

## **Analysis of Results and Challenges in Written Communication. An Analysis Conducted at Prince Mohd University in Al-Khobar**

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**Abstract:** *Communication classes represent an important part of the freshman curriculum at Prince Mohd University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Training students to become better learners and thinkers has always been a challenge that needed to be addressed constantly. Students need to be reminded that taking English communication classes requires more than just memorizing. Composition and grammar complemented by reading and understanding as well as techniques addressing academic writing need to be a part of the curriculum of every student enrolled in the program. The program has integrated into its curriculum academic writing that is successfully taught at prestigious American universities. The same model is currently used at Prince Mohd University. This paper examines the results as well as the challenges that the students face in their communication classes*

**Index Terms:** *approach to challenges, course materials, freshman courses, linguistic considerations, written communication, writing lab*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

There are certain factors that can influence students' performance in English communication classes in which English is used as a language of instruction. Students can face challenges mainly due to limited language skills and cultural differences. At Prince Mohd University these challenges are addressed constantly. This paper uses a qualitative research methodology, in-depth questionnaires with fifty-seven students enrolled in the course and interviews conducted with five instructors teaching the course.

In this paper, both the instructors' perspectives and the students' perspectives are taken into account. Data acquired from the instructors suggest that the challenges experienced by students taking written communication classes consist mainly on capacities and prerequisites required for completing the course. From this study, identification of supportive activities for academic writing teachers emerged.

The lectures at Prince Mohd University follow a pattern used in all classes teaching the material: a combination of reading materials, academic writing techniques, revision of grammar, composition tools, revising, proofreading and formatting techniques, writing a summary, a short essay on a specific topic or a short research paper. The program leaders have successfully integrated the work of famous authors into its curriculum. The two main textbooks used in the lectures are John Langan's *College Writing Skills with Readings* and Pamela Arlov's *Wordsmith: A Guide to College Writing*. The two authors were chosen due to the comprehensiveness and clarity of the material included. According to Arlov, a good textbook should "reinforce our efforts. [...] The book should be orderly and user-friendly, with a flexible format. Explanations should be clear and supported by numerous exercises and examples. The book should contain much more than is strictly necessary [...]. Finally, if it includes a little bit of fun, so much the better- for us and for our students." (Arlov, 2012:xi)

The attractiveness of the chosen material relies mainly in choosing essays on common topics that follow common sense strategies and they don't include materials, which are hard to understand by the

mass of the students. The lectures are very clearly structured and short quizzes and activities are included at the end of each chapter so that each particular student can check and revise the material presented in class. The online tool addresses thus the needs of the students and the course content can be introduced to students who are very experienced in writing as well as to those who need a lot of improvement.

### **Common Sense Approach**

The common sense approach brings a lot of benefits to the students. Starting with the writing steps and brainstorming strategies draws students in, participation in class can boost the student's interest in the class. The teacher can thus approach students by giving them extra activities, which are done both in class and at home through self- study. By displaying interest in the class, and by knowing that doing extra work can boost their participation grades, students are directly involved in the grading process. The Arabic learner is very conscientious and can be highly motivated if she can understand how she's been graded. Adjusting the writing topics to the Saudi culture is very important if co-participation and interest of the student is sought. Keeping a writing journal helps students improve the writing speed and avoid mental blocks when composing new papers. By writing short essays, students make their writing come to life. By grouping the essays according to the type of technique they are centered on, the students have a clear insight into what's being done in class. Arlov's guide sums up the approach that is needed in order to succeed in writing essays: "Writing is a process of trial and error-sometimes it feels like mostly error. Even experienced writers often find writing difficult, often wonder each time they write if they have anything worthwhile to say or the ability to say it. In addition, the very act of writing makes the writer vulnerable. Your words and experiences are a part of you, and putting them on paper for others' examination can make you feel exposed. So why should you bother to write? You should bother because, at its best, writing can give you power and joy and the ability to move others. Fortunately, writing is a skill that improves with practice, and if you give it serious effort, you will amaze yourself." (Arlov, 2012:14)

The logical order followed by the materials helps in creating a learning environment in which students are not passive learners, but in which students contribute to the building of their writing portfolio. A first teaching approach regards giving students the confidence that what they create can help them in the future. Students are taught to write by writing. Each written assignment is part of a larger portfolio representing a part of the learning sequence. By acknowledging the fact that an order must be followed in writing, students can easily understand that each written excerpt has to display a certain type of order. Once this idea has been highlighted, the students can analyze in a proper way professional essays that belong to different trends. The students can also understand the difference between academic and professional writing.

