

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY EFL TUTORS OF ACADEMIC STUDY SKILLS MODULE: A PEDAGOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the challenges encountered by EFL tutors in the delivery of ASS module. It also investigated the experience of tutors and the attitudes of learners towards learning the modules that contributed to the Cohort Survival Rate (CSR) of the learners and identified how these challenges overcome. There are many challenges that tutors have encountered in handling the ASS module. These include: attitude of the learners towards the module; difficulty of the learners to use English Language; learners' punctuality and attendance; heavy assessment methods; module activities level of difficulty; and test tutors' patience/perseverance. Despite the challenges in handling this module, ASS tutors were able to transfer learnings as far as the required learning outcomes are concerned. They believed that patience is one that they have learnt from teaching this module that contributed a lot to deliver the module with maximum efficiency. Moreover, it is also necessary that tutors should focus on the learners' mindset and motivate them toward hard work and prepare them mentally for their higher studies. Inadequate language skills, lack of motivation and poor attendance are main reasons for the failure of the students. However, due to tutors patience and perseverance in motivating the learners, 81 percent of the learners were able to pass the module.

To further address the gaps, the curriculum developers reviewed the current curriculum for ASS to lessen the difficulties encountered by tutors and meet the desired CSR of the learners. The teaching and learning activities (TLAs) particularly the guided learning and portfolio activities were simplified to fit the intellectual level of the learners. Written report was also simplified so that the learners will meet the expected learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Challenges, delivery, cohort survival, pedagogical point of view*

1.0 Introduction

The General Foundation Programme of a Higher Education Institutions in Oman is a formal, structured, generic programme of study offered in the Foundation Studies designed to prepare students to succeed in their higher education studies. It is a compulsory entrance qualification to undergraduate programmes offered in Oman. The Foundation Department, a department responsible in the nurturing the foundation students, offers GFP which aims to equip students with the required generic skills to prepare them to the level. The programme suits the requirements of those who need to enhance their English Language and key underpinning knowledge and skills to take up degree programmes. The department facilitates and provides an effective route for progression onto undergraduate programmes. (*Module Handbook, Academic Study Skills Module AY 2016-2017*).

The GFP under the new curriculum consists of four core modules which include: General English Language (GEL), Mathematics (Basic, and Pure and Applied), Information Technology (IT) and Academic Study Skills (ASS). ASS is a separate module that aims to equip students with the fundamental and academic skills needed for post-secondary or higher education studies. It helps students to make use of their time and become more effective learners and develop research and communicative skills that will help them in the future.

At the end of the semester, students in this module are expected to: manage their time, learn how to conduct library research, take down notes and give presentation. This module is taught and is delivered for 45 hours over a semester. It is designed to help students find out how it is taught and learned in higher education. For that reason, the learning strategies used in this module are varied to give students a chance to experience a wide range of academic learning styles. Students would be working on their own, in a group, or with the class as a whole. Class activities may include pair discussion, group debates, presentations, short tutor lectures, seminars and tutorials. The in-class activities are supplemented by independent study outside class, doing such things as researching information, thinking, discussing and writing about self learning, planning how to improve own skills, carrying out specific tasks and so on.

ASS is a new module offered for GFP students as per Oman GFP standards, thus identifying its grey areas and valuating student learning outcomes are necessary. It is from this context that the researchers came up with this study to find out the challenges encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) tutors and offer solutions to resolve these challenges to attain the intended learning outcomes of the module and help students perform better.

2.0 Research Objectives

This study aimed to determine the challenges encountered by EFL tutors in the delivery of ASS module. It also investigated the experiences of tutors and the attitudes of learners towards learning the modules that contributed to the Cohort Survival Rate (CSR) of the learners.

