

English Language Education

Rahma Al-Mahrooqi  
Christopher Denman *Editors*

# English Education in Oman

Current Scenarios and Future Trajectories

 Springer

# English Language Education

Volume 15

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Editors

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# Foreword

Motivated by a dearth of academic work explicitly focused on English language education in Oman, Rahma Al-Mahrooqi and Christopher Denman have put together a comprehensive 18-chapter volume on *English Education in Oman*. According to the editors, the body of available work on English language education in Oman is relatively small, especially when compared to a number of other Muslim majority nations where numerous issues related to the topic have received a great deal of investigative attention.

Of course, in recent years there have been a growing number of researchers writing about English language education practices in the sultanate. Their work, however, tends to be scattered across international journals or included in edited collections of work about education and social issues in the Middle East and North Africa. In response, the editors' primary motivation with this volume is to provide readers with a single focused resource about the contemporary theoretical, empirical, and practical work being done in and about English education in Oman.

The volume introduction is particularly valuable as it paints a picture of the state of affairs of formal education in general, and English language education more specifically, in the Sultanate of Oman. This brief insider perspective of how far the country has come since the first formal government school was opened in the twentieth century sets the volume in context thematically.

In building upon the historical developments outlined in the introduction, chapter authors have centered their contributions around teacher-centered, student-centered, and teaching-centered issues. By taking a variety of perspectives about English education in the country, contributors not only offer studies about practical issues and concerns that educators, students, administrators, and policymakers are addressing to improve its delivery, but also examine the possibilities of introducing new paradigms and frameworks to Oman that have been applied across a diverse range of educational contexts.

Over the course of the development of this volume, all 18 of the collected papers underwent a rigorous peer review and selection process. The papers presented here highlight some of the areas of empirical overlap and divergence in relation to the provision of English education with other Arab and/or Muslim-majority nations, in

addition to other nations from around the world. It is hoped that, as a result of these explorations, this volume will be of use to English language educators and applied linguists in Oman and the Gulf region, in addition to being of interest to a wide range of readers from around the world.

Contributing to the knowledge base of a profession is an important way of giving back. The chapter authors have done an admirable job of sharing their expertise and the results of their research endeavors and theoretical considerations. As a result, this volume is a showcase of some of the excellent work being done in and about English education in the Sultanate of Oman, and gives readers greater insight into its current status and future trajectories.

TESOL President (2011–2012)

Graciously submitted by  
Dr. Christine Coombe

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# Introduction



Rahma Al-Mahrooqi and Christopher Denman

**Abstract** Formal education is relatively new in the Sultanate of Oman. The first nationwide public education system did not come into existence until 1970, and the first university opened its doors in 1986. During this time, English has continued to play a central role in the sultanate's schools, colleges, and universities. The language, which is taught as a subject in government schools and used as a dominant medium of instruction across many tertiary-level institutions, enjoys high levels of official support. This is due to the belief that English will remain the preeminent language of science, scholarship, and international business for the foreseeable future. Perhaps now more than ever, English education in Oman is at a critical juncture with the country seeking to better integrate into the international community by taking advantage of the access to global markets and academic and professional mobility that globalization allows while, at the same time, striving to maintain its culturally distinct identity. Within this context, a variety of perspectives and approaches highlighting the state of the art of English education in Oman and some of the most important challenges, opportunities, and potential ways forward are explored.

Formal education is a relatively new concept in the Sultanate of Oman. Historically, education in the country was predominantly associated with the al Katateeb system where private teachers either used their own houses for schools or taught pupils under trees or in simple school buildings. These teachers instructed students in the Qur'an and basic literacy skills based on their own knowledge and experience. Quranic schools were usually coeducational for young children until around the age of 10 and, from then on, were segregated. The first regular public school – the Al Sultaniyya School – was opened in 1928. This school was largely an extension of the al Katateeb system as instruction occurred without a curriculum and was based on the knowledge teachers believed to be most important for their students to acquire (Ministry of Education, 2011). The Al Sultaniyya School was opened in an

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education landscape where the only other formal institutions were the Peter Zwemer Memorial School, established by the American Reformed Church's Arabian Mission in 1896, and which gradually changed from offering English-medium instruction to rescued slave children in its earliest incarnation to a school where the children of Omani families learned English as a subject when it permanently closed in 1987, and a handful of "Hyderabadi" schools run for and by the local Indian community (Oman Department of Information, 1974).

These were later joined by three publically funded Al Saeediya schools which were opened in Muscat and Salalah between 1940 and 1970 and which offered instruction at the equivalent of a primary level. These all-boys schools were unique at the time in that they occupied purpose-built buildings and subjects were taught according to a syllabus. In these schools, English was taught from grades 4 to 6, although the medium of instruction was Arabic. In 1970, Sultan Qaboos came to power, and the country's "renaissance" began. The new sultan placed the development of a nationwide education system at the heart of his many reforms. As a result, 6 years into his reign, there were more than 206 government schools across Oman with more than 55,000 students. These schools eventually adhered to the General Education curriculum in which English was taught as a subject from grade 4 onward. However, by academic year 1998/1999, the implementation of the new Basic Education curriculum, designed in response to perceived deficiencies in the General Education system, had started on a rolling basis. Basic Education now covers the majority of public schools in Oman.

The Basic Education curriculum supports a number of important reforms, with perhaps the most important of these in relation to this volume being the teaching of English from the first grade and a greater number of hours devoted to the subject (Ministry of Education, 2011). In addition, the Basic Education curriculum explicitly highlights the value of student-centered, communicative-based classrooms in which the traditional role of the teacher as sole expert and authority is replaced by that of a facilitator of language discovery. This shift in pedagogical approach, however, has raised important concerns for both established and newly graduated teachers in Oman. A number of studies suggest that teachers are either not adequately trained to implement the kinds of classrooms that the new curriculum supports or, even if they have access to appropriate training, often lack the motivation to implement these reforms in an effective manner (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2010; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012).

In addition, concern has also been raised about how a lack of teacher autonomy in implementing the curriculum and an overconcern with "getting through the book" and preparing students for exams has led to the continuation of classroom practices that place grammar drills and vocabulary memorization above the development of English communicative proficiency. Within this context, it is perhaps little surprise that Omani English classrooms at both the school and college levels have been characterized as continuing to have largely teacher-centered, noncommunicative environments.

At the time of writing, there are around 1,048 government schools across the sultanate with approximately 523,000 students. These are complemented by around 486 private schools with about 97,000 students where the medium of instruc-

tion is often English or a combination of English and Arabic. These private schools are becoming increasingly popular with middle-class parents due to the central role English plays in Omani society across a variety of domains and the importance it assumes for their children's future academic, professional, and even social success.

In addition to the system of government and private schools that covers almost every corner of the sultanate, Oman's first, and only, publically funded university was opened in 1986. At Sultan Qaboos University, the medium of instruction for all science and some humanities-based majors is English. Since its establishment, around 40 universities and other higher education institutions have opened across Oman, with most of these also employing English as a medium of instruction for many of their majors. While the dominant place English assumes in these institutions is often offered as one means of enhancing graduate employability, the transition from Arabic-medium government schools to English-medium tertiary institutions has been reported as posing a number of significant difficulties for Omani learners. It has been reported that Omani graduates are leaving their higher education institutions with insufficient English language communication skills to successfully meet workforce demands (Al-Issa, 2014; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016). The government and higher education providers have recognized the importance of the issue and the way that it has the potential to negatively impact upon both the successful completion of learners' degrees and the pace of Omanization which seeks to replace expatriate workers with Omani nationals.

As a result of these concerns, the general foundation program for higher education institutions was introduced in academic year 2008/2009, with higher education institutions now required to offer learners who do not satisfy the requirements of English language proficiency tests a compulsory English foundation program of around 1 year in duration. The immediate aim of the English language component of the foundation program is to help close the gap between students' English skills and those that are demanded by their colleges. However, preparing students with the English skills they most likely need in their future professional careers and social lives is also an important, if not explicitly stated, objective. It is intended that students graduate from their foundation programs with an English language proficiency level that is equivalent to approximately an IELTS band 5.0, although research on whether or not they are actually achieving this is still in its early stages.

Within this context, some scholars have expressed doubt about whether both English-medium instruction and the teaching of English as a foreign language/lingua franca are being implemented effectively, or even for the greater good, in Oman. As offered above, a number of studies have reported that school graduates often have limited English language abilities which negatively impact upon their success in both tertiary-level English-medium environments and in a national workforce that has a seemingly ever-increasing demand for employee English proficiency (Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; Moody, 2009). Likewise, Omani college students often complain that English-medium instruction represents a significant challenge in their adaptation to university life and hinders their abilities to understand subject content at a deep level (Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, & Ateeq, 2015). There are also a

number of sociocultural issues associated with English instruction in the Arab Gulf, including the belief offered by some authors that learning in, and about, English inevitably involves the acquisition of Western values and beliefs that may not be compatible with traditional Arab and/or Muslim identity.

However, despite these potential challenges, government education policies fully support both instruction in English as a subject and the provision of English-medium instruction at the school and tertiary levels with the belief that “Oman needs English – the only official foreign language in the country, as a fundamental tool for ‘modernization’, ‘nationalization’ and the acquisition of science and technology” (Al-Issa, 2007, pp. 199–200). Renard (2010) claims that, for Omani education institutions to function effectively in an increasingly globalized world, they must “continue to make significant investment in English to enable full involvement in global academic networks that function in English” (p. 3). This investment is based on the belief that English is now, and will continue to be for the foreseeable future, the preeminent language of science, scholarship, and engagement with the world’s academic and business communities. Perhaps now more than ever, English education in Oman is at a critical juncture with the country seeking to better integrate into the international community by taking advantage of the access to global markets and academic and professional mobility that globalization allows while, at the same time, seeking to maintain its culturally distinct identity on both the regional and world stages.

Contributors to this book explore these themes from a variety of perspectives, with chapters here divided into three parts. These are teacher-centered issues, student-centered issues, and teaching-centered issues. The first part of the book includes Kurowski’s exploration of the professionalism and professionalization of TESOL teachers through the processes of autonomy or accountability within an Omani context. In this chapter, the author argues that, while TESOL as a field can be viewed as professionalizing, the elements of professionalism, such as salary, authority, and prestige, are much smaller in scale for TESOL teachers than other professionals, and, subsequently, the traditional model of professionalism is denied to TESOL professionals due to their lack of autonomy. Kurowski concludes that, as a result, TESOL teaching is a semi-profession informed by managerialized professionalism.

Noone then discusses an approach to developing materials for Omani tertiary-level science students in order to bridge the gap between authentic science texts and student reading abilities by adapting texts to match learners’ abilities. To achieve this, the author describes a process for developing texts and their units of study, before discussing two methods used to evaluate the piloting of the units: a study into the percentage of unknown words encountered by students, and analysis of a feedback form given to teachers who piloted the developed units. Noone concludes by placing his work within a discussion of a number of important issues related to text development both within Oman and around the world.

Denman and Al-Mahrooqi then look at teachers’ attitudes toward the use of alternative assessment in an Omani university’s English language foundation program. The authors note that, despite increased use of these forms of assessment due to

recent reforms to education systems across the Middle East and North Africa region, as of yet very few studies have examined how they are implemented in an Omani context. Denman and Al-Mahrooqi seek to address this through exploratory research that focuses on the practices and perceptions of ten university-level English language instructors toward alternative assessment in Oman.

Al-Hanai next discusses the advantages and disadvantages of teachers doing research with their own students in Omani tertiary institutions. The chapter discusses the ways in which a number of ethical principles, such as potential research benefits to participants, informed consent, and confidentiality, can be undermined by classroom discrepancies in teacher-student power relations. In addressing this, Al-Hanai offers a series of recommendations for teacher-researchers and their institutions that seek to explicitly acknowledge some of the risks involved with teachers doing research with their students.

