the second lowest level of EL098, tutors observed that students face linguistic challenges in listening comprehension, including difficulties coping with natural conversational speed, insufficient vocabulary, and issues with comprehending and retaining information. In EL099, tutors identified students' struggles with understanding unfamiliar accents and the inability to correlate spoken words with their existing knowledge. Tutors from both levels recommended that students need to enhance their listening skills by engaging with authentic English conversations through mediums such as radio and television.

In addition, EL111 tutors added a couple of significant challenges, namely the students' struggles to adjust their auditory perception to authentic English language conversations and their difficulty in comprehending various English accents that they had not encountered previously. Consequently, tutors here recommend that students need more practice in listening to native English conversations. The points mentioned by tutors of EL112 are not very different from the ones expressed by the tutors of the previous accredited level. For instance, pronunciation persists as a notable difficulty at this level. Other difficulties observed in students' performance include the inability to realize the appropriate structure, missing the semantic relations of meaning, inaccurate guesses and incorrect interpretations. Similar to their counterparts in EL111, EL112 tutors recommend that students need more practice in listening to different accents of English.

## V. CONCLUSION

The study has set out to chart the progress of a large sample of EFL entrants as they moved from high school into a higher education institution using English as the medium of instruction. In this pursuit, the researchers have attempted to interrogate the effectiveness of theories in assessing the challenged and projecting potential solutions.

### *A. Findings*

In response to the first research question on the needs of EFL new entrants in a higher education institution using English as the medium of instruction, and whether they change with different EFL proficiency levels, the study findings confirm that there are different needs of EFL new entrants in a higher education institution using English as the medium of instruction and these change with different EFL proficiency levels.

In an effort to yet venture into proposing a multilayer EFL deep-learning framework, the researchers construe the feedback received into its equivalent theoretical correlation. Deep learning in our EFL frame is analogous to the one proposed in Artificial Intelligence. The reference is to multilayer in a network where each layer transforms its learnt data into implementations that transcend the conceptual sphere associated with that particular level into representation in the next layer. The same pattern recurs with a slightly more abstract and composite representation at each level.

In addressing the third research question regarding which theories can anticipate potential challenges and evaluate solutions throughout the extended journey of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in higher education institutions where English serves as the medium of instruction, the researchers propose a multi-tiered EFL deep learning framework. This framework integrates teaching methods at each level, specifically tailored from the existing EFL theories and approaches to suit the students' needs and the teaching learning context. Therefore, although each level could induce tutors to adopt a certain approach, it cannot be claimed that one single approach could be viably utilized at one level exempting entirely all others. So, while the behaviorist-oriented approaches could have a place in the beginning levels, these levels need activities that are cognitively based and communicatively oriented. The difference will be on the degree of emphasis or dose deemed feasible in each level. Thus, the researchers recommend integrating activities and procedures from various existing theories, approaches, and methods of EFL teaching to address the five levels i.e., cognitive, innatist, behaviorist and interactionist. The selected and or tailored activities and procedures need to fit the teaching context and the students' needs. Teaching context here refers to the teaching duration, type of students, cultural backgrounds, social restrictions, availability of teaching tools including smart tools in addition to prominent language problems students exhibit, etc. Our approach is eclectic, as we customize it for each level based on students' linguistic and extralinguistic needs, as well as the teaching environment. Throughout, our focus remains on communicative instruction. With this pedagogical perspective in mind, our eclectically-based approach is cognitively and intentionally tailored and implemented in a multilayered mode. In other words, we thoughtfully incorporate a spectrum of pedagogical EFL theories and methods into our purpose-made approach, ensuring that instruction at one level informs subsequent levels. The

following tenets delineate the implementation of this approach:

At the initial levels (EL097, EL098, and EL099), teaching activities must be purposeful, and information should be clear, comprehensible, and relevant. In other words, students at these levels need to bridge their existing knowledge with new concepts (Ausubel, 2000). According to Ausubel's Subsumption Theory, for learning to occur, learners should connect newly acquired pieces of information to existing ones that they have already acquired, i.e., connecting new to old information. This is important at this level because we cannot claim that we can follow the communicative approach entirely in teaching these elementary levels since the students' foreign language background may not always accommodate what is newly taught, i.e., the fertile environment that hooks newly introduced language items to already existing ones may not always be there.

The tutors' input pinpointed the difficulties that surface at each level and, therefore, in teaching, these difficulties should be addressed through tailoring appropriate teaching procedures wisely customized from various methods and theories, as outlined above.

