



REVIEW ON THE DELIVERY OF GENERAL STUDY SKILLS MODULE: A TUTORS' EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

Teaching delivery is an approach based on professional identity that creates a distinct classroom culture. Delivering General Study Skills (GSS) as a core modules in the Faculty of Foundation Studies (FFS) of Gulf College (GC) combines the difficulties of teaching with institutional expectations and students' demand for quality instruction. This study aimed to assess the delivery of GSS module and its impact on the module outcomes for General Foundation (GFP) students. It also identified gaps in the delivery of the module that contributed to the performance of the students and came up with suggestions for improvement that would help programme leaders and module leaders modify the module descriptors and device teaching and learning activities (TLAs) suited to the level of the students. Looking at the module outcomes, of 325 students who took GSS for the Second Semester of AY 2017-2018, there were 237 or 69.8 percent passed the module and 66 or 20.4 percent failed. Of the total number of students, 32 or 9.8 percent did not submit the requirements for the module or no attendance at all. Using a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) among the participants, the researchers found six (6) important themes such as student's motivation, students' capability, challenging role, patience, heavy assessment methods and level of difficulty. In student's motivation, the students are not serious in their studies and they are not attending their classes regularly as most of them are working students; in students' capability, the students faced difficulty in understanding the lessons and can't cope with the requirements of the module due to inability to understand English language; in challenging role, the teachers need to focus on teaching the basic of research as the modules requires a research-based outputs. 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 turnitin. Patience of the tutors is challenged in handling this module. Despite of this

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challenge, GSS tutors were able to transfer learnings as far as the required learning outcomes are concerned. They believed that patience played a vital role in teaching this module that helped a lot to deliver the module with maximum efficiency; in assessment method, three heavy assessments are expected for students 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. The module's level of difficulty is too high to the students' level of intellect. Considering that, the students are still in the foundation level, yet they were bombarded with research-based activities which is already done by the undergraduate students in their terminal courses. GSS as one of the core modules of GFP is difficult on the part of the students. It implies that the module needs to be reviewed in terms of its expected learning outcomes, module assessment, teaching and learning activities. In addition, students' level of communication skills and attitudes towards their studies need to take into consideration. To address the gaps, FFS with its Programme and Module Leaders should review the current curriculum of GSS to meet the desired outcomes. The module descriptors should need to be redesigned in such a way that it should meet not only the OAAA and the partner university requirements but also the needs of the GFP students. The teaching and learning activities (TLAs) particularly the activities included in the portfolio need to be reviewed and lowered its level of difficulty.

Keywords: tutors' experiences, delivery, approach, deployment, result, and improvements.

1. Introduction

The General Foundation Programme of Gulf College is a formal, structured, generic programme of study offered under the Faculty of Foundation Studies designed to prepare students to be successful in their higher education studies. It is a compulsory entrance qualification to undergraduate programmes offered in Oman. The FFS, a department responsible in the nurturing of foundation students, offers GFP which aims to equip students with the required generic skills to prepare them to level 3. 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 faculty facilitates and provides an effective route for progression onto undergraduate programmes. (Module Handbook, Academic Study Skills Module AY 2016-2017).

The GFP consists of four core modules which include: General English Language (GEL), Mathematics (basic, pure, and applied), Information Technology (IT) and General Study Skills (GSS). GSS is a 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 one 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 by specialised lecturers and is delivered for 45 hours of whole class contact over a semester. In the class contact hours, students would be working with the tutor and other fellow students. 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 student a chance to experience a wide range of academic learning styles. Student would be working on his/her 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.

Since GSS is a new module offered for GFP students as per Oman GFP standards, assessing its effectiveness and evaluating student learning outcomes are necessary. It is from this context that the researchers came up with this study to find out the gaps and what improvements need to be addressed to attain the intended learning outcomes of the module and help students perform better.

2. Research Objectives

This study aimed to assess the delivery of General Study Skills module and its impact on the module outcomes, and the academic performance of the GFP students. It also identified gaps in the delivery of the module that contributed to the performance of the students and offered suggestions for improvement that would help programme leader and module leaders modify the module descriptors and device teaching and learning activities (TLAs) suited to the level of the students.

