



## TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM IN ARAB HIGH SCHOOLS IN ISRAEL PREPARE STUDENTS FOR ACADEMIC AND SPOKEN ENGLISH IN ISRAELI UNIVERSITIES?

**Sohad Shalata<sup>i</sup>**

Girne American University (GAU),  
Northern Cyprus

### **Abstract:**

The transition from secondary school to higher education presents significant linguistic and academic challenges for many Arab students in Israel who use English for both academic and communicative purposes. This study investigates the extent to which the English curriculum in Arab high schools in Israel prepares students for academic and spoken English in Israeli universities. The study seeks to explore students' perceptions of their preparedness for university-level English and to identify the limitations of secondary school English education in preparing students for higher education. This study, therefore, adopted a qualitative methodology employing semi-structured interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study involved 40 Arab university students enrolled in their first or second years at various Israeli universities from different academic disciplines and shared their experiences in learning English before and after entering higher education. The interview data were coded and analyzed thematically to recognize recurring patterns and themes. The findings showed that although secondary school English education provided students with a basic foundation in English, it did not adequately prepare them for the academic and communicative demands of higher education. Participants reported limited exposure to academic English, spoken communication, authentic language use, and higher-order thinking skills, highlighting a gap between school English instruction and university expectations. The study recommends strengthening academic and spoken English instruction, increasing opportunities for language practice, and making school English education further responsive to the demands of higher education through curriculum review and enhanced teacher quality and professional development.

**Keywords:** English curriculum, academic English, spoken english, higher education, arab students in Israel, language preparedness, academic readiness, transition to higher education

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [shalata-s12@yahoo.com](mailto:shalata-s12@yahoo.com)

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## 1. Introduction

English has become the dominant language of international communication, scientific research, technology, and higher education worldwide. In many academic contexts, proficiency in English is no longer viewed as an additional skill but rather as a fundamental requirement for academic achievement and professional advancement. Universities increasingly rely on English-language textbooks, research articles, digital resources, and international collaborations, thereby keeping English proficiency essential for students' successful participation in higher education (Li, 2025).

Similarly, Feniger and Ayalon (2016) describe English as a "gatekeeper" that regulates both access to and progression within Israeli universities. In addition, Spector-Cohen *et al.* (2019) emphasize that students entering higher education are expected to possess sufficient academic and communicative English skills to meet the linguistic demands of university study. Recent studies have identified difficulties in acquiring English, which affect academic reading, writing, spoken communication, classroom participation, and engagement with English-language academic materials (Halabi, 2023; Cohen-Azaria & Zamir, 2021; Abu-Rabiah, 2025). These findings suggest that a substantial proportion of students enter higher education insufficiently prepared for the academic and communicative demands of university-level English.

Aronin and Yelenevskaya (2022) argue that this multilingual reality creates additional challenges for Arab students in achieving high levels of English proficiency since English proficiency functions not only as an academic requirement but also as a determinant of educational opportunities, academic achievement, and future career prospects. Therefore, evaluating the effectiveness of the English curriculum in preparing students for higher education constitutes a critical educational concern (Haim & Levi, 2023). While previous research has addressed English language learning, language anxiety, academic readiness, and the experiences of Arab students in higher education (e.g., Amara, 2018; Yitzhaki *et al.*, 2022), there has been limited investigation into how effectively the English curriculum in Arab high schools prepares students for both academic and spoken English at Israeli universities.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which the English curriculum in Arab high schools in Israel prepares students for academic and spoken English in Israeli universities. The study seeks to explore Arab university students' perceptions of their linguistic preparedness, identify the strengths and limitations of their secondary school English education, and examine the challenges they encountered during the transition to higher education.