Certain similarities and differences between the two languages can be addressed, particularly those that tackle recurring problems which means that we adopt activities that are advocated by the innatist approach, particularly at the pre-advanced levels as in EL097-EL099.

The initial levels should feature varying types of drills which enable students to practice language structures that constitute persisting difficulties, pronunciation difficulties, etc. In other words, we adopt and develop activities that reflect and benefit from the behaviorists' assumptions. Such drills are essential at all levels, emphasizing the development of the four language skills to support the learners and broaden their knowledge base. For instance, at the initial levels, drills primarily emphasize formulating grammatically correct sentences and focus on pronunciation. At the advanced levels, however, students engage in exercises that involve extensive writing, particularly in the areas of paragraph and essay composition. Definitely, such drills will mean exposing students to different types of paragraphs and essays that function as models for them to read and analyze prior to embarking on the writing process, i.e., read then write.

The advanced levels engage in communicative learning and teaching atmosphere capitalizing on what they have learnt. Here their background makes it possible for natural communication and natural use of the language in the receptive and productive skills. In other words, here we expect that students have reached a level at which they can use language to communicate their views in a grammatically correct and culturally appropriate manner.

The curriculum must align with the principles and criteria outlined earlier. Based on our examination of the existing curriculum that is in use at AOU, we have proposed specific modifications related to the presentation of language content across the five different levels. These proposed views were discussed earlier in section 9. Academicians at the publishing house providing the textbooks to the AOU students were given a copy of the suggestions delineated in section 9 and were also invited to peer visits to some teaching classes with the researchers. Researchers and Textbook writers listened to the views of the tutors in the four skills and have agreed to modify the textbooks based on the views voiced by the tutors and the suggestions and recommendations made by the authors of this project.

### *B. Implications and Recommendations*

The present study has significant implications. During the period of this research project, the research team engaged in fruitful discussions with the authors of the new C21 to integrate the quantitative and qualitative findings of the research into the new curricula. The goals were to enrich the C21 curriculum ensuring that it fills the gaps identified through the research's findings, and to address the linguistic and extralinguistic issues encountered by the students who were using the old curriculum.

The new C21 curriculum which is modelled against the Common European Foreign Language Framework (CEFR) was crosschecked against these needs and many modifications were suggested and implemented. The curriculum combines language skills with 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills such as communication, creativity, critical thinking, and study skills. At the beginning levels, which correspond to (A1+, A2 and B1) CEFR, there is a greater emphasis on providing relevant lexis and grammar in the context of contemporary university life. These include personal life, family and friends, and job and career decisions. Recycling the necessary vocabulary is further achieved by using built-in quizlet digital flashcards and games through QR codes for each unit of the textbooks. At the last two levels which correspond to (B1+ and B2), more focus is given to reading and writing. Overall, many units have writing models (paragraphs or essays) that serve as a reference for the intended rhetorical patterns for each level. What follows are the issues addressed at each level as cross-checked against C21.

At level 1, represented by (A1+) which targets the needs of the EL097 students, more vocabulary items related to learners' contextual and cultural norms and expectations were proposed, along with adjustments to grammar and lexis to support both new and existing knowledge of the learners. The propositions are intended to make learning meaningful to the learners. As reflected in the research findings, at the lowest entry level, EL097, the difficulties encountered in writing relate to how information is received and processed. Gaps in knowledge have to be addressed and hence tutors engaged in making knowledge meaningful in order to help the learners organize and relate new information to existing information/knowledge. Other findings include categories of deficient syntax, poor lexis, poor phoneme to grapheme correspondence marked the needs of EFL learners. In speaking, lack of vocabulary, insufficient knowledge of grammar rules, absence of correct pronunciation marked the performance of the same group.

At level 2, represented in the C21 curriculum construction by (A2) which targets the needs of our EL098 students, the

research team proposed more focus on providing models in the foreign language that can guide learners into sentence construction and organization, including mechanics. For this purpose, descriptive paragraphs with varied themes are targeted. As for reading comprehension, coherence between sentences is underlined to help learners relate ideas and understand how these are manifested in sentence construction. Learners' misspelling problems at this level were tackled through appropriate spelling activities. In addition, the textbooks were suggested to give overt emphasis to students' recurrent flawed sentence structures, inaccurate constructions and weak organizational patterns that are attributed to L1 negative transfer and to provide students with ample activities that help them overcome these problems. In speaking, listening, and reading, appropriate drills are suggested to be presented to deal with problems surfacing at this level.

