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Learning Reconsidered: Supporting the Preparatory Year Student Experience

Rania M Rafik Khalil

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Rania Khalil[a] *

[a] *The British University in Egypt, Sherouk, 11387, Egypt*

Abstract

Preparatory Year students are challenged by many aspects of their academic life as they make the transition from school to university. As a result, there has been growing emphasis on accountability for the quality of student life, teaching and learning. It has been observed that when faculty supported students' efforts to meet high expectations, students rose to the challenge. The role of faculty staff is not simply to disseminate information but rather to create conditions that assist students to construct their own knowledge. Excellence in teaching and learning can only occur when both faculty and students are both actively engaged.

Keywords: Preparatory Year; Student Support; Independent Learning; Higher Education

1. Introduction

The diversity of higher education institutions in Egypt, and the increasing number of student enrolment into private universities have put a growing emphasis on accountability for the quality of student life, and the teaching approaches to learning. This paper, aims to address overarching Preparatory Year concerns and identify a Preparatory Year framework for student support in higher education.

For a long time, students in higher education in Egypt had been exposed to material that did not pertain to the real world. Today, students enrolled in private universities, are fortunate enough to study programs that offer material and assignments with relevant content, thus encouraging effective learning and higher-quality work (Glasser, 1990). Main stream research concerned with Preparatory Year such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007) initiative, Liberal Education and America's Promise, argues that in addition to knowledge of human culture, the essential learning outcomes for a 21st century education, includes a wide range of skills, such as inquiry and analysis, teamwork, problem solving, ethical reasoning and intercultural competence.

This paper is divided in to four main sections including the introduction. The second section focuses on recognizing the problem and data collection. The third section focuses on the data, discussing limitations, and offering recommendations through a framework, followed by, the fourth section, the conclusion which sums up the whole argument of this paper.

1.1 The Setting

Each Fall semester, universities across the country whether state or private greet new cohorts of Preparatory Year students focusing on what module contents they will cover hoping that by the end of the year, some of these students will think differently and reflect on their new academic experiences and on their future careers. As faculty, we tended to forget that Preparatory Year students at this stage are more impacted by the process of learning than by the content they will cover. Preparatory Year students at the British University in Egypt (BUE) were no different. In general, Preparatory Year students are regarded as being challenged by many aspects of their academic life as they make the transition from high school to university. Research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) points out that the first two years of university study are the main factors instigating the development of students' cognitive skills in relation to reliable predictors of academic performance such as 'self-efficacy;' which Bandura (1977) defines as, the belief in ones' ability to perform specific tasks to achieve desired results.

1.2. Recognizing the Problem

Efforts at the BUE to record Preparatory Year views in an attempt to use the data collected to enhance teaching and learning was limited when this study was initiated in November 2009. Conducting this preliminary study, was imperative in order to provide appropriate Student Support Systems, particularly, where non-native speakers (mainly of Egyptian nationality) interact with native speakers. Few of the young Egyptian learners on entering university were expected to understand the learning process they undergo in Preparatory Year.

It is important to first highlight, the main obstacles that were presumed to affect Preparatory Year students enrolled at the private university, in which, the study was held; namely the BUE. Many entering students were passive recipients who were for many years spoon-fed information; most Preparatory Year students are comfortable absorbing others' knowledge than they are critically analyzing multiple perspectives to arrive at their own judgments (Baxter, Magolda, 2001). Another critical factor, was that only a relatively small number of students had acquired the IGCSE, American Diploma or the International Baccalaureate and could communicate effectively with staff and colleagues in English. For other Egyptian Preparatory Year students, life was not so easy; not only did they as young learners have to blend seamlessly into a British higher education system, find their bearings around the campus, adapt to the bicultural setting, cope with academic challenges but also communicate without disruption to achieve a free-flow transfer of thoughts as non-native English-speaking students.

Young Egyptian students are conditioned by previous academic stages to be dependent learners; in addition, English language, is taught at schools from text books without listening practice or speaking. The linguistic demands on a student in Preparatory Year at the BUE are great, and these demands are compounded when the student is pressured to comply with the academic environment of a UK higher education system that requires the student master information which is essential to his/her academic progress. Because the language of instruction at the BUE is English, understanding the difference between what is said by the speaker and what is intended for communication was an obstacle in the way of effective communication between the non-native English speaking learner and the native academic speaker. Thus, when it comes to communicating with native speakers, non-native speakers are confronted by the regional dialects (Trudgill & Hannah, 1994) of individual speakers and the speed of speech (Aitchison, 1994). Wilson (1994) identifies four questions the listener attempts to answer in understanding speech utterances 1-"what did the speaker intend to say?" 2-"what did the speaker intend to imply?" 3-"what was the speaker's intended attitude to the propositions expressed and implied?" 4-"what was the intended set of contextual assumptions?" and after interpreting, the listener evaluates the utterances in order to respond (Klopf & Park, 1992).