Students are taught to distinguish between a traditional essay introduction and a professional one. They are taught the differences in style and audience when writing to explain, to inform, to define, to classify or tell a story. They are also shown the importance of word choice and visualizing the subject when having to write an essay. The use of creativity in topic selection, composition structure and word choice is reflected in the final grades. By knowing that writing clear, effective sentences and essays one can achieve more than a simple piece of writing, the students become eager to complete extra activities they may otherwise not be interested in. Students learn to understand that, finally, a written document derives from a certain culture and portrays the way people view things at a certain time and place. Students are shown that the way they see things makes them unique. They learn that the way one writer expresses herself will differ substantially from the view that another writer has.

## Research Methods

The course evaluations completed by the students at the end of the semester are implemented in order to summarize the students' overall opinion regarding what has been done during the semester. In order to gain a greater understanding of the challenges and finding ways to respond to them, a questionnaire involving students enrolled in the academic writing class was undertaken. Specifically, factors that either supported or hindered the students' learning and successful completion of the course were explored. The questionnaire addressed specific course evaluation questions related to the lecture and the assessment methods used as well as the teacher's approach to the learning process:

- Were the knowledge and skills the course was designed to develop made clear to me?
- Was the instructor fully committed to the delivery of the course? (Classes started on time, instructor was always present and the material well prepared)?
- Did this course improve your ability to communicate effectively?

In order to gain full a full understanding of the written communication course, further questions are added to the pool of the questions above for which answers will be sought from the instructors:

- How did the students cope with language barriers and cultural differences?
- What are the key factors that help students be successful in academic writing?
- What are the key factors that inhibit student's capacity to be successful in the writing class?

In this paper, the instructors' perspectives relative to these questions are presented too. The questionnaire used comprises questions that synthesize the satisfaction with the materials that were chosen, as well as the progress and the assessment methods used.

### Breakdown of Results according to Students' Perception

Out of the fifty-seven students who were invited to take part in the course evaluations for the spring semester 2019, 48 participants responded promptly with a combined response rate of 85% for the two sections identified as target respondents. Out of the 48 participants, 45 participants agreed and strongly agreed that the knowledge and skills the course was designed to develop was made clear to them. Another question that was asked was if the teacher cared about the student's progress and was helpful and 43 students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. When asked if the things that they had to do in this course (class activities, assignments, laboratories, etc.) were helpful for developing the knowledge and skills the course was intended to teach, the respondents agreed or strongly agreed in a high proportion of 44 out of 48 respondents. The answer to the question of whether this course improved their ability to communicate effectively received a positive agree or strongly agree answer from 44 subjects. The answer to the question related to the link between quizzes, exams and projects and the course received a positive answer from 45 subjects.

Students' perception of the written communication class was seen favorably from the following standpoints: clarity of the material introduced to them, requirements needed to pass the course successfully, reference material that was added to the teaching material, teacher's interest in the course and knowledge, teacher's availability during office hours, interest in student's progress, the nature of the material introduced, the inspiration the material offered them, the degree to which the course improved both their knowledge and their writing skills, the availability of resources (textbooks, library, computers), the satisfaction with the delivery of the course, and the increase in the ability to communicate effectively. When asked about the specific parts of the course and the lecture that they enjoyed, students mentioned motivation given to the students, flexibility of the teacher, interest in the material covered, the useful nature of the course, the kindness that the students receive from the teacher, the strategies employed used in generating ideas and developing essays. The overall mean result was 4.5 out of 5 for the fifty-seven subjects taken into account and a total of 1,106 responses received for a total of 23 questions and the students belonging to two different sections.

### Breakdown of Results and Challenges according to Educators' Perception

The challenges the students face in a written communication class reflect the areas in which extensive practice needs to be introduced. The writing class has to focus on more than pedagogical theory. Enhancing the writing skills combined with reading comprehension practice can increase the students' knowledge and skills. Arlov's method used in teaching academic writing combines more than just pedagogical theory. It is a manual with real life application, meant to put together the three main areas needed in accomplishing effective communication strategies.

A first challenge that needs to be addressed by the educator is tackled by stressing the importance of practice and actual writing practice in a writing class. Arlov's focus is on practice, the Wordsmith guide transcends basic communication tools and tries to implement a higher element in communication: creating effective meaning. Arlov's method used in teaching academic writing combines more than just pedagogical theory. It is a manual with real life application, meant to put together the three main areas needed in accomplishing effective communication strategies.

