CHAPTER 5

Development of Writing Centres in Oman: Tracing the Past, Understanding the Future

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Introduction

Oman is one of the Gulf Corporation Council (henceforth, GCC) countries which considers oil as their primary product and source of wealth. GCC includes Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab of Emirates and Oman. These countries are looking for ways to expand their role in global circles by developing their citizens in several aspects of life including education. To meet these goals, Oman implemented a new reform of education (Issan & Gomaa, 2010) and included English language as an important device. The Ministry of Education implemented several programmes to enhance the competency of Omani students in English language and consequently reach their ultimate goal.

This chapter traces the development of writing centres (henceforth, WCs) in Oman through history, its current state and future potentials. An overview of the historic and current state of WCs is used with a comparative analysis of the Western and GCC WCs, using the Murphy and Law (1995) WCs traditions model. Then a historical review of English language learning development in Oman is explored. The historical review also

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gives us hints on Oman's readiness to accept foreign language at the present. Finally, further investigations are made on the current state of English language learning in relation to Omani education and the road to possible improvement on the part of the WCs towards meeting its vision and the overall ambitions of the Omani Sultanate.

An Overview of the Field of Writing Centres from the West to the Arabian Gulf Region

WCs are one of the important hubs in Western universities that provide instant and constant support to all students. The vast spread of WCs in thousands of universities and high schools in Northern America and Canada indicates the increasing need to these centres in academic life. Unlike WCs in the Arabian Gulf countries, WCs in the West are mostly documented through several journals discussing various subjects about issues of writing and WCs history. However, the pictures they paint are not always true. The idea of vagueness in tracking the history and activities of WCs is common in the West and the GCC. Carino (1995) states that although the history of WCs looks clear and clean, it goes through various ambiguities. The history of Western WCs is not documented until the late 1970s when the open admissions policy started and the increasing need for WCs and writing labs expanded (Bawarshi & Pelkowski, 1999; Carino, 1995). At the beginning, WCs establishment aims to remedy the writing skills of international students who flux to the American universities in response to the open admission policy. It used to be the 'cousins of English departments, stereotypical "remedial fix-it shops" where enlightened staff administers current traditional pedagogy to underprepared and poorly regarded students' (Carino, 1995, p. 103).

It is difficult to appoint accurate dates in the history of WCs at the GCC countries; documents available show that the first WC was established in 2009 (UoN Writing Centre, 2016). The hesitation in giving accurate dates is due to shortage of official information and documents about WCs in the region. WCs in GCC are mostly not independent institutions. The available information provided by the Middle East–North Africa Writing Centres Alliance (MENAWCA 2016), and similar other resources such as the websites and annual reports of the hosting universities, shows that most of the WCs are integrated into the higher institutions as supporting and training centres. The English-writing support included in these centres was adopted as a result of the increasing need of the use of

English language across different disciplines and programmes in the region (see Albishi, 2016; Al-Issa & Al-bulushi, 2011). However, there are a few independent WCs in the region.

Following the Murphy and Law (1995) model of WCs traditions, a comparison can be attempted between the difficulties faced by the WCs in the West and the current state of WCs in the GCC countries as a new concept in the region. The traditions include:

1. The tradition of sharing
2. The tradition of mystifying our colleagues
3. The tradition of being at the bottom of the totem pole
4. The tradition of incorporating collaborative learning
5. The tradition of tutors' personal enrichment
6. The tradition of being people oriented (Murphy & Law, 1995, pp. 28–35)

The WCs' work has gone through changes and sophisticated phases since the 1970s. On the one hand, the tradition of sharing where administrators, tutors and instructors are unsure about what to do, or hesitate on how to start a WC, has almost vanished. However, the concept of sharing evolved to become more institutionalized and professional. A lot of journals appeared dedicating their focus to writing and WCs. These journals such as *The Writing Center Journal* and *Writing Lab Newsletter* publish new findings and innovative knowledge in the field. Also, several associations and their websites such as the *International Writing Centers Association IWCA* and *Middle East–North Africa Writing Centers Alliance MENAWCA* were launched to serve and guide new and old WCs. So, sharing is taking new shape which privileged the new WCs in the GCC. The idea of cooperating on progressive activities in the higher education institutions still exists in the GCC countries. As an example of this, WC of the University of Nizwa (UoN) at the Sultanate of Oman assists several other universities to initiate their WCs (UoN Writing Centre, 2016). On the other hand, GCC WCs still have the tradition of helping individuals and students to develop in writing and other academic areas.