To achieve these objectives, the study adopted a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 40 Arab university students enrolled in their first and second years of study at several Israeli universities. Through thematic analysis of participants' experiences, the study generated six interrelated themes that explain students' preparedness for academic and spoken English, as well as the challenges they

encountered during the transition to higher education. The findings thus, contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between secondary school English education and Arab students' readiness for higher education in Israel. They also provide practical insights for improving secondary school English instruction to better align with the linguistic and academic demands of higher education.

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature highlights several factors that influence English language learning and students' preparedness for higher education. Haim and Levi (2023) argue that, despite recent improvements in the English curriculum, students continue to face significant difficulties in speaking, writing, and reading, while teachers often struggle to implement new instructional strategies due to a lack of knowledge and training, which affects the teaching methods and skills that are used during the lessons. As a result, these challenges undermine students' preparedness for higher education and prevent them from acquiring the proficiency required for successful engagement with academic English. (Zeid & Cretu, 2020).

Moreover, English language learning in Arab schools is influenced by multilingual realities, unequal educational resources, and limited opportunities to develop English proficiency. Consequently, students may experience gaps in academic English skills and insufficient preparation for the linguistic and academic demands of higher education (Aronin & Yelenevskaya, 2022; Or & Shohamy, 2016).

### **2.1 Language Policy, Educational Inequality, and English Learning in Arab Schools**

The role of English as a key language for communication studies in Israeli universities has been extensively examined in the literature. Ayalon and Mcdossi (2016), for instance, indicate that first-generation college students in Israel, especially Arab students, frequently enter higher education with limited academic and communication skills, which impedes their ability to meet university requirements and preparedness. Furthermore, Amara (2017, 2018, 2022) illustrates that deficiencies in Arabic language education policies affect the acquisition of other languages rather than promoting academic and spoken proficiency in English. In addition, many teachers focus primarily on teaching the content and skills required for the examination, which may limit opportunities for students to develop their language competencies and be exposed to new higher-order thinking skills. Thus, the linguistic gap in Arabic-language institutions is strongly influenced by nationalist politics, creating challenges for acquiring academic English and negatively affecting Arab students' performance in higher education. These tensions are reinforced by national English education policies. However, Or and Shohamy (2016) show that while policy documents portray English as a powerful academic and professional resource, its implementation varies across Arab sectors, whereas Arab schools receive fewer resources and less pedagogical innovation. Aronin and Yelenevskaya (2022) similarly reveal that in minority settings in Israel, there are no

structural practices, skills, or methods. Moreover, the teacher demonstrates insufficient pedagogical competence, particularly in Arab sectors. Based on that, the student's performance results in inconsistent language-learning experiences.

Given the lack of educational strategies in Arab schools, Zeid and Cretu (2020) state that Arab teachers are concerned about implementing recent curricular reforms because of insufficient training, limited resources, and students' weak linguistic foundations. These findings suggest that the curriculum's aspirations are not fully realized in practice, resulting in limited progress in students' academic English development.

## **2.2 First Language Foundations and Their Impact on English Acquisition**

Abu-Rabia (2021), shows that insufficient preparation in students' first language may hinder the acquisition and development of additional languages. He claims that students who experience difficulty constructing meaning in their first language often struggle even more when introduced to English academic texts. Similarly, Khalaily (2022) claims that weaknesses in Arabic reading and listening comprehension affect performance in English, and since the English curriculum presumes foundational literacy, many students have not fully developed.

## **2.3 Educational Structures, Schooling Conditions, and University Readiness**

Arar (2018) claims that Arab schools frequently operate under limited and constrained leadership conditions; therefore, the schools have limited opportunities for pedagogical enrichment, which impedes their capacity to implement academic programs. These limitations may also impede students' subsequent engagement in academic settings due to restricted English proficiency. Jaraisy and Agbaria (2025) further claim that Arab schooling tends to provide limited opportunities for critical literacy and deep academic engagement; therefore, students' readiness for university-level study will not be sufficient or in line with expectations. Agbaria (2022), on the other hand, illustrates that ethnic and gender-based inequalities affect educational choices and access to sufficient academic preparation and English readiness.

