Language Transfer and Sociolinguistic Competence in ESL: Insights from Omani Higher Education

Abstract:
This study investigates the influence of sociolinguistic competence and language transfer on English as Second Language (ESL) learning in Omani higher education. Focusing on three institutions - Sultan Qaboos University (public-city), Muscat University (private-city), and Sur University College (rural-public) - the research explores how sociolinguistic factors impact language acquisition and the types of language transfer that occur among students. Through a comparative analysis of phonological**,** grammatical, and pragmatic language transfer, the study highlights both the similarities and differences in sociolinguistic competence across different institutional settings. The findings reveal that sociolinguistic norms, particularly Arabic language influences**,** contribute significantly to both positive and negative transfer. The study also identifies challenges in addressing sociolinguistic competence in ESL curricula, offering recommendations for integrating pragmatic training**,** pedagogical approaches, and teacher professional development. The research highlights the importance of fostering contextualized language learning and mitigating negative language transfer to improve English proficiency among Omani ESL learners.
Keywords: ESL, language transfer, Omani higher education, sociolinguistic norms & competence,

1 Introduction

The interplay between language and society is central to sociolinguistics, particularly in understanding how individuals use linguistic norms in diverse social contexts. As Wang et al., (2023: 7) observe that language in sociolinguistics has been predominantly placed in nuanced and complicated relationships with other semiotic resources. In the realm of English as a Second Language (ESL), sociolinguistic competence - the ability to use language appropriately in varied cultural and social settings, plays a pivotal role in determining communicative effectiveness. It consists of the knowledge of social contexts and the socio-stylistic value of the range of variants associated with these contexts. (Rehner & Lasan, 2023 : 1) This competence extends beyond grammatical correctness to encompass an understanding of context-specific conventions, such as politeness, formality, and culturally appropriate speech acts. For ESL learners, mastering these aspects is often as challenging as acquiring linguistic accuracy, especially when their native linguistic and cultural frameworks differ significantly from those of English.

One critical factor influencing the development of sociolinguistic competence in ESL is language transfer**,** the process through which learners' native language (L1) norms and structures influence their use of a second language (L2). Meng (2024: 1) states that language transfer can manifest positively, as when similarities between L1 and L2 facilitate learning, or negatively, when linguistic or cultural differences lead to errors and further says that learners draw on their existing linguistic competence when acquiring a new language Sociolinguistic implications of transfer are particularly pronounced in areas like pragmatics, discourse styles, and politeness strategies, where the norms of one language may not align with those of another. For instance, Arabic-speaking learners of English might transfer culturally rooted forms of address, politeness markers, or indirectness strategies into their

English usage, potentially causing miscommunication or misunderstanding in intercultural interactions. Sabbah, (2016: 270) observes differences between the two languages, namely Arabic an English which cause students to involuntarily and unconsciously make not only mistakes but also errors.

Oman presents a compelling context for examining these dynamics, as English occupies a unique position within its education system and society. The introduction of English into Oman's educational systems presents a balancing act between adopting a global language and preserving the linguistic and cultural, Arabic identity. (Vaishnav, 2024: 265) The government recognizes that competence in English is important if Oman is to become an active participant in the new global economy. (Al-Jardani, 2017: 134) Therefore, as a non-native English-speaking country, Oman has adopted English as a crucial medium for global communication and economic development. In higher education, English serves as the primary language of instruction in most disciplines, requiring students to achieve a high level of proficiency. However, sociolinguistic competence often remains underdeveloped, as ESL instruction in Oman tends to emphasize structural and functional aspects of language over pragmatic and cultural dimensions. Additionally, the influence of Arabic as the students' first language shapes their English learning experience, creating fertile ground for language transfer to occur.

This study focuses on three distinct higher education institutions in Oman, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), a public institution located in the urban center of Muscat; Muscat University, a private, urban-based university also located in Muscat; and Sur University College**,** a public institution situated in a rural setting. These institutions provide diverse socio-educational environments that influence students' exposure to English and their development of sociolinguistic competence. Urban institutions like SQU and Muscat University often offer greater exposure to English through international faculty, multicultural student bodies, and access to global resources. In contrast, Sur University College represents a rural perspective, where students may have less exposure to English outside the classroom and may rely more heavily on Arabic-dominated social contexts.

By adopting a comparative approach, this study seeks to uncover the sociolinguistic challenges and patterns of language transfer among ESL learners in these three institutions. A comparative perspective is particularly used to highlight how factors such as institutional type, location, and cultural environment shape learners' sociolinguistic competence. It also allows for a broader understanding of the role of sociolinguistic transfer in the context of Omani higher education, identifying both commonalities and differences across institutions.

1.1 Sociolinguistic Competence and Its Role in ESL

The role of sociolinguistic competence in ESL is pivotal in fostering communicative effectiveness and cross-cultural understanding. It allows learners to navigate diverse social situations, such as professional meetings, casual conversations, or academic discussions, with confidence and fluency. As observed by Rehner & Lasan, (2023: 1) sociolinguistic competence consists of the knowledge of social contexts and the socio-stylistic value of the range of variants associated with these contexts and it is an integral component of communicative competence in second language acquisition (SLA). Moreover, it reduces the risk of miscommunication caused by cultural differences, such as using direct language in situations requiring politeness or misunderstanding idiomatic expressions. Teachers can

enhance sociolinguistic competence through contextualized learning activities, exposure to authentic materials, and explicit instruction on cultural norms. By integrating this competence into ESL education, learners are better equipped to participate in globalized communication networks where language is not just a tool for expression but a medium of social connection and cultural exchange. Mede et al., (2015: 3) state that even the most perfect grammatical utterances can convey a meaning entirely different from what the speaker intended because there are several factors that are to be considered when communicating in L2 such as age, gender, status of the participants and the formality of the setting. Hence, for ESL learners, developing this competence is crucial as it bridges the gap between linguistic knowledge and practical language use, ensuring that their interactions are culturally appropriate and contextually relevant.

