

# Developing EFL Students' Comprehension and Improving Writing Through Presentations: Success in the UAE

Laila S. Dahan

American University of Sharjah, Sharjah, UAE

In today's globalized world with English as the lingua franca, many countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are focusing on English as a medium of instruction (EMI). Due to the many expatriates resident in the UAE English has become the main language of business, industry, and higher education. This paper looks at one of those English medium universities with an American curriculum. Since most American curriculums require substantial amounts of writing, it is important that students become competent at writing in their second language at this particular institution. This paper discusses how a novel assignment, allowing English as a foreign language (EFL) students to present readings in the classroom at an EMI university in the UAE, has helped them become both better readers and writers. Since the majority of the students are native speakers of Arabic, the project was designed with their oral traditions and proficiency in mind.

*Keywords:* reading comprehension, presentation skills, improving writing

## Introduction

In today's globalized world, the English language has become the new lingua franca (Canagarajah, 2006, 2007; Jenkins, 2007; Prodromou, 2008; Seidlhofer, 2001), and many young people around the globe feel the need to master this global language. English is a necessity in many parts of the world, but perhaps more so in nations like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where tourism and a booming economy require a lingua franca in order to function. The UAE, like other countries in the Arabian Gulf, has witnessed notable transformations in all aspects of socio-economic and political life in a very short period of time (Bahgat, 1999). The UAE is quite unique in that the number of expatriates exceeds the local population and foreigners dominate the work force in most segments of the economy and in the government bureaucracy (Kapiszewski, 2007). The large number of expatriates requires a language that everyone is familiar with and can use, and today's global language is definitely English. Additionally, in the UAE over the past decade there has been a rapid expansion of English as a medium of instruction (EMI). This is visible in the many international schools which have opened to serve the increasing number of expatriates in the country, in addition to the move towards EMI in all universities and colleges. In the UAE and the Gulf generally, there is an evident trend to adopt English both as a language of status and as an academic language (Harrison, Kamphuis, & Barnes, 2007). Furthermore, increasing numbers of international universities have opened up in the country in response to a growing need and desire for EMI. However, despite

this continual drive towards EMI, it is important to be aware of the connection between oral language and written language, especially in the context of native speakers of Arabic.

### **The Relation Between Oral and Written Language**

There is quite a difference between a written and spoken language. However, according to Chafe and Tannen (1987), up until the early 20th century, not many linguists paid much attention to that difference. However, at that point, they reveal Bloomfield (1933), Sapir (1921), and De Saussure (1966) as “some of the most influential linguists” of the first half of the 20th century, who “went out of their way to emphasize the primacy of spoken as opposed to written language” (Chafe & Tannen, 1987, p. 383). This factor is very important when teaching students who come from an oral culture, as do most Arabic speakers. In fact, as Boullata (1989) argued, “orality has always been an important mode of communication and of cultural transmission in the Arab tradition” (p. 1). He went on to emphasize that “Arab audiences [throughout the centuries] have been noted for their strong inclination to rejoice in listening to the cadences and rhythms of their language...” (p. 2). It was this factor that I took into consideration when developing my presentation project for students. I know that they prefer speaking to writing, and I therefore harnessed that preference into an assignment which I felt they could excel at.

This paper outlines the process which English as a foreign language (EFL) students engage in as they prepare and present readings for their writing classes at an American university in the UAE. The activity was developed in order to help students become better summary writers through presenting their readings. This paper first gives background information on the institution and the department where the activity was designed and implemented. It then proceeds to discuss the method and activities involved, the outcomes of the activity, how students are assessed, and finally how this assignment helps improve the writing of EFL students and why it is important.

### **The American University of Sharjah**

The American University of Sharjah (AUS) is a non-profit, independent, coeducational university that is fashioned on the American model. The institution was founded in 1997 by His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamed Al Qassimi, member of the Supreme Council, ruler of Sharjah, and the president of AUS. The language of instruction is entirely in English and the curriculum is modeled on that of American universities. The university attracts students from the Arabian Gulf region and the entire Middle East. It receives hundreds of foreign students annually. Today there are over 4,000 students, from over 70 different nationalities, studying for undergraduate and graduate degrees at the institution. Although most students matriculate with the required English proficiency based on TOEFL scores, many have not spent any time in high school developing their writing or reading skills. At AUS the Department of Writing Studies (DWS) is the gateway to the university. All students must successfully complete two or three courses in a sequence in order to progress onto their majors. As an instructor in this department, I have faced many challenges in helping our students comprehend a variety of readings and then apply that understanding in order to become better writers. The importance of the relationship between reading and writing has been recognized by researchers in the field (Eskey, 1988; Reid, 1993; Tierney & Pearson, 1983), and is therefore an important part of teaching writing. Over the past year and a half I have

designed and implemented an innovative approach that involves the students presenting the assigned course readings to the class. This method has helped our students benefit from their readings in such a way that it has improved their comprehension of texts, leading to better formal writing. The need for good writing skills is imperative in an American curriculum institution, and therefore this approach certainly fills a requirement that all students face at AUS.

