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From the Editor

Dear Colleagues,

We are happy to introduce the first issue of the Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) to our colleagues in schools, universities and research centers around the globe. As a publication whose goal it is to generate new knowledge about English language, linguistics, literature, culture and translation as well as English teaching and learning in the Arab world, we now aim to expand our circle of readers and contributors. We emphasize that AWEJ is a journal open to all Arabs, no matter their nationality, religion or background, as well as scholars throughout the entire world. It is our hope that you will take this opportunity to notify other scholars and teachers at your institute of our presence.

AWEJ is a refereed, peer-reviewed, and open-access e-journal for scholars, researchers, teachers, and officials of the English language in the Arab countries and in the entire world. We are non-profit, and seek to collect, organize, and disseminate information and research on new trends of English teaching and learning.

It is our mission with AWEJ to generate new knowledge about English language in the Arab world and to focus on promoting research and best practices that will improve the use of English in these countries, helping teachers, scholars and students cope with the emerging global challenges of the 21st century. Through AWEJ we hope to establish a forum for lively professional discussion that will promote the development of links between language-related research and its application in educational and other professional settings.
AWEJ is only possible with great support from the international community. We recognize that our mission is a challenging one, and we will need all possible support from our colleagues at all levels, including the Ministries, universities, public and private research centers and other schools, institutes and learning centers. We welcome you to AWEJ and encourage you to share your experiences and insights.

Kind Regards,

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Arab Learners of English and Reverse Visualization as a Reading Problem

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Abstract

Reading is a gateway to language learning as it is the only/major source of input in a foreign/second language situation. Several factors influence reading speed and comprehension, for example, learner’s language aptitude, attitude to the target language, and motivation. Much research has already been done in these areas.

The areas that have remained the Cinderella of research into reading skills are the impacts of (1) the phonological differences between English and Arabic, (2) the letter-sound disparity of the English language, (3) the phonological similarities between some English words and Arabic obscene and vulgar words and (4) the reverse directionality of the English writing system, as compared to right-to-left writing system of the Arabic language on reading pace and message reception. The present paper attempts to illustrate how speed and comprehension are adversely affected by reverse visualization, and offers suggestions to overcome the hurdles.
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Keywords: reading speed, comprehension, sub-vocalization, fixation, regression, reverse visualization.

The Place of English in Arab Countries

Three types of people use English: those for whom it is a first language, those for whom it is a second or additional language, and those who learn it as a foreign language. Where do Arab speakers of English belong? Certainly, they do not belong to the inner circle; they belong to the outer circle and the expanding circle respectively (Kachru 1992) though slowly they may move to the outer circle because more and more people are learning English. The circles are not static; they are dynamic. So how do we describe the place of English in Oman in terms of its status and role as a first, second and third language? We can say that English is a foreign language in Oman and in other Arab countries. Now, you will ask me why I describe English as nearly a foreign language in Arab countries. The reason is quite clear. English is spoken and written by a small minority in a few situations.

The Importance of Reading Skills in ESL/EFL Situations

All of us learnt our first language by listening and imitating. That is how children in Britain, America and Australia learn English. However, people in most Asian countries do not have opportunities to learn English the natural way. Then, how do most of us in non-English speaking countries learn English? Well, we listen to our teachers and pick up some English. But teacher talk alone, though very significant in our contexts, cannot give us enough English. That is why teachers give their students reading tasks nearly every day. Obviously,
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reading material is language input. Teachers give students a variety of reading materials to read and provide multiple opportunities to learn vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structures as they occur in authentic texts. Students thus get a complete picture of the ways in which the elements of the language work together to convey meaning.

Recently, there has been a lot of talk about communicative method of teaching English. We occasionally see some teachers trying to use it in their classrooms. This communicative approach has resulted in an emphasis on learning English through spoken interaction in the classroom. However, reading remains the main source of language input in ESL and EFL situations. That is why reading dominates English language teaching materials. Teachers spend periods after periods reading aloud and explaining paragraphs after paragraphs in their school and college classrooms, and students have to do loads of homework based on reading. In other words, English functions as a library language in countries like most Asian countries. Students spend hours reading and understanding texts. They grapple with grammar and struggle with vocabulary. They spend a very large chunk of their time reading English textbooks.

However, students face several reading problems and do not know how to overcome them and improve their reading skills. Universities, institutes and language centres organize seminars, conferences, symposia, and workshops on reading skills. Native and non-native speakers of English write hundreds of books on how to develop reading skills in ESL and EFL learners. Books sell like fire. Academic events are described as grand successes. Scholarly gatherings come to a close, but reading problems do not. They continue to haunt curriculum designers, syllabus framers, course-book writers, teachers, source-book experts, and teacher
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trainers. There are too many theories and too many methods. There are so many of them that teachers feel confused. Teacher training colleges and universities suggest different theories and classroom approaches. Based on the premise that little knowledge is a dangerous thing, there is a constant effort to update teacher attitudes, skills and knowledge. But is too much knowledge always a safe thing? I think what we need is a common sense approach. Such an approach involves several factors—a parent-like understanding of how second language is acquired, practical hands-on experience in teaching a second language, and knowledge and understanding of student backgrounds and prevailing conditions.

Unfortunately, poor reading skills, and therefore poor learning skills, have become a reality for an alarming number of children. As we know, reading and learning are the two things that determine the success of children during school career. Reading mastery is a basic building block of school success. First children learn to read; then they read to learn. Because children with reading problems and reading difficulties battle to read, they are therefore also hampered in the learning situation. When children are poor at reading, they fall behind in all of their schoolwork almost immediately. Furthermore, this reading failure can last an entire lifetime and make higher education and higher earnings out of reach. That is why we need to attack reading problems at an early stage with some knowledge of theory and lots of practical wisdom. No doubt, we need to know the basics of the different approaches, methods and techniques of teaching in general and language teaching in particular. However, that is not enough. The teacher has to take practical measures to help the learner. For example, a teacher of reading skills, like the teacher of any other subject or skills needs to maintain a diary to keep track of the learners’ problems, understand why those problems occur, think about
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remedial steps and then implement them. In particular, the teacher has to keep in mind the fact that reading in
a second language is different from reading in a first language.

How does Reading in a Second Language Differ from Reading in a First Language?

Second/foreign language teachers have to make special efforts to understand the reading behaviours and
reading problems of their students, because reading process is a highly personal activity and hence difficult
to observe and monitor. Spoken and written performance is easy to scrutinize; reading performance is not.
The reader himself may have an idea of what is happening when he is reading a text. However, quite often he
may not be in a position to explain the process. The position of an observer is more difficult as he has no clue
to help him access the complex psycholinguistic game that is being played inside the mind of the reader. As
Rumelhart (1977) points out, reading involves the reader, the text and the interaction between the reader and
the text. When we read a text, we try to process new information with reference to old information. Our mind
tries to discover connections between the old and the new. As Cook (1992) argues, “the L2 user does not
switch off the L1 while processing the L2, but has it constantly available” (p. 571). Cook further adds that
teachers of a second language must not and cannot treat it in isolation from the learners’ first language,
because the first language is present in the learners’ minds, whether the teacher wants it to be there or not (p.
584). The two languages interact with each other in all sorts of ways. All second language learners fall back
on their first language while processing second language input. The incoming fresh data include our
experience of the world and knowledge of the language (Widdowson 1983, Cook 1989).
Any reading, be it reading in the first language or second/foreign language, is an attempt at negotiation of meanings, an interaction between the reader and the text. However, reading by a monolingual reader is different from reading by a “bi-literate reader” (Singhal 1998). Reading in a second language is a bilingual process, not a monolingual event (Upton 1997). Bilingual readers have two languages available simultaneously. They consciously or subconsciously process the second language with reference to their first language.

Some research has been done in

(i) second language acquisition (Ellis 1985, 1997),
(ii) reading comprehension (Haenggi and Perfetti 1992, 1994),
(iv) bilingual proficiency (Bialystok 2000),
(v) language transfer (Gass and Selinker 1983, Odlin, et al. 1989), and
(vi) inter-lingual errors (Mahmoud 2000, 2002).

Sarig (1987) and Anderson (1991) rightly point out that reading is a highly individual activity. Nevertheless, there are general factors that influence reading speed and comprehension. One such factor is the reader’s mother tongue. However, we do not know for sure how people use their mother tongue when they read something written in another language. But, one thing is indisputably clear. As Cook (1992, p.571) points out, we cannot switch off our native language resources when we read in a second language. It is unrealistic
to treat a second language in isolation from the first language. Our native language is all the time in our minds. It is readily and constantly available to us. Its knowledge is connected in all sorts of ways with the second language. As Selinker (1992, p. 171) remarks, native language has “a principled role” in second language acquisition. This role of the first language has become a central issue in second language acquisition thinking.

Some Common Reading Problems

Sub-vocalization occurs when we pronounce internally what we are reading in order to grasp the meaning. For example, as I read this sentence I hear words in my head and from there I am able to understand. My vocal cords don’t move, as I can talk and read at the same time, and still hear the words internally. However, some readers may even move their lips. If they do that, they are auditory readers. This is the bad habit that is the hardest to drop. Auditory reading is difficult to beat because we are used to reading and hearing the words in our minds. Some people even go so far as to mumble the words. The problem with sub-vocalization is that it greatly slows down the reading process. A sub-vocalizer has to wait to hear the words for comprehension to kick in, and this unnecessarily delays reading speed. Eliminating sub-vocalization is a key to faster reading.

Fixation is that split second when our eyes focus on a letter or a word. Fixations are the actual stops or pauses between eye-spans when the eye is moving to its next fixation point. We cannot see while the eye moves so we do need the fixation points to see. The problem is most beginners fixate word by word by word.
The fixations slow them down because they are stopping on each and every word. The problem that comes up here is that, like the other obstacles, it impedes concentration and comprehension as well. The paradox with reading slowly is that it really hurts comprehension.

Regression is when the reader jumps back to earlier segment on the page due to some reason. We back skip go back over what we have previously read. Regressions are the most wasteful. They can really slow down the reader. People regress for many reasons.

- Sometimes a word is deleted to avoid repetition, but the reader thinks it is a mistake (My ideas are down-to-earth and my examples simple.).

- The word is difficult to spell (lieutenant).

- The word is difficult to pronounce (rendezvous).

- The word has silent letters in it (psychology).

- The word echoes some sound (abracadabra).

- The meaning of the word is not clear (“bovine spongiform encephalopathy” for “mad cow disease”).
• The word is similar to another word in its sound (“T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock is an impotent person.” The word “impotent” sounds like “important”).

• The expression is ambiguous (“Visiting guests can be a nuisance”).

• The expression shocks the reader in some way (“I spent the best part of my life sleeping in the arms of another man’s wife! I mean I spent my babyhood and childhood sleeping in the arms of my mother.”).

Some Reading Problems of Arab Learners of English

Anyone who has taught English as a foreign language in the Arab world is familiar with the problems these learners face in learning English. As we know, Arabic is a non-Romanized language and so its native speakers face special challenges in learning to read. These problems result from:

the English alphabet,

the left-to-right direction of English texts, and

the complex letter-sound correspondences of English.
These factors result in the following common problems:

reverse visualization
fixation,
subvocalization and
regression.

We will restrict the scope of the present paper to the problem of reverse visualization and resulting regressions caused by the right-to-left writing system of the Arabic language. However, before we discuss this specific difficulty, we will briefly mention some common problems of Arab readers of English.

Some work has already been done on some problems of Arabic speaking learners of English. Let me briefly mention two such attempts. One is a study by Ryan and Meara (1996), who claim that Arabic speaking learners are “vowel blind”. They think that this blindness is a result of the tri-consonantal vocabulary patterns in Arabic. They illustrate their intuitive claim with a set of examples. They offer katab (he wrote), yiktib (he writes), kaatib (clerk), kitaab (book), maktab (office), and maktaba (library) as examples of the K-T-B tri-consonantal root. As we can see, all these words are related formally as well as semantically. They all contain the three consonants (K-T-B) and they are related in their meaning (writing, book, library, office, clerk). In their opinion, Arabic speakers make meanings mainly on the basis of the three consonants, not so much on the basis of the vowels between the consonants. In other words, the three consonants are enough to assume that the word that contains them is related to other words in the same domain. Thus in Arabic, vowels
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are secondary to consonants. But, the case of English is different. Ryan and Meara (1996) give a set of examples from English to show that consonants are not the only clue to the semantics of words. To cite one case, the R-D-R tri-consonantal root is not enough for us to relate different words to the same domain. For example, reader, radar, rider and raider have the three consonants (R-D-R) in them, but they do not belong to the same domain. The R-D-R tri-consonantal root is shared by words that are not semantically related. Do consonantal clues help us relate words semantically in English? Well, it is not impossible to find examples of certain combinations of sounds that tend to go together with certain meanings in English too. For example, the “sn” combination in English often suggests something to do with breathing noises and nose: sniff, sneeze, snout, snot, sneer, stuff, snorkel, snooze, snore, snicker, snivel, snort and snuffle. A person who goes round with their nose in the air might be snooty, might snub people, and a bit of a snob. Another case is that of the form sm(o), which can be said to carry similar meanings: smoke, smoker and smoulder. The following is yet another set of words that have some semantic similarity: jingle, juggle, jet, jiggle, jitney, jitterbug, jitters, jive, jog, joggle, jolt, jostle, journey and jump. However, such combinations are exceptions and are often misleading. That is to say, we cannot guess the semantic field by just looking at the consonants; we need to look at the vowels too in order to get to the meaning. Having compared the importance of consonants in Arabic and English for word recognition, Ryan and Meara argue that this dominance of consonants in Arabic is a cause of the vowel blindness among Arabic speaking learners of English.

The other study is by Mahmoud (2002), who examines how Arab learners of English interpret English idioms. For example, day after day, red-faced, head over heels and stretch one’s legs mean every day,
embarrassed, completely, and take a walk respectively in British English; but Arab learners of English interpret them as every other day, furious, upside down and lie down respectively.

Directionality and Reverse Visualization Problem

Directionality is another visual skill important for academic success. One test for this skill is illustrated by a figure that represents a duck and a rabbit at the same time. If the visual reflex is from left-to-right, a duck will be seen. On the contrary, if the visual reflex is from right-to-left, a rabbit will be seen. There is a popular psychological test that requires a spectator to answer if s/he visualizes an old woman or a young woman in the picture. The perception depends on how one approaches the picture, on whether one starts the visual reflex from left or from right. This is just one test out of a series to determine the directionality of the visual reflex.

As far as languages are concerned, some have vertical orientation and some have horizontal orientation. Vertical orientation languages are usually written from top to bottom, and horizontal orientation languages are usually written from left to right. Most languages are written from left to right: English, German, French, all seventeen Indian languages, and Vietnamese are some examples. A few languages are written from right to left: Arabic and Hebrew are two examples. It is just a convention of our cultures that the English language is written from left to right and the Arabic language is written from right to left.
Because of the right to left orientation of Arabic, directionality is a serious problem for Arab learners of English. One of the common problems with them is optical reversal. Children with this kind of problem often confuse letters like “b” and “d”, “q” and “p”. This tendency toward mono-phonemic reversal is extended to bi-phonemic reversals. As a result, they sometimes read rat as tar, and won as now. Such reversals may or may not produce semantically meaningful units. For example, when the student reads boor as door, bitch as ditch, big as dig, and bark as dark, the reversal is lexically productive and might lead to misinterpretation; but when the student reads quick as puick, the reversal does not yield an English word. Fortunately, this tendency toward reverse visualization is not an incurable problem. I have tried the following exercises with some Arab learners.

Remedial Activities for Reverse Visualization

Reverse visualization is a common phenomenon among the people whose native language follows the right-to-left writing system such as Arabic and Hebrew. Fortunately, with a little effort reverse visualization can be corrected. The teacher needs to select his/her activities carefully to help the learners overcome the problem. Here are a few remedial exercises:

i) Give them practice in words they usually misread:

Many Arab learners of English visualize words and their spellings in a wrong way. Visualization is the ultimate visual skill. This is similar to being able to see things in the mind’s eye. The ability to visualize is closely related to the ability to abstract from specifics and the ability to visualize is deeply involved in this
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process. One way is to make the learners see the difference between from and form, blow and bowl, broad
and board, flow and fowl, lion and loin, split and spilt, etc.

ii) Give them unidirectional spelling words that they cannot read from right-to-left:

Look at the following words carefully: read, eat, drink, get, need, and back. Can you read them from right-
to-left? Do you get new words from the ones you can?

iii) Give them retronyms (bidirectional spelling words) that they can read from right-to-left:

Look at the following words carefully: bud, but, dam, deer, gel, god, gum, lived, loop, loot, mood, nap, not,
pat, tap, tip, top, war, and was. Can you read them from right-to-left? Do you get new words when you read
them like that? Write down the new words and check their meanings with the help of a dictionary.

iv) Give them tautonyms (bidirectional homophonic spelling words) that they can read from left-to-right and
right-to-left:

Look at the following words and their spellings carefully. First read them from left to right. Then read them
from right to left: dad, deed, dud, eye, mum/mom, noon, nun, peep, and pop.

Do you get new words when you read them from right-to-left?

Reverse visualization causes multiple regressions during second/foreign language reading process. As we
have noted earlier, regressions are the most wasteful as they considerably slow down reading speed and
comprehension. I have tried some strategies to help students with regression problem.
Regression Problem

As we have recorded earlier, second/foreign language readers at the elementary and intermediate stages regress for various reasons, for example,

* They encounter words that have silent letters: “k” and “p” as in *knife*, *receipt*.

* They come across words that contain letters that represent different sounds: “a” in *fat*, *father*, *fall*, *woman* and *fate*.

Arab readers of English regress particularly due to the following reason:

* They come across words that use the same letters in different sequences, for example, *board* and *broad*, *diary* and *dairy*.

Remedial Activities for Regression Problem
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v) Tell them to read the text until the end:

Perhaps the best way to overcome regression is to help the learners to read the text until the end of the section before jumping back. This alone will massively reduce the need to re-read what they have already covered. The teacher can ask students to read several short passages without stopping. Later, he can give them longer texts.

vi) Give them brief passages containing wrongly spelt words and ask them to read them fast:

Read aloud the following passages as fast as you can without going back to what you have already read:

i) I cdnuolt blveiee taht I cluod aulaclty uesdnatnrd waht I was rdanieg The phaonmneal pweor of the hmuan mnid Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae. Theset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Amzanig huh? yaeh and I awlyas thought slpeling was ipmorantt

ii) “If you wnat to raed fahtser, you suhold raed sipmle sorteis ervey day. Moroveer, you should not wrroy abuot the slieplng of inviduisal wrods. Tehn olny can you icnaerse yuor raednid seped. Wehn you are raeding you shluod not re-raed wrods and netnees taht you have arlaedy raed.”

iii) Well, here’s the answer to why you forgot to carry your umbrella even as dark coulds thundered outside.

