



The Impact of English Language Requirements on Graduate Students in Libya: A Case Study of University of Zawia

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ABSTRACT

English language proficiency is a key admission requirement for postgraduate programs worldwide, including at the University of Zawia in Libya. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, such requirements may create access barriers for academically qualified applicants whose language development has been shaped by systemic rather than individual limitations. This study investigates the extent to which English proficiency requirements affect postgraduate admission at the University of Zawia and identifies the challenges applicants face in meeting these standards during the academic year 2026–2025.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted in this research. In the first phase, placement test records from 321 applicants at the Zawia University Language Centre were analyzed quantitatively to establish the scope of the proficiency gap. In the second phase, qualitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with 50 newly admitted postgraduate applicants, providing explanatory depth to the statistical patterns identified.

The findings reveal a significant gap between institutional expectations and applicants' actual proficiency levels. 65% of applicants were positioned below the minimum admission edge, 80% self-rated their English as moderate or weak, and 64% reported no adequate institutional learning opportunities. Consequently, 82% indicated they would postpone or withdraw from postgraduate study. Critically, students did not reject English proficiency as a legitimate academic goal; rather, they called for greater institutional support to achieve it equitably.

The research indicates that current requirements may function as barriers to access rather than measures of readiness. The Recommendations suggest a deadline extension policy, free institutional English courses, integrated language support and localized testing facilities.

Keywords: English Language, Graduate Students, English Language Requirements, Higher Education in Libya, University of Zawia, Academic Achievement.



2. Explore applicants' perceptions of English proficiency requirements and propose evidence-based recommendations that balance academic standards with equitable access to postgraduate education.

1.4 Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how English language proficiency requirements influence access to postgraduate education, particularly in university of Zawia in Libya. The study provides valuable insights into the gap between institutional expectations and applicants' actual language proficiency levels. The findings may assist university administrators and policymakers in evaluating the effectiveness of current admission policies and in developing supportive language preparation and assessment practices that balance academic quality with equitable access. Additionally, the study contributes to the academic literature on language policy and postgraduate admissions. It provides a base for future research in similar educational contexts.

1.5 Limitations

The participant sample was relatively small consisting only 50 individuals. In addition, all participants were drawn exclusively from the University of Zawia which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other Libyan universities or wider regional contexts. Future research should employ larger samples instead.

2. Literature Review

This study is based on established frameworks in language proficiency and academic language development which provide a conceptual basis for examining and understanding the role of English language proficiency and the requirements in postgraduate admission.

2.1 English Language Proficiency in Higher Education

Canale and Swain (1980) define English language proficiency as the capacity to use the language effectively across diverse communicative contexts, a conceptualization that underscores the multidimensional nature of language competence beyond mere grammatical knowledge.

Central to this study is Cummins' (1984) influential distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). While BICS refers to the conversational fluency acquired relatively quickly in everyday social interactions, CALP encompasses the more complex, context-reduced language demands required for academic tasks. Cummins argued that attaining CALP is considerably more critical for academic success than BICS, and that its development requires a substantially longer period — a challenge particularly pronounced for learners of English as a foreign language.

This distinction carries significant implications for higher education contexts in which English functions not as a primary medium of instruction but rather as a school subject. In such settings, as Kachru (1992) and Crystal (2003) observed, learners are especially vulnerable to falling short of the proficiency thresholds required for academic admission and participation. In response to this challenge, many higher education institutions have adopted language placement tests as a standardized mechanism for assessing applicants' readiness for academic study, a practice widely endorsed in the language testing literature (Hughes, 2003; Alderson, 2000).

These theoretical perspectives provide a useful framework for examining how English language proficiency requirements influence postgraduate admission processes and shape access to advanced academic opportunities.

2.2 Challenges in English Language Learning in the Libyan Context

Research on English language learning in Libya and comparable Arab EFL contexts consistently identifies a cluster of interrelated challenges that impede the development of academic language proficiency. Aljoundi and Sheik (2025) document linguistic, cultural, institutional, and structural barriers that collectively limit Libyan students' capacity to develop academic English competence, noting that these barriers are embedded in educational systems rather than reflecting individual learner deficiencies. This systemic perspective is essential to interpreting the present study's finding that 80% of postgraduate applicants rated their English as moderate or weak.