1.2 Literature Review

The interplay between sociolinguistic competence and language transfer has garnered significant attention in the context of English as Second Language (ESL) learning. This literature review explores key studies relevant to these themes, with a particular focus on Omani higher education. Sociolinguistic competence, defined as the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts, is crucial for effective ESL learning. Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of communicative competence, emphasizing sociolinguistic knowledge as a core component of language proficiency. Later research, such as Canale & Swain (1980), further elaborated on this framework, highlighting the role of sociolinguistic competence in achieving pragmatic and discourse-level accuracy. In the context of the Arab world, Bani-Khaled (2014) explored sociolinguistic challenges faced by Arab ESL learners, identifying cultural norms and linguistic conventions as key influences on language use. Specific to Oman, Al Mahrooqi & Denman (2015) examined sociolinguistic norms in Omani classrooms, noting the prevalence of Arabic interference in English communication and the limited emphasis on pragmatic competence in curricula.

Language transfer refers to the influence of a learner's first language (L1) on their second language (L2) acquisition. Odlin (1989) provided a foundational overview of transfer phenomena, distinguishing between positive transfer, which facilitates learning, and negative transfer, which hinders it. More recent studies, such as those by Ellis & Shintani, (2013), have delved into specific types of transfer, including phonological, grammatical, and pragmatic aspects. Research in the Omani context has revealed significant instances of language transfer due to the linguistic proximity of Arabic and English. For example, Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi (2012) documented common phonological errors, such as the substitution of /p/ with /b/, as a result of L1 influence. Similarly, Gilbang et al., (2024) investigated grammatical transfer, noting issues with verb tense usage and word order among Omani ESL learners.

Studies combining the themes of sociolinguistic competence and language transfer highlight the interplay between linguistic and cultural factors in ESL learning. Gass & Selinker (2008) emphasized the need to address sociolinguistic norms to mitigate negative transfer and foster positive transfer. Specific to Oman, Al-Ani, (2013) examined the integration of sociolinguistic training in ESL curricula, recommending targeted interventions to enhance pragmatic competence. With the rise of technology in education, digital tools have become instrumental in addressing sociolinguistic and transfer challenges. Pegrum et al. (2013)

highlighted the potential of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in fostering sociolinguistic competence. Additionally, Al-Adwan et al. (2021) explored e-learning frameworks in the Middle East, underscoring the importance of contextualized digital literacy for ESL learners.

2 Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to explore the intricate relationship between sociolinguistic competence and language transfer among ESL learners in Oman's higher education institutions. It investigates how sociolinguistic factors, rooted in students' native Arabic language and cultural frameworks, shape their acquisition and use of English. The research also seeks to uncover patterns of similarity and difference in sociolinguistic competence across three distinct institutions.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the influence of sociolinguistic factors on language transfer among Omani ESL learners.
2. To compare sociolinguistic competence among students from diverse institutional settings.
3. To identify sociolinguistic challenges specific to urban and rural contexts in Oman.

Research Questions

1. How do sociolinguistic factors influence language transfer among Omani ESL learners?
2. What are the similarities and differences in sociolinguistic competence among students from Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat University, and Sur University College?
3. What role do institutional and environmental factors play in shaping the sociolinguistic competence of ESL learners in Oman?

2.1 Research Methodology

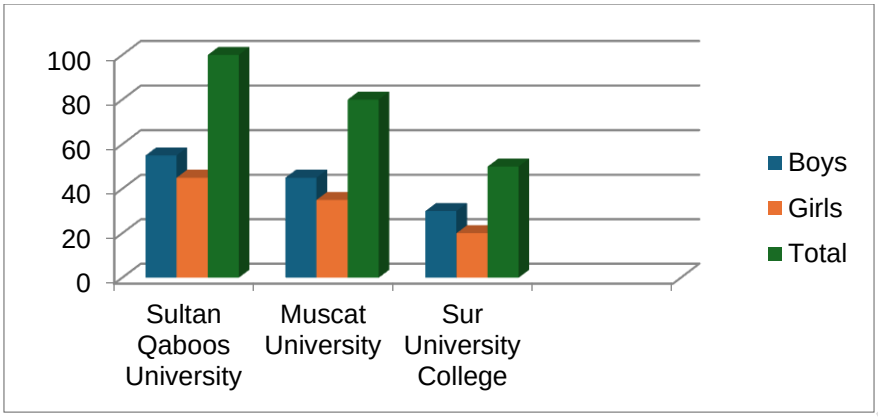
This study adopted a comparative, analytical design to examine the role of sociolinguistic competence and language transfer in ESL learning among Omani students. By focusing on three distinct higher education institutions - Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Muscat University, and Sur University College - the study tried to compare how sociolinguistic competence and language transfer vary across urban, rural, public, and private settings. By including students from these three institutions, the study aims to capture the variation in language transfer and sociolinguistic competence across different sociocultural contexts within Oman

2.1.1 Population and Sampling

Table 1: Institutional Breakdown of Participants:

Name of the Institution	Boys	Girls	Total
Sultan Qaboos University	55	45	100
Muscat University	45	35	80
Sur University College	30	20	50

Figure 1: Institutional Breakdown of Participants



2.1.2 Criteria for Selecting Participants:

The criteria for selecting participants were designed to ensure a representative sample from each institution, considering factors such as proficiency level, age, and background to provide a comprehensive picture of language transfer and sociolinguistic competence across different contexts.

