

Negotiating Pedagogies in Omani Writing Centers

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INTRODUCTION

English has emerged as an important foreign language to be mastered in all Middle Eastern regions. Proficiency in the English language is considered as an invaluable skill which gives a competitive edge to people in this globalized world. In Oman, English language teaching (ELT) is a fairly new undertaking. It was incorporated in the Omani education system in 1970 when Sultan Qaboos began modernizing the country. The Sultanate has ever since recognized the significance of English as a lingua franca and the only official foreign language in the country.

In an effort to improve ELT in the Sultanate of Oman and tackle all the challenges and requirements of domestic and international businesses, the Omani government implemented a new system for elementary and secondary schools, called the Basic Education System (BES), in 1999. According to the Oman Ministry of Education (2008):

Teaching English became part of the education system at all levels of institutions, from kindergarten to college. Knowledge of the English language was

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required in order to successfully complete an undergraduate degree, regardless of the major. (as cited in Alrawas, 2014, p. 2)

However, ELT statistics in Oman indicate that more than half of the Omani students who finish school and join public and private universities are unable to use the language fluently or in a meaningful way using all literacy skills. A similar situation is observed in the majority of students who are granted scholarships to countries where English is the official language to study for their degrees. These students spend their first year studying English in their respective preparatory programs even though they have received formal instruction in English at schools for 12 years (Al-Issa, 2010). According to the Education First English Proficiency Index (EFEPI, 2015), Oman is at the bottom of Education First's global ranking of English skills and is one of the main regions to register declining proficiency in the English language. The report indicates that Oman demonstrates incredibly low levels of English ability overall and is ranked 58th among 70 countries. In addition, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) performance report (2015), which illustrates the mean overall and individual band scores achieved for Academic and General Training test-takers, indicated in its 2015 figures that the *average overall band score for Omani candidates in the Academic version of the test* is 5.0, which translates as a modest user of the language/which is considered a modest proficiency level of language use.

Even though students in Oman receive 12 years of English education in schools, they still struggle with the English language when they enter university. Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2011) indicated that almost 1900 students out of 2700 students accepted at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in 2010–2011, which is one of the biggest and most prestigious universities in the country, were required to join the General Foundation Program (GFP) English language course.

From the discussion above, one could assume that many Omani university students encounter difficulties when they write their academic assignments, term papers, and projects, as their writing skills have not been developed adequately throughout their school years. Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students are flooding college and university writing centers in Oman; remedial writing classes provided in the Omani writing centers try to meet the needs of the increasing number of students (O'Connell, 2012). Nevertheless, the majority of professionals at Omani writing centers are expatriates who come from a variety of Western and Eastern countries, such as the United States, Canada, China, the Philippines, Korea, India, and Pakistan (Ambrose, 2016). These writing instructors try

to apply a wide range of writing approaches and strategies imported from their countries when tutoring the Omani students. Research on localizing foreign writing pedagogies has emphasized the importance of negotiating foreign imports with students. ELT scholars argue that when imported or Western writing approaches are implemented for local use, writing instructors should take into consideration the literary practices, educational traditions, students' needs, and instructional constraints in the local context (Barnawi, 2016; Bradley & Orleans, 1989; Erbaugh, 1990; Leki, 2001; Liu, 2008; Muncie, 2002; Sampson, 1984; Sapp, 2001; You, 2004). Recently, studies in L2 writing have supported a critical awareness of students' agency in academic writing (Liu, 2008). Canagarajah (2002) contends that the linguistic and cultural eccentricities that EFL/English as a Second Language (ESL) students demonstrate need to be seen as "resources" to enhance the academic discourse community and be appreciated as portrayal of their voices and personalities. Writing center professionals should help students "in negotiating with academic conventions and creating multivocal genres" (Liu, 2008, p. 88). Studies in recent times have revealed the effectiveness of considering students' agency in academic writing through negotiating the writing pedagogy in EFL/ESL contexts. Thonus (1998) argued that greater participation and cooperation from student-writers leads to more improvement in writing skills. However, there has not been any study conducted to discuss the effect of negotiating the writing pedagogy as an instructional approach in Middle Eastern writing centers. This chapter attempts to discuss the effects of negotiating writing pedagogies with EFL students at Omani writing centers. The following section views the challenges that many Arab students face when improving their writing skills.

CHALLENGES ARAB STUDENTS FACE WHEN WRITING IN ENGLISH

By and large, writing is a complex and demanding skill for both native and non-native speakers, as writers have to consider different aspects in their writing, such as "content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary and mechanics, which means using the right punctuation, spelling and capitalization" (Abu Rass, 2015, p. 49). Writers are expected to present written texts that are syntactically appropriate, semantically accurate, and culturally acceptable (Alsamadani, 2010). Because English and Arabic linguistic and orthographic systems vary, it is believed that Arab learners face difficulties in learning EFL/ESL (Alsamadani, 2010). Arab learners

often import the stylistic features of Arabic as their first language; for instance, learners usually “write long sentences with coordinating conjunctions, repeat themselves and argue through presentation and elaboration, talk around the topic, and repeat phrases before stating the main points” (Abu Rass, 2015, p. 49).

