

# Challenges and Possible Solutions to Enhance the Teaching Learning Process of Research Writing to GFP students in Oman: An Action-Research

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**Abstract:** *This action research in English Language Teaching (ELT) tries to discuss the difficulties in teaching research in General Foundation Students (GFP) in Oman and suggesting adoptable method within the HEI to address the difficulties. The research was completed in Fall Semester of the current academic year 2023-2024 within an HEI. 34 students' performance were observed by two teachers to complete the action research following Feldman's Action Research Method. The research results include the suggestions to tackle the identified hurdles in teaching research and enhancing students research experience at GFP level within the HEI.*

**Key Words:** *ELT, GFP in Oman, Research Writing, Action Research.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Updating an accepted teaching practice appropriately demands clear cut evidence for identifying the challenge and suggesting solution especially when the school/institution follows highly organized and unified course delivery. The current action research tries to identify the challenges in teaching research essay to General Foundation Program (GFP) in Oman.

In Oman, all the licensed HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) have General Foundation Program (GFP) prior to the undergraduate and diploma program to enhance the English language skills, Mathematical skills, General Study Skills, and Computing skills of students. It is a non-credit course. The program functions as per the Oman Academic Standards of General Foundation Program (OASGFP). HEIs in Oman has the autonomy to design the GFP for one year according to the courses offered by them. Mostly the intense course is offered in two semesters or with three levels within a year which completes with autonomous exit following the OASGFP criteria.

The HEI in which the current study has taken place completes the General Foundation Program in two semesters as F1 and F2. And an extra English for Special Purpose Program as F3 for Medicine & Pharmacy and MLS Students. A student shall not pass the GFP until all the learning outcomes are met. .... the HEI must demonstrate that the chosen assessment method is effective in determining whether the student has attained the required learning outcomes. .... (OAAAQA - General Foundation Programme Accreditation, n.d.) OASGFP allows the HEI to design and function formative and summative assessment methods to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes insisted, such as course work, midterm exam and final exam for both the levels. Course work for English Language Skills includes different paragraph/essay writing, group discussions, debates, presentation, and research essay writing. The second/senior semester of GFP (F2) in this HEI completes in 14 to 16 weeks. During the current research, the semester has got completed in 14 weeks. In which, the research commenced in the 5<sup>th</sup> week.

**2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY – ACTION RESEARCH:** Action Research allows the practitioners of any discipline to undertake research about their practice to observe, evaluate and improve the practice. Action research in education is always recommended by scholars as it allows teachers to execute the research within the real classroom. In English Language Teaching (ELT). ... Action research provides an opportunity to explore the effectiveness of a particular teaching practice, the development of a curriculum, or your students' learning, hence making continual improvement possible. In other words, the use of an interactive action-and-research process enables practitioners to get an idea of what they and their learners really do inside of the classroom, not merely what they think they can do. By

doing this, it is hoped that both the teaching and the learning occurring in the classroom can be better tailored to fit the learners' needs. (IP & Hong Kong Baptist University, 2017) Action research is carried out by identifying the research problem, designing a strategic plan and its implementation within the real classroom, evaluating the implementation by observation, and addressing the problem by improving the implemented plan. Action research clearly allows the teachers to identify and streamline the areas to be improved in teaching to enhance the learning.

This action research carried out by following the action research method designed by Allan Feldman and Tarin Weiss. As the first step the study introduce and rationalize the context within which the study has been carried out. And then it clearly states the aim of the study and objectives of the study. And this research details every step of the action research and the justification of each phase followed by the findings. The paper ends with the possible solutions to update the teaching method adopted within the department adhering to the learning outcomes suggested by OASGFP.

**3. CONTEXT OF THE STUDY:** This research was carried out during the Fall semester of 2023-204 from 24<sup>th</sup> September 2023 to 21<sup>st</sup> December 2023(course delivery period). The GFP department of every HEI in Oman has the freedom to enrol students to the program by following the OASGFP. Standards are not curricula. It is the responsibility of each HEI to develop the curriculum, teach and assess students, and review and improve its GFP curriculum in line with the requirements of these standards..... A student shall not be required to undertake a component of a GFP if s/he has already met the required learning outcomes for that area of learning. (OAAAQA - General Foundation Programme Accreditation, n.d.)

