

Democratizing English Language Assessment through Critical Action Research in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The use of standardized tests as one measure of students' readiness to study at the tertiary level is a global practice. Making important decisions about a student's future based solely on the results of a single test, however, is irresponsible and can have harmful effects on teaching and learning. Yet such decisions are made about Emirati students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) based exclusively on their performance on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam. Grounded in a critical language testing (CLT) perspective (Shohamy, 2001b), this critical action research study explores the value of providing Emirati students in a pre-college preparatory English program with an alternative to IELTS. Issues related to democratizing English language assessment in the context of higher education in the UAE and introducing critical themes to Emirati students are discussed.

Keywords: English language learners, critical language testing, alternative assessment, action research

This study seeks to problematize and suggest alternatives to the use of a standardized test, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), for English language learners in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Using standardized tests as the single measure of ability can lead to superficiality in teaching and learning, reducing teaching to a dull technical skill and stifling the development of students' higher order thinking skills (Rees, 2001). An alternative conception of assessment in the classroom is necessary to offset the power such tests hold over teachers and learners.

Keesing-Styles (2003) identifies a critical framework for assessment as one that takes into consideration the voices of teachers and students through dialogic interaction, or negotiation, of curriculum and assessment strategies in order to eschew oppressive relations of power. This critical approach is grounded in the concept of praxis, or the reciprocity of thought and action (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). In praxis, thought is as equally subject to transformation as action, with the only constant being the imperative to act justly. Freire's (1970) problem-posing education epitomizes this reciprocal process through which the teacher-student dichotomy is dissolved, allowing for the co-construction of reality and more equitable relations in the classroom. A critical approach to assessment also draws on learners' experiences and problematizes them to reveal discourses of oppression and domination (Keesing-Styles, 2003). Through critical dialogue, "students come to name the world in a way that could lead to the world being changed" (Crookes, 2013, p. 64). The purpose of this study was to provide a critical alternative assessment framework for teaching and learning in a context where a standardized test wields tremendous power over the curriculum.

In the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), standardized tests such as IELTS and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are used as gatekeeping exams to tertiary study. IELTS is an academic language proficiency test used mainly for admission to higher education institutions in the UK and other Anglophone countries (Davies, 2008). The test is also used in countries like the UAE where English is the medium of instruction for most degree programs at the tertiary level. It is undoubtedly a powerful test, with two million candidates around the world having sat the exam in the year up to May 2013 alone (IELTS Partners, 2013b). While the test developers and administrators explicitly state that the test should not be used as the only measure of students' readiness for tertiary study in English (IELTS Partners, 2013a), that is precisely how the test is used in the UAE.

Background

Desert City College (a pseudonym used to protect the anonymity of the institution) is an English-medium college for men in the UAE located in a small city outside of the main population centers of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. It is part of a federally-funded system of colleges providing free education to Emirati nationals. Burden-Leahy (2009) defines the UAE as a high-income post-colonial country. Unlike many other British colonial contexts, there was little interference in the everyday life of the people living in the Trucial States (present-day UAE), which became a unified independent country in 1971. Furthermore, the country's population, largely illiterate until after unification,

did not inherit a system of higher education from its colonizers. According to Burden-Leahy, the virtual lack of a colonial legacy of interference in domestic affairs allowed for a perception of Western expertise in developing an educational infrastructure as mainly positive and English-medium instruction as a necessity to modernization. Nevertheless, there remains a tension between Western-style secular education and traditional values. Writing about teacher education programs in the UAE, Kirk and Napier (2009) describe the state of higher education in the UAE as one of “hybridity, or dichotomous educational development characterized by imported Western-style teacher education programs versus local traditional education and Islamic society” (p. 139). The opposition between the traditional and the modern is a powerful narrative in the wider educational context and society in the UAE as a whole. The importance of English in the UAE is heightened by the high percentage of non-Arabic speaking expatriates working in the country; Emiratis account for roughly 15% of the total population (UAE National Bureau of Statistics, 2014), and English has emerged as the unofficial lingua franca of the country.

Despite the critical role of English in everyday life, lack of proficiency in academic English is a barrier to educational opportunities for many Emiratis. Throughout the UAE, 78 percent of Emiratis wishing to study in higher education programs did not qualify for direct entry to degree programs in 2014 and had to complete a yearlong Foundations program (UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2015). Most students are not able to meet the minimum English requirements for tertiary study. Lack of literacy development in home and school contexts is one major reason. Evidence suggests that most Emiratis do not read at home in Arabic or English and that print-based literacy practices are not a regular part of their lives (Freimuth, 2014). Neither do schools seem to support basic literacy in English, let alone higher-level inferential and evaluative literacy practices. Ridge and Farah (2012) argue that for male Emiratis in particular, negative attitudes towards literacy at home and school are likely “to have a highly detrimental impact on current and future tertiary studies” (p. 6). Due to a dearth of male Emirati teachers, most teachers in boys’ schools—who are required to be male Arabic speakers—come from Egypt, Syria, Jordan and other Arab countries (Ridge, 2010). Due to poor training and working conditions, low job security, and a lack of institutional support, these teachers struggle to be effective (Ridge, 2010; Russell, 2015).