Furthermore, the level of explicitness and implicitness of the meaning creates another difference between Arabic and English stylistics (Mohamed, as cited in Mohamed & Omer, 2000). For example, Arab writers often try not to convey the meaning of their sentences explicitly, expecting their audience to be responsible for comprehending the meaning. Jabur’s (2008) study about Omani Muslim women’s perceived experiences as writers in ESL notes, “the way Arab people write in Arabic is implicit and circles around the point; if they write directly and straight to the point, they are considered uneducated” (p. 6). In addition, Arab writers often transmit their Arabic patterns of thinking to their writing in English. Another problem with Arab writers is the fact that their writing instruction in schools and universities tend to focus on the product rather than on the process. Since many writing teachers in Arab countries focus their instruction on grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation instead of content and organization of ideas, many Arab learners of English struggle to express their opinions fluently (Abu Rass, 2015). The next section highlights some major factors that influence the English-language skills of many Omani students, especially their writing skills.

FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS’ WRITING SKILLS IN OMAN

Several reasons can be attributed to the inefficient writing skills of many Omani students. First and foremost, many Omani EFL teachers are not provided with adequate preservice training for teaching writing. In 2006, Al Rasbiah conducted a study on the needs of EFL instructors in Oman. She found that all instructors believe that they need more training in the area of teaching writing. This indicates that teachers are not well-prepared to teach writing as they should be and only moderately competent in teaching one of the most important language skills. Worse still, teachers’ skills are not regularly developed because of the limited number of training courses, workshops, and conferences that are offered to them every year (Al Rasbiah, 2006). Alrawas (2014) believes that despite the fact that Omani EFL teachers may seem to understand their students, they are not able to offer efficient academic writing support and instruction.

The second reason is the rigid curriculum. Sergon (2011), in his study about the English education in Omani public schools, interviewed a number of EFL teachers to find answers to his question of why, with all the effort that the government exerts over the English education and with the 12 years of English education, Omani students still struggle with the English language. He found that all the interviewed EFL teachers thought that the curricula were inadequate and “clearly not challenging or engaging enough for the students” (Sergon, 2011, p. 20). In addition, the teachers reported that the curricula have no sense of continuity of skill levels, and that they sometimes completely underestimate students’ English level.

Moreover, the lack of motivation is another factor that has an impact on students’ English language improvement. Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2014) examined the different kinds and triggers of motivation of 100 university students in Oman before and during their formal schooling through a series of one-on-one oral and written interviews. They found that the majority of students believed that the materials used in class were tedious and did not offer them enough opportunities to practice, and that the teachers firmly followed what is in the book without relating the content to their lives. Students rarely felt engaged or motivated in the classroom, and one of them indicated that she felt she learned English more from life than from school; other students reported that learning English was all about the grades, which made it boring. Thus, Omani EFL students need the English curriculum and the teaching methodologies to be more motivating and engaging, as well as to be more relevant to their lives.

Another important factor influencing students’ English writing skills is textbooks. Al Abri (2008) evaluated EFL teachers’ perceptions on the Basic Education English textbooks. He found that the textbooks were viewed as inappropriate, as they did not reflect students’ needs or objectives. Almost all of the teachers in the study indicated that they needed to be professionally consulted, as they were the ones who had to use the textbooks (Al Abri, 2008).

Other factors that influence students’ writing skills include the limited class time, the large class size (often over 30 students in one class), and the huge amount of materials that teachers have to deal with in class in one term. Additionally, there is the heavy workload for teachers, as their duties involve “planning, implementing and marking lessons, providing remedial lessons to struggling students, giving and marking portfolios

and exams—all in addition to any administrative work” (Sergon, 2011, p. 19). The Omani Ministry of Education tends to place too much pressure and responsibility on EFL teachers without giving them the opportunity to make important decisions related to their teaching. As a result, teachers seem to focus on improving students’ marks and getting through the materials at the expense of ensuring their comprehension. The teaching is merely geared toward tests.

As far as the writing skill is concerned, there is a pressing need for the Omani government and educators to improve EFL writing teaching practices. It is clear that there exist various obstacles in Omani’s English learning environments and teaching methods, resulting in the low level of proficiency in the English language among Omani students in general and the writing skills in particular. Both EFL teachers and students seem to be unsatisfied with the current curriculum and methodologies, as they are not engaging and out of touch with students’ needs and objectives (Sergon, 2011). Hence, if instructors intend to improve Omani students’ English competence, specifically their writing competence, among other needs, writing should be regarded as high priority in improving English instruction. Moreover, students should have a more powerful and active role in constructing and transforming EFL pedagogies to satisfy their needs and reach their educational goals. Al-Jadidi (2009) insisted on encouraging Omani students to take responsibility and ownership of their learning. The next section introduces the concept of writing centers and highlights the popularity and importance of institutions in the Middle East, specifically in Oman.

WRITING CENTERS IN OMAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST

A large number of students in Oman are seeking writing support at college and university writing centers due to their underdeveloped writing skills. Ryan McDonald, who is the writing center coordinator at SQU in Muscat, Oman, and the chair of the Middle East–North Africa Writing Centre Alliance (MENAWCA), once mentioned in an interview with Ambrose (2016) about the university writing center that the number of students who visit the SQU writing center has significantly increased in the last few years, especially for Foundation Year students. He further explained that “in the Foundation Program, the students are roughly divided into 6 levels and a student completes two levels a semester. By level three (equivalent to a per-intermediate language learner) they begin

to write, descriptive essays, guides, and plans. This is the level they begin to use the WC” (Ambrose, 2016, p. 2).