3.0 Research Questions

This study was conducted to determine the challenges encountered by ESL tutors in the delivery of the Academic Study Skills modules. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. What are the challenges encountered by EFL tutors in the delivery of Academic Study Skills module?
2. Which of these challenges contributed to the Cohort Survival Rate of this module?
3. What improvements are made to meet these challenges and improve the CSR of the ASS module outcome?

4.0 Theoretical Lens

This study was based on the by the curriculum implementation theory advocated by *Gross (1971)*. He said that the implementation of any educational programme should consider the facilities, teachers' capability, management support and compatibility with organizational arrangement and clarity of the tutor of what is to be done. This theory was used to guide this research as it is relevant to the implementation of the new module in the General Foundation Program of the HEIs in Oman. The theory emphasizes the four elements which says that the new course should be clear to the implementer, the tutors. They should be aware of the changes of the curriculum. Resources needed for the new module must be available and relevant to the curriculum. Capability of the tutor is important and they must be trained and in the position to handle the new course. The management support is also a plus factor to make a change of curriculum a success.

Specifically, this research was based on Fullan's Educational change model, an approach focused on "the human participants taking part in the change process, in case challenges and problems encountered during the curriculum implementation. (*Fullan (1991)*). He said that every stakeholder in the educational institution as a change agent should take part in the review of the curriculum using the four phases of change process: initiation, implementation, continuation, and outcome.

Initiation is the initial plan to implement the new curriculum. There are factors to be considered in planning stage which include: existence and quality of innovations, access to innovations, advocacy from central administration, teacher advocacy, and external change agents. *Fullan (1982, 1991)*

Implementation according to *Fullan and Stigelbauer (1991)* identified three areas of the major factors affecting implementation which include: characteristics of change, local characteristics and external factors (government and other agencies). They also identified characterizations of change to each stakeholder and the issues that each stakeholder should consider before committing a change effort or rejecting it.

Continuation, however, is a decision about institutionalisation of an innovation based on the reaction to the change, which may be negative or positive. Continuation depends on whether or not: the change gets embedded/built into the structure (through policy/budget/timetable), the change has generated a critical mass of administrators or teachers who are skilled and committed to, and the change has established procedures for continuing assistance. *Fullan (1993)*

Outcome is the result of the changed process. It may or may not support the achievement of a positive or successful change outcome. Thus, monitoring and evaluation of the change process is a must because change does not end in recognizing or initial context with the innovation, but starts with the contact and evolves along with the continuous interaction with it and the environmental changes that it brings forth. *Fullan* (1993)

5.0 Methodology

The methods and procedures used in this study include: research method, research model, selection of participants, research instrument, and data gathering procedures.

5.1 Research Methods

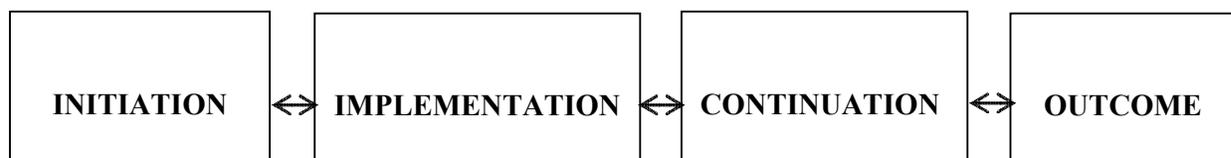
This study used phenomenology research approach. It is a qualitative research method that is used to describe how people experience a certain phenomenon. It permits the researcher to probe the perceptions, perspectives, indulgences, and feelings of those people who have actually experienced the situation of interest. *Giorgi* (1997). *Richards* (2003) also said that “the aim of phenomenological research is to penetrate to the essential meaning of human experience and focus on the self-understanding as active, meaning-making participants in the human world”.

A thematic analysis was also used to describe the challenges encountered by EFL tutors. A thematic analysis is one of the most common forms of analysis in qualitative research emphasizing, pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or "themes") within data. It is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set (*Braun & Clarke, 2006*).