(Times of India, Oct. 25, 2005)
The teacher listens to the student and notes how many times s/he regresses. The teacher gives away prizes to the students who read the passage without regressions.

**Conclusion**

The paper discusses and illustrates the reading difficulties of Arab learners of English. These problems stem from several reasons such as the nature of the English alphabet, the letter-sound disparity of the English language, and the reverse directionality of the English writing system, as compared to Arabic writing system. These factors lead to bad reading habits like fixation, regression, sub-vocalization, and reverse visualization. One cause is the phonological differences between Arabic and English. For example, Arabic does not have /p/ sound. Consequently, learners find it quite difficult to articulate words that contain /p/ sound. Most Arab speakers of English replace /p/ with /b/. So when they want to say *pear* and *pad*, they end up saying *bear* and *bad* respectively. The listener has to get used to this kind of accent in order to understand what the speaker is saying. Moreover, /f/ and /v/ are allophonic variants in Arabic; as a result it is rather difficult for the listener to distinguish between words such as *very* and *ferry*, *van* and *fan*. The awareness of the difference between /p/ and /b/, and /f/ and /v/ created by their English teacher helps the students in the long run. However, at the initial stage, this awareness seems to have an adverse effect on reading speed and comprehension, because the Arab reader vocalizes/sub-vocalizes fixates and regresses over words that have /p/, /f/ and /v/ sounds in them. A second factor is the phonological similarities between some English words and Arabic taboo words. They consciously or subconsciously associate these words with similar sounding Arabic words, especially taboo words. A third factor is the reverse direction of the English language writing system, as compared to
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the Arabic right-to-left writing system. The present paper limits its scope to the discussion of reading problems stemming from this oppositeness. The resulting reverse visualization causes multiple regressions, fixations, and sub-vocalizations. Consequently, reading speed and comprehension are adversely affected. Having discussed these problems, the paper offers a few exercises that can help overcome or at least minimize these problems.

Profile

Dr. Z. N. Patil is a Professor of English in the Department of Training and Development, School of English Language Education of the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. Besides teaching English for specific and practical purposes, he organizes consultancy workshops for government and private firms in India. He taught English to pre-service diplomats and in-service seaport officers in Vietnam from 1999 to 2002 and served as Senior English Language Adviser in Japan from 2003 to 2006. His major publications include Style in Indian English Fiction: A study in politeness strategies (New Delhi: Prestige Publishers, 1994) and Spoken English for Vietnamese Learners (Hanoi: The World Publishers, 2002). He is associated with online “Asian EFL Journal” (Associate Editor till October 2007; Regional Advisor since then), “Asian ESP Journal” (Senior Editor), “The Linguistics Journal” (Senior Associate Editor), “TESOL Law Journal” (Regional Advisor), “Journal of English as an International Language” (Senior Advisor: since 2007), “Iranian Journal of Language Studies” (Regional Advisor/Editor: since 2006), “Journal of Educational Technology” (Member of Editorial Team), and “Journal of Research Practice” (Reviewer: since 2005).
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Abstract

Although postgraduate researchers make up a high percentage of the international students in higher education around the world, they are particularly vulnerable to the relatively high incompletion and failure rates. Good research and academic writing skills are needed to avoid some of the many obstacles faced. This paper develops a framework and self-help guide which may assist PhD students in particular to achieve more effective academic dissertation design and writing. The approach outlined below has been further refined elsewhere in terms of the particular links between language and knowledge building, and also in relation to the second language learning challenges facing many international students (Richards, 2010). Here we focus on the integrated aspects of the design and writing process which might be developed with appropriate ‘focus and structure’ towards a chosen academic problem or topic of inquiry.

Introduction:

There are both ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ reasons why postgraduate researchers struggle to complete a research dissertation. The ‘macro’ factors consist of various environmental, attitudinal and personal issues which are often difficult for universities to support. Conversely, most postgraduate researchers also struggle with a range of ‘micro’ factors which relate to the obstacles involved in achieving a sustainable research design and effective writing strategies.
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which articulate and disseminate or communicate a focus and structure of inquiry. These ‘micro’ aspects thus relate to the specific stages and aspects of how many postgraduate researchers seem to get disorientated and confused at any or all of the four key stages of research and writing – that is the stages of developing a topic focus, framing this in relation to a literature review, further grounding this in the empirical aspect of data collection and analysis, and finally in relation to the writing up process as an integral process of communication and not just a retrospective report. This paper is concerned with achieving or emerging a more integrated approach to the stages and aspects of the academic research and writing process.

Part 1. The emergent approach: An antidote for ineffective approaches to writing/research

The table outlines a contrast between a more ad hoc approach on the left to the academic research and writing process, and on the right a more integrated or emergent approach. The left column thus lists the often disconnected stages and aspects of what might be called a typically ad hoc approach. Such an example of a dissertation design and written output often fails to achieve or develop a clear inquiry focus which links a problem to a question and also some specific issue or perspective to a recognizably useful or relevant focus and structure. Likewise our example of an ad hoc approach typically involves a literature review which tends to read more like an annotated bibliography rather than an academic framework for locating the academic relevance and implications of the inquiry undertaken. Just as postgraduates often get lost in the attempt to
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find a relevant topic of research inquiry so too they can become easily disorientated by an unfocused reading strategy.

A more integrated approach will clarify the connections between a literature review contextualization of the chosen inquiry focus and the particular methodological design for an empirical contextualization through some specific process of data collection and analysis. This is often reflected in a superficially descriptive approach to the data building process which may also involve evaluation with no particular problem-solving or integrating purpose. In this way, we might characterize an ad hoc approach as a somewhat hasty and superficial as well as retrospective or disconnected approach to the academic research and writing process.

Table #1: From an ad hoc to a more integrated or ‘emergent’ approach to academic research and writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical ‘non-relevant’ (descriptive and/or ad hoc) approach</th>
<th>Antidote: a relevant research problem/focus question should more integrally link sections of thesis of paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>❖ No key focus question – general topic or vague perspective (and/or too many conflicting foci/questions)</td>
<td>❖ Introduction – a viable focus question links specific problem/context and general relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Literature review also descriptive and sample/case study either decontextualised</td>
<td>❖ Literature review situates the research focus and design in ‘exemplifying’ academic</td>
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</tbody>
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<th>or context-specific/confused</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>❖ All stages of research process and elements of thesis/project defined in isolation (write-up of research is ad hoc or disconnected)</td>
<td>❖ Different stages and elements are meaningfully linked in terms of an integral or cohesive design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Methodology merely descriptive (i.e. retrospective or non-relevant evaluation)</td>
<td>❖ Methodology thus above all else refers to an appropriate design strategy for exploring and responding to an organizing focus question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ Overall, an ad hoc, retrospective and ultimately hasty or superficial notion of the inquiry process, and contribution to human knowledge</td>
<td>❖ Supported by appropriate methods of ‘triangulation’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❖ The writing up of a dissertation/paper thus also tells the ‘story’ of how findings/outcomes/ conclusions (etc.) are related to initial focus question and research problem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adapted from Richards 2009*

The inherently important role of language in the knowledge building process should be emphasized in the writing up process. An effective research design focus and structure should be reflected in more integrated aspects of interpretive as well as descriptive triangulation. This should also be linked to integrated aspects of grammatical cohesion (e.g. the use of connectors to
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link paragraphs, sub-sections and the main sections of a coherent academic dissertation) as well as the lexical coherence of a prioritized and linked set of key words and related concepts – which link as well as inform each of the key sections of a dissertation. As developed elsewhere, this provides a framework for not only linking ‘Academic Discourse’ (ranging from a general form such as ‘Academic English through to the particular discourses of different areas of knowledge) and research methodology, but also each of the particular sections of a dissertation.

An emergent approach to the writing process thus lies in between the poles represented by the spontaneous or innovative approach known as ‘process writing’ on one hand, and on the other the more disciplined approach to structuring writing through such techniques as the use of headings and subheadings. An emergent approach will thus involve both directly structured and organically connected links between sets of keywords supported by an the unfolding as well as direct links of a dissertation’s grammatical cohesion. On this basis, the different sections of a dissertation should all contribute to academic research and writing process as an integrated mode of knowledge building. This might be imagined in the pyramidal convergences between the design purposes of an introduction, the concept or topic infrastructure of a literature review, the data accumulation and the information pyramid of the data collection and analysis.

In the emergent approach postgraduate researchers are encouraged to recognize that the writing process and the dissertation itself is not something which just happens in a hasty or retrospective way at the end of an inquiry process. Rather writing should begin at the outset of the inquiry
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process and reflect the effort to identify a relevant problem and articulate a research question on one hand, and on the other to refine a ‘focus’ and then develop this into a working structure of ‘thread of inquiry’. In the initial stages of writing researchers should not worry too much about getting the form correct. Rather they should attend to ‘emerging’ a sustainable direction and overall structure of inquiry in terms of a developing sense of both understanding and explanation. The middle stages of an applied research design and the writing process should converge as a knowledge building process which integrates the various elements of the dissertation. The importance of revision is emphasized especially in the later stages in terms of (a) the polishing, refining, and 'further prioritizing' of link between overall focus and specific parts and examples (e.g. adding further details and examples); and (b) the dialogue with a particular ‘reader’ as a way of making more accessible, coherent and clear as a ‘thread’ of inquiry or argument.

Table 2 below outlines an ‘academic writing’ checklist using the emergent approach to achieve more effective focus and integration. As developed more fully in Part B below, it also provides a means for considering how the elements and stages of academic writing are meaningfully linked in terms of an integral or cohesive design based around a relevant focus question. The background to and rationale for this should be indicated in the introduction. The literature review should provide the framework for locating or situating the academic relevance of the inquiry within a recognized area as well as an established ‘hierarchy’ of knowledge of some
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kind. The methodology of evaluation should be pertinent to the methodology of design – in turn, reflecting the strategy needed to respond effectively and appropriately to the initial focus question. All the elements of the written thesis or paper should recapitulate, inform and frame the developed thread of inquiry – that is, represent the ‘story’ of the inquiry as well as explain the connection between the focus question and specific findings or outcomes.

Table #2: Emergent method - academic thesis/writing checklist

- Does the writing directly or indirectly address a central focus question which provides some particular angle or perspective on an area or topic of relevant inquiry?
- Is the focus question framed in relation to some relevant ‘aim’ linked to a particular context and implied audience?
- Is the focus question ‘unpacked’ in relation to series of guiding sub-questions (we recommend three)?
- Does the introduction contextualize both the general and particular relevance of the inquiry or study?
- Does the literature review or selective referencing effectively situate the academic or intellectual relevance of the central focus – in terms of either a general topic or specific area of recognized significance?
- Does the research or inquiry design represent a methodology or strategy to
appropriately and effectively address an implicit or explicit focus question, issue or problem - in terms of a relevant means or process of evaluating the response to this?

- Does the critical discussion which reports on the inquiry process (and, if appropriate, data analysis) progressively and meaningfully address the key components of a focus question in terms a structured connection between evidence and findings?

- Does the conclusion pull the threads of inquiry together in terms of an overall response to a central focus question – with a particular emphasis on how the inquiry has productively contributed to human knowledge-building with either links back to the literature review/established areas and/or forward to possible further implications and inquiry?

- Does the writing effectively use transition words, headings, and introductory/concluding sub-sections to reinforce the sense of a progressive thread of inquiry which has internal integrity and relevance?

- Above all else, is there an overall and developing sense of the writer putting a series of discussions, ideas and references into their ‘own words’ to reflect a sense of convergent understanding?

Adapted from Richards 2009
Part B. Revisiting the key sections of academic thesis writing and research/project design

Introduction (including an initial abstract)

The primary function of an introductory section or chapter is, of course, to provide a background context to the rationale and prioritized outcomes and audience for a particular chosen focus of inquiry. A common mistake in many postgraduate dissertations is to make the introduction a shortened version of the literature review section to follow. The introduction section is an opportunity to meaningfully contextualize a chosen focus in terms of the distinct or related aspects of practical context, personal interest and projected applications of the general study to be undertaken. In other words an introduction should serve to explain the relevance of chosen research problem or question and associated inquiry in mainly concrete, common-sense and meaningful terms and not just academic references. An effective introduction should also ground the main research problem or issue and either directly or indirectly verbalize this in terms of a central research question and key (we recommend three as a generic structure of inquiry) supporting research questions. Many postgraduate dissertations fail to do this. The abstract is arguably the most important section of a dissertation and should summarize the whole introduction section in relation the overall development as well as purposes of both an academic project and the dissertation as an integrated writing process.
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Many postgraduate research literature reviews tend to read like an annotated bibliography, either an ad hoc record of reading or descriptive listing of readings linked to a central and related topics. A central purpose of literature reviews in dissertation writing is to academically contextualize and also ‘situate’ a chosen focus of either applied or fundamental inquiry in relation to a framework of established topics and related concepts both general and particular. The most effective literature review will thus reflect a trajectory from the general to the particular in terms of locating the key concepts of a particular research question. Dissertations without a clear focus question, or related topic, issue or problem tend to result in descriptive and general literature reviews which do not have a great or effective link to an applied focus of inquiry. Such a tendency is exemplified by the provision of some models to new researchers which advise two distinct literature reviews which do not ever really connect – one an ‘empirical’ literature review and the other a ‘theoretical’ literature review. Whilst perhaps a provisionally useful distinction in some projects, this is often an artificial distinction which cannot ultimately be sustained. It is also an approach which particularly encourages a disconnected view of the relation between theory and practice (and thus ‘mind-body’, ‘thinking-doing’, rationalism-empiricism, etc.).

Methodology

The best way to appreciate the guiding notion of methodology and how it relates to the overall design of a thesis (or other writing) as well as an applied project is perhaps in the following
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terms: the methodology of an inquiry-based research project or writing pertains to the overall strategy of the research design to address an implicit or explicit focus question, issue or problem in terms of an appropriate and relevant means or process of evaluating the response (to the initial or central question). In short, the concept of methodology of academic research design ultimately refers to an organizing strategy of knowledge-building which precedes and should inform the methodology of research evaluation. However many postgraduate research students are required choose either a quantitative or qualitative method of evaluation before they have research problem, question or design. Thus the concept of methodology is often confused with the particular methods chosen to achieve some kind of data collection, analysis and triangulation of evidence. The more relevant contrast is rather between descriptive and interpretive applications of methodology and this applies both to quantitative and qualitative approaches to research evaluation.

Data analysis and/or findings

Generally speaking, this section or chapter – as well as stage of project development - serves to organize different kinds of evidence conceived to assist with answering a focus question grounded in a particular context of relevance. An ad hoc approach will typically present data in a de-contextualized vacuum and/or project findings in a discrete with little or no systemic let alone strategic connection to either “the data” or any informing inquiry purpose or focus. As well as encouraging a trajectory of analysis and knowledge-building proceeding from the merely
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descriptive to a more strategic, convergent and (dialogically) interpretative approach, the method outlined above (i.e. of focusing on a central question linked to three supporting questions) provides an exemplary strategy for organizing the analysis of any relevant data and generation of findings. The use of research questions as a meaningful knowledge building framework to organize the sequence and connections between data-gathering questions constitutes what might be called a data-gathering framework which also usefully prioritises and focuses on who, where and how relevant data and information might be collected. Such a framework is very efficient and effective in generating findings in terms of a sequence, order and relevance which lends itself to an emergent approach to the writing process.

The process of writing thus replicates the inquiry design process either directly or inversely in terms of building on evidence-related responses to a series of guiding questions transformed into related topics and headings. In short, the method above is useful because it encourages both ‘thinking’ and ‘writing’ in terms of building progressively and interpretively on succinct, related and increasingly explicit and direct responses to a central question, issue or aim. Depending on the kind of project or inquiry undertaken, one would expect to see a meaningfully constructed chapter or discussion which either leads up to and includes an overall response to the central focus question or a basis for critical further discussion in a separate section or chapter.

Discussion and/or conclusion
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‘Critical further discussion’ may take the form of either directly expounding on the implications of the ‘findings’ of a critical inquiry or, rather, taking a more direct and speculative focus. In any case, depending on whether the project is more practically or conceptually/theoretically orientated, the focus of critical discussion can be linked to distinct or convergent notions of ‘practical implications’, ‘new frameworks’ of understanding, or relevance in terms of established or possible future links and interventions vis-à-vis an earlier review of ‘the literature’ (i.e. fields and debates of focused academic relevance). Thus, if ‘critical further discussion’ is not included or developed in either a findings section/chapter or a separate section/chapter, it may be briefly gestured to in a short concluding section or chapter. In sum, whether extensively developed or only briefly outlined, the main function of the concluding sections of academic inquiry and writing is to get to the very heart and substance of a meaningful response to a central focus question.

‘Re-vision’ process (editing and revision)

The revision (or rather re-vision) of any effective academic inquiry and writing will ever leave open or take up the opportunity for further refinement of ‘focus and structure’. If this is not a retrospective ‘rescue job’ then hopefully the meaningful focus and direction initially outlined at the outset has generally been translated into a dynamic and integral series of stages and sections or chapters – so that only minor refinements are needed. In contrast to how the editing process focuses on formatting and error correction, the revision process focuses on the overall coherence
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and cohesion of academic writing as a form of communication. Thus the notion of revision alternately refers to a projected audience on one hand, and on the development of an initial into an integral ‘thread of inquiry’ linking all the elements and part of a dissertation. These connections are clarified as much as possible through the wording and sequence of headings and sub-headings on one hand, and the structured transitions in each section or chapter epitomized most importantly by introductory and concluding/summarizing paragraphs on the other. In this way ‘the thread’ of an inquiry vision is developed in a way that tries to ensure as much as possible that a reader (or examiner) will not get lost and will be able to recognize the focus, structure and basic integrity of your academic inquiry and writing.