The tradition of mystifying our colleagues is a situation where our colleagues do not exactly know the role of WCs. They think that the purpose of the WC is to edit and proofread the papers of students, and, maybe, to only hold sessions to solve what they have failed to do (Murphy & Law, 1995; North, 1984). Unfortunately, these 'old familiar misapprehensions'

(Murphy & Law, 1995, p. 29) still exist in some GCCs' WCs even if they are not clearly articulated. Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), among several others in the GCC universities, integrated their WC with the General Foundation Program (GFP) to help students acquire a wide range of academic skills in different courses, including overcoming writing problems (Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014). Faculty and instructors of WCs who are supposed to be professionals make it worse and deepen the misunderstanding when they do not understand their role or the role of their centres. Misunderstanding can be seen through links on MENAWCA's website which guide visitors to unrelated programmes such as universities General Foundation Programmes. So, websites presenting the General Foundation Programmes and preparatory centres which solve many problems of the students as WCs is one of the 'misapprehensions' about WCs. Ignorance of WC goals by their faculty and staff members helps to confirm the tradition of mystifying. In Saudi Arabia, a WC page at King Saud University includes link of instructions appeared to be directed at the faculty who seek help on reviewing and editing their abstracts of conferences or journal articles (Centre for Writing in English KSU, 2016). The report of WC at the UoN (2011) identifies this misunderstanding of the WC role by faculty, staff and students as one of their challenges and further invites them to understand

> that TWC is not a proofreading or editing service facility. It is important that members of the UoN understand that TWC provides assistance in writing for the improvement of academic students' writing proficiency. The Writing Center wishes to be invited at the beginning of each academic year of organized assemblies for student orientations, so that it may familiarize students and faculty alike regarding the services and programs offered by TWC. (The University of Nizwa Writing Center TWC Annual Report, p. 18)

The governmental process of the budgets of education at GCC is mostly similar (Alpen Capital, 2016). The governments set the budgets of the educational institutions according to several criteria. The institutions make their balance of fixed aspects of budgets according to the need of their entities and last records of previous financial year (Spending Regulations MOF, KSA, 2015). The spending on education at GCC countries was close to 22% of the countries' total budgets. This exceeds the education budget of some of the first world counties such as the USA,

the UK and Germany (Alpen Capital, 2016). The decision of WC initiations in GCC is based on a higher committee that takes into consideration the ability to fund the WC and provide it with proper facility and faculty, and make it share the same financial status and other privileges and rights of any other department. So, the idea of 'being at the bottom of the totem pole' is barely mentioned in WCs of GCC no matter the level of those rights and statuses.

Murphy and Law (1995) in their model of WCs' traditions mention the active participation of WC in enriching language learning context. They notice that the tradition of 'collaborative learning' succeeded in adding new approaches where students are expected to be the centre of the class and play an active role. However, the role of WC in creating teaching and pedagogical practices remain passive at the GCC (see Chap. 12 for more on this; see also Al-Issa & Al-bulushi, 2011; Al Khateeb, 2013; Al-Khairy, 2013; Kamil, 2011). This does not ignore the fact that WCs in GCC play vital role in 'the tradition of tutors' personal enrichment'. It can be recognized that the existing WCs in the Arabian Gulf region are participating in training their tutors and providing sufficient experiences. For example, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia, posts an advertisement on their website requiring students to apply for tutoring positions (Centre for Writing in English KSU, 2016). These opportunities are supervised by professional staff and scaffold with developing courses. Also, the WC at the UoN in Oman mentions the experience of their staff when they participated in their first ever conference abroad (UoN Writing Center, 2016). However, tutors do not generally improve their methodologies, and training does not guarantee excellent results (Al-Issa & Al-bulushi, 2011).