Figure 2: Selection Criteria for Participants

Proficienc Level	Age	Background	Inclusion Criteria
• Intermediate to advance • Basic understanding of English	• 18 to 25 years • Age of maturity	• Various linguistic, cultural and socio-economic background • Exposure to English	•Undergraduate program sudent •Native Arabic speaker •Learning English for the last 5 years

2.2 Data Collection Methods:

To gain a comprehensive understanding of language transfer and sociolinguistic competence, the following data collection methods was employed:

2.2.1 Surveys/Questionnaires: A structured questionnaire was administered to all participants to assess their language proficiency, exposure to English outside the classroom and self-reported experiences with language transfer (positive and negative). The questionnaire also included questions on their understanding of sociolinguistic competence, such as knowledge of cultural norms and pragmatic use of English.

2.2.2 Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants from each institution to gather in-depth insights into how sociolinguistic factors affect their language learning. These interviews explored their perceptions of sociolinguistic competence, challenges in using English in academic and social settings, and experiences with language transfer.

2.2.3 Language Use Analysis:

A language use analysis was conducted by observing and analyzing participants' written and spoken English in various contexts (e.g., classroom discussions, essays,

and informal conversations). This helped to identify patterns of language transfer and sociolinguistic competence in real-life language use.

These questions aimed to gather both quantitative and qualitative insights into language transfer, sociolinguistic competence, and the influence of background factors such as gender, age, and socio-cultural context. The analysis of language use section helped to identify patterns in the students' language production and behavior.

2.3 Findings and Analysis

2.3.1 Comparative Analysis of Data from Institutions

2.3.1.1 Proficiency in English (Scale 1–5): Across the three institutions, significant variations emerged in students' self-assessed English proficiency:

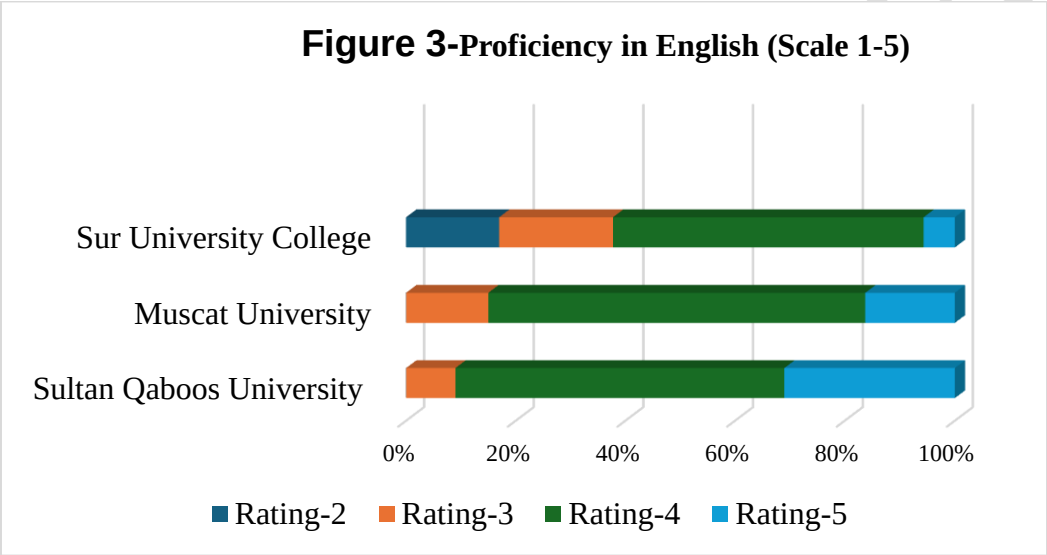


Figure 3-Proficiency in English (Scale 1-5)