The need to prepare school leavers for the Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA) English exam, used as a placement test in federal institutions, compounds the problem. Students are accepted into degree programs if they score 180 or 185 on the CEPA, depending on the institution (Coombe & Davidson, 2014). Nationally, the average score in 2013 was 163 (Salem & Swan, 2014). While scores have improved over the past decade,

educators and policymakers argue that use of the exam does not facilitate adequate preparation for study in English at the tertiary level (Swan, 2012). Upon entering Foundations, students must then prepare for IELTS. In the fall semester of 2013, the college system made the decision to use IELTS as the single measure of Foundations students' readiness for baccalaureate studies, rendering marks in course work irrelevant. The curriculum for the exit level was subsequently revised to correspond directly to the demands of the test. The exit level of Foundations is now nothing more than an IELTS preparation course.

A narrowing of teaching and learning is a common effect of high stakes language tests, whether or not teachers feel it is in the long-term interest of their students (Wall, 2012). It is likely that teachers in the context feel compelled to limit their teaching to the knowledge demands of IELTS. Emphasis on test preparation in Foundations perpetuates a technical and impoverished approach to language teaching already pervasive in public schools (Freimuth, 2014). The government intends to replace CEPA and IELTS with national tests (Salama, 2014). Whether these tests are put in place and how they will improve upon the current system remains to be seen. Although the government claims to be taking steps towards the encouragement and development of literacy skills, and reading in particular, in order to transition towards an economy based on knowledge rather than petroleum ("Knowledge to power", 2015), the underlying problems of literacy practices in the culture at large as well as teaching and learning in schools persist.

Theoretical Framework

There is acknowledgement in the language testing community of the irresponsibility of making decisions about students' futures on the basis of a single test (e.g. Brown & Hudson, 1998; Coombe, Purmensky, & Davidson, 2012). Shohamy (2001b), however, regards the use of high stakes language tests as inherently problematic. Shohamy's research demonstrates how powerful language tests influence language education and have detrimental consequences for students and teachers alike. She calls for a critical language testing (CLT) approach, aligned with critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001) and critical pedagogical perspectives, which view language tests as tools of control serving specific agendas in particular contexts of use. In line with critical applied linguistics, CLT operates at the intersection of language and society under the assumption that social reality is problematic and always involves relations of power that can lead to inequity, but that reform and justice are possible (Pennycook, 2001). The ultimate goal of CLT is not only to empower the test taker to challenge the uses of tests, but also to develop systems of assessment that are fundamentally democratic in nature insofar as they include the voices of students and learners in the assessment process and ultimately

devolve power to the test taker by following “principles of shared power, collaboration and representation” (Shohamy, 2001a, p. 378).

Crookes (2013) argues that Shohamy’s work is directed towards testers and the uses of high stakes language tests, but is less focused on language teachers who are “trying to figure out how to do testing and assessment in their own classroom that is consistent with a critical language pedagogy” (p. 69). He suggests that research on the use of democratic assessment strategies in the language-learning classroom that give voice to students is sorely needed. The present study attempts to address the gap in the literature in the context of higher education in the UAE. It describes an intervention at the classroom level that sought to challenge the hegemony of IELTS through an alternative assessment strategy, as well as encourage students to problematize issues of local concern.

Literature Review

Only a handful of studies report on the washback and impact of high stakes English language tests in the UAE. Washback refers to the effects of testing in the immediate context of teaching and learning (i.e., the classroom), while the impact of a test relates to its effects on the institution and wider social context (McNamara, 2000). Lethwaite’s (2007) examination of teachers’ and Emirati learners’ attitudes towards preparing for the Writing module of the IELTS Academic test indicated that both groups felt the test had positive effects on learning. Teachers, however, were concerned about the removal of other forms of assessment, such as portfolios, in the university preparatory program under investigation. Farah (2007) and Freimuth (2013) researched the consequences of high stakes tests on learners in the UAE from critical perspectives. Farah’s (2007) study of the attitudes of 102 female Emirati learners towards the use of the institutional TOEFL revealed largely negative feelings about the test. The consequences of failing the test—exclusion from university studies and lack of employment opportunities—were of great concern to the students, and they saw the test as a barrier to success. Freimuth (2013) examined the cultural bias of passages in the Reading module of the IELTS Academic test and concluded that IELTS does not include “equal representation of academic perspectives from around the world but rather from an English socio-cultural perspective” (p. 218). The Emirati college student participants in her study had largely negative attitudes towards the test due to, among other things, dislike of reading in general, difficulty understanding the questions and the topics of passages, the high level of vocabulary, and time pressure. Freimuth (2013) argues that culture and nationality influence candidate performance on the module. Thus, the use of IELTS as a gatekeeping exam for Emiratis studying in tertiary educational institutions in the UAE is problematic.

