

 **ESSAY**

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**International Collaboration to Promote Literature and Linguistics via  
the Extremely Short Story Competition [ESSC]**

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There is a danger that our students' writing becomes meaningful only as far as it ends up in the assessment archives of our universities and colleges. The Extremely Short Story Competition (ESSC), as introduced here, provides an educational event designed to fulfill a very real need of our student writers by offering a safe, secure environment where their voices can be heard by a much wider audience than is usually available, even from within the language classroom.

At Zayed University (ZU), an information-technology rich institution for female Moslem Emirati students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the ESSC has been devised to provide university students with a context which ensures their writing will reach a wide audience. Run under the auspices of the ZU Literature Club and with support from the British Council, the ESSC combines freedom of expression together with strict submission rules. Students with all levels of English ability are invited to write extremely short stories combining:

- a) a subject of their own choice
- b) fact or fiction
- c) poetry or prose
- d) non-English words - when necessary

However, adherence to rigid submission rules is required:

- a) students must write EXACTLY fifty words - not 49 or 51!
- b) they may add a title
- c) they may use a nickname or "nom de plume"
- d) individuals confirm that the writing is "all their own work"; however this does not preclude any "pre-teaching" using extremely short stories
- e) students agree to their work being used for research purposes
- f) they agree to their work being edited for publication

These criteria ensure that opportunities are provided for individual students to fully exploit their creative potential, whilst retaining their anonymity. This provides a comfortable familiar atmosphere for female Moslem university students, many of whom are veiled, and all of whom wear the headscarf, or “shayla”, and also creates a learning context which can be easily integrated with computer technology.

Based on competitive events for native speakers of English run by New Zealand National Radio (Edwards 1997) and The Daily Telegraph Newspaper UK (Aldiss 2001), the ESSC has been run with great success in the UAE. The ESSC, offered only to non-native users of English, was first made available to female students from the two campuses of ZU, over one hundred kilometers apart, in the Emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. This was achieved by students submitting contributions to the ZU Literature Club where they were archived and sent on to the Editor for processing ready for presentation and publication.

The ESSC ZU was distinct from the earlier competitions in that:

1. it was designed solely for non-native English writers
2. submissions were only accepted electronically - by email
3. the term “story” was more open-ended, encouraging fact or fiction, poetry or prose - to encourage submissions from students in all academic departments with all levels of English ability and hence promote diversity and interest
4. all authors were required to agree to their work being edited to enable presentation and publication of their writing - here a balance was struck between providing a true representation of the student-author's message and effecting the minimum number of changes
5. rigorous implementation of the 50 word stipulation was adhered to using the word count facility in Microsoft Word. This facilitated:
  - a. ease of explanation — at a distance between the two campuses
  - b. ease of editing — with nothing being redundant or insufficient, the stories could be quickly edited back to 50 words enabling interim presentations to be made encouraging further submission to the competition
  - c. consistency of electronic submissions — ready for publication and research
6. two electronic corpora were compiled ready for research into textual

features produced by UAE writers of English that required mediation to enable “*display without undue criticism*”:

- a. one corpus of raw, unmediated student texts
- b. a parallel corpus of edited texts ready for presentation and publication

The ESSC ZU 2004 ran for three months and encouraged 150 ZU students to submit 250 ESSC stories. These stories were compiled into a volume entitled '*Emiratia*' which was printed with financial support from the English Language Center ZU (Hassall 2004a). At the awards ceremony, judged and sponsored by the British Council UAE, these books were distributed to all the student authors who had contributed to the competition in the hope that this might go some way to “kick-start” an English literature for Emirati nationals, perhaps providing the first beginnings of a body of significant writing in English.

Since its publication, *Emiratia* has provided the stimulus for publishing three ESSC stories every day on the “Leisure Pages” of the *Khaleej Times*, a UAE-wide English language newspaper (Dandige 2005). This has been so successful that the *Khaleej Times* has promised a further print-run of the *Emiratia* volume. In addition the IT Department at ZU has been directed to build a website to run another ESSC competition - this time for both female and male students, UAE-wide (Hassall 2005c). This competition, ESSC UAE 2005/06, is presently underway and has collected more than 500 ESSC stories from the three major national UAE institutions together with the British Council UAE. Major sponsors of the ESSC are offering substantial prizes provided by a major airline [Gulf Air], a “rewards” company [Airmiles], a shopping mall [Mercato] and a bookshop [BookWorm]. The ESSC provides a valuable creative context that students and their teachers can develop informally, away from the restrictive constraints of the curriculum, and for many students who have written multiple stories, in their “tens,” it appears to be fulfilling a substantial student need. Similarly, as Piecowye (2005) observes, “at Zayed Univesity students are now selecting the 50-word format to display their ideas for project work.” In addition, the 50 word short story context is providing a fertile avenue for development of language pedagogy including Abu Wardeh (2006, forthcoming), Hassall (2005a, 2005b), and

a field for research with the ICCE Hassall (2006a, 2006b forthcoming). With his co-author Siva Ganesh, the present author is extending investigation into language corpora using the statistical instruments of Correspondence Analysis [CA] and Data Mining (Hassall & Ganesh 2005a, 2005b). The *Emiratia* volume has made its way to East Asia (Hassall 2004b) where UAE student texts provided motivation for a pilot project to be run in the Republic of Korea [ROK]. In January 2005 the ESSC was replicated at the British Council in Seoul, using stories from the *Emiratia* volume as a stimulus for the ESSC ROK 2005. A further workshop to introduce the ESSC and *Emiratia* was held at the Asia TEFL conference in Beijing (Hassall 2005d) where the possibility of running the ESSC in universities in other countries was explored. At this workshop, significant interest was shown by the participants, who included delegates from the Japanese Association For Asian Englishes [JAF AE]. Running the ESSC in additional countries could promote similar beneficial results by engaging students in language production that would have clear authentic outcomes, which eventually might lead to the development of English literatures in those countries. Reciprocal opportunities for cross-varietal linguistic research would accrue as additional countries implement the ESSC. Resulting corpora would be archived and made available for such research by universities in other nations who wish to participate. It was also suggested that any valuable resources, expertise and monies accumulated whilst running the ESSC, including technology such as the ESSC ZU website and the *Emiratia* volume, together with any surplus donations or royalties, should be used to make the ESSC available to students in less wealthy countries, thereby contributing to humanitarian aid through literacy education. It now appears that what started out as a valuable activity for the language classroom may, in due course, provide a powerful force to encourage international collaboration in higher education promoting literature and linguistics. As Honna suggests “extending the ESSC to other countries and widening the distribution of *Emiratia* and parallel volumes to an international student readership will enable the Extremely Short Story Competition to attain its realization as a vehicle for advancing literature, linguistics and literacy education through English as a language of international and multinational communication” (Honna 2005).

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