5.2 Research Model

This study examined the challenges that EFL tutors encountered in the delivery of the Academic Study Skills module. It explored their experiences, feelings and attitudes towards the module and their students. This study adapted Michael Fullan’s educational change model which focused on the roles and strategies of various types of change agents. He said that there are four broad phases in the change process: initiation, implementation, continuation, and outcome. (*Fullan, 1982, and 1991*)

Figure 1
Research Model of the Study



5.3 Participants

Participants in this study consisted of ASS tutors, as the change agents, handling this module in the General Foundation Program in a higher education institutions in Oman.

5.4 Research Instruments

To get the important information, the researchers formulated interview guide questionnaire in accordance with the research questions. It is composed of eight probing questions to examine the participants' knowledge and experiences in teaching the ASS module.

5.5 Data Gathering Procedures

The information on this study were taken from ASS tutors through questionnaires and a focus group discussion (FGD). The following procedures were done:

Random Interviews. During the first week of classes, a random interview was done among lecturers who taught ASS module since it was the first time that this module was offered in the GFP. Feedbacks were asked on how they felt handling the module for the first time. They revealed that they felt difficult in lesson preparation especially that the module requires four major learning outcomes.

Validation of Research Questions. After the methodology to be used was identified, research questions were formulated and validated.

Floating of Questionnaires. Before the questionnaire was floated to the selected participants, permission was obtained from the Head of Faculty (HOF) copy furnished the Research Coordinator of the Faculty. ASS tutor were the participants of the study.

Analysis of Information. After the questionnaires were retrieved, information were transcribed, analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis.

6.0 Scope and Limitation

This study was limited to the tutors who handled Academic Study Skills module. With the small number of participants, the results could not make general conclusions with regard to the experiences of the participants. It could only offer implications and perceptions which may be of help for the curriculum developers to review the course outline and devise teaching and learning activities (TLAs) suited to the level of the learners.

7.0 Results, Analysis and Discussions

Presented in this section is the process on how Academic Study Skills module is implemented and delivered as one of the modules in the General Foundation Program. Feedback from tutors through FGD was also presented and analysed using thematic analysis and identification of central thoughts to identify the challenges encountered and find out how these challenges contributed to the cohort survival of the GFP students.

The information gathered from the interviews were categorized by taking into account the recurrence of their reactions using: a) common, b) typical, and c) variant responses. Results of the students' performance in Academic Study Skills as a module outcome is used and analysed to identify the cohort survival of the module. This will help assess what made the students fail and unable to meet the requirements.

7.1 Initiation

The ASS module is a 45-hour module in a semester. In the class contact hours, learners are expected to work with their tutor and other fellow students. This module is designed to help them develop their written communication and presentation skills. The learning strategies used in this module are varied to give student a chance to experience a wide range of academic learning styles. They worked on his/her own, in a group, or with the class as a whole. Classroom activities include pair discussion, group presentations, short tutor lectures, portfolio writing, guided learning activities and written report. The classroom activities are supplemented by independent learning activities, home works and assignments. (*ASS Module Handbook*)

7.2 Implementation

This module is implemented using three parts of assessments namely: 1) Class Participation, Guided Learning Activities 2) Group Presentation and 3) Portfolio (with written report), and Punctuality and Attendance.

Group Presentation (40% of the marks)

The topic for group presentation is based on what has been discussed in the module or it can be a topic of own choice. Whatever topic students do, the choice must be approved by the tutor.

Portfolio (40% of the marks)

A learner's portfolio is a compilation of academic work and other forms of educational evidence assembled for the purpose of (1) evaluating coursework quality, learning progress, and academic achievement; (2) determining whether students have met learning standards or other academic requirements for courses, grade-level promotion, and graduation; (3) helping students reflect on their academic goals and progress as learners; and (4) creating a lasting archive of academic work products, accomplishments, and other documentation.