The entrance exam/placement test of GFP identifies the students' level in each of its three learning areas such; English, Math, and IT. Accordingly the students are accommodated to F1 or F2 or exempted from Foundation program. In the current semester F2 had 11 students who passed F1 after repeating F1 or F2 in the previous year and enrolled into F2 and 23 students who have directly accommodated to F2 English class according to the placement test result. So, the class strength is a mix of low level and high-level students. And distribution of students into two classes equally were done with strength of 17 in each class. Two teachers were in teaching writing and reading in both the classes. Both the classes included low level and high-level students. The duration of the semester was appropriate. Feldman opines that ...teachers work together to aid each other as they engage in individual action research project... (Feldman, 2002). The teachers who taught in both the classes were the course leader and course coordinator. It again assisted them in choosing the context do the action research so that then could update the chosen area in the following spring semester.

**4. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:** This study aims to observe the students learning of research writing and the actual writing of research completing their course work to update the teaching of research writing at undergraduate level. The research is carried by

- Developing/updating the existing inhouse materials for teaching research to GFP students
- Identifying the difficulties in using the same teaching material to teach researching and research writing to low level and high-level students in GFP
- Identifying the difficulties face by the students in doing research
- Suggesting the possible solutions to address the identified difficulties

**5. EXECUTION OF RESEARCH:** F2-English Language and Study Skills 2 (FEL002) serves as an introductory bridging course targeting receptive and productive language skills. Running from September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023, to January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024 (where by 21<sup>st</sup> December 2023 lecture delivery and course work got completed), it spans 15 weeks of systematically developing reading and writing abilities, aiming for an integrated approach to reinforce these skills effectively. The curriculum extensively cultivates paragraph and essay composition, refining writing mechanics and fostering effective expression. Students are also urged to master reading strategies, enhance their academic lexicon, and improve their comprehension of diverse texts. Central to F2 is a focus on research skills, testing students' preparedness for their first year. Fundamental research skills are introduced, and students are guided in utilizing online learning tools like Blackboard for self-directed learning. The course's learning objectives align with the standards set by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAAQA) for the GFP across higher education institutions.

**6. THE EXISTING COURSE MATERIALS:** Until Spring 2023, the HEI maintained consistent research materials with subtle variations, mainly revolving around rubric adjustments and the introduction of analytical aspects. The alterations did not significantly impact the genres or structure. Students were provided umbrella topics or a list for guidance, aiding in narrowing down choices or averting confusion. They proceeded by formulating a research question to delineate the scope of their investigation. An outline followed, focusing on preliminary research to refine the thesis statement. Feedback sessions allowed students to expand their essays, delving into recognized educational websites with teacher guidance.

Last year, students crafted their essays during in-class sessions, using hard copies and abstaining from electronic devices. This process spanned a week and culminated in a hard copy submission to the teacher. Subsequently, after feedback, students uploaded the second draft on Blackboard for final evaluation. The research genre maintained was Argumentative, requiring at least two direct quotes, paraphrasing, and summarizing techniques. Emphasis was placed on teaching students about plagiarism, in-text citations, and using Harvard referencing for bibliographies. This procedure has been consistent for the past few years, although modifications have been introduced this semester.

**7. THE CURRENT CHANGE:** Several changes have been implemented from the outset, notably in the stage of topic selection. Students were granted the freedom to choose topics aligned with their interests, aiming to foster a sense of ownership and engagement in their research pursuits. This shift was driven by the desire for students to explore their passions rather than selecting predefined topics.

**7.1 REASON:** Although initially intending to maintain the outline-based approach without introducing synopses, a change was made to incorporate synopses. This addition aimed to deepen students' understanding of their research topics, boosting confidence, and exposing them to comprehensive investigation, even preceding the first draft. Moreover, introducing synopses in research writing was for its beneficial purposes:

a. **CLARITY AND FOCUS:** Synopsis was introduced to provide a concise overview of the research topic, guiding students to define the purpose, scope, and methodology of their research early in the process. This clarity helps students maintain focus throughout their investigation.

b. **UNDERSTANDING AND PLANNING:** It helps students delve deeper into their research topics, aiding in a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. This process assists in planning and structuring the research, establishing a clear roadmap before drafting.

c. **EARLY EVALUATION:** It allows for early feedback and evaluation. They provide an opportunity for instructors to gauge the viability and depth of student's chosen topics, ensuring they are on the right track before investing significant time and effort into the full research paper.

d. **LITERATURE REVIEW INITIATION:** Synopsis often involves preliminary readings and analysis, encouraging students to begin their literature review early in the research process. This ensures a more informed and comprehensive understanding of the existing scholarship related to their chosen topic.

e. **CONFIDENCE BOOST:** Crafting a synopsis helps build students' confidence as they navigate their research. It allows them to articulate the purpose and rationale behind their investigations before diving into the extensive writing process.

f. **PRESENTATION PREPARATION:** Additionally, synopsis serves as a foundation for presentations. Presenting synopses in front of the class prepares students for the final presentation, aiding in refining their communication skills and translating research findings effectively.

