Chapter 11

Investigating Scaffolding Writing Instruction: A Tool for Struggling EFL Writers

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the Arabian Gulf and beyond, higher education students face the challenge of learning to write academic essays in English though possessing limited ability in the language. Scaffolding writing techniques provide support for them as they learn about essay structure while working within their Zone of Proximal Development (i.e. in the metaphorical space between what learners can accomplish unassisted and what they cannot do on their own). This chapter discusses the results of classroom research on how scaffolding writing instruction in English affected tertiary student writing outcomes in the Sultanate of Oman. Instructional techniques used in the study, which include aspects of the Hammond and Gibbons (2005) macro and micro ESL scaffolding model, as well as modeling and collaborative writing, are discussed in detail. The results of the study found that using scaffolding writing techniques revived students’ forgotten knowledge of essay structure during approximately ten hours of instruction. In addition, data showed that students favored this instructional strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education students the world over have the often daunting task of writing academic essays. This becomes even more challenging for students writing in a language other than their mother tongue. For tertiary students who are not only writing academic essays in a new language but who also lack a firm foundation in first language literacy and academic skills, academic essay writing can seem overwhelming. Such is the case for many students attending colleges and universities in the Sultanate of Oman, where English is the language of instruction in the vast majority of academic institutions. The current study focused on college students enrolled in Dhofar, located in the south of Oman. These young people face the task of writing academic essays in English since they study several other subjects in English while enrolled in their degree programs. Unfortunately, many are inadequately prepared to take on the challenge but simply cannot avoid it.
A brief look at the history of education in Oman is necessary for understanding the challenges EFL students face when they enter college. Before 1970, Oman had just three schools in the entire country, and these were exclusively male with a limited curriculum. However, with the arrival of the current leader, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, education was given top priority, and rapid expansion of the educational system took place, with a focus on ensuring access for everyone to schools throughout the country. By 1975, there were 205 schools that served nearly 56,000 boys and girls across the diverse areas of the country (Alkaaf, Jindal-Snape & Roger, 2011, p. 310). By the 2006-2007 academic year, there were over 1,053 schools and over 560,000 students enrolled in them. Following this initial phase of quantitative development, the second stage, beginning in the early 1980s, focused on improving the quality of education by such means as teacher training and textbook preparation (Rassekh, 2004, p. 9).

However, Al Shmeli reports that it was recognized in the early 1990s that “students graduating from the school system were not strong in their command of the English language, or in generic skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking” (2009, p. 2). This trend can also be seen in other Arab countries, where the focus is on a rote learning of facts and concepts, rather than on higher order thinking skills (MENA Development Report, 2008, p. 49). To address this problem, following the Conference on Oman’s Economic Future, Vision 2020, the third phase of Oman’s educational development introduced reforms to help students prepare for future challenges in the global economy (Rassekh, 2004, p. 8). A new curriculum, termed Basic Education, was instituted in 1998 which, among other things, gave students “the ability to develop self-learning skills and to enquire and investigate; the ability to acquire life, social and environmental skills; and competences in scientific and critical thinking, creativity and aesthetic appreciation” (Alkaaf, Jindal-Snape & Roger, 2011, p. 312). The grand scope of these reforms, however, has not produced graduates with a firm foundation in these skills, evidence for which is that many students must strengthen them when they enter college and must take foundation courses.

In addition to the changes in curriculum in 1998, English language instruction began to be taught in grade one, with the intention of helping prepare students for tertiary education delivered in English. The hope was that twelve years of English instruction would allow students to enter directly into their respective college degree programs. However, a combination of factors has contributed to the majority of students requiring intensive English instruction before they begin their degrees in earnest. Some of these factors include self-reported insufficient teacher preparation and support, a curriculum logistically unrealistic and seen as irrelevant to teachers and students alike, and poor student motivation (Sergon, 2011, 18-26). The unfortunate reality is that, while secondary students in Oman are exposed to English instruction for over a decade, most are inadequately prepared to take on the challenge of university studies upon graduation. A case in point was the Fall 2011 class of incoming students at Sultan Qaboos University, the country’s top university that only accepts the highest scoring students from the secondary exit exam. Only 300 or so students were able to enter directly into credit-bearing classes, while 2,451 students had to enter the university as Foundation Year students, in order to strengthen their English, Math, and IT skills (Sergon, 2011, 5). So, in spite of a concerted effort to reshape education through well-intentioned reforms, students attending college in Oman continue to face challenges to their learning.

In Dhofar, the culture presents other circumstances that influence students’ performance in college. This is the largest province in Oman and home to a rich and vibrant culture centered on family and tradition. Above all else—school and work included—family takes precedence. While admirable, this can mean students missing im-
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