At the pedagogical level, Tawir and Baharum (2024) observe that English instruction in Libyan contexts is often delivered through traditional methods — notably the Grammar-Translation Method — that prioritizes metalinguistic knowledge over communicative practice. Teachers tend to concentrate on examination content at the expense of productive language use, which leaves learners with limited ability to deploy English in authentic academic or professional contexts. This background explains a striking finding in the present dataset: 94% of postgraduate applicants had never sat an international English proficiency test, suggesting that their formal education had not oriented them toward the kind of language use that such tests assess.

Abdelati (2019) identifies further obstacles within Libyan English classrooms, including a persistent mismatch between curriculum goals and actual teaching practice, overreliance on the first language as a medium of instruction, limited teacher professional development, and the use of inauthentic materials that generate low student engagement. These conditions reduce opportunities for meaningful communicative interaction and leave graduates underprepared for the linguistic demands of postgraduate study — consistent with the 64% of participants in the present study who reported no adequate institutional opportunities to develop their English skills.

Beyond production skills, Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) demonstrate that reading comprehension difficulties represent a significant and widespread challenge among Arab EFL learners, particularly in navigating different academic text types. As reading comprehension is foundational to research-level study — including literature review, source evaluation, and academic writing — these weaknesses compound the challenges associated with meeting postgraduate English requirements.

Collectively, these studies establish that low English proficiency among Libyan postgraduate applicants is not an individual failing but the product of systemic weaknesses that begin in early schooling and gather through higher education. This conclusion has direct implications for how English proficiency requirements should be designed and implemented: policies that impose international benchmarks without accounting for the educational contexts in which applicants have been formed risk functioning as barriers to access rather than equitable measures of academic readiness.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed an explanatory mixed-methods design. The quantitative part was followed by a qualitative part to explain and contextualize the statistical findings. This design was chosen for two main reasons. First, the study includes two research questions that are

different but related. The first question requires analyzing numerical data, while the second requires collecting descriptive information from participants. Using only one method would not have been enough to answer both questions properly. Second, the sequential structure means that the results of the quantitative phase helped direct the qualitative phase, so the two types of data work together rather than being treated separately.

In the quantitative phase, placement test records from 321 applicants at the Zawia University Language Centre were analyzed to establish the distribution of proficiency levels relative to the minimum admission threshold. In the qualitative phase, data were collected from a separate group of 50 newly admitted postgraduate applicants through a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, providing explanatory accounts of the barriers, perceptions, and experiences that underlie the statistical patterns. The two samples were kept independent for logistical reasons; however, their findings were interpreted in relation to one another throughout the analysis, with quantitative results establishing the scope of the issue and qualitative accounts clarifying its causes and implications.

3.2 Participants

The study involved two independent participant groups. The first comprised 321 postgraduate applicants whose placement test records were obtained from the Zawia University Language Centre; this group provided the quantitative proficiency distribution data. The second comprised 50 newly admitted postgraduate applicants recruited during two placement test sessions; this group participated in the qualitative phase. The qualitative sample represented three disciplinary backgrounds: Humanities (48%, n=24), Basic Sciences (30%, n=15), and Applied and Medical Sciences (22%, n=11). Female participants constituted 78% of the qualitative sample (n=39), reflecting the broader gender composition of postgraduate applicants during the study period.