### **Reading and Writing in the Department of Writing Studies**

In order to ensure that my students can gain the valuable skills required to write well, it is important that I assign a significant amount of reading. Unfortunately, reading has become something of a lost art among today's students who have been raised amid so much technology (Dahan, 2010). It has been noted that EFL students often have problems with reading and writing. This is due to several factors, such as poor literacy backgrounds in both their L1 and L2, very little experience with active reading, and a lack of prior knowledge (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2008), which combined make it difficult for them to connect with written texts. But despite these factors, we encourage our students to read quite a bit. The Department of Writing Studies has put together two collections of essays which are global in nature and are more relevant to our international student population than ready-made texts which we have used in the past. The first textbook and anthology of readings is the *Majlis of the 'Others'* (Shine, 2012), which we use in our introductory writing course, wherein students are familiarized with essay writing. The second is called *Where I Stand: The Center and the Periphery* (Abusalim, 2012), and is utilized in our more advanced writing class. Both have become important resources for our students. Despite the fact that many of our students still resist reading as a whole, at least for pleasure, by having readings with which they can connect, they at least are able to enjoy their assigned readings more.

### **The Assignment**

The assignment is given to the students within the first two weeks of the term. It is already on the syllabus and students are made aware that each of them must make at least one presentation with a group during the semester; there is also the possibility of additional presentations depending on class size, or for extra credit if they so choose. Initially I ask for four volunteers to present the first reading. A few students generally will offer to be the first presenters of the term. If I do not get volunteers, I choose four students at random from the class roster; group size can range from three to five students. I then give the group and the rest of the class the title of the essay and its page numbers in their reader, plus the date of the presentation. They are given about one week to prepare their presentation of the assigned essay. Every student in the class is expected to read the essay and be prepared to discuss it with the presenters. The main thrust of the assignment is that the presenters be able to summarize the essay and clearly present it to their classmates. The first week of class is spent teaching them about how to write a summary. Each student in the group must have a speaking role on the day of the presentation. Once a summary has been presented orally, students are then free to decide what else they would like to add to their presentations. All presenters spend time discussing the authors, others have looked at the writing itself and talked about the thesis statement, argument, word choices, subject matter, and more. There are several factors which presenters must address in order to meet the requirements of the assignment.

### **What Is Expected?**

The main feature I am looking for in the presentation is a very evident comprehension of the text. Therefore, I require that a clear summary be at the heart of any presentation. Each group should be able to summarize the essay they read concisely and clearly for their audience. The summary or overview should help the class better understand the reading and should also clarify any points which were unclear to the readers. I also require the group to research the authors and share background information about them with the audience. Each student in the group is expected to take part in the presentation during the group's turn in front of the class. The presenters must also attempt to involve the rest of the students in the class. In other words, the presentation should not just be a reiteration of the text which they read. Instead, it should expand upon the reading and its meaning and should furthermore generate student participation from the audience. I want the presentation to be interesting and challenging enough that it conjures up questions or comments from the audience. Therefore, after the initial summary of the essay is produced, the presenters are free to embellish or use the presentation as they see fit, as long as it maintains its educational value to the class. The final step in the process is a very brief written summary which each group member must write on his/her own and turn it in to me following the presentation. The results of these presentations have been very positive and reveal to me that this is a method which is useful for our students.

### **Outcome of the Assignment**

It is quite fascinating to see how our students can rise to the occasion when they are given the opportunity to shine in front of the class. Instead of bland, monotone presentations, most groups excel at finding innovative strategies to present a simple reading. I am always pleased with the amount of effort that students put into their presentations. Presenters use powerpoint, show videos, give quizzes, offer prizes, provide refreshments, and more, as part of their presentations. More often than not the presentations bring the readings to life through a variety of ways, but mainly by accomplishing their goal: summarizing a piece of writing.

Although the readings are not necessarily difficult or obtuse, students who do not spend a lot of time reading, often do not grasp the subtleties of the texts. By having a group prepare an in-depth reading of an essay and then present it, it gives students in the classroom a clearer understanding of what they read and helps them obtain a deeper glimpse into the nuances they may have missed while reading on their own. An example of this is the videos that students find and add to their presentations. As we are dealing with an age group which is extremely fond of technology and moving images, the visual segments of their presentations are usually quite exciting and very useful for helping the class connect more with the reading. One particularly interesting presentation was on an essay about globalization and the Arab world. The presenters were able to find a video which was specific to the topic of the essay and whose message was very easily understood by the class. These videos that the students locate and share with the class reveal their own interest in the topics and a willingness to go that extra step in order to ensure their presentation is not only coherent, but also entertaining.

