

Developing Intercultural Competencies in Language Classrooms: Bridging the gap for stakeholders

Dr. AARATI MUJUMDAR

Assistant Professor and Chair

Department of General Education

Modern College of Business and Science

Al Khuwair, 133 / P.O. Box: 100

Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

aarati@mcbs.edu.om

Abstract

Multicultural workspaces are a norm rather than an exception. Increasingly, business houses are recruiting graduates with intercultural competencies who are comfortable working with diverse people both, at home and abroad. Employees are required to interact with peers, customers, clients, and many others who are shaped by different values, beliefs and experiences. It is important therefore, that language classrooms become sites for teaching life skills.

Each class is a microcosm of the global space - diverse in age, gender, religion, educational background, life experiences and socioeconomic strata. This diversity challenges teachers to make the classroom 'all inclusive' and help students to be 'mutually intelligible', work collaboratively, communicate across cultures, think critically, and develop ethical practices.

This paper focuses on developing intercultural competencies through the 'analyze-present-writing' process in an Academic writing classroom. This process takes the students through two cycles of information processing using Socratic questioning, presenting, agreeing/disagreeing with the author's views, synthesizing information using outside sources finally leading to writing individual reports.

Findings revealed that intercultural competency can be taught in classrooms. Students can acquire soft skills which will enable them to be work ready and be the conduit to bridge the gap between people belonging to different cultures, at the same time contributing to their own professional and personal growth.

Keywords: intercultural competency, collaboration, creativity, employability, academic writing, authentic materials, technology

INTRODUCTION

Innovation and knowledge are key to successful economies today. Businesses no longer operate within any one region or a country; instead, they have traversed the proverbial 'seven seas' to become global. Their porous boundaries have accommodated economic migrants leading to diverse workforce, transcending language, faith, and cultures. Markets have become competitive, and success of any business depends on collaborative relationships, networking agility and skills. To attain success in doing business, it is necessary to hire workforce with appropriate skillset that adopt and adapt to any industry's work culture. One may question which skill sets are we referring to? Which

skillset makes a graduate work ready? Why choose an academic writing class to teach these skills, instead of Basic Marketing or Economics?

The industry wants graduates with 21st century skills and educational institutes want to make their graduates work ready. Though different industries require different skill sets, all industries require certain core generic skills. Out of the many, intercultural communicative competence is considered one of the most important generic skill of the 21st century. Communicating in a new language is experiential, and its use helps the learners to develop new and critical perspectives of the surrounding contexts in which it is used. According to Byram, (1997a), the language they learn is both “intercultural and communicative” as it confronts them with “the experience of otherness”. Also, if the language referred to is the English language, (second language for many users and used for business communication across countries), the issue of ‘intercultural communicative competence’ becomes focused for the industry and the education institutes.

This paper describes the attempt made to develop this cognitive skill in students in the language classrooms. It is divided into five sections. The first discusses the Literature Review on 21st century skill sets, specifically the importance of intercultural skills in business situations. The second on the theoretical premise on which this paper is based, the ‘analyze-presentation-writing’ process devised to teach these skills and the procedure which the students followed. Next, the findings detail the responses from the student questionnaire followed by a discussion. The paper closes by recommending how to proceed further in developing these skills.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW -21ST CENTURY SKILL SET

Today multicultural workspaces are a norm rather than an exception. Industries require work ready graduates with well-developed technical and soft skills for their multicultural workspaces. Curricula of all universities place greater emphasis on developing technical skills in their graduates. Though important for critical productive performance, soft skills, are not taught implicitly. Robles, (2012), and Nealy, (2005) opined that they need to be made an important part of the academic programs. This view was further endorsed by Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremner, Greven & Furnham (2010), who emphasized, that the responsibility of teaching these skills, rested on higher education institutes, as they were human capital providers. The industry feedback also revealed that most graduates did not have the requisite skillset needed to enter the job market. Byram and Feng, (2004), stated that lack of skillset in graduates dropped the momentum of progress and growth of an industry as time and resources were lost in training the hired personnel to work in “multicultural settings”. Syed Ahmad (2013) also corroborated the finding and stated that responsibility lay on the institutes of higher education to help the graduates acquire the much-needed skillset.