In recent times, educators in the Middle East have become more and more cognizant of the importance of developing writing centers in educational institutions in order to improve students’ writing composition skills. In the United States, nearly all high schools, colleges, and universities provide writing centers to help students enhance their writing competence (Albishi, 2017). However, writing centers in the Middle East, especially Gulf countries, are relatively new; their value has been only recently recognized and now several have been established in the region (Eleftheriou, 2011). A number of universities, such as the University of Nizwa (UoN) and SQU in Oman, United Arab Emirates University, College of the North Atlantic in Qatar, and the University of Bahrain, are aware that writing centers and studies that focus on the best practices in teaching writing are essential to the success of students.

However, there is a limited amount of literature available on writing center research in the Middle East (Eleftheriou, 2011). The MENAWCA, a corporation established to create relationships and improve connection between English-language writing centers all over the Middle East and North Africa, has issued only two newsletters since its formation in 2007. Despite the scarcity of studies on writing center practice in the Middle East, writing centers are helping a growing population of students (Murray, 2010). Similarly, in Oman, students are flooding writing centers nationwide, seeking writing help and support in order to improve their writing skills. For instance, around 1200 writing sessions per semester are held at the SQU writing center. According to O’Connell (2012), the number of Omani EFL students who have been utilizing the writing center at the UoN, which is the first Omani writing center in the country, has significantly increased since its establishment on April 18, 2009. He also stated:

The UoN’s Writing Center officially began to provide English writing programs and services to students on April 18th 2009, consisting of a modest staff of only 2 full-time employees. Since that time, the perspicacious student support facility has come to be recognized as an invaluable learning facility for academic students, faculty, and the community alike, servicing the needs of more than 38,247 scheduled appointments in less than 3 years. (O’Connell, 2012, p. 4)

In the Sultanate of Oman, the majority of writing centers have a homogenous student body, but their backgrounds, goals, perspectives,

and needs toward education and writing are varied, as in any multicultural university in the West (Ambrose, 2016). Although Oman is considered a small country, with a population of around three million people, there are various languages and cultural values and traditions influencing literacy and composition at all levels.

WRITING CENTERS' APPROACHES

In recent years, writing center scholars and researchers have started using expressions like “dialogic” and “collaborative” in tandem with “non-directive” to describe learning approaches that highlight the active role of the student and the interactive nature of the learning process (Eleftheriou, 2011). Concepts such as non-directive, dialogic, interactional, and collaborative approaches “encompass terms that are used interchangeably in the literature: facilitative, minimalist, Socratic, and noninterventionist” (Eleftheriou, 2011, p. 1). The non-directive approach encourages students to assume an active role in the writing tutorial. Tutors need to encourage students to have a sense of responsibility toward their writing: “Make sure that writers take ownership,” “Trust the writers’ ideas of the text,” “Ask them their plans for revision,” and “Keep hands off and let writers make corrections” (Gillespie & Lerner, 2000, p. 45). On the other hand, the directive approach “encompasses terms that are used interchangeably in the literature: authoritative, top-down, and interventionist” (Eleftheriou, 2011, p. 1). With the directive approach to writing, the responsibility for the tutorial falls on the tutor. Nondirective strategies involve making corrections on the page and telling writers what to do (Gillespie & Lerner, 2000).

A number of scholars have encouraged the integration of both directive and non-directive approaches in the interactions between writing center tutors and tutees (Blau & Hall, 2002; Brooks, 1991; Carino, 2003; Corbett, 2008; Eleftheriou, 2011; Evertz, 1999; Jones, 2001; Shamon & Burns, 1995; Thonus, 2001; Williams & Severino, 2004). Williams and Severino (2004) argue that even though studies in the early 1990s promoted directive strategies and authoritative roles for tutors, research in the last few years recommends the use of dialogic and collaborative approaches to instruction to help students maintain ownership of their writing.

In the Sultanate of Oman, culture and society play a very important role in the lives of people; educational institutions, such as schools, university, and writing centers, are no exception. Omani students are affected by

external challenges and influences that hinder their progress in English language learning. An influx of expatriate EFL instructors from both Eastern and Western cultures may not be able to adapt to the needs of Omani students (Alrawas, 2014). Al-Issa (2005) argued that cultural issues play a significant role and should not be neglected in foreign language learning. He further explained that learning English includes cultural aspects, which need to be adapted to suit Omani EFL students, in order to create a mutual understanding with students and offer an effective learning context. Writing centers' tutors should pay attention to the religious and cultural backgrounds of students to provide a positive classroom atmosphere. According to Vaidya (2007), a high-quality education commences with the needs and objectives of students, as well as of teachers, and takes the best feasible actions to tackle all the obstacles. Therefore, understanding EFL students' needs and goals at Omani writing centers through negotiating writing pedagogies is one solution that offers a path for progressing further with students taking more powerful and effective roles in their learning process. This approach of negotiating writing pedagogies with student-writers could help lessen or eliminate some of the persistent challenges in teaching writing (Alrawas, 2014).

In recent times, ELT researchers and scholars have integrated the concept of negotiation in EFL classrooms and emphasized the role of students in expressing their preferences and needs. Learners have more freedom and power within a "negotiation curriculum" (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Negotiating writing pedagogies includes interaction and communication in the classroom, where teachers' and students' experiences are exchanged. The subsequent section introduces the notion of negotiating pedagogy in EFL writing classrooms, particularly in the case of Omani writing centers' tutorials.