3.3 Data Collection

Quantitative data were drawn from official placement test records held by the Zawia University Language Centre, which were verified for accuracy and completeness prior to analysis. Qualitative data were collected through two instruments. The first was a structured questionnaire comprising both closed-ended items — using Likert-scale and categorical response formats — and open-ended questions that invited participants to elaborate on their experiences and recommendations. The second was a semi-structured interview protocol, administered with a subset of participants to explore key themes in greater depth and to provide a richer account of the perceptions and experiences captured in the questionnaire. Both instruments were piloted with a small group of participants not included in the main sample to assess clarity and appropriateness before full administration.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically, with recurring patterns grouped into categories to identify dominant trends across participants. Data were analyzed using SPSS v.26, including:

- Frequencies & percentages
- Means
- Chi-Square Test of Independence to examine associations between categorical variables

3.5 Validity and Reliability

Several procedures were implemented to strengthen the validity and reliability of the study. To ensure validity and reliability, the study combined quantitative placement test results with

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qualitative questionnaires and interviews, providing various perspectives on the research problem. The instruments were reviewed by language teachers and experts in Zawia Languages center to ensure that they met the intended aims of the study. Standard data collection procedures were utilized and Placement test results were officially verified by the Zawia University Language Center, and qualitative responses were cross-checked to ensure consistency and accuracy in coding and analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Table 1: Sample Distribution by Gender and Field of Study

Variable	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	11	22%
	Female	39	78%
Field of study	Humanities	24	48%
	Basic science	15	30%
	Applied / Medical	11	22%

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the study sample (n=50) by gender and field of study. Female participants constitute the majority at 78% (n=39), while males represent 22% (n=11). This gender imbalance is particularly relevant when interpreting subsequent attitudinal findings, as the Chi-Square analysis (Table 16) later confirms that gender is significantly associated with how the policy is perceived ($\chi^2=4.12$, $p=0.042$). Regarding academic background, Humanities students form the largest group (48%, n=24), followed by Basic Sciences (30%, n=15) and Applied/Medical Sciences (22%, n=11). This disciplinary distribution is consequential: as the qualitative data later reveals, Humanities students reported the widest perceived gap between their current proficiency and the mandated IELTS standards, a pattern consistent with their higher rates of policy opposition documented in Tables 5 and 10.

4.2 Prior English Test Experience and Policy Awareness

Table 2: Participation in English Proficiency

Response	Frequency	%
Passed	3	6%
Failed	0	0%
Never taken	47	94%

Table 3: Level of Awareness of English Requirement Policy

Level	Frequency	%
high	4	8%
Moderate	27	54%
Low	19	38%

Tables 2 and 3 reveal a compounding challenge at both experiential and informational levels. A vast majority of students (94%) have never sat an international English proficiency test, meaning the policy confronts them with an entirely unfamiliar standard. This inexperience is exacerbated by inadequate awareness: only 8% of students report high familiarity with the

policy, while 38% remain poorly informed. Together, these figures establish an important interpretive baseline — student reactions documented throughout this section cannot be attributed to informed resistance, but rather reflect responses shaped by limited exposure and incomplete knowledge. This context helps explain the predominantly negative sentiment captured in the open-ended responses (Table 10), where 62% expressed negative feelings toward the requirement.

4.3 Self-Assessed Proficiency and Perceived Appropriateness of Requirements

Table 4: Students' Self-Assessment of Current English Level

Level	Frequency	%
Good	10	20%
Moderate	22	44%
Weak	18	36%

Table 5: Perceived Appropriateness of IELTS Requirements

Opinion	Frequency	%
Appropriate	13	26
Somewhat appropriate	17	34
Not appropriate	20	40

Reading Tables 4 and 5 together exposes a clear alignment between students' self-perceived proficiency and their evaluation of the policy's fairness. The 80% of students who rate their English as Moderate or Weak (Table 4) largely correspond to the 74% who view the IELTS requirements as either "Somewhat Appropriate" or "Inappropriate" (Table 5). This correspondence suggests that opposition to the policy is not ideological but pragmatic — rooted in students' awareness of the distance between their current abilities and the demanded standard. The inferential analysis in Table 17 subsequently confirms this reading: students with weaker self-assessed proficiency are significantly more likely to consider postponing or withdrawing from graduate studies ($\chi^2=9.21$, $p=0.01$). Qualitatively, this frustration is echoed in Table 11, where 50.9% of respondents identified institutional support — rather than personal motivation — as the primary mechanism needed to bridge this gap.