The application of alternative forms of assessment in tertiary educational contexts to offset the power of IELTS deserves consideration in the UAE. Troudi, Coombe, and Al-Hamly (2009) found that English language teachers in Kuwait and the UAE felt they needed to be given greater voice in decisions about the assessment of students. These teachers suggested that multiple measures of students' language proficiency and academic readiness are needed given the fact that students in the region are disadvantaged by standardized language tests. Alternative assessment seeks to combine the processes of learning and teaching with evaluation, and generally takes the form of projects and portfolios designed to provide evidence of learners' knowledge that is authentic, classroom-based, and cooperative (Coombe et al., 2012). The mere selection of alternative approaches to assessment may counter modernist societal assumptions about "the legitimate use of assessment data to name, to compare and to judge" (Broadfoot & Black, 2004, p. 19). Alternative assessment as a practice at the classroom level, inclusive of teachers' and students' voices in the development of assessment criteria and opportunities for revision and improvement, has the potential to counter comparative systems of assessment. Examination systems seek to classify and discriminate, thereby reducing the individual to what Foucault (1977) refers to as "a describable, analysable object" (p. 190).

Following Foucault, Lynch (2001) proposes a critical conception of alternative assessment in which the positivist assumption that traits and abilities of language learners can be objectively measured is called into question. Learner knowledge cannot be separated from social life, and language proficiency, like other forms of knowledge, is constructed in interactions between teachers and learners. Therefore, it is essential to take into consideration "power relations that exist in the assessment process" (Lynch & Shaw, 2005, p. 264). Lynch and Shaw propose a validity framework for assessment grounded in Foucault's conception of power relations as mobile, and in which individuals are seen not simply as the targets of power but also as "vehicles of power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). In their study of portfolio assessment in an MA TESOL program, Lynch and Shaw (2005) developed a framework for validity based on giving voice to students and ensuring equity in the assessment process. Students in the program were extremely positive about the validity of portfolio assessment and felt that they had developed strong professional and academic identities through their development.

The inclusion of democratic processes in assessment, however, is only one aspect of a critical approach. Language teachers—and perhaps English language teachers in particular as purveyors of a global commodity—wishing to employ critical pedagogical principles must also seek to address 'critical domains' in the wider social context, problematizing given assumptions that

overtly or covertly perpetuate injustice and oppression (Pennycook, 1999). A critical understanding of language as an ideological tool, and language teaching and learning as value-laden, is now widely accepted in the TESOL literature (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Yet exactly what critical alternative assessment in the language classroom looks like remains inadequately described.

Looking at the UAE specifically, Coombe and Barlow (2009) maintain that federal tertiary institutions have made progress towards the use of multiple-measures assessment in order to reduce the power of high stakes exams, but this does not seem to be the case in the Foundations program at Desert City College. Despite calls for using alternative measures to assess students' proficiency in English (Troudi et al., 2009), there is little research on how teachers go about doing alternative assessment in the UAE context, let alone how critical issues can be addressed within an alternative assessment framework.

Methodology

Research Question

This paper focuses on findings from the action phase of a study that sought to implement a critical alternative assessment strategy in an English-as-a-foreign-language classroom. The guiding question was:

What are the outcomes of using an alternative assessment strategy based on a critical pedagogical perspective with Emirati Foundations students?

Critical Action Research

A critical action research methodology was employed. Educational action research seeks to engage teachers in “taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach” to problems in their given contexts (Burns, 2010b, p. 2). In TESOL, action research approaches are often aimed at solving teaching and learning problems at the classroom level, but fail to problematize structural aspects of the educational context (Burns, 2011; Troudi, 2015). Nevertheless, recent examples can be found of critical action research in TESOL that examine institutional and social contexts (e.g., Banegas, 2011; Mack, 2012). The action research described in this study was critical as its purpose was to allow participants, the teacher-researcher and students alike, to think beyond the prescriptions characteristic of the context. The study was committed to “democratic processes for reform” (Mills, 2007, p. 6) by, albeit covertly, questioning a taken-for-granted educational policy that prevents teachers from providing genuine educational opportunities for their students (Crookes, 1993).

In order to highlight my positionality as a participant and researcher in the study, the first person is used below to describe my place in the intervention. Takacs (2002) defines positionality as “the multiple, unique experiences that situate each of us in relation to each other” (p. 175). While it may seem to be merely a stylistic choice, the use of the first person underscores my role in the process, and my position as a teacher, non-Emirati, and Westerner in relation to the student participants.