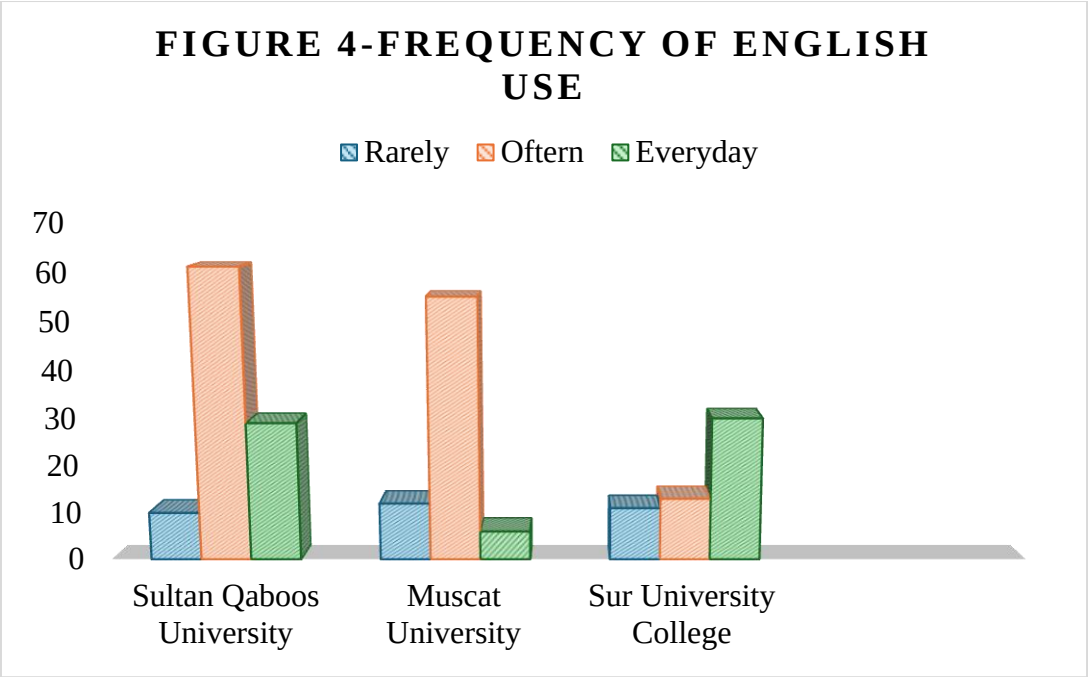
Sultan Qaboos University (SQU): Most students rated themselves at the higher end, with 60 students (35 boys, 25 girls) selecting 4 and 31 students (15 boys, 16 girls) selecting a 5. However, a smaller group, 9 students (5 boys, 4 girls), rated themselves as a 3, indicating a modest level of proficiency. Muscat University: Responses indicated similar trends, with 55 students (30 boys, 25 girls) rating themselves 4 and 13 students (8 boys, 5 girls) rating themselves a 5. A relatively small group, 12 students (7 boys, 5 girls), rated their proficiency at 3. Sur University College: Here, a more even distribution was noted. While 30 students (18 boys, 12 girls) rated themselves a 4, a noticeable portion, 11 students (6 boys, 5 girls), rated a 3, and 9 students (6 boys, 3 girls) rated themselves a 2, reflecting more challenges in proficiency.

2.3.2.2 Frequency of English Use:

This data highlights a gap in proficiency levels between urban (SQU, Muscat University) and rural (Sur University College) institutions, reflecting disparities in exposure to English.

Sultan Qaboos University: A substantial proportion of students reported using English often (61 students, 37 boys, 24 girls) or every day (29 students, 13 boys, 16 girls), with only 10 students (5 boys, 5 girls) indicating rare usage. Muscat University: A similar trend was observed, with 55 students (31 boys, 24 girls) using English often, and a smaller number (6 students, 1 boy, 5 girls) reporting everyday use. Sur University College: Usage was more

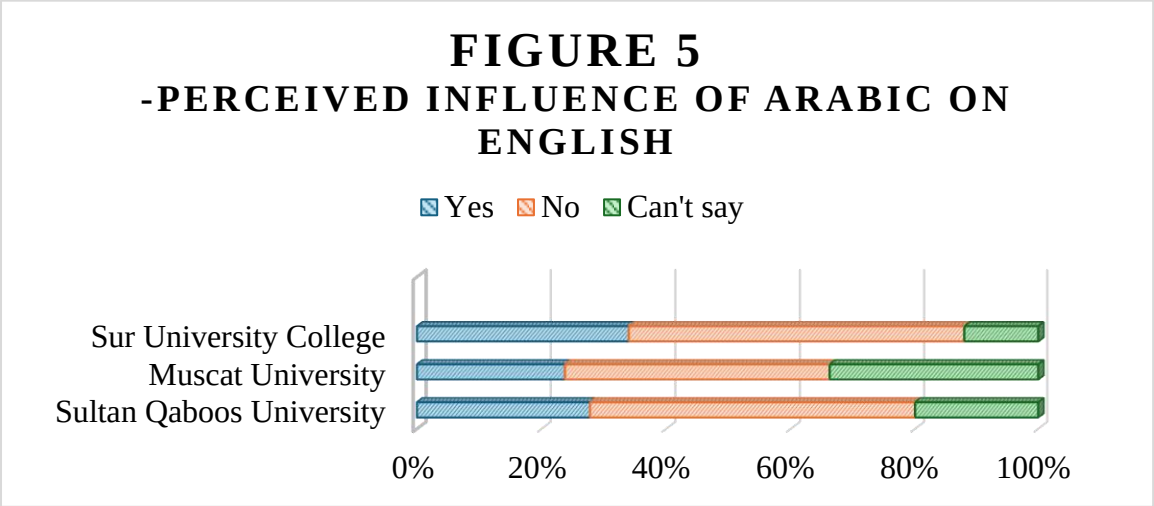
variable, with 30 students (16 boys, 14 girls) using English often, but 13 students (6 boys, 7 girls) reporting rare use



These findings suggest that urban institutions foster more consistent English usage, likely due to greater exposure and curricular emphasis.

2.3.2.3 Perceived Influence of Arabic on English:

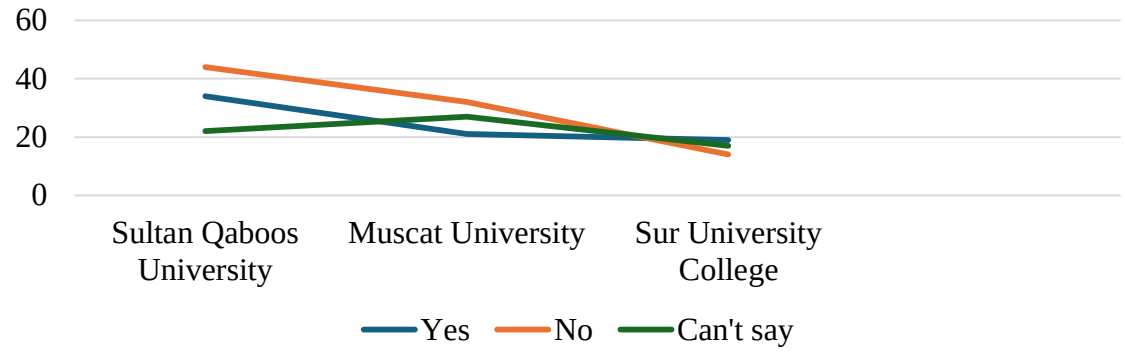
Across institutions, most students acknowledged the influence of Arabic on their English use which demonstrates a pervasive awareness of language transfer among students, with some variations across institutional settings.



