Chapter 20
An Evaluation of Sohar University GFP Students’ Performance in Writing: A Pedagogical Perspective

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ABSTRACT
This chapter reports on a cross-sectional evaluation of the EFL writing abilities of Sohar University GFP (General Foundation Program) students. A representative sample of students (from elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate levels) and teachers is included with a corpus (i.e. content) analysis of students’ writing assignments. The researcher also analyzes samples of intermediate students’ writing portfolios. Thus, triangulation is drawn on by employing a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods in order to find answers to the major concern relating to what type of writing abilities Sohar GFP students have. A summary is offered of the implications and recommendations based on analysis and discussion of the findings.

INTRODUCTION
Most researchers share the view that ESL/EFL writing is not easy for learners as this skill requires a good command of English in terms of grammar and vocabulary as well as certain writing micro-skills. For example, Modhish (2012) considers writing in L2 a demanding task, suggesting that for L2 learners to be able to write in a way which conforms to the writing norms of their native counterparts, they need to familiarize themselves with the various components of writing that would assist them to do this. Being able to produce grammatically correct sentences in L2 is undoubtedly important, but awareness of how discourse in L2 is created is also of great importance.

EFL/ESL writing is a difficult, complex and challenging process (Alsamadani, 2010). Its difficulty, complexity and challenge originate from the fact that writing includes many steps, such...
as determining a thesis, finding support for the thesis, organizing, revising, and, finally, editing to ensure an effective, error-free piece of writing (Langan, 2005). Furthermore, ESL/EFL writing is one of the most important aspects of language teaching. As Lee (2003, p. 112) asserts, “it is likely that most business and technical writing in the world is done in a second language.” Good ESL/EFL writing is the main concern for teachers, researchers, textbook writers and program designers in the field of foreign language teaching (Lee, 2003), but the composing task for most ESL/EFL students is especially difficult because its process calls for a wide range of cognitive and linguistic strategies of which they are mostly unaware (Luchini, 2010). Moreover, research about EFL/ESL writing has grown dramatically over the last 40 years, specifically between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. As a consequence, writing has now become an interdisciplinary field of research (Matsuda, 2003). Historically, there are three major types of ESL/EFL writing approaches. They are the product approach (Brown, 2001; Harmer, 2007; Hyland, 2002; Silva; 1990), the process approach (Brown, 2001; Raimes, 1985; Silva, 1993; Wang, 2004; You, 2004), and the genre-based approach (Casanave, 2004; Deng, 2007; Harmer, 2007; Hyland, 2003a; Hyland, 2003b; Leki, 2003).

Given the importance of the writing skill and its complexity as well as its difficulty, the researcher decided to conduct a study on the writing performance of the General Foundation Program (GFP) students at Sohar University. The main objective was to find out if the students possessed the necessary writing micro-skills that would enable them to undertake major studies which nearly all require a high level of writing proficiency in English. But before delving into the details of the study, let us consider a brief overview of the situation of English in Oman.

THE SITUATION OF ENGLISH IN OMAN

Oman can be considered as an example of countries in Kachru’s so-called Expanding Circle (1992). English has the status of a foreign language. But it is acknowledged by the government to be important for developing the country’s economy since it is a main tool for Omanisation or the gradual replacement of skilled expatriate manpower by locals (Al-Issa, 2005). In addition, English has institutionalised domains such as business, science, technology, education, and the mass media. Hence English teaching has been receiving considerable attention and legislative support from the government. The National English Language Policy (NELP) stresses the importance of English language teaching, as the following quotation from it emphasizes:

*The English language skills of the Omani nationals must be seen as an important resource for the country’s continued development. It is this recognition of the importance of English as a resource for national development and the means for a wider communication within the international community that provides the rationale for the English curriculum (Nunan et al., 1987:2, cited in Al-Issa, 2005).*

Between 1970 and 1998 English used to be taught from the fourth grade onwards and thus pupils were studying it for nine years prior to their transfer to the tertiary level. That means a total of 9 years of teaching or around 600 hours of English language instruction (Al-Hammami,1999) cited in (Al-Lamki, 2009). In 1998 a new program called Basic Education was initiated by the Ministry of Education. English started to be taught in grade 1 and hence the nine years of English instruction