Halabi (2023) thus documents linguistic insecurity among Palestinian students in Hebrew-medium universities, including difficulties engaging with English-medium academic discourse. He claims that schools play a central role in preparing students to meet these demands. Likewise, Cohen-Azaria and Zamir (2021) show that Arab students often rely on compensatory strategies, such as translations or peer support, because their schooling did not equip them with the academic English needed for success.

Moreover, Abu-Rabiah (2025) demonstrates that students with low self-efficacy and limited proficiency in multiple languages struggle with academic cognitive language in higher education, which may be related to insufficient teaching methods and skills used in secondary school. Feniger and Ayalon (2016) addressed the role of English in higher education, describing it as a "gatekeeper" that restricts access and engagement within Israeli universities. Their findings show that Arab students disproportionately fail

to meet English proficiency requirements, highlighting systemic inequities in language education. Consequently, incomplete linguistic preparation pushes some students to pursue higher education abroad, revealing how gaps in English readiness shape long-term educational trajectories (Arae & Haj-Yehia, 2016; Arar & El-Hija, 2018).

Aizenkot and Ben David (2023) show that university success increasingly depends on critical thinking, independent learning, and effective academic communication skills, which are also required for advanced English literacy. However, these competencies are not systematically applied through the English curriculum in Arab schools, creating a gap between secondary school and higher education. Similarly, Spector-Cohen *et al.* (2019) argue that EAP reforms in Israel have struggled to align high school preparation with university expectations, leaving minority students particularly disadvantaged, such as the Arab sector, which is considered a minority sector, and then academic Arab students will not be fully prepared for higher education.

#### **2.4 Teacher Competence, Teaching Practices, and Students' Academic Preparedness**

Despite the factors discussed above, teacher competence remains a critical influence on students' readiness for the academic world. Agbaria and Muff (2023) reveal that Arab teachers often work within politically charged environments, so this constraint may negatively affect teachers' ability to provide high-quality instruction and implement the curriculum as intended, and then it indirectly impacts the quality of lessons. Yitzhaki *et al.* (2022), on the other hand, argue that translanguaging in "Shared Education" programs and the use of English within shared educational environments in schools help prepare Arab students for English in Israeli higher education, as oral communicative competence is considered highly important for academic interaction and participation.

Dallasheh and Zubeidat (2023) also discuss the educational challenges faced by Arab learners in Israel's higher education. Their study therefore presents obstacles such as linguistic, social, and cultural challenges that influence students' academic experiences. They argue that cognitive language plays a crucial role in academic integration, which is needed to meet academic requirements and communicate, particularly for Arab students who study in multilingual environments. Moreover, Jaraisy and Agbaria (2025) argue that the strategies that are applied within the school tend to offer limited opportunities to develop strategies grounded in critical literacy, analysis, and meaningful academic engagement. As a result, students' intellectual confidence and preparedness for university-level study are affected, ultimately affecting their readiness for the academic world and widening existing educational inequalities.

#### **2.5 Theoretical Framework**

The present study is informed by three theoretical perspectives that provide a foundation for understanding English language learning, curriculum implementation, and students' preparedness for higher education. Tyler's Objectives Model (1949) highlights the importance of defining clear linguistic and academic outcomes for students in language education. In this model, Tyler suggested that curriculum development should begin

with clearly defined educational objectives; the selection of content, teaching methods, and assessment strategies should be guided by specific objectives. Constructive Alignment Theory was further introduced by John Biggs in 1996. This theory emphasizes alignment among learning objectives, teaching activities, and assessment methods, building knowledge through meaningful learning activities that encourage creativity, leading to improved students' motivation to actively participate in classroom interactions.

In addition, the Interaction Hypothesis, introduced by Michael Long (1980), emphasizes the central role of interaction in second language acquisition. According to this hypothesis, language learning is enhanced when learners participate in meaningful activities and understand the forms of communication needed. Through such interaction, learners receive feedback and modify their language, thus improving their performance.