2.3.2.4 Impact of Social Background (Urban/Rural):

Most students in all institutions agreed that their social background affects their English skills and the students coming from rural background faced these issues prominently. This indicates that social context plays a key role in shaping linguistic competence and learning experiences.

Figure 6-
Impact of Social Background (Urban/Rural):



2.3 Semi- Structured Interviews Analysis:

The semi-structured interviews provided rich insights into how academic and social contexts, Arabic language norms, and institutional settings influence English use among Omani students. Participants from SQU and Muscat University exhibited greater confidence in using English in academic settings, often attributing this to exposure to structured English learning and resources. As one SQU student stated, "I feel confident writing essays or giving presentations in English, but when I'm with friends, we always speak in Arabic. English feels too formal for casual conversations." In contrast, students from Sur University College reported limited use of English outside the classroom, citing challenges in accessing environments that encourage real-world practice. A student from Sur noted, "Outside class, I don't really use English. It's easier and more natural to just speak in Arabic with my friends and family."

A recurring theme across institutions was the impact of negative transfer from Arabic, particularly in writing and speech. Students often described directly translating Arabic idioms into English or inadvertently using Arabic sentence structures. As stated by Sabbah, (2016, : 270) It is because the students do not know what is correct. They occur because in a particular instance, the student is unable to perform what he or she knows. For example, one SQU student remarked, "I often translate Arabic idioms directly into English. For instance, instead of saying 'I'm very tired,' I might say 'I'm broken,' which confuses people." Similarly, a Sur University student admitted, "When I write essays in English, I sometimes use Arabic sentence structures without realizing it. My teacher always points this out." Pragmatic transfer also emerged as a challenge, with cultural norms influencing communication styles. A Muscat University student shared: "In English, I use long greetings like we do in Arabic. I would say, 'Good morning, how are you, how is your family?' But my professor told me it sounds strange and too formal." Female students, in particular, reported using more polite forms of English, reflecting sociolinguistic norms around gender and respect.

Institutional settings significantly shaped students' exposure to English and their adaptability in using it. Urban institutions like SQU and Muscat University offered opportunities for real-world practice, such as debates and workshops with international speakers, which students described as pivotal for their language development. A Muscat University student noted, "Our University organizes debates and workshops with international speakers. These events

really help us practice English in real situations." In contrast, rural students at Sur University College struggled with informal English styles, citing textbook-heavy learning and limited exposure to diverse accents and cultural references. One student observed, "When I hear people with different accents, like Indian or British, I struggle to understand them because I'm used to American English from movies." Abdulloh, (2021: 30) feels that students applied such code-switching in several situations, such as explaining due to vocabulary limitation; improving clarity while communicating with learners or partners or people who speak L1 with limited vocabulary to improve understanding; Despite these challenges, students across institutions displayed adaptability, modifying their English based on their audience. As an SQU student explained, "When I talk to my professor, I try to use formal words like 'moreover' and 'thus.' But with my friends, I just say 'and' or 'so.'"

2.4 Analysis of Language Use

The analysis revealed significant patterns of code-switching between Arabic and English in both spoken and written contexts among students. Eldin (2014, : 80) states, "Code-switching can be used by speakers to express certain feelings and attitudes. Speakers may switch codes to express happiness, excitement, anger, sadness, and many other feelings". In academic settings, students often reverted to Arabic when encountering technical terms or culturally specific concepts that lacked direct English equivalents. For instance, students at Sur University College frequently used Arabic fillers or explanations during discussions, as one participant noted: *"When I don't know the English word, I explain in Arabic so others can understand."* This was less common at SQU and Muscat University, where students demonstrated more selective code-switching. They primarily used Arabic for emphasis or peer interactions during informal breaks, such as saying *"Wallah, this assignment is so difficult"* to convey emotional intensity. In written assignments, Arabic syntax and grammar transfer were evident across all institutions. Typical errors included placing adjectives after nouns (e.g., "The car red") and translating Arabic idiomatic expressions directly into English, leading to phrases like *"The house big"* or *"Peace be upon you"* in formal essays.

Students' errors in language use spanned semantic, syntactic, and lexical dimensions. Semantic errors frequently stemmed from the direct translation of culturally specific Arabic idioms, as one Sur University student remarked: *"I wrote 'My head is full' instead of 'I'm overwhelmed,' and my teacher didn't understand."* Lexical issues, such as overgeneralizing vocabulary meanings, were also common; for example, students used "bring" instead of "fetch" or "take" in multiple contexts. Syntactic errors, including article omissions (e.g., "I went to market") and tense inconsistencies (e.g., "Yesterday I go to the library"), were observed across institutions but were particularly pronounced at Sur University College due to limited exposure to English. In group activities and peer discussions, sociolinguistic competence significantly influenced communication. Muscat University students excelled in adapting their language for different audiences, effectively using informal English expressions, such as *"Let's brainstorm ideas"* during collaborative tasks. Conversely, students at SQU and Sur University College often adhered to formal or culturally influenced styles, such as addressing peers with *"Dear colleagues"* in casual settings, which occasionally hindered their participation in mixed-nationality groups.

These findings highlight the practical challenges students face in using English effectively across contexts, including overcoming negative language transfer and improving adaptability

in social and academic communication. Addressing these issues requires targeted pedagogical interventions, such as integrating cultural and pragmatic training, promoting real-world language use, and enhancing exposure to diverse linguistic contexts. For instance, workshops that focus on common idiomatic expressions and informal conversational styles could help students navigate mixed-linguistic environments with greater confidence.

3 Discussion

The findings from the analysis of language use among Omani students in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts provide valuable insights into the complex relationship between language transfer, sociolinguistic competence, and institutional influence. The data highlight key patterns in the way students navigate English communication, with notable variations across different institutions, and show how their Arabic linguistic background and sociocultural factors influence their English use, both academically and socially.

3.1 Code-Switching and Language Transfer

One of the most prominent findings is the frequent occurrence of code-switching between Arabic and English, particularly in informal settings. Students at Sur University College, who had limited exposure to English outside the classroom, frequently relied on Arabic to express complex or culturally specific ideas. For example, during discussions about traditional Omani customs, students often used Arabic terms like *'majlis'* (a gathering space) or *'wasta'* (social connections/influence), as they struggled to find precise English equivalents. In contrast, students at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and Muscat University, with greater access to English-speaking environments, exhibited more controlled code-switching. They primarily used English for academic and professional communication but occasionally switched to Arabic for emphasis or cultural references, such as using *'Yaani'* (meaning "you know") to add nuance during peer conversations. This pattern reflects a broader influence of sociolinguistic factors, with code-switching serving as both a communicative strategy and a reflection of students' linguistic comfort zones.

The phenomenon of negative language transfer was also evident in students' written and spoken English. Common errors included transferring Arabic sentence structures into English, such as placing adjectives after nouns (e.g., *"The car red"*) or directly translating idiomatic expressions like *"My head is full"* to convey being overwhelmed. As Alqarni, 2022, : 202) highlights, "Due to the close ties between the Arabic language, national identity, and Islamic identity, there is a complicated association that is used to assess people. In other words, national and Islamic identities are consolidated when more Arabic is employed." This linguistic interplay often shaped students' syntax and lexical choices, particularly when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary or concepts. For instance, students frequently omitted articles (e.g., *"I went to market"*) or substituted inappropriate terms, such as using *"big problem"* instead of *"major issue."* These patterns were particularly pronounced among students at Sur University College, where limited exposure to authentic English contexts reinforced reliance on Arabic linguistic norms.

3.2 Influence of Arabic Sociolinguistic Norms

The influence of Arabic sociolinguistic norms emerged as a central theme in the data, significantly shaping students' English communication styles. For instance, students from rural institutions like Sur University College frequently used formal and indirect language in both academic and social contexts, mirroring the politeness strategies and hierarchical

structures deeply embedded in Arabic culture. A common example was the use of extended greetings, such as *"Peace be upon you and God's mercy and blessings,"* even in casual conversations where a simple *"Hi"* or *"Hello"* would suffice in English. Similarly, students often used polite forms such as *"Could you kindly explain again, please?"* in peer interactions, where more direct phrasing would be expected. These behaviors align with pragmatic transfer, where Arabic norms of politeness and deference are applied in English, sometimes leading to perceptions of excessive formality or ambiguity, particularly in intercultural settings.

At (SQU) and Muscat University, students displayed a greater ability to adjust their English to suit various social contexts. For example, while they might employ formal phrases like *"I would appreciate it if you could clarify this point"* when addressing professors, they shifted to more relaxed expressions such as *"Can you explain this?"* with peers. However, challenges persisted in adopting the informality and directness often expected in English-speaking environments, especially when interacting with international peers. For instance, students might hesitate to use idiomatic expressions like *"Let's get to the point"* or *"That's not quite right"* for fear of appearing rude. These differences underscore the complex interplay between cultural communication styles and the expectations of English-speaking contexts, highlighting the need for greater emphasis on pragmatic competence in ESL curricula.

3.3 Sociolinguistic Competence and Institutional Influence

Institutional context significantly influenced students' sociolinguistic competence, shaping their ability to adapt English usage across various settings. At Muscat University and SQU, where students were regularly exposed to diverse linguistic and cultural environments, greater adaptability was evident. For instance, students at Muscat University demonstrated the ability to switch fluidly between formal academic English during classroom presentations (*"The research findings indicate a significant correlation…"*) and informal conversational English in casual interactions, using phrases like *"What's up?"* or *"Let's grab a bite."* This adaptability reflects their heightened awareness of social and cultural expectations in different communication contexts.

In contrast, students at Sur University College, who had fewer opportunities to engage in informal or professional English settings, exhibited limited capacity to navigate varied language registers. For example, in group discussions, they often relied on overly formal constructions like *"I think it would be appropriate if we proceed in this manner"* instead of simpler alternatives such as *"Let's do it this way."* This tendency to maintain formal tones, even in informal settings, often mirrored Arabic politeness strategies, suggesting that rural students' sociolinguistic competence is shaped by restricted exposure to real-world English usage.