Murphy and Law (1995) further note the constancy of the last tradition that refers to people's orientation in WC. 'The tradition of being people-oriented' is the use of various machineries for people interactions in tutoring. Easy access to technology and writing support helps to maintain this tradition. The extensive financial support of the GCC countries on education helps in providing all necessary assistance to WCs. As mentioned earlier, almost one-third of some GCC countries' budgets go to education (Alpen Capital, 2016). Therefore, when the decision is made to initiate a WC, the needed facilities, hardware, software and labs do not constitute any obstacle. However, lack of sufficient staff may present a problem. The director of WC at the UoN lists inadequate numbers of human resources as one of their challenges (UoN Writing Centre, 2016).

One of the main reasons behind establishing WCs in the West is to answer the increasing need of centres to help international students admitted due to the open admission policy in the USA, especially the non-English speakers among them. In the GCC countries, one could expect that WCs will face similar hardships as they deal with similar conditions of both faculty and students relations. The traditions of WCs are still active in most of the parts where WCs are facing similar difficulties and hardships in the East and in the West irrespective of the various financial supports by governments. The question remains whether the WCs are going to keep struggling in GCC countries to find their identity or they will develop and flourish like the ones in the USA, and then we will be able to say 'history repeats itself'.

Historical Review of English Language Teaching in Oman

Linguistic History of Oman

Oman is located at the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula. This location situates it at the heart of historic events, maritime and trading crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe (Nicolini & Watson, 2004). The location enables Oman to be exposed to different languages and thus be affected by them. Oman's early history is full of moves and important turns including the Portuguese colonization. As a result of this rich history including trading markets, colonization, immigration and other factors, Oman hosts different dialects that borrow vocabularies from different languages and influence its local modern dialects (Holes, 1996, 2006). Languages used in modern Omani Arabic dialects include Urdu, Persian, Baluchi and even Portuguese, which was a result of the Portuguese colonialization that ends in 1924. In the 1960s and early 1970s, another linguistic influence was noticed after the inflow of immigrants from Zanzibar and Indian subcontinent. This makes it linguistically richer. Holes (1989) notes that

> since 1970, with influxes of Omanis from other areas of the country and from East Africa, a flood of expatriate Arabs, chiefly from Egypt, and the permanent or semi-permanent immigration of non-Arabic speakers from the Indian subcontinent. The linguistic influences of these groups have been added to the already polyglot local community in which many local families were already bi- or trilingual in Arabic, Swahili and one or other of the

> languages of the Indian subcontinent as a consequence of Oman's maritime and trading heritage. … [I]t would make a fascinating site for the study of sociolinguistic phenomena such as multilingualism or code-switching. (Holes, 1989, pp. 446–447)

Therefore, Oman had long history of interaction with different languages and cultures, a history that commenced its new phase when His Majesty the Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said ascended the throne of the Sultanate of Oman.

English Language and Education in Oman

Oman lived in history until 1970 when major changes happened. Before 1970, Oman remained a poor country with almost no infrastructure nor education or even any proper healthcare system in place (Al-Jadidi, 2009). The renaissance of modern history of Oman started when Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said attained power (Rassekh, 2004). We can find evolution in education systems and planned developments with accurate vision in this period of time (Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi, & Al-Ketani, 1999; Rassekh, 2004). Different procedures were initiated and several factors were taken into consideration to achieve the intended developments.

English is considered to be a vital tool of development in developing countries (Al-Issa & Al-bulushi, 2011; Coleman, 2011). The importance of English language teaching (ELT) has been on the increase since the Second World War, and this is a direct result of the rise of two English-speaking countries of the USA and the UK with hegemonic powers. Consequently, this hegemony took over knowledge of science, economy, politics and related fields. These fields are going through huge development, where English is the main language in use (Albishi, 2016; Phillipson, 2008). Crystal (2006) claims that about 80% of the world science is published in English. So, various scholars discussed the phenomenon of English language as the lingua franca (Hülmbauer, Böhringer, & Seidlhofer, 2008; Seidlhofer, 2004), global language (Crystal, 2003; Gnutzmann, 1999; Seidlhofer, 2005) or English as a world language (Mair, 2003). Therefore, a noticeable interest increases from non-English-speaking countries towards the teaching and learning of English (Crystal, 2003), and Oman is no exception (Al-Issa & Al-bulushi, 2011). This drive was led by two main factors. First, ELT is supported by English-speaking countries like the UK through several ways including the spread