### 3. Material and Methods

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a qualitative research methodology to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences and how this shapes their academic understanding and education (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019; Smith *et al.*, 2021). The approach is rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, emphasizing the in-depth analysis of personal experiences and their interpretation within specific contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Therefore, IPA was considered particularly appropriate for this study because it enabled an extensive exploration of Arab university students' experiences of learning English in secondary school and their subsequent use of English in higher education.

Qualitative research fits within interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, which focus on subjective meanings and recognize multiple realities. According to Tisdell *et al.* (2025), reality is socially constructed through individuals' experiences and interpretations of the world around them. Thus, the methodology enabled participants to reflect on their scholastic experiences and performance, and to describe how these experiences influenced their preparedness for academic and spoken English at university. Thus, in this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection, providing in-depth perspectives and allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions and seek clarification when necessary (Kallio *et al.*, 2016).

The interview protocol was informed by the literature on English language education, academic English proficiency, spoken English, university preparedness, and the educational experiences of Arab students in Israel. The questions explored participants' experiences of learning English in secondary school, their preparedness for academic and spoken English in higher education, the challenges they encountered during the transition to university, their perceptions of the strengths and limitations of the English curriculum, and their recommendations for improvement. All interviews were conducted in Arabic to encourage authentic and detailed responses.

Therefore, the study population consisted of 40 Arab university students enrolled in their first or second year at Israeli universities. The selection of this population was directly related to the study's purpose, which aimed to explore students' perceptions of how well secondary school English education prepared them for the academic and spoken English demands of higher education. First- and second-year students were considered particularly suitable for the study because they had recently transitioned from secondary school to university and were therefore able to reflect on the challenges, strengths, and limitations of their prior English learning experiences. The study focused on students from various academic disciplines to gain a broad understanding of preparedness for academic and spoken English across fields of study (Smith *et al.*, 2021). A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation who could provide rich, meaningful insights into their instructional experiences (Tisdell *et al.*, 2025). Participant selection was based on academic year, field of study, participants' experience in secondary school, and willingness to participate. Diversity in gender and academic disciplines was also evaluated to ensure a range of perspectives on preparedness for academic and spoken English in higher education. Ethical approval was obtained for the study, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation. All ethical procedures concerning confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity were strictly followed.

#### 4. Results

The following study offers a deeper understanding of Arab students' perceptions of secondary school English-language competence in Israel and of the linguistic and academic demands of higher education. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with Arab university students from various academic disciplines, who shared their experiences in learning English in secondary school and transitioning to university. Participants indicated that secondary school English education was built on a basic linguistic foundation that was inadequate for preparing them for academic English and the communicative requirements of higher education.

Analysis of the interview data identified six major themes: the need to strengthen academic literacy, spoken English competence, teaching practices and teacher quality, self-directed learning, authentic language use, and alignment between secondary school English education and university expectations. Thus, any efforts to improve English language education should also promote academic English proficiency to reduce the challenges that Arab students face in higher education.

##### 4.1 Theme 1: The Gap Between School English Education and University Expectations

The participants' responses indicate a gap between their preparedness upon entering university and the linguistic and academic demands of higher education, where the

English curriculum, teaching practices, and assessment methods encountered in secondary school did not adequately prepare them for university-level expectations.

#### **4.1.1 Curriculum–University Misalignment**

Many participants described secondary school English instruction as primarily focused on grammar, memorization, and examination preparation rather than the development of academic language skills. One participant stated: *"The teacher usually provided us with the analysis of the text, and our role was simply to memorize it and reproduce it in the exam."* Participants also pointed out a gap between school English and the linguistic demands of higher education. While secondary school instruction emphasized general English and examination requirements, university study required students to read academic texts, understand discipline-specific terminology, and engage in analytical reading and writing. Consequently, many participants perceived school English as emphasizing high grades rather than developing the academic English proficiency needed for successful university study.