All industries require manpower with technical and soft skills. Core generic skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, teamwork, collaboration, cultural awareness, information management, creativity, innovation, managerial abilities are seen transferrable across a range of contexts in higher education and at workplaces (Bennett et al., 2000, Lowden et al. (2011). They help in continuous learning, organizing, adapting, and applying specific skills strategically to new situations and circumstances (Paadi, 2014). These findings corroborated the

research conducted in countries having developed and developing economies (Jackson, 2009; Zainuddin and Rejab, 2010; Jeswani, 2016, Blom and Saeki, 2011).

1.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Intercultural communication is seen as foundational and key to global work force development in the 21st century (Deardorff, 2006, Deardorff and Jones, 2012). Globalization and internationalization are not an imagined phenomenon but a realized construct which is changing our societies and reshaping cultural identities. According to Bennet (1998), “Cultural identities of individuals are no longer based solely on geographical locations or nationality, but among social factors, on gender, age, economic class and most importantly lived on experiences in more than one geographical setting incorporating more than one culture”. Global workplaces require qualified professionals with efficient communication competence who can accomplish the set goals and maximize profits through communication and teamwork (Ala-Louko, 2017; Lazar, 2017). Liu and Zhu (2016) supported and emphasized that, “these professionals are not only required to be experts in their working practices, but also competent at intercultural communication in English at the workplace”. Reinforcing this point, Thill and Bovee (2005) stated that any company whose workforce had the aptitude in intercultural competence had a competitive edge. Even for expansion of businesses, a company achieved a significant edge over their competitors when their employees were engaged in effective cross-cultural communication with their colleagues, customers, and business partners having multi-cultural backgrounds. This helped the employees to achieve the mission and vision of their company and build value for the stakeholders (Erez, 1992; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; as cited in He & Liu, 2010). This skill reduced and eliminated relationship conflicts, disagreements, resentment, and frustration (Jia-Chi, 2010) and employees could arrive at a common ground and work collaboratively (Pelled, 1993). This resulted in positive work atmosphere and helped in building a healthy relationship and “good business sense” (Hynes, 2012). A company thus, holds an internal and external competitive advantage if its employees have effective intercultural communication skills.

These cognitive skills have no outward manifestations. Within the constantly “changing contexts of social dynamics and educational ideology” (Byram and Feng, 2004), the question arises on how these skills can be brought into the classroom and developed in learners so that they can “acquire and internalize” (Wellington, 2005) them. Given that the growth of any business depends upon effective intercultural communicative competence of the employees, Modern College of Business and Science Muscat (MCBS) took up the challenge of developing and equipping the graduates with the skill of intercultural communication through a methodology devised and executed in the Academic Writing language classroom.

2. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

2.1. Research Question

MCBS conducted a study to investigate whether intercultural communicative competence can be taught to the learners through the ‘**analyze-present-write**’ process in the Academic Writing language classroom.

The research questions addressed were:

In an academic writing language classroom

1. can intercultural communicative competence be developed in learners?
2. can a dialogic approach help students develop intercultural communicative competence?

Based on the research questions the hypotheses generated and investigated were:

Hypotheses

1. working in groups develops Intercultural and sociocultural competencies,
2. working in groups develops cognitive competencies,
3. using authentic materials helps learners in groups to develop content
4. using technology helps students to develop academic writing skills.

2.2. The Theoretical Premise

Research based on a sound theoretical framework serves as the foundation for the study and helps in generalizing results. Two models for developing this skill were considered - Byram's model of Intercultural communicative competence (1997, 2002) and the ICOPROMO model (Glaser et al 2007), developed by the European Centre for Modern Languages, Council of Europe. Though Byram's model (1997) is considered the most influential model of Intercultural communication, it was the ICOPROMO model (Glaser et al 2007), that was considered as the base for the methodology designed for this study.

The rationale was:

Byram's model (1997) assessed an individual's ability to communicate and interact in sociocultural situations while the ICOPROMO model helped develop two kinds of professionals:

- undergraduate and graduate students who were preparing for professional careers, and
- personnel at the managerial levels with social science backgrounds who were preparing to work in different cultural environments.

The ICOPROMO model (Glaser et al 2007) was proposed by Glaser et al (2007) to develop intercultural competence for professional mobility.