Building on this theme, Hovhannisyian describes ways in which intercultural research can be incorporated into English language teaching and learning in Oman. After highlighting the potential tension within the sultanate between the need for English and societal resistance toward it, Hovhannisyian proposes an intercultural research perspective of the cognitive, communicative, and cultural aspects of both teaching and learning as a process and consequence of cultural and historical premises. The proposed outline of the principles of ELL/ELT research is offered by the author as one means of providing language policy and curriculum developers with a systematic content and methodology approach to intercultural research.

The second part of the book explores student-centered issues. Here, Al-Maamari and Al-Mahrooqi offer the results of a student evaluation of their English language teachers in Basic Education schools. The paper seeks to address the qualities of English language teachers in Omani schools from the perspective of grade 9–12 students as gauged by a self-report questionnaire designed to measure teacher knowledge bases. The researchers report that students largely perceived their teachers' qualities as being positive, although teachers in grades 9 and 10 were believed to possess more positive qualities than those in grades 11 and 12.

Chirciu and Mishra next aim to investigate the relationship between second language classroom learning and students' real-life experiences in their chapter. The authors sought to achieve this through an examination of the implementation of literature and critical literacy-oriented materials and teaching and learning techniques in two undergraduate English language classrooms in Oman. Participants were asked to record their views in weekly diaries and to respond to an online survey. Results suggest that literature and critical reading pieces help students connect their classroom learning with their lived experiences.

In the next chapter, Al-Mahrooqi and Denman offer an investigation of the English language reading habits of university students in Oman. After discussing the often reported lack of reading culture in both Oman and the greater Arab world, the authors offer an exploratory study of the reading habits of 95 tertiary-level students in an Omani public university. Somewhat contrary to initial suppositions, Al-Mahrooqi and Denman report that around half of participants read sometimes and most claimed reading to be one of their hobbies, while a majority claimed to be

aware of reading strategies that could help enhance their reading skills and believed that it was important to develop their core language skills.

Next, Scatolini, Shamim Miah, and George explore the issue of remediation in Omani colleges with the aim of establishing support schemes that can assist at-risk college students. The authors describe Oman's tertiary-level education context in which almost all students entering university are required to attend English foundation programs due to a lack of "college readiness." The chapter then explores some of the preliminary concepts and concerns which could be beneficial to Omani colleges that are seeking to set up support and/or remedial programs and structures.

Al-Mahrooqi and Denman investigate the implications for employability and sustainable development in Oman of the successful development of English language proficiency and communicative competence. The chapter examines a number of issues related to how English language proficiency and communicative competence are developed in Omani schools and universities while focusing on the challenges that the government education system faces in this area. The authors conclude by offering recommendations for bridging the gap between graduates' English language skills and the demands of the Omani workforce.

Sinha, Roche, and Sinha's chapter reports on a study of attrition at a regional private university in Oman. The authors track a cohort of students from their pre-award, foundation studies on through their first and second years of undergraduate study. Sinha, Roche, and Sinha report that Omani students whose beliefs are in conflict with those of their teachers are more likely to fail and leave their studies than their fellow students who do not share those beliefs, and that students with good levels of English proficiency are more likely to succeed in their studies than those with poor English proficiency.

Next, Chikwa, Al-Damen, and Mathew examine the importance of developing autonomous learners in language learning in Omani English foundation programs. The chapter discusses findings of a small-scale exploratory study conducted in Oman that examined the extent to which EFL foundation students were inclined toward learner autonomy. The authors report that the majority of participants rely heavily on the teacher in the language learning process and, hence, have limited levels of learner autonomy. The authors explore the reasons for these low levels of autonomy before presenting arguments for the development of autonomous learners in language learning settings.

The final part of the book features chapters related to teaching-centered issues. It begins with K. Thomas Baby's examination of the integration of content-based instruction (CBI) into a foundation program for Omani nursing students. In his analysis of the different teaching components included in the general foundation English course offered in Oman's Ministry of Health institutions, the author analyzes and evaluates how CBI can be employed to enhance and promote effective language learning strategies while also offering practical implications associated with CBI practices in the classroom. Thomas Baby concludes with an alternative proposal for English education in Oman in which CBI assumes a primary role.

Chalikandy also focuses on the theme of tasks in a chapter about effective ways of accommodating learners' identities in Omani higher education through their use.

After foregrounding learners' multiple identities, mixed abilities, and individual needs, Chalikandy argues that task-based teaching is capable of accommodating these variables as tasks provide individualized opportunities for learners, thereby creating supportive work groups by encouraging higher levels of learner interaction.

The next chapter features Hoffman's examination of whether the use of comics in an Omani college resulted in increased intra- and post-trimester scores on reading quizzes and exams. The author's research involved building a comics database that was accessible to staff and students via multiple e-learning platforms. Hoffman's results suggest positive participation and feedback by students and staff in the comics-based activities, even if improvements across various measures of linguistic proficiency were less noticeable.

Jayaraman then describes a study of teaching sound-spelling coordination as a productive skill to Arabic-speaking undergraduates in Oman. The author acknowledges that writing skills can be a particular challenge for Arabic-speaking tertiary-level students in Oman's Dhofar region, before investigating a group of Dhofari undergraduate EFL students who are disfluent English speakers in terms of both their linguistic and communicative abilities. Based on Jayaraman's own observations of learners, in addition to the classroom assessment of their written performance in class and their academic progress over a semester, the author offers an examination of the main problem areas Dhofari learners have associating pronunciation and spellings in writing.

Finally, McGee's chapter about how corpus linguistics can be used in the classroom as a means of innovation offers three ways in which corpus linguistics research and findings have influenced the author's classroom practice during his time in Oman and the Arab Gulf. The author focuses on the skill areas of vocabulary, grammar, and writing in order to explore this theme, before suggesting that exposing students to corpus-based insights can make language and linguistics study more engaging and can even become a catalyst for significant learning moments in the classroom.

As these chapter descriptions suggest, contributors to this volume take a broad variety of perspectives on English education in Oman. In doing so, they offer a valuable examination of English language education in the country at a critical juncture – a time in which many of the featured issues have the potential to influence the current standing and future trajectories of English education in the sultanate. As such, this volume is intended as a resource for local and international students, instructors, researchers, course designers, administrators, policymakers, and all other stakeholders who share an interest in English education in Oman, throughout the Arab world and beyond.

Through its combination of chapters featuring original position pieces and research studies, the book offers a variety of perspectives and approaches highlighting the state of the art of English education in Oman while also describing some of the most important challenges, opportunities, and potential ways forward. We sincerely hope that readers will be able to gain a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of both the current scenarios and future directions of English education in



Oman through the collection of papers offered here. As more and more attention is paid to developments across many of the nations of the Arab world – with education, along with social and economic growth and social stability being perhaps the most important of these – we hope that readers, both within the region and beyond, will find this volume timely and of theoretical, practical, and methodological relevance.

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**Part I**  
**Teacher-Centered Issues**



# Professionalism by Whose Model? Professionalism and Professionalization of TESOL Teachers Through Autonomy or Accountability



Steven James Kurowski

**Abstract** Professionalism is as well-defined colloquially as it is sociologically through a public (i.e., field) discourse which seems to have moved on from the sociological dialog existentializing professionalism to recognizing the term as a political construct. Advantages are accrued to those considered to be on the certified end of the spectrum of professionalism. While many consider TESOL to be a professional field, assuming professionalism by virtue of the emic perception of the work may be, etically speaking (Pike, *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior*. Glendale, CA: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1954.), inexpedient, leading to a generalized assumption of status, autonomy, and ethics but, more specifically, to a managerialized form of these determined by individual employment contexts. This small-scale interpretive study explores how eight TESOL teachers in an Omani university substantiate a managerialized form of professionalism as they did not appear to employ authentic autonomy in their practice, though other important elements, such as rigorous training and qualifications, were evidenced. Participant autonomy is prescribed and controlled through management and government intervention showing a de-professionalization of teaching in general and TESOL in particular. While TESOL can be said to be professionalizing, it is important for the profession to develop not only the stomach but also the teeth of professionalism if TESOL “professionals” are to lose their quotation marks to become professionals in the authentic sense.

**Keywords** Professionalism · Professionalization · Authentic · Managerialization · TESOL · Autonomy

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## 1 Introduction

Three domains run through this chapter: professionalism, teaching, and TESOL. Throughout, TESOL teachers may be referred to in what seem to be waffling terms such as “professional,” “would-be professional,” “semiprofessional,” and so on. This is not to say that TESOL teachers are not professional *per se* but that the use of the term “professional” in the literature and in the working lives of teachers is at issue, and unraveling its use in literature can clarify what the future of professionals within the TESOL field can be. A brief survey of over 100 articles printed in such well-regarded journals as *TESOL Quarterly*, *Applied Linguistics*, and *The Modern Language Journal*, among many others, shows authors frequently employing the term “professional” in an often cavalierly nuanced way. Liu (1999), for instance, identifies teachers as “TESOL professionals” (p. 85) and discusses teachers’ “professional issues”; Lyons (2006) explores “professional practice and development” (p. 151); Koster, Denderink, Korthagen, and Lunenberg (2008) write about “professional development of teacher educators” (p. 567). Writers on TESOL teachers or teaching fail to define “professional” or “professionalism”; these terms are assumed, contributing to a vague perception of TESOL teachers *as* professionals in an authentic sense.

This chapter explores the literature of professionalism in TESOL and, as described above, within general teaching research literature. It also explores what a small group of English language teachers within an Omani university foundation English program considers their own concept of professionalism to be. The following primary questions were considered:

1. What are TESOL teachers’ concepts and influences in professionalism?
2. How do TESOL teachers’ nonteaching education and work experience before teaching influence their professionalism?
3. How have TESOL teachers’ views of professionalism in ESL teaching changed with education and experience?
4. In what ways are TESOL teachers different from (i.e., have an edge over) other TESOL teachers in terms of their own private experiences?

The impetus for this chapter was the view that teachers’ nonteaching work experience and education positively influence their practice and outlook, giving them an edge over other teachers and enhancing their self-perceptions of their own authentic professionalism.

## 2 Literature Review and Background: Professionalism in the TESOL and Educational Literature

Oman can be described as employing a model of professionalism similar in most respects to that found elsewhere in the TESOL industry. While the notion of being considered to be “professional” and working within a “profession” – particularly following first a choice to become a TESOL teacher among other potential careers, many years of rigorous training (to the baccalaureate level and higher), and extensive experience – is a crowning achievement for many, the reality is quite different. TESOL teachers everywhere are in an uphill battle when it comes to reaping the rewards of “professionalism.” Knowledge of the TESOL position in reference to “professionalism” is important in that it provides a map toward the attainment of “professional” standing; rather than staying stuck within a nebulous, other-defined mode of employment, TESOL “professionals” can, in fact, lose their quotation marks to become *TESOL professionals*.

Given the dearth of discussion of what constitutes TESOL “professionalism” (hereafter without quotation marks except in special circumstances) in the academic literature, and particularly with reference to Oman, we shall draw parallels with the general teaching “profession” (likewise hereafter without quotation marks) from the education literature in general since this literary canon is endemic within TESOL teaching as well; much of the literature which discusses TESOL professionalism emanates from the general teaching domain.