Overall, introducing synopsis in research writing nurtures critical thinking, planning, and communication skills while ensuring a more focused and informed approach to the research process.

Individualized one-on-one feedback sessions followed, offering detailed guidance to ensure precision and clarity in their work. Feedback on the synopsis was not solely provided by the research writing instructor; students were also required to present their synopsis individually in front of the class. This practice aimed to align with the final project, a PowerPoint presentation stemming from their research. Consequently, the speaking teacher played a role in ensuring students could effectively translate their research writing into a compelling presentation. Additionally, the collaboration among teachers aimed to collectively assess the validity and strength of the argumentative topics chosen by the students.

**7.2 REASON:** Individual feedback for synopses during the research phase offers several advantages:

a. **FOCUSED GUIDANCE:** Providing individual feedback allows instructors to address each student's specific strengths and areas needing improvement in their synopses. This targeted guidance ensures personalized support tailored to individual needs.

b. **CLARITY AND DIRECTION:** Synopsis acts as preliminary roadmaps for research papers. Individual feedback helps clarify any unclear aspects of the synopsis, ensuring students have a clear direction and understanding before delving deeper into their research.

c. **EARLY CORRECTIONS:** By offering individualized feedback early in the process, instructors can identify and rectify any misconceptions or errors in the initial stages of the research. This prevents students from veering off course or developing flawed research strategies.

d. **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:** Personalized feedback demonstrates instructor investment in each student's progress, fostering a sense of engagement and accountability. This can motivate students to invest more effort in their research process.

e. **ENHANCED LEARNING EXPERIENCE:** Addressing individual strengths and weaknesses in the synopsis stage provides an opportunity for students to learn and improve their research skills before advancing to the comprehensive research paper. It promotes a more robust learning experience.

f. **CONFIDENCE BUILDING:** Constructive feedback on synopses boosts students' confidence. It validates their efforts, offers affirmation, and guides them towards producing a more polished and refined research paper.

g. **PREPARATION FOR FINAL DELIVERABLES:** Feedback during the synopsis phase ensures students grasp the fundamental concepts, methodologies, and objectives of their research. This knowledge serves as a strong foundation for their final research paper and subsequent presentations.

h. **ALIGNMENT WITH LEARNING OBJECTIVES:** Individual feedback ensures that students meet the required standards and objectives of the research assignment. Instructors can align their feedback with course objectives, ensuring students are on track to meet these benchmarks.

• In essence, individual feedback during the synopsis stage plays a pivotal role in refining students' research skills, aligning their work with the assignment's objectives, and laying a solid foundation for the subsequent stages of the research process.

**7.3 REASON:** Unlike previous practices, students weren't assigned in-class research tasks but instead conducted their research within the provided timeframe before the deadline. Assistance was available throughout the process upon students' requests. Having students conduct research at home rather than in a restricted class environment has a few advantages:

a. **FLEXIBILITY:** Home-based research allows students to work at their own pace and schedule, catering to individual learning styles and preferences. It eliminates the constraints of a fixed class period, enabling students to allocate time at their convenience.

b. **INDEPENDENT LEARNING:** Researching at home promotes independent learning. It encourages students to take responsibility for their education, fostering self-discipline, time management, and self-directed study skills.

c. **REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE:** Conducting research at home mirrors real-world scenarios where individuals often work independently or remotely. This experience prepares students for similar situations they might encounter in future academic or professional endeavours.

d. **RESOURCE ACCESSIBILITY:** Students have access to a wider array of resources at home, including personal libraries, online databases, and technology. This expanded access enhances the quality and depth of research materials available to them.

e. **COMFORT AND ENVIRONMENT:** Home environments can offer comfort and familiarity, facilitating a conducive atmosphere for deep concentration and focus. Students may find themselves more relaxed and able to delve deeply into complex research topics.

f. **EXTENDED LEARNING:** Researching at home allows students to extend their learning beyond the classroom. They can explore diverse resources, consult experts, and engage in discussions outside of formal class time.

g. **INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT:** While not in a classroom setting, students still have access to guidance and support from instructors. They can seek assistance through emails, virtual office hours, or scheduled consultations, ensuring they receive necessary help during the research process.

h. **PROMOTION OF CRITICAL THINKING:** Working on research independently encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students learn to navigate challenges and make decisions, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

However, while independent research at home offers numerous benefits, it's essential to ensure students have access to the necessary resources, guidance, and support systems to facilitate a successful research experience. The final draft retained the Blackboard upload method, and no alterations were made to the rubrics. These changes aimed to enhance students' autonomy, confidence, and depth of understanding in their research endeavours.