Meaningful teaching in a class of Arabic students cannot be created otherwise than by introducing three pillars in teaching: content, teaching techniques and language improvement. The guide follows modern teaching techniques and implements the online writing lab. According to Maite Correa, professor of linguistics at Colorado State University, who authored the article 'Teaching theoretical Linguistics in the Second Language Classroom: Beyond Language Improvement', teaching an English communication class or any related English class requires a focus on three main areas: content, pedagogical content, and second language acquisition theory. The term 'content' he refers to is the course content as such, in our case writing academic papers, the second pillar he refers to is the 'pedagogical method' used in our case the intertwined combination of written practice and understanding and comprehension activities backed by reading, and the third pillar refers to linguistic elements of the target language, nature of language and target language system. The instructional effectiveness surrounding Arlov's guide to academic writing can be assessed following the models proposed by Johnston and Goettsch in 2000 regarding the prerogatives needed in students' training. The three areas are those that bring into foreground introducing teaching material (the content), seconded by pedagogical insight into writing strategies and finally, the nature of language and rendering meaning. The linguistic approach has to be considered when teaching academic writing to the freshmen. According to Maite Corea, supporter of Johnston and Goettsch' ideas, the teacher's duty is "to not only be highly proficient in the language, but also to know the linguistic elements of the target language system, recognize the changing nature of language, and accommodate for gaps in their own knowledge of the target language system" (Correa, 2014: 162).

The rationale for such a claim is that this theoretical knowledge, which encompasses most areas of what, is taught in an introductory Linguistics course (phonology, morphology, syntax, sociolinguistics, pragmatics), which will enable teacher to "organize instruction, diagnose their students' linguistic difficulties, and assist them in understanding linguistic concepts. This apparent inconsistency is not such when we look into the nature of what language and language study encompass. Ives already claimed half a century ago that, while the study of the forms of language is a science, the proper and effective use of language is an art" (Correa: 165).

In fact, and although we cannot simply detach ourselves from the human component of language, we cannot forget either that our method of looking at it is, in many ways, scientific. Language is simultaneously the stuff of art – the fabric of which poetry is wrought – and a puzzle for social and biological science. It spans the alleged gulf between the humanities and the sciences [...] perhaps the only subject that regularly gets research funding from agencies in the humanities, the social sciences and the natural sciences (Correa, 2014: 165).

The challenge that students face when studying academic writing derive mainly from the fact that students have to deal besides the content of the textbook also with the shortfalls created by not being a native speaker. Pamela Arlov's textbook manages to overcome such challenge by bringing into

foreground a focus on a linguistic approach; this is done via the highlight she creates by introducing units in the manual which focus on different areas of linguistic inquiry, such as syntax, with subchapters on phrase structure similarities and differences between dialects that lead to a better understanding of written communication. Another focus of Arlov's guide is on the morphological analysis that compares the structure of words in English. The subchapters on verbs, pronouns, modifiers, reference and point of view add to the cogency of the course and provide student with the necessary tools for communicating effectively. A writing teacher should be aware that it is not enough for the student to know the rules of the grammar alone, but the students should also know how these rules should be applied in the essays and summaries they are drafting because the knowledge of a language goes beyond knowing the grammar and the rules of the language alone.

The teachers' approach to teaching writing skills addresses those difficulties which non-native writers are faced by. According to Hymes, D., author of 'Inequality in language: Taking for granted', an effective communication class would require an elementary literacy in linguistics course for every student. According to him, our moral duty as communication teachers is to make students reflect not only on the language we are teaching, but on their native language as well. A foundation basic course in communication serves as foundation for further courses in courses that deal with power relations like political science, cultural and ethnic studies, women and gender studies, anthropology, education, literature, sociology, history. Learning to use a language for communication is very different from learning about the linguistic intricacies of that language. While many language majors enjoy studying a language, not many of them find theoretical linguistics as a worthy, valuable, easy-to-grasp subject with real-life applications. (Hymes, 1992: 22) The main challenge facing students taking a writing class is the lack of English proficiency affecting students' performance. As writing instructors point out, language can be a barrier to grammatically correct expressions, asking questions and communicating thoughts and knowledge. Instructors who teach a written communication class have also witnessed students' struggles in understanding lectures, completing essay assignments and writing examinations. Many times teachers discover that students don't take notes. Therefore, reading sample essays and excerpts does an important part of teaching. Teaching solely readings is not sufficient though. Bringing new information to the students to understand the readings is also very important. What has been noticed in almost every class is the fact that students find writing essays quite challenging at the beginning of the semester. As they get accustomed to the writing techniques, the hard work needed when completing academic papers becomes routine only. Half way through the semester, the improvement doesn't hesitate to appear. The lack of proficiency can be dealt with by creating positive learning experiences. Encouraging students to ask questions in class and to participate in sample essay reading or analysis can facilitate their learning experience. Ives S. notes in her article Linguistics in the classroom that "there is no royal road to good writing, no magic method that will turn out skilled writers" (Ives, 2012:172). In order to succeed in a writing class, students need to have the necessary tools used in composition. Prerequisites, including knowledge of grammar and vocabulary taught in previous semester, must be completed, before a student can succeed in any composition class. This is what many writers insist upon; it is the duty of the linguist to deal with these prerequisites. Ives makes a comparison between the academic functions of linguist versus composition teachers in which she mentions that they are related in "somewhat the same as botanists and gardeners when raising plants. Their duties do not conflict; they complement. The botanist identifies plants, groups them in families, analyzes their physiology, and observes the ecological factors, which promote or stop growth. The gardener uses such information and adds to it his knowledge of the virtues of different fertilizers and methods of cultivation. If he has good soil and healthy stock, he may get good results regardless of how little he knows. But if the soil is not good, his stock is poor, or his experience is little, there is much he can learn from the botanist, although the botanist cannot teach him all that he needs to know. {...} What this means is that the students whose environment has provided them with habitual use of good English