At level 3, represented in the C21 curriculum construction by (B1) which targets the needs of the EL099 students, the researchers proposed drills and exercises on correct grammar in writing applications, particularly subject and verb agreement, morphological rules, structure and construction of words. In addition, selecting appropriate lexis to discuss assigned themes revealed the need for more drills. At the third lowest entry level, EL099, concerns on drills and practicing were reflected in tutors' replies. In writing, subject and verb agreement, errors and mixing content lexis underlined the need for more practice rather than deficiency in knowledge. In speaking, learners were considered as not confident about their pronunciation and hence in need of more practice. All these speaking and writing concerns were brought to the attention of the textbook writers. In reading comprehension for the same group, inability to extrapolate, apply or infer meaning are suggested to be remedied by appropriate drills in the new curriculum. In listening comprehension, the difficulties related to problems with unfamiliar accents were to be tackled by presenting listening activities that involve different accents, i.e., American and British English as well as other major accents, where possible.

At level 4, represented in the C21 curriculum construction by (B1+) which targets the needs of the EL111 students, the researchers proposed integrating grammar skill; sentence types, parts of speech, in writing and speaking modules that represent real communicative events, suitable for the learners' contexts and needs and provide adequate supplementary lexis that can aid performance. In addition, the importance of coherence and cohesion in linking the spoken and written text needs to be underlined and supported through the use of appropriate mechanics. At the credited levels of EL111 and EL112, EFL learners encountered challenges primarily linked to interactionist theories, which emphasize that learners' ability to communicate effectively in English is influenced by their opportunities to interact with others. Although learners possess a foundational proficiency across all the four language skills, they still faced difficulties in the interactive language use in real-life contexts. At level 5, represented in the C21 curriculum construction by (B2) which targets the needs of the EL112 students, the researchers proposed diversifying exercises to ensure fluency and ability to communicate across a range of topics, using different styles ranging from argumentative to persuasive and applying appropriate vocabulary and correct grammar.

Based on our proposed model, no single approach, no matter what merits this approach possesses, can be solely followed if teaching a foreign language is to be a success. We, alternatively, have advocated the use of an eclectically-built approach that encompasses activities, techniques and teaching procedures from all major existing EFL theories and teaching methods that take students' background as well as the other sociocultural and infrastructural considerations into account. The pedagogic approach advocated here is explicit, comprehensible and relevant and thus more useful for learners at this level as it directly addresses their knowledge gaps. For second lower or middle intensive levels, the suggested eclectically-built approach makes use of, among other teaching procedures, the contrastive approach that draws on the similarities or differences with the first language to support learning English as a foreign language learning. At the third lowest or upper intensive level, the behaviourist perspective can be part of the built approach since learners need drills and practices to expand their knowledge basis in all four skills. At the fourth level beyond the intensive tiers, interactionist theories and perspectives, including communicative approaches, should constitute a sizable component of the eclectically developed approach, which yields favorable outcomes, once learners master the basics.

In conclusion, there is no single approach that can fit all learning stages. An eclectic-oriented model is what is needed; a model that is flexible in targeting the learners and their needs and not imposing an obsolete single model that can inhibit learning and is incapable of yielding the desired results.

The findings are hoped to enhance student channeling to appropriate academic paths and propose the required teaching approach that can support their academic development, and hence support retention rates. Our findings will serve the development of a context for reviewing and expanding academic and research synergies and can provide a useable body of knowledge to strengthen informed teaching and learning strategies in an EFL context and can guide subsequent planning for EFL courses within an EMI institution.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Aizawa, I, Rose, H., Thompson, G., & Curle, S. (2023). Beyond the threshold: Exploring English language proficiency, linguistic challenges, and academic language skills of Japanese students in an English medium instruction programme. *Language Teaching Research*, 27(4), 837-861. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1362168820965510>
- [2] Al-Hosni, S. (2014). Speaking difficulties encountered by young EFL learners. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, 2(6), 22-30.
- [3] Ausubel, D. P. (2000). *The Acquisition and Retention of Knowledge: A Cognitive View*. Springer.
- [4] Bailey, R. (2018). Student writing and academic literacy development at university. *Journal of Learning and Student Experience*, 1, article 7. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332151711>