3. Research Questions

This study was conducted to assess the delivery of the module and its outcomes, identify gaps and look at how to improve these gaps to attain the intended learning outcomes (ILOs). Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. What approach is used in the delivery of GSS module?
2. How GSS module is deployed to GFP students?
3. What is the performance of the GFP students in GSS module for AY 2017-2018?
4. What gaps in GSS module affect students' performance as perceived by GSS tutors?
5. What improvements are to be done to fill these gaps to attain the modules' ILOs?

4. Theoretical Lens

This study is anchored on Constructive Alignment Theory (Biggs (1999)). This theory emphasizes the three major components: 1) learning outcomes; 2) teaching and learning activities; 3) assessment tasks. The 'constructive' aspect refers to what the learner does, which is to *construct meaning* through relevant learning activities. The 'alignment' aspect refers to what the teacher does, which is to set up a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes. The components in the teaching, especially the teaching methods used and the assessment tasks (ATs) are *aligned* to the learning activities assumed in the intended outcomes. The learner is 'trapped', and cannot escape without learning what is intended.

Specifically, this research was based on ADRI model, an approach to investigate the module outcomes and identify gaps in the delivery of the module. This approach was used to evaluate or rate the organisation's activities and results. A school could use ADRI as a structure to describe any program, initiative, project or other area of endeavor. It is a model for critically analyzing the effectiveness of quality assurance systems. Razvi (2006) says that ADRI is a model for critically analyzing the effectiveness of quality assurance systems. It can be used for self-reviews and also for external reviews such as those conducted by the Oman Accreditation Council.

5. 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

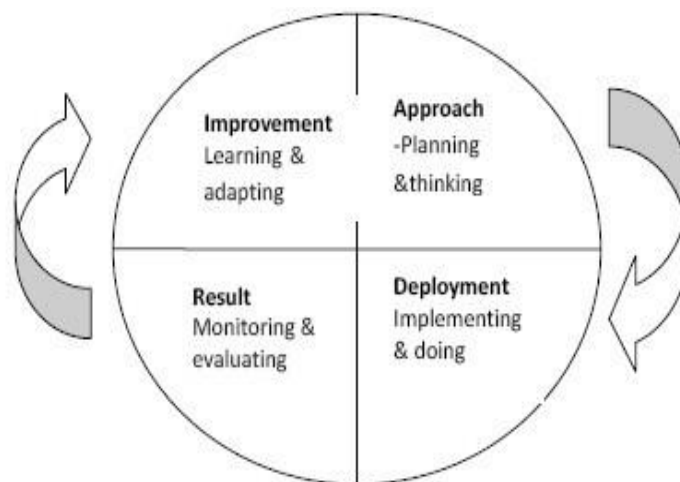
This study used the qualitative- explanatory case study method. The explanatory case study focuses on an explanation for a question or a phenomenon (*Yin (1984)*). According to him, a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon. A thematic analysis was also used in analyzing the information gathered from the participants. 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

5.2.1 An ADRI model

It is used as an approach to investigate the module outcomes of the Academic Study Skills and identify gaps in the delivery of the module. Showing on the next page is the research model used in this study: *Razvi (2006)*

Figure 1: Research Model of the Study



5.3 Participants

Participants in this study consisted of GSS tutors handling this module for the Second Semester of Academic Year 2017-2018.

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 questions with probing questions to examine the participants' knowledge and experiences in teaching the GSS module.

5.5 Data Gathering Procedures

The information on this study were taken from GSS 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 General Study Skills module since it was the first time that this module was offered in the GFP. Feedbacks were asked on how they feel handling the module. They revealed that they felt difficult in lesson preparation especially that the module requires four major learning outcomes.
- Conceptualization of the Paper. After random interviews, this paper was formulated to find answers to the gaps as revealed by the tutors.
- 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 Centre head copy furnished the Research Coordinator of the centre. GSS lecturers were the participants of the study
- Analysis of Information. After the questionnaires were retrieved, information were transcribed, analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis.

6. Scope and Limitation

This study was limited to the tutors who handled General Study Skills for the AY 2017-2018 with the limited 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 programme leader and module leaders to review the course outline and devise teaching and learning activities (TLAs) suited to the level of the learners.

7. Results and Discussions

Presented in this section is the process on how General Study Skills was implemented and delivered as one of the modules in the General Foundation Program. Results of the students' performance in General Study Skills as a module outcome is used and presented to find out how many students passed and failed the module as well as those Non Submission (NS) cases. This will help assess what makes the students failed and unable to meet the requirements. Feedback from tutors through FGD was also presented and analyzed using thematic analysis and identification of central ideas to identify the gaps and come up with an improvements needed. 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.