#### **4.1.2 Assessment Misalignment**

Participants highlighted that secondary school examinations focused primarily on memorization and recall rather than meaningful language use. Many reported that achieving high grades did not necessarily reflect English proficiency or readiness for university-level study. As one participant explained: *"I achieved more than 90 in five-unit English, but when I entered university, I realized that my actual English level was much lower than I expected."* Although some participants acknowledged that school examinations contributed to vocabulary development and writing conventions, most believed that examination success reflected admission requirements rather than genuine academic preparedness for higher education.

### **4.2 Theme 2: Insufficient Preparation for Academic English**

The second major theme emerging from the participants' responses concerned preparation for the academic English demands of higher education in certain skills. Therefore, many students reported possessing basic reading and writing skills upon entering university; they frequently described difficulties in comprehending academic texts, understanding specialized terminology, and producing academic writing at the level expected in university courses. Participants generally believed that secondary school English education provided a linguistic foundation but did not sufficiently prepare them for the academic literacy skills required in higher education.

#### **4.2.1 Academic Reading Challenges**

Many students explained that the level of academic reading at university differs from that in secondary school, particularly evident when dealing with complex academic language, lengthy texts, and discipline-specific terminology. In addition, several participants explained that they frequently paused while reading because they didn't

know the word's pronunciation or meaning. One participant explained: *"I could read the text, but I did not always understand what I was reading. I often used translation tools and online resources to understand academic terms."* Consequently, many students relied heavily on translation applications, online dictionaries, and artificial intelligence tools to facilitate comprehension and support their academic learning.

#### **4.2.2 Academic Writing Challenges**

Participants generally agreed that school writing instruction focused heavily on grammar rules and basic essay organization, such as paragraph structure, rather than on developing advanced academic writing skills, whereas university assignments required critical discussion, analytical thinking, evidence-based argumentation, and engagement with academic sources, and expect students to write at a high level. As one participant noted: *"At school we learned how to write essays, but most of the topics were related to daily life. At university, writing required critical thinking and academic discussion."* Although the participants reported that certain elements of secondary school writing instruction were beneficial, they emphasized that this preparation was predominantly structural rather than academic, and they encountered challenges with academic writing assignments.

### **4.3 Theme 3: Challenges in Spoken English Readiness**

The third major theme identified in participants' responses is the limited ability to communicate fluently and at an academic level in English. They had few opportunities to develop oral communication skills during secondary school. Participants claim that their speaking difficulties stem from classroom practice, insufficient exposure to authentic spoken English, and the dominance of traditional teaching methods.

#### **4.3.1 Lack of Speaking Practice**

Most of the participants said that speaking activities were either infrequent or largely absent in English classrooms. Many explained that in most English lessons, discussions were conducted in Arabic; in addition, several participants mentioned that English lessons rarely required students to speak English for extended periods, since the focus was on literature rather than speaking tasks. Also, when teachers asked questions in Arabic, they answered in Arabic or simple English. Because of this, many felt they finished secondary school without enough speaking fluency or confidence. One participant explained: *"I do not remember having regular opportunities to speak English in class. Most communication happened in Arabic, and we were rarely encouraged to express ourselves in English."* Further, one of the most important points that Participants highlighted is the absence of meaningful interaction with native English speakers and the limited exposure to authentic communicative situations.

#### **4.3.2 Communication Demands at University**

The participants shared their experiences of considerable difficulties and challenges when required to use English during classroom discussions, presentations, group

projects, and interactions with lecturers and international students. They also reported a contrast between speaking English in front of familiar classmates at school and communicating in large university settings with unfamiliar audiences. One participant explained: *"At school we spoke in front of classmates we already knew, but at university we had to speak in front of large groups of students, which made me feel nervous and hesitant."* This created additional challenges in participating in discussions, asking questions, and responding confidently during classroom interactions.