Summary

Many postgraduate researchers tend to struggle with the ‘micro’ aspects of undertaking a postgraduate dissertation degree which relate to the specific stages and aspects of the academic research and writing process. In this way many tend to get disorientated or confused at any or all of the four key stages of inquiry which correspond to the main sections of a dissertation. In this paper we have outlined a strategy for achieving a more integrated approach from the outset of the inquiry process. This involves the initial design of a relevant focus and structure which is then supported as an emergent process of unfolding inquiry along the integrated lines of interdependent dissertation aspects linked to a particular ‘thread of inquiry’. In this way the academic research and writing process might be conceptualized as a corridor of relevant
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knowledge building linked to a particular authentic problem or relevant purpose and outcome – a corridor which might also be supported by academic supervisors or mentors as well as the above as a kind of self-help guide. Such an approach might also be productively used to better assist the learning of ‘academic English’ - especially by international students for whom English or any other language is a second or foreign language.

References


Bio: Professor Dr. Cameron Richards

Dr. Cameron Richards is a Professor within the Perdana School of Science, Technology and Innovation Policy studies within the University of Technology Malaysia (UTM). His current academic work and interests especially focuses on policy studies and research on one hand, and assisting both postgraduate students and colleagues with more effective models and practices of academic research inquiry, academic writing and general ‘knowledge-building’ on the other. He
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retains long term interests in rhetoric, cross-cultural communication and methodology studies which inform his interdisciplinary interest in the global convergence of different knowledge systems. As well as having worked previously at the Queensland University of Technology and the University of Western Australia, he has also worked extensively in Asia including past positions at the Singapore National Institute of Education (NTU) and the Hong Kong Institute of Education.
ELT Materials Writing Projects: Challenges of Professional Communication

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Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges associated with collaboration on the ELT Materials Writing projects at the university level. The study looks into the professional, psychological and socio-cultural variables that might have caused the success or failure of these projects. More specifically, it examines the dynamics of group and peer communication which prevailed in ELT Materials Writing Projects at the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University. The paper concludes by offering guidelines that will help future writers to establish and maintain effective communication among team members to enhance their project chances for success.
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Key Words - communication, materials writing project, psychological and socio-cultural factors, team work.

Introduction

While there is a consensus regarding the centrality of textbook use in the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University, there is a dilemma surrounding the selection of suitable textbooks. Commercially produced textbooks are abundant, and sometimes they offer complete packages of materials. They are also easy to acquire as long as the institution has adequate funding to purchase them. However, there are inherent problems in most of these textbooks. They are produced for the global market and so are targeting a wide array of learners worldwide (Masuhara and Tomlinson, 2008). Moreover, these textbooks were not written based on needs analysis or research conducted in the local context, aspects which experts in the field deem very important (Klein, 1990/1991; Malik, 2010, Richard, 2001; Yan, 2007). As a result, the language and contexts used in these textbooks are contrived and so students can neither really identify with them nor find them stimulating or meaningful. Therefore, they are woefully inadequate for the Omani context since they are not tailor-made to suit the Omani learners’ needs and culture.

For these reasons, adapting some of these textbooks to the Omani context has proven to be an expensive endeavor. The amount of supplementary materials produced for the purpose of
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adaptation is sometimes as voluminous as the textbooks themselves. Engaging in such adaptations is very time consuming and not worthwhile in the long run as authors produce new additions annually which render old adaptations obsolete as they might not go hand in hand with the content or structure of the new edition. Due to this and many other reasons, the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University has made it its task to produce its own materials which are appropriate for the local context in terms of language level, content and topics, skills, techniques and strategies in focus. However, many variables have played a role in the success or failure of these projects. These variables relate to the professional, psychological and socio-cultural environment which hosted these projects. A thorough investigation of these variables is hence necessary to find out what could make or break a materials’ writing project - a step that could minimize future losses and increase success of these projects.

Brief description of the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU henceforth) is the only national university in Oman which is government-funded and so it offers 100 % free education for its students. The university uses English as a medium of instruction in all its science based colleges, College of Commerce and several other specializations in the Colleges of Law, Education and Arts and Social Sciences. Since its inception, the university has realized the importance of equipping students with the prerequisite English language skills to help them succeed in their majors. To this end, it has established a Language Centre to teach English to all university students.
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Currently, the Language Centre teaches foundation level English (a non-credit program), credit level English which is mainly English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for academic purposes (EAP). Students start with the non-credit foundation English; and once they finish it, they take English credit courses which are divided into programs each of which focuses on a specific college. The English for Science Program, for example, teaches English courses that focus on content that is predominantly science based. The English for Engineering Program teaches English for Engineering, and so on.

Similar to all educational contexts, the three main ingredients in these programs are the students, the teachers and the materials used in the instructional process. The students are the recipients of the instruction. The teachers are the agents that deliver and direct instruction. They interact with students using certain instructional materials- usually in the form of textbooks- as a context for both learning and interaction. Therefore, textbooks are viewed as very important by most of the teachers at the Language Centre. Due to that, the textbook has always been of central importance in both the intensive and credit English language programs.

Examples of materials writing projects executed at the Language Centre

The materials writing projects implemented at the Language Centre are of different ranges and magnitudes. Some of these projects are quite extensive spanning across different programs or levels, and some are program specific. Many of these projects proved to be successful but
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some did not succeed in achieving the desired results. Success is measured here by the continuation of a certain project with regard to the ability of the project team members to build a common language and shared assumptions (Manathunga, 2009, p.38) and to produce materials that have worked with the target language learners. Lack of success is measured by the termination of the project due to conflicts of different sorts that arose in the team with regard to lack of synergy in the team, communication conflicts, ineffective performance of certain team members, malfunctioned internal and external communication practices, inability to produce appropriate, interesting and enjoyable materials and to work in teams across such cultural boundaries as boundaries “between various workplace cultures” (Esslinger and C. McCorkle, 1985, p.165).

One example of a successful extensive project was “Explore Writing” which focused on the lower three levels of the intensive program (levels 2, 3 and 4). The project was envisaged by the Language Centre administration following an extensive curriculum evaluation and revision project of the whole intensive program which was done in 2004 and 2005. The project aimed at producing writing materials using a text-driven approach and focused on providing meaningful language and context to students. The Language Centre wanted to market these textbooks at least in Oman to benefit other institutions which are looking for appropriate writing textbooks for their foundation students. Therefore, the centre took extra care in following copyright laws very strictly. To execute the project, the Language Centre
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administration planned the process very meticulously prior to implementation. Still, changes had to be introduced to the process owing to circumstances that emerged during the implementation process.

This huge writing project commenced with a call for applications to the position of “materials writer” that was sent via email to all Language Centre faculty in fall 2006. The call clarified the requisite skills, abilities and responsibilities that the potential writers should have, namely cognizance of the Arabic culture and Omani culture in particular; interest in writing teaching materials; relevance of experience; ability to work in teams; willingness to work in the Language Centre for at least four years after receiving training in materials writing; awareness of the various teaching and learning styles and strategies; and ability to accept constructive criticism and feedback from others and hence to alter the materials based on the received feedback. Materials writers had the right to a reduced teaching load as long as they were actively engaged in the project.

To decide which of the applicants matched these criteria a panel was formed. The panellists chose six team members to produce the required materials. To guarantee the production of high quality materials and smooth administration and management of the project, team members were asked to focus the materials writing task. Other responsibilities were delegated to a “think tank” team that would do the initial planning, administration and management of the project, an editorial board that would function as an internal referee body and that would
perform on-going and final reviewing and editing of the materials, a “text bank” team that would collect texts and pictures for the writers to chose from, and a “designers”’ team that would draw pictures and illustrations befitting the Omani context.

The start-up of the project encouraged extensive reading of existing documentation found at the Language Centre especially those pertaining to the results of the extensive evaluation of the curriculum held in 2004 and 2005 as well as an extensive literature review of existing theories and approaches on teaching writing. In addition, the chosen writers went through rigorous training by two well known trainers who are textbook writers themselves. Throughout these tasks, the team of the selected writers met together, asked questions and shared ideas.

Indeed, the project was a joyful and rewarding experience. It provided its participants with the opportunity to be creative and demonstrate their own individual creativity, share their knowledge, experiences and skills and learn from the others and with the others. However, the members of all teams had many moments of frustration and pain. Regretfully, three of the six selected writers were asked to leave the team due to their inability to produce suitable materials. Two of these writers had difficulty adapting to the chosen approach for the materials and producing engaging materials. The third writer had a problem accepting feedback and could not adapt the materials to the students’ needs. Some of the members of the “think tank” faced problems in explaining the path to the success of the project and communicating their approach to the materials writers. Sometimes the writers went from mere consuming whatever was
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provided to them by the “text team” members instead of coming up with their own innovative ideas and creating their own texts, activities or assignments. In some cases the texts were chosen by the “text team” and suggested to the individual material writers who later contextualized and customized them to the needs of the students to their own liking. In these cases the procedures and approaches were sometimes not well communicated to the other writers or team members, and consequently were not accepted. The inability to share and to voice thoughts, ideas and opinions, and sometimes even to listen to the views of the others led to psychological and communication problems. These problems were made more complex when more experienced team members acted as mentors to their colleagues and insisted on their own classroom experiences, some specific methodologies and approaches to bear on the materials. However, members often discussed things and reached middle-grounds, something that contributed to the eventual success of the project.

Due to the support of the Language Centre administration and the hard work of the teams, this project was fortunately finalized yielding a series of excellent writing books called “Explore Writing” and are to be used for levels 2, 3 and 4 of the intensive program. The feedback that the materials writers received from teachers and students proved that the materials are working very well in the classrooms.

While the “Explore Writing” project proved to be a successful one, some other extensive materials writing projects, unfortunately, fell apart or got postponed to an indefinite time. An Arab World English Journal
example of such projects is a speaking and listening materials writing project. This project was terminated or postponed due to a number of reasons, one of which is lack of synergy between the writers’ perceptions regarding the approach to be followed in the envisioned textbooks. The project was too ambitious and the members required resources and equipment that were not readily available in the classrooms. A few conflicts happened between pairs working together due to difference in perceptions, ideas and personality factors. Therefore, a pair or two had to change members. The factors that led to the postponement of this project were very complex. The lack of a clear vision and a consensus regarding the approach coupled with personality clashes made effective communication quite impossible among some team members, which in turn caused the collapse of the project.

The Language Centre also commissions small scale projects, where there is only one writer supervised by a program coordinator. The materials produced by the writer receive feedback from the program coordinator (project leader) throughout the design process and revisions are made during the piloting stage. No professional training is provided in such individual projects and it is only experienced teachers who propose and conduct such projects.

Case study

The purpose of the study The present study endeavours to discuss the challenges of communication within the Language Centre project teams of materials writers, their perceptions
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about such aspects as team selection, team dynamics including various types of internal and external communications, final product and intended audience. By reporting the results of the survey the authors look into how to create synergy among the teams of material writers to achieve effective communication and enhance the chances for the success of future projects or teams.

Questionnaire History In materials development and writing, the role of the writer is not merely limited to the adaptation or creation of texts and exercises that meet the needs of his/her target students; rather, the writer acts as a mediator that negotiates ideas, beliefs about students’ needs, learning capabilities and styles with other individuals and groups from within and without the Language Centre. Hence, the writer is by no means the first and the only party involved in the process of materials writing. At the Language Centre the writer is, on the one hand, an individual involved in various types of informal and formal internal communications, face-to-face and computer-mediated interactions (via e-mail and the virtual Language Centre website) with the other writers in the team. S/he and the rest of the team members are also involved in various types of external communications with two other bodies that are as creative as s/he is. The first body is the one that represents the students and their teachers, and the second one represents the editorial board. The editorial board functions as an internal refereeing body that provides detailed feedback on the materials to the writers. The board can accept or reject materials; therefore, it is a decision making body in its own right. The Director of the
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Language Centre is involved in the decision making process as s/he provides the general guidelines or the blueprints for the project. Although the writers do not often interact directly with her/him, they do sometimes meet to brainstorm, thrash out ideas and iron out disagreements. In large projects, the trainers and the designers are also involved in the process of providing feedback and so they serve as the external referees for the project.

The relationships between these parties and the writer or team of writers might not always be crystal clear from the outset to all involved. Although the roles of each member in the team are identified from the very beginning, these might change to adapt to new circumstances and changes in the group memberships or dynamics. Therefore, socio-cultural, linguistic as well as personal factors may play a significant role in the process of designing and developing the materials the three bodies have worked on. In the present study, the researchers were interested in investigating the dynamics of the communication processes between the parties involved in the materials design in order to shed light on what could contribute to the success or failure of these projects.

The process of communication in the Materials Writing Projects is often a two-way or three-way street. The writers have to communicate with the teachers piloting the materials; they answer their questions and receive their feedback regarding the materials and how the students responded to and interacted with the new materials in real life classrooms. The feedback of the pilot team is also communicated to the editorial board so that they may know how effective
their prior feedback to the writers was. The writers also communicate with the editorial board and the external referees if there are any assigned in the project. These communications involve sometimes an intense negotiation of meaning so that all members arrive at the same understanding of a certain concept or reach a certain compromise when ideas are too different to converge in one path.

A similar approach to the identification of communication flows in materials writing projects is described by Esslinger and McCorkle who suggested looking at the many ways of communication aspects by building a matrix which would allow project management to focus upon goals or objectives for which communication is most critical (Esslinger and C. McCorkle, 1985). At the level of materials writing projects, the emphasis is on internal communications (within the team of writers, between the team members, pairs of writers and between these and the project manager) as well as external interactions with the editorial board, external referees or trainers, teachers and students who will use the final product. Therefore, the matrix logically includes such aspects as team selection, team dynamics including various types of internal and external communications, final product and intended audience.

To address the factors which have an impact on the effectiveness of communication between all the parties involved in the different stages of materials writing projects, a questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire consisted of eight parts, which contained “yes/no” questions which required participants to explain their answer or comment briefly on the items in question.
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(Appendix 1). The inventory focused on such aspects as team selection, starting point of the project, the roles of the team leader, editorial board or internal referees, students and teachers’ feedback and deadlines. It also attempted to elicit personal views and opinions of the participants as well as their advice to future material writers. For the purpose of this paper, the reported results will only focus on areas related to the process of communication that take place in materials writing projects.

The questionnaire was first sent as an email attachment to the Language Centre teachers who were involved in materials writing in the LC. Then, hard copies were provided for the writers. The writers were requested to complete the questionnaire, add any comments they wished to make, print it out and leave it in any of the investigators’ mail boxes. It was explained that this questionnaire was part of an investigation of the challenges that material writers were facing in developing and writing materials and was aimed at improving the process of materials writing in the Language Centre. It was also clarified that the feedback about teachers’ problems and concerns would be of great benefit since it would be conveyed to participants of future writing projects in order to assist them in performing their tasks and achieving the most out of their projects. The investigators also noted that it was an anonymous questionnaire and teachers were requested to be free to speak their minds. They were also made aware that the findings will be published as a research study.
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Participants of the study  19 from 30 writers answered the questionnaire because the rest were involved in small-scale materials development, revision or adaptation projects within courses in the programs they taught in, and therefore they thought that the questionnaire was not meant for them. However, there are a few teachers among the 19 who responded that they were involved in projects which they did individually.

Of the 19 writers who answered the questionnaire, 17 (89.5%) were female and two were males (10.5%). Two teachers (10.5%) were in their 30s, seven teachers (36.8%) were in their 40s and the majority of the teachers (ten – 52.6%) were at the age of 50 and above. As for their education background, the bigger group of the participants were MA holders (15 – 78.9%). One teacher (5.3%) had an MPhil, another had a Diploma in Language Teaching (5.3%) and two teachers had a PhD (10.5%). The participants had varied teaching experiences. Three teachers (15.8%) had a teaching experience ranging from five to nine years. Seven teachers (36.8%) devoted from ten to twenty years to teaching. Those teachers who had more than 20 years of experience in the profession made the biggest group of the research sample (nine – 47.4%).

However, most of teachers had quite a few years of teaching experience in Oman. 14 teachers (73.7%) worked in Oman from five to nine years and five teachers (26.3%) from ten to twenty years. This section of the questionnaire revealed that the writers are of varied characteristics which are an indication that the selection process was not dependent on any specific background factors except those that relate to the criteria specified for potential writers.

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Results and discussion

Team Selections  When asked whether it was clear why each member of the writing team was selected, 12 participants (63.2% of the sample) expressed that they understood why the selection was made, while four (21.1%) of the participants stated that the reason for the selection was not clear, and three (15.8%) stated that they had been involved in projects that required individual rather than team work and therefore answered as Non-Applicable to this questionnaire item. This factor is quite important in team selection, for it clarifies as well as validates to each team member why s/he was chosen and what s/he can bring into the project. Closely related to this aspect is the need to understand the role of each member in the writing team and what s/he can contribute to the project. Ten participants (62.6% of the sample) reported that the role of each member of the team in the project was clear, while six participants (31.6%) reported the contrary, which represents a lack of an understanding of the quality of the work or experiences the members brought into the projects and the responsibilities assigned to them. The fact that some participants did not understand what their team members could contribute to the writing projects might have lead to lack of communication during the project. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that team members understand why each member was selected and what this member can contribute to the project. This is one of the basic factors that need to be considered during team selection.
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The participants were also asked about whether or not they had expressed their interest in joining a materials writing project before being invited to join the teams they worked in. 12 (63.2%) participants reported that they had, while four (21.1%) stated that they had not, and here again three reported this factor as Non-Applicable. The fact that the majority reported they had shown interest in joining writing projects indicates that they were driven and, therefore, had a chance of withstanding the challenges such projects might create for members.

When asked whether or not they had been given the freedom to choose a writing partner, eight participants (42.1%) of the sample- indicated that they had not, while seven (36.8%) stated that they had, and three participants reported this factor as Non-Applicable. Also, seven participants reported that they were not given the freedom to change their partners during the project, while six (31.6%) reported that they were given such an opportunity but did not indicate clearly whether or not they had indeed made use of it.

The sample was asked whether they regarded previous training in writing or material development as a must for members to be selected for a writing project. The majority of the sample (63.2%) stated that previous training was not a requirement for the involvement in materials writing project, while only 36.8% stated that it is an important requirement. The fact that two thirds of the sample considered previous training unimportant for the involvement in such projects indicates that the majority did not view such projects as challenging tasks but rather as tasks that require the use of the skills that they have acquired through teaching.
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classroom preparation. When asked about whether they had been involved in training in materials writing before starting their writing projects in the LC, 16 participants (84.2% of the sample) indicated that they had not had training before starting the projects. However, training was an integral part of large scale projects; such as the “Explore Writing” project and the listening and speaking project. The training was provided by the Language Centre and professional trainers were contracted to do the training.