One hundred and fifty students participated in this study across the university over two semesters; but only fifty one of them were Preparatory Year. The small number of Preparatory Year students was a slight setback. The practices discussed and the framework suggested may be adapted to any cohort of Preparatory Year students and Preparatory Year teaching staff so that both the instructor and student "cultivate simultaneously" (Bernstein & Bass, 2005, p.40). The frame work discussed here emerged from the need to understand Preparatory Year at the BUE and the conviction that learning and constructing knowledge extends beyond academic skills.

There are two main focal points to this study which are 1-how Egyptian Preparatory Year students are thinking about the foundation year of their university education under a private UK higher education system set in Egypt, the challenges, 2-what they consider most important in their academic learning skills and student support that have proven successful to them. This study also highlights how as faculty we were able to use this information to modify our teaching and learning techniques, provide student support appropriate to young learners' needs and foster student success by offering these students an opportunity to learn, change and grow appropriately in alignment with the needs of the community.

2. Review of Literature and Research Methodology

Extensive research has been carried out by Johnson (2008) regarding using interview questions for different pedagogical reasons particularly in real life situations in order to determine several key aspects that usually would entail decision making of some sort. This section and the ones that follow, discuss the initial collection of data, the methods employed, the problems observed with students' abilities, the methods selected to support Preparatory year and the evaluation tool used to assess the effectiveness of the support.

The discussed framework was introduced in order to improve student performance by setting a foundation year with relevant student support services that would help create the right environment that allowed young non-native English speaking learners overcome language proficiency difficulties, build interdisciplinary skills, overcome culture difficulties, communicate effectively with native-English speaking academic staff, adjust to university level academic expectations, adopt successful study habits and become independent learners. These effective practices in addition to what is defined by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (2005) as academic challenges, include "the extent to which students engage in activities that require analyzing, synthesizing, applying theories, and making judgments" (p.177). In their synthesis of effective practices, Kuh, Kenzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) note that "challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning"(p.177).

Teachers were a key component in the learning and teaching environment of the suggested framework. Prosser, Trigwell, & Waterhouse (1999) point out, that it is the teachers who have the ability to influence the learning context and invoke deep approaches to learning; helping the students to believe that their academic performance is primarily in their own hands (Block, 1987). Kuh et al. (2005) reported that when faculty supported students' efforts to meet high expectations, students rose to the challenge. Excellence in teaching and learning can only occur when both faculty staff and students are both actively engaged. The role of the faculty staff is not simply to disseminate information but rather to create the conditions that assist the students to construct their own knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; McKeachie, 1986).The framework set also sought to enhance student support which Ramsden (2004) argues needed development.

2.1 Research Methodology

2.1.1 The Interview Sample and Tools

As this was a preliminary study on Preparatory Year students, fifty one Preparatory year students from a variety of majors participated in the Module Student Evaluation; an additional six students volunteered to participate in the in-depth Staff Student Liaison Committee interviews administered by the English Department. The selection of the student sample was solely based on their agreement to volunteer. Data collection started in November 2009 and ended early May 2010. The questions of the surveys were crafted to help identify the techniques students used to learn, determine what changes they perceived were important to make a turning point in their independent learning experience, and understand how they viewed themselves as young learners in transition from high school to university. Questions included students' satisfaction with the support facilities, and the English Language Program. All full time students take English based on their placement test score on entry. The questionnaires and interviews also aimed at helping students view themselves as important components of the learning and teaching process.

2.1.2 Data Collection

Reasons behind collecting data, were communicated clearly to the fifty one Preparatory Year students filling in the survey and as well as to the six students who volunteered to participate in the Staff Student Liaison Committee interviews. It was clearly emphasized to the students that the surveys were anonymous, and would not in any way interfere with students' grades. Students were invited to share their best educational experiences as well as the dilemmas, challenges, and decisions they faced. The surveys were also meant to indirectly prompt students to explore the opinions they hold, and examine why they think as they do.