#### **4.4 Theme 4: Language Anxiety and Reduced Academic Confidence**

The fourth theme addressed the psychological effects on students resulting from the linguistic challenges they face, with particular emphasis on language anxiety and diminished confidence in academic English contexts. Participants shared their experiences, which were full of fear, nervousness, hesitation, and self-doubt.

##### **4.4.1 Speaking Anxiety**

When the participants shared their experiences of speaking English in English courses, they reported anxiety, nervousness, and fear. One participant explained: *"I felt nervous when speaking English at university because I was afraid of making mistakes in front of a large number of students."* Another participant stated: *"Sometimes I avoided asking questions because I was not sure whether I had understood the lecturer correctly."* Several participants also noted that the fast pace of university lectures increased their anxiety and reduced their willingness to participate. As a result, many students became reluctant to contribute to discussions, ask questions, or engage actively in classroom interactions.

##### **4.4.2 Low Academic Self-Confidence**

In addition to anxiety, many participants claim that they feel less confident when they use English in academic contexts. Students claim that they are linguistically unprepared for university study, particularly when communicating orally in class or engaging with complex academic materials. One participant explained: *"I felt that my English was not good enough compared to other students, so I often preferred to remain silent."* Some participants also reported uncertainty when reading academic materials, interacting with lecturers, or completing assignments in English. These experiences often required extra effort and preparation, increasing stress and frustration.

#### **4.5 Theme 5: The Need for Reform in English Language Education**

The fifth and final theme reflects the participants' suggestions for improving English language education and enhancing students' readiness for higher education. Through the interviews, participants proposed a range of changes related to curriculum design, teaching practices, assessment methods, and opportunities for authentic language use.

#### 4.5.1 Improving Teaching Practices

Participants highlighted the importance of employing qualified English teachers with strong language proficiency and the ability to implement engaging, innovative teaching methods. Many students also criticized the excessive dependence on traditional teaching approaches. They claim that most teachers focus on grammar instruction, memorization, and exam preparation, so they are dissatisfied with traditional teaching methods. One participant explained: *"Teachers should focus more on helping students use the language rather than simply preparing them for examinations."* Another participant suggested: *"English teachers should receive continuous training to ensure that they use modern teaching strategies and create opportunities for meaningful language practice."* Participants also highlighted the need to provide equal participation opportunities for all learners rather than focusing primarily on high-achieving students.

#### 4.5.2 Authentic and Academic Language Exposure

Another major recommendation was to increase students' exposure to authentic and academic English. Participants strongly advocated English-only classrooms, regular speaking activities, and opportunities to interact with native English speakers throughout secondary school. One participant commented: *"If students regularly communicate in English and interact with native speakers, they will be much more prepared for university."* Participants also recommended increasing exposure to academic texts, discipline-specific terminology, analytical reading tasks, and critical thinking activities.

### 4.6 Theme 6: Enhancing Students' Preparedness for Higher Education

Participants identified various strategies to improve English language proficiency. Their recommendations focus on the idea that they should concentrate and ask as many questions as they can in class. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of self-directed language learning and not relying on material learned in school, and advocated for stronger collaboration, such as listening to native speakers of English, so that they will notice that the language facilitates a smoother transition to higher education.

#### 4.6.1 Promoting Independent Language Learning

Participants frequently encouraged future students to engage with English beyond the classroom through films, television programs, social media, digital applications, games, podcasts, and online learning platforms that helped them develop vocabulary, listening skills, fluency, and confidence. One participant stated: *"Students should not rely only on school. Watching films, playing games in English, and using English every day can make a significant difference."* Several participants also recommended attending additional language courses and seeking opportunities for real-life communication with English speakers.