Procedure

The study employed a four-phase action research model comprised of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Burns, 2010b). In the planning phase, I analyzed questionnaires on student participants’ reactions to taking the IELTS Academic Reading and Writing modules, and interviewed two informant teachers in Desert City College’s General Studies program about the demands of the introductory EAP course at the baccalaureate level. Data from the questionnaires suggested that feelings of nervousness, stress, and pressure were prevalent among students while taking the tests. Interviews with informants indicated that students entering the EAP program were inadequately prepared to study at the baccalaureate level, where reading and writing are integrated rather than treated as separate skills. Students under the informants’ supervision struggled with basic skills such as decoding and organizing ideas, as well as academic concepts like note-taking, citation, and plagiarism.

The goal of the action phase was for students to complete a project on a topic connected to an issue of local concern. In total, six one-hundred-minute sessions and five partial sessions were devoted to the project over a five-week period in April-May 2015 (Table 1). In the first two weeks, I guided a discussion on local issues, after which participants developed their project titles, created focus questions, and researched their topics. Assessment criteria were also negotiated and drafted (Appendix A). Consensus was reached on the format of a presentation to deliver the project. Participants elected to deliver their presentations using Apple’s Keynote application. From the end of the second week through the third week, participants practiced giving their presentations and received feedback from peers. I also gave feedback via email. They then revised and delivered their presentations. In the fourth and fifth weeks, participants were asked to listen to an audio-recording of their presentation and assess themselves. I then met with each participant individually to compare notes, assign a provisional mark, and guide the revision of the presentation. Next, participants were given the opportunity to record the presentation a second time for a final mark if they were unsatisfied with the mark on their initial performance. Finally, a debriefing session, which also served as the focus group interview, was held.

Table 1: Timeline of the Project

<u>Week</u>	<u>Session</u>	<u>Action(s)</u>
1	1	Teacher introduced the project; brainstormed topics; negotiated assessment criteria
	2	Reviewed assessment criteria; students selected topics; students formed questions for topics; teacher assigned independent work
2	3	Students reported on project status; negotiated format of project
	4	Students worked independently on projects
	5	Students practiced presentations; students conducted peer evaluations; Teacher provided feedback to students
3	6 ^a	Students requested extra time to complete projects
	7	Students delivered presentations
4	8 ^a	Teacher discussed self-assessment; teacher provided audio recordings of presentations to students
	9 ^a	Negotiated feedback and initial grades assigned in one-on-one conferences between teacher and students
5	10 ^a	Teacher discussed resubmission procedures
	11 ^a	Teacher conducted debriefing (focus group interview)

^a Partial session

Participants

The student participants were seven students (Table 2) in a course focused on IELTS preparation at the exit level of Foundations which I had started teaching at the beginning of February. The first eight weeks of the course had been focused on IELTS preparation. There were originally eleven students in the class, but four obtained the required band on IELTS and were permitted to drop the course. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the institution and my supervisor in a doctoral program in TESOL at the University of Exeter. The participants were informed of their right to participate in the study of their own free will and to withdraw from the study at any time.

Table 2: Description of the 7 Student Participants in the Action Phase

<u>Name^a</u>	<u>Topic of Project</u>
Nasser	Obesity in the Gulf
Badr	Air Pollution in Desert City ^b
Ebrahim	Street Racing
Abdulaziz	Car Accidents in the UAE
Faisal	English Teaching in Desert City ^b Schools
Hamdan	Mobile Phone Use by Children in the UAE
Qasim	Marriage and Divorce in Desert City ^b

^a All names are pseudonyms.

^b Desert City is a pseudonym used to protect the anonymity of the institution

Data Collection

Data was collected through a reflective journal that included field notes taken before, during, and after the sessions devoted to the project, as well as notes written outside of class. The reflective journal is often used in action research studies (Burns, 2010a; Richards, 2003), and involves the recording and contemplation of events in the classroom so that teacher researchers can “systematically reflect on their practice” (Mills, 2007, p. 70). At the end of the action phase a semi-structured group interview was conducted with the participants to capture their perspectives on the intervention (Appendix B). I hoped that interaction between the participants would lead to a mutual understanding of the process (Mills, 2007). Secondary data sources included audio-recorded presentations, Keynote slides, and other documents developed in the action phase. The observation and reflection phases involved a systematic review of the primary data sources to better understand the events of the action phase and inform potential future cycles of research.

Data Analysis

The two main sources of data were the reflective journal and the group interview. Transcripts of both sets of data were coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), encompassing the coding of data and the classification of codes within broader themes. The analysis of the reflective journal was more theory-driven than inductive, concerned particularly with democratic procedures in assessment and attention to critical domains. Analysis of the focus group interview was more inductive, with a focus on participants’ attitudes and understandings regarding the effectiveness of the intervention.

Findings and Discussion

Four major themes were identified in the data (Figure 1): *democratic approaches*, *problematizing*, *perceived benefits*, and *considerations for future cycles*. Sub-categories for democratic approaches were *student input* and *assessment practices*, while sub-categories for perceived benefits included *student gains* and *student motivation*. Given the focus of this paper, only the first two themes, *democratic approaches*, and *problematizing* are discussed below.