4.4 Perception of the Requirement: Motivation vs. Barrier

Table 6: Students' Perception of English Requirement Impact

Statement	High	%	Moderate	%	Low	%
Motivating	14	28%	18	36%	18	36%
Barrier	30	60%	10	20%	10	20%

Note: Inter-item correlation=0.72

Table 6 presents perhaps the most diagnostic finding of the quantitative phase: 60% of students perceive the policy as a high barrier, while only 28% find it highly motivating. The inter-item correlation ($r=0.72$) confirms the internal consistency of these responses, lending reliability to this sentiment. Critically, this quantitative pattern is not an isolated data point — it is reinforced and explained by the qualitative data. In Table 11, students articulated why the policy functions as a barrier rather than a catalyst: the absence of institutional support (50.9%), the lack of English integration within research programmes (30.9%), and insufficient incentive structures (18.1%). The barrier perception thus reflects a structural critique of

implementation, not opposition to English proficiency per se. Students who called for a "Grace Period" (Table 9, ranked 1st) or "Free Courses" (ranked 2nd) implicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of the requirement while objecting to the conditions under which it is imposed.

4.5 Future Academic Intentions and Available Learning Opportunities

Table 7: Students' Intended Actions After Policy

Option	Frequency	%
Continue applying	9	18%
Postpone application	26	52%
Withdraw from graduate studies	15	30%

Table 8: Students' Perception of Learning Opportunities

Option	Frequency	%
Yes	7	14%
To some extent	11	22%
No	32	64%

The data in Tables 7 and 8 must be interpreted jointly, as the latter provides the structural explanation for the former. Only 18% of students intend to continue their applications without interruption, while 82% plan to postpone or withdraw entirely — a finding that signals a serious risk of academic attrition. Table 8 contextualises this outcome: 64% of students report no adequate opportunities to develop their English proficiency in preparation for the requirement. The policy thus imposes a standard without providing the conditions for meeting it — a gap that the qualitative data characterise with notable consistency. This interpretation is corroborated qualitatively by Table 12, where "Grace Period / Flexible Timeline" (40%) and "Free or Supported Courses" (33%) ranked as the two most urgent student recommendations, reflecting a demand not for the removal of standards, but for the institutional means to meet them.

4.6 Proposed Solutions

Table 9: Suggested Interventions According to Students' Opinions

Solution	Frequency	%	Rank
Grace period after admission	38	29%	1
Free or supported courses	34	25.9%	2
Lower language requirements	29	22%	3
Intensive preparatory English modules	18	13.7%	4
Other suggestions	12	9.1%	5

The solution priorities in Table 9 offer a coherent and internally consistent picture when read alongside the qualitative themes in Tables 11 and 12. The top-ranked preference — a Grace Period (29%) — reflects students' desire for a concurrent model in which academic enrollment and language development proceed in parallel. This preference is reiterated in Table 12 (40%), confirming its centrality across both structured and open-ended responses. The second-ranked solution — Free or Supported Courses (25.9%) — directly addresses the structural gap identified in Table 8, where 64% of students reported no current access to adequate learning opportunities. The consistency between quantitative rankings and qualitative narratives across multiple instruments strengthens the validity of these findings

and confirms that students' primary demand is not the abandonment of English standards, but a more equitable and supported path toward achieving them.

4.7 Open-Ended Responses

Table 10: Personal Feelings toward the English Policy

Response category	Frequency	%	Rank
Negative	31	62%	1
Neutral	12	24%	2
Negative	7	14%	3

Table 11: Turning English Learning into a Motivation for Research

Theme	Frequency	%	Rank
Institutional support	28	50.9%	1
Integrating English Research	17	30.9%	2
Incentives	10	18.1%	3

Table 12: Additional Suggestions or Recommendations

Theme	frequency	%	Rank
Flexible timeline	12	40%	1
Free or supported courses	10	33%	2
Other multiple measures	8	27%	3

The qualitative data provides the interpretive layer necessary to move beyond the "what" of the quantitative results toward the "why." The predominantly negative sentiment in Table 10 (62%) aligns directly with the barrier perception documented in Table 6 (60%), confirming that these are not isolated responses but a coherent and reproducible attitudinal pattern across instruments. Table 11 further nuances this picture: students are not dismissing the value of English proficiency, but are calling for it to be embedded within — rather than imposed prior to — their research experience. The preference for "Integrating English with Research" (30.9%) resonates with the quantitative finding that Humanities students, for whom English serves primarily as a research tool rather than an instructional medium, are disproportionately represented among those who view requirements as inappropriate (Table 5). Finally, the institutional measures proposed in Table 12 — localizing testing centers, flexible timelines, and subsidized preparation — collectively address the logistical and economic barriers that the quantitative data (Tables 7, 8) identified as the primary drivers of academic attrition risk.