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#### 4.6.2 School–University Alignment

Participants suggested that secondary schools and universities should be connected by incorporating academic projects, discipline-specific vocabulary, and university-oriented learning activities, while others suggested inviting university lecturers to schools, organizing academic workshops, and exposing students to samples of university tasks and expectations. One participant explained: *“Students should become familiar with academic English and university requirements before they graduate from school.”* Participants believed that greater alignment between secondary school education and university expectations would improve students’ readiness and reduce the academic challenges experienced during the first years of higher education.

### 5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the English curriculum in Arab high schools in Israel provides students with an ineffective level of English language learning; however, it does not adequately prepare them for the academic and spoken English demands encountered in higher education, although most participants had completed the highest level of English and had high final grades in secondary school. Participants demonstrated the difficulties they face in higher education, such as reading, writing, and engagement with academic discourse. Conley (2018), for instance, argues that secondary education often fails to equip students with the advanced academic skills required in higher education, particularly in critical thinking, analytical writing, and academic communication. Spector-Cohen *et al.* (2019), on the other hand, claim that the Israeli education system is continually working to improve English language proficiency, especially in English education. However, significant gaps remain between school instruction and university expectations, particularly among minority students.

The findings further revealed that participants attributed much of this lack of preparedness to the nature of English instruction they experienced during secondary school. Students repeatedly described learning environments dominated by memorization, examination preparation, and teacher-centered instruction. According to participants, success in English classes often depended on memorizing vocabulary lists and model answers, and exams already tested the material rather than developing independent language-critical thinking skills. As a result, students became accustomed to reproducing information rather than analyzing, evaluating, or critically engaging with texts.

However, university study requires students to interpret information, construct arguments, evaluate evidence, and engage in higher-order thinking (Aizenkot & Ben David, 2023; He *et al.*, 2022). Further, Talbot (2024) claims that the English curriculum should provide students with powerful knowledge rather than focusing on personal responses to texts, ask students analytical questions, and give them new strategies that help them think deeply. He further suggests that the English curriculum should enable learners to acquire new structures and knowledge that support critical engagement with

language and literature. However, the participants reported that the teachers and the required materials provided fewer opportunities to develop the analytical, communication, and academic literacy expected in higher education.

Moreover, the Participants explained that they had difficulty when they had to analyze academic texts independently, construct arguments, or engage in critical discussion. Consequently, many experienced difficulties when confronted with university assignments requiring analysis, evaluation, synthesis, and academic reasoning (Nallaya *et al.*, 2022).

Many explained that the English they encountered at university differed substantially from the English they had studied at school. These findings are consistent with Hyland's (2019, 2023) argument that academic English involves far more than grammatical knowledge and vocabulary acquisition; academic texts contain specialized terminology and vocabulary, as well as complex linguistic structures, that pose significant challenges for students, requiring them to analyze the text and take considerable time and effort. The findings also revealed substantial challenges related to spoken English. Participants were unable to communicate confidently in English during university discussions, presentations, and classroom interactions. Students frequently attributed these difficulties to the limited opportunities they had to practice speaking English during secondary school, because Arabic was used extensively in English lessons and teachers often switched to Arabic whenever students encountered difficulties.

Another challenge is that students struggle with language proficiency, which significantly influences their academic confidence (Yitzhaki *et al.*, 2022). Participants said that they felt anxiety, embarrassment, and hesitation when they were required to speak English at university. Therefore, identifies limited vocabulary, lack of speaking practice, and low self-confidence as major barriers to oral communication, and demonstrated that anxiety negatively affects students' willingness to communicate (Zrekat & Al-Sohbani, 2022; Alaraj, 2024). As a result, participants reported using digital translation tools and online learning resources to understand academic texts, complete assignments, and overcome linguistic challenges; these kinds of tools compensated for gaps in academic preparedness.