### 2.1 *Professionalism Historically and Social-Culturally*

Professionalism is as well-defined colloquially – as how-to (Hoban & Erickson, 2004) – as it is sociologically through a public (i.e., field) discourse which seems to have moved on from the sociological dialog existentializing professionalism to recognizing the term as a political construct (Kennedy, Barlow, & MacGregor, 2012). Advantages are accrued to those considered to be on the professional end of the employment spectrum (Ritzer, 1975) based upon a professional ethos (MacPherson, Kouritzin, & Kim, 2005). While many consider TESOL to be a professional field, and the TESOL literature exploits the language of professionalism, assuming professionalism by virtue of the emic perception of the work may be, etically speaking (Pike, 1954), inexpediently leading TESOL teachers to a generalized assumption of status, autonomy, and ethics but, more specifically, to a managerialized form of these determined by individual employment contexts (Power, 1997; Strathem, 2000). TESOL participates in a public discourse on professionalism and, by virtue of its practitioners’ beliefs, is self-viewed as a professional field. By definition,

however, a profession is one which is publicly recognized. This public recognition extends historically back into the medieval period where those serving the European courts were accorded professional status by employers who were at the top of the social structure (Gamble, 2010). TESOL can safely be said to be professionalizing (MacPherson et al., 2005), moving through a sense of itself as a “nonprofession” (Lorimer & Schulte, 2012, p. 32), though the sort of professionalism exhibited in reality is likely to be different from that envisioned in the colloquial sense.

Professionalism as a construct was not in the past what it is today. Prior to the 1950s, professionalism was a normative value, traditionally associated with sociological positivism (Comte, 1853; Durkheim, 1938, both cited in Khalili, Hall, & DeLuca, 2014), and professional life was informed by what one did for which one could be measured objectively. Khalili et al. (2014) note that individuals did not construct a professional identity but received it; they were shaped by it, receiving predetermined, appropriate, and expected positional behaviors from educators and established professionals. The original professionals were the doctors, lawyers, and clergymen of the nineteenth century (Evetts, 2005); they were gentlemen, competent, experienced, altruistic, and trusted to provide advice to middle- and upper-class clientele. Their professionalism was informed beyond public recognition by a second key component which has become a defining element nearly absent in the teaching (and TESOL) profession of today (Bodman, Taylor, & Morris, 2012; Bustingorry, 2008; Colley, James, & Diment, 2007): control of one’s work, or autonomy (Freidson, 2001).

A discourse on professionalism has engaged the TESOL world for some time, and, arguably, one could state that TESOL itself came into being as a result of questions regarding professionalism and the professional ethics of teaching English as a second language (Altalis, 1987). During the 1970s and 1980s, professionalism was viewed skeptically as a monopoly on certain kinds of work whereby a centralized body of knowledge becomes accessible through a special group of acolytes who corner and funnel this knowledge into an occupational jurisdiction (Evetts, 2005). An organized occupation which can control knowledge of its own work and is sustained by a particular ideology of expertise and service is a defined “profession,” while the ideology itself, combined with the institutes which sustain it, is a defined “professionalism” (Freidson, 1994, p. 10, cited in Gamble, 2010). These two constructs are apparent in TESOL through, for example, TESOL Inc., the institute, and the ideology formulated through TESOL journals and texts which arise from the research activities of practitioners. However, as Farmer (2006) points out, unlike the medical field, the TESOL knowledge base is “substantially unstructured” (see also Gamble, 2010).

Divisions and factions appear to split the TESOL knowledge base as ideas are presented, deconstructed, and demolished (see, e.g., the audiolingual method, the grammar translation method, the silent period, critical hypothesis theory, and Chomsky’s language acquisition device) until they are revived, recycled, and repackaged. Uncertainty while partaking of the knowledge base must be a norm in TESOL as teachers are buffeted by the “changing winds and shifting sands” of professional knowledge (Marckwardt, 1972, p. 5). It is unlikely that the knowledge

base will improve in the coming decades for two reasons. First, there appear to be few attempts in TESOL practice to take up an articulated question to disprove the published result. Second, ideas which are proven good based upon their citation value and a lack of negative evidence tend to flourish. The TESOL discourse, however, is not unique in this as even the medical field may struggle with prevailing bias (Ioannidis, 2005) though it is much more likely that a published medical research idea will be studied in order to disprove the theory and results by, say, a competing research team with an alternative theory since such research may result in both high status and rich reward.

## 2.2 *The Traditional Professional Model*

Several defining features of the traditional professional model are evident from a sociological perspective. These, adapted from Evans (2010, p. 186), are:

1. Extended and rigorous training
2. High prestige
3. High levels of authority and autonomy
4. A professional organization and community
5. A good salary
6. An overall ethic of serving the public good

The professional organization and community regulate the profession to ensure individual performance standards. Furthermore, the knowledge in relation to expertise and the number of new entrants and their training are all carefully controlled (Hextall, Cribb, Gewirtz, Mahoney, & Troman, 2007). Numerous researchers posit teaching as falling within the traditional professionalism mode (Corrigan & Haberman, 1990; Eraut, 2002; Luukkainen, 2000; Schön 1983, all cited in Oder, 2008). The professional model for teachers, however, is quite different from what teachers believe it should be (Oder, 2008). The professional identity of teachers, as provided by sociocultural theory and which works to define teacher professionalism, is constructed through teacher beliefs, nature, knowledge of teaching practice, and educational theory moderated through ongoing experiential analysis (Assaf, 2008). It is difficult to disagree with this view, but it is only in the most general of senses a description of a profession of teaching. This definition, which could nearly be termed a minimalist view of professionalism, essentially deals with what teachers have at their disposal to do their work rather than the elements which accrue to teachers as a result of their effort (i.e., autonomy, status, prestige, a good salary, etc.). Bartels (2002) believes knowledge of how teachers are prepared is missing from the professional knowledge of teachers, an idea which weakens the professional model for teachers.

Bodman et al. (2012) suggest that there is more to teacher professionalism than the minimalist model provides and includes accountability and agency: teacher

professionalism is mired within performance standards, extrinsic motivation to develop, and a lack of agency to implement reforms demanded from above. Essentially, teachers lack autonomy within their work, and teacher identity is restrained through calculated means such as employment and government policies, accountability, and priorities, though a teacher's own experience may be part of the process. The native/non-native TESOL teacher dichotomy, for instance, has ostensibly been used as a means of control through "othering" one or the other group though arguments exist for the professionalism of both (see, for instance, Phillipson, 1992).

Professionalism as teachers envision it appears not to be engaged within an ethos of service as in the traditional model but within an ethos of performance complete with top-down control, surveillance, increased marketization, reductions in funding, and "failing respect or recognition of professional knowledge" (Bodman et al., 2012, p. 17). Canagarajah (2012), like many researchers in either the teaching or the ESL domains, while arguing teaching *is* a profession, defines teaching "professionalism" as simply that which is able to be done with one's skills, rather than as a reciprocal relationship between service provider and client. This is a position with which Farmer (2006) and Freidson (2001) argue is critical for professionalism.

### 2.3 *Modes of Professionalism*

Sachs (2001) distinguishes two forms, or modes, of professionalism – democratic and managerial – as spectrum extremes. Evetts (2005) adds a third, occupational professionalism, which focuses on specialist expertise and conformity to external standards and principles and could be applied to the managerial mode of professionalism. Both democratic and managerial modes of professionalism rely upon effectively enhancing status and knowledge authority through credentializing, as well as increasing future training potentialities through ongoing professional development opportunities – the division between what you get and what you do as a professional (Crandall, 1993). Differentiating these modes as democratic and managerial depends upon who is holding the key to the profession – essentially, who gets in and who does not as well as who does what and why it is done. These choices in the democratic mode are made by the members, institutions, and ethos of the profession; in the managerial mode, they are made by governments, administrators of schools, and business managers.

The democratic mode, espousing the *authentic professional* (Ball, 2005), defines teachers as autonomous professionals in their ability to perform their work. Authentic professionals are different from managed professionals in terms of autonomy, which is an important element of professionalism outlined above. Autonomy is an important concept for teacher professionalism with a long history (Boote, 2006). For Ball (2005), authentic professionalism emerges from critical engagement in political dialog and action but is also founded on emotional relationships with the self, students, and colleagues. Bodman et al. (2012) argue that teachers have neither autonomy nor responsibility if decision-making lies at the policy level

(i.e., management), thereby autonomizing the authentic professional. Policy makers are unable to measure all aspects of teaching in terms it deserves; much of a teacher's work is not measurable and is therefore unrecognized, a point taken up by many researchers (Dhillon et al., 2011). Autonomy is considered to be the converse of performativity measured through accountability terms (Patrick, Forde, & McPhee, 2003); setting to a course of utilizing others' advice and instruction on teaching (i.e., through management constructs) rather than teaching from a place of self-knowledge and self-control leads to de-professionalism.

A lack of autonomy is considered to be a serious problem for teachers (Bottery & Wright, 2000) as they try to prove their qualifications are deserved through thoughtful application of skills and knowledge. Little (1990) suggests that, while grounded in norms of privacy and noninterference sustained by the teaching organization, teacher autonomy is at odds with recent trends in collaborative teaching initiatives imposed by educational management. Menter (2009) notes the irony of curtailing autonomy and independence of teachers through a discourse of "professionalization" through collaboration. Autonomy, according to Ryan and Deci (2000), is not about acting alone, but for a teacher, it is about drawing on his or her own will in the process of continued (professional) development.

For the authentic professional, failing in autonomy means failing as a professional. In order to curb the likelihood of the professional failure of teachers, a series of procedures and engagements are used such as:

Top-down control, increased surveillance, competition for teaching roles with assistants and non-teachers, increased marketization, commercial approaches to education, reductions in funding, failing respect or recognition of the professional knowledge of teachers reflected in media reports taking up the standards agenda and perpetuating the governmental view that teachers are directly responsible for standards, [undermining] teachers' professional agency. (Bodman et al., 2012, p. 17)

This view forms the basis of *managerial professionalism* for teachers. Teachers, as defined professionals in this mode, are responsible for meeting accounted targets. This view of teacher professionalism is provided by the economics of teacher education – in other words, careful measurement of one's educational program and post-training practice (Hulme & Menter, 2014). Governments provide the first level of teacher disempowerment, while senior management teams of schools, dictating implementation, leave teachers with little more than implementation of policy, leading to low teacher morale and high stress levels (Bottery, 1997). This produces the discomfort of reconciling autonomy with accountability, a move that does not help an autonomously driven workforce (Patrick et al., 2003). Continued professional development (CPD), itself a mix of managerial and democratic discourses (Day & Sachs, 2004), is introduced as a means to develop teachers – into what is debatable. It is apparent, especially as CPD is generally not an option in many workplaces, that the espoused ideals of professionalism are used to exploit the culpability and professional assumptions of the language teaching expert into accepting a managed view of professionalism. For the TESOL professional in this mode of professionalism, compliance with educational management equates with professionalism (Gray & Whitty, 2010).



Managerial professionalism as the primary mode of TESOL teacher professionalism is a worldwide phenomenon (Sachs, 2001). This mode of teacher professionalism is argued to be problematic: “macro-level accountability worsens schooling problems since they ignore the micro-level details founded on a clear conception of teachers’ lives” (Boote, 2006, p. 462). Yet, teacher autonomy is claimed to be bolstered through action research through such means as teaching portfolios (Donaghue & Dolci, 2013) and results in improved student scores (Bustingorry, 2008). In contrast, a “feeling” of autonomy and an imposed agenda of action research providing an outlet for teachers to exercise autonomy are not the same things as professional autonomy. These become stratagems to enforce a managerial mode, resulting in a decided move away from autonomous professionalism in the traditional sense argued by Freidson (2001). Within the managerial mode of professionalism, an appeal to “professionalism” is disciplinary in nature inculcating “appropriate work identities, conducts and practices” amounting to “disciplinary logic which inscribes ‘autonomous’ professional practice within a network of accountability and [governing] professional conduct at a distance” (Fournier, 1999, cited in Colley et al., 2007, p. 280).