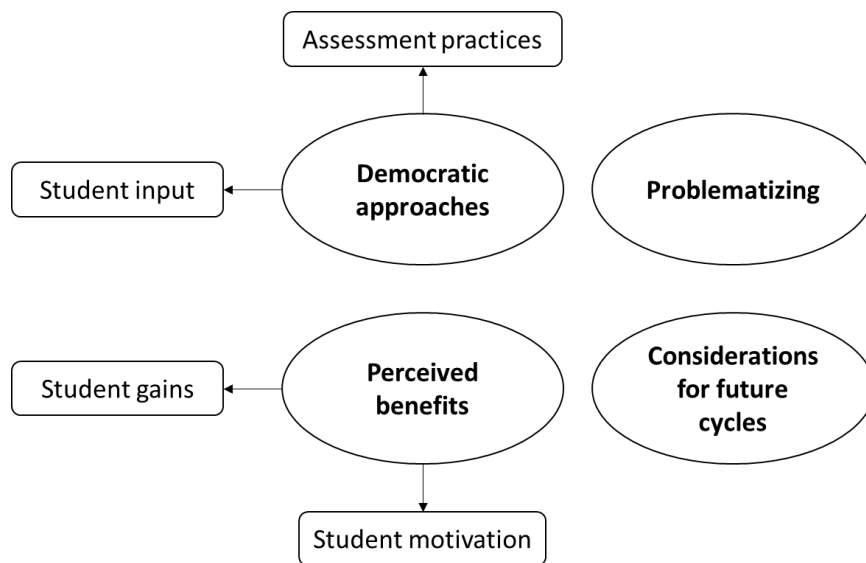


Figure 1. Final thematic map. This figure shows the four main themes.

Democratic Approaches

Most of the data regarding democratic approaches was drawn from the reflective journal. Student input into the project (exclusive of input on assessment) mainly consisted of negotiation of the schedule, topics, and format of the project. In the first session, I went over a draft outline of the project schedule with the participants and asked for their input. They raised no objections to the schedule. In the second session, the topics and research questions were negotiated in a ‘roundtable’ discussion. Moving the desks in the classroom together and facing one another seemed to facilitate greater discussion and negotiation than in the first session, so this arrangement was maintained throughout the duration of the action phase. The format of the project was decided in the third session, with participants unanimously electing to do a Keynote presentation and to give the presentation in class. The debriefing in the final session also provided the participants with an opportunity to discuss the various elements of the project and make suggestions for future cycles.

Instances of democratic approaches to the assessment process were numerous, including negotiation of the assessment criteria for the project, review and refinement of the assessment criteria, peer assessment and self-assessment opportunities, negotiated feedback and marking, and the chance to resubmit the project for an improved mark. In the first session, I asked for student input on the assessment criteria, and these were negotiated in a lengthy discussion. I then drafted the criteria, and we reviewed them as a group in the following session. I was particularly concerned with including students' input, as the following extract from the journal indicates: "I included many of my own ideas here but tried to put the emphasis on the 'message' of the presentation per students' suggestions, while putting less emphasis on language use."

Focus on content and ideas rather than language use was appreciated by the students, as they mentioned in the focus group interview:

DP: Do you think the marking was fair, the way we did the marking?

Ebrahim: Yes. It's fair.

DP: The language was only 20 percent. Is this enough? The grammar and vocabulary and these things.

Ebrahim: That's enough ...

Qasim: Yes. It's very nice... It's all about how to present. How to talk to the students... That they understand it—understand you. That's the important thing.

The inclusion of peer assessment and self-assessment was not predetermined but arose during the course of the action phase. Prior to the fourth session, I wrote, "It would be good to have them do peer evaluations, so I should devise something based on the assessment criteria." Peer assessment is an established alternative assessment practice in TESOL, though research on its efficacy for writing proficiency is more prevalent than studies on oral proficiency (Cheng & Warren, 2005). The purpose of the peer assessment was to get students to think about the assessment criteria in relation to their own performances, not only the work of their peers. I created the peer assessment handout using the agreed-upon assessment criteria as a guide (Appendix 3). The participants completed the peer assessment handouts after each practice presentation and gave them to the presenter. At the same time, I completed my own evaluation of each presentation and emailed specific feedback to each student after the session.

Following the delivery of presentations in the seventh session, it occurred to me that "it would be a good idea for the students to listen to recordings of themselves and self-assess." Like peer assessment, the use of self-assessment

has received significant attention in the TESOL literature. Research issues in self-assessment relate to accuracy of self-assessment, the devolution of power to students, and the ability of students to self-regulate (Huang, 2015). I created a checklist based on the assessment criteria for students to rate their own performances (Appendix D). In the following session, each participant was provided with the checklist and the audio-recording of his presentation. As an assignment, they were asked to listen to the recordings and rate themselves.