NEGOTIATING PEDAGOGY IN EFL WRITING CLASSROOMS AND WRITING CENTERS

Most writing center studies have been conducted in Western contexts, with results that encourage the use of a non-directive or collaborative approach to writing. The effect of this approach has expanded to the Middle East, including Oman, where the emphasis on this pedagogical approach is possibly not the best solution to tackle the specific challenges and concerns faced by Omani students striving to improve their English writing skills. Students in Oman who seek help at writing centers may not

have had prior knowledge or experience with non-directive, collaborative tutorials. However, as tutors at Omani writing centers come from a variety of countries, they often transfer their own pedagogical approaches to writing tutorials. Nevertheless, research has shown that Arab students may experience some challenges in the ways in which they respond and adjust to imported approaches and methods (Eleftheriou, 2011).

Contemporary scholars have stressed the importance of considering students' agency when adapting Western or imported pedagogies (Barnawi, 2016; Canagarajah, 2002; Liu, 2008; Liu & You, 2008). According to Liu (2008), negotiations between student-writers and their tutors concerning different aspects of their academic writing not only inform the tutors of the students' goals and needs, but more importantly, such interactions can help the tutors in adjusting imported pedagogies. Liu encourages local writing teachers to consider their students' agency when adapting imported pedagogies. Social constructivists' approaches in language learning and teaching emphasize the fact that students learn through active, dialogic interactions with their instructors and peers, and with the context (Brooke, 1987; Lantolf, 2000; Russell, 1997). Canagarajah (2002) contends that "understanding the strategies preferred by the students to accomplish their pedagogical tasks will help teachers to encourage students to adopt their own styles of learning rather than imposing methods [or strategies] from the outside" (p. 144). Writing tutors should raise students' awareness of the importance of using their selected strategies and the advantages of representing their identities and voices (Barnawi, 2016). The utilization of such "socially engaged" and "ideologically informed" instructional approach to writing can help EFL student-writers to develop metapedagogical and critical awareness of writing, besides forging a connection between a person and public professional writing (Canagarajah, 1997; Liu, 2008; Pico, 2013).

Negotiating students' pedagogical needs in writing classrooms can provide students with ample opportunities to bring their own meanings and ideas to class (Canagarajah, 2004). Therefore, writing centers' tutorials can be viewed as platforms for social interactions, discussions, negotiations, transformations, and identity construction by student-writers. In this atmosphere, investment plays an integral role "in language learning theory for demonstrating the socially and historically constructed relationship between language learner identity and learning commitment."

Informed by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism, the author of this chapter made an effort to discuss the

effectiveness of implementing negotiating pedagogy in Omani writing centers. Through a dialogic learning approach, student-writers in Omani writing centers can interact and negotiate their pedagogical needs with their writing tutors in order to develop a creative and meaningful learning environment. They can also negotiate with their peers, construct their writerly identity in classrooms, and, at the same time, demonstrate their autonomy of thought and authorial presence (Barnawi, 2016). Student-writers can be “radical agents of change” (Fielding, 2001, p. 124); thus, negotiating their pedagogical needs with their tutors in writing centers through a dialogical learning approach could help promote their agentive appropriation and uptake (Canagarajah, 2015; Norton, 2011). That is, “recognizing that they have the agency to assert their own identities, learners are able to negotiate symbolic capital, reframe relations of power, and challenge normative ways of thinking, in order to claim the right to speak” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 47). Thus, student-writers will see writing center tutorials as a place for individual growth, development, negotiation, and personality construction.

DIALOGISM

Dialogism is a concept that is related to the idea presented in the book *The Dialogic Imagination* by Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin (1986), dialogism refers to a dialogic communication between a person and the world. Omani writing centers’ tutors can create a dialogically based context in which they discuss and negotiate their imported pedagogies with their tutees in order to help them adapt the pedagogies, take ownership of their learning, and actively engage in the learning process. This chapter emphasizes a dialogic interest in language connected to the “multiple ways of communication in a social world” (Cohen, 2009, p. 332). This refers to the notion of heteroglossia, “or the multiple ways of speaking in a social environment” (Cohen, 2009, p. 333). Bakhtin stated that heteroglossia was “distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263). This indicates that words communicated at a certain situation and time have a distinctive meaning than when uttered at other times. In a writing center setting, writing tutors and student-writers can interact in multiple ways.

What follows are two global concepts of dialogism and an argument which explains that these concepts can create a framework for negotiating academic writing pedagogies between tutors and tutees at Omani writing centers.

GLOBAL CONCEPTS

Bakhtin differentiated between two types of discourse, namely authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. Authoritative discourse (monologic discourse) refers to the voices of authority requiring acceptance or acknowledgment (Bakhtin, 1981). Authoritative discourse can form our inner thoughts and, thus, our discourse. In contrast, internally persuasive discourse (dialogic discourse) is the opposite of authoritative discourse. Our words are “half-ours and half-someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345). With internally persuasive discourse, the self creates a personal understanding of world experiences. The dialogue and interaction of internally persuasive discourse shape our identities (Morson & Emerson, 1990), hence constructing our inner voices. Through a dialogic leaning approach, students can negotiate their pedagogical needs with their tutors, which help them develop a creative and meaningful internally persuasive discourse.