Interestingly, some participants argued that their English proficiency was developed largely through Self-directed learning experiences by relying on private language courses, social media interactions, English movies, and listening to music to enhance their language skills. As Amengual-Pizarro's (2024) proposed, engagement with English beyond the classroom contributes significantly to language proficiency and academic achievement and supports the claim that curriculum reforms alone are insufficient when teachers lack adequate training, resources, or support (Haim & Levi, 2023; Zeid & Cretu, 2020; Haim & Tannenbaum, 2022).

To gain a deeper understanding of the findings, the results were examined through Tyler's Objectives Model (1949), Bigg's Constructive Alignment Theory (1996), and Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1980) in order to provide a useful framework and explanation for understanding how curriculum objectives, teaching practices, assessment

methods, and classroom interaction influence students' preparedness for academic and spoken English in higher education.

Tyler (1949) emphasizes that effective education requires identifying what students should learn and applying teaching methods to help students achieve these intended outcomes. Accordingly, the present study's analysis reveals a gap between the intended objectives of the English curriculum and what students actually learn. Although the curriculum aims to develop English proficiency and prepare students for academic success, students still feel that the emphasis is on achieving high grades rather than on developing the academic, communicative, and critical-thinking skills required for higher education.

Moreover, Biggs (1996) claims that students are more likely to achieve meaningful learning outcomes when classroom instruction and assessment reflect the intended educational goals. However, the findings indicate a possible misalignment among curriculum objectives, teaching practices, and assessment methods. The participants reported that classroom instruction and examinations emphasized memorization and the reproduction of information, whereas university study required critical thinking, analytical writing, independent learning, and academic communication.

Furthermore, Long's theory (1980) emphasizes that learners develop language proficiency when they actively engage in discussions, negotiate meaning, and participate in authentic communicative situations. However, the participants claimed that English lessons often relied on traditional teaching methods and that some teachers frequently speak in Arabic during lessons when they want to explain something or give instructions. Students also indicated that interactive activities, discussions, and speaking opportunities were limited. Ultimately, students entered university with a lack of confidence in their ability to communicate in English.

Overall, addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that aligns curriculum objectives, instructional practices, and assessment methods with the actual linguistic and academic demands students encounter in higher education.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored the extent to which the English curriculum in Arab high schools in Israel prepares students for the academic and spoken English demands of higher education. The findings indicate that although participants achieved high grades in English exams and understood the instructions and generally perceived themselves as prepared for university study, their experiences in higher education revealed substantial challenges in academic reading, academic writing, and engagement with academic discourse.

The study also revealed a significant gap between secondary school English education and university expectations. Participants described educational experiences in secondary school that were largely characterized by memorization, examination-oriented

learning, and limited opportunities for critical thinking, authentic communication, and academic language development.

Consequently, many students are enrolling in university without the competencies required to interpret complex texts, engage in analytical writing, participate confidently in discussions, or communicate effectively in academic settings. These findings support previous research highlighting the persistent disconnect between secondary education and higher education requirements. (Spector-Cohen *et al.*, 2019).

The findings further indicated that limited exposure to academic English, ineffective speaking practice, and the use of traditional teaching methods affect students' academic engagement and increase their challenges during the transition to higher education. In contrast, participants who engaged in self-directed learning through English-language media, online resources, language courses, and authentic communication opportunities reported greater confidence and stronger language proficiency. Therefore, the growing recognition of learner autonomy is an important component of language development (Amengual-Pizarro, 2024; Li, 2025).

The study also revealed that students' challenges extended beyond language proficiency, affecting their academic confidence and participation. Consequently, many students don't participate in classroom discussions and academic interactions. The results show that the current English curriculum only partially prepares Arab students for higher education and does not fully equip them with the academic English competencies necessary for university success, particularly in communicative competence and higher-order thinking skills. This research attempts to narrow the gap between secondary and higher education by identifying the challenges students face and highlighting strategies to address them. English should be regarded not only as a subject but also as a fundamental academic language that supports students' academic achievement, confidence, and success. Future research should further investigate the role of self-directed learning in enhancing students' English language proficiency and facilitating their readiness for higher education.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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