Two teachers of those who participated in the study briefly commented that they had adequate training in materials writing soon after joining the team at the Language Centre. All the others explained that they had no previous formal training in materials writing and design. However, (89.5%) of the sample mentioned that prior to joining the project, they had relevant experience in industry due to on-practice learning. They had learnt a lot from their former peers, senior teachers and from participating in materials writing projects of different scales and calibres.

When asked about team dynamics, 73.7% of the participants reported that inter-personal relationships and collaboration between all team members were present. Verbalizing her perceptions about the collaboration aspect of the materials writing projects one, of the teachers pointed out that this was mainly collaboration between her and the partner she was paired with. Another teacher described the communication aspect as "a vital part of keeping quality of the materials and bending with the team". A third teacher commented that in her case the
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Atmosphere was generally collaborative. In her opinion a team cannot be called efficient if it is "unable to intellectualize disagreements and move towards productive dialogue".

Starting point The participants were asked about issues relating to the starting points of their projects. When asked about whether they were provided with clear aims and objectives in the introduction to the writing project, 12 participants (63.2%) stated that the aims were clearly stated to them, while five (26.3%) disagreed, and two (10.5%) stated that it was not applicable to their projects. Also, when they were asked whether they were provided with guidelines describing the stages of the project, eight participants (42.1%) stated they were, while nine participants (47.4%) stated they had not received guidance, and two reported this factor as Non-Applicable. When comparing these two factors, we can see that there is a serious problem in some projects with respect to management. The fact that the aims of some of the projects were unclear to some of the writers and that they were not all provided with guidance throughout the stages of the project signals communication problems between project participants and the organizers or leaders of these projects, who were responsible for providing the writers with such crucial data and help.

In addition to the provision of clear aims, the writers were all provided with project frameworks to help them organize the components of each unit/book they were writing. When asked whether the unit/book writing framework was clarified or justified, a generally positive reply was given. 12 participants – 63.2% of the sample – stated that the framework was clarified.
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while three participants (15.8%) said it was not, another three gave a Non-Applicable response, and one gave no response. The writers were then asked whether the unit/book writing framework was usable or unusable. Two participants (10.5%) reported that it was usable, while four (21.1%) reported that it was not. Three other participants (15.8%) reported that their team amended the framework they were given, while another four reported that the framework was developed by the team. Another three participants gave no answer to this question, two others stated that this factor was Non-Applicable, and one participant reported that his team was not given a framework.

One of the participants of the study thoroughly contributed her personal opinion about the framework calling it “half the battle of materials design”. She remarked that the framework of the project she was involved in, though planned with attention to numerous parts and details, underwent several changes. In the course of the project the original framework was adjusted due to clearer vision of some conceptions that were related to the learners’ necessities, language level, and suitability of content with regard to the local culture. The framework also had to take account of a proper balance among skills, possibilities of integrating skills and layout issues.

When asked about the length of time it took the participants to know their exact duties, four participants (21.1%) stated that it took them very little time, while three others (15.8%) stated the contrary and another three stated that it took them 'some time' without being very specific. One participant gave no response, while seven participants (36.8%) gave a Non-Applicable
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response to this factor. Only one teacher knew her exact duties from the very beginning of the project. One of the teachers clarified that it took the team she worked with quite a long time to start the writing process as such due to engaging in a lengthy literature review and framework development procedures. At that point she was not sure about her exact duties. Another teacher commented that her initial views of the project procedures, which were merely writing units for the course book, changed as she had to spend a lot of work on brainstorming the book design, consultations and project presentations prior to writing. The third teacher explained that the scope of her duties was “ever-increasing” and that made her feel resentful at times. The fourth teacher noted that it took quite a long time to arrive at a clear understanding of her personal duties and the fifth teacher commented with regret that her exact duties had never been specified.

The participants were asked about the length of time it took them to know the other members of the writing team. Eight participants (42.1%) stated that this factor is not applicable, while six others (31.6%) stated that it took them very little time. The latter responses were attributed to the fact that members of the team were mostly friends and colleagues, had frequent and long meetings, gave and discussed feedback, and piloted the materials together. However, for one teacher it took a few months until trust was really established. Interestingly, she noted that her personal respect for the other writers grew as she worked alongside them. Another teacher commented that getting to know each other even within the framework of a project is “an on-
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going commitment”. However, a third teacher noted that each team member in her case worked on his/her unit till the project collapsed and she did not know any of them personally.

The participants were asked to describe their feelings at the start of the project. Their answers and comments varied from a plain comment such as “don’t remember” to some invigorating descriptions. One teacher observed that she felt that it would be a huge responsibility and not an easy task as she had expected. She also noted that she felt stressed and confused. A second teacher wrote that although she was excited she was afraid as well. She thought that she wouldn’t be good enough and felt very nervous. A third teacher also expressed her uneasy feelings at the start of the project. She described herself at this stage as being apprehensive and anxious about the future results and product. She even remembered questioning herself about what might happen if she could not come up with an excellent product. A fourth teacher described her feelings as being daunting. However, she did not give any further explanation of the reasons or circumstances causing such feelings. Similar feelings were mentioned in one of the teachers’ responses, where she wrote that she felt lost, uncertain, worried, overworked and not appreciated. Interestingly one of the teachers described a controversial array of feelings from feeling daunted to feeling excited as she believed that she wanted to implement some changes and was eager to face interesting challenges. Her point of view was partially supported by another teacher who wrote that she began the project on a very positive note with considerably high expectations.

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Conveying her feelings at the time when the materials writing project started, one of the material writers who worked on an individual project (not a team project) described herself as being “in deep sea without a paddle”. She further added that when she participated in such a project for the first time in 2005 the environment for these endeavours was not yet in place. The work was based mainly on intuitions rather than structured guidance. The time given was woefully inadequate – only six hours of release time a week to produce a student’s handbook, involving anything from 350 – 400 pages of printed material and an accompanying teacher’s manual. This was in addition to teaching and office hours, preparation and marking, writing tests, coordinating courses and attending meetings. Editing and feedback were sporadic and cursory as no time was allocated to these essential stages of materials writing, nor was there any structure in place by way of an editorial board. The teacher was the researcher, writer, editor, layout expert and, in many cases, the person piloting the materials, taking notes and making revisions.

The participants were asked about the length of time it took them to produce the first few pages of material. One of the participants commented on her personal experience stating that it took her around a month. Another explained some pre-requisites for materials writing projects, namely, the identification of the gaps and limitations in the existing course books; analysis of the demands of the curriculum; studying the existing in-house materials to perceive patterns in
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exercises and tasks and layout. She also explored the need to constantly monitor the students’ performance to identify issues which could be addressed by the materials.

**Team leader and editorial board** The participants were asked whether the team leader explained his duties and responsibilities at the beginning of the project. Eight participants (42.1%) gave positive answers, while five (26.3%) reported the opposite. Three participants (15, 8%) did not give an answer to this question, and another three answered as Non-Applicable. When asked whether the team leader facilitated the communication of ideas and concepts, ten participants (52.6%) replied positively, while four (21.1%) stated that s/he did not. Two participants gave no reply, while three stated that this factor was Non-Applicable.

Nine participants (47.4%) also reported that the leader of their writing teams gave enough and useful feedback on the material they wrote. However, five participants (26.3%) stated that their leader's feedback was neither enough nor useful which was definitely a hindrance for them.

When asked whether the team leader was ready to solve the team members' problems, ten participants (52.6%) gave a positive reply, while five stated that their leader did not have this skill. Despite the high number of positive replies given to this question, when asked whether the team leader addressed problems immediately and took action, seven participants (36.8%) reported that their team leader did not do that, while another seven gave a positive reply.
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The participants were asked about whether the team leader was aware of problems with group dynamics and whether or not he/she took action to solve such problems. The replies were very positive to the first part of the question, but varied to the second. It is worth quoting one of the teachers who commented that it is “often difficult to know what to do in the situation when something is wrong with the team dynamics even if one knows about the problems and it takes time”. In her opinion, problems with team dynamics have ramifications far beyond the writing group. There is always a danger that “the problem person” may feel alienated and rejected.

When asked whether they felt free to talk about their problems with their team leaders, ten participants (52.6%) stated that they felt free to do so, while four stated that they did not. The rest of the replies were either Non-Applicable or empty. The participants also responded well to the question about whether the team leader directed the team in a particular course of action or engaged the team in decision making. A majority of the participants very highly evaluated their team leaders who could listen, be responsive, take actions when needed and set realistic deadlines. They noted that their team leaders were very experienced and in many cases encouraged the whole team to make decisions. Team leaders very often unfailingly gave complete freedom to the writers in their endeavour and were always ready to listen to problems and help to sort them out. Two teachers evaluated the dynamics of their team leaders as “poor”. One of them explained that she was not happy with the team leader, who in some situations acted more like a boss rather than a team member, whereas in others when he was aware of
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problems with group dynamics, he was not able to solve them. Another described her team leader as a person who was not in control of the project though he often acted as a boss. Moreover, that team leader often took credit for other people’s work and blamed them for failures if there were any.

The participants gave useful comments about the qualities of a successful writing project team leader. The list of the qualities the participants gave includes being approachable, encouraging, resourceful, diplomatic, but firm, cooperative, realistic, flexible, supportive, understanding, respectful, honest, trustworthy, appreciative, available, democratic, decisive, “a motivator not a dictator”. It is very important for the team leader to have a prior experience in project management, to entertain a clear vision of the project and to possess excellent interpersonal and intercultural communication skills. The team leader should be able to work with a plan that has clear overall goals, a good action plan to achieve the objectives and have an ability to account for the risks and failures. The team leader must possess the ability to explain, listen, emphasize, decide, take action and collaborate. The team leader should appreciate the effort of each member and exhibit excellent project administration skills. In addition, as one teacher put it, “a team leader must firstly and foremost be a team player but someone who can also lead”. Moreover, as one of the respondents noted it is crucial for a team leader to facilitate the collaboration of his team with the other parties in the project and with other projects otherwise there will be “dissociation and no unified success”.  

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When asked whether they understood well the duties and responsibilities of the editorial board members working with them on their projects, four participants (21.1%) gave a positive answer, while another four gave a negative one. And when asked about whether or not they felt the editorial board members’ feedback on the material they had produced was enough and useful, five participants (26.3%) stated that it wasn't, while four stated that it was. The rest of the replies were either Non-Applicable or empty. One of the teachers mentioned that in her case, external communication with the board members and internal referees was well organized; the head of the editorial board would email writers and assign the time for face-to-face meetings.

Participants' Recommendations

To improve communication process in materials writing projects, the participants of the study suggested some recommendations that can be used as guidelines for future material writers. One of the teachers expressed her concerns about the start of the materials writing projects. In her opinion the writers’ brief should be spelled out in detail, namely its objectives, the addressed syllabus, skills, grammar items, vocabulary list, layout, number of pages, appendices, length of materials and their origin (authentic or simplified) and format (workbook or textbook). She also emphasized the importance of regular communication between team members at all stages of the project, including first writing, editing, piloting, revising and final draft, printing and piloting. In addition, she mentioned that a materials writing project can take all the time of the teacher and a great deal of effort, as it is also important to design a holistic picture of the Arab World English Journal
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materials, to correlate materials to the course, to carefully work out the sections, to collect suitable articles, stories, newspaper reports, samples of student’s writings, samples of exercises, tasks and pictures that seem interesting and can be used in the materials, to convince the authorities of adequate release time, to try out units with colleagues and to simultaneously work on the teacher’s manual and write the answers to the exercises. This could give feedback on the workability of the exercises and can be used for the teacher’s manual.

According to the opinion of the materials’ writers at the Language Centre, feedback provision is very important for providing a better understanding of how the materials are working in the classroom. One writer also highlighted that piloting the materials gives useful feedback, so it needs to be done in all projects.

Former participants in the Materials Writing Projects believe that future materials writers should never get frustrated with feedback and comments. As one of the participants put it, “good writers need to go through a series of trials and errors”. In her opinion, materials writing “cannot be done individually”. Therefore, future materials writers should maintain a high spirit and accept group work and enjoy it.

Another participant explored the importance of being completely open to feedback and to have the best interest of the project at heart. She commented that the success of the materials can only
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be measured if they help students to learn and this “success can be achieved when you trust your team, when you are open and honest but polite when giving your feedback”.

A third teacher recommended keeping the needs of the students and the objectives of the course clearly in mind. She also advised writers to be prepared for hard work and multiple revisions of all materials.

A fourth teacher advised future writers to be patient. She also recommended them to be less emotional, because working in a big team, in her opinion, is “not easy”.

A fifth participant emphasized the importance of communication in future materials writing projects. She specifically mentioned the need to match personalities and create a spirit of collaboration and mutual understanding among team members.

The need to consider the writers' personality types when assigning partners and tasks in future projects was emphasized by another participant. Her point of view was supported by another teacher who wrote, that there was no need to impose on people to work together if they could not do that. This teacher also mentioned that there was no need to interrupt the momentum of the group by adding an extra person half way. An additional piece of advice was given by another participant who advocated employing local expertise. She explained that “they are more qualified as they are sensitive to local academic and educational needs”.

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Conclusion

Effective communication is essential for the survival and prosperity of any work environment. It ensures the smooth flow and exchange of ideas and the establishment of a harmonious atmosphere among all stakeholders which reflects very positively on the workplace and leads to the successful accomplishment of tasks. Effective communication fends off conflicts and helps resolve those that arise due to the complexity of the work environment or human nature. In educational settings, the value of effective communication cannot be overstated. To bring about the best results and to fulfill educational objectives, schools and universities have to find ways to communicate their visions, missions and objectives to all staff and students. However, this might not be an easy task given the multitude of variables involved in these institutions.

Modern higher education institutions are often multicultural settings that encompass people from different countries, different backgrounds, different experiences, different disciplines and different qualifications. Depending on how universities view and utilize multiculturalism, this very aspect can either foster or hinder communication. To illustrate, working in teams to accomplish a certain objective or to carry out a certain task is a salient aspect of higher educational institutions. If team members have divergent values, views and ideas regarding the goals, objectives or the process of achieving or implementing the objectives, the tasks can cause schisms among team members, which might yield mediocre results or lead to the failure of the project. Many other factors can determine team dynamics of interaction such as the
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characteristics of the leader, her/his knowledge of the subject matter and the leadership style s/he adopts. Team dynamics can really make or break the assigned writing project.

Individuals who work in materials writing projects in language institutions, in addition to possessing some creative skills and competencies, should be able to network, work in teams, create multiple alternatives, learn and share. Effective professional communication among all the participants in such projects presupposes their abilities to establish constructive and meaningful relations, recognize individual culture-inclusive differences in traditions of materials writing and learn from them, manage disagreements and share experiences with others in a mutually enriching way. These abilities would benefit the production of better quality teaching materials. Such materials are produced only when there is effective communication between the parties involved in the writing project. Such communication resides in open dialogue, prompt response to feedback, learning from all parties involved, collaborating, imitating, and imbibing from “all the specifically human characteristics of development” (Vygotsky, p. 210).

Appendix 1

QUESTIONNAIRE TO MATERIAL WRITERS
Dear colleagues,

In an effort to improve the process of material writing in the Language Centre (LC), we are conducting an investigation of the challenges that material writers are facing in developing and writing materials. You are kindly requested to complete this questionnaire, adding any comments you wish to make. Your feedback about your problems and concerns will be of great benefit since it will be conveyed to participants of future writing projects in order to assist them in performing their tasks and achieve the most of their projects. Please notice that this is an anonymous questionnaire, so be free to speak your mind! Many thanks!

## A. Team Selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was it clear to you why each member of the writing team was selected?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Was it clear what each member of the writing team can contribute to the writing project?</td>
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<td>Had you expressed your interest in joining a material writing project before you were invited to join the team?</td>
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<td>Were/Are you given the freedom to choose a writing partner?</td>
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<td>Were/Are you given the freedom to change your writing partner?</td>
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<tr>
<td>In your opinion, is previous training in writing or material development a must for</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members to be selected for a writing project?</th>
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</table>

| Had you had any training in material writing before starting the writing project? If so, please explain briefly. | Explain or Comment Briefly |
| Had you had any experience in material writing before starting the writing project? If so, please explain briefly. | Explain or Comment Briefly |

| Were/Are there team dynamics and inter-personal relationships and collaboration between all/some of the writing team members? If so, please specify whether they were/are between ‘ALL’ or ‘SOME’ team members. | Explain or Comment Briefly |

## B. Starting Point

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>YES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were you provided with clear aims and objectives in the introduction to the writing project?</td>
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<td>Were you provided with guidelines describing the stages of the project?</td>
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<td>Was the unit/book writing framework clarified or justified?</td>
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<tr>
<td>In what way was the unit/book writing framework usable/unusable?</td>
<td>Explain or Comment Briefly</td>
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<tr>
<td>How long did it take you to know your exact duties?</td>
<td>Explain or Comment Briefly</td>
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</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer Options</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How long did it take you to get to know the other members of the writing team?</td>
<td>Explain or Comment Briefly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can you describe your feelings at the start of the project?</td>
<td>Explain or Comment Briefly</td>
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<tr>
<td>How long did it take you to produce the first few pages?</td>
<td>Explain or Comment Briefly</td>
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</table>

C. Team Leader

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did the team leader explain his duties and responsibilities at the beginning of the project?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did/Does the team leader facilitate well the communication of ideas and concepts?</td>
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<td>Was/Is his feedback on the material you wrote enough and useful?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Was/Is the team leader ready to solve your problems?</td>
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<td>Did/Does the team leader address problems immediately and take action?</td>
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<td>Were/Are you free to talk about your problems with the team leader?</td>
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<td>Did/Does the team leader direct the team in a particular course of action or was/is the whole team engaged in</td>
<td>Explain or Comment Briefly</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer Options</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did/Does the team leader act as a member of the team or just a boss?</td>
<td>Explain or Comment Briefly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Was/Is the team leader aware of problems with group dynamics? If so, did/does he take action?</td>
<td>Explain or Comment Briefly</td>
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<tr>
<td>What, in your opinion, are the qualities of a successful writing project team leader?</td>
<td>Explain or Comment Briefly</td>
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</table>

### D. Editorial Board and Internal Referees

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<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>YES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Did/Do you understand well the duties and responsibilities of the editorial board members and the internal referees?</td>
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<td>Was the editorial board members’ feedback on your material enough and useful?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Was the internal referees’ feedback on your material enough and useful?</td>
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<tr>
<td>In what way was/is your communication with the board members and the internal referees organized?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Were/Are any of the board members and the internal referees aware of any problems with group dynamics? If so, did/do they take action?</td>
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In meetings with the board members and the internal referees, did/does the team leader act as part of the writing team, i.e. did/does he support the team members’ work?  