- [5] Cheng, A. (2008). Analysing genre exemplars in preparation for writing: The case of an L2 graduate student in the ESP genre-based instructional framework of academic literacy. *Applied Linguistics*, 29(1), 50-71. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amm021>
- [6] Coleman, J., Hultgren, K., Li, W., Tsui, C. C. F. & Shaw, P. (2018). Forum on English medium instruction. *TESOL Quarterly*, 52(3), 701-720. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.469>
- [7] *Common European Framework Reference Languages Level descriptions*. (2022). Retrieved March 4, 2024, from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>
- [8] Coneyworth, L., Jessop, R., Maden, P. & White, G. (2020). The overlooked cohort? – Improving the taught postgraduate student experience in higher education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 57(3), 262-273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2019.1617184>
- [9] Dearden, J. (2014). *English as a medium of instruction – a growing global phenomenon*. British Council. Retrieved November 20, 2024, from [https://www.britishcouncil.es/sites/default/files/british\\_council\\_english\\_as\\_a\\_medium\\_of\\_instruction.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.es/sites/default/files/british_council_english_as_a_medium_of_instruction.pdf)
- [10] Ellis, R. (2016). *Language teaching research and language pedagogy*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- [11] Gass, S. M., & Mackey, A. (2012). *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition*. Routledge.
- [12] IELTS. (2018). *Setting IELTS entry scores*. Retrieved July 13, 2020, from <https://www.ielts.org/ieltsfor-organisations/setting-ielts-entry-scores>.
- [13] Jafari, N. & Ansari, D. (2012). The Effect of Collaboration on Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Accuracy. *International Education Studies*, 5(2), 124-131.
- [14] Kong, M. & Wei, M. (2019). EFL Learners' Attitudes toward English-medium Instruction in China: The influence of sociobiographical variables. *Linguistics and Education*, 52, 44-51. Retrieved February 21, 2024, from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0898589818303991?via%3Dihub>
- [15] Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Longman.
- [16] Lasagabaster, D. (2018). Fostering team teaching: Mapping out a research agenda for English-medium instruction at university level. *Language Teaching*, 51(3), 400-416. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444818000113>
- [17] López-Gopar, M. E. et al. (2021). Co-constructing Social Justice: Language Educators Challenging Colonial Practices in Mexico. *Applied Linguistics*, 1-14.
- [18] Macaro, E., Curle, S., Pun, J., An, J. & Dearden, J. (2018). A systematic review of English medium instruction in higher education. *Language Teaching*, 51(1), 36-76. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444817000350>
- [19] Mačiulskienė, J. C. & Zutkienė, L. D. (2024). Is the English proficiency level always reflected in placement tests? *International Linguistics Research*, 7(20), <https://doi.org/10.30560/ilr.v7n1p1>
- [20] McGrath, L., Negretti, R. & Nicholls, K. (2019). Hidden expectations: Scaffolding subject specialists' genre knowledge of the assignments they set. *Higher Education*, 78, 835-853. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00373-9>
- [21] McKinley, J., Rose, H., & Zhou, S. (2021). Transnational Universities and English Medium Instruction in China: How Admissions, *Language Support and Language Use Differ in Chinese Universities*. *RELC Journal*, 52(2), 236-252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882211020032>
- [22] Mezek, S., McGrath, L., Negretti, R. & Berggren, J. (2021). Scaffolding L2 academic reading and self-regulation through task and feedback. *TESOL Quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3018>
- [23] Moll, L. C. (1990). Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development: Rethinking its Instructional Implications. *Infancia y Aprendizaje*, 51-52, 157-168.
- [24] Mouhanna, M. (2016). *English as a medium of instruction in the tertiary education setting of the UAE: The perspectives of content teachers*. Doctoral Thesis. University of Exeter. Retrieved November 20, 2024, from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/77032172.pdf>
- [25] Pecorari, D. (2020). English Medium Instruction: Disintegrating Language and Content? In: Dimova, S., Kling, J. (Eds.), *Integrating Content and Language in Multilingual Universities*. *Educational Linguistics*, (Vol. 44). Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46947-4\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46947-4_2)
- [26] Rabab'ah, G. (2005). Communication problems facing Arab learners of English. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 3(1), 179-197.
- [27] Robinson, P. Ed. (2011). *Second language task complexity: Researching the cognition hypothesis of language learning and performance*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- [28] Shepard, C. & Morrison, B. (2021). Challenges of English-medium higher education: The first-year experience in Hong Kong revisited a decade later. *Language use in English-medium instruction at university*. Routledge.
- [29] Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA.: Newbury House.
- [30] Trenkic, D. & Warmington, M. (2019). Language and literacy skills of home and international university students: How different are they, and does it matter? *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 22(2), 349-365. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S136672891700075X>
- [31] Tran, T., Tran, T., & Bien, T. (2020). An exploration of the factors hindering students' lesson comprehension in EMI classes. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 2(3), 29-42. DOI: 10.36892/ijlls.v2i3.317
- [32] Wingate, U. (2015). *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Practice*. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783093496>
- [33] Wingate U. Academic literacy across the curriculum: Towards a collaborative instructional approach. *Language Teaching*, 2018;51(3):349-364. doi:10.1017/S0261444816000264
- [34] Yung, K. W. H. & Fong, N. (2019). Learning EAP at university: Perceptions of high achieving first-year ESL undergraduates. *ELT Journal*, 73(3), 306-315. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccz019>