2.1.3 The Survey

The survey responses of the fifty one Preparatory Year students who participated and the six students volunteering for the Staff-Student Liaison Committee in-depth interviews, were disseminated according to the respondents' statement patterns. The responses were categorized in order to identify student growth and development as depicted by the students themselves. The surveys were administered in the first semester and then administered again in the second semester of the academic year 2009/2010. The survey was filled during two hours of the English Language sessions, the Staff-Student Liaison Committee - SSLC in-depth interviews were a one hour meeting scheduled at the end of the semester. The SSLC survey questions were emailed out to students to give them time to reflect on the questions. Oral feedback from the discussion was a major source of qualitative data (Patton, 1990). The data from the survey and the interviews were processed manually based on the traced patterns found in students' comments.

The next section analyzes the data collected from the survey and complements the analysis with the data from the in-depth interviews. The Modular Student Evaluation Survey included 51 Preparatory Year student respondents from different majors; while only 6 respondents were Preparatory Year in the SSLC interviews.

3. Data Analysis

Collecting feedback from Preparatory Year students was regarded by many of the young learners as a new experience. The students were assured that the information collected would be used for improvement within the following academic year. Data collected for this study through the survey and the in-depth interview with students also addressed how non-native English-speaking Egyptian students perceive language to be one of their greatest challenges. Student responses showed that Preparatory Year students who made use of the English Department student services, tended to be more self-assured about their language proficiency.

Egyptian young learners come from a very chaotic academic two year high school background that depends heavily on private tutoring and spoon fed information. Results of the survey showed that students who had attended the Induction Program and Development Workshops offered at the start of the semester, succeeded in fostering an atmosphere that balanced both the academic and social components of their university study. How much effort students in Preparatory Year put into their studies and the level of their motivation and engagement in academic learning during this year is furthered explored in the next section.

Many Egyptian undergraduates start university without appropriate study tools. Low student motivation (Crone, 2007) and procrastination have been aspects that surfaced as traits which deterred Preparatory Year students from steady academic progress. Delay in beginning assignments to the extent that it becomes difficult to achieve (Greene, 2002) is an issue that required the attention of faculty and was remedied by introducing Time Management strategies. Academic Honesty sessions held by the Library and the English Department were also part of the Induction to help reduce the percentage of plagiarized student work.

3.1The Results

Several common academic learning experiences were identified by the 51 Preparatory Year students who took the survey and the 6 who attended the SSLC. Of the 51 students surveyed, 74% (n=38) indicated an overall satisfaction with the facilities, student support services and the unique British/Egyptian environment.

The students' recommendations for a smoother transition into university included that 50% (n=3) required conversation sessions independent of the English language modules to obtain the required language proficiency which would support their learning in a UK higher education system. The second most obvious remark made, was that more motivation strategies were necessary to prompt Preparatory Year students to attend workshops and classes as attendance was not compulsory, hence, students did not fully benefit from the learning experience. An attendance policy was submitted for approval by the senate in June 2010.

3.2 Study Skills

Within the analysis of the collected data, a subtopic emerged which is, the need to develop better study habits by identifying key study skills relevant to the Preparatory Year students. Students in the Preparatory Year indicated that learning to study was a key element to their academic success, 66% (n=34) indicated that they had neglected the use of the Library, the Writing Centre and the instructor Office Hours. Out of the 6 students interviewed, 66% (n=4) admitted that feedback and grades were motivators that played an instructive role in prompting them to rethink their study habits and evaluate their learning experiences and the effort they invest in their academic study.

3.3 Feedback and Grades

One of the main themes underpinned from the student responses in the surveys, was that comprehensive feedback about their work particularly in the English language sessions, was constructive and a powerful indicator to them about their language proficiency level. 21% (n=11) indicated that written feedback impacted the way they approached future assessments by being better prepared either by using the same study skills that resulted in good grades or by altering their flawed study habits that have affected their grades negatively.

Grades at this stage seemed to be of more importance to them than to mastering the content of their majors. High grades indicated to Preparatory Year students that their study habits were effective while lower grades indicated that the students needed to modify and fine-tune their study skills. Faculty staff teaching Preparatory Year in the English Language Program shared the rubrics with the students and spent time in the classroom explaining how it works in relation to feedback not only to raise awareness of the students but to help them understand about their own learning process and how grades work. Student engagement is increasingly being incorporated in the classroom "where students discuss the assessment criteria and apply them themselves to their own or other students' assignments" (Rust 2003). Although sharing assessment criteria and rubrics was found to assure students that marking is fair and accurate, informing them about the standards against which their work will be judged was not sufficient to improve their understanding of the assessment process or enable them to perform better in most cases.