This chapter is related to Bakhtin’s global concept of unfinalizability, as it explains the use of negotiating pedagogy with Omani writing centers’ students. Negotiating pedagogy is an important approach to writing centers; writing tutors can implement such pedagogy to help students assume an active role in writing tutorials. By producing an unfinalizability environment that creates dialogue, students’ identities can be reshaped as students-writers communicate with their tutors and peers (Barnawi, 2016).

Bakhtin uses the concept of culture to help us think of language as a “tool” (Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005, p. 3). Language is regarded as emergent and structured, exposing cultural backgrounds, protecting them, and reconstructing them for our own needs and use. Experiencing various opportunities to interact socially with other individuals enhances our understanding and engagement (Hall et al., 2005). Through dialogue, culture emerges as it is experienced through the culture of others (Bakhtin, 1986). Punekar (2004) contends that cultural competence in a writing center involves knowing how to deal with specific issues during a tutorial with a student from a completely different culture than the tutor. Cultural competence also includes having a basic knowledge of the tutee’s background, goals, and needs and dealing with specific challenges which may otherwise hamper the effectiveness of the writing session and compromise the objectives of the writing center. Negotiating pedagogy can also involve discussing cultural issues related to writing, which can help in

resolving many of the conflicts and challenges in teaching writing. Therefore, the role of students and teachers is central to the implementation of dialogic learning strategies in the classroom. The following section discusses tutors' and learners' roles in applying negotiating pedagogies in writing centers.

TUTORS' AND LEARNERS' ROLES IN IMPLEMENTING NEGOTIATION IN WRITING CENTERS

Teaching and learning roles are interrelated, yet the instructor's role is essential in reinforcing negotiation. To apply the notion of negotiating pedagogy in Omani writing centers, writing centers' tutors need to have a strong faith that "maintaining an ongoing dialog among their learners is intended to accommodate the learners' needs and ultimately to achieve significance of the learning experience" (Zaki, *n.d.*, p. 3). In addition, writing instructors should encourage their student-writers to discuss and negotiate their learning needs and outcomes. As for the learner's role, their engagement and communication in tutorials allow them to have more power and responsibility (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Students need to get involved in meaningful learning experiences that enhance their understanding of the language and the world. Consequently, students' ability to express their opinions freely and to criticize the materials or content is considered a foundational principle of negotiating pedagogy which could improve their critical thinking skills and, hence, interactive negotiation in the writing classroom. A number of scholars (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Celce-Murcia, 2001; Keşici, 2008) have proposed some steps that can help teachers pursue negotiation in the classroom and create a meaningful learning context that enhances students' negotiations and critical thinking skills:

- T*: Clarifies activities and defines their purposes
- S*: Take learning seriously and think critically and reflectively
- T*: Negotiates goals and encourages students to express their thoughts and opinions openly and freely
- S*: Improve self-confidence and take responsibility for making decisions
- T*: Constructs the course syllabus together with students
- S*: Make joint decisions regarding important aspects of the course syllabus, such as assignments, projects, and assessment procedures
- T*: Helps students grow independent and gives them opportunity to prioritize their learning activities in and out of class

- S: Use time efficiently and present assigned work accurately
- T: Trains students to work collaboratively and to accept peer feedback and error correction
- S: Value cooperation, accept critique, and show respect for other opinions
- T: Encourages research and gives time for guidance and consultation
- S: Follow directions in questioning and carrying out research
- T: Ensures that students are involved and interested in evaluating their learning progress
- S: Learn to monitor and assess their progress through positive interaction with their peers and the teacher
- T: Creates an atmosphere of understanding and accepts innovative ideas
- S: Respect the equal opportunity and rights given to them
(*tutors*: T; students: S; as cited in Zaki, [n.d.](#), p. 3)

The characteristics discussed in this section explain briefly what tutors and students should do to utilize negotiating pedagogy in the classroom. In order to sustain negotiation, instructors need to offer students the opportunity to develop their research and critical thinking skills; therefore, students should reflect and create their own work from their experiences. However, there has been very little research conducted to investigate the effect of using negotiating pedagogies on EFL writing courses. The next section reviews studies that utilized negotiating pedagogies in writing classrooms as well as strategies that can be used to employ negotiating pedagogy in writing courses.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF NEGOTIATING WRITING PEDAGOGIES

After discussing the theoretical underpinning and emphasizing the democratic context for negotiation in EFL education, practical examples of the use of negotiating pedagogy in EFL setting are presented in this section. The examples are not all-inclusive, but do demonstrate the strategies instructors can utilize to implement a negotiation pedagogical approach in their classes.

Johns (2002) offers an excellent example of academic writing in a Language and History course. In her classroom, students were not simply writing about historical accounts and facts, but were trained to criticize and question historical events and not to take them for granted. Students were introduced to new notions that reinforce critical appraisal and evaluation of

historical incidents and link them to their experiences. In this democratic class, students were encouraged to be unprejudiced, broad-minded, and willing to accept new ideas, as opposed to emphasizing fixed, inflexible concepts that leave no space for negotiation and interaction.

Johns' (2002) pedagogical strategy is essentially based on the idea of liberating students, motivating them to learn, and helping them develop their critical thinking skills, question their previous knowledge, negotiate the course content and objectives to take ownership of their learning. Reflection and research were focused to help students reach the objectives of the course. The outcomes of her approach were quite encouraging, considering its impact on students' critical thinking skills and their ability in questioning, reflecting, and connecting what is learned to their experiences. Abbasian and Malardi (2013) contend that motivating students to write effectively involves reflecting on the social and cultural aspects of their experiences, which help encourage students' identity formation and self-expression.