Educational management teams decide which procedures and methods are to be employed for autonomous purposes, but the primary purpose for circumscribed autonomy is control. Managerial control emerges through a promise of autonomy through accountability but promotes occupational change and intervention of micro-level control over professional practice (Fournier, 1999, cited in Colley et al., 2007). The impact of this “brutal interlocking of managerialism and holistic, student-centered learning and teaching” is teacher demoralization (Dhillon et al., 2011, p. 8).

Failing to perform, especially within areas of prescribed autonomy, is failing as a professional in managerial professionalism. Managerial professionalism is described as being system driven, involving external regulation, undertaken for political ends, involving competing and market-driven mechanisms, and characterized by a “logic” of control and compliance through audit, careful management, teacher accountability, and restriction of autonomy (see Connell, 2009, cited in Hardy & Melville, 2013; Power, 1997; Strathem, 2000; Whitty, 2008).

There may be other modes of professionalism to the two explored here – self-oriented, classroom-oriented, dialogically oriented, organizational, and occupational (Evetts, 2005; Hsieh, 2014; Whitty, 2008); however, autonomous and managerial professionalism are two modes clearly characterized by the literature reviewed. Regardless, professionalism is generally assumed by most researchers when they write about teachers. Professionalism means different things to different people (Freidson, 1994; Troman, 1996; see also Hoyle, 1975; Ozga, 1995; Sockett, 1996, all cited in Evans, 2008), and its meaning has shifted over time reflecting the sociohistorical contexts of its use (Khalili, Hall, & DeLuca, 2014), though a stable core definition and a set of optional conditions appear when individually defined. These are explored by the participants described in the interpretive study detailed in the next section.



### 3 Method

The study was undertaken with a particular frame in mind: TESOL teachers exhibiting professionalism in their work will, in all likelihood, be able to readily identify professional points of reference, recognize their own development of professionalism (i.e., a code of ethics, an ethos, etc.), and use their complete knowledge and experience (including nonteaching experience) to creatively solve problems within their own teaching sphere autonomously, describing a traditional authentic professionalism. “Professional points of reference,” noted above, refers to ideas about what professionalism is or is not, definitions, text reads, conversations between individuals overheard or participated in, and professional individuals known to the interviewee or by whom the interviewee has been influenced. Elements of one’s own professionalism expressed would likely follow one of the two forms, either as an autonomous professional or as a managerial professional.

The definitive element for autonomy would be in expressing how one could use one’s experience which may or may not derive from known TESOL frames of reference (i.e., research papers, methodologies, approaches, explicit training, etc.). Initially, the intention was to show how teachers’ experience prior to their teaching and learning about teaching is as important to solving problems within the TESOL classroom as knowing the research. Emerging from the discussions, however, is that prior nonteaching experience and nonteaching education have little influenced the teaching of the teachers interviewed and that respondents hold a principally managerialized view of teaching professionalism in TESOL. Teachers interviewed did not consider their education or experience warranted the self-perception that they are in any way different from other teachers in terms of professionalism.

Eight teachers were recruited for this study from a new university (less than 5 years old) in Oman. Each teacher agreed to participate and provided a signed ethical release form indicating they understood their rights as participants within the study and could opt out for any or no reason whatsoever. The study was performed within the interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm was utilized for researching this question for three key reasons. First, interpretivism immerses the observer within the observed to extract meaningful context and voices, making a difference to the observed (Pring, 2000) by eliciting their voices in meaningful ways. Second, as professionalism is a reference point within the humanities in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and education, and given that these fields frequently recognize that knowledge is constructed through relationships to others, it followed that an interpretivist approach was more appropriate than an empiricist approach which distances the observer from the observed. Meaning in the interpretivist paradigm is co-constructed by the circumstances in which people live and from what they say about themselves within their contexts (Crotty, 2011). Third, theory in the interpretivist paradigm emerges from the data collected; it is “grounded” – theory emerges from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3), and the subjects must be able to identify the truth value inherent in the emergent theory as it applies to their situation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

Each participant was interviewed in English privately in a classroom within the university campus for approximately 1 hour, though some participants spoke more in-depth and required more time. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and each transcription was explored for themes relating to the theory within the literature reviewed and open coded using grounded theory to identify theories which emerged from the data (Cohen et al., 2011). Although it was hoped that a follow-up interview could be held with participants, a lack of available time prevented this.

### ***3.1 Participants***

As stated above, when the participants for this study were recruited, they were informed of their rights as research subjects. Their identities would be anonymized, and they could withdraw themselves and their data from the study for any or no reason whatsoever. Eight individuals provided consent for participation and the publication of data. In keeping with ethical research standards, participants have been anonymized with pseudonyms so as to preserve their identities.

Table 1 contains more detailed information about the participants. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 55 years old, were a mix of native-speaking and non-native-speaking teachers from a number of different countries where English is both a native and a second or foreign language, and were approximately an even split between males and females. Furthermore, the participants' TESOL teaching experience ranged from 5 to 20 years. Half of the participants held a master's degree, frequently in a TESOL- or applied linguistics-related field.

### ***3.2 Questions and Data***

Participants were asked to mentally sweep across temporally bound experiential spaces from pre-teaching to current teaching and to seek out relevant responses to ten questions about professionalism – a complicated task. Each question, enumerated below, revealed rich data about the participants' beliefs about professionalism in general and specifically in TESOL which was coded and linked across interviews to construct participants' theories about professionalism as espoused by the group as a whole.

## **4 Results**

As almost all participants have been regularly employed within the TESOL field for at least 5 years, it was considered that a unified concept of professionalism would emerge from their responses and that participants would each be able to articulate

**Table 1** Research participant details

Name	Rodica	Nicola	Kasim	Albert	Catharine	Martin	Kendra	Melek
<i>Age range</i>	36–40	46–50	41–45	46–50	51–55	51–55	30–35	41–45
<i>Nationality</i>	Romanian	Australian	Tunisian	Irish	British	British	Georgian	Turkish
<i>Gender</i>	Female	Female	Male	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female
<i>Education level</i>	Bachelors	Masters	Masters	Bachelors	Bachelors	Bachelors	Masters	Masters
<i>Major</i>	Foreign language and literature: French and linguistics	TESOL philosophy and music and Ethnomusicology (BA)	ELT	English language and publishing	English language	Modern European literature	English language and literature	International ELT and applied language studies
<i>Minor</i>	English and linguistics	Business	N/A	N/A	Italian language	Modern European history	N/A	N/A
<i>Work before teaching ESL</i>	6–10 years	0–5 years	0–5 years	16–20 years	6–10 years	6–10 years	0–5 years	0–5 years
<i>Work teaching ESL</i>	0–5 years	16–20 years	16–20 years	6–10 years	21–25 years	16–20 years	6–10 years	16–20 years
<i>Industry of majority of pre-teaching work</i>	Law and legal services	Retail	Military	Publishing	Manufacturing	Casual labor: factory, hotels, agriculture, computer, seasonal	Administration and business	Retail
<i>Other industries of pre-teaching work</i>	Pharmaceuticals; import and export	Admin and agriculture	N/A	Construction/labor/artisan/ranching	Retail	N/A	Tour guide and translation	N/A

how they uniquely applied themselves in their professional sphere. Participants did elaborate a unified theory of professionalism, a managerial professionalism, and rarely elaborated on ideas which suggested a more traditional or autonomous professionalism.

### 1. When you think about professionalism, what comes to mind?

*Professional Behaviors* Participants replied to this question by discussing elements of work and expectations upon them as teachers and as employees within businesses (Bodman et al., 2012). They were interested in discussing behaviors and experience, gaining feedback, and being knowledgeable, dedicated, accountable, proficient, and ethical. Melek, for instance, noted:

I think it is the set of attitudes and behaviours that are expected from an employer-employee. And in order to do our jobs efficiently, but these set of behaviours, I think changes from one institution to another institution. Also, a teacher or an individual has his or her own set of behaviours, which is called, which could be defined as professionalism.

Rodica expressed behaviors in terms of what professionals do when they lack answers (Patrick et al., 2003): “Will not be shy to ask questions, when he doesn’t know. Will refer to a specialist, and will try to learn as much as he can.”

Participants expressed numerous existential requirements for professionals within their areas of work. Professionalism, they stated, was about being prepared and proficient in applying theory which had been acquired through rigorous training to the demands of their environment (Evetts, 2005). Martin pointed out that, as a professional, “You are one hundred percent focused on what needs to be done, and you are very well prepared in a sense that you are comfortable with knowing what you are doing, and you do it to the best of your ability.”

Being professional encompasses several other behaviors such as punctuality, making corrections when things go wrong, ensuring one exhibits the correct image, anticipating issues to be resolved, collaborating, making decisions appropriately, and maintaining a good employer-employee relationship (Menter, 2009), which Albert calls reliability or to “want to do your best.”

*Qualifications* Qualifications such as certificates, diplomas, and degrees were regarded as defining professionals, though this was just a starting point (Evetts, 2005); for Rodica, a focus on a degree as a matter of professionalism is to fail to see what professionalism is: “But I think, it’s much more than that. Because, when I think of the degrees or the certificates, or whatever – the diplomas, that means that I’m just ignoring the skills.”

Classrooms, businesses, and educational departments encompassed the professional domain for these participants. Participants also noted an important element of being professional is consulting and collaborating with peers for ongoing learning (Menter, 2009). They viewed self-learning as very important and articulated a need for feedback from those around them for continued development. As Kendra was clear to articulate:

So, teachers are always learning all the time, I think, in my opinion. That's what I usually do. We should always improve our work. It's always based on our feedback. We always accept our feedback, whether it's negative or positive. So, we learn from our mistakes. So, that's how every person should do. If you want to be a professional, you should accept everything, every kind of feedback from others.

## 2. Who are your influences in professionalism?

Many participants pointed to supervisors, advisors, trainers, teachers, and colleagues with whom they had worked as their chief influences in professionalism. Some participants articulated friends with whom they had worked or trained largely in teaching, and in one case a family member was mentioned. Primarily, however, professionals are evidenced for the participants within the domain of teaching, either in the training they had received or in their working contexts as teachers. In the case of the family member, the participant decided he was professional only in his ability to utilize training and networking to influence outcomes for clients (Evetts, 2005).

## 3. Why do you consider this person/these people the most professional person/people you know/knew?

*Skills and Techniques for Solving Problems* Individuals nominated by the participants as professional were done so for several reasons. The individuals were academically rigorous, interacted well with others, were accorded some kind of status such as fame, behaved appropriately in all situations, and were capable of not only suggesting solutions to problems but also seeing these solutions through to a successful conclusion. In many cases, the individual provided insight into the inner workings of the field within which they worked to the participants. In other cases, it was the fact that these individuals were able to navigate the professional domain to achieve benchmarks of success like promotions. These individuals were helpful, expert, experienced, and, ultimately, impressive while working to a high standard. For example, Melek's teacher provided her with numerous reasons for strongly influencing her professionalism:

So, I adopt her, I adopt her behaviour in class. She didn't give up, and she was very, as I said, well prepared and she was considering our needs, and different techniques, providing us with real life materials, and she was also helping us to speculate about the topics.

For Melek, and indeed for many of the other participants, teachers played a key role in defining her professionalism for several reasons ranging from preparation to the teacher's use of differing methods of engaging a class.

## 4. What was your first contact with a professional person?

*Primary Professional Contact* For most participants, the primary professional person with whom they had made contact was a teacher, viewing teachers not as semi-professionals but as professionals in their own right in contrast to Evans (2010). Teachers and trainers were found in high school, university, and internship contexts. People who were working within the domain which the participants had hoped to

enter (i.e., teaching or translating) were also considered to have provided the first professional contact. Martin, in contrast, nominated a doctor for whom he had been caddying at a local golf course. For Martin, it was the behavior and apparent wealth and status of the doctor which were most impressive:

I think, at that time it was probably, you know, he had a very nice car, the way he dressed, the way he talked, he was always very civil and polite to people, people who he was playing golf with, to me, to everyone. You know... uh... You know... he just seemed a well-rounded, decent sort of a person, as so many doctors did at that time, he never seemed to talk down to anybody. He obviously came from a very good social background, he was obviously very highly qualified and well educated, but that didn't seem to stop him saying 'please' and 'thank you', asking people how they were.