**Aziz Thabit Saeed** is Professor of Linguistics and Dean of the Faculty of Language Studies, Arab Open University, HQ, Kuwait. Prof. Saeed earned his PhD from Ball State University, Indiana, USA in 1997. He has published more than 40 papers and articles in the fields of Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition and Translation. He has also published 8 books and many book chapters; made more than thirty conference presentations in over twenty different countries; chaired and coordinated five international conferences; served as Dean and Department Head; reviewed papers for many international journals (editor in three). Prof. Saeed has received many international grants and awards, including the Fulbright Alumni Grant (5 times), DAAD Grant Award (Germany), Voss Award, and Ball State University Internal Grant (USA). His research interests include Applied Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, Second Language Acquisition, Translation, and pragmatics.

**Hayat Al-Khatib** is Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Arab Open University Lebanon. She received the degree of PhD from the University of London in 2002. Prof. Al-Khatib is member of the British Association of Applied Linguists (BAAL), Research Support Group at the University of London, German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Association of Professors of English and Translation at Arab Universities (APETAU). Prof. Al-Khatib is active in regional and international conferences, with an interest in linguistics, sociolinguistics, language teaching and education. She was shortlisted for best paper award at the Cambridge Fourteenth International Conference, Cambridge University, 25-28 September 2011. Her professional background includes serving in many positions including the Academic Vice-Rector at the Arab Open University Lebanon 2004-2014, Head of the Research Committee 2004-2014, Head of the Promotion Committee 2004-2014, Chair of the English Department 2005 to date, teaching at the University of London 2000-2002 (Goldsmith College), teaching at the University of London (Institute of Education) 1999-2001, and External Examiner for PhD candidates at European and Lebanese universities 2008 to date.

**Kaldun Mohamednur Said** is a lecturer at the Arab Open University, Kuwait, and Chair of the English Language Units, AOU, HQ. Prior to joining the AOU, he taught for eight years at different educational stages, Kuwait University and other tertiary education institutes. He holds an MA in Translation and an MBA from Kuwait University, and he is a CELTA-certified teacher from Cambridge University. Some of his translated works have been published by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences and they focus on disseminating popular science. His interests include TESOL, second language acquisition and translation. Email: ksaid@aou.edu.kw is a lecturer at the Arab Open University, Kuwait, and Chair of the English Language Units, AOU, HQ. Prior to joining the AOU, he taught for eight years at different educational stages, Kuwait University and other tertiary education institutes. His interests include TESOL, second language acquisition and translation.

**Ghada Abdel Hafeez** is the local dean of the Faculty of Language Studies (FLS) at Arab Open University-Bahrain, and a distinguished professor of English Literature. Professor Abdel Hafeez's scholarly contributions encompass a wide range of fields, including Egyptian women writers, post-colonial interpretations of contemporary literature, trauma, memory, home and exile, border crossings, rituals, the rewriting of myths, women's silence, and the metropolis. Her research interests extend beyond literary studies to include education, leadership, civic education, curriculum planning and assessment, and quality assurance in education. Her research papers have been featured in prestigious journals such as *Dotawa: A Journal of Nubian Studies*, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, *The Jordan Journal of Modern Languages & Literatures (JJMLL)*, and *World Journal of English Language*. She is a Fulbright Visiting Scholar who conducted research at Northeastern Illinois University, Illinois, USA, in 2016. She is also a CELF Fellow (Civic Education & Leadership) from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, New York, USA (2013).