It is assumed that the learner's portfolios through compiling, reviewing, and evaluating learner work over time can provide a richer, deeper, and more accurate picture of what learners have learned and are able to do than more traditional measures—such as standardized tests, quizzes, or final exams—that only measure what students know at a specific point in time. Portfolios are collections of student work representing a selection of performance. It may be a folder containing a student's best pieces and the student's evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the pieces. It also includes written report of 800 words that contains a research-based which shows various stages of conception, drafting, paraphrasing, and final revision. The report also requires turnitin.

Punctuality (10 % of the marks)

Learners are marked on these aspects based on the number of school days they attended in the actual contact hours. The approximate number of school days the students should attend in a semester is 48 days. A conversion of class attendance and punctuality is used to give marks on this aspect.

Guided Learning Activities (10% of the marks)

These activities are done once a week. All activities are compiled and given a mark. Activities given a guided learning activities are related to the topics discussed within a week.

7.3 Continuation

Since ASS is a core module in the new GFP curriculum, the module is regularly offered to the upcoming GFP students. Learners have to take the module as a separate module apart from General English. However, monitoring and evaluation of the module outcomes have to be done to look at the gaps encountered by both tutors and learners on its initial implementation.

7.4 Outcomes*7.4.1 Tutors Challenges (Participants' Pedagogical Point of View)*

Tutors of ASS who handled the module for the entire semester were asked to give their personal assessment as to their experiences in handling the module. As per tutors' experiences, it showed that most of them find it difficult to deliver the module not because they lack the knowledge of handling it but because of the students' motivation and capacity to learn the modules. Despite of a clear module descriptors specifying its learning objectives, teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks the module outcomes of the learners in terms of their performance is a bit alarming looking at the module's cohort survival rate.

Chart 1: Central Themes and Ideas on the Challenges of EFL Tutors of Academic Study Skills Module

Themes	Participants' Responses	Central Ideas
1. Learners' Motivation/Attitudes	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of learners' interest towards the module
2. Learners' English Language Skills	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners difficulty to use English language accurately.
3. Learners' Punctuality and Attendance	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple absences of the learners
3. Challenging Role as a Tutor	Common	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research-driven activities • Tutor's transfer of learning • Learner's Participation
4. Patience as a Tutor	Common	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measures tutors' patience/perseverance
5. Heavy Assessment Method for learners	Common Variant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple Assessments
6. Module Activities Level of Difficulty	Common	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module Review

Learner's Motivation and Attitudes

Learners' attitude towards their studies is very important to succeed in every module they are taking. In the case of GFP learners, low level of interest towards their studies was observed by the tutors as one of the biggest challenge they faced in teaching ASS. *Garcia & Pintrich (1994)* said that self related beliefs such as personal goals, self-efficacy, interest, and value beliefs is a factor on student's motivation in learning.

"Learners are not serious in their studies". T1- P3

"Learners are not attending their classes regularly." T1- P4and 8

Most of the GFP students particularly in the evening session are working. They don't have much time for their studies. They come to the class most of the time unprepared as they are coming from their respective workplace. *Baporikar, et al. (2012)* in their study "*Quality of Higher Education in the 2st Century*" pointed out that *most students who entered in the university are not only those with a weak academic base / basic skill but also with low motivation mindset*. Their focus is more on memorization to pass exam and get degree. With this idea in mind, tutors find it difficult to motivate them to study hard and give importance on their studies.

Learners' Inability of English Language

English is a universal language used as a medium of instruction by most of the colleges and universities. HEIs in the Arab region use English as a medium of instruction. However, tutors observed that learners are struggling to understand the English language. This is due to the fact that Arabic is the first language and a medium of instruction used in their basic education. Thus, in the case of GFP learners, their ability to use the target language is low that made them hard to understand the module as it is delivered in English.

"The learners faced difficulty in understanding the lessons delivered in English".

T2- P 1

"They can't cope with the requirements of the module". T2- P 6

"Teaching Academic Study Skills is a big responsibility

given the level of the students in using the English language". T2- P2

Baporikar, et. al (2012) concluded that students are unable to acquire skills and knowledge up to the desired level. This is due to a problem on the external factors which the students bring with themselves to the institute in the form of weak educational background from school, unprepared mindset for higher studies and attitude toward hard work.

Learners' Punctuality and Attendance

Every learner is expected to attend classes regularly. He/she has to meet the required number of contact hours expected in the module he/she is taking. However, there some learners who come late and a regular absentee for some reasons. Some of them come late due to conflict of their work schedule. Some of them attend the class in an alternate week due to their work schedule. Thus, they will have to attend their classes every after two weeks.

"I finished my duty at 2:00 pm, my classes start at 3:00 pm, so I came late in the first period of my classes". T2- P 2

"My mother is sick and I brought her abroad for medication" T2 P 6

"I work in the interior for Oil Company that requires one week off and one week duty" T4 P 5-8

Challenging Role as a Tutor

The expected learning outcomes of the module composed of four major components which include: Written Portfolio, Group Presentation, Compiled Guided Learning Activities, and Class Participation and Punctuality. These learning outcomes are a big challenge on the part of the tutors as far as transfer of learning is concerned. A big challenge is that the tutors are expected to deliver the module in such a way that students should be able to come up with a portfolio containing 800 to 1,000 words research- based written report subject for similarity report.

"Guiding the students to write in a step by step and enhancing students basic knowledge of English Language". P1-5 and 7 "The teachers needs to focus on teaching the basic of research". T3-P6

Guided writing was the best strategy that tutors did to be able for students to come up with an expected output in writing. Guided writing activity like sentence completion was effective for them to have a clear idea on how to expound their ideas. Paraphrasing was even introduced to have a clear knowledge on how to paraphrase ideas taken from sources. In addition, another challenge for the tutors is the group presentation that needs to be presented in front of the audience with visual materials. This aspect needs to be done with teamwork as well.

"Group Presentation is difficult to teach because the students find it difficult to speak in front of the audience". T3- P3, 5

"Group presentation because the level of the students is different and they find the task as very tough. T3-P1, 2, 6, and 7

Knowing the level of English proficiency of the students, this outcome is a big challenge for the tutors that needs a lot of motivation on the part of the students for them to deliver for at least 10 minutes.

"Encouraging the students to deliver effective presentation". T3-P 1

Group activity was an effective strategy that tutors made to motivate students to speak in front of the audience. In this strategy, working as a team is very important to come up with an expected output. Group leader guided and led the members on what points need to be discuss during the presentation.

High rate of participation on guided learning activities is apparent for students. They were able to submit and complied the requirements. It seems that this output is easy for the students as assessed by the tutors.

“ Guided learning is easy to teach because it applies what the students have learned the whole week”. **T3- P 1-3, 5,6, and 7.** *“Guided learning is easy because the students sit in a group and share their ideas”.* **T3- P1.** *“Guided learning because it focused on vocabulary where students need to answer a worksheets”.* **T3-P 4 and 8**

Overall, teaching ASS is a challenge for tutors especially those who have less background in doing a research- based activity. Teachers handling this module should need to have a basic knowledge of writing a research so that he/she can be able to transfer the required learning to the students.

“I learnt about the process of preparing a research work.” **T3- P2**

“Lack of instructional materials in teaching students research skills.” **T3-P2**

Patience as a tutor

Despite the challenges in handling this module, ASS tutors were able to transfer learnings as far as the required learning outcomes are concerned. They believed that patience is one that they have learnt from teaching this module that contributed a lot to deliver the module with maximum efficiency.

“It is necessary for the teacher to be patient and understanding on the students attitudes towards learning. **T4-P4**

“Patience, understanding, and perseverance. **T4-P 5-8**

Moreover, it is also necessary that tutors should focus on the learners' mindset and motivate them toward hard work and prepare them mentally for their higher studies.