It is interesting that not more participants nominated doctors or lawyers since these tend to be the two professional categories which people fix in their minds (Evetts, 2005).

5. What nonteaching/teacher training experiences have you had where you feel you began to develop your (global) concepts and beliefs of professionalism?

*Professional Development Genesis Ambiguity* Nearly all participants felt their concept of professionalism really began to take shape as teachers, and, prior to being a teacher, they had no real notion of what professionalism was. Martin recognizes that he was:

not quite sure whether I really developed any sort of beliefs and concepts of professionalism until I was at least... yes... until at least I went to university which was sort of later than many people. I never really gave too much thought or any idea to this. To me, work was something that you did for a certain period of time, and you got paid at the end of the week, and you... uh... you know... did your best, whatever it was you were doing. But there was nothing really I can say that made me start to consider professionalism, really, what was... had to be based on mutual respect, and that, all you could expect at the end of the day was to be paid correctly and paid on time.

Nicola spoke about negative knowledge about professionalism (Gartmeier, Bauer, Gruber, & Heid, 2008) gained from working with her father in his business, describing the frustrating state of his bookkeeping as in need of repair: "In administrative work, mostly I worked for my father, and it was not professional.... A professional has to follow through. It's not enough to just do it, you have to show it, the processes continue to the end." Another described his dissatisfaction at his fellow soldiers for failing in their military training through inadequate effort and how this developed his concept of professionalism:

...most of the staff were not trained well. And they lacked good performance. It was a job like any other job. And, they didn't practice well. They didn't have enough training, so I was really upset, because it was not done in a proper way. Yeah, practice makes perfect. So, professionalism, it means if you practice well, you achieve professionalism.

One participant related that it was not through work experience where he began to develop his concepts and beliefs of professionalism, stating, instead, that it was through such means as documentaries and books that an idea of professionalism

began to take shape. One participant, having worked for a tyrant whom she had come to deeply respect, described how her boss's insistence on perfection in every detail of her work transformed into a deep trust of her capabilities, leading her to begin to feel as if she were developing her level of professionalism through systematization and the use of appropriate techniques and tools (Fournier, 1999) which were hitherto unknown:

He wanted answers, he want the answer to be correct, and there was no, not even a hesitation. If he asks you a question, and you went 'uh...' he would start to get frantic. "Why don't you know? Why don't you know? How do you not know this thing?" And I developed because of this. You would never know this when you looked at my desk. But I developed a really tight, systematic system of work, which meant, if I died in a car crash one day, the system would live. The people could have access to my information. It was like that. And I got to learn computer skills. I got to be good at computers.

Interestingly, each participant, in relating the genesis of their conceptualization of professionalism, connected professionalism to deep emotions which were expressed in their use of prosodic elements in speech. The primary emotions, however, which appear to correlate with professionalism are frustration in failure followed by calm reflection and concluding with pride in achievement. These experiences relatedly point toward a generalized form of professionalism by identifying both professionals, semiprofessionals, and nonprofessionals in the same terms as influences in terms of the modes of professionalism. Participants related more closely to a systematized, practical, results-oriented, and performance-based professionalism (Bodman et al., 2012; Dent & Whitehead, 2003).

#### 6. What kinds of work experience have you had prior to starting work in language teaching?

*Limited Autonomy* Participant experiences detail a lack of any real autonomy in decision-making. Albert, however, approaches limited autonomy as he describes a shift in his work ethic: "The first time I really cared for work, to really go the extra mile, probably would have been with horses"; as the conversation progresses, the theme of horses returns, but the discourse has shifted from work ethic to a methodology in approaching learners to reduce their affective filter:

I was saying to my friend afterwards that, it was just like breaking horses, teaching these six year olds. And, he said, "What are you talking about?" I see they are very low level. They are six years old, and I'm not trying to be funny, it's all about patience and repetition. Patience and repetition. When you break a horse, you break a horse in thirty days normally. And really, I do the same thing all the time. I'm gradually progressing, bit by bit, bit by bit. But, it is a very slow process... the same thing over and over again. Then when we think they got that, then you move a bit forward, again, again, until they got it. Tiny bit forward again, again, again. Just keep doing it. Patience and repetition, patience and repetition. Now, with older level students, it's different. And I must make adjustments, but it's different because you try different approaches. This one is not working; alright I will do something else. Whereas, with horses, and I found with kids, to a large extent anyway, it was patience, repetition, patience, repetition, until they got that bit, and then go onto the next.

Travel and tourism also figured within the discussions with a conclusion similar to Albert's though resulting in an internalized cultural sensitivity and pedagogical need to adjust topics to suit individuals from different cultures. Participants in all cases related how they began to see things worked in their respective domains and endeavored to emulate those around them exhibiting high skill or efficient means of work. In some cases, how things worked in a particular area appears to have primed the teachers for similar experiences in other areas, and they utilized this priming while striving to overcome challenges and position themselves as knowledgeable individuals within their teaching domains. This appears to express a form of autonomy (Ball, 2005; Patrick, Forde, & McFee, 2003). Participants did not elaborate beyond recognizing parallels between teaching and their earlier experiences (i.e., utilizing nonteaching experience to make decisions regarding in-class decisions). Priming also appeared within their discussions of themselves as language teachers.

7. What pre-teaching work experiences influence your professionalism as a language teacher?

*Order and Processes* Participants related numerous types of work experience, most of which are reflected in the previous question. Working as an editor, interning as a librarian, and working within a corporate environment as a bookkeeper or a translator within a high-pressure office, however, meant some participants' relationships with the outside world were limited to certain kinds of activities such as organizing objects and laboring. Restricted contact with clients was recalled and amounted to the kinds of transactions performed where limited accuracy was required as in retail work, for instance. In all cases, participants were placed under the direct supervision of another. However, these kinds of managed situations did not reduce teachers' ability to be cognizant of connections with other domains or to recognize connections to past experience when the right pedagogical moment arose. Nicola, for instance, could recognize the lack of professionalism in her father's case and the professionalism of others: "We had to do a practicum with two different libraries. And both times, I was really impressed with the way the people I was assigned to understood their work and knew what needed to be done and were able to explain it well." The practice of the librarians she worked with can be discerned in how she approaches her students' challenging language situations in class:

So, this semester I got a listening class. And as you know them, it's way too difficult for the students. So, I can't expect very much input from the students. So what am I doing? I'm giving more information, telling them what they need to know.

Participants' elaborated experiences continually reinforced concepts of order and process in terms of accountable outcomes and measures of managerial professionalism (Patrick, Forde, & McFee, 2003).

8. What were your beliefs about professionalism in language teaching prior to becoming a language teacher?

*Managerial Professionalism* Participants diverged in their beliefs about professionalism in language teaching prior to becoming a language teacher. Some



participants expressed ideas about professionalism in language teaching in terms of the demands of any job they might have found themselves doing: “Before I started teaching, I thought that the teachers came in, they stood up, they told the students what to learn, and gave them practice...”; and, “Caring about your students doing well, mark papers in the evening. Well, I never really thought about the concept of professionalism in teaching. Go in, do your best, do what you have to do, to the best of your ability.” They considered that teaching was a kind of work with few demands and little activity. Preparation for the job was not relevant to their beliefs about professionalism and neither, too, was pre-teaching training nor ongoing training.

*Expected Professionalism* Some participants appeared to have been more thoughtful in their pre-teaching days as they considered being a teacher, likely due to the fact that they had reportedly chosen to become language teachers at an early age and were watching their teachers carefully: Melek states, “When I was fifteen years old. Then, I had decided to be an English teacher. So, I have always wanted to be an English teacher. So, they are my inspirations and they, I took examples from their behaviours maybe. I tried, I’m still trying. I’m trying to be a good teacher.” For these participants, attitudes like patience and caring were expressed as part of language teacher professionalism, as were training targets such as learning about methods and ELT concepts. Ultimately, however, all participants spoke about what they believed the expectations upon themselves would have been as they considered language teaching before becoming a teacher in terms of what would be expected of them within any kind of job, teaching or otherwise. For all participants, there was always an overarching structure to their discourse signaling a superior individual – a boss, an employer, or a head teacher – to whom they would be accountable (Patrick et al., 2003). Melek states that to help someone become a professional, “give him the tools and proficiencies he or she needs, to do the job efficiently.”

Martin relates his key to professional success gleaned through observing his more knowledgeable peers is “flexibility... I... I’m a great believer in it. I don’t think you... you can maybe do your job without being flexible...,” whereas Albert declares that prior to teaching, the concept of professionalism meant one should “go in, do your best, do what you have to do, to the best of your ability.” Each of these three positions clearly positions the work as a managed job rather than a profession; jobs require tools, efficiency, flexibility, accountability, and doing one’s best.

9. What skills/ways of thinking/ways of working have you developed through your nonteaching experience or training which you believe give you an edge in language teaching over other language teachers?

*Toeing the Line* The majority of participants expressed modesty when considering their “edge” in language teaching. Likely, individuals did not want to move outside an expected vision of themselves as a professional which suggests an element of professionalism in TOEFL (or in general) is not to boast about one’s abilities. However, upon reflection, participants expressed confidence, acceptance of difficulties and change, flexibility, responding appropriately to and within different cultures,

discipline, being helpful, positivity, proficiency, and recognizing and understanding the troubles of learners in the learning situation as their primary edge in their work. Interestingly, no participant shared a technique or a tool which they use – drama or corpus linguistics or anything inspired from an outside domain, for instance – which can help them to meet their students’ needs (Farmer, 2006). Nicola spoke briefly (above) about slowing down for her students when they weren’t at the class’s intended level. Nicola did express one critical idea which may be uncontested in TESOL:

I think that I’m a good employee. So, as an employee, tell me to do something, I will do it, I might probably fail, but I will do it. If there is a policy in place, I will follow that policy, even if I think it’s stupid. And, that gives me an edge in employability, I think. I’m more likely to keep my job than somebody who doesn’t do those things.

A critical edge, for Nicola, is remaining employable, even if it means following a policy she finds disagreeable. This may not be so different for other teachers engaging themselves in the professional field (Dhillon et al., 2011). Many teachers discussed, whether in the context of this question or not, the need for professional development and constant improvement through a process of gathering feedback and reflecting. It was noted earlier that these modes of professional activity are typically imposed as means for development (Bodman et al., 2012; Evetts, 2005; Hardy & Melville, 2013) though may, in fact, be a means of professional longevity in the TESOL field.

10. What do you believe about professionalism in language teaching now, and how does it differ from your concept of professionalism in language teaching prior to becoming a language teacher?

*The Right Attitude* Participants articulated how having the right attitude toward one’s work is important to developing critical insights into methods of teaching and also discussed that time well spent is “one aspect of professionalism, learning and trying to get better all time, [to] try to improve the whole time,” even if the relevance is not immediately comprehensible. Engaging in the professionalism of language teaching is, as one participant put it, a journey through which all TESOL teachers must go. Flexibility in one’s beliefs was expressed as well; otherwise, “You’re just going to wind up banging your head against the wall.” These ideas are expressions of elation and of frustration. There is no end point to training or development, which makes reaching the next phase exciting but also frustrating as these may lead teachers to professional burn-out and/or plateau at the goal being moved upon approach (Farrell, 2014).