of ELT institutions like the British Council (Phillipson, 2008), which was established in 1934 and now reaches over 500 million people across the world (British Council, 2016). Second, non-English-speaking countries, like Oman, consider the importance of English in their overall development through communicating with others which will help in increasing their share in world domains (Al-Issa & Al-bulushi, 2011). So, they initiate teaching English language and prioritize it in education (Salha & Nariman, 2010).

The renaissance of Oman education started during the Sultan Qaboos's era in parallel with the oil floods in commercial quantities to be exported in late 1970s (Issan & Gomaa, 2010). The emergence of this wealth helps the country to build a solid educational system and meet the Sultan's vision in elevating the status of his people in several aspects of life including education. This vision was recognized by the Omani government and translated into actual policies to meet intended results. In this relatively short history of education, Rassekh (2004) states that the development of education in Oman has gone through three stages:

1. stage one emphasized the rapid quantitative development of education;
2. stage two started in the early 1980s, when the Ministry of Education initiated serious efforts to improve the quality of education; and
3. stage three began from 1995, after the Conference on Oman's Economic Future, Vision 2020, when a number of reforms were introduced in order to cope with the educational requirements of the future. (Rassekh, 2004, p. 8)

In the third stage of the Oman history, the government notices the ultimate role of education in modern world and thus included education in its reform agenda so as to achieve its developmental goals. It also considers English as an important tool that will satisfy the quality of Oman educational reform and supply the country with qualified Omani labour force so as to be ready to join the emerging local and international markets. The Omani Ministry of Education declared its belief in the crucial role of English as a statement of public policy which emphasizes the important role of English worldwide and its use in various domains such as economic, political, scientific and technological fields, including the academia, finance and telecommunication, which are all important in the new future that Oman is hoping to join (Al-Issa, 2002, 2006; Al-Issa &

Al-Bulushi, 2011). According to Al-Issa (2002), 'The choice of English here is primarily for transition purposes … based upon sociolinguistic, socioeconomic, sociocultural, historical and political factors' (2002, p. 198). One of the crucial reforms in education was to start teaching English from grade one in public schools (Issan & Gomaa, 2010; Sivaraman, Al Balushi, & Rao, 2014). English also became a medium of instruction in most majors of private and public schools and universities of higher education. All these are meant to ensure the success of their development plans, and to improve Omani participation in the world economy and technology.

English Language Proficiency in Omani Schools

At some point, it was discovered that the ancient and modern linguistic history of Oman and the ambitious steps of the Omani Ministry of Education was not reflecting on the Omani students' level of English proficiency. World rankings show that Oman is categorized as 'very low proficiency' in English language; ranking 64 out of 72 countries (Education First, 2016). In 2001, the Ministry of Education in Oman decided on a plan to prepare the students for the higher education where English is the medium of instruction. This plan hopes to improve English language proficiency, including the implementation of teaching English from Grade 1 (see Al-Issa & Al-bulushi, 2011; Issan & Gomaa, 2010; Sivaraman et al., 2014). Also, Omani students have to pass through a GFP ranging from 6 to 12 months to prepare them for university so as to achieve an acceptable level of English writing and communicating skills. The programme was established in 2010 as a result of the inability of 70 % of the Omani applicants to meet university admission standards, one of which is the English language proficiency equivalent to 5.0 on IELTS (Al-Issa & Al-bulushi, 2011).