Differences were also evident in language use during group activities and peer discussions. Students at Muscat University, accustomed to a globalized learning environment, were more comfortable employing informal English expressions, fostering ease and spontaneity in communication. For example, they might say, *"That's cool, let's try it out!"* during brainstorming sessions. Conversely, students at Sur University College tended to adhere to formal language, often expressing ideas with phrases like *"I believe this solution might work efficiently,"* reflecting the indirectness and deference characteristic of Arabic norms.

These patterns highlight the significant role of institutional settings in shaping sociolinguistic competence. Urban and private institutions like Muscat University and SQU provided dynamic opportunities for sociocultural integration and English practice, enabling students to develop pragmatic competence and fluidity in navigating different communication contexts. In contrast, rural settings with limited exposure to diverse linguistic environments posed challenges for fostering this adaptability, underscoring the need for targeted interventions in ESL curricula to bridge the gap.

3.4 Types of Errors and Challenges

The analysis of errors (semantic, syntactic, and lexical) showed that negative language transfer from Arabic to English was a significant challenge for many students, particularly in the areas of grammar and idiomatic expression. Syntactic errors, such as subject-verb agreement issues, the omission of articles, and incorrect word order, were common, especially among students with less exposure to native English speakers. Lexical errors, such as the use of Arabic words in English contexts, were particularly prominent at Sur University College. Examples include commonly used Arabic phrases like *"Alhamdulillah"* (Praise be to God) in expressions of gratitude or relief, *"InshAllah"* (If God wills) to indicate future intent, and *"MashAllah"* (What God has willed) when expressing admiration. Similarly, phrases like *"Yalla"* (Let's go) or *"Astaghfirullah"* (I seek forgiveness from God) were used in informal conversations or to express disapproval. While these expressions carry cultural and religious significance, they can confuse listeners unfamiliar with Arabic, particularly in international academic settings.

Students also exhibited lexical errors such as overgeneralizing vocabulary meanings and incorporating direct translations of idiomatic expressions, which often resulted in semantic inaccuracies. For example, the direct translation of Arabic sentence structures led to phrases like *"The house big"* or culturally specific expressions like *"Peace be upon you,"* which, while appropriate in Arabic, might seem overly formal in English contexts. Pragmatic challenges included the use of overly polite or indirect language, influenced by Arabic sociolinguistic norms, which could sometimes hinder effective communication, particularly in informal or intercultural settings.

The findings underscore the complex interaction between linguistic competence and sociolinguistic factors in shaping Omani students' use of English. While urban and private institutions provide students with better opportunities for adapting their English usage to various social contexts, rural students face challenges due to limited English exposure and sociocultural constraints. The influence of Arabic sociolinguistic norms is pervasive, contributing to both pragmatic transfer and language errors. To address these challenges, ESL programs in Oman must not only focus on linguistic accuracy but also integrate pragmatic training and sociocultural awareness, ensuring that students develop the full spectrum of language skills necessary for effective communication in diverse contexts.

3.5 Practical Implications:

1. **Improvement of Teaching Practices:** The findings suggest that ESL teachers should not only focus on grammar and vocabulary but also prioritize pragmatic language use, encouraging students to consider the social context of language. Implementing tasks that require adaptation to different audiences will enhance students' ability to use language appropriately in various settings.

2. **Curricular Development:** Curriculum designers should focus on building students' sociolinguistic competence by incorporating diverse English varieties, cultural norms, and communication styles into the syllabus. This can be done through case studies, role-plays, and cross-cultural discussions, which will prepare students for real-world English usage.
3. **Policy Implications:** Education policymakers in Oman can use these findings to create policies that promote balanced language development, where both linguistic accuracy and pragmatic skills are emphasized. Furthermore, increasing inter-institutional collaboration and globalization in curriculum content can ensure that students are better prepared for international academic or professional environments.

4 Conclusion

This study has highlighted the significant role of sociolinguistic competence and language transfer in shaping the English language proficiency of Omani ESL learners, with a particular focus on Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat University, and Sur University College. The findings demonstrate that students' ability to use English appropriately in various social and academic contexts is deeply influenced by both their Arabic language background and the institutional setting they belong to. Urban institutions like SQU and Muscat University, with greater exposure to English and diverse cultural contexts, fostered higher levels of pragmatic competence and adaptability in language use. In contrast, students from rural settings like Sur University College showed more reliance on Arabic structures and formal communication styles, which occasionally hindered effective English usage, especially in informal or intercultural contexts.

The study underscores the need for a more holistic approach to English language education in Oman, one that not only focuses on linguistic accuracy but also incorporates the development of pragmatic competence. To bridge the gap between linguistic proficiency and sociocultural adaptability, it is crucial for ESL curricula to integrate sociolinguistic training that reflects both local cultural norms and global English communication practices. By equipping students with the tools to navigate diverse social settings, educators and institutions can help ensure that Omani students are not only proficient in English but also adept at using it effectively in real-world scenarios. This approach will contribute to the development of well-rounded English speakers who can engage confidently and appropriately in both academic and social settings across cultures.