4.8 Proficiency Distribution Analysis

Table 13: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Students by Proficiency Level

Level	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative %
Level 1	103	32.1%	32.1%
Level 2	106	33.0%	65.1%
Level 3	47	14.6%	79.7%
Level 4	52	16.2%	95.9%
Level 5	3	0.9%	96.8%
Level 6	10	3.1%	100.0%
Total	321	100.0%	

Table 14: Eligibility Status for Graduate Studies Admission

Eligibility Status	Levels Included	Frequency	Percent
Ineligible	Level 1 & 2	209	65.1%
Eligible	Level 3, 4, 5 & 6	112	34.9%
Total		321	100.0%

Table 15: Chi-Square Test Results for Distribution Uniformity

Statistical Measure	Value
Chi-Square Value	194.85
Degrees of Freedom	5
P-value	< 0.001

Tables 13 and 14 establish the quantitative scope of the proficiency gap at the institutional level. The majority of students are concentrated in the two lowest proficiency levels (65.1%), with a sharp decline at higher levels — Level 5 representing less than 1% of the population. Based on the minimum admission criterion of Level 3, only 34.9% of applicants qualify for graduate studies, meaning the exclusion rate stands at a critically high 65.1%. The Chi-Square goodness-of-fit test (Table 15) confirms that this distribution is highly non-uniform ($\chi^2=194.85$, $df=5$, $p<0.001$), rejecting the null hypothesis of equal distribution across levels. These figures contextualise and reinforce the survey findings in sections 4.3–4.5: the barrier perception and attrition risk documented there are not perceptual distortions but reflect a genuine and statistically confirmed proficiency gap.

4.9 Association Analysis: Chi-Square Tests

Table 16: Gender Differences in Perception of English Requirement as a Barrier

Gender	Barrier	Not a Barrier
Male	7	4
Female	31	8
Chi-Square	4.12	
p-value	0.042	

Table 17: Relationship Between English Level and Intended Academic Decision

Level	Continue	Postpone	Withdraw
Good	6	3	1
Moderate	3	12	7
Weak	0	11	7
Chi-Square	9.21		
p-value	0.01		

Table 16 examines whether gender is associated with barrier perception. Since the p-value (0.042) is below the significance threshold ($\alpha=0.05$), we reject the null hypothesis, confirming a statistically significant association. A closer look at the frequencies shows that 79.5% of females (31 out of 39) perceive the requirement as a barrier, compared to 63.6% of males (7 out of 11). This disparity may be attributed to the fact that the majority of female participants are from the Humanities sector, where the perceived gap between current skills and international standards is often wider.

Table 17 explores the relationship between self-assessed English proficiency and intended academic decision. The result is highly significant ($p=0.01$), providing strong empirical evidence that a student's proficiency level is a primary predictor of academic persistence.

Among students with a "Good" level, 60% intend to continue their application immediately. By contrast, among students with a "Weak" level, 0% intend to continue, with 100% opting to either postpone or withdraw entirely. Together, Tables 16 and 17 confirm that the policy's impact is not uniform across the student population — it falls disproportionately on female students, Humanities applicants, and those with weaker language backgrounds, reinforcing the study's central argument that the requirement functions as a structural filter rather than an equitable academic standard.