A democratic approach was also taken to the marking of the projects. I sat down with each student individually in the ninth session to discuss the evaluation of the project. The following extract from the journal summarizes the procedure: “I met them individually to discuss my evaluation. I compared their results of the self-assessment with my marks and walked through my comments in each area. Finally, I asked them if they felt the mark was fair.” An initial mark was assigned at the end of each conference. Given the transparency and negotiated format of the presentation, it is not surprising that all of the students accepted the assigned marks, which ranged from 73 to 89 percent. In fact, some of them felt that the mark they received was generous. Participants were then given the option to revise the presentation by recording an amended version of the presentation and submitting it electronically.

Overall, data from the reflective journal, and to a lesser extent the focus group interview, suggest a constant and dynamic attention to democratic processes throughout the action phase of the project. Though my input was greater than the students’, assessment criteria were shaped collaboratively. It is possible that transparency in assessment and negotiation of the project led to higher levels of motivation and student interest in the process as most of the students completed in-class and out-of-class assignments in a timely manner. This was not the norm for this particular group of students in the eight weeks of IELTS preparation they did prior to commencing the project.

The democratic approach taken to assessment in the action phase shows great promise for use as an additional source of evidence regarding Emirati Foundations students’ readiness for academic study in English, addressing the “need for procedures to assess areas that cannot be tapped by tests” (Shohamy, 2001a, p. 380). Many of the participants in this study showed a willingness to negotiate the assessment criteria, while others were less vocal. However, consensus was reached through class discussion, during which each student was given the opportunity to contribute. The study provides further evidence that through the process of negotiation and dialogue regarding assessment, students can arrive at a shared understanding of desired outcomes generated in specific contexts (Keesing-Styles, 2003). Peer assessment and self-assessment were mainly teacher initiated and planned, but were based on the negotiated criteria

for the project. Greater student input in these areas, however, would be needed to make the project more meaningful to learners. Though in need of refinement, the approach could be used in tandem with a language proficiency test to make informed decisions about students' readiness to study at a higher academic level, as well as to guide students deemed less prepared in their future English language learning.

Problematizing

Problematizing refers here to data regarding evidence of criticality (or lack thereof) on the participants' parts, as well as instances of my efforts to encourage criticality and the problematization of issues addressed by the participants. The reflective journal provides confirmation of my attempts to introduce a critical perspective on issues of local concern to participants. From the first session, however, I was concerned with the fine line between encouraging students to problematize elements of their own society and insisting on criticality, asking, "Can I impose criticality?" The following excerpt, a reflection on the discussion of topics in the first session demonstrates the difficulty of getting students to think in critical ways:

We were able to brainstorm topics, but students avoided (or didn't think of) explicitly critical domains. I tried to get them to problematize the topics they did come up with. For example, when I asked them about issues in education, they mentioned teachers of English in schools. They said that most of them were Egyptian. Then there was laughter. I pursued this further to try to get at the root of the laughter. Why is nationality an issue? What's the problem with Egyptians? This has come up before in other classes, where students who did homework and paid attention in class were labeled "Mustafas" or students said, "Egyptian, teacher, Egyptian." Why might the quality of education be low in government schools because of teachers' nationalities? Would it be better if the teachers were Emirati? I didn't get very far with this line of questioning.

Despite my initial efforts to steer the participants in critical directions, they continued to skirt problematic issues throughout the course of the action phase. The following extract from the journal, written after the fourth session, serves as an example:

With Badr's project on air pollution, he has not drawn any conclusions about the government's or industry's role in the problem and how they can take steps to deal with it. This

despite my having given him an article on this from *The National* [an English language UAE-based newspaper].

This was echoed in another journal extract following the fifth session:

Nasser talks about obesity, but not about why people in the Gulf/UAE might be particularly susceptible. Abdulaziz talks about the dangers of speeding, but not about the underlying mentality that makes speeding such a major problem in the UAE among young men.

The unwillingness or inability of this group of students to engage with issues of local concern critically was sustained over the course of the action phase, though a discussion following Hamdan's presentation on mobile phone use by children in the seventh session, as well as comments made in the focus group interview suggest that the participants might have been taking steps towards adopting more critical stances. Hamdan's presentation on mobile phone use by children was well organized and presented, but uncritical. However, in the ensuing discussion about the issue among the participants, Nasser suggested that parents do not care about what their children are doing. Hamdan was quick to point out that many parents do not have time to monitor children, particularly in large families where the father is away working in another city during the week, leaving the mother to manage the household. My personal interactions with Hamdan during the course revealed that he came from a large and relatively poor family (in which he, as the eldest son, bore significant responsibility) without the expat domestic workers often employed by Emirati families. It is possible that issues of class and socio-economic disparity were a subtext to the seemingly innocuous debate about children's uses of mobile phones. At the time of the discussion, I chose not to push the conversation further, perhaps because I did not want to cause Hamdan any embarrassment. Yet this exchange suggested that socioeconomic status may be an important critical issue in the Emirati context.