## 8. OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION:

**SYNOPSIS:** The introduction of synopsis yielded multiple advantages; however, encountered challenges were noted, particularly among weaker students who struggled to grasp the concept. The rigidity of genre-based limitations in topic selection hindered flexibility, making it challenging for some students. The requirement for choosing debatable topics with supporting evidence for refutation and rebuttal in the third body paragraph

**OBSERVATIONS:** Upon implementation of synopsis, weaker students faced challenges comprehending the concept due to genre constraints. The rigid structure demanded by an argumentative topic led students to prioritize form over essential research skills. Difficulty in identifying refutation and rebuttal points was evident, resulting in some producing descriptive essays rather than engaging in critical argumentation.

**SOLUTIONS IMPLEMENTED:** To address these challenges, several measures were taken. A sample synopsis was provided to illustrate expectations, and individualized feedback sessions were conducted to clarify requirements.

**OBSERVATIONS:** The rigid focus on argumentative topics persisted, hindering students from emphasizing crucial research skills. Recognizing these limitations, the decision was made to overhaul the approach in the upcoming semester.

**REVISED APPROACH:** The focus for the future will shift from strict genre-oriented research to emphasize vital research skills like paraphrasing, summarizing, inference, referencing, and in-text citation. To encourage exploration and interest, the decision was made to keep topic genres open-ended, allowing for a diverse selection. This approach aims to increase students' engagement with research skills holistically, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation beyond specific genres. The aim is to empower students with essential research abilities while sparking curiosity and exploration in various research methodologies pose difficulty, especially for weaker students.

## 9. SUGGESTIONS TO ADDRESS THE IDENTIFIED ISSUES :

- **CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS AND TRAINING:** In the future, it's crucial to provide clear instructions to both teachers and students regarding the adoption of synopsis. Comprehensive training sessions should precede the implementation to ensure everyone understands the process before moving forward. A dedicated week focused on synopsis development before the first draft submission will aid in better comprehension of the topic and concept.
- **DIVERSIFIED ESSAY FOCUS IN SYLLABUS:** To empower students in choosing research genres, the syllabus has been strategically designed this semester. By mid-semester, students will have received instruction on various essay types including descriptive, compare and contrast, narrative, and an overview of other genres. This approach aims to enable students to select the genre based on the topic, fostering a more organic and flexible approach to research writing.
- **NEW RUBRIC DEVELOPMENT:** Since the current rubric is tailored for argumentative essays, it's imperative to create a new rubric focusing on general research writing skills rather than specific genres. This adjustment will align with the broader approach to research skill development.
- **COURSE DESCRIPTION UPDATE:** To reflect the changes in the curriculum, it's essential to update the course descriptions accordingly. This will ensure alignment between the course content and the expected learning outcomes.
- **COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION AND TEACHER PREPARATION:** Engaging in thorough discussions with the team is crucial, especially for teachers unfamiliar with the concept of synopses. Providing them with samples and comprehensive training beforehand will facilitate their understanding and implementation of this new approach.

In essence, these action-oriented suggestions aim to enhance the adoption and implementation of synopses while broadening the focus from specific genres to holistic research writing skills. This approach seeks to empower both teachers and students, fostering a more comprehensive and flexible research writing environment.

**10. CONCLUSION:** The identification, implementation, observation, evaluation, and the suggested improvisation of the current research was able to offer a clear reason to update the research teaching method practiced. This study mainly completed within two classrooms with total number 34 students and two teachers. It tried to identify the difficulties in using the same material to teach undertaking and writing research to both low level and high-level GFP students in Oma. And during the study, the research reflected on the teaching practice they have adopted and improvised it. After the successful completion of the action research, the study suggested possible solution to address the identified issues.

Developing any teaching learning material especially for self-driven task like research writing by clearly identifying the need of both low level and high-level students within the same class is always challenging. This study could achieve it and at the same time the study offers the scope to continue to reflect on the implementation of the suggestion and result of the same. The major limitation of the study is limiting it into a confined number of students' performance. Inclusion low level and high-level students in both the classes with different teachers justifiably overcome the limitation to some extent. The current study gives both teachers and students a chance to reflect on the existing teaching practice especially in English Language Teaching and Learning.

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