<table>
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<th>Explain or Comment Briefly</th>
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**E. Material**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>YES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did/Do you have a problem with creating authentic material?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you been provided with examples of authentic materials?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Was/Is it important for you to produce materials that suit students’ needs?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you been challenged with the need to render the materials to correspond to the students’ learning styles and strategies?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you been provided with examples of engaging exercises/activities/tasks?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Were/Are you restricted to certain types of exercises/activities/tasks?</td>
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**OPTIONAL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank the following aspects of the choice of materials in the order of their importance to you:</th>
<th>Explain or Comment Briefly</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>_____content “suitability”</td>
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<tr>
<td>_____personal, academic and professional interest on the</td>
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F. Students’ and Teachers’ Feedback

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were you provided with a list or criteria of students’ needs at the beginning of the project?</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ELT Materials Writing Projects: Challenges of Professional Communication

| Were/Are you allowed to participate in the wording of the surveys, questionnaires, or feedback forms given to students? |   |
| Did/Do you have free access to the students’ completed surveys, questionnaires, or feedback forms on the material you have developed? |   |
| Were/Are you provided with useful and comprehensive feedback from teachers on the material you have developed? |   |
| Did/Do you involve your students in the writing project? | As team members_____ |
| If so, tick the type of involvement it was/is or describe briefly. | Pre-project surveys _____ |
| | Questionnaires _____ |
| | Feedback forms _____ |
| | Explain or Comment Briefly |

G. Deadlines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were/Are the deadlines you were given for final material submission practical?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did/Do the editorial board members abide by the deadline for reviewing your work?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did/Do the internal referees abide by the deadline for reviewing your work?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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When there is a problem with meeting a deadline, could/can the matter be solved in a collegial way?

Did/Does the team leader support the extensions of deadlines if needed?

In your opinion, what deadline is practical?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explain or Comment Briefly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

H. Your Advice

What advice can you share with future material writers?

_____________________________________________________________________

I. Information about You

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>{ } male</th>
<th>{ } female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>{ } 24-29</td>
<td>{ } 30-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>{ } BA</td>
<td>{ } MA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ELT Materials Writing Projects: Challenges of Professional Communication

Total number of years teaching English

{ } less than 5 years { } 5-9 years { } 10-20 years { } more than 20 years

Total number of years teaching English in Oman

{ } less than 5 years { } 5-9 years { } 10-20 years { } more than 20 years

References


ELT Materials Writing Projects: Challenges of Professional Communication


Strategies for Learning Vocabulary

Employed by Science-Oriented Students: A Qualitative Perspective

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Abstract:

Vocabulary learning strategies for the present investigation have been defined as any set of techniques or learning behaviors, which science-oriented students reported using in order to discover the meaning, and to retain the knowledge of newly-learned words. The present investigation has been designed to explore vocabulary learning strategies reported to be employed by science-oriented university students in Northeast Thailand. The subjects of the study were 133 science-oriented students sampled on the basis of convenience and availability. An open-ended strategy questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were used as the main methods for the data collection. The data obtained were analyzed qualitatively in response to the purpose of the investigation.

The findings of the research show that three different emergent categories have been reported which include 1) the strategies to discover the meaning of new vocabulary
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items; 2) the strategies to retain the knowledge of newly-learned vocabulary items; and 3) the strategies to enhance their learning vocabulary items or to expand their knowledge of vocabulary. However, for the purpose of this paper, only the first two categories have been taken into consideration. Lastly, the implications of the research findings for the teaching and learning of English for science-oriented students are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Vocabulary learning strategies, Science-oriented students

**Introduction**

Much research in the field of language learning and teaching over the past three decades has looked at the relationships between characteristics of language learners and their language performance. The priority of the investigation, especially in the 1980’s, seemed to focus on how language learners dealt with their target language learning. Very often, the dichotomous term used to describe language learners is either ‘good/poor’ or ‘successful/unsuccessful’. Many researchers have investigated a series of factors basically hypothesized to have a relationship with how language learners go about learning a foreign language. These factors include learner's foreign language experience, gender, field of study, status of the target language, or ethnicity. These early investigations inspired some researchers in the field to attempt to identify what language
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learners, especially those who are ‘good’ or ‘successful’ actually do when they learn a foreign language. The first attempts to scrutinize such good learner behaviors which were empirically evidenced, were carried out by Stern (1975), and Rubin (1975). Shortly after the lists of characteristics of good language learners had been proposed by both Rubin and Stern, more researchers started to turn their attention to investigate learning strategies of good language learners. Examples are Politzer (1983); Chesterfield and Chesterfield (1985); O’Malley et al (1985); Ramirez (1986); Oxford (1989), and more recently Campbell (1990); Embi (1996); Ely (1998); Halbach (2000); Davis-Wiley (2000); Intaraprasert (2000, 2003); Markham (2001); Prakongchat and Intaraprasert (2008) and Sriboonruang and Intaraprasert (2010).

With regard to vocabulary learning strategies very little empirical research has been carried out exclusively to investigate what types of learning strategies students employ in order to deal with learning foreign language vocabulary (e.g. Stoffer, 1995; Schmitt, 1997; Kudo, 1999; Gu and Johnson, 1996; Gu, 2002; Siriwan and Intaraprasert, 2007). This has been pointed out by Schmitt (1997, p. 199) “…vocabulary learning strategies- has attracted a noticeable lack of attention.” In the context of Thailand, no empirical research has been carried out exclusively to investigate how university students particularly those who are science-oriented deal with new vocabulary items. Since
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Science-oriented students have to partly deal with English for science and technology (EST), reading seems to be the dominant skill as pointed out elsewhere in Intaraprasert (2000). Consequently, vocabulary has played an important role in their English language learning. The present investigation aims to fill this gap. The researcher decided to undertake an exploratory investigation designed to examine types of strategies science-oriented university students reported employing in order to deal with new vocabulary items based on an open-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. This investigation was descriptive-interpretative in nature rather than confirmatory, hypothesis-testing, or as termed by Skehan (1989) and Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), it employed the ‘research-then-theory’ rather than the ‘theory-then-research’ format (cf. Graham, 1997). To put it simply, this investigation was not intended to reconfirm any theories or hypotheses about students’ use of strategies in order to acquire new vocabulary items in English. Rather, it was designed to examine types of vocabulary learning strategies of science-oriented university students in Thailand.

Research Questions

Based on the review of literature, the research questions can be formed. The present investigation attempts to explore the vocabulary learning strategies employed by science-oriented students learning English. In order to establish some empirical data in the

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context of language learning of science-oriented university students, the present investigation is designed to answer the following specific questions:

1. What types of strategies do science-oriented students employ in order to deal with new vocabulary items? and

2. What are the implications of these research findings for the teaching and learning of English for science-oriented students?

**Characteristics of the Research Subjects**

**Table 1 : Number of Students by ‘Perceived’ English Language Ability; Gender; and Field of Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Perceived’ Language Ability</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Good/very Good</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Perceived’ Language Ability</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of Study</th>
<th>Engineering</th>
<th>Agricultural Technology</th>
<th>Public Health</th>
<th>Information Technology</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The characteristics of the research subjects can be summarized as follows:

- The number of students perceiving or rating their English language ability as ‘fair’ is slightly smaller than those perceiving their language ability as ‘poor’. No students perceived their language ability as ‘good/very good’.
- The number of female students is slightly larger than the number of their male counterparts.
- The number of engineering students is larger than those studying in the other major fields of study while the number of agricultural technology students is the smallest.

Data Collection and Data Generation Methods

In collecting the data to answer the research questions for the present investigation, the researcher posed three open-ended questions to the subjects of the study as the guide for them to provide information about their vocabulary learning strategies, i.e. when encountered with new vocabulary in a lesson, how would you deal with it in order to
learn such a new word? Apart from these three open-ended questions, the participants were requested to provide the researcher with their gender, their ‘perceived’ language ability and their field of study. The researcher made every attempt to ensure the readiness of everything for when the data collection started. When meeting with students, the researcher started the classroom process by briefing them on the purpose of the data collection and the use of the outcome of this investigation. The students were asked to look through the questions and they were allowed to ask about any questions that they did not understand. The students were asked to think about the responses to the questions outside class time and hand in their responses the following day to the researcher’s office. Out of 133 students, fifteen were interviewed in order to elicit more information about their vocabulary learning strategies. However, it was found that the data obtained through the interviews did not yield different results from those obtained through the open-ended questionnaire. The data obtained through both the written open-ended questions and interviews were then processed and analyzed qualitatively and in part, the coding system suggested by Lawson and Hogben (1996) was used to help analyze the data and categorize the emergent strategies.

To sum up, initially, the researcher looked carefully through the responses to the written questionnaires provided by 133 students and interviews by 15 students,
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attempting to find the common characteristics of the reported statements such as learning behaviors and a purpose of using such learning behaviors. It emerged that most of the statements which could be regarded as ‘vocabulary learning strategies’ were reported by students in order to achieve a particular learning purpose, identified later as to discover the meaning of new vocabulary items, to retain the meaning of newly-learned words and to enhance their vocabulary learning. The process of classifying these reported learning behaviors or strategies together with purposes of using certain learning behaviors was iterative. Moreover, the researcher had to reconsider different aspects of the classification, for example, terms used to identify purposes of strategy use and labels to identify strategies as the whole system, several times in order to reach a satisfactory classification.

Results and Discussion

• What types of vocabulary learning strategies were reported being employed by EST students at Suranaree University of Technology?

In response to the research question posed to the participants, the result of the data analysis has revealed that altogether 21 individual vocabulary learning strategies have
been reported being employed by the participants in order to achieve two different purposes when encountering new vocabulary items especially those for the classroom lessons. Two main purposes of strategy use can be preliminarily classified. They are for classroom lessons. They are: 1) to discover the meaning of new vocabulary items comprising ten individual strategies; and 2) to retain the knowledge of newly-learned vocabulary items comprising eleven strategies. In classifying vocabulary learning strategies for the present investigation, the researcher always recognizes that the strategies in both categories are always supportive with each another. That is, the strategies which students reported employing in order to discover the meaning of new vocabulary items may help them retain the knowledge of the newly-learned vocabulary items. In the same effect, the strategies which students reported employing to retain their knowledge of English vocabulary may also help them in terms of discovering the meaning of new vocabulary items.

What follow are detailed discussions about the major findings in association with the past research in the field.

**Category 1: Strategies to Discover the Meaning of New Vocabulary Items**
The vocabulary learning strategies under this main category are the strategies which were reported to be employed by 133 EST students in order to discover the meaning of new vocabulary items they frequently encounter while studying in class. The strategies are not ordered according to the most frequently used by the students. Rather, they are ordered in terms of the similarity they share with the preceding one(s):

- Use a Thai-English dictionary
- Use an English-Thai dictionary
- Use an English-English dictionary
- Guess the meaning from the context
- Ask one’s classmate or friend
- Ask one’s teacher
- Ask someone other than one’s teacher, classmate or friend
- Look at the word roots, prefixes or suffixes
- Use an on-line dictionary
- Use an electronic dictionary

When taking a close look at the individual vocabulary learning strategies under this category, to discover the meaning of new lexical items, it is found that three main
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strategy groups have been reported being employed by the participants. These strategy groups are: dictionary use, social strategies, and contextual reliance.

With regard to dictionary use, Summers (1988) claims that it plays an important role in EFL learning. For the present investigation, the participants reported making use of different types of dictionaries available including hard copies as well as electronic ones. These strategies are very common for most foreign language learners and have been reported in different research work. Examples are Schmitt (1997), Sanaoui (1995), and Kudo (1999). For the present investigation, some students who reported using dictionaries to discover the meaning of new lexical items claimed that ‘it is an easy way to find the meaning of a new word’. However, this is not always easy when it comes to the word with more than one meaning as a few students reported, ‘at times I do not know which meaning to choose from because there are many meanings and I cannot decide which one should be the appropriate one’ (translated script). The dictionaries used are either bilingual, i.e. English-Thai or Thai-English, or monolingual dictionaries, i.e. English-English. In this regard, Thompson (1987) has demonstrated both advantages and disadvantages of both types of dictionaries. In terms of monolingual dictionaries, he maintained that ‘monolingual dictionaries for foreign language learners tend to be unquestioningly regarded as better than bilingual dictionaries. However, monolingual
dictionaries have serious disadvantages in many language teaching situations: particularly learners will often not know which word to look up, and even when they do, the definitions in the foreign language may not help them very much. Bilingual dictionaries are potentially more efficient and more motivating sources of information for language learners’ (p. 282). He also concludes that ‘monolingual dictionaries have a very important role to play at the most advanced levels. ‘For learners below this level, a bilingual dictionary can do all the useful things that a monolingual dictionary can do’ (p. 286). Summers (1988) has supported the use of dictionaries so as to discover the meaning of new foreign words that ‘dictionary use is a valid activity for foreign learners of English, both as an aid to comprehension and production’ (p. 111).

Another main group of strategies which have also been reported by many students deals with asking other people who they think know English better than themselves such as teachers, classmates, or anyone who knows English. Some students reported that ‘my teacher is the best source of knowledge as he is very smart and can answer any questions the students ask. Hence, I normally ask my teacher for the translation’ (translated script). However, teachers are not always an ideal resource person as a few students do not want to approach their teachers. Rather, they prefer asking their classmates. As one participant reported, ‘I think my friends are better than myself and I can rely on him or her when I
don’t know the meaning of a new word. I don’t really want to ask my teacher because I am afraid that he or she will ask me a question and I will feel embarrassed if I cannot answer the question’ (translated script).

The last major group of strategies in this category deals with contextual reliance. Many students reported using this strategy as a priority to find out the meaning of a new word, ‘when I encounter a new word, the first thing I do is look at the sentence as a whole and then try to guess the meaning. If I cannot guess I’ll turn to a dictionary or ask my classmate’ (translated script). Regarding using contextual clues to discover the meaning of new foreign words, Judd (1978 cf. Nation, 1982) pointed out that ‘…in order to grasp the meaning of a word or a phrase, students must be aware of the linguistic environment in which the word or phrase appears’ (p. 73). However, it is not always easy for students to get the meaning from the context because at times the context alone does not provide enough information or many words are not always interpreted through the context they appear and more contexts or environments are needed. Nation (1982) asserted that learning words in context would not help with the learning of a word form, as the context of a text is remembered much better than its formal elements. Thus, except by providing a number of different environments, it is difficult to see how context does help the initial learning of a new word and the use of contextualized material might be
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less efficient than the use of word lists (Morgan and Bailey, 1943 cf. Nation, 1982) even though context may bring less frequent use of a dictionary and time spent on learning new words.

Category 2: Strategies to Retain the Knowledge of Newly-learned Vocabulary Items

The vocabulary learning strategies under this main category are the strategies which were reported being employed by 133 EST students in order to retain the knowledge of newly-learned vocabulary items. Like the first category, the strategies reported being employed were for classroom learning purposes. These strategies include:

- Memorize with or without a word list
- Keep a vocabulary notebook
- Group words based on the synonymy or antonymy
- Associate new words with the already-learned ones
- Use new words in writing
- Use new words to converse with peers
- Speak Thai with English loan-words
- Keep words as the computer background
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- *Keep word cards or word charts in one’s bedroom*
- *Keep words as rhymes or songs*
- *Use pictures*

The strategies reported being employed in order to retain the knowledge of newly-learned lexical items by the subjects of the present investigation are consistent with past research work, e.g., Sanaoui (1995); Porte (1988); and Hulstijn (1997). In general, we can see that the strategies employed do not deal with deep cognitive processes. This might be that most, if not all, the participants for the present investigation are those who are not very successful in language learning, judging from the perception of their language ability as shown earlier. Another tentative explanation for this phenomenon might be that students may not be conscious of their cognitive process and, thus, are not in the position to make them explicit to the researcher. Furthermore, the findings might be subjected to the reach tool, i.e. the questionnaire. In other words, the open-ended question might not elicit information about cognitive processes. However, this is not the purpose of the investigation to examine how successful or unsuccessful language learners employ vocabulary learning strategies. Rather, the present investigation concentrated solely on lexis, seeking to obtain comprehensive accounts of learners’ approaches to vocabulary.
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learning. In language learning, retention needs to persist for at least long enough for learning to be reinforced in a following lesson (Nation, 1982). As revealed through the data analysis, the participants reported different types of strategies to help them retain the knowledge of newly-learned words. These strategies can be discussed under the major groups as: rote learning or rote rehearsal; note-taking; and keyword strategies.

In respect of rote learning or rote rehearsal and vocabulary learning, a few past researchers have found that this method or strategy has been used by foreign language learners, e.g., Naiman et al (1975); O’Malley and Chamot (1990); Wenden and Rubin (1987); Gu, (2002); Gu and Johnson (1996); Kudo, (1999); and Sanaoui (1995). This strategy has been employed by language learners to commit new foreign words to memory and has been regarded as the first and easiest strategy people pick up and use. Naturally language learners keep repeating new words until they can be recognized (Gu, 2003). In repeating new vocabulary items, the learners may repeat the word mentally or aloud several times when they encounter it, or they may return to a lexical item sometime after they have encountered it and repeat it (Sanaoui, 1995). In addition, Oxford (1990) pointed out that the exact form of rehearsal could be just a simple reading or writing of the word, the repetition of the word and the meaning, or repetition may involve some form of structuring. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that most of the foreign
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language learners have employed this strategy more frequently than others. This is also reported in Lawson and Hogben (1996, p. 120) that the most frequently used procedures by Italian language learners involved some form of repetition. Not only did they use repetition in almost two-thirds of the opportunities, but repetition was used on most of the words by most of them.

Another group of strategies which have been reported here is taking notes, may be in the form of vocabulary notebooks, word cards or wordlists. After getting information about a new word, learners may take notes (Gu, 2003); however, McCarthy (1990) has pointed out that the learners differ in what they do in note-taking, when they take notes, and how they take notes.

Finally, a few strategies in the group of ‘keywords’ were also reported being employed (e.g. *Group words based on the synonymity or antonymity and associate new words with the already-learned ones*). The ‘keyword’ method involves linking an English word to another English word which sounds like the ‘to be learned foreign word’. In addition, Cohen (1987, p.51) has discussed the major types of associations or linking consciously used by learners to improve their performance in learning new words. These types of associations can be created, for example, by linking the words to the sound of a
word in the native language, to the sound of a word in the language being learned, or to the sound of a word in another language.