References:

Abdulloh, A. (2021). The Students' Perception towards Code-Switching and Code-Mixing in Sociolinguistic: A Case at an English Education Major. *EDULINK EDUCATION AND LINGUISTICS KNOWLEDGE JOURNAL*, *3*(1), 24. https://doi.org/10.32503/edulink.v3i1.1476

Al Mahrooqi, R., & Denman, C. (2015). *Issues in English Education in the Arab World,*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. https://eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=de034e23-0c82-4095-a393-ed0c39334d42%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=908761&db=e000xww

Al-Adwan, A. S., Albelbisi, N. A., Hujran, O., Al-Rahmi, W. M., & Alkhalifah, A. (2021). Developing a Holistic Success Model for Sustainable E-Learning: A Structural

Equation Modeling Approach. *Sustainability*, *13*(16), 9453. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13169453

Al-Ani, W. T. (2013). Blended Learning Approach Using Moodle and Student's Achievement at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. *Journal of Education and Learning*, *2*(3), p96. https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v2n3p96

Al-Issa, A. S., & Al-Bulushi, A. H. (2012). English language teaching reform in Sultanate of Oman: The case of theory and practice disparity. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, *11*(2), 141–176. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-011-9110-0

Al-Jardani, K. S. (2017). English Education Policy in Oman. In R. Kirkpatrick (Ed.), *English Language Education Policy in the Middle East and North Africa* (Vol. 13, pp. 133–146). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-46778-8_9

Alqarni, A. M. (2022). Code-Switching and English Language: A Linguistic Study in the Saudi Perspective. *World Journal of English Language*, *12*(7), 196. https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n7p196

Bani-Khaled, T. A. A. (2014). Attitudes towards Standard Arabic: A Case Study of Jordanian Undergraduate Students of English. *International Journal of Linguistics*, *6*(4), 154. https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v6i4.5959

Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing. *Applied Linguistics*, *1*(1), 1–47.

Eldin, A. A. T. S. (2014). Socio Linguistic Study of Code Switching of the Arabic Language Speakers on Social Networking. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, *4*(6), p78. https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v4n6p78

Ellis, R., & Shintani, N. (2013). *Exploring Language Pedagogy through Second Language Acquisition Research* (0 ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203796580

Gass, S. M., & Selinker, L. (2008). *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. Routledge. https://bpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/websites.umass.edu/dist/c/2494/files/2015/08/Gass.Second-Language-Acquisition.pdf

Gilbang, C., Daniel, D., & Ancheta, R. F. (2024). ERROR ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN ESSAYS OF OMANI EFL STUDENTS. *European Journal of English Language Teaching*, *9*(2). https://doi.org/10.46827/ejel.v9i2.5423

Hymes, D. H. (1972). *On Communicative Competence. Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings*. Penguin. https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=1541741

Mede, E., Dikilitaş, K., & Hasan Kalyoncu University, Department of English Language Teaching, Gaziantep, Turkey. (2015). Teaching and Learning Sociolinguistic Competence: Teachers' Critical Perceptions. *Participatory Educational Research*, *2*(3), 14–31. https://doi.org/10.17275/per.15.29.2.3

Meng, P. (2024). The Evolution of Transfer Theory in Second Language Acquisition: From Behaviorism to Sociocultural Perspectives. *SHS Web of Conferences*, *199*, 02001. https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202419902001

Odlin, T. (1989). *Language Transfer: Cross-Linguistic Influence in Language Learning* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524537

Pegrum, M., Oakley, G., & Faulkner, R. (2013). Schools going mobile: A study of the adoption of mobile handheld technologies in Western Australian independent schools.

Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, *29*(1). https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.64

Rehner, K., & Lasan, I. (2023). Developing Second Language Learners' Sociolinguistic Competence: How Teachers' CEFR-Related Professional Learning Aligns with Learner-Identified Needs. *Education Sciences*, *13*(3), 282. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13030282

Sabbah, S. S. (2016). Negative Transfer: Arabic Language Interference to Learning English. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2844015

Vaishnav, Pankaj. B. (2024). Reimagining Cultural Identity through Technology in English Language Education in Omani Students. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, *50*(10), 264–274. https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2024/v50i101617

Wang, J., Jin, G., & Li, W. (2023). Changing perceptions of language in sociolinguistics. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *10*(1), 91. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01574-5

Appendix 1 Data Collection Method

Data Collection Method	Questions
Sample Survey Questions	1. How would you rate your proficiency in English on a scale of 1-5? (1 = beginner, 5 = advanced) 2. How often do you use English in daily communication? (e.g., in class, with friends, in social media, etc.) 3. Do you think your first language (Arabic) influences your English language use? If yes, how? 4. What challenges do you face while learning English in a higher education setting? 5. Are there any specific English language skills you find particularly difficult? (e.g., speaking, writing, listening, reading) 6. Do you encounter any cultural differences when using English in academic settings? 7. Do you believe that your social background (urban/rural) has an impact on your English language skills?
Semi-Structured Interviews	1. Can you describe your experiences using English in both academic and social contexts? 2. How do you think your Arabic language background influences your English language use in both speaking and writing? 3. Could you share an example where you have transferred a language rule or structure from Arabic to English? 4. How do you feel about the role of gender, age, or cultural background in shaping your English language competence?

	5. Can you provide an instance where you faced a communication barrier in English due to sociolinguistic factors like accents or cultural references? 6. In what ways does your educational institution (public vs private, urban vs rural) influence the way you use and learn English? 7. How do you adjust your English language use when interacting with peers or professors from different backgrounds or nationalities?
Analysis of Language Use	1. Identifying instances where students switch from Arabic to English in conversations or written assignments. 2. Analyzing the use of code-switching in formal vs informal settings (e.g., in lectures Vs. casual conversations). 3. Examining how students apply their first language (Arabic) grammar or syntax rules when writing in English. 4. Looking at the types of errors (semantic, syntactic, lexical) students make that can be attributed to language transfer from Arabic to English. 5. Investigating the use of cultural references and idiomatic expressions in English among Omani students. 6. Studying the students' usage of English in peer discussions or group activities and how their sociolinguistic competence shapes these interactions.