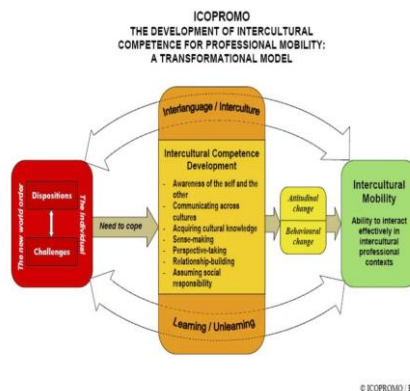


Figure No. 01. Development of Intercultural Competence for Professional Mobility (2007)

This transformational model suggests how individuals can transform themselves to achieve intercultural competence to achieve professionalism. The individual is likely to go through a process of transformation while facing intercultural challenges in communicating with others. To cope with the cultural challenges and to communicate effectively, the individual must learn, acquire, and unlearn some aspects of communication and culture of others. The impact of this 'learning-unlearning process' helps the individual to create a 'sense' which leads to changed attitudes and behaviors resulting in communicative performance. This process enables the individual to build relationships with others assuming social responsibilities. The individual can further take up additional challenges and apply coping strategies for successful communication.

MCBS is a human resource provider for industries. The focus of this study was, first on developing competencies and not assessing them and second, students graduating from MCBS through various Programs in Business, Computer, Math, and IT would be expected to work in various industries in multicultural settings. The ICOPROMO model (2007) was found more suitable for the study because it prepared the graduates for various cultural environments, which today is the norm.

2.3. The Devised Process

The challenge was to devise a methodology that would help the students to develop intercultural communicative competence, and in the process of internalization, students should not remain "passive consumers but constructors of knowledge who engage in creative cultural development" (Freire, 1974, 1995, Giroux, 1992, 1997). The task of 'Report Writing' was chosen to teach ICC to students in the Academic Classroom. The rationale for choosing Report Writing is explained later in the paper. Different pedagogical approaches to teaching culture through the language class were considered. Dudley-Evans and St John's (1998) study of "direct or indirect negotiation tactics" and "politeness strategies", Kavalir's (2013) comparative-contrastive approach, and Casanave's (2004) contrastive rhetoric approach in ESP writing classroom were considered. However, the researcher felt that a **dialogical approach** was best suited for the purpose of the study. According to (Seelye, 1997, cited in Kavalir, 2013), the dialogical approach considers "the students' own culture and how it interacts with the target culture, increases awareness of the different perspectives and the possibilities of exploring further cultural differences in intercultural communication contexts". Dialogic teaching emphasized student-teacher relationship, mutual respect, freedom of expression, sharing and empowering the language learners as their voices were heard. Students were "motivated in these activities knowing that the perspectives and outcomes are to be useful in their future workplace" (Xue 2015). Considering the advantages of this approach a Project based task was designed which would provide experiential learning.

A Project based task was preferred because the main objective was active participation in "recurring communicative action in the various (intercultural) business communication settings" (Planken et al 2004). It also "heightens the cultural awareness and encourages them to develop the beginnings of a professional identity as communication specialists who will need to be able to operate in a multicultural business environment" (Planken et al 2004). Teachers' role is minimal in this approach. They assist and facilitate in communicative interaction "through mutual cooperation" (Corbett, 2003); act as mediators when there is communication breakdown between students and devise tasks suitable to develop linguistic abilities in certain groups

(Corbett, 2003; Skehan, 2003; Ellis & Shintani, 2013; Mezger-Wendlandt, 2013b). In experiential learning, students share cultural knowledge and their real-life experiences through discussions, role plays, reflection, simulations, case studies, critical incidents, films, videos, games computer-based tasks which becomes a part of the learning process (Ala-Louko, 2017).

The other features of this devised methodology were:

1. Group work/ Collaboration
2. Use of authentic materials
3. Group presentations
4. Use of Technology

2.3.1. Group work /Collaboration

As discussed earlier, collaboration and teamwork are key for any company to achieve their goals. Working in a team is challenging as “challenges [are] involved in the dynamics of teamwork” (Zimmerman, 2010). Cultural encounters are routine like for employees who globally exchange products and create knowledge (Gertsen and Soderberg, 2010). Since cultures are dynamic and “cannot be considered monolithic” (Peterson and Coltrane 2003), tasks and activities were devised to help the students learn the dynamics of working in a group, explore and observe interactions, reflect on them and discover their own voices, empowering them in language and cultural experience.