Heavy Assessment Method for learners

ASS has four assessment methods. Since it is an assignment module, it doesn't require a final examination. However, three heavy assessments are expected for learners which they find it difficult as it requires a lot of time, preparation and research skills. Thus, the tutors are challenged to meet a 100 percent module outcomes which they dislike most in teaching the module.

“The module has lots of laborious activities.” **T5-P6**

“The number of activities are too much for the students”. **T5-P1**

“ Students think the GSS is very difficult”. **T5-P4**

Module's Level of Difficulty

The module's level of difficulty is too high to the students' level of intellect. Considering that the students are still in the general foundation level, yet they were bombarded with research-based activities which is too high for them. Since the activities of the modules are the required outcomes, learners have to comply for them to pass the module.

"Limit the activities of the module". T6- P 3, 4 and 6

"Minimize the activities and the amount of words required in the report. T6-

"Activities are to heavy for students". T6-P8

"Level the module assessment to the students' capability". T6-P7

7.4.2 Module Outcome of GFP Students

Academic Study Skills module doesn't require final examination assessment. It has four summative assessments which include: group presentation, portfolio written report, guided learning activities, and class participation and attendance. As of First Semester of AY 2016-2017, of 777 students who took the Academic Study Skills, there were 637 or 81.9 percent passed the module, and 39 or 5.02 percent failed, and 101 or 13 percent did not submit the requirements.

Cohort Survival Rate of GFP Learners

It is observed that those who passed the module were able to submit and compiled all the requirements and those who failed were not able to complete and comply the requirements due absences. Moreover, poor language skills, lack of motivation and poor attendance are main reasons for the failure of the students. Furthermore, those No-submission (NS) cases were the students who did not complied at all the requirements. The reasons could be due to absences, non-appearance in the class, laziness, poor time management, and employment and work commitments.

7.4.3 Factors Contributed to the Cohort Survival Rate

Looking at the CSR or the module outcome, ASS as one of the core modules of GFP is a bit difficult on the part of the students in terms of what is expected of them. It implies that the module needs to be reviewed in terms of its expected learning outcomes, module assessment, teaching and learning activities. It can be inferred that the tutors' perspective and point of view in terms of challenges they faced in handling the module affect the module outcomes in terms of the cohort survival of the module. The tutors point of view that says that learner' motivation and attitudes toward their studies manifests in the learners performance. It also added the learners' inability of English language is one of the causes of students failure. However, learners' punctuality and attendance contributed to the learners failure and non-submission of the requirements too. Lastly, heavy assessment method for learners also contributed a lot for the failures as the module requires multiple assessments.

7.4.4 Improvements on the CSR of the ASS module Outcome

To address the gaps, curriculum developers reviewed the current curriculum for ASS to lessen the difficulties encountered by tutors and meet the desired CSR of the learners. The module descriptor was redesigned in such a way that it should meet not only the partner university requirements but also the needs of the GFP students. The teaching and learning activities (TLAs) particularly the guided learning and portfolio activities were simplified to fit the intellectual level of the learners. Written report was also simplified so that the learners will meet the expected learning outcomes. The change has to be implemented in the following academic year.

8.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

It is concluded that the following challenges are identified in the delivery of the ASS module: Learners are not serious in their studies. Learners are not attending their classes regularly. Learners can't cope with the course requirements of the module due to inadequate English Language skills. Lack of instructional materials in teaching students research skills. The module has lots of laborious activities. Teaching and Learning activities are too much for the learners. Learners think that ASS is very difficult module. The four assessments are too heavy for the learners. It can be recommended that the English Language skills of the learners should be enhanced. Tutors should motivate learners to attend classes regularly. They should be encouraged to have more confidence in delivering group presentation. Tutors need to be more patient and understanding on the learners' attitudes towards learning. Activities of the module should be limited, minimized and customized in accordance to the level of the learners' capability.

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