In terms of the effectiveness of this type of strategy, according to Gruneberg and Sykes (1991), a large number of studies have recently shown that the keyword method of vocabulary acquisition considerably enhances the rate of retention of foreign words. However, it might be argued that even if the keyword methods were no more effective than conventional methods of vocabulary acquisition, if students found their use more enjoyable and interesting, then this in itself would be enough reason to utilize the technique in foreign language learning.

- **What are the implications of these research findings for the teaching and learning of English for science-oriented students?**

The findings of the present investigation are generally consistent with the previous studies in terms of students’ employment of strategies in learning new foreign vocabulary items. The strategy classification has been carried out and is similar to those of a few past researchers’. As mentioned earlier, on the whole the strategies reported being employed by science-oriented students in the study did not involve mental processes for lexical acquisition as already discussed previously. However, an implication of the findings of
the present investigation revealed that learners’ practices for vocabulary learning are an important aspect of lexical learning that merits future attention. Although the findings do not provide insight into mental processes for vocabulary learning, understanding learner’s habits of study contributes to a better understanding of how they come to learn the lexis of the target language, in this case, English. Another implication that can be drawn from the findings of the present investigation is that students should be encouraged to make full use of dictionaries no matter what form they are in. As discussed earlier, teachers can design tasks in order to improve learner skills in using dictionaries. Another strategy which has been used by students and which they should be encouraged to use for discovering the meaning of new words is guessing from context. This has been evidenced in Seibert (1945 cf. Nation, 1982) of the high possibility of success in guessing the meaning of words from context. Trained learners can guess between 60 to 80% of the unknown words in a text using only context clues. Learners should be given guidance and practice in the techniques of guessing from context because this will be valuable both in learning new words and in establishing words already studied in their already-learned wordlists.

Conclusion
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The present investigation has been conducted in a data-based, systematic, and non-judgmental descriptive and exploratory manner. It has contributed to the field of research on vocabulary learning strategies in terms of their types. The main contribution of the present investigation has been vocabulary learning strategies of science-oriented university students learning English for science and technology in Thailand. Data collection and data analysis have been carried out qualitatively.

Lastly, the researcher believes that with appropriate instruments for eliciting vocabulary learning strategies, as well as a research design, a researcher can gain further insights into how students deal with language learning especially new vocabulary items. It is worth noting that ‘what learners do while studying words is more important than how motivated they are, how hard they work, how much time they spend and the number of repetitions of each word’ (Nation, 1982, p. 25). Furthermore, as shown in past research, it is highly recommended that students try different strategies in order to learn new words in English. This is because no single strategy has been proved the best of all. Finally, such variables as teachers’ teaching styles, students’ language proficiency levels, learner belief in language learning, or students’ socio-economic status, could have an impact on such research if they had been taken into account.
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Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

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Prof. Cameron Rechards
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Abstract

In recent times there has been a rapid increase in the number of Arab postgraduate students in Malaysian universities which typically expect international students to submit dissertations in English. Whilst these students often achieve good qualifications in their home country, many struggle with the cultural or social as well as academic adjustments to a foreign university, to a different culture and to the requirements of undertaking research and writing in a second or foreign language. This paper will investigate the particular cultural as well as language barriers which typically confront Arab students undertaking postgraduate study in Malaysia. As well as identity key challenges faced, it will inquire into the possible strategies for assisting students to more effectively engage with many of the larger cultural barriers and academic challenges faced in language proficiency issues. The paper will report on a study undertaken into the perceptions and experiences of Arab postgraduate students at five Malaysian Universities: UM, UTM, UKM, UPM, and IIUM

Introduction
Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

In the last few years Malaysian Universities have witnessed a rapid growth in the number of Arab postgraduate students. The growing presence of Arab postgraduate students is also associated with cultural and language barriers which affect the academic performance of these students. The notable increasing growth of Arab and other nationalities of Middle East students in Malaysia started a few years after the event of “9/11” in 2001. Although, there is no exact statistical number of Arab students in Malaysia, this growing number is significant. Also they have growing requirements of better support to assist a range of problems and challenges linked to adjusting to academic life in their host country. These students need opportunities to understand culture, to improve language skills, new academic system, and possess a contextual awareness of new communities.

Traditionally, most Arab states instruct their educational institutions to send their students to the West Europe and North America universities and to some extent the former Soviet Union states and East Europe countries according to exchange students’ protocols agreements. Although Arab students all speak Arabic and generally share the same linguistic background, there are slight differences in dialects. So, we can say they share the barriers of English acquisition but they belong to different academic cultural background due to the different educational systems of their countries. On the other hand, they share almost the same cultural background with slight differences in terms of many factors such as nationality, religion, standard of living, political system etc.

Universities and colleges in many countries, among them the United States, Britain and others rely heavily on international students for their income. For example international students studying in New Zealand earned the country $1.7 billion and made education the fourth-largest export earner (Perrott, 2003).
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Furthermore, these students have become such an integral part of these universities’ campuses. According to Ward (2002), international students are enormously beneficial to the U.S and bring knowledge and skills to the classroom, and new experience to the laboratories, provide campuses with a good level of diversity, create and promote long term relationship between the American educational institutions and abroad. Furthermore, as Hartle (2002) explains, international students help to increase the skills of the local American workforce, as well as boost appreciation for democracy.

Also, Open Door (2008, p.3) reports that the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. State Department are especially attentive to this matter and “manage a wide range of academic, professional, and cultural exchanges that include approximately 40,000 participants annually, with the goal of increasing mutual understanding and respect between the people of the United States and the people of other countries.” The same report estimated that there were 623,805 international students in the US in the 2007/08 academic year. In the last few years the enrolment of international students in the United States’ higher institutions has declined. In his testimony, the director of Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues Scott (2007) has outlined three main challenges in attracting international students to the United States and their implications for global competitiveness. These challenges are: (1) the global landscape of higher education is changing and it provides more alternatives for students, particularly as other countries also expand their educational capacity and technology-based distance learning opportunities; (2) the cost of obtaining a degree in the United States is rising, which may discourage international students from enrolling in U.S colleges and universities; (3) visa policies and procedures, tightened after September 11, 2001, to protect U.S national security interests, may have contributed to real and perceived barriers for international students seeking to enter the country.
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Similarly, there are many other countries which are working aggressively to attract international students. This includes Britain which announced the “setting up of a goal of attracting 100,000 more international students to the country in the next five years” (Johnson 2006, p. 16). Furthermore, according to Chun-Fen (2008, p. 8), Japan’s cabinet discussed the plan to accept 300,000 international students as part of Japan’s global strategy and its international commitment to expand flows of human resources. According to "College Enrolment Statistics Canada” (2009) the recent total for international student enrollment in Canada is 123,901 in 2008.

According to the China Scholarship Council (2008), the number of international students in China reached 195,503 in the 2007-08 academic year. They are from 188 countries and regions and enrolled in 544 universities and colleges, scientific research institutes and other teaching institutions. The Chinese government awarded scholarships to 10,151 students. World Migration Report (2008, p. 105) states that between 1998 and 2004, the number of foreign students enrolled worldwide rose by 52% to 2.7 million with the OECD countries hosting 85% of the total. Knight (2009) estimates that by 2025 the demand for international education will grow to 7.2 million students, a quantum leap, from 1.2 million students in 2000. She believes that certainly not all of this demand will be met by students’ mobility.

The cultural and academic barriers faced by international Students in Malaysia
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In 2006, UNESCO reported the most recent total for international student enrollment in Malaysia is 30,407 international students. A little more than a third of this population came from China. On March 9, 2008, Malaysian newspaper, The Star said that the number of international students had increased between 2006 and 2008 by 30%, bringing the overall numbers to 65,000 foreign students enrolled in private and public institutions of higher education last year, compared to 48,000 in 2006. The Malaysian Higher Education Ministry set up an international students division to cope with the increasing number of Arab and other foreign students pursuing higher education in Malaysia and turning the country into a center of educational excellence. The division has been operating since 2007 to facilitate the entrance and management of foreign students who are expected to number 100,000 by the end of this year (2010). These students are distributed in 20 public and 35 private universities all over Malaysia. In addition, Verbik, (2007) believes that at present, Malaysia, Singapore and China have emerged contenders and have a combined share of approximately 12% of the global student market.

Therefore, many of Arab postgraduate students who come to Malaysia found it difficult to adjust to the English language and the education system in the country. There are a number of academic barriers which students need to get adjusted to. Students may have difficulty adjusting to the various accents of instructors along with their different teaching styles. They may have difficulty understanding class lectures, making them feel reluctant to participate in class discussions. Moreover, students may find test constructions difficult to comprehend, and they may be
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unfamiliar with testing and grading systems of the university. Those who have low English proficiency may require extra time to read their textbooks. Further, they may not be able to articulate their knowledge on essay exams or research papers due to their limited vocabulary. For many international students, poor English is a major stress and can create significant problems and barriers when trying to function and succeed in Malaysia. Simple mispronunciation issues can be a major factor. Some Arab nationalities have a very difficult time with the pronunciation of the English language and it can be very frustrating to them. They may be motivated and they may give their full and sincere effort, but still may struggle to learn the English language.

**English Language Barriers**

It is well known that for many international students the transition to study in a new country is associated with several language problems. Some universities around the world have taken steps to help new students to adjust to these problems. Research indicates that many international students have difficulties and barriers with various aspects of English. The use of English language in both the classroom and social contact situation is a common problem for many Arab students also. To address the concern of the increasing number of Arab students who do not even the basic English skills, Malaysian universities have launched a number of initiatives, including the offering of basic study skills, language support and professional skills development classes. For instance, one of the authors of this paper has been teaching academic writing for these students at the UTM for the three years and has noted that many Arab students lack sufficient English skills.

One of the greatest challenges that Arab postgraduate students face is the communication barrier, since misunderstandings can occur through verbal or nonverbal communication. Transitioning students face a variety of cultural differences that can put tension on their relationships with both
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faculty and peers (Riedlinger, 2008). Research by Liu (1999) indicates that language barriers constitute a significant problem for Chinese students also. Although Chinese students are required to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or other equivalent English proficiency examinations before studying abroad, most Chinese students still fear that their English is inferior because they have few opportunities to listen and speak English in China. What Chinese students learn in China is formal standard written English. Therefore most of them have no problem with reading and writing but do have difficulties in listening and speaking English.

Phongsuwan (1997) studied the relationships between college satisfaction and language ability, and academic performance of international students, and found that: (1) there was a significant relationship between communicative language ability (CLA) and satisfaction with the college's contribution to academic and/or personal growth, quality of instruction, services, campus climate, and GPA at the level of 0.05; (2) there was a significant relationship between GPA and satisfaction with campus climate at the level of 0.05; (3) there was no significant relationship between GPA and satisfaction with the college's contribution to academic and/or personal growth, quality of instruction, and services; and (4) there was no significant relationship between CLA and English studied in school system in home country. Finally, CLA contributed to both college satisfaction and GPA. GPA was positively related to satisfaction with campus climate social life, but not academic aspects of the college.
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In his exploratory research studied international students’ perceptions of their experiences in New Zealand, Li (2003) discovered that many students held strong negatives views about the quality of education received. This is indicated by the following comment:

Teachers’ teaching competence, course content, and teaching approaches. Some teaching approaches and methods were considered incompatible with students’ learning concepts, such as classroom involvement, participation, spontaneous and interactive teaching, group work, and meaning-focused classroom activities. It was pointed out that teachers’ lack of linguistic, pedagogical and intercultural communication skills (p. 15)

Cultural Barriers

Cultural differences present additional challenges for Arab and other international students. Adjustment issues concern the degree to which a students’ native culture is similar or different in comparison with the local Malaysian culture. In addition to language issues, international students' relation to other cultures may affect their academic performance and learning responses. For instance, students from some countries may have been taught that it is a sign of disrespect to look directly at lectures when they are speaking to them, or to differ in opinion from these of their lecturers. Understanding the audience expectations differ between cultures as well. Students may have been taught to state their opinion directly in discussions. They may have also been taught not to speak in class unless called upon. Depending on their school culture, they may have had more experience memorizing information than criticizing arguments or asking questions. For this reason people from such cultures may be more hesitant to speak up in class discussion than other students. Their writing may also rely heavily on abstract and passive constructions that obscure the direct presentation of their ideas.
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Riedlinger (2008) explained that often problems surrounding transition and adjustment to life can be attributed to anxiety and some time associated with fear of failure. She added that perhaps the most trying aspect of the international students’ experience is the fact that while most students undergo a similar adjustment process, they have to deal with their emotions in isolation. Wang and Frank (2002) found out that some international students from Asian countries are particularly sensitive to the need to "save face." If one is providing assistance or instruction for an Asian student and asks if the student understands, it is likely that the student will state that he or she does understand, even if the student fails to understand or is unsure. A response indicating that the student does not understand may reflect negatively on the student and on the instructor. In contrast, directness and assertiveness in communications are generally valued by American students and scholars.

Trice (2001) in her study on faculty perception on graduate students stated that the international students wanted their institutions to help facilitate cultural adjustment by focusing on interaction between American and foreign student. This involved discussion forums for international students to share their experiences, and faculty members' understanding of international students' limitations. Faculty members were aware that language problems were greater than any other issue and many acknowledged the difficulties in cultural adjustment. International students in Malaysia are afforded the opportunity of meeting people of diverse cultures and sub-cultures within Malaysian society, including different ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, different economic and social classes. There is also exposure to different gender roles. International Students experience how individuals in Malaysian society view their place in the society differently. Study in Malaysia provides exposure to multiple and diverse cultural perspectives.
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through a unique environment. Furthermore, students interact not only with host nationals, but also with other international students and faculty from diverse cultures and nationalities.

On the other hand, Ramburuth (2001) focused on cross cultural learning behavior in relation to international students because of a pressing need to understand the learning styles, needs and expectations of these students. He explains that despite the strong waves of internationalization in Australia, there is still “insufficient understanding of how students from diverse backgrounds approach their learning, or how they may differ in their learning behavior from local students” (p.1.).

**Academic barriers**

As newcomers, international students face multiple pressures that may affect their academic performance. Foremost among these is their level of English language proficiency (accent, pronunciation, slang, etc.). But there are many other pressures that may also be encountered. Many international students report that they find the instruction in their classes fast-paced because they must make a number of adjustments. This is not only in relation to language and communication styles, but also in terms of the Malaysian educational system and other cultural and social differences. This is all while trying to absorb new materials and ideas.

Grayson (2005) identifies the nature of the English language problems faced by domestic and international students in four universities to assess the academic achievement of different origin and language groups. He indicates that it is clear that in all four universities, large numbers of
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international and domestic students have shown that they have various aspects of language which were reflected in their implications for academic achievement.

According to Laad & Rudy (1999) the finding of their research indicates a faculty member’s instructional style can be a barrier rather than a bridge to students learning. Faculty members should attempt to use alternative examples in conjunction with international students’ culture and they should also explain the context, and they should be more flexible. In addition, Trice (2000) believes that the faculty members could play a significant role on international students learning experience. The study revealed that faculty attitude, teaching style and appreciation of native cultures of international students are critical in students’ learning.

Lin (2002) points out in his research on Chinese postgraduate student in the U.S. that there is a conflict between students’ own learning styles and the American way of teaching and learning. These students could use their prior knowledge as resources for their individual learning, “they had positive learning experiences. Learning challenges for these students included language proficiency in classroom discussions, a lack of training in research skills, a lack of exposure to current research in related fields, and a lack of cultural knowledge or understanding”. Furthermore, Xu (2003) in his research about Chinese students' adaptation to learning in an American university emphasized that they had experienced difficulties caused mainly by the language deficiency and the lack of awareness of the great differences in teaching and learning between their home institutions in China.

The obstacles faced by Arab students in Malaysia: Research findings
Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

The questionnaires were distributed to (326) respondents who made up the Arab postgraduate students population. These students are studying in different majors at five Malaysian universities; Universiti Malaya - University of Malaysia (UM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) – National Universty and International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM.). The questionnaire was designed to cover three main areas: 1) to examine their English language proficiency barriers; 2) to study the cultural barriers; and finally 3) academic barriers that Arab postgraduate students are facing. This study examined Arab students from 15 Arab countries out of 22 Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, Libya, Somalia, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Algeria, Oman, Egypt, Palestine, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Morocco. Table No. 1 shows the number of students of each country where students lived prior to studying in Malaysia.

Table 1. Nationality of Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestine</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morocco</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Language barriers

Most of the Arab graduates students who would like to join Malaysian postgraduate programs take one to one and a half years to complete a required English language program prerequisite. This is if they did not meet the initial criteria of 550 points in TOFEL or 6.0 in IELTS. There is a slight difference in the score that is required by these five universities.

The data shows that 166 (50%) of the respondents agreed that the lessons taught in these respective academic English programs are generally suitable to their needs in learning English. 160 (49%) of the respondents agreed that tests and quizzes conducted were suitable to assess their level of English proficiency. 130 (39%) of all the respondents agreed that the duration of the English course was appropriate to their needs in learning English. The data further shows that 100 (30%) of the respondents were satisfied with their English program at their respective universities. But only 116 (35%) of them felt that the lecturers are helpful in assisting them in learning English. The respondents indicated a low 39% (139) percentage of satisfaction about the suitability of the duration of their English course when matched to their learning needs. Similarly as Table 2 also indicates, only 34% (112) were satisfied with prescribed textbooks.

Table 2. Arab Postgraduate Students’ Perception about English Language Programs
Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I like the English Program that I joined at my University</td>
<td>28 (8.58%)</td>
<td>100 (30.67%)</td>
<td>40 (12.26%)</td>
<td>120 (36.80%)</td>
<td>38 (11.56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Lessons taught are suitable with our needs in learning English</td>
<td>20 (6.13%)</td>
<td>166 (5.092%)</td>
<td>30 (9.20%)</td>
<td>80 (24.53%)</td>
<td>30 (9.20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The lecturers are helpful in assisting us learning English</td>
<td>30 (9.20%)</td>
<td>116 (35.58%)</td>
<td>70 (21.47%)</td>
<td>50 (15.33%)</td>
<td>60 (18.40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tests and quizzes conduct suitable with my level of English proficiency</td>
<td>50 (15.33%)</td>
<td>160 (49.07%)</td>
<td>26 (7.97%)</td>
<td>50 (1533)</td>
<td>40 (12.26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Duration of the English course is suitable to our needs in learning English</td>
<td>40 (12.26%)</td>
<td>130 (39.87%)</td>
<td>36 (11.04%)</td>
<td>70 (21.47%)</td>
<td>50 (15.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The textbooks used are suitable for us</td>
<td>36 (11.04%)</td>
<td>112 (34.35%)</td>
<td>20 (6.13%)</td>
<td>88 (26.99%)</td>
<td>70 (21.47%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

The survey further showed that only 58% (190) of students thought that their language learning laboratories were sufficiently good. A majority of 60% (196) believed that provided audio-visual materials (listening and speaking CDs, language learning software, etc.) were inadequate for their needs. In addition, as Table 3 represents, the data revealed a high percentage of the students thought that the library services at their universities (55% or 180), the provision of reference books (67% or 220), and student internet access (74% or 244) were generally inadequate.