2.3.2. Use of Authentic materials

Developing any skill in classroom is intricately related to the kind of materials used. Peterson and Coltrane (2003), state that use of authentic materials offer authentic cultural experiences to language learners. They can range from literary texts to internet materials which may include clips from television shows, news broadcasts, clippings and articles from newspapers, magazines, different websites or even printed materials such as travel brochures, restaurants menus. No fixed meaning is attached to these materials; they are open to multiple interpretations. These materials provide personal freedom to the learners to form their opinions and express them which becomes a part of their sociocultural development. The authentic text used in this was the newspaper article ‘Oman losing its competitive edge on Foreign investment’ (2016) written by Saleh Shaibany, a noted newspaper columnist of Oman (Appendix A).

2.3.3. Group Presentations

Making presentations is an important aspect of learning and in any business scenario a well-designed presentation reflects professionalism and reinforces the corporate image. Keeping the current trend in mind that graduates today may have to work collaboratively and make presentations as a team, the objective of group presentation was to help students learn to “work as a group” and not “in a group” to achieve a common goal. This activity leads to ‘meaningful group work,’ in which students’ work together utilizing the group members’ skills. Moreover, working as a group presupposes collaboration, in which all group members will be involved and will be working on a common task to produce a joint outcome (Bennet and Dunne, 1992; Galton and Williamson, 1992; Webb and Palincsar, 1996; Hammar, 2011a,b).

2.3.4. Use of Technology

Technology has become integral to the education system. Internet-mediated intercultural communication constitutes a “second wave” of L2 pedagogy (Kern et al., 2004, p. 243). Internet is considered a flexible tool for developing linguistic and intercultural skills as it can act as:

- a tutor in standalone training programs
- an input for motivating, authentic, and topical materials
- a medium for target-language production
- a social environment. It offers possibilities for communication, self expression and collaboration as it draws on the importance of interaction in both cognitive and sociocultural approaches to language learning (Debski, 2006).

Integration of new technologies tend to encourage students to use target language for intercultural learning and it was assumed that Internet mediated activities would motivate our digital natives and make their learning experience more interesting.

Based on the above, ‘analyze-present-write’ procedure was devised to teach Report Writing. The students were taken through the following procedure:

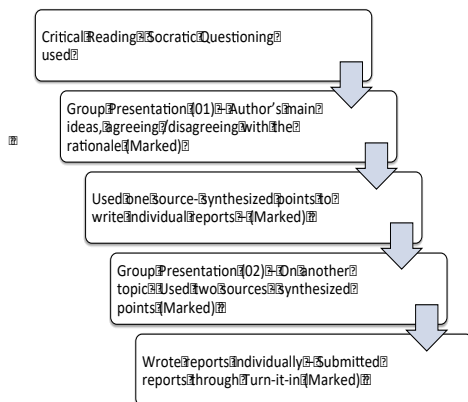


Figure no. 2. Analyze-Present-Write Methodology

This methodology involved students to work in groups on authentic materials, use technology to research, prepare slides, present, discuss, defend their points of view, and finally write a report synthesizing ideas from two / three sources. Their writing would help the teacher to understand whether discussing and presenting helped the students to write effective reports.

At the end, a questionnaire was given to help them articulate their experiences of working in a group.

2.4 The Study

MCBS is the first private college of Oman, providing undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in Business, Computers and IT. After passing the Foundation program (English, Math and IT courses - 0 Credits) the students have to clear two (02) mandatory Academic Writing courses comprising 6 credits (English Composition 101 and English Composition 102) before other areas of specializations are open to them. In

English Composition 102, students are taught to write an Argument essay with counterargument and refutation, a Report and a Research Paper (1000-1100 words) with in-text citations and referencing resources in APA style.

2.4.1 Sample

For this study, the students had completed ENG Composition 101 and had registered in ENG Comp 102. About 5 to 6 sections of the same course (ENG Comp 02, comprising 25 students each) are offered every semester. The students enrolled in Sections D1, D3 and E1 were considered for the study as the researcher was teaching these sections. In all 63 students constituted the sample. The demographic details of the sample are tabulated below:

Table 01: Demographic Details of the Sample

Total number	Total - 63 Section D1= 21 Section D3= 23 Section E1= 19	
Females	45	
Males	18	
Part time	09 all in Section E1 Worked in Bank Muscat, PDO, Malls etc	
Full time	54	
Age group	21- 40 years	
Nationalities	Omani (majority), Lebanese, Egyptians, Bangladeshis, Tunisians	

All students were informed that action research was being conducted. They had an option of being a part of the project or to opt out it. The sample voluntarily took part in the project. Majority of the students were from the public schools of Oman while very few of them were from the private schools.