These findings align closely with the broader literature on English language policy in Arab higher education contexts. Aljoundi and Sheik (2025) documented linguistic, cultural, and institutional barriers limiting students' capacity to develop academic English competence — a pattern directly reflected in this study's finding that 80% of participants rated their proficiency as moderate or weak. Tawir and Baharum (2024) linked traditional, exam-focused pedagogy to weak communicative outcomes, which helps explain why 94% of participants had never sat an international English proficiency test despite years of formal English instruction. Abdelati (2019) identified a systemic mismatch between curriculum goals and classroom practice, consistent with the 64% of participants who reported no adequate learning opportunities. Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) further highlighted reading comprehension difficulties among Arab EFL learners, reinforcing the conclusion that low proficiency among Libyan postgraduate applicants reflects deep-rooted systemic weaknesses rather than individual failure. Taken together, the existing literature and the present findings confirm that English proficiency requirements, when introduced without commensurate institutional support, risk functioning as mechanisms of exclusion rather than meaningful measures of academic readiness.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study can be understood through the theoretical framework introduced earlier in this paper. Based on Cummins' (1984) distinction between BICS and CALP, the proficiency gap identified in this study is not unexpected. Many applicants completed their previous education in systems that focused on basic language skills rather than the academic language proficiency needed for postgraduate study. As a result, they are unlikely to meet international proficiency standards without additional preparation and support. The fact that 94% of participants had never taken an international proficiency test, and that 80% described their English as moderate or weak, reflects this gap. This is not a matter of individual failure, but rather a mismatch between what students were taught and what postgraduate admission currently requires.

The data also show that the current policy does not affect all students equally. Humanities students, female applicants, and those who cannot afford private language courses are more likely to be excluded. This suggests that the policy, as it stands, may be widening existing gaps rather than helping to close them. The recommendations in this section are based on these findings. Their goal is not to reduce academic standards, but to give more students a realistic opportunity to meet them.

This study examined how English language proficiency requirements affect access to postgraduate study at the University of Zawia. It used a mixed-methods design combining survey data, open-ended responses, and institutional placement records. The overall finding is clear: without sufficient institutional support, the current policy is limiting access to graduate education in a way that is neither fair nor proportionate to students' actual research potential.

The placement data show that 65.1% of prospective postgraduate students scored below the minimum required proficiency level (Table 14). This means that the problem is widespread rather than isolated. The survey results confirm that students feel the impact of this policy

directly: 82% reported that they had considered delaying or withdrawing their applications (Table 7), not because they lack interest in English, but because they have no clear path to meeting the requirement (Table 8). The solutions students themselves suggested — such as a grace period, affordable preparation courses, and embedding English language development within their academic programs (Table 9) — point toward a fairer approach in which language learning is supported as part of graduate study rather than used as a barrier to entry.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Flexible Admission Timeline: Allowing newly admitted students to begin their postgraduate programmes while working toward the proficiency requirement within a set period would help prevent students from dropping out or delaying their studies. This directly addresses the finding that 82% of respondents considered withdrawing their applications (Table 7).

Institutionally Funded Preparation Courses: Since 64% of students reported having no adequate opportunities to improve their English (Table 8), and private preparation courses are too expensive for many in the current economic situation, the university should offer affordable English courses designed specifically for postgraduate applicants.

Discipline-Integrated Language Development: Instead of treating English as a single barrier that all students must pass in the same way, language development should be built into each student's academic activities — such as reading, writing, and reviewing literature within their own field. This would make language learning more relevant and more achievable, especially for Humanities students.

Differentiated Proficiency Standards: Applying the same proficiency level to all disciplines may not be fair or appropriate. A tiered system that adjusts the required level based on how much English is actually used in each field would be more equitable and academically justified, particularly given that 40% of respondents felt the current requirements were unsuitable (Table 5).

Strengthened Policy Communication: With 38% of participants reporting low awareness of the proficiency requirement (Table 3), the university needs to communicate its admission policies more clearly and earlier, giving prospective students enough time to prepare.

In summary, this study does not argue against English proficiency as an academic requirement. Rather, it shows that setting standards is not enough on its own — students also need the support and resources to meet them. The key challenge for the University of Zawia is not whether to require English proficiency, but how to help students achieve it in a way that is fair, flexible, and supportive of the university's overall research goals.

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