## 5 Discussion

While there are numerous forms of professionalism detailed above, the two which this study considered were the traditional model and the managerial model. It was initially considered that participants would reveal an adherence to the traditional model of professionalism; however, the converse appeared to be the case. Participants described themselves as drawn into, and acting within, a managerialized form of professionalism developed through their training and work experience. Language teachers as a group believe that they work within a professional domain, as evidenced by the number of articles within *TESOL Quarterly*, for instance, which bind the activities of the teacher research to professionalism. While status, authority, and high pay are beneficial, and qualifications obtained through rigorous training are a means of ensuring highly trained individuals fill the post of TESOL educator, the critical dimension of professionalism – autonomy – appears to be absent from participants' views of professionalism and roots the participants' professional viewpoints within a managerialized form. The participants interviewed appeared not to recognize the difference between the two forms of professionalism and accepted ongoing management pressure to change and develop to meet targets (Evetts, 2005). Interestingly, participants like Nicola appeared to express the autonomous decision to go along with the rules and requirements handed down from management in exchange for employability, and no participant was able to identify a particular "edge" in their teaching informed by previous nonteaching experience or education which suggests a curtailing of autonomous employment of experience and knowledge.

However, in offering these findings, there are several limitations to this small-scale study that need to be considered. Following the initial interview phase, follow-up interviews could not be conducted due to time limitations. Following an interpretive grounded theory methodology, this omission is important as it allows the researcher to narrow the field of data to hone in on important ideas. This may have led to reduced validity. Likewise affecting validity is the context-boundedness of the results. Though the participants ranged in experience and nationality, it is unlikely they are representative of a wider context than the one in which they were interviewed. Furthermore, the number of participants did not reach a saturation point of 25 individuals (Douglas, 1985), though it has also been suggested saturation in grounded theory occurs when the data is completely accounted for in all the categories and subcategories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## 6 Conclusion

Professionalism as a construct is one which many occupational groups connect to in theory, creating such phrases as “professional + *n*” (where *n* may be replaced by “nannies,” “sales clerks,” “estheticians,” “hairstylists,” “dance therapists,” “real-estate agents,” “financial planners,” “massage therapists,” “records clerks,” and “human resource managers” (Macpherson et al., 2005), where utilizing the adjective is seen as an enhancement to the occupational category. Professionalism in the traditional sense as developed over centuries within the medical, legal, and theological domains is composed of rigorous training, prestige, authority, autonomy, organization and community, a commensurate salary, and an overall ethic of serving the public good (Evans, 2008). TESOL as a field can be said to be professionalizing: an organization has been set up with a knowledge base, though it has been argued that this is fragmented at best (Farmer, 2006), and a yearly financial report is generated enumerating the expenses of maintaining a professional organization. Though the elements of professionalism – salary, authority, and prestige – which are beneficial to professionals are diminished in scale for TESOL teachers, the key element which appears to be absent is autonomy, denying the traditional model of professionalism to TESOL professionals: TESOL teaching is a semiprofession informed by managerialized professionalism (Evetts, 2005).

The small-scale study explored in this chapter appears to substantiate this idea as participants, with specific reference to university instructors in Oman, did not provide examples of how they employ autonomy in their practice, though other important elements such as rigorous training and qualifications were evidenced. Autonomy is prescribed and controlled from management and government showing instead a de-professionalization of teaching in general and TESOL teaching in particular (Bottery, 1997; Colley et al., 2007). If the predominant accepted mode of teacher professionalism is that of the managed professional, then employers, TESOL Inc., and TESOL teachers support a managerial-natured professionalism; however, since the professionalism of teachers is invalid, then employers are simply managing, even unknowingly, their businesses, and teachers are not autonomous professionals: they are simply employees, a state of affairs which a stronger TESOL Inc. should be positioned to rectify.

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# Developing Texts that Match Readers' Abilities in the Sciences: Seeking an Appropriate Instructional Level



Richard L. Noone

**Abstract** This chapter discusses one approach to developing materials for Omani science students that seeks to bridge the gap between authentic science texts and student reading abilities by adapting texts to match those abilities and building on them in ways that are grounded in L1 and L2 research. It begins with a description of the context in which the materials have been developed and the problems encountered by learners and teachers that initially motivated their development. Next, there is a description of the process that was followed in developing the texts and their respective units of study. The third part discusses two methods used to evaluate the piloting of the units: a study into the percentage of unknown words encountered by the student population and a feedback form given to teachers who used the piloted units. The chapter concludes with a discussion about some of the most important issues of text development that arose from this project.

**Keywords** Reading abilities · Text development · Authentic texts · Science students · Instructional level

## 1 Introduction

Although we teach all of the language skills to our students, English reading skills are arguably the most important for those in higher education studies in Oman as not only is English often the language of textbooks, but it is also the language of most major journals across every field. Consequently, the ability of students who intend to study in a science college to read and adequately understand science texts is of paramount importance. Many different theories on how best to approach the development of reading materials can be found. Perhaps the most popular idea in ELT currently is to use “authentic texts.” Aside from the difficulty of defining exactly what an authentic text may be (Mishan, 2004), almost any conceptualization of “authentic” in the context of college-level science may result in texts with a high

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density of words that are unknown to the student population. Texts that have a high percentage of unknown words are often too difficult for learners to meaningfully respond to, resulting in frustration (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Nation & Deweerdt, 2001) unless teachers spend a great deal of effort and energy creating enough context for students to manage the texts (Devitt, 1997; Floyd & Carrell, 1987). In university English foundation programs, however, time is short as students are expected to reach a high level of competency in a very small time frame – typically 1 year. Therefore, the idea of spending a long time with one authentic science text dense with infrequently occurring vocabulary is impractical and likely counterproductive.

This chapter discusses one approach to developing materials for Omani science students that seeks to bridge the gap between authentic science texts and student reading abilities by adapting texts to match those abilities and building on them in ways that are grounded in L1 and L2 research. It begins with a description of the context in which the materials have been developed and the problems encountered by learners and teachers that initially motivated their development. Next, there is a description of the process that was followed in developing the texts and their respective units of study. The third part of this chapter discusses two methods used to evaluate the piloting of the units: a study into the percentage of unknown words encountered by the student population and a feedback form given to teachers who used the piloted units. Finally, there a discussion of issues relevant to text development is offered.

## **2 Literature Review and Background**

### **2.1 Context**

The texts and units built around them were developed for Level 6 Sciences of the Foundation Program (FP) in the Language Centre (LC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman. English courses in the FP at the LC are required of undergraduates who did not meet exit requirements for English language. The Level 6 Sciences course is the last stop before students exit the FP into science credit courses. Students enter Level 6 either by placement at the beginning of the year or by advancing through the lower levels of the program. Teachers in the program notice an important difference between these two groups; those who place into Level 6 usually have noticeably higher language abilities than those who advance through the levels.

Before the development of the texts discussed here, the reading course for Level 6 consisted of an in-house text written by LC teachers called Further Academic Reading (FAR). The book contained units built around texts that were largely a synthesis of authentic texts gathered from the net on various science-related topics including things like e-waste, hydrogen fuel cells, erosion control, and biodiversity. The average Flesch-Kincaid grade (FKG) level readability of these texts was 12.4. The units had pre-reading exercises, reading comprehension questions, vocabulary

building exercises, and other activities built into them. They were also accompanied by a vocabulary quiz that used words from the readings; however, the students did not know which words from which reading would be selected.

## 2.2 *Problem*

Teachers using the previous materials often found them to be excessively packed with unfamiliar vocabulary and, thus, very difficult to teach. For instance, using student feedback on unknown words, the writer often had lists that were 40–50 words long from just one reading. Dealing with such readings is a daunting task for learners and teachers alike. One method used to cope was a kind of jigsaw reading where different groups were responsible for handling different parts of the reading and then presenting the part they had covered in the next lesson to the rest of the class. This made the readings more manageable but also used a lot of time which was often impractical as the pacing of the course required teachers to cover many units. The class was a grand chore, and it was very difficult to keep students motivated and interested. Teachers who taught the course agreed that simplification of the texts was sorely needed.

To make the vocabulary issue more concrete, the writer took the first paragraph of one of the readings and got a general consensus from students as to the words that were unknown to them. This paragraph consisted of 109 different words of which students did not know 25. This means that students knew only about 77% of the words. Research into L2 reading comprehension in terms of the ratio of known to unknown words reports that learners need to know 98% of the words in a text in order to achieve adequate comprehension on their own (Hsueh-chao & Nation, 2000). These students, however, are in a class and have a teacher – and perhaps each other – to support them. Therefore, a ratio of known to unknown words for instructional purposes is needed. Grabe (2009) refers to work by Nation (2006) as the source of a figure of 95% for L2 instructional reading; however, the writer's own reading of Nation indicates that this figure is, at best, implied and instructional reading was not Nation's focus. Regardless, there is a long history of such research in L1 reading. In the L1 literature, three different reading levels are defined by reference to the percentage of unknown words encountered by students in the text: independent, instructional, and frustration (Cahalan, 2003; Strange, 2013; Treptow, Burns, & McComas, 2007). The first researcher to suggest these criteria was Emmett A. Betts in 1946 (cited in Cahalan, 2003). Interestingly, he defined the independent reading level at 98% known words – the same as that found by Hsueh-chao and Nation (2000). Therefore, it seems reasonable that definitions of the instructional and frustration levels for L2 readers may also mirror L1 findings.

Since the time of Betts, a number of researchers have come up with a variety of definitions of independent, instructional, and frustration reading levels. At present, there is general agreement that readers who know 95–100% of the words, and can thus comprehend about 75–100% of the text, are at the independent reading level;

those who know 91–94% of the words with 60–75% comprehension are at the instructional level, and those who know less than 91% of the words are reading at the frustration level (Strange, 2013). When we compare the instructional level for L1 learners to the percentage of known words calculated using feedback from students in the writer’s class (77%), it is apparent that they are deep into the frustration level. Reading at the frustration level is correlated with both less time on task and less comprehension than either the independent or instructional levels (Cahalan, 2003; Treptow et al., 2007). Reading at the instructional level, moreover, results in the greatest time on task and is also linked to higher reading fluency and accuracy growth rates than either of the other two conditions.

### **2.3 Proposal**

With support from the coordinator of Level 6 Sciences, the writer submitted a proposal for the improvement of the FAR reading texts. The proposal had three main goals. The first was to either revise or replace the existing reading texts so that they approximated the instructional level. The second was to revise or replace the exercises accompanying the texts. The final goal was to replace or revise the existing vocabulary tests so that they would adequately reflect any changes to the texts from which they were derived.

The proposal also outlined some criteria to be used for determining an empirical method of controlling vocabulary and thereby matching the texts to the readers. The criteria were based on a vocabulary profile on a writing test that required students to read and take notes from a text before writing. During this task, students consistently asked the meanings of the same words across different classes. After putting the text through a vocabulary profiler, it turned out that all of the words were either from the second 1000 of the General Service List (GSL) or off-list words. This suggested that students had largely mastered the first 1000 words of the GSL but were deficient with higher-level words. Thus, it was proposed that if the texts consisted of 95–98% of the words from the first 1000 of the GSL, using Betts’ definition of the instructional level (cited in Cahalan, 2003), the texts would be at the appropriate reading level.

## **3 Method: Development of Texts**

### **3.1 Topic Selection**

In the initial proposal for the new book, the word “revise” played a prominent role as it was hoped that it would be possible to work with existing texts to simplify them. However, it soon became apparent that as words changed, so did other aspects of the content, and the effort required to adapt the texts and yet maintain their

meanings was greater than simply starting fresh with texts that the writer could see a way to fit together. Therefore, a search for topics that might be appropriate for the book began. Topic selection was guided in three important ways. First, the writer and the development team wanted to cover a variety of topics that were relevant to the fields of study in the science colleges. Browsing the webpages of the different colleges offered a number of possible topic ideas. Another important guide was to create links to existing materials in listening, speaking, and writing. Finally, we wanted to find contemporary scientific topics that would help students to consider issues that are relevant to Oman and its rich cultural heritage and that connect these to local communities of scientific practice so as to build on the ample feelings of national pride that exist in modern Omani students.