However, the English proficiency of the Omani students was still not satisfying (Al-Issa & Al-bulushi, 2011; Sivaraman et al., 2014). Sivaraman et al. (2014) conducted a study on 132 Omani students at the university level to measure their English language competency. The participants were grouped according to the university admission tests which classify them into two groups, namely those students who were unconditionally admitted to their chosen programmes and those students who needed to go through further English learning programmes. The study finds that both groups are found to be non-sufficiently proficient in English language

skills. The study finds that teachers are aware of the students' lack of competency in English; but they do not know the exact level of this problem. This is because students do not express their lack of understanding in class to avoid making mistakes when using English language to express themselves in class. So, teachers assume students' comprehension of the subjects. Also, the study finds that despite the well-provided facilities and infrastructure, the students are facing major problems in English language skills. More actions need to be taken to enhance ELT in Oman and focus on the tertiary students' language skills that could help to achieve the Omani overall ambitions. (For other pedagogical efforts made in Oman to improve English proficiency, please refer to Rania Kabouha in Chap. 12 of this book for further specific details.)

Issues Surrounding EFL Writing in Omani Higher Education Landscape

Writing is one of the most important language skills especially at the tertiary levels (Al husseini, 2014; Zhu, 2004). The Omani Ministry of Education realizes this importance and identifies it as one of the areas of weaknesses of the Omani students. Moreover, some English language teachers were found to be lacking modern experience in teaching writing. So, in 1998 the ministry implemented a $25 million programme with the University of Leeds targeting the teachers and aiming to enhance their ELT skills including writing (Al-Issa & Al-bulushi, 2011). However, the programme did not succeed and the teachers withdrew. Consequently, Omani students continue to face problems with English writing (Husseini, 2014).

According to Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014), Omani students are found weak in writing in English at the university level despite their high or low scores in secondary schools. The English courses of the GFP include writing aspects that contain several components like grammar and vocabulary to enhance learning of the students and improve both the writing and other language skills. Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) conducted a study on 1431 Omani students to investigate their writing problems. University students represent 28% of the participants (317 students) selected from three different universities in Oman. The study concentrates on basic skills in writing like starting a paragraph, writing a sentence, connecting ideas and using appropriate vocabulary. It is interesting to mention that the university students use writing strategies (such as brainstorming, drafting, revising and editing) more than secondary students; but the results of the

study show that difficulties of writing English is more pronounced among university students. The study concludes that students are facing major problems with writing and more needed to be done to address it by the Omani education system.

The Emergence of Writing Centres in Oman

It is difficult to appoint the exact date of the establishment of the first English WC in Oman due to lack of reliable documents that can be used in research or documentation. It is for these reasons that this study utilizes the following data sources to capture and document the history of WCs in Oman:

- Personal contacts to collect as much data as possible (flyers, handouts, newsletter and reports);
- Specialized websites such as the MENAWCA in order to find information bordering on the history of WCs in Oman; and
- Governmental and official websites of higher education institutions in Oman to explore the availability of WC in each institution.

The MENAWCA shows only three links of WCs in Oman directing to the universities' official websites and not the WCs' web pages. UoN is the only university which has a WC webpage with most of the information needed. However, the report of 2011 is the latest document available. Searching the MENAWCA website and other sources, four universities (the Sultan Qaboos University, SQU; the Arab Open University, AOU; the Sohar University, SU; and the College of Applied Science, Rustaq) seem to have activities that correlate with writing and writing development.

Available sources show that the first WC in Oman was approximately established in 2009 (UoN Writing Centre, 2016). WCs are mostly supporting centres emerging to help students in their academic endeavours through tutoring, personal interactions and short courses. Also, these centres provide training on the use of facilities and other academic skills. The concern of the current centres is to help students in achieving effectiveness and build personalities at university levels. Most of these WCs offer support of writing in Arabic and English courses.

SU, AOU and College of Applied Science, Rustaq, do not mention writing clearly on their web pages but include it within different activities.

SU includes only two short courses in English for Specific Purposes writing under the division of General Studies. The courses are 'writing for Impact' under the category of 'Behavioural Competencies' and 'Technical Report Writing Skills Workshop' in the field of 'Industrial Management' (Sohar University, 2016). Activities of writing at AU and College of Applied Science writing support are barely mentioned in the web pages of students' support centres. At SQU, Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) disclose that writing training and teaching are included in GFP. The web page of the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS) at SQU mentions the integration of writing and tutorial in the centre to serve both GFP and the advanced students in Arabic and English languages (SQU, 2016). Therefore, the policies of the CPS show that two separate divisions are included within it, namely the WC and the Tutorial Centre. The WC offers its services in English to the faculty and students. Although the WC is dedicated to advanced students, it can help any other student who seeks help. All students are assigned 30-minute sessions of one-to-one tutoring.