Liu (2008) conducted a study in which she investigated how her Taiwanese students negotiated with imported writing pedagogies adopted from the United States. Specifically, she examined students' agency in adapting her imported pedagogies. The pedagogy employed in her class is referred to as the sequenced writing assignment approach, which was used in conjunction with two English writing classes at a Taiwanese university. This approach comprised five interrelated writing tasks: "project proposal, summaries, a survey, an interview with an expert, and a final report" (Liu, 2008, p. 89). Data were collected from her "teaching journal, students' writing (writer's autobiographies, major papers, and end-of-semester reflection papers), and notes from teacher-student conferences" (Liu, 2008, p. 89). The findings of the study indicate that even though she intentionally adjusted the pedagogy for her students, the students intentionally or unintentionally negotiated with different areas of academic writing at metacognitive, textual, and contextual levels. The study also found that students' negotiations with academic writing not only inform her with students' pedagogical needs, but more importantly, negotiations are considered an essential aspect of the socio-academic process of reforming Western pedagogies in a local context. The researcher believes that local teachers need to respect and consider their students' agency when adapting imported pedagogies, without being critical toward students' negotiations in academic writing.

In addition, Liu and You (2008) observed their students' negotiation acts in first-year college academic writing courses at a Taiwanese and an American university. They used teaching journals to record their observations of and negotiations with their students as well as with their own reflections. They also used Microsoft Network Messenger to daily discuss their pedagogies with each other. The sequenced writing assignment approach was utilized in their teaching, which included four writing projects: personal experience, literature review, survey/interview, and a final report. They found that their students actively negotiated with their writing assignments at different levels like metacognitive, textual, and contextual. The study reported that "both Chinese and Angelo-American rhetorical traditions and students' high school writing experiences played an important part in their initiation into new academic discourses" (Liu & You, 2008, p. 169). Nevertheless, the Chinese and American students did not follow their high school traditional writing styles passively, but "they actively negotiated with the teachers' expectations, discipline-specific conventions, their own dreams and experiences, and other contextual factors in their academic apprenticeship" (Liu & You, 2008, p. 169).

Another study which has investigated the effect of using negotiating pedagogy in EFL writing classrooms was conducted by Barnawi (2016). He studied how his 23 Saudi senior engineering students' negotiations with American writing pedagogies that he adopted from the United States on aspects related to self, content, and form helped the students assume active roles in class and take ownership of their learning. For this purpose, Barnawi (2016) utilized two negotiating cycles in his writing class with the aim of scaffolding the students "in strategically negotiating with academic conventions and creating multivocal genres" (Liu, 2008, p. 88). The first cycle aimed at helping students actively engage in the learning process with his guidance and support. The cycle included negotiations with aspects relating to revising the objectives of the course, choosing the materials of the course, text modeling and formation, collective creation of texts, autonomous formation of texts, student-teacher meeting, and relating to connected or similar texts. He thinks that these activities are interrelated and dependent on each other in order to support and advance the teaching and learning process in the writing class. The second negotiating cycle was intended to examine if students can effectively transfer what they have learned to exam papers. This cycle involved "developing the context, modeling and deconstructing texts, independent construction of texts, and portfolio submission" (Barnawi, 2016, p. 7).

The study found that this approach transferred students' writing conventions from writing to display knowledge to writing to establish knowledge. In addition, the study found that these pedagogies helped the researcher to think reflectively of his teaching practice as an EFL writing instructor, as well as enhanced his students' learning process. Barnawi (2016) found that his students had a different reaction toward this pedagogy. Participants' attitudes to the negotiating strategies varied from "appropriation, wake-up call and awareness, to interrogation and resistance" (Barnawi, 2016, p. 17). Barnawi encourages EFL writing teachers to adopt a dialogic learning approach in their classrooms, as it helps students become more engaged and agentive in the classroom. He believes that learner's agency is an integral part of academic writing classrooms. The study indicated that the implementation of negotiating pedagogies provides ample opportunities for both the teacher and students to recognize their favored writing strategies and, hence, adapt to their pedagogical needs and comply with academic writing conventions. Barnawi (2016) acknowledged that the implementation of this approach is a difficult undertaking, especially with Arab students. In the next section, some major challenges that could hinder the application of negotiating pedagogy in writing centers, as well as in EFL classrooms, will be discussed.

CHALLENGES OF NEGOTIATING PEDAGOGY IN EFL CLASSROOMS AND WRITING CENTERS

The implementation of a negotiation learning approach might not run without problems and difficulties. Undoubtedly, some obstacles will stand in the path; the followings are the factors that hamper the employment of this approach in Arab EFL classrooms/writing centers.

Sociocultural Factors

Negotiation is at risk in a culture that does not permit freedom of speech and questioning, limits individuals' natural instinct to inquire, denies individuals' viewpoints, and places no value on critical thinking. In a society where democracy is non-existent, people are not allowed to question or be involved in a dialogue; negotiation is outlawed. This situation will be mirrored in the EFL classroom, where learners are not allowed to negotiate, as they have not been familiarized with this kind of practice in their social, education, or cultural life (Alrawas, 2014).

Studies conducted on the use of constructivist approaches in EFL classrooms with Middle Eastern students have revealed that the application of such approaches can sometimes be ineffective due to some cultural factors (Martin, 2006). Scholars argue that some Arab students do not welcome learner-centered, facilitative teaching approaches, as the education system in many Middle Eastern countries focuses on rote learning, memorization, and other passive learning styles (Richardson, 2004). Martin (2006) highlights that people in power in many Gulf countries, including the Sultanate of Oman, are seldom criticized in public. This trend is reflected even in EFL classrooms and writing centers. Teachers in Oman are highly valued and rarely confronted or challenged (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011). Learners “are not expected to initiate communication or speak up unless called upon to do so” (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994, p. 138). Mynard (2006), explains that Arab students hardly ever defy rules and regulations or take risks in the classroom, as they are afraid of disgrace.

Omani students, as do many other Arab students, may feel nervous and confused if they are asked to take an active role in the EFL classroom. Punekar (2004), in his paper on tutoring Omani nursing students at the Villanova University Writing Center, mentioned that it is important to make student-writers feel comfortable at the writing center, particularly with regard to Omani students, as they can be reticent to communicate or interact with the tutor. He believes that this is in part because of cultural factors, and Omani students, all of whom refer to tutors as “instructors,” are afraid to question or negotiate with tutors. One solution to this issue is to help students become more interactive by integrating humor or showing interest in and inquiring about students’ culture (Punekar, 2004).

Mynard (2006) maintained that such students

[f]requently feel unable to adjust to a different system of education—one where they are expected to take more responsibility for their own learning and apply higher-level cognitive processing and problem-solving skills. Students often feel ill equipped to make the move toward autonomy. (Mynard, as cited in Martin, 2006, p. 3)

Richardson (2004) agrees with this argument, stating:

The current student-centered learning paradigm where the student forms a partnership with her teachers to achieve her individual potential is a notion contradictory to the Arab students’ home lifestyle. In fact, individual growth is seen as a concept that could cause disharmony within families. (Richardson, 2004, p. 432)

Institutional Requirements

These refer to the academic or language prerequisites that need to be met by students to be able to reach a specific level of language competence (Benesch, 2002). They contain, for example, course books, tests, quizzes, tasks, collaborative work, papers, participation, and attendance. Learners who take a language course should follow the institutional requirements if they want to complete the course. However, some students could be hesitant in completing the demanded assignments because of a variety of reasons, such as the absence of motivation, lack of dialogue in the EFL classroom, or difficulty in adapting to the classroom atmosphere. In fact, when negotiating, the curriculum is not considered as an integral aspect of the institution's demands. This creates a condition, called "dictated curriculum," that is extremely inflexible and does not consider students' needs or goals. In this situation, students will be forced to comply with the institutional policies without receiving any advantage from the learning experience (Richardson, 2004). Sergon (2011) argues that students in Oman do not feel engaged or motivated in their EFL classroom, as their instructors strictly follow the textbook without linking it to their life experiences.

Learners' Expectations

Many Arab students consider the information in the textbook as non-negotiable, and that instructors are prophets who never make mistakes. Therefore, students may never have the courage to doubt or question the teacher or criticize the task (Abu Rass, 2015). In addition, those learners perceive the teacher's role as the knowledge provider, and when they are offered with the opportunity to negotiate, they actually misjudge the teacher's ability and qualifications. It is also presumed that some introverted students may experience difficulty, as they cannot express their ideas openly in public. In this case, teachers are recommended to treat these students with a lot of tolerance and understanding.

Teachers' Perception

Tutors who support the notion of negotiation in education often attempt to encourage students' interactions in the classroom. A negotiation learning approach does not simply mean chatting or giving students more space for talking (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Nevertheless, it is about allowing learn-

ers to think critically and question what is being presented or taught in the course. Additionally, negotiation helps in addressing students' needs and enables them to adapt their learning aims and attitudes.

Time Constraints

Many teachers experience the problem of limited class time. They have to complete certain materials during a very short period of time (Benesch, 2002), which is presumably not appropriate for applying the negotiation approach. Meeting the course objectives and emphasizing language accuracy and fluency could restrict the teacher from offering opportunities for maintaining adequate negotiation or dialogue in the classroom (Jabur, 2008).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

An increasing number of EFL students are seeking writing help and support at Omani college and university writing centers. This trend emphasizes the significant supplementary role of these centers and EFL writing instruction in improving academic writing skills. Writing centers and EFL writing pedagogy share similar directive and non-directive approaches to writing. However, it is sometimes troublesome and strenuous for EFL instructors to implement constructivist learning approaches in EFL classrooms; even the most experienced, skillful, and innovative teacher may experience some complications when applying such strategies in the classroom curriculum. Reasons that discourage teachers from using dialogic teaching strategies include time constraint, large class size, class management issues, and inconveniency in the teacher–student relationship (Punekar, 2004). Obviously, the essence of classroom logistics hampers the activities that are important to the enhancement of writing skills. Fortunately, these approaches can be used effectively with EFL students in writing centers. As writing centers' tutors are unburdened by classroom dynamics and assessment or evaluation, they can effectively apply dialogic learning approaches in their interactions with tutees. However, many writing centers' tutors in Oman are oblivious to the needs of their tutees and are often inadequately trained to deal efficiently with this special population, as the majority of Omani writing centers' faculties are expatriates who come from several Western and Eastern countries with different educational and pedagogical backgrounds and specialties that influence their

teaching practices. Hence, negotiating and discussing writing pedagogies between tutors and tutees at writing centers in Oman can be considered an effective method for instructing this distinctive population of writers, who come to the writing center for a wide range of purposes and from different fields of knowledge.