Looking at all of these considerations ultimately led to the selection of four topics that were then built into units: cell phone towers, DNA testing, the kingfish population in Oman, and the Oman Botanic Garden. All of the topics were represented in the science colleges. Moreover, one of them had a connection to existing course materials (DNA testing), one to scientific research at the university (the kingfish population of Oman), and another to science-related activity in the surrounding community (the Oman Botanic Garden).

### ***3.2 Text Specifications***

The LC's Curriculum Unit publishes the Foundation Program English Curriculum Document (2013) that outlines requirements for the reading curriculum at Level 6. This document includes the types of learning outcomes that students should be prepared to achieve, as well as general guidelines for texts. More specific text guidelines in terms of readability levels are given for the tests that appear at the end of the course. Table 1 features the learning outcomes for Level 6 and the test specifications for Level 6 reading tests. These guidelines were used to guide the text development process, and the kinds of activities that preceded or followed the texts, in order to meet the learning outcomes. An additional specification that is not mentioned in the document has to do with text word length. The previous approved FAR reading text had readings from about 800–1000 words, and so this is the specification that we also followed.

### ***3.3 Text Creation***

The process of creating the texts used in the book began with gathering source texts from the Internet around the selected topics. For general-type topics such as cell phone towers and DNA testing, this was a more daunting task due to the sheer bulk of data that is available. The text on cell phone towers, for example, has 46 pages of source material from 7 different sources. The topic on kingfish used two research

**Table 1** Reading outcomes and test specifications for Level 6

Reading course learning outcomes for Level 6	
Read and respond to a 1–2 page text in a given period of time	Identify parts of speech and their functions in a text
Show understanding of instructions	Identify pronouns and their reference
Skim a text for the main idea	Identify the relationship between textual and graphical information
Scan a text and demonstrate comprehension of specific information	Interpret graphically presented data (maps, charts, graphs, tables)
Distinguish between main ideas and supporting details	Transfer relevant information from a text to a table
Distinguish between facts and opinions	Identify the writer’s point of view
Identify arguments for and against a certain issue in a text	Analyse relationships within and between sentences to understand different text structures
Make inferences based on information in a text	Identify ideas expressed in compound and complex sentences
Deduce the meaning of words from context	
Identify the meaning of unknown words using knowledge of word formation	
Reading test specifications for Level 6	
Word length: 400–450 words	
Readability level: FKG, 10–12 approx.	
FRE: 45–65 approx.	

articles published by professors in SQU’s College of Agriculture and Marine Sciences. The topic on the Oman Botanic Garden used two research papers published by some of its developers and information from the garden’s website. Part of what went into the gathering of the sources was the identification of themes within the topic that the sources may support. This was necessary as the length requirements only allowed for limited information. Once the sources were gathered for each text, the information was then synthesized into one document. This was a lengthy process that initially involved a lot of copying, pasting, deleting, and rewriting. Once the needed information was present in the text, the first stage of the simplification process began. This stage involved the application of the writer’s knowledge of student vocabulary levels and aspects of text cohesion and was largely intuitive.

After over 20 years of teaching English – 10 of which have been in the current context – the writer has developed a good sense of words that large numbers of students will not know. The efficacy of that sense has been demonstrated repeatedly through interactions with students over the years, and so this general “feel” for words that students won’t know was a starting point for the vocabulary simplification process. When the writer felt that the words would not be understood, simpler words or phrases replaced them. However, this was not done in all instances as the texts were meant to be at the instructional level and many words that were likely to be unknown were central to the topics.

Text cohesion refers to the importance of the connections between ideas both within and between paragraphs. Many important aspects of text cohesion have been examined by researchers (Graesser, McNamara, & Kulikowich, 2011); however, in the context of these texts, two important types of cohesion stood out: referential cohesion and causal cohesion. Referential cohesion refers to how well connected content words are between sentences and can be enhanced by including noun phrases that are repeated between sentences (Graesser et al., 2011). This type of cohesion was thought to be important for these texts because they provide scientific content that introduces new ideas and terms that readers must comprehend. Causal cohesion refers to how well different clauses and sentences reflect their causal nature by using explicit words or phrases that indicate causation such as “therefore,” “consequently,” and “one result of this is that...” (Graesser et al., 2011). Causal cohesion was felt to have special importance in these texts as many of the scientific ideas expressed in them were of a cause and effect nature. Moreover, a significant part of the writing course is on cause and effect as a rhetorical function. Therefore, the writer also attempted to more explicitly embed referential and causal cohesion into the texts in the first stage of simplification.

The second phase of simplification was more empirical. In this phase, the writer used the Range software program (Heatly, Nation, & Coxhead, 2002) to analyze the vocabulary of the texts and see how well they met the goal of having 95–98% from the first 1000 words of the GSL. The Range program places the words from a text into different word lists and provides information including the number of tokens (the number of times particular words appears in a text), types (how many different words appear in a text), and families (the number of word families that appear in a text). The word lists included were the first 1000 words of the GSL (List 1), the second 1000 words from the GSL (List 2), and the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) (List 3). Analysis of this data immediately revealed that the goal of using 95–98% of words from List 1 was entirely unrealistic; the only way to do this would be to remove words essential to the topics at hand. Thus, it was decided to try to keep List 1 coverage at 80% or above and to provide a glossary for each reading that is composed of all words that are beyond List 1 (i.e., List 2, List 3, and off-list words). At this point, further simplification was done at the vocabulary level until all texts met the new specification.

The final four texts were then completed. The first unit is entitled “Are Cell Phone Towers Dangerous?” It started as an attempt to simplify an existing unit from the old book but soon took a direction of its own. The main shift was from a sensationalist perspective of the dangers of cell phone towers to a more balanced scientific point of view using different sources. The second unit is entitled “DNA Testing” and makes a nice connection to a lecture in the listening and speaking part of the course. The third unit is entitled “Oman’s Troubled Kingfish Population” and uses real research conducted by faculty in the College of Agriculture and Marine Sciences. The fourth unit is entitled “A Unique Botanic Garden in Oman” and describes a special project currently underway in old Al-Khoud that, when complete, will be the only garden of its kind in the world. Whenever possible, this unit is enhanced by a class visit to the garden for a guided tour by Omani staff.

**Table 2** Vocabulary word percentages for word lists

Book	Unit	Word count	List 1 %	List 2 %	List 3 %	Off-list %	FKG
New further academic reading	Cell towers	890	79.1	6.4	4.3	10.2	10.1
	DNA	1032	80.8	9.9	4.4	4.9	9.2
	Kingfish	909	84.5	4.2	2.8	8.6	12.1
	OBG	1165	82.8	5.8	5	6.4	12.8
	<i>Average</i>	<i>999</i>	<i>81.8</i>	<i>6.6</i>	<i>4.1</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>11.5</i>
Old further academic reading	Cell towers – old	956	67.6	13.2	6.7	12.5	12.6
	E-waste	1029	71.7	6.7	9.7	11.9	13
	Fiber-optic	1054	63.2	6.9	11.5	18.4	13.8
	Cybercrime	783	70.4	6.7	6.7	16.1	11.7
	Hydrogen fuel	921	62.6	5	10	22.4	13.2
	Erosion control	936	71.6	9.9	8.8	9.7	10.2
	Biodiversity	1042	75.2	4.4	7.1	13.3	11.6
	Clean Coal	914	71.1	6.3	7.4	15.3	10.8
	Burning issue	894	77.1	5.7	8.4	8.7	12.3
	Safer farming	889	75	6.5	9.6	8.9	13.3
	Satellites	887	65.5	7.6	9.5	17.5	13.6
<i>Average</i>	<i>936.8</i>	<i>70.1</i>	<i>7.2</i>	<i>8.7</i>	<i>14.1</i>	<i>12.4</i>	

Table 2 shows the vocabulary word percentages for each word list of the final texts and compares them to the texts of the previous book. As can be seen, the average percentage of words from List 1 of the New Further Academic Reading (NFAR) book (81.8%) is much higher than the Old Further Academic Reading (OFAR) book (70.1%). Moreover, the average percentage of List 2 words (6.6% compared to 7.2%) is slightly lower, and the average percentage of words from List 3 (4.1% compared to 8.7%) and off-list words (7.5% compared to 14.1%) is roughly half as low. This indicates a very large difference in terms of vocabulary density between the two sets of texts. Finally, the average FKG readability measures for the NFAR book are 11.5, while those for the OFAR book are 12.4.

#### 4 Results: Unknown Word Density Research and Teacher Feedback Questionnaire Analysis

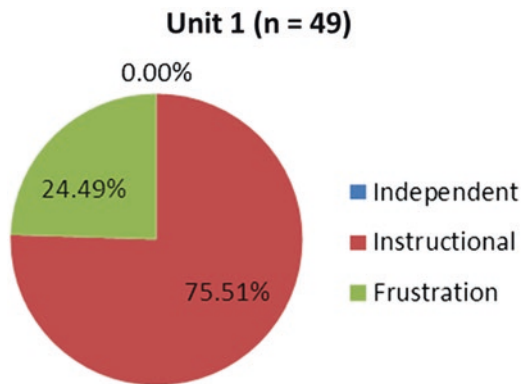
The books were piloted the following semester, and two different investigations to evaluate their appropriateness were carried out. The first was to gather data from students about unknown word density and see how well the texts met the instructional level. The second was to gather teacher feedback on different aspects of the texts and units via a questionnaire.

### 4.1 Unknown Word Density Investigation

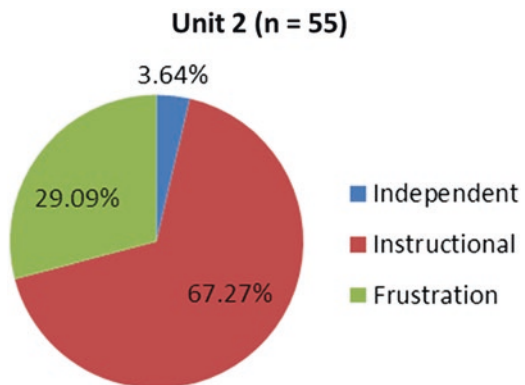
In order to determine how well the texts achieved the goal of attaining an instructional level for students, the writer asked current teachers using the textbook to have students identify the unknown words they encountered as they read one unit. Different teachers were asked to do this for different units so that three classes each covered three units (Units 1, 2, and 4). The units were randomly assigned to the different groups for a quasi-experimental design. The total sample sizes for each unit from the three classes were as follows: Unit 1 = 49, Unit 2 = 55, and Unit 4 = 40. This method of determining the number of unknown words has been used by previous researchers who found that, although students tend to overestimate their word knowledge, the method yields results that are about 80% accurate (Win-a-rom, 2010). For the analysis of this data, the writer defined the instructional level at anywhere from 90% to 97% known words, the independent reading level at 98% known words or higher, and the frustration level at below 90% known words.

Charts 1, 2, and 3 indicate the percentages of students reading at each of the defined reading levels by unit according to this data. For the majority of students,

**Chart 1** Percentages of students reading at each defined reading level: Unit 1

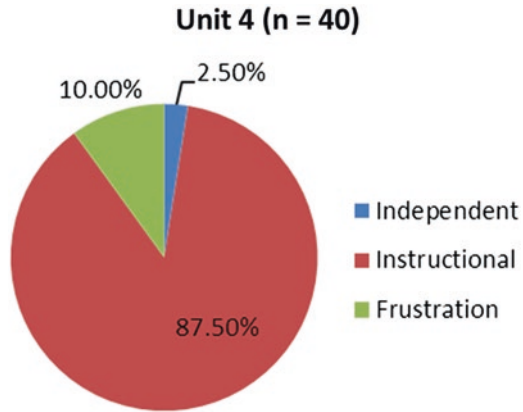


**Chart 2** Percentages of students reading at each defined reading level: Unit 2





**Chart 3** Percentages of students reading at each defined reading level: Unit 4



the texts were at the instructional level (76%, 67%, and 88%, respectively). Moreover, the texts were not too easy as very few students were at the independent level (4% for Unit 2 and 3% for Unit 4). However, there was still a significant percentage of students at the frustration level for each unit (25%, 29%, and 10%, respectively), and given the tendency for students to overestimate their vocabulary knowledge (Win-a-rom, 2010), these percentages were probably higher. This is a particularly troublesome finding since the data was collected in the fall semester when the students who enter the program tend to have better developed reading abilities. Therefore, the percentage of students reading at the frustration level will likely be greater in the spring. This issue reflects a general challenge that all programs face at the research site. Are the materials for the fall appropriate for the spring? However, given the relatively high percentage of students at the instructional level, it is likely that the instructional level group will be a majority in the spring as well.

## **4.2 Validation and Analysis of Teacher Feedback Questionnaire**

A 38-item questionnaire with statements related to the quality of the texts and units was designed in order to gather feedback from piloting teachers. The questionnaire followed a Likert scale of agreement with 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree and also had three open-ended response questions. Additionally, the Likert scale questions had space to the left of each item for comments. The questionnaire focused on two basic themes: the texts and the material accompanying them. There were also some questions related to teachers' ideas about how best to teach vocabulary. Text-focused statements dealt with cultural appropriateness, interest, relevance, and difficulty. Statements focused on accompanying materials dealt with the types of exercises, the glossaries, and other

**Table 3** Category structure

Category	Count	Average measure (respondents)	Category measure
Strongly disagree (1)	2	0.19	-3.69
Disagree (2)	25	0.16	-1.45
Neutral (3)	35	0.40	0.02
Agree (4)	84	1.40	1.46
Strongly agree (5)	40	2.11	3.64

features of the units. There were two types of statements in the questionnaire: the majority were statements that directly assessed teacher agreement, but a few focused on teacher observations and actions. The questionnaire was answered by seven different teachers who used the texts. The Likert scale responses were analyzed using the Winsteps program (Linacre, 2014a) which uses a form of item response theory (IRT) known as Rasch measurement. IRT methods provide a way to take ordinal observation (counts of responses) and transform them onto an interval scale that is expressed in logits (log odds). There are several advantages to Rasch analysis. Firstly, it allows one to investigate the validity of the measurement instrument in terms of the category structure, teacher responses, and items. In addition, it offers a visual representation of all of these facets of measurement via a person or item map that locates each facet on the same scale.

One of the requirements of Rasch measurement is that all of the items measure the same construct (unidimensionality). However, as statements that measured teacher observations and actions were not always consistent with statements that measured their agreement, it was decided to omit the observations and actions items from the analysis. The items asking about teacher ideas on teaching vocabulary were also omitted as one item about whether the units would benefit from a wider variety of activities was considered a given and did not reflect the units as they currently stood. Additionally, items with negative wordings were recoded to properly reflect the agreement construct. For example, statements like “There were *not* enough new words in the readings” that had a response of 4 (“agree”) were recoded to 2 (“disagree”) as all other items that are coded as 4 are positively worded.

Having defined the construct more appropriately, the Likert items were Rasch analyzed. An important part of validating a Likert scale is to investigate the category structure to see if it adequately fits the model. The scale in this case is a measure of agreement with categories from one to five. Winsteps provides data on scale properties that indicate scale category functionality. In the initial analysis, there were some problems with two of the scale categories: two and three. As shown in Table 3, the problem with category two was that the average measure in logits was lower (0.16) than the average measure for category one (0.19), indicating that responses to both categories were hard to distinguish between. The problem with category three was that, although it was selected a number of times, the odds of a respondent selecting category three were always less than the odds of selecting any of the other categories at all points along the scale. This indicated that the category was not providing any meaningful information to the construct being measured. Given that category

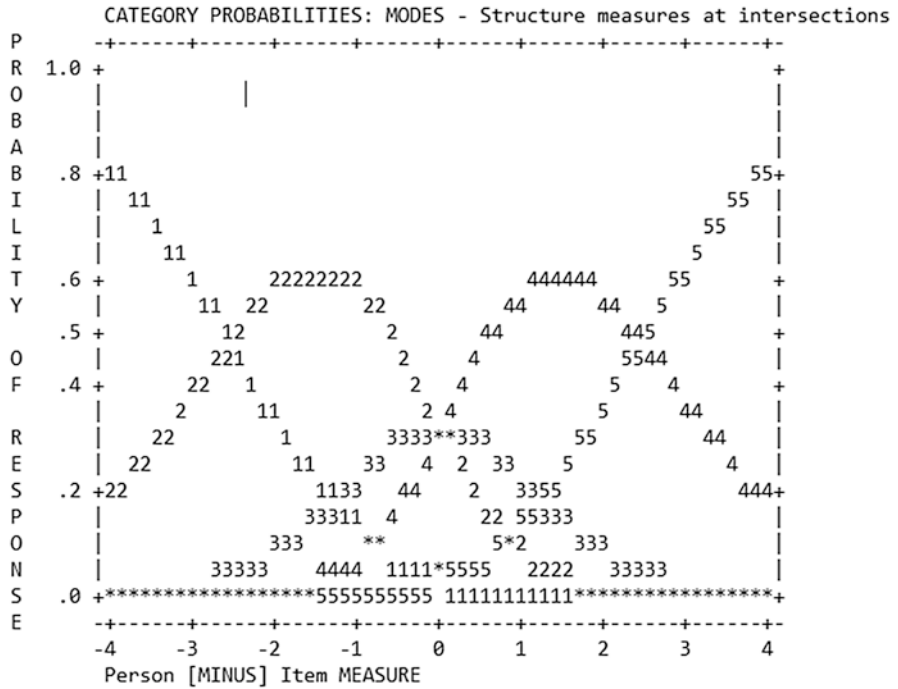
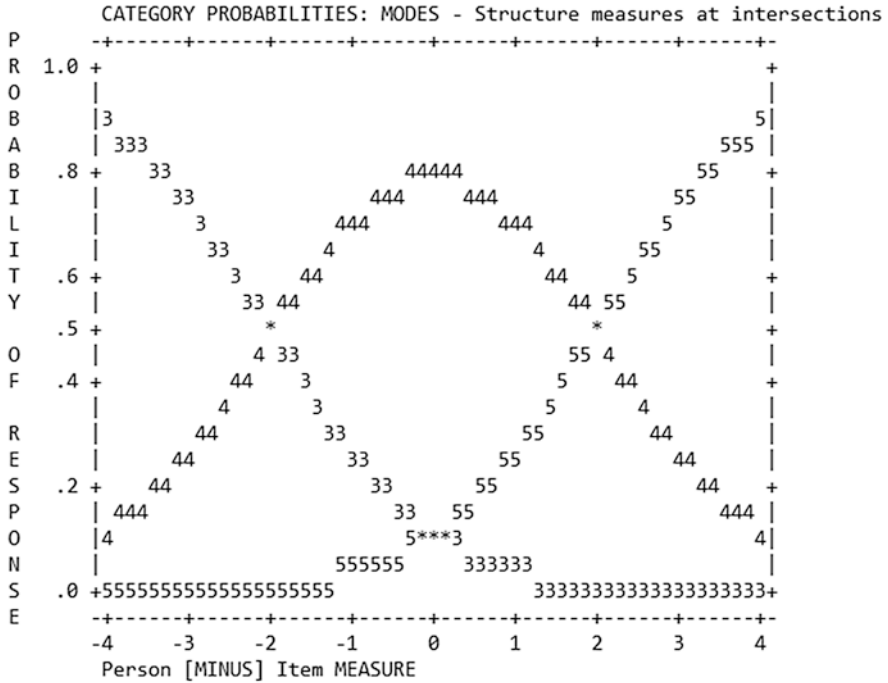


Fig. 1 Poor category structure

three was a “neutral” response, this analysis makes it clear that the scale would have been better off without this category, thereby forcing respondents to choose between “agree” or “disagree.” Figure 1 displays this problem in a visual way. The left vertical axis indicates the probability of a response, while the horizontal axis gives the person minus the item measure in logits. Each response category is represented by its number. As can be seen, at any point along the scale, the probability of selecting three is lower than other alternatives. Properly functioning scales have visible peaks for each category and a similar portion of the scale where the probability of selecting it is greatest.

One solution to both of these problems is to collapse the malfunctioning categories into one of the others (Linacre, 2004). In this case, responses for category one (“strongly disagree”) were combined with those of category two (“disagree”) as there was significant overlap between the two categories already and very few responses to category one at all. In looking at category three, an examination of the category measure of Table 3 revealed that it was almost exactly between category four and category two as the difference between two and three is 1.47 logits (−1.45–0.02) and the difference between four and three is 1.44 logits (1.46–0.02). Therefore, the writer looked at the levels of agreement of the teachers from the initial analysis in order to decide how best to recode “neutral.” Agreement measures of teachers showed two who were clearly lower in agreement than the rest, two who hovered



- 3 = Disagree
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

Fig. 2 Improved category structure

between agreement and low agreement, and three who were higher up the scale. With this kind of spread, the writer decided to recode “neutral” for the two respondents who exhibited the least amount of agreement and the lower of the two hovering respondents as “disagree.” The neutral category was recoded as “agree” for the four remaining respondents. Finally, to keep continuity of the scale categories, the final coding was 3 = disagree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. Figure 2 shows the new category structure. As can be seen, each category in Fig. 2 has a visible peak and represents a meaningful portion of the scale, although category four is much broader than would be hoped for. However, this structure allows meaningful interpretation of the data. In this revised scale, scores of -4 to -2.03 represent “disagree,” scores of -2.03 to 2.03 represent “agree,” and scores of 2.03 to 4 represent “strongly agree.”

Beyond category function, Winsteps provides data at the item level and person level to ensure that both adequately represent the construct being measured. This information is in the form of chi-square statistics that look at model fit in terms of both unexpected responses from persons on items that are far from their measures (outfit) and those that are close to their measures (infit). Items that have outfit or infit

**Table 4** Measures of agreement

Teacher	4	2	1	3	7	5	6
Measure	2.30	1.69	0.51	-0.18	-1.73	-1.91	-3.12
Category	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Disagree

values greater than 2.0 degrade the measurement process and ought to be removed from the analysis (Linacre, 2014b). All respondents fit the data in the measure. However, items 6 (“The topics were culturally appropriate”), 16 (“The glossary at the end of the readings helped the students to complete the readings”), and 23 (“The vocabulary lists helped students prepare for the test”) did not fit the model and so were removed from the analysis. Item 6 likely did not adequately represent the construct as the respondents were from different cultural backgrounds from those of the students. This could have resulted in differing interpretations of the meaning of “culturally appropriate.” Items 16 and 23 rely on student actions that teachers may not have had opportunity to observe, perhaps resulting in teachers guessing, and this might explain why these items did not fit the model.

Table 4 shows the measures of agreement for each teacher using the scale from Figure 2. Five of the seven teachers show overall agreement, one shows strong agreement, and one shows disagreement. The range of agreement, furthermore, is quite large as this response category covers a broad range of the scale and so different degrees of agreement are apparent. Respondent two, for example, exhibits a degree of agreement (1.69) that nears strongly agree (2.03), whereas respondent seven’s level of agreement (-1.73) is close