According to available sources, Oman has only one WC at the UoN which adopts the professional approaches of WCs (see Harris, 2016). Established in 2009 (UoN Writing Centre, 2016) and dedicated only to English writing, it instructs students of all disciplines and seeks to improve their writing proficiency. Its participation in initiating several other WCs in Oman and outside of it gains significant recognition within the GCC countries (UoN Writing Centre, 2016). The UoN WC (2016) annual report, which is the last published report, shows the services provided and approaches followed to help students. According to the published WC reports, appointments made within one year (from September 2010 until August 2011) were 15,054, pointing to the massive services provided by the centre, including workshops, tutorials and extracurricular activities. The total number of registered academic students for the WC services within the same period is 3750. A range of full-time staff instructors, part-time and peer tutors participate in the activities of WC. The activities vary according to the individual needs of beneficiaries. Services include 30-mintute one-to-one tutoring, 50-minute workshops, consultations, conversations and curricular scaffolding. The WC staff held 11 meetings in 2011 to ensure flexibility, experimentation through dynamic plans and immediate critical evaluation of emergent matters and implementation of new policies therefrom. The centre composed its mission and vision according to their goal of establishment as following:

Vision:

The Writing Center will be recognized as an educational facility that provides quality instruction and support across all disciplines to further develop students English writing abilities.

Mission:

The Writing Center will cater primarily to academic students currently enrolled in their degree programs that need to improve their English writing proficiency.

The Writing Center is a learning support service designed to promote a dynamic writing culture for students. The Center will aim to improve student English writing composition skills, reinforce quality study habits, support critical thinking, and encourage creativity and innovation. The Writing Center's programs, services, and extracurricular activities will reflect the Islamic and cultural values embraced by the Sultanate of Oman in order to assist in the development of quality graduates. (The University of Nizw Writing Center TWC, 2011 Annual Report, page 3)

Why Writing Centres?

The Omani reform holds English language as one of the important tools to achieve the intended goals. As in other languages, English consists of basic skills including writing which is one of the important language skills. It is considered to be the most important skill in a university environment (Johns, 1981) and beyond (Zhu, 2004). A study involving 35,000 participants at the university level shows that faculty staff upholds the crucial nature of writing in academic context and subsequently in the real world (Zhu, 2004). Writing starts before college levels and becomes dominant at the tertiary levels because students have to critically analyse and integrate knowledge and then propose results and conclusions (Al husseini, 2014; Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Flowerdew, 2005). Also, at the tertiary levels, students come up with various views and need to reference different sources and literature to gain wider perspectives after which they build their arguments. These skills accompany students to their classes in different disciplines (Al husseini, 2014). WCs help students to gain

different high-level academic skills such as evaluation and analysis. Herrington (1985) conducted a study on university students to observe their writing in academic context and found a social change of the roles of students which was observable in their writing across different disciplines. Thus, WCs encourage students to develop and use several skills in order to maintain a habit of critical thinking and eventually achieve effective writing skills.

Conclusion

The Sultanate of Oman gives high attention to its education. The three stages of Oman history put its human capital and its development at the core of its reforms to elevate the country. An observer of the Omani situation notices the huge leaps taken into the path of development during the last three decades. The infrastructural development, the policies and the plans support the overall vision of the country to increase its role and active participation in the world as an integral player. However, the standard of education at that point in time does not meet the ambitions of the sultanate. This includes absence of vital knowledge and skills such as English proficiency and writing. Several attempts were made to overcome this problem such as initiating WCs. However, the activities of these centres need to be more professional to reflect the generous spending of the country on all aspects of education. The WCs could witness better improvements by borrowing from past experiences of the Western WCs, and then expand their activities so as to further improve on the current levels of the Omani students.

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