2.4.2 The Written Task

Out of the three topics taught to the students in ENG 102, Report Writing was chosen as the writing task to develop intercultural communicative competence in students. The reasons were:

Report writing is an important writing activity at all workplaces irrespective of business sectors. At some point in their careers all employees have to write some kind of report (incident, feasibility, problem-analyses, recommendation, progress, evaluation etc.) that deal with different aspects in businesses. Reports are written either individually or in collaboration with other employees of the same company or members of sister concerns situated in another country. Given that our students while on job would be required to write reports, the task of report writing was chosen to develop intercultural competence in students. The researcher assumed that students would be “more motivated if they know and learn things that they will need in real-life business situations,” Jendrych (2011).

Writing any kind of report involves higher order thinking skills. The writer first analyzes the text, summarizes the main points, gathers relevant information, infers the intention of the author from the various documents, agrees or disagrees with the points written in the text giving reasons for it and finally creates a new document on which the reader can act. These students were considered ready to be taught report writing because, one, they had already completed studying how to write an

argumentative essay with counter argument and refutation which meant that the critical ability to question issues had been ignited. Two, they had been guided in the skills of writing a research paper where paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing points from two-three sources, in-text citations and writing bibliography in the APA style was taught. In this writing task the students would be able to use all the skills taught in the semester.

2.4.3 The Procedure

Teaching on writing reports started in the 10th week of the Spring semester and finished in the 15th week after which the students had their final exams. Each section had three hours of contact hours per week. All activities were taken during class time. The researcher had some designated office hours in which the students could come and meet the researcher by appointment and clarify their doubts. The students were taken through the classroom procedure of the 'analyze-present-write' as given below.

2.4.3.i - Step 01

The students were given authentic materials to read critically. They had to analyze the newspaper article 'Oman losing its competitive edge on foreign investment' (Appendix 01). The theme of this article was considered an appropriate starting point because as future professionals they needed to be in sync with the economic condition of Oman. They read the text on their own and summed up the major points in the article. After eliciting the main points, the Socratic method of questioning was introduced to help them critically analyze the text through a prepared task sheet (Appendix 02). This was divided into 05 sections, each corresponding to the various aspects of the text and the 5-paragraph structure of the report they had to write. The first was - introduction, second - summarizing the main points, third - analyzing the author's purpose of writing the article, fourth - agreeing or disagreeing with the points the author had written and the rationale, fifth - writing their own point of view on the issue of foreign investment and the message they would like to send to their peers.

2.4.3.ii - Step 02

After analyzing the text, the students were divided into groups of 4/5 for deeper understanding of the text because "when the same material is presented in other instructional formats, it is understood better", (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005; Davis, 1993). The groups (eclectic mix of nationalities) were formed with the consent of all students so that cultural problems do not arise later. Next the group made a presentation on the analyzed text - in the order of the sections analyzed. All students were marked on two aspects – content and the manner of presentation. Marking was based on an in-house rubric. This rubric was an adaption of two rubrics, used by the teachers to assess presentations in the course 'Introduction to Public Speaking'.

2.4.3.iii - Step 03

The group researched on a source related to the original text. Discussions followed and using the points from the new text, they individually wrote a five-paragraph report adhering to the structure of report given in the task sheet. The reports were marked for content, relevance of the new points synthesized and on individual understanding of the issue. Marking was based on an in-house rubric prepared for this purpose based on

revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl et al, 2001). The first cycle of the methodology ended here.

2.4.3.iv - Step 04

In the first 'analyze-present-write' cycle, students were scaffolded through a task sheet and tasks to develop their language skills. The same groups were retained for the next cycle. The groups now chose a topic on their own, found three resources, synthesized the points from all the three and made a group presentation. Through designated office hours the students discussed their topic with the teacher, showed the resources they had gathered which were later submitted. Their presentations were marked on content and manner of presentation based on the rubric mentioned earlier.