7.1 Approach

The GSS module is a 45-hour module over a semester. In the class contact hours, students are expected to work with the 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.

7.2 Deployment

This module is deployed 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.

1. 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.

2. Portfolio (40% of the marks)

A student 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. Advocates of student portfolios argue that compiling, reviewing, and evaluating student work over time can provide a richer, deeper, and more accurate picture of what students 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.

3. 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.

4. Punctuality(10 % of the marks)

Students 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.

7.2.1 Guided Learning Activities (10% of the marks)

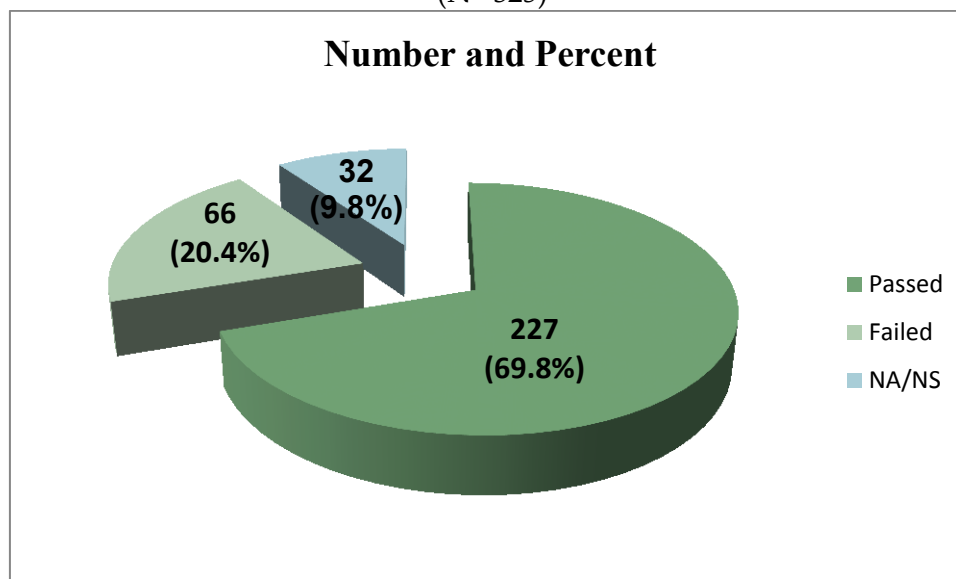
These activities are done every Wednesday. All activities are compiled and given a mark. Activities given a guided learning activities are related to the topics discussed within a week.

7.3 Results

7.3.1 Module Outcome (Performance of GFP Students)

GSS is an assignment module. Thus, the students are not required to take final examination in this module. However, they have to comply the required assessments of the module which comprise four components namely: Group presentation, portfolio written report, guided learning activities, and class participation and attendance. As per the official grid sheet submitted to the Registrar for awards board, of 325 students registered in General Study Skills for the Second Semester of AY 2017-2018, there were 237 or 69.8 percent passed the module and 66 or 20.4 percent failed. Of the total number of students, 32 or 9.8 percent did not submit the requirements for the module or no attendance at all.

Chart 1: Number and Percent Distribution of Students who Passed/Failed/Non Submission in General Study Skills -First Semester of AY 2017-2018
(N= 325)



Source: Official GSS Grid Sheet

Those who passed were able to comply all the requirements of the modules which include, portfolio, written report, oral presentation, guided learning activities, and class participation and attendance. However, those who failed are due to poor language skills, poor comprehension and understanding of the topics, lack of motivation and attitudes towards their studies, and poor attendance. Furthermore, Non Submission (NS) and No Attendance (NA) cases were those students who did not comply the required portfolios, guided learning and presentations and or no appearance at all in the class. Laziness, poor time management, employment and work commitment added to the reasons for NS cases.

7.3.2 Tutors Experiences (Participants' Point of View)

Tutors of GSS for the AY 2017-2018 were asked to give their personal assessment as to their experiences in handling the GSS 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 clear a module descriptors specifying its learning objectives, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks, module outcomes as per the performance of the students is still a bit alarming looking at the cohort survival rate of the module.