Many Preparatory Year students perceived learning and earning good grades was skill based rather than knowledge based. This was an indicator to faculty staff teaching Preparatory Year that learning for these young learners is defined as managing their schedules and developing effective study skills as they rarely join the university knowing what they need to do in order to succeed academically. Preparatory Year students also faced the challenge of transferring their study skills and English language skills to their degree areas; Whitston (1998) indicates that transferability is a key feature of the concept of skills and has been the main focus of challenges to the value of skills approaches.

3.4 English Language Learning

The biggest hurdle for Preparatory Year students was indicated by 64% (n=33) as progressing through the English Language Program. Most of the students enrolled at the university were non-native English-speaking students who spoke Arabic. English Language modules are offered to help students improve their language

proficiency. The English Language Program is a requirement for graduation. Although almost all of the students agreed on the importance of the English Language modules, they reported that they procrastinated in completing assignments because of the workload. Also as non-native speakers, they were unfamiliar with many cultural implications of utterances that at times impeded understanding and interfered with their participation in class activities or discussions. Klopf and Park (1992) note, it is "a world or words" and inadequate language skills can pose challenges which include alienation as a result of not being actively involved in university life (Jenkins & Bainer, 1991; Smith, 1991). It was also taken into consideration that because many of the students were non-native English speakers, it would therefore be better that native-speaking instructors spoke at a slightly slower speed when addressing Egyptian students in order to avoid miscommunication. It was also necessary to minimize the use of metaphors, idioms and figurative speech because for many students the confusion would be great due to the cultural differences.

3.5 Independent Learning and Motivation

It was reported by 49% (n= 24) of the Preparatory Year students, that independent learning and the freedom to make choices in their academic learning impacted their motivation level and sense of self-worth. Some of the students admitted that they were being forced to learn how to become independent, and respect task deadlines. The Egyptian culture in general is more flexible with regards to due dates.

3.6 E-learning and CALL

Furthermore, it was clear that e-learning played a significant role in keeping students informed of academic changes, news, updates and effective virtual participation with academic staff as 84% stated that this fluid communication taught them to be organized and was easy to use although recurring technical difficulties were at times discouraging and frustrating.

CALL (Norizan Abdul Razak, 1998) an online computer based English language learning tool which has multiple directional learning and individual independent learning facets was the least used by approximately 90% of the total students interviewed and surveyed. The in-depth interviews helped clarify the reasons behind why students did not want to use CALL. Using CALL has many advantages as Ravichandran (2000) outlines these advantages as:

1- Interest and Motivation

2- Individualisation

3- A Compatible Learning Style

4- Immediate Feedback

Discussing computer based English language learning in the SSLC interview, all of the students including the 6 Preparatory Year students, indicated that because CALL needs practice to meet the learning objectives it becomes tedious and they are de-motivated. Although Iacob (2009), points out that CALL may be among the best tools to stimulate student motivation; all the students indicated that they feel lost and apprehensive about using CALL in the absence of an instructor. Because BUE addresses differentiation and encourages communicative learning, using CALL was regarded as a useful learning tool that students could use to learn *with* not *from*. Alhaway (2000), for instance, suggests that CALL can reinforce classroom input and offer additional student support according to individual students' needs. Some critics however consider CALL to have its limitations regarding technology and the resistance of students to using it as a learning tool (see Alonso et al., 2005; Bates, 2001; 2000; Blinco et al., 2004; Bracewell et al., 1998; Harasim et al., 1995; Marginson, 2000). It is assumed here in the case of the Preparatory Year students by the author that the students' lack of independence, has much to do with their recoiling from using CALL.

3.7 The Writing Centre

Many students acknowledged that as they neared the end of their Preparatory Year, they realized that they needed to use the Writing Centre for assistance with their research graduation projects for an improved quality of writing. Only 16% (n=1) of the students believed they could navigate seamlessly from being high school graduates to university level students without resorting to student support services or altering their study habits.

3.8 Applying the Framework

Based on the findings discussed above, this paper would like to discuss the framework piloted in order to ensure that Preparatory Year students achieve a seamless transition from high school to university as independent learners.

The University in its scope to ensure a solid foundation year for entering students and young learners, encouraged staff to put forward proposals for student support mechanisms, which over the span of two semesters were initiated and piloted. Some of these have already been tackled and discussed above in the data analysis; others the author will present briefly in this section of the paper. Such mechanisms included Induction for all new students, English Department orientation session and Student Support workshops offered by the Library. Other mechanisms to support student learning are the English Department Writing Centre and the Advising and Language Support Office (ALSO).

3.8.1 The Induction and ALSO

Faculty staff across the university in response to the need to guide and support students on and off campus, suggested ideas compatible with the needs of their students. The English Department Preparatory Year coordinator and core group; suggested establishing an Advising and Language Support Office (ALSO) to assist all Preparatory Year students with any outstanding issues regarding English language learning. The office opened its services to both Preparatory and all undergraduate students in September 2010. The Preparatory Year core group also took the initiative to prepare an Information Welcome Pack and a short video to orient new students and help them adjust to English language classes. The only drawback was that Egyptian Preparatory Year students lacked confidence to work independently and it was feared that students may make use of ALSO, the staff Office Hours, the Information Welcome pack or the Writing Centre and its website.

3.8.2 Academic learning

It was assumed by the faculty staff interpreting the data that by the second semester, Preparatory Year students were able to pay more attention to module content as opposed to the first semester; where the main focus was adjusting to university life.

3.9 Discussion and Recommendations

The analysis of the survey responses and the interviews, are in agreement with the author's initial assumptions and findings that Egyptian Preparatory Year students, lacked awareness about study skills, were not familiar with how to use student support facilities, lacked language proficiency and were not focused on the learning material. They were after all, unseasoned young learners. Kuh's (2007) explains that "many high school seniors are not prepared academically for college-level work and have not developed the habits of the mind and heart that will stand them in good stead to successfully grapple with more challenging intellectual tasks" (p.5).

The survey also indicated that although the majority of the students were aware of the learning experiences they had undergone and made note of what they needed to change in order to succeed academically, some had not completely adjusted to the university level expectations and still found difficulty in preparing for exams, using the Library, attending English Language classes, procrastinate, struggle with their writing and resort to short-cuts which ultimately produce poor quality work and leave them with low self – esteem. Overall, the survey responses and interviews indicated that students perceived their Preparatory Year as a time to adjust to university workload and how to read and write at university level rather than a time to focus on the content of what they are learning.

The author based on the above sections and analysis of collected data, would like to make four recommendations for effective Preparatory Year student support.

1- Students must be given constant exposure to independent learning tools such as CALL, e-learning, and the Writing Centre online self-help (see www.bue.edu.eg/writingcentre) it is free accessible.

2- An Advising and Language Support Office (ALSO) has proven in a very short time, to be a resourceful and successful student support facility. The student support office has not yet operated to its full capacity as it is still being piloted. ALSO is a complimentary drop-in service for Preparatory Year students for any issues related to English language learning. ALSO must be ready with sufficient and appropriate material that can ensure the students' proficiency in language that match the IELTS requirements.

3- Given that students should be more autonomous in their learning, allowing more free time on their schedules may direct student to eventually attend the workshops offered for students as student support by the faculties, the library, and the English Department which would ultimately help them in their studies.

4- Staff development workshops to develop teachers' conceptions of teaching and teaching skills.

Due to the small number of Preparatory Year students who participated in the survey, the results cannot be generalized and it is possible that given the fact that the author is an instructor for Preparatory Year and is Preparatory Year coordinator, some of the assumptions may have at some point interfered with the interpretation of the data.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Supporting Preparatory Year students is challenging without doubt. The conclusions reached based on the analysis of data and the in-depth interviews, suggest that Preparatory Year students are willing to adapt to university academic expectations, if appropriate support services that meet their needs are in place. There will always be, however, some students who may resist the use of such services out of lack of understanding or the inability to become independent learners.

Faculty who teach Preparatory Year students, realize that this foundation year, for many of the Egyptian students, is just that – a year in which they are being prepared for higher education, and it is the responsibility of faculty and the university to offer academic support services to these students and create the environment that fosters their success.

In order to give Preparatory Year students what they needed to succeed at the BUE, it was important first to understand how they defined their learning, how they saw themselves make the transition from high school to university and which student support best suited their needs. It was also important to take into account the language barrier, and the demands of being independent in a society and culture that had for long taught them to be dependent both socially and academically.

Carrying out this study was important to the faculty staff teaching Preparatory Year, as there was little insight of their needs as young learners. From the author's point of view, it was imperative that academic faculty staff altered their perception of Preparatory Year and made an effort to understand in order to be understood in the classrooms. It was only when academic staff were able to fully take into account the challenges and needs of Preparatory Year students, that the transformation of young Egyptian learners from being inexperienced undergraduates to seasoned learners was complete.

Acknowledgements

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