Table 3. Facilities Available in Learning English Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Facilities</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Language Laboratories</td>
<td>190(58.28%)</td>
<td>110(33.74%)</td>
<td>26(7.97%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Library</td>
<td>30(9.20%)</td>
<td>116(35.58%)</td>
<td>180(55.21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Audio Visual Material (Listening and speaking tapes, language software, etc.)</td>
<td>60(18.40%)</td>
<td>70(27.47%)</td>
<td>196(60.12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reference Books</td>
<td>40(12.26%)</td>
<td>66(20.24%)</td>
<td>220(67.48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td>32(9.81%)</td>
<td>50(15.33%)</td>
<td>244(74.84%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Likewise, the Arab students did not evaluate their programs highly in terms of the focus of listening, speaking and reading skills. 64% (210) of students thought that their was poor focus on second language listening skills. 53% (174) of students similarly that the English speaking skills focus of their course was poor. However, as Table 4 indicates there was a more positive view of the course focus on reading and writing skills in English as a second language.

Table 4. How Arab Students Evaluate the English Program Skills
Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>40(12.26%)</td>
<td>76(23.31%)</td>
<td>210(64.41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>72(22.08%)</td>
<td>80(42.53%)</td>
<td>174(53.37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>204(62.57%)</td>
<td>72(22.08%)</td>
<td>50(15.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>204(62.57%)</td>
<td>82(25.15%)</td>
<td>40(12.26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To sum up, the central finding of the survey was that less than half of the Arab student respondents believed that they received adequate quality of and preparation from the university language programs for international students. Another key finding was most students do not think the lessons taught were adequate for the English learning needs. Some of contributing reasons for these problems and general sense of satisfaction were identified as follows: (a) the classes being “too big” (in some cases more than 40 students in one class); (b) the “regular” absence of the lecturers; and (c) “too many holidays”.

It is worth mentioning that due to these limitations and student complaints two cultural attachés from Arab embassies have already visited one of these five universities and raised this matter with people in charge English language programs. The respondent feedback suggests that it is time for universities to take serious measurement to update and revise its English programs as well as building more modern (i.e. digital) language learning labs.

**Academic Challenges**
Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

Arab students from different academic cultures have experienced different teaching/learning systems in their home countries. The participating Arab students in this study from UM, UTM, UKM UPM, and IIUM all came from 15 Arab different countries. Therefore, their cultures and education systems are different from Malaysia. The data shows that most of the Arab postgraduate students (61% or 200) at these five Malaysian universities have given high priority to their academic activities. This is especially so in terms of relationships with lecturers and 52% (or 172 students) saw this as a requirement of academic success. The data revealed a number of other significant findings. 74% (242) saw a significant structural difference between the style of teaching and learning in universities in Malaysia and those in their home countries. Another interesting difference is that many Arab students indicated that they accustomed to higher education with a more specialized focus than is the case in Malaysia. The comments of the respondents also indicated that many Arab students come from cultures in which it is not easy to approach the lecturer about the discomfort they are experiencing during their studies. In addition, the comments reveal that Arab students may also feel that they have no one to turn to discuss these problems. As also indicated in Table 5, participants also report changes in their academic plans, and lack of certain types of assistance.

Table 5. Academic System and Arab Postgraduate Students’ Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Academic system is different from my own country</td>
<td>26(7.97%)</td>
<td>200(61.34%)</td>
<td>20(6.13%)</td>
<td>50(15.33%)</td>
<td>30(9.20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I face academic difficulties</td>
<td>16(4.90%)</td>
<td>230(70.55%)</td>
<td>8(2.45%)</td>
<td>26(14.11%)</td>
<td>26(7.97%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lectures are helpful to solve my academic difficulties</td>
<td>20 (6.13%)</td>
<td>170 (52.14%)</td>
<td>12 (3.68%)</td>
<td>64 (19.63%)</td>
<td>60 (18.40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Academic difficulties are affecting my achievement</td>
<td>18 (5.52%)</td>
<td>220 (67.48%)</td>
<td>20 (6.13%)</td>
<td>36 (11.04%)</td>
<td>32 (9.81%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Methodology of teaching is different from my own country</td>
<td>40 (12.26%)</td>
<td>242 (74.23%)</td>
<td>18 (4.90%)</td>
<td>20 (6.13%)</td>
<td>8 (2.45%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cultural barriers**

Cultural differences can have an adverse effect on Arab students’ ability to develop their language skills and academic performance. The data shows that a low 27% (90) of Arab students at Malaysian universities do not think they suffer from cultural difficulties at university. On the other hand, 68% (224) of all respondents indicated that the emphasis on multiculturalism in Malaysia is a positive for international students. 80% (262) of the respondents agreed that Malaysia is a multi-religious country where people are free to practice their own religion. At the same time, 59% (192) of respondents indicated that they generally saw Malaysian people as welcoming towards foreigners or people from different ethnic backgrounds. Yet the data shows that 47% (156) of Arab students have difficulties finding their favorite food living in Malaysia, and 52% (170) are satisfied at resources or places appropriate for their personal needs. Furthermore, as Table 6 reports, 47% (140) of all respondents indicated that Malaysia's lifestyle and culture is similar to their own.

**Table 6. Arab Students’ Cultural Challenges at Malaysian Universities**
Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>22. (6.74%)</th>
<th>90(27.60%)</th>
<th>18(5.52%)</th>
<th>156(47.85%)</th>
<th>40(12.26%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I have serious cultural difficulties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Multicultural identity in Malaysia is good for international students</td>
<td>20(6.13%)</td>
<td>224(68.71%)</td>
<td>30(9.20%)</td>
<td>18(5.52%)</td>
<td>34(10.42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Malaysia is a Multi religion country; you are free to practice your own religion</td>
<td>18(5.52%)</td>
<td>262(80.36%)</td>
<td>16(4.90%)</td>
<td>20(6.13%)</td>
<td>10(3.06%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>People are welcoming towards foreigners/ people from different ethics backgrounds</td>
<td>34(10.42%)</td>
<td>192(58.89%)</td>
<td>20(6.13%)</td>
<td>50(15.33%)</td>
<td>30(9.20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I have difficulties to find my favorite food</td>
<td>30(9.20%)</td>
<td>156(47.85%)</td>
<td>30(9.20%)</td>
<td>60(18.40%)</td>
<td>50(15.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Limited places available to find my own personal needs</td>
<td>36(11.04%)</td>
<td>170(52.14%)</td>
<td>20(6.13%)</td>
<td>60(18.40%)</td>
<td>40(12.26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Malaysia’s lifestyle and culture is similar to my own</td>
<td>22(6.74%)</td>
<td>144(44.17%)</td>
<td>20(6.13%)</td>
<td>80(24.53%)</td>
<td>60(18.40%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 identifies the most troublesome problems encountered by Arab students studying in Malaysia. 54% (178) indicated that the academic barriers were their biggest problem. 35% (116) identified language problems as their main grief. A smaller number of just on 10% (32) were particularly worried about cultural barriers.
Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers

Table 7. Most Troublesome Problems faced by Arab postgraduate Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the most important troublesome problems</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic challenges</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>54.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language challenges</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>35.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural challenges</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9.81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

International postgraduate students in every country face a range of cultural, academic and often language barriers which they must deal with to achieve successful completion of their studies and academic accreditation. Like other such students Arab students in Malaysia are exposed to views often different from those in their home countries. Living in a different cultural context requires adaptation to the new cultural environment, to the learning of new languages, and also to different contexts of academic education. The present study has thus identified the most troublesome problems encountered by the Arab postgraduate students at five Malaysian universities. These problems faced were ranked as follows: first, academic difficulties; second, languages difficulties; and third, cultural difficulties. The fact that most of the Arab students are Muslims – as is the Malaysian population in general - may explain the lesser figure for cultural challenges. This is despite how many students did link cultural factors to their perception of academic challenges.

A significant number of students were concerned about language barriers. Some of these saw language issues being linked to the cultural obstacles faced. However at all the five universities surveyed, a majority were concerned that the English language learning programs preparing them for academic study were not adequate for their needs and purposes. Amongst other ways in which Malaysian universities might explore greater level of support for Arab and also other international
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students, a key focus might the improvement or enhancement of the English language courses. Such courses might also incorporate a focus on increased cultural awareness of the local context, as well as being better linked to the particular requirements of academic research and writing.

References


Arab Postgraduate Students in Malaysia: Identifying and overcoming the cultural and language barriers


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Abstract

This study is one of the first to examine EFL student multimedia-based online poster project completion using the Glogster application in South Korea. Data was collected through media artifact analysis, language use production, and interview. Analysis sees interesting results emerge for international versus local students, particularly regarding the positive or negative impact of group dynamics. Also, students clearly recognize the importance of pedagogy when using multimedia but still seek escapism from classroom anxiety through its use, and although learners desire to work collaboratively their pre-existing schema shapes expectations of multimedia. Importantly, learners responded well to Glogster, viewing it favorably, as almost all felt they could practice and develop English skills using the application. Ultimately, students were keen to create content that was not only interactive but based on the common interest of group members, with English language use viewed as an essential component of this process. The research also
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highlights potential methods for applying Glogster created poster projects and associated presentations diagnostically, while drawing attention to the rewards provided when analyzing learner output produced when creating and constructing projects with the application.

*Keywords:* CALL, digital posters, EFL, Glogster
The internet no longer simply allows learners to explore and discover their own learning pathways, but it allows learners to construct their own content and add to the online database of resources in the form of multimedia-based UGC (user generated content) built on the premise of sharing and socializing (Craig, 2008). One such application built on this premise is the free–for-use web-based interactive digital poster publishing tool Glogster (2008). The potential for incorporating the use of such tools in the EFL context is that they can provide learners with a means of using the internet to combine and collate information with emphasis on collective sharing and community-based creation of data that can then generate and sustain authentic learning experiences (see Chen, 2006; Chong & Yamamoto, 2006; Craig, 2008; Huh, 2007; Stanley, 2006; Tsou, Wang, & Tzeng, 2006; Vuorikari, 2005). Working cooperatively and communicatively with such tools can also lead to the implementation of constructivist learning approaches in the language classroom that are built upon the real life experience of students. When this occurs stronger connections can be made between learning content and the students’ world (Oguz & Bahar, 2008), and as such, the collaborative creation of knowledge, and the sharing and dissemination of that knowledge becomes the core of the learning process (Lee, 2008; Richardson, 2006). In this
regard, the viability of incorporating Glogster for use in the EFL context at the university level will be explored, and the potential benefits for language production detailed. Ultimately this will be undertaken by determining student perspectives of application use through group-based interviews in order to identify the emerging benefits afforded to learners after classroom integration of the tool. In addition, by generating readability statistics on language use production, and undertaking media artifact analysis of student created learning content, the potential for instructors to use Glogster created poster projects diagnostically will be determined.

**Conceptual Framework**

As a free-for use web-based poster publishing platform audio, images, and video can all be imported into a Glogster ‘glog’ page, or linked to or grabbed from a webcam feed, while text titles, stickers, and speech bubbles can be created on the glogster ‘glog’ page directly. Various effects such as frames, shadows, font size changes and color schemes can be implemented as well. Space on the Glogster webpage (glog) can be used freely, meaning items can be placed or replaced, rotated, overlaid, and resized. In addition, all content can be linked to other glogs or other web pages or content around the internet. Content applied and learner material developed in such a way allows students to construct learning in an active
and meaningful manner, and associate the lesson to the real world and their own lives (Oguz & Bahar, 2008).

Further, in terms of social networking with Glogster, user moods can be entered next to their profile icon, and friends can be added. Glogs can be shared amongst friends, messages can also be sent to online friends from Glogster pages, and all glogs can be rated and commented upon by users of the online community. Such aspects of the publishing tool promote cooperation with other individuals when working in teams on a digital poster project, and can lead to effective classroom networking for communication and collaborative work (Craig, 2008). Such small-group interaction establishes co-operative learning opportunities, that Abdullah and Jacobs (2004) note can lead to increased opportunity for students to produce linguistic output, while eliminating barriers to the sharing of student work and content (Craig, 2008).

So too, working with authentic material and material that students have collated themselves (such as their own images, or produced audio or video) can increase motivation and create an interest in working interactively and collaboratively (Chao & Huang, 2007; Chun & Plass, 2000; Ellison & Wu, 2008; Huh, 2007; H. S. Kim, 2007; Kung & Chuo, 2002). Learner publication of media artifacts also allows students to construct relevant
connections among varied resources and provides a means to enrich the learning experience through revisiting, reflection, and revision of those artifacts (see Ferdig, 2007). Student production and development of a multimedia project, such as an interactive digital poster using publishing tools like Glogster, can additionally see multimedia content accommodate various learning styles simultaneously (I. O. Kim, 2000). For example: visual, through video and images; auditory, through audio and written words; kinesthetic, through interaction; and extrovert, through projection of creativity. Moreover, completion of such projects comes to develop personal responsibility within students (see Kwon, 2002), with utilization of such activities leading to a sense of empowerment and independence in students while they become more accountable for their own learning.

Once digital posters have been developed with the publishing tool Glogster they can then be embedded into class wikis, or blogs, or shared among classmates added to the system as friends. Particularly since Glogster allows for the organization of media and widgets to form a collage that can be embedded into any web page or viewed stand-alone from the Glogster website (Valenza, 2008). As for language students specifically, Sutcliffe (2008) sees learners using Glogster to create digital posters on topics relating to themselves, celebrities, towns and so on, with the publishing tool providing learners with a means to showcase their writing skills through typing, and speaking skills through mp3 recording.
Essentially, through one piece of work, students can present both their oral and written skills whilst at the same time showing off their creative talent, particularly if students shoot short video projects to upload along with a transcript. Priester (2008) agrees, and further highlights Glogster applicability in the educational setting. He suggests such uses as: young learners showing and labeling elements of fairytales; older learners being able to practice creativity and persuasive writing skills in advert design; development of biography projects and travel posters, allowing students to post key points with responses and visuals to enhance the content; and, using the publishing tool to create topic-based e-posters as alternatives to creating paper-based brochures or posters in the physical world, especially since glogs can also be printed and are interactive. So too, the easy learning curve of Glogster type applications suites younger learners (1st and 2nd graders) as well as older learners (adults) with minimal English language and low digital literacy skills.

Although digital posters may be initially time-consuming to create in terms of searching for online materials, uploading UGC, and creating links, or running into technical difficulties (H. S. Kim, 2007), paper-based poster projects may prove more time consuming and do not allow students to practice the development of ICT (information communication and technology) skills (H. S. Kim, 2007). Once complete though, digital posters and other web-based authentic materials can assist language educators in circumventing issues
associated with rapidly outdated material (H. S. Kim, 2007), with content easily refreshed and accessed anywhere anytime by all stakeholders (parents, students, instructors) (Peter, 2005). Further, compared to paper-based projects, material costs can be alleviated by utilizing online digital poster publishing tools.

Additionally, instructors are able to promote digital posters and media artifacts as a means to develop task-based learning that can be aligned to government or curriculum standards (Ba, Martin, & Diaz, 2001) that are constructed from a safe and private platform. Such projects if used early on in the syllabus are useful for gathering diagnostic data and for providing a baseline of student performance, with peer assessment and summary presentations useful to highlight student skills (see Orsmond, Merry, & Callaghan, 2004). Ultimately, the use and application of digital poster publishing tools with EFL students will not only appeal to today’s digital learners, but through the integration of such tools in the classroom come to support the development of digital, media, visual, and information literacy skills as students are required to seek out, collate, question and arrange factual data elements and media artifacts in an interactive online environment. This is particularly poignant as visual images are increasingly becoming “the predominant form of communication across a range of learning and teaching resources delivered across a range of media and formats” (Bamford, 2004, p. 2).
METHODOLOGY

Data Sources

The study was conducted during the second half of the second semester of the 2009 academic year. Data was collected through media artifact analysis of online content, readability analysis of an offline written summary and face-to-face group interviews.

Media artifact analysis was conducted as it can illustrate the quantity, consistency, and uniformity of media application in each and across each project. This can tell us the depth of student reliance on various media elements, the digital literacy levels of students, and the levels of interactivity built into each project. This last point is particularly significant, as interactivity can lead to increased engagement with learning material and develop higher-level cognitive skills (Tang, 2005).

Analysis of the linguistic output from student-produced and -presented written summaries in terms of readability statistics (see Briere, 1978; and, Shokrpour, 2005) along with vocabulary and word usage was then conducted, and acted as a diagnostic tool for students’ work (see Orsmond, Merry, & Callaghan, 2004). Then, in order to determine student language production outcomes, off-line written summaries were parsed through
tools available at the Compleat Lexical Tutor website (Cobb, 2008). This is noteworthy as such analysis can inform us of the literacy level of students as well as their linguistic and communicative ability, and assists in determining likely areas upon which learners can spend more time focusing on target language improvement.

Finally, to briefly explore student perceptions regarding use of the Glogster application in the context of a ‘multimedia English’ class, short six-question face-to-face standardized open-ended small group interviews were conducted. The focus of the six interview questions revolved around knowledge of Glogster, expectations held of the application, linguistic and collaborative skills development stemming from application use, the difficulties experienced during project development, as well as aspects of project completion time-management. Interviews served as an important means of teasing out student perceptions of the website, and for determining viability of digital poster publishing tool use with students in the EFL classroom. Asking students about the way they interact and engage with multimedia provides insight into the approaches they take to learning with interactive digital content, exposes their existing digital literacy knowledge levels, and bring the ways in which student linguistic and collaborative skills can develop to the forefront. Under the same token, exploring learner perceptions of application use through exploratory interviews can lead to an understanding of student expectations of digital content use in the classroom.
It can also extend to provide an appreciation of the difficulties they experience when engaged in learning from multimedia contexts. Further rationale for selecting the interview technique is that it can allow researchers to ask set questions of interviewees, and to probe for greater depth of explanation of responses where necessary (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008).