Chart 2: Themes and Central Ideas on the Experiences of Tutors of General Study Skills Module

Themes	Participants' Responses	Central Ideas
1. Student's Motivation/Attitudes	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of students' interest towards their studies
2. Student's Capability	Typical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability of students to use the target language (EL)
3. Challenging Role	Common	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research-driven activities • Tutor's transfer of learning • Student's Participation
4. Patience	Common	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measures tutors' patience/perseverance
5. Heavy Assessment Method	Common Variant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple Assessments
6. Level of Difficulty	Common	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module Review

A. Student's Motivation and Attitudes

Students' attitude towards their studies is essential to succeed in each of the module they are taking. In the case of GFP students, low level of interest towards their studies is observed by the tutors as one of the biggest problems they faced in teaching GSS. Garcia & Pintrich (1994) said that self-related beliefs such as personal goals, self-efficacy, interest, and value beliefs are a factor on student's motivation in learning.

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

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

Since most of the students are working, they don't have time for their studies. They come to the class unprepared. Learning for them doesn't matter. What they want is just to finish their desired programme and get a diploma for promotion purposes. 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, teachers find it difficult to motivate them to study hard and give importance on their studies.

B. Student's Capability

English language is a universal language used as a medium of instruction by most of the colleges and universities. Gulf College is one of the higher institutions in the Arab region that uses English as a medium of instruction. However, tutors observed that students are struggling to understand the target 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 GC students, their ability to use the target language is very low that made them hard to understand the module as it is delivered in English.

"The students faced difficulty in understanding the lessons delivered in English". T2-P1

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

"I am not motivated to teach General Study Skills because it's a big responsibility given the level of the students". 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.

C. Challenging Role

Expected learning outcomes of the module comprise 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 turn it in.

"Guiding the students to write in a step by step and enhancing student's basic knowledge of English Language". P1-5 and 7

"The teachers needs to focus on teaching the basic of research". T3-P6

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

Moreover, 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

High rate of participation on guided learning activities is apparent for students. They were able to submit and accomplish 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

Thus, teaching GSS 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

D. Patience

Despite the challenges in handling this module, GSS 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

In addition, besides of all efforts to improve the quality of GFP, it is also necessary that tutors should focus on the students' mindset and motivate them toward hard work and prepare them mentally for their higher studies.

E. Heavy Assessment Method

GSS has multiple assessment methods. Since it is an assignment module, it doesn't require a final examination. However, three heavy assessments are expected for students which students 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

F. 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 are usually done by the undergraduate students in their terminal courses. Since the activities of the modules are the required outcomes, students 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 too heavy for students". T6-P8

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

7.4 Gaps

Looking at the passing rate or the module outcome, the result shows that GSS as one of the core modules of GFP is a bit difficult on the part of the students in terms of its expected learning outcomes. It implies that the module needs to be reviewed in terms of its expected learning outcomes, module assessment, teaching and learning activities. Students level of communication skills and attitudes towards their studies are also important issues that need to be taken into account.

7.4.1 Conclusions

It is concluded that the following gaps are identified in the delivery of the GSS module:

1. Students are not serious in their studies;
2. Students are not attending their classes regularly;
3. Students can't cope with the course requirements of the module due to inability to understand English Language;
4. Lack of instructional materials in teaching students research skills;
5. The module has lots of laborious activities;
6. Teaching and Learning activities are too much for the students;
7. Students think that GSS is very difficult;
8. Assessments are too heavy for students.

7.5 Improvements

To address the gaps, the Faculty of Foundation Studies, with its Programme and Module Leaders, should review the current curriculum for GSS to meet the desired outcomes. The module descriptors should need to be redesigned in such a way that it should meet not only the OAAA and the partner university requirements but also the needs of the GFP students. The teaching and learning activities (TLAs) particularly the activities included in the portfolio need to be reviewed and lowered its level of difficulty. Concept of written report as one of the requirements should also need to be reconsidered looking at the capability of the students.

7.5.1 Recommendations

Based from the gaps identified, the following are hereby recommended:

1. Enhance students' basic knowledge of English language;
2. Motivate students to attend classes regularly;

3. Encourage the students to have more confidence in delivering group presentation;
4. Tutors need to be more patient and understanding on the students' attitudes towards learning;
5. Limit the activities of the module;
6. Minimize the activities and the amount of words required in the written report;
7. Level the module assessment to the students' capability.

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