Chapter 10

A WID Collaborative Pedagogical Model in Computing: A Study in Oman

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ABSTRACT

As many countries in the Middle East region have adopted English as the dominant medium of instruction in higher education, language support mechanisms offered to learners are an area demanding urgent attention in research and pedagogy. This chapter is a reflective account of a collaborative instructional model adopted to support the academic writing requirements of around 132 students enrolled in an undergraduate program in computer science in the region. This study is an attempt to implement a collaborative pedagogical initiative that would support learners’ disciplinary writing requirements. Findings from the semi-structured interviews with content teachers and a survey administered to students enrolled in this module indicate that they perceive it as an effective model of general as well as disciplinary academic writing support. This approach will inform the building of a comprehensive academic writing support strategy to help learners achieve the requirements of their programs by offering targeted rather than general academic writing support.

INTRODUCTION

The vast body of research into disciplinary variation points to the necessity of tailoring courses for the specific needs of a group of learners who belong to a particular discourse community. As North (2005, p. 520) points out, students need to be socialized into the literacy practices of their disciplines. Many studies have investigated variation among the disciplines through various approaches such as genre analysis, corpus linguistics, and multi-dimensional analyses. Some of these studies reveal the adoption of preferred genres by discourse communities.

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Nesi and Gardner (2012), for instance, found that the “case study” genre is preferred in the Business and Health disciplines, while the “explanation” genre is adopted more commonly in Biology, Chemistry, and Engineering. Samraj (2005, p. 142) claims that a characterization of a “disciplinary culture” will be incomplete without a discussion of the genres it favors.

The language teaching community’s cognizance of these findings is manifested in the various efforts reported in the literature on the planning and curriculum design of ESP courses. However, focus on these two aspects has led to “the relative neglect of inquiry into implementation of LSP and issues related to teaching” (Basturkmen, 2012, p. 60).

The adoption of English as the medium of instruction and assessment in higher education by many Middle Eastern countries has prompted a growing amount of research in this area. An overview of the relevant literature reveals that most studies on Arab university students focus on generic writing skills and especially on their lexi-co-grammatical errors. For example, Btoosh and Taweel (2011) compared the essays of students enrolled at a Jordanian university with native speaker essays. They report considerable use of intensifiers, first person pronouns, and a decided lack of passive structures in the former. A previous study undertaken by Btoosh (2004) also deals with the vocabulary problems faced by Arab university students. Crompton (2011) analyzed a corpus of 95 essays to study article errors made by Arab students. Randall and Groom (2009) compiled a learner corpus of Arab university students’ writing and report the spelling difficulties they faced in academic writing.

Some studies have explored the academic writing of Arab students beyond the general essay. Alshahrani (2015) reports considerable variation between graduate Arab L1 and English L1 students’ doctoral dissertation corpora in a comparative analysis of metadiscourse use. The research conducted by Annous and Nicolas (2015) on the perspectives of content teachers on their role in fostering the academic writing skills of students is one of the few studies done in the area of Writing in the Disciplines (WID) on Arab university students. Al Sharafi (2014) explored the use of modality in third year English major students at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman, by analyzing a corpus of 15 academic essays. He points out that the patterns of use of modality in Arab learners are similar to that of English L2 learners from other cultures and, therefore, claims that contrastive rhetoric does not account for these.

As can be seen above, studies on pedagogic models implemented to support disciplinary writing in this geographical region seem somewhat limited. This study aims to fill this gap in knowledge by exploring the effectiveness of implementing a WID approach to facilitate the academic writing skills of Arab students.

Context

The instructional model reported in this study was implemented in one of the largest private colleges in the Sultanate of Oman. The college has academic partnerships with two universities in the UK which, together with the local Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), oversee the maintenance of academic standards. The MOHE has prescribed a minimum English language proficiency equivalent to an IELTS Band 5 for eligibility to enroll in any academic course delivered and assessed in the English language. Some language modules offering generic language skills are taken by all students enrolled in undergraduate programs. Unfortunately, many students still struggle to cope with the academic writing requirements of their programs as evidenced by the feedback obtained from external reviewers, faculty, and the students themselves.