are likely to do well whether their teacher knows much about language or not. On the other hand, in so far as the students do not have these habits, the teacher will find useful what the linguist has to say. Even if one does not have this preparation for formal and systemic teaching, he may still get acceptable results with some students by requiring practice, making corrections, and insisting on revision, provided he is himself a reasonably competent craftsman.” (Ives, 2012:172). Additionally, teachers can help improve the students’ learning experience by allowing more time for the students to complete their assignments, redoing exams or assignments and familiarizing students with the newest techniques used in essay writing. Giving access to e-tools that provide online resources and quizzes, as well as reading practice, can be fun too.

Another major challenge students face in a writing class is dealing with cultural differences. The American style curriculum based on active participation and continuous grading leads to interactive learning. Students are often dependent on instructors when completing their assignments. Certain essay topics are left out, and topics are often scrutinized for cultural differences. Also, another battle fought in class is the main thought that literature is part of one’s curriculum, together with cultural aspects of the language; students often have a hard time understanding the benefits of being exposed to literary excerpts as sample readings. Interactive participation incorporates this approach into the teaching curriculum. Dr. Faez, professor of linguistics at the University of Ontario, has highlighted in one of his articles the importance of addressing cultural issues in an English communication class: “Students of diverse backgrounds bring unique cultural practices and norms that are often not acknowledged or valued in the school system. Culturally responsive pedagogy recognizes the varied value systems such as dress and appearance, work and play, health and hygiene, and school rituals that students of different cultural backgrounds bring to their education and addresses them effectively. This form of instruction results in positive educational outcomes. Instruction that is not tailored to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds brings about negative academic outcomes.” (Faez, 2012:76) An additional challenge faced by students is keeping the focus on the content rather than the form of writing. Teaching students that writing is the expression of beliefs and experiences takes a long time; letting the students understand and practice the correct attitude toward writing through which a teacher assesses the individual contribution to the assignment and the personal view and comprehension is sometimes difficult to grasp by the students. Teaching them that all viewpoints that are elaborated on are accepted if sufficient details are included are also hard to comprehend by the students. Students learn to write by writing, they learn that writing is not solely talent, but also a skill that can be improved if you gain confidence and mastery.

Finally, students can become interested in studying a language if teachers make them aware of the endless applications of such a study. Language would thus be used to apply their knowledge upon graduation to their career objectives, by perceiving that language is more than a compilation of the prescriptive grammatical rules that are found in traditional grammar texts; Communication teachers are usually required to take language teaching methodology courses, but language teaching takes much more than speaking a language and knowing how to teach it. According to Spring et al, in the article “The successful introductory course”, it is very important that all communication teachers incorporate in their lessons those aspects of language, which they consider to be relevant for the group of students in the respective class. The author suggests a “universal student approach, an approach intended to work whether the student was interested or irked, major or non-major. I asked myself two questions: what are the fundamental problems? [...] (Spring, 2000:120) The answer suggests a living communication course. We need to know how language works as a system so we can make informed choices in our teaching. This way, language pedagogy, applied linguistics and theoretical linguistics are the three pillars of language teaching, A major challenge that needs to be addressed teaching any student majoring in the humanities or social sciences is overcoming difficulties stemming from lack of insight

into elementary literacy in linguistics course because most disciplines in the study areas deal with language at some point.

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