In the interview, Faisal, Nasser, Qasim, and Badr remarked on the value of doing the projects in order to address problems in society, as shown in Badr's comment: "I think local issue good theme because we need to know what the problem and to search—to reduce the problem. And to give people advice about this topic." On a similar note, Qasim stated: "We should see... this problem and see more information, and we should solve it to—to make... good relationship in our place, in local." On the other hand, Ebrahim and Hamdan felt that global topics would be more appropriate for presentations. Ebrahim argued that issues in the local context were "small" and difficult to research, while Hamdan

believed that it was more important to learn about problems in other parts of the world.

Overall, the project was only marginally successful in fostering criticality among the participants. One reason for my failure to instill a critical perspective was fear. Hudson's (2013) study of 'native speaker' English language teachers at tertiary institutions in the UAE—a group that form the great majority of English language teachers in colleges and universities—suggests that fear of discussing sensitive topics is a powerful force in limiting the pedagogical choices of English language teachers. Institutions espousing a “no religion, no politics’ mantra” may constrain teachers’ willingness to engage with critical domains (p. 123). Anecdotally, I was told when I first joined Desert City College that I should avoid any political or religious topics. Engaging students in critical examinations of issues regarding inequity in the UAE context—issues such as gender inequality, the treatment of domestic and migrant workers, class difference, and even the use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education—constitutes an act of bravery in a climate where questioning the status quo can be seen as dissension and may have serious consequences for teachers, up to and including loss of employment and deportation. This is not to say that the intervention was futile in this regard. Raising consciousness on critical issues can be an extremely gradual process that can only occur in phases (Troudi, 2015), and, as Crookes (2013) argues, “All teachers know that the day their course concludes is not the end of the course’s effects on students” (p. 72). By encouraging students to problematize issues in the local context, however cautiously, I may have sown the seeds of criticality and the problematizing of taken-for-granted societal structures in the local context.

Reflection and Conclusion

“[T]he power of action research is not in its generalizability. It is in the relevance of the findings to the researcher or the audience of the research” (Mills, 2007, p. 97). Burns (2010b) suggests that despite the fact that findings from action research cannot be generalized, they “may have *resonance* in other teaching contexts” (p. 95). The findings of this study may resonate with teachers in other similar language learning contexts and even with teachers in mainstream settings where students are used to a more traditional, passive role in the classroom and have little or no say in assessment decisions.

The findings indicate that the democratization of assessment as an alternative to high stakes testing can have positive consequences in terms of students’ attitudes, engagement, and performance. The participants in this study were invested in the assessment process and recognized the potential gains that participating in the project could engender. That being said, the participants did

not engage in criticality connected to the social context to the degree hoped for at the outset, due not only to their own limited experience in thinking critically, but also to my trepidation in problematizing issues related to social injustice and inequity in the social context, perhaps due to my position as a non-Emirati and Westerner.

Critical studies must be judged on the basis of their ability to transform the research context in a positive way (Shohamy, 2001b). I would argue that these participants were positively affected by the intervention, though it would be a stretch to say that transformation was achieved. The action taken was of benefit to the students in that it gave them the opportunity to look beyond IELTS and engage with language learning and assessment in new ways. However, as Mills (2007) argues, educational change can only occur in contexts that permit teachers “to harness the collective power” of their co-workers, including administrators (p. 155). Informal discussions I have had with teachers in my college and other colleges within the system suggest that focusing on IELTS in the Foundations program is a barrier to the development of language proficiency. In January 2016, I presented some of the findings of this study at a professional development session for all teachers in the exit level of Foundations across the college system. During the presentation, I conducted an informal survey of teachers’ attitudes towards teaching IELTS using an online survey application and found that the overwhelming majority found the use of the test in the context to be highly problematic.

No action, however, has been taken to discontinue the use of IELTS as the single measure of learners’ readiness to study at the tertiary level at Desert City College. In fact, over the past five years, leaders in the college system have taken steps to constrain teachers’ power inside and outside the classroom by adopting an increasingly bureaucratic model of decision-making. To my knowledge, teachers in the Foundations program are no longer formally consulted regarding decisions about the curriculum, testing, or even the diagnosis of students’ needs. In such a climate, action research such as that described in this paper will have little effect, thereby calling into question the validity of pursuing future cycles of research. Teaching and learning would be far better served if the institution moved towards a professional model that recognized the dignity of teachers and gave them greater voice. In Mills’ (2007) words, “Power should be seen as an investment, not as a means of controlling people” (p. 156).

UAE leaders have asserted their desire to develop a knowledge economy fueled by an informed, innovative, and responsible citizenry. It is clear that major obstacles must be overcome in order to achieve their goal. At the most fundamental level, the problems of literacy in the home and school must be

addressed. Greater training and support for school teachers is urgently needed. In terms of achieving English language proficiency, an essential skill in the multicultural context of the UAE, standardized tests are not the answer. Approaches that engage learners, students, and administrators in shared responsibility for determining and measuring achievement and proficiency in English, on the other hand, could play a role in instilling in future generations of Emiratis a sense of responsibility, ownership, and power necessary for the country to transform itself into the just and knowledgeable society it aspires to be.