2.4.3.v - Step 05

The final step demanded that students individually write the report and submit it for **assessment** through the Turn-it-in software. This would reveal whether they had used research skills and or they had resorted to plagiarism. Marking was based on the In-house rubric mentioned earlier.

2.4.4 Questionnaire

Finally, a questionnaire was administered to the students to understand their experiences of working in a group. Questions were asked on five specific areas:

1. What was your experience of working in a group?
2. How did group work help?
3. In what way did group presentations help?
4. How did technology help in writing the report?
5. What other aspects did you learn from this task?

When asked informally in class how they felt about being a part of the process, some students narrated their experiences on their interaction with the group members. They were also asked to write at least two paragraphs on this whole exercise. Writing helped those students who hesitated in class to speak in front of their peers, and it triangulated their responses from the questionnaire.

3. DISCUSSIONS

What had the students learned? Academically, they had learned to **analyze** the text, **infer** the authors' purpose, **evaluate** the reasons given by the author, **reflect** on the article based on their own thinking, **synthesize** points and arguments from other sources and finally **create** a new text based on the ideas they had formed while interacting with the text and their peers. Socio-culturally they had learned to interact with their peers, collaborate as a group to achieve their goal.

The responses from the questionnaire revealed interesting insights.

3.1 What was your experience with working in a group?

Working in a group they learned that each member was very different though they spoke the same language-Arabic (except for the students from Bangladesh). Their different life experiences had shaped their personalities which made them different from each other. They learned to cooperate with each other despite looking at the same

issue from different perspectives. This made them realize that every issue needed to be looked at from various angles. Another important realization was that each colleague had his/her own point of view /a new perspective which was correct. To collaborate and converge at one point was a huge learning. In Byram's words, (1997a), they had "the experience of otherness". Though they divided the work among themselves to make a presentation, all collaborated to present a cohesive whole which brought out their decision-making skills, leadership qualities and problem-solving abilities - 21st century skills that industry wants to see while hiring graduates.

3.2 How did group work help?

Group work made all students help each other. Though the text was analyzed in class using Socratic questioning, some students felt challenged in understanding the text, which did not allow them to understand the implied meaning of the author. The other members who had understood, explained to them the deeper meaning in lucid Arabic. This interaction, the give and take helped the team members to build a rapport and confidence among themselves which made them understand that they could rely on or consult each other in times of difficulty. This raised their confidence level while presenting their point in front of the group members knowing well that even if they were not very correct, they would not be looked down upon or ridiculed or laughed at as they all were working together towards a common goal. Group work reinforced thinking and they gained confidence in themselves. Students began to understand themselves better.

3.3 How did group presentation help in report writing?

The presentations revealed that students "worked as a group" and not "in a group" which presupposed 'collaboration' to produce a joint outcome (Bennet and Dunne, 1992; Galton and Williamson, 1992; Webb and Palincsar, 1996; Hammar Chiriak, 2011a,b). Another important outcome was that the learners understood the structure of the report and the content needed for each section of the report. They knew how to logically place the ideas, connect one paragraph to another and how the link words and sentences help to achieve coherence. They learned that using strong words revealed their convictions; the same point could be expressed in numerous other ways, in terms of sentence structures, use of expressions, vocabulary and supporting examples. Listening to other groups presenting indirectly helped them to understand how to explain a point and give examples to support it. In short, it made them confident of their writing.

3.4 How did technology help in writing the report?

The use of technology helped the students to integrate content with reality. It created a virtual classroom. Students emailed each other seeking suggestions on the power point slides they had prepared for the presentation. It motivated each one to contribute their best. Researching sources, synthesizing points for their presentation leading to writing taught them a quite different kind of reading activity - they learned to sift through the myriad text resources and choose what was most apt for their chosen topic. It helped students to understand and monitor their thinking process; experience helped them to access, analyze, organize, and share their learning. In short, it promoted self-directed learning.

3.5 What other aspects did you learn by undertaking this task?

'Analyses-presentation-writing' indirectly developed higher order thinking skills in the students. They agreed-disagreed with the author's views, read other materials, together as a group researched material, presented and supported their point of view. Finally, they created their own text which clearly indicated they were confident of communicating and defending their position.