According to Rafoth (2015), author of *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One*, writers' concerns and needs should be the tutor's top priority, and the writing center is considered as a consumer-oriented business that attends to the needs of students. Research has shown the effectiveness of negotiating writing pedagogies in EFL classrooms with students. Such an approach offers opportunities for the instructor to recognize the preferred writing strategies by students as well as to address their pedagogical objectives. Therefore, integrating such an approach in Omani writing centers can fulfill their ultimate aim of satisfying students' needs and producing self-sufficient writers.

This chapter encourages the implementation of negotiating writing pedagogies in Omani writing centers. This notion of negotiation is discussed within Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogism, as well as within democratic pedagogy, as a context for building critical thinking skills and improving students' writing skills through meaningful negotiation. Nonetheless, conflict may occur between learners and instructors, who then negotiate to arrive at an agreement. During the negotiation process, learners are encouraged to take initiatives, express their needs, and take decisions. On the other hand, instructors need to become facilitators and colearners. Learners can negotiate with their peers and teacher as to what they need to learn and question the teacher's evaluation system (Celce-Murcia, 2001).

Research conducted on the use of dialogic pedagogical approaches in EFL writing classrooms indicates promising results that support the utilization of such strategies. Indeed, negotiating students' pedagogical needs may trigger different kinds of reactions and "at the same time, make the relationship between writing teachers and students more complex than might initially have appeared" (Barnawi, 2016, p. 17). Student-writers who look for help and support at a writing center generally come "with baggage, desires, hopes and fears about the world [of writing]" (Kent, 1994, p. 4). Providing students opportunities to voice out their pedagogical needs, negotiate, and express their thoughts freely about the curriculum, with acceptance, respect, and appreciation on the teacher's part, is the core of democratic education. Such an atmosphere will encourage

learners to take ownership of their own learning and become more agentic critical thinkers as well as better writers. As Canagarajah (2002) states, “understanding the strategies preferred by the students to accomplish their pedagogical tasks will help teachers to encourage students to adopt their own styles of learning rather than impose methods [or strategies] from the outside” (p. 144).

Using a dialogic learning approach in Omani writing centers where learners negotiate pedagogy with their tutors entails training instructors to comprehend and encourage the principles of democracy within the writing tutorials. Moreover, as studies have revealed, such a strategy motivates learners to become more independent and responsible for their own learning and view themselves as critical thinkers who collaborate with their peers and tutors and reflect on what they learn. Writing tutors in the Sultanate of Oman need to raise students’ awareness about the effectiveness of negotiating their pedagogical needs in EFL classrooms or writing centers. This “socially engaged” and ideologically based strategy to writing pedagogy enables EFL student-writers to develop “metapedagogical and critical awareness of writing and, at the same time, address the gap between individual and public professional writing” (Barnawi, 2016, p. 19).

Therefore, when writing teachers tailor instruction for their students, they need to encourage their students’ negotiations with pedagogy. In addition, teachers have to show acceptance, openness, appreciation, and tolerance toward students’ negotiations. To stress the significance of this approach and the value of engaging tutees in writing tutorials to tutors, it is of paramount importance to pinpoint the weaknesses in tutors’ tutorials and promote a sense of cooperation; hence, tutors will become self-critical and open-minded toward students’ suggestions (Liu, 2008). In this case, the writing center becomes “an ideal place in which to begin teaching and practicing a critical and self-reflective form of acculturation, what Edward Said calls ‘critical consciousness’” (Bawarshi & Pelkowski, 1999, p. 42). The writing center will be seen as a place where different discourses wrestle with each other and are negotiated, or as in the words of Mary Pratt, the writing center becomes like a “contact zone.”

It is recommended that writing centers’ tutors in the Sultanate of Oman participate in workshops, conferences, and courses that raise their awareness of the significance of dialogic teaching approaches to writing and how to use them effectively in teaching students. Writing center studies in recent years have emphasized the importance of pretutorial discussion and

negotiation (Eleftheriou, 2011). Tutees reacted positively to tutors who offered time at the beginning of the writing session for discussing assignments and concerns and negotiating an agenda for the tutorial. Therefore, this aspect of tutorials should be highlighted during training, and tutors need to realize its importance throughout their employment at the writing center. This initial dialogue is especially useful and helpful for tutees who may not be sufficiently fluent in English to completely comprehend the requirements of assignments or to express their own intentions about the task. In addition, this gathering of data directs the tutorial and creates rapport between tutor and tutee. It is also important to note that university professionals need to be keenly cognizant of the growing alliance and connection between their fields and the writing center tutors in order to be able to deal effectively with all students and address their needs (Eleftheriou, 2011). This chapter confirmed the desirability of encouraging tutors at Omani writing centers to negotiate their writing pedagogies with their students and explain the significance of this approach to first-time clients at the beginning of the session and to implement it with sensitivity. Thonus (2003) states that when student-writers interact with writing tutors who are trained in applying methods that effectively respond to their needs, there is a greater possibility that they will enhance their writing skills.

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