Each of the group interviews were digitally recorded then transcribed, and underwent member validation before coding and analysis. Instructor classroom observations and comments on interview transcripts were also taken into account.

**Participants**

Participants came from a small sample of convenience (N= 20) consisting of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese learners of English at a mid-ranked provincial university in South Korea. This sample of mixed junior/senior Department of English ‘multimedia English’ class students was split into four groups of five students who then worked together over three class periods (nine hours) to complete an online Glogster poster consisting of multimedia artifacts (audio, images, hyperlinks, text, and video). The groups also worked on an associated off-line written topic summary that was to be orally presented. To ensure consistency each group was provided with the same topic based on previously studied content from the class textbook. Students were awarded the liberty of selecting their own group members so that personality clashes could be alleviated, so that they could work with established friends, and so that they could form a group that would presumably work
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together more autonomously, cohesively, collaboratively, and potentially, more effectively.

All participants were classed as advanced level language learners by the English Department, and it was these groups who would all participate in the interview. Group 1 consisted of Chinese (N=2), Japanese (N=2), and Korean learners (N=1); Group 2 consisted of Korean learners only (N=5); Group 3 was a mix of Chinese (N=3) and Koreans (N=2); while Group 4 consisted of entirely Korean students (N=5).

**Procedure**

Three class periods were used throughout the course of Glogster poster project development, as any practical result would need to occur in this timeframe during real-world usage, including that of the classroom incorporation of such web-based content alongside the set curriculum of the research context. In the first class participants were introduced to Glogster. This introduction was achieved by providing an extensive tutorial on application use, and by showing several best-practice digital poster projects as examples. Students then had a chance to interact with the Glogster website while they brainstormed ideas and discussed the topic during class. This was then followed up with out-of-class research on the topic for homework. In the second class students worked collaboratively to prepare and finalize the Glogster project. All groups were then given the freedom to develop the poster project in their own way with no restrictions placed on what to pick and choose amongst the elements offered by the Glogster environment. While students worked on their projects, the
instructor coached each group individually on media presentation, artifact application, as well as verbal and non-verbal communication techniques. Students then presented their projects to each other in a following class session. After the third class session was over, and all submissions and presentations were complete, analysis of each summary along with Glogster poster projects was undertaken. At this stage each of the four groups of students were interviewed individually by a research assistant, with all 20 of the students participating.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the results from analysis of summary presentations and poster projects to determine student media artifact use and language production. It also presents student interactions and responses to use of the digital poster publishing tool by summarizing interview findings. A discussion of the data is conducted relating implications of the findings to the conceptual framework behind the study.

**Media Artifact Analysis**
Media artifact analysis shows that Group 2 applied the most use of multimedia and built in interactivity with the publishing tool, while Group 4 used the least amount of multimedia across their poster project (refer to Table 1). Group 1 was the only group to neglect interactivity or linking to other sites, other glogs, or their summary. In fact, only Group 2 linked to their summary from within their project. Taking full advantage of developing interactivity, Group 2 was also the only group to relate and link their poster project to other glogs, although Groups 3 and 4 did provide links to other sites. Such diversity in media artifact use can perhaps show a glimpse of the preferred learning style of each group, with Group 2 clearly the most visually oriented. There was also a strong use among all groups of on topic graphics, with minimum reliance on decorative images. While fifty percent of groups applied audio to the main page of the glog, all groups applied relatively the same amount of textual information to their poster. This could be a result of students being used to providing text-oriented output in traditional learning environments. The exception to this was Group 2 who applied significantly more textual information compared to other groups. In this regard, it appears that student groups came to rely on their existing strengths and skills to develop material based on their individual learner characteristics and thereby effectively did take control over their own learning (see, for example, Jones & Liu, 2001). However, to gain consistency across groups regarding multimedia development it appears that more direction and more responsibility would need to be provided to learners. One
method of achieving this would be to provide guidelines dictating a set minimum of links, artifacts, and so on necessary to complete the project to a specific standard. Such direction could then focus students on the types of desired outcomes that can assist them in making further and more substantial connections to the material they develop and the content they create.

Table 1
*Analysis of Multimedia Artifacts Applied in Each Group Project*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Artifacts</th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Group 4</th>
<th>Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background images</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text boxes with text</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphics on topic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Value1</th>
<th>Value2</th>
<th>Value3</th>
<th>Value4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decorative graphics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio on main page</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to other glogs</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to external sites</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to summary</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Readability Statistics

As for readability statistics (see Table 2), word counts show student summaries for their off-line class presentations fell short of the directed 300-500 words. Perhaps, a threat of penalty could ensure students meet the word count in future. Nonetheless, only Group 1 met the target count as set by the instructor, while other groups fell short by over half of the length expected and this of course also led to presentations being shorter than expected. Regardless, data shows a low level of spelling and grammar problems for students, with Group 4 having more grammar problems than others. In addition, this indicates that the words the students do know they can usually spell, but, average words per sentence indicate writing problems regarding punctuation as does the number of sentences per paragraph. So too, the number of paragraphs and number of sentences per summary indicates potential problems with the structural layout of written summaries for off-line presentation, as the overall group average represents only two sentences per paragraph. This shows that such students could benefit from working on focusing effort on punctuation, and better proficiency of structuring written work.
Table 2

*Readability Analysis of Group Summaries*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary Elements</th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Group 4</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counts</td>
<td>Words</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paragraphs</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sentences</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Incorrect spelling</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Misused grammar</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Averages</td>
<td>Sentences per paragraph</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Words per sentence</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocab.</td>
<td>K1 (most frequent 1000)</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>K2 (1001-2000)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>K3 (2001-3000)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>K4 (3001-4000)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>K5 (4001-5000)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Off list (not on BNC)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Words in text (tokens)</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different words (types)</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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To determine use of vocabulary and use of words in terms of frequency, BNC (British National Corpus) data was used. Originally, the 100-million-word British National Corpus was mined for high frequency words (see Leech, Rayson, & Wilson, 2001) which were then grouped into families. In turn, these words were then sorted into thousand-family lists by Nation (2006), and it is the first three of these that currently represents the basic learner lexicon of English. With this in mind, it is clear to see that the majority of student lexical choices stem from the BNC 1,000, with total vocabulary choices ranging through to the BNC 5,000. This shows students have a grasp of knowledge relating to the high frequency ‘here and now’ and ‘lived experience’ words. Interestingly too, there are a number of off-list words used among all groups except for Group 4. Off-list words are terms that do not appear as part of the BNC 14,000. The use of such words is not high enough to say these learners possess a much wider vocabulary, but they clearly possess knowledge of a broad range of vocabulary. In terms of unique word use, taking into account words in the text and use of different words, Group 1 uses the least unique items (51% of the summary) followed by Group 2 (57%), then Group 3 (65%) and Group 4 (69%). This shows that even though summary size was small, the range of unique vocabulary present is wide but that almost half of the vocabulary from each summary consistently stems from the first 1,000 most commonly used English words. It was expected that junior and senior (third and fourth year) English Department students would be able to apply a much higher academic standard.
Potentially, this indicates that these students may need assistance in learning how to incorporate and effectively apply the vocabulary they do know within written and spoken discourse.
Interview

The initial interview question regarding knowledge of the application (Have you used Glogster before?) found that no student had used or even heard of Glogster previously. Regardless, all students (N=20) compared Glogster to other multimedia applications they had previously used (such as CyWorld and QQ) and expected the same functions to be available, rather than viewing the Glogster application as something unique that could provide them with something new and different. As such, pre-existing schema came to heavily influence student expectations of the project and initial application use. Further, it was uncovered that most students (N=18) perceived the use of such multimedia-based applications and the internet in class to reduce the stress of learning English, with a good number of students (N=12) also mentioning that it was vital to feel the importance of English through any multimedia project. This highlights a keen learning awareness in students in that they want their instructors to strive to put pedagogy first when seeking to incorporate technology or website use into the language learning classroom. This notion is well reflected in the literature with the importance and value of pedagogical practice stressed over the simple application of media use (see, for one example, Burston, 2003).

The second interview question focused on expectations of the application (What expectations did you have of Glogster before and after using it?). Answers illustrated that
first, and foremost, all students (N=20) expected use of the application to be fun, that it would be easy to work with and that they would be able to develop something interesting with it. This aspect ties in to the concept of students viewing computer use for ‘edutainment’: if instructors can realize these expectations in the selection of websites or online tools for in class use then the edutainment value presented by the computer can possess the ability to capture learner involvement and motivate students to become more engaged with the learning tools provided by instructors. Ultimately though, the majority of students (N=15) found Glogster a little difficult to work with due to infrastructure constraints (slow internet connection speed from the computer lab, computer crashes, and so on). Due to this, non-saved projects were at times lost, but this was somewhat advantageous as these particular students (N=5) then needed to rethink, redesign, and redevelop their work as well as learning the importance of constantly saving digital projects as they were being developed. This outcome emphasizes the importance of incorporating websites and technology into the classroom in a smooth manner. This would mean selecting websites and tools that possess small learning curves, and websites and tools that perform well on the available hardware and technology available to students in the local teaching context. In addition, the concept of contingency plans needs raising here. A backup action plan needs to be created for such classes as students must still be provided with a means to engage with project work in case computers fail, or if internet access goes down entirely. This aside,
after project completion, all students ($N=20$) felt that using Glogster was exciting as it allowed them to express ideas in different ways, and interesting as they could select various media elements and work interactively with those elements. This shows that students wanted to work using their creative skills, and were eager to engage with a variety of materials to express themselves, which relates back to their initial expectations of the Glogster website offering an exciting outlet for creativity as well as being an application that would be enjoyable to use and one that would assist them in developing practical and linguistic skills.

The third interview question, revolving around linguistic skills development (How were you able to practice English through Glogster development and group work?), found that students ($N=15$) who considered classmates as actively collaborating to complete the project indicated high levels of target language use during project work, and a general interest in the use of multimedia for learning. In turn, this saw students report a positive development of their English skills. This is in contrast to the students ($N=5$) who reported a general disinterest in the use of multimedia for learning. These particular students considered their classmates as inactive and indicated low levels of target language use during project work. Consequently, these students (all from Group 4) came to hold a negative view of the project and perceived no development of their English skills over the project completion period. Of
particular note, there appeared to be a preference amongst international students to mix their first language with English and Korean during project work. It was found by the instructor that these students actively and effectively utilized resources from their native language, the local language, and the target language during the project completion phase. This outcome comes to support the positive impact of allowing students to use languages other than the target language during classroom project completion (see also Kent, 2004). Aside from recognizing that there is indeed value in students using their native language(s) in the EFL classroom context, rather than outlawing use of the native-tongue, levels of group interaction are important. It is essential that teachers encourage high levels of group participation and active collaboration so that a sense of achievement and target language improvement can be generated amongst learners.

As for collaborative skills development (How were you able to help each other learn new ICT skills during project completion?), the fourth interview question responses came to highlight that almost all students ($N=15$), except those from Group 4 ($N=5$), reported a reliance on individual group members strengths in order to solidify and teach each other the necessary ICT skills as they completed the project. For example, students good at working with graphics took the lead in graphic use and manipulation and instructed other group members in such techniques. This shows emergence of student self-reliance and learner
autonomy in the project development phase, leading to collaborative learner led group work established from a sense of student fostered community. This outcome shows that it is important for teachers to become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of students under their charge. Instructors can then match students with appropriate peers when establishing group work, and can also promote the strengths of individual students while encouraging such students to embrace their skills and knowledge in a leadership fashion when working collaboratively with peers, and in this manner the development of learner autonomy can be fostered.

Difficulties of application use (what were the main difficulties in using Glogster?) was the focus of the fifth interview question. In this case, all students (N=20) viewed the actual task of using Glogster as a challenge, but developing content with the application was not perceived to be a difficult task. Nonetheless international students (N= 7) tended to find it difficult to adapt to technology use, and reported heavy reliance upon Korean peers to assist in this aspect of project completion. This is supported by instructor observation and from interview transcripts, and in this regard it is clear that the Korean students in the class generally possessed a higher digital literacy level compared to the international students. On the other hand, from a pedagogical perspective, the biggest difficulty seemed to be student production of English within the project outside of the offline written summary and online
multimedia content development. Some students \((N=5)\) felt that it was difficult to improve English simply by searching for, collating, and engaging with multimedia artifacts. This is particularly true for the members of Group 4 who, it was found, tended to rely solely on native language search engines and websites during the multimedia collection stage as opposed to the international students who the instructor reported used not only their native language but both Korean and target language websites for such purposes. This underscores the need to provide increased direction to students, particularly those who are not used to undertaking projects that require elements of self-directed learning. In this case, use of student-developed content (such as digital stories, and mp3 recordings) over student-collated materials would have proven more beneficial and served to focus students’ attention on working with the digital content. This would have promoted higher interest in interactive and collaborative work, which in turn could have led to increased linguistic output while increasing relevant connections among resources.

The final interview question concerned time management (Was the in-class time provided adequate enough to complete the project?). Time management proved to be the most challenging aspect of working with the multimedia environment for students, with all students \((N=20)\) feeling they were very busy during class time while working on the project. This means that enough time was provided to see students maintain an interest in project
completion and to motivate them to complete the project in the required timeframe. However, the more diverse the ethnicity of the group, the longer it took to complete the task. This could relate to the way such groups interacted in project completion compared to the monolingual native language groups, as these groups were found to be learning not only technological skills, but also learning and practicing the local community language along with classroom target language skills simultaneously. As a result, homogenous groups (Group 2 and Group 4) felt that the time provided was adequate, but the more heterogeneous groups (Group 1 and Group 3) felt that more time on task could have been provided. This highlights the importance of instructors striking a balance between providing an adequate amount of time for task completion along with a means for the task to simultaneously provide room to adequately stimulate language practice and development in learners.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed at determining the applicability of using the digital poster publishing tool website Glogster in the university EFL context of South Korea. Results indicate that use and application of digital poster publishing tools with EFL students appeals to today’s digital learners. However, to gain consistency in use across groups regarding multimedia
development, more direction and more responsibility needs to be provided to learners. This could be in the form of guidelines dictating the minimum number of hyperlinks, media artifacts and so on necessary to complete the project to a set standard. As students desire to work collaboratively, this can then secure a more focused project direction early on, and provide increased scaffolding for the social construction of content. Of note here is that the diversity of media artifact use by students in such projects can also provide insight into their preferred learning styles. That is, if they are allowed the freedom to focus on further development and collation of multimedia artifacts beyond a set minima so that characteristic learning strategies and style orientations can emerge.

Further, the research came to highlight the ability to utilize Glogster poster projects as a diagnostic tool, and that determining student performance with the publishing tool can be fruitful. If used in such a manner any resulting outcomes could provide a means of establishing a baseline of student performance. Using Glogster in this manner can also highlight the current skill level of students and areas of much needed target language improvement. For this study, overall readability statistics showed that it is important for participants to develop their vocabulary to a higher academic standard, develop an ability to write more on topic, focus on punctuation and develop a better proficiency of structuring written work. Most importantly, count levels indicate that these learners need to undergo
further training regarding structuring and laying out work and require help with punctuation, grammar and spelling. On the other hand, counts also show that broad student vocabulary use emphasizes that these learners possess a comprehension of high frequency ‘here and now’ and ‘lived experience’ words that serve them well. As such, these learners will need assistance in developing an understanding of how to incorporate such vocabulary effectively into spoken and written contexts, with a focus on academic writing along with aspects of effective structural development, punctuation and grammar required.

It was also established that although pre-existing notions and familiarity with other online multimedia-based software applications colored students attitude and initial expectations of Glogster, they also envisioned the in-class process of multimedia use as being for ‘edutainment’ (i.e., reducing stress and providing learning). Importantly though, students recognized and held an expectation that any in-class use of computers and multimedia should operate in a pedagogical manner to facilitate educational benefit. As such, these learners view educational technology as a means to provide them with interesting, exciting and entertaining learning opportunities. In addition, students who considered classmates as actively collaborating to complete the project indicated high levels of target language use during project work, and as a result (perceived) positive development of linguistic skills. This was particularly evident in the international versus local student
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case, where groups with higher self-regulated learning ability also appeared to come to obtain a greater sense of empowerment and achievement through project completion. Interestingly too, international student groups preferred to mix the native language(s) with the classroom target language (English) and the local community language (Korean) during project completion. As a consequence they were able to focus on and successfully utilize resources from their native language, local language and the target language, and this shows the positive impact of allowing student use of languages other than the target language during project work undertaken in the classroom. In this regard, learner autonomy and self-reliance emerged seeing collaborative student led group work form out of a sense of student fostered community. This student fostered community also saw each student group come to rely on the strengths and skills of individual group members to develop material based on learner characteristics, with students taking control over their own learning and at times providing peer coaching. This was particularly evident in the case of local Korean students who generally possessed higher digital literacy levels over the international students and who coached these learners on technical issues and aspects of content development. This study also highlights that the participants in fact found it very difficult to produce digital English content outside of the summary and multimedia labels, and that simply searching for digital content and engaging with multimedia artifacts does not lead to extremely high language output production in an end product. Perhaps, during the project completion phase,
use of student constructed digital media artifacts would prove more beneficial and interesting to learners. Particularly since self-generated material would serve to not only increase linguistic output but also come to refocus student attention on working with project content by promoting relevant connections between learners and multimedia artifact development through UGC.

As with all research, this study has several limitations. In particular, only a small number of subjects acted as participants and this restricts the ability to generalize results. However, this is not unique to this research as a large number of educational studies rely on small samples of convenience. So too, the advantage of confining the sample to one educational department and to a smaller sample size is that it affords greater experimental control (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). A further limitation stems from the place of investigation, as the research was conducted at a mid-ranked university. In this case, the students themselves (in terms of low self-efficacy, low self-esteem, and low motivation), along with other learner variables, such as those involving socio-economic background, social capital, or home environment, could have held sway more than what is evidenced by the data. The impact of this is unclear on the present study, and this is an area of investigation that could lead to future research possibilities.
Despite these limitations, it seems that the Glogster publishing tool could serve as an educational application in multimedia English courses. The website would also prove to be an ideal technology for allowing a synthesis of all class projects in a final portfolio form, thereby extending the tool from single poster project use to an e-portfolio management system. This is an important consideration for such web-based publishing tools and one worthy of future research, particularly since web-based learning is becoming a major trend of teaching and learning models, and is increasingly being incorporated into the classroom and home-based educational activities.

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