The summaries, which each group member must write and turn in, following their presentations are often some of their best writing all term. By spending time with the text, learning about the author, and then presenting it to the class, their comprehension of the text increases as does their ability to write a clear and concise summary. In order to determine what grade to give each student, I take into account the entire process in addition to the written summary.

### **Assessment of Presentations**

For my particular courses I have included these presentations within the 10% we allot for in-class writing and quizzes, although it is certainly possible to give it a higher percentage. In order to grade the presentations I designed a rubric which I use during the performance. Each presenter is allotted points, and a final score is given to the entire group. I give points for presentation style, clarity of speech, a clear summary, interesting information or videos, and how involved they were able to get their peers in the classroom. After the class I write up a short blurb for each group, which I email to them, pointing out the highlights of the presentation, revealing their particular strengths, and also giving them input on what could have been adjusted to make the presentation better. This helps them prepare for future presentations or “extra credit” presentations during the rest of the term. The written summary, which they turn in, is also graded. Despite the large numbers of students I teach each term, I take extra time grading and commenting on this particular summary. I include substantial feedback and address, in some detail, both the positive and negative attributes of the written summary. This extra focus on this particular summary is done in order to help students realize the importance of truly understanding a reading in order to write a clear summary.

### **Students' Opinions**

Generally the students are quite happy with this assignment. Although it seems intimidating when they hear about it during the first weeks of class, once they take on an essay and start realizing that it can be interesting, they do enjoy it. Our students tend to be better speakers of English than writers, which is often the case for EFL learners. In addition, Arabic speakers come from a more oral tradition. Therefore, the opportunity to show their skills as orators is appreciated in these situations and is especially helpful as a positive influence on those whose writing is poor. Many of them actually ask if they may do other presentations during the term, as they realize they do well with this particular assignment. They are often much happier with the grade they receive on this specific summary than with other graded assignments in the course. Due to the positive input I have received from my students on this assignment, I plan to keep using it.

### **Future of This Assignment**

I feel that this method of getting students to read and comprehend a text is one that works better than any of the alternatives. In the past, when I would ask students to read the essays, some would, many would not, and I was left having to present the readings myself, as there was very little input from the students. Because they did not feel vested in the readings, as there was no grade, they tended to assume someone else in the class would participate and they would not have to read the assignment or be overly involved in the classroom discussions. Since I know that reading is imperative for good writing, I had to find a way to ensure they would actually do the readings. Using this new approach has certainly helped in getting more students to read the assignments, because they are interested in what their peers will be presenting and they enjoy being able to comment on their peers' efforts.

I have also found that their writing at the end of this particular assignment is often much better than other things they write during the term. By engaging with the text, they become more interested in what they need to produce and work harder to ensure that their efforts pay off in the end. Overall, this project helps our students reach our course objectives in terms of their writing skills.

### **Benefits to the Reading and Writing of EFL Students**

By giving students the opportunity to engage with a particular text in an in-depth manner, it allows them to develop a real interest in the piece. They enjoy discovering more information about the authors and they begin to learn about new ways to present their findings.

As mentioned earlier, the readers produced for our department are global in nature. Therefore, many of the pieces that my students read are written by Arabs or Arab-Americans who write in English. This particular fact has been a positive point of interest for the students. By learning about the authors they often find something in common with the writers. In this way they are able to see that others can and do write well in their second language, and it gives them the inspiration to be better English language writers themselves.

Furthermore, this particular assignment is essential in helping to empower the students, which is also part of my rationale for giving it. By providing this assignment, which requires them to read carefully, develop opinions, and access resources they are becoming empowered (Dahan, 2010). By giving them control over how and what they will present from a reading, they are being allowed to articulate their own voices and sentiments. This is very important for them to gain confidence in their own opinions and choices and this is transferred to their writing. As they develop confidence in their own abilities to summarize and present texts, they also gain trust in their own abilities, which tends to be reflected in their writing as the semester progresses.

### **Conclusion**

Since English is a major key for success both globally and in the UAE specifically, more and more students are choosing to study in English medium universities. If the institution of choice has an American curriculum it is incumbent upon students to write a great deal and display an ability to engage with readings in order to produce academic prose. As an instructor of writing in the UAE I consistently must come up with ways to engage my students and ensure that they are developing the prerequisite reading and writing skills they need in order to succeed at university. Therefore, I continue to try out new methods in my classroom. Initially, when I designed and implemented this particular process I was not sure about the outcome, but I did conceptualize the idea around the notion that our students are excellent verbal communicators. They are usually more comfortable speaking in English than they are writing or reading. Therefore, I wanted to be able to tap into that strength found amongst most of my students and let them use that strength to understand their readings. This particular method is currently working exceptionally well. By taking further ownership of their readings, my students are engaging more with the texts and becoming more active readers. In so doing they are benefitting from reading well-written pieces, which has led to more coherent and clear written work by many of these students.

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