All the submissions were marked. It needs to be highlighted that the researcher had taught report writing skills in the earlier semesters also. The reports submitted this time were definitely better in content and structure than the previous semesters. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss to what extent the writing skills of students had improved. The discussion, therefore, is limited to the development of intercultural competence in students.

4. FINDINGS

An activity was initiated in the language classroom to teach life skills to the students. The findings revealed that intercultural communicative skills can be taught in the classrooms using various activities. Going back to the ICOPROMO model (Glaser et al, 2007), the challenges given to the students were to work in a group, undertake two cycles of the 'analyze-present-write' process. They needed coping strategies to learn and unlearn many concepts, collaborate with the group and deal with tough situations that they had never handled before. In this process they understood themselves better, learnt how to deal with other people's behaviors. Indirectly they learned to deal with the world around them, and act assuming social responsibility. They developed a different way of looking at the things around them, indirectly suggesting that they had changed in some ways. This ability to be flexible towards others opinion and share point of view with them is the key to "interact effectively in intercultural professional contexts" (ICOPROMO model, Glaser et al 2007).

The hypotheses generated proved positive. Intercultural communicative skills can be taught in classrooms. The dialogic approach helped the students to shed their inhibitions, personal and cultural barriers; group presentations on authentic texts helped in developing writing effective reports.

4.1 Plagiarism

Academic integrity was an important fall out of this methodology. The final similarity reports revealed low and medium matches. The students told us that they did not know how to paraphrase some points from the resourced text and therefore they 'copied'. In some reports there were absolutely no language errors, which is extremely hard to believe because they were not linguistically proficient. Certain words and expressions used were not their own and not appropriate to the written context. To find out more on these aspects, those students were called individually by the researcher and questioned. They admitted to the use of Google translation and paraphrasing software. They used them because they were afraid of losing marks, thus, losing their grades. From this, it can be inferred that some students when they are in a group, they are confident of writing but once they are on their own, they lose self-belief that they can write on their own. These students need linguistic and psychological support to develop their communicative abilities in the target language.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that students should be taken through this process of development. At the freshman level, they are new to the college environment. Instead of leaving them on their own to understand each other, devising such activities and executing them in the classroom, will help students acclimatise to the new academic environment. Support through coaching and guidance will help them get interested in academics and find their way to the next academic level. All courses need to emphasise on developing their interpersonal, intercultural skills. As they graduate towards sophomore and senior levels, case studies, projects using appropriate contexts from their major courses should reinforce these skills. This would develop both hard and soft skills and it would enable them to be self-directed and goal oriented - employability requirement today.

CONCLUSION

The academic writing classroom initiated them into the realm of intercultural environment. Many such inclusive activities will prepare them for the world outside. This study was limited to the language classroom involving only the researcher. If other teachers use the same model to teach report writing in the other sections of the same course, it needs to be seen whether the results would be similar or varied. It could be further expanded to apply in other content courses. Giving students opportunity at the initial stage of their academic journey would help them later to confidently work collaboratively, think independently and be the conduit to bridge the gap between people of different languages and cultures attaining professional and personal growth.

Appendix A

Shaibany, Saleh. (2016, March 27) Oman losing its competitive edge on foreign investment'

<https://timesofoman.com/article/80219/opinion/columnist/oman-is-losing-its-competitive-edge-on-foreign-investment>

Appendix B

Worksheet- Report Writing

Read the given article and then answer the following questions given in various sections.

Section I / Paragraph 01

1. What is the title of the article?

2. Who has written it?

3. From where is it taken?

4. What is the article about?

5. Write the thesis statement of the article?

6. Identify some difficult words from the article and derive its meaning from the context.

	Words	Meanings

Section II / Paragraph 02

Identify the main points from the given article and write it in the space given below. Paraphrase the explanation given for each point. You can use examples given in the article to explain the points.

	Points	Paraphrase

Section III / Paragraph 03

Answer the following questions.

Why do you think that the author has written this article? What is the author's purpose of writing?

Does the author state the purpose directly or indirectly?

Section IV / Paragraph 04

Do you agree or disagree with the ideas written by the author?

If you agree give two reasons.

1.

2.

If you disagree give two reasons.

1.

2.

Section V / Paragraph 05

What message would you like to give to your peers on the issue that you have read and written?

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- Students who voluntarily participated in the study

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