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Appendix A
Assessment Criteria

Message – 40 points

PASS (100%)	PASS WITH MINOR CHANGES (75%)	PASS WITH MAJOR CHANGES (60%)	FAIL: NEEDS TO BE REDONE TO RECEIVE A MARK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The presentation has a clear focus and the ideas are easy to understand [50] * The presentation addresses the research question(s) thoroughly [25] * The presentation is at least 4 minutes long [25] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The presentation is usually focused and easy to understand, but some sections need improvement [35] * The presentation addresses the research question(s) well [15] * The presentation is at least 4 minutes long [25] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The focus of the presentation is often unclear and hard to understand [25] * The presentation addresses the research question(s) adequately [10] * The presentation is at least 4 minutes long [25] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The presentation is very unclear and very difficult to understand [0] * The presentation does not address the question(s) adequately [0] * The presentation is less than 4 minutes long [0]

Organization – 30 points

PASS (100%)	PASS WITH MINOR CHANGES (75%)	PASS WITH MAJOR CHANGES (60%)	FAIL: NEEDS TO BE REDONE TO RECEIVE A MARK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The information in the presentation is clearly connected [50] * The presenter introduces and concludes the presentation very effectively [25] * All work cited is clearly referenced [25] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The information in the presentation is usually clearly connected [35] * The presenter introduces and concludes the presentation well [20] * Most of the work cited is referenced [20] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The information is sometimes clearly connected [25] * The presenter introduces and concludes the presentation, but this area needs improvement [18] * Some of the work cited is referenced [17] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The information is not clearly connected [0] * The presenter does not introduce or conclude the presentation adequately [0] * There are no references to work cited [0]

Language Use – 20 points

PASS (100%)	PASS WITH MINOR CHANGES (75%)	PASS WITH MAJOR CHANGES (60%)	FAIL: NEEDS TO BE REDONE TO RECEIVE A MARK
<p>* Vocabulary use is generally accurate and appropriate for the topic [40] * Grammar errors do not interfere with the message of the presentation [35] * Pronunciation is clear [25]</p>	<p>* Vocabulary use is good and generally appropriate, but there are some errors that make the presentation unclear in places [30] * Grammar errors interfere slightly with the message [25] * Pronunciation is mostly clear [20]</p>	<p>* Vocabulary use is adequate and somewhat appropriate, but a lot of improvement is needed [25] * Grammar errors interfere somewhat with the message [20] * Pronunciation is somewhat unclear [15]</p>	<p>* Vocabulary use is inadequate and inappropriate [0] * Grammar errors interfere significantly with the message [0] * Pronunciation is very unclear [0]</p>

Presentation Skills – 10 points

PASS (100%)	PASS WITH MINOR CHANGES (75%)	PASS WITH MAJOR CHANGES (60%)	FAIL: NEEDS TO BE REDONE TO RECEIVE A MARK
<p>* The presenter is well-prepared and speaks to everyone in the audience [100]</p>	<p>* The presenter is generally well-prepared and usually speaks to the audience [75]</p>	<p>* The presenter is adequately prepared and sometimes speaks to the audience [60]</p>	<p>* The presenter is not prepared and does not speak to the audience [0]</p>

Appendix B

Focus Interview Questions

- Was it a good idea to do the project?
- Do you think 'local issues' was a good theme?
- Did doing the project help you with your language skills?
- Is it useful to do projects in the exit level?
- How can I improve the project for students in the future?

Appendix C
Peer Assessment Handout

Presenter's Name:

Check one box for each statement.

	Very Good	Good	Needs Work
The purpose of the presentation is clear.			
The presenter talks about the questions he wanted to answer.			
There is a clear introduction.			
There is a clear conclusion.			
The ideas in the presentation are easy to understand.			
The presentation is long enough.			
The presentation is well organized.			
The presenter gives references to works cited.			
The presenter knows his topic well.			

Comments:

Write anything here that you think will help the presenter to make his presentation better. You can write in English or Arabic.

Appendix D Self-assessment Assignment

Name:

Listen to the recording of your presentation. Then complete the following self-assessment.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree
My presentation was clearly focused on a local issue.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I answered my research questions well.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My presentation was at least 4 minutes long.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My ideas were connected clearly to each other.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I introduced each section of the presentation well.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I did a good job of introducing the presentation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I did a good job of concluding the presentation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I mentioned all my sources and gave URLs for online resources.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My use of vocabulary was good.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My use of grammar was good.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My pronunciation was good.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overall, I think I did well on this presentation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Preparing and doing this presentation helped me with my English language skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Preparing and doing this presentation was interesting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I learned some interesting things from doing this presentation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Comments:

