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Great Expectations or Great Outcomes? Exploring the Context of English Language Policy Transfer in Bahrain

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This chapter addresses English language education and writing pedagogy in secondary schools in Bahrain and explores the impact of societal factors on the operational delivery of education programs that have been borrowed from another country. The authors draw on data from focus groups held with teachers from 10 secondary schools in order to gain a better understanding of how a new teaching policy is indigenized by people on the ground. The chapter concludes that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) borrowing in Bahrain presently reflects merely the government's great expectations, with real outcomes suffering from a time-lag. The authors argue that the students' personal context competes with general economic developments in the country, resulting in discordant readings of the importance of the new reforms.

Keywords: English-language education; socio-cultural frameworks; teacher perceptions; transition to higher education; Bahrain

International policy borrowing is a topical issue in the Middle East, as importing educational successes observed in other countries is seen as a "quick fix" to internal dissatisfaction, negative external evaluation, economic competition, and globalization (Phillips & Ochs 2004), all of which have affected the region to a varying extent in different countries (see also Uysal, this volume). The growth of policy borrowing in culturally diverse states, however, raises questions about its viability in the socio-cultural context surrounding the pedagogic culture in the target community. At the time of this writing,

we, the authors, were involved in a three-year long study, researching the transition of Bahraini students to western-style universities whose national education context was just being transformed as a result of changes to English language education, based on the success of a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) program in Singapore. The issues that were raised in the study about the role of socio-cultural frameworks of schools in such transitions prompted us to focus on the perceptions of secondary English language teachers. The teachers participating in this research provided insights into how a new policy became indigenized and adapted in the country's education system. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to present teacher perceptions regarding the impact of the socio-cultural context on the potential for successful CLT implementation in schools in Bahrain (for other discussions of faculty perceptions on curriculum implementation in the MENA region, see Annous, Nicolas, & Townsend; Austin; Hodges & Kent; Miller & Pessoa; Theado, Johnson, Highly, & Omar, this volume).

This chapter draws on focus group data with secondary teachers, but before turning to our focus group findings, we begin with a discussion of the latest English teaching and writing pedagogy initiatives in Bahrain. These initiatives have been introduced with dual aims of increasing students' opportunities to study in foreign universities, either in the region or worldwide, and of creating an education system that can support the county's transition to the knowledge economy. The socio-cultural context and specific intricacies of secondary education in Bahrain, however, present an interesting narrative system for the development of these reforms. We thus review relevant literature on the impact of societal factors in the "target" culture on the operational delivery of programs that have been borrowed. We suggest that, particularly in our example, an analysis of community, parental, and student influences on English language education and writing pedagogy is essential if we are to understand why international transfers of programs become indigenized in a particular way, which, in turn, may cause some of the concerns about the levels of student preparedness for university writing in English. Next, we explain our research, our methods, and describe our participants. After the discussion of findings, we offer an analysis of how the voices of our teachers helped us develop a more advanced understanding of what happens to programs and pedagogies that are not locally situated.

Background to English Education and Writing Pedagogy in Bahrain

The history of education in Bahrain indicates that the country's first schools

were developed with an emphasis on the mastery of "pre-packaged" knowledge in certain subjects to respond as quickly as possible to the growing demand for literate people who could acquire information quickly to teach and work in offices (Shirawi, 1989). M. K. H. Quaddummi (1995) explains that this view on education is the reason why rote learning and inculcation became culturally ingrained methods of teaching. The focus on "usable" knowledge also indicates that education has traditionally been positioned as an important chain in the country's economic development, with very early investment in other sectors than just the oil industry. The role of education supporting the economy became particularly prominent in the early 2000s when the country began preparations for the transition to the knowledge economy, urging significant reforms of the education sector. For secondary schools, as well as the primary and intermediate sectors, this meant undergoing changes under the umbrella of National Education Reform Initiatives (NERI) whose aims, *inter alia*, were to graduate students with professional qualifications to a degree level and emphasize practical skills and English language development applicable to the labor market (Bahrain Economic Development Board, 2008).

The intricacies surrounding the secondary system in Bahrain and the national schools in particular, however, beg the question of the relevance of reforms focused on preparing future university students and citizens able to fill the gap in the labor market. Students who usually populate national secondary schools come from expatriate families who were brought to Bahrain on government employment contracts to work in military and police sectors. The jobs in these sectors have been occupied by members of these families for generations, which historically and politically have been "reserved" for them. Nowadays they have also come to symbolize membership and belonging to a particular community. What, among other things, characterizes these communities is a very instrumental and pragmatic approach towards school and education, particularly the English language, which was commonly claimed by the parents to be unnecessary for their children who were preparing to continue their jobs in the government sectors, where Arabic is used (Abdulmajeed, 1995). This may suggest that students will prefer the inculcation methods culturally developed in Bahrain, as the context in which their future career prospects are located is likely to shape views that education is valuable when it facilitates a quick completion of the secondary certificate, which, in turn, also facilitates the transition to the careers occupied by their parents. Arabic is also the primary language the students use at home and at school, and the fact that education in national schools is delivered in Arabic makes English an additional "outlier." While this might be more relevant for boys than for girls, female students may also be attracted to traditional

pedagogies, as they offer opportunities for higher grades and status (Hayes, Mansour, & Fisher, 2015). Such national attitudes are thus likely to cause some tensions between the new purposes of education linked to the economic vision for Bahrain and the more traditional, "domestic" views. If the new pedagogies are not relevant for the students, what does this then mean for the teachers? What decisions will teachers make and how will they position themselves to tailor their ways through the new reforms?

While researching the transition issues in the broader study, we uncovered important themes about expectations and reality in conversations with our teachers. We report below how CLT, being an approach emphasizing classroom interaction and paying little attention to grammatical accuracy (Richards & Rodgers, 1986), is viewed to be affected by the pre-existing arrangements in the national education system in Bahrain. Following CLT, students are expected to interact with others in the classroom, either in group or pair work, but also in writing. This interaction involves completing tasks that are mediated through language and involves negotiation of information and information sharing. For example, asking for directions and asking supporting questions to make sure individuals take the correct route involve exchanges of information regarding the local area. Broadly speaking, assessment is therefore based on evaluating levels of communication and students' competence in achieving the objectives within the constraints of their language proficiency (Richards, 2006). The teachers in our study noted that this differs from nationally set assessment arrangements in Bahrain that require high levels of mastery of knowledge and error-free competence. We explore this "mismatch" below.

The government in Bahrain introduced CLT at all levels of education in 2005 to shift English language pedagogy in the country from discrete language items to developing students' communication skills in English, self-expression, and thinking (Al-Baharna, 2005). Supporting this shift was a new genre-based writing pedagogy introduced in 2002 (Bax, 2006), grounded in the idea "that a more systematic approach to teaching of these skills could benefit from a more systematic approach to the kinds of *texts* included in the syllabus" (Bax, 2006, p. 321) The genre-based approach contained many CLT elements, as it focused on developing skills for communication. It was believed that the focus on genres provided a systematic approach to English teaching whereby teachers could focus on one area of writing at a time (e.g., writing a story or a letter of complaint), which would enable them to better support the students in advancing their skills as they could focus on one text at a time (Bax, 2006).

The findings that we report below give insights into the implementation of CLT that were perhaps unexpected by the policy makers, particularly in relation to the assumption that teachers were going to simply adopt the new

pedagogies, or at least actively seek ways of their adaptation that would remain faithful to CLT. These insights are theorized below in the context of literature that places negotiations of school processes in the center of interactions between individuals and their socio-cultural contexts.

Theoretical Background

While being initially focused on the intercultural transition of students in Bahrain—that is, how students were negotiating their journeys from one culturally specific education setting to another—we focused our literature search on factors that affect this transition. Some studies discuss the impact of national culture on students' levels of adaptation to the new teaching and learning environment (e.g., Druzhilov, 2011; Jin, 2011; Serpell, 2007) and how students themselves experience the new learning environment, negotiating the influences from the past to adapt to the new teaching and social conditions in their host universities (e.g., Marginson 2014; Sovic, 2009). Other literature reminds us of the role of school in shaping particular student identities that may or may not have the required attributes to then progress to higher education (e.g., Mavor 2001). However, we were surprised to find that the effects of student aspirations on teachers' work and how the teachers subsequently position themselves to strike a balance between student and government goals is not discussed as a factor in transitions. This gap prompted us to theorize the findings we present below in the context of literature pointing to teacher decision-making, which we argue in the conclusion indicates that choosing policy to facilitate transition to higher education cannot simply be based on matching the pedagogy with the skills requirements at university. There is a chain of important decisions that are made prior to teachers undertaking new skills development.

This chain of decisions can be best explained by analytical perspectives that acknowledge the impact of socio-cultural factors surrounding teachers' school lives (e.g., Mansour, 2013). The context of the "target" country must therefore be considered, as its potential effect on the indigenization process is likely to determine how much of the borrowed model will retain its original elements (Phillips & Ochs, 2004). We noted in the research that the intricacies of the secondary context in Bahrain that we described above acted as powerful discourses affecting decisions of teachers regarding CLT, resulting in subjective interpretations of the best ways of tackling the conflict between the students' and the government's objectives. Research conducted elsewhere has shown similar outcomes and pointed out that societal beliefs underscoring the purpose of education and, subsequently, specific school structures,

create a dynamic narrative for potential developments of the new policy (e.g., Das, Shaheen, Shrestha, Rahma, & Khan, 2014; Li & Baldauf, 2011).

Furthermore, literature suggesting that teachers are not always willing to negotiate the established structures in light of the changing conditions of their work was particularly helpful in contextualizing our outcomes (e.g., Comber, 2011; Street, 2009). It has shown that how teachers respond to the new teaching agendas is contingent upon the perceived relevance of these agendas for students' needs and the values they place on education (Comber & Nixon, 2009) as well as whether complying with the new teaching policies may have reputational consequences for the teachers themselves (Hayes, 2016). Janks (2014), for instance, explains that attitudes towards policy and willingness to adopt it are developed based on the perceived social effects of engaging with it, particularly in terms of supporting parental aspirations regarding their children's future job prospects. Such insights helped to contextualize the teacher decision-making process that was revealed in this study with regard to what may cause delays and modifications to the intended outcomes of policy borrowing. We argue that these modifications and outcomes invariably have an impact on what skills are actually developed at school level, challenging the idea that policy borrowing is a "quick fix" and a guarantee for their development.

Methods and Participants

We report in this chapter on data from teacher focus groups. We chose focus groups as the approach to data collection because we were interested in the views of people who have shared similar experiences with CLT implementation (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

English teachers from 10 secondary schools across five governorates in Bahrain took part in this study. Governorates refer to five districts into which Bahrain is split which have their own councils. Schools in each governorate were randomly selected. The total number of English teachers employed in these 10 schools was 85 and the total number of teachers included in all focus groups was 60. The teachers who were included in the study were all working full-time, all native speakers of Arabic, and of Bahraini, Egyptian, Jordanian, or Tunisian origin. Their teaching experience varied from one to more than 12 years and the age range was between 21 and 60 years old. All teachers had a teaching degree.

One focus group session was held in each school. During the focus groups, we inquired about the general pedagogy of teaching English, the context of English teaching practice in Bahraini schools and the challenges of imple-

menting the present curriculum. The teachers were also asked to elaborate how they thought the context of their teaching practice influenced students' transition to university. All focus group questions can be found in the Appendix.

All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The focus group questions were written in English and Arabic but the discussions were conducted in English. On average, the sessions lasted between 40-60 minutes. To code the data, schools were randomly assigned a letter from A-J, and teachers were given numbers. So, for example, a response coded Teacher1B was from the teacher who spoke first in school B. All data were sent back to participants for validation, and no comments with corrections were returned.

Data were analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser, 1965) to identify whether any differences or similarities existed in the English teaching practices across the participating schools and in teacher perceptions on their role in transition. This involved breaking data into units and coding them to develop categories. These categories were constantly evaluated as they were compared among different focus groups (Glaser, 1965). Constant comparisons were also used because, in interpretive research, comparing among different participant groups develops greater confidence in the findings through using multiple sources of evidence (Andrade, 2009). Segments of transcribed texts were coded with key concepts that summarized their content, and these concepts were then grouped together based on similarities. For example, text segments coded "easy to get marks on assessment projects," "memorizing model answers," "copy and paste," "not transferable to university," were grouped under the larger category of "assessment." Analysis was undertaken by each researcher individually and then compared to develop a set of overlapping themes. Below, we present only findings relevant to teacher perceptions regarding the effects of the school context on CLT. They are grouped under two themes: a) Great Expectations and b) Policy Rejection?

Findings

Great Expectations

Teachers drew comparisons between what was expected when the new curriculum (CLT) was implemented and what was really happening in their classrooms. As explained earlier in this chapter, the rationale for the new curriculum was to shift the focus of language teaching from "coverage" of the material to CLT, but according to the majority of teachers, this did not happen because:

> The curriculum is too long, we never have the time to teach them, we only perform lessons, that's all. We never teach. There are a lot of things in the book [all agree]. And if you're not going to deliver the whole thing, the students will also lose it [referring to what might be tested in the exam] and they won't trust the book any more. (Teacher 1E)

This type of comment, which was representative of many teachers, elucidates how the teachers were making sense of the new English teaching reform in light of traditional understandings of learning.

But it was also indicated that the expectations of the current curriculum could not be met because the decision about CLT was not adequate to the context in which it was being implemented, as this teacher noted:

> In my opinion, it's not bad [the curriculum]: the problem is not with the book though because even if you bring a simple book you can still make use of it. It's the system, people around you, administration, Ministry of Education, the department of curriculum, the administration in the school, you know, the whole thing. And the students' level, some of them you can't teach what they want you to teach. (Teacher 5G)

The comment from Teacher 5B highlights the incoherence of the decision to implement CLT, further suggesting that the new vision for English language education for Bahrain has not been accompanied by similar changes in domestic values and social developments. This was reflected in many conversations with our teachers who referred to aspects of teaching and learning as well as the socio-cultural intricacies surrounding secondary education in Bahrain.

First, a lot of teachers displayed contradictory views on language development to those promoted by CLT, as explicit focus on grammar was seen by the teachers as essential. For example, Teacher 1D said: "The directive is not to teach grammar. Grammar must come through texts. But it doesn't work [teachers all agree]. They must know the rules. They don't know the tenses." Second, the teachers also seemed to feel that students would not learn effectively when involved in communicative tasks when there is no teacher control. As one teacher explained:

> This approach [CLT] gives them new opportunities, shows them that there are other ways of teaching than those by means of which they have been taught so far. [But] if they

see the teacher who is serious and authoritarian, they will follow. (Teacher 2H)

The need for the teachers being in control of the classroom was perceived as resulting from students' understandings of learning but also teachers' own experiences, which indicated that:

> With the communicative approach, they make a big noise and they don't learn. Or some of the students work, the others copy from them and then that's it. They need something that would allow the teacher to control the class more. (Teacher 5D)

Whether these comments were grounded in teachers' own beliefs about learning that might have been shaped by their own socio-cultural context could not be concluded from the research. What was, however, evident is that teachers' choices to follow the traditional methods were informed by the interplay of students' career aspirations, communal attitudes that shape them, as well as national understandings of competence and the value of good grades. Details of this finding are provided in the second part of this results section.

Here, however, the teachers cited below explain the impact of familial connections and political settlements, which highlights the point made earlier regarding the incoherence of the government's decision to invest in education preparing for the transition to knowledge-based jobs. Teachers explained that students do not have aspirations to work in these jobs, suggesting that the new reforms have not been accompanied by relevant societal changes. For example:

> Here in the region, we have one big problem, students are not motivated because they go for the military jobs. They are not motivated to become a doctor or an engineer, and so on. Their motivation for learning is low because of this. The government makes it very easy for the students here in the Gulf to take military jobs, in military institutions, so why should they bother? (Teacher 3A)

A teacher in another school continued, noting that:

> The highest motivation for most of the students is to go and work as a soldier. They want to get their certificates and then go and serve in the army. They don't care . . . So they just sit in class, do nothing, they get their marks and in the end they get their certificates. (Teacher 2I)

The very pragmatic attitude towards education underscored by the objective of "getting their certificates" seems to then translate into very instrumental strategies, enabling students to meet course requirements with minimum effort. The teachers commented that as a result of this attitude, students "copy and paste from the Internet or they submit it in a foreign language" (Teacher 3B).[1] Also, "they pay a stationary [a little corner shop] to do it for them" (Teacher 1B).

There was a general sense among the teachers that such strategies were enabled because "for examining the writing topics, the questions are always from the book" (Teacher 8C). This also suggests a deeper paradigmatic issue, reflecting that necessary structural changes have not yet taken place to support the implementation of the borrowed policy. The teacher quoted below explains that the old system of preparing assessments by the Ministry of Education advisors who tend to rely on the content of the book results in facilitating the traditional forms of learning based on inculcation. This reliance contradicts the objectives of the new policy, suggesting that if CLT is to become successfully implemented:

> We don't want the examinations to concentrate only on the book. We want to encourage the students to read outside the book. The exam people, they don't go outside the book. For examining the writing topics, the questions are always from the book, we don't want this, we [should] teach the skill, how to describe, we don't want the exam paper to focus only on this. (Teacher 8C)

The comments in this section indicate that the new CLT policy has mainly been developed at the surface level and at present only reflects the government's great expectations. They also point to a complex interplay among factors related to teacher beliefs, student aspirations and structural changes in need of revisiting, all of which are predicted by the teachers to be a barrier to their fulfillment. The section below presents the results of this interplay, suggesting that teacher ambivalence and positioning in the borrowed system may be linked to socio-cultural and survival reasons that have subsequently led to an informal rejection of CLT.

Policy Rejection

One of the most significant themes that emerged in the research, pointing to an informal rejection of policy, was that the teachers did not actively seek ways of implementing CLT within the constraints of the "target" culture. Rather,

they reported subjugation to student and parental pressures. Because there have been no structural changes to the ways exams are designed and administered, and because "the students only study for the final exam [and] they don't want extra information" (Teacher 1A), the teachers explained that they continue to facilitate exam preparation through traditional ways of memorization.

> They take the model writing from the teachers. They just need the model for the exam. Yes, we provide them with the model writing . . . They hate you when you try to help them and explain what should be done first and then next, they don't like that, just direct monotonous way of teaching. That's it. (Teacher 3B)

It was also concluded that some teachers may have not actively sought to implement the new strategies because a number of participants indicated their support for teaching methods that can facilitate traditionally understood forms of competence, built through accuracy and certified by high marks. For example:

> All Arabs think in this way, you see. All of them want to get high marks and they stick to the written topics they will be examined in, so they study them carefully, by heart, to get high marks. But from my point of view, *that's their right*. (Teacher 2J)

The students' needs and teachers' own beliefs thus seemed to have informed decision-making that might have led to an informal rejection of CLT. The teachers in this study explained that they did not seek ways of trying to implement the new teaching pedagogy because they experienced a lot of resistance from the students and their parents. In refusing to implement the new pedagogy, they avoided negative evaluations of their own professionalism:

> They have model answers and they learn by heart. But, to be frank, it's not only the teacher, it's not the teacher's choice to do that. In the past, the ministry used to give us the topic that will be on the exam and we used to give them a piece of writing and they learnt it by heart. And the teacher who doesn't do this will be blamed by the students and the parents. (Teacher 1E)

Another teacher added:

> . . . if you want to come up with ideas that are more cre-

> ative and when the students can express themselves clearly, the newspapers will write that this is irrelevant and prevents the students' progress. So there are a lot of complaints about teachers. (Teacher 4F)

Negative evaluations seemed to be a big concern for teachers. Often, a sense of defense of their professionalism could be noted in conversations through comments which highlighted that teachers were prepared to teach CLT through their training but chose not to because they were deterred by the context:

> We've been through our training and we know about different methods, but when you try to apply them here, it does not match, some students cannot work with those methods. (Teacher 2D)

The decision-making process presented above was one of the most significant themes that emerged in the broader research to which the findings in this chapter are linked. We felt that it was important to present them here because they point to the limitations of our original approach to investigating transitions. Even though the findings presented here do not tell us much about the actual transition of students, they point to teacher decision-making, and the socio-cultural influences on which these decisions rest, as an important undercurrent in policy borrowing, a process that is often initiated to facilitate transitions. We expand on this point in the concluding remarks below.

Concluding Remarks

We presented in this chapter teacher perceptions regarding the impact of the context of schools in Bahrain on the potential for CLT implementation. We also showed that the socio-cultural context and specific intricacies of secondary education in Bahrain present a dynamic narrative system that was seen by the teachers to affect this potential. We found teacher choices and the undercurrents of their decision-making particularly interesting as the conversations revealed how the teachers position themselves in a borrowed education system, to strike a balance between student and government goals. Exploring teacher perceptions also gave us a more advanced understanding of what happens to programs and pedagogies that are not locally situated, suggesting answers to global questions of why policy transfers may not lead to the outcomes for which they are intended (see also Uysal, this volume). In our case, teacher sense-making had an impact on the outcomes of policy that was

implemented in Bahrain to facilitate transition to higher education, suggesting that decisions to borrow a program cannot be simply based on matching the pedagogy with the skills requirements at university and assuming that this will provide a "quick fix" to the existing problems, when, simultaneously, the new teaching policy may be rejected by teachers in schools. Further developments of the research suggest that the perceptions of the type of skills needed at university were also inadequate (Hayes, Mansour, & Fisher, 2015).

It seems that the socio-cultural intricacies of the secondary context in Bahrain acted as a powerful discourse affecting decisions of teachers regarding CLT. This then resulted in individual interpretations of the best ways of acting and taking decisions to continue to teach in traditional ways. Such teacher behavior also points to deeper issues related to the political incoherence of borrowing policy to improve life chances of young people in the country in a socio-political context where these life chances are not something that students aspire to. The conversations with teachers revealed that this incoherence is created by a lack of aspiration to do knowledge-based jobs, not implementing relevant structural changes in the national assessment system, and negative teacher evaluations by parents or in the national press that point to very traditional understandings of education still held in Bahrain.

While these conclusions concur with the literature regarding teacher choices (e.g., Comber & Nixon, 2009; Das et al., 2014; Janks, 2014; Li & Baldauf, 2011), as well as broader skepticism towards developments such as CLT in the Arabian Gulf (Aydarova 2013; Bahgat 1999), they also point to the negative role that policy borrowing may play in national developments aiming to support students' transition to higher education. It seems that such policy borrowing resulted in decisions by teachers not to implement new CLT approaches or undertake new skills development initiatives, which in turn affected the operational success of the curriculum changes proposed under NERI. This study revealed a complex chain of decisions involving students, parents, and teachers as well as those responsible for national assessments, all of whom are likely to have an impact on the government's strategy to improve students' transition to higher education.

The findings reported here suggest that hopes underlying CLT borrowing in Bahrain at present merely represent the government's great expectations. The great outcomes, on the other hand, that the change in pedagogy, particularly in terms of writing, is expected to bring about may suffer from a time-lag, before domestic and social developments catch up with the speed of education reform in Bahrain. We argue that what causes these delays is related to the fact that students, parents, and teachers who are subject to the new education reforms cannot fully appreciate their objectives, as they

still internalize approaches to learning and teaching through nationally held beliefs about education. These beliefs, particularly for students, seem to be reinforced by the political and employment settlements that were created by the nation-state a long time ago but that are still held in high regard by the locals, despite the overall global progress that the country has made (Bahrain Education Board, 2008). For teachers, the socio-cultural context seems to be informing their pedagogical decisions. We conclude that the students' personal and educational context competes with general economic developments in the country, resulting in discordant readings of the importance of the new reforms. We also believe that the juxtaposition of global economic developments with traditional career opportunities and practices towards achieving education competence is relevant to many MENA countries. We therefore hope that much could be made of our research in future work.

Note

1. The teachers explained in the focus groups that students pay little attention to the projects they submit and when they copy from the Internet, they do not notice that the material is not in English

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Appendix: English Language Teachers— Focus Group Questions

1. Can you tell me how you teach English?
2. Can you tell me about what influences the way you teach English?
3. Do you face any problems with teaching English? How would you solve these problems?
4. How do you feel about the reforms concerning the English curriculum and the changes in methods of teaching? How do you implement the curricular requirements and the new methods of teaching?
5. You are a qualified English teacher. How does your training apply to your current teaching situation?
6. Would you like to elaborate on the problems your students face with learning English? What in your opinion should be done to solve the problems students face?
7. How about students' transition to university? What do you know about the requirements/ language demand at university?
8. What in your opinion should be done to respond to the linguistic requirements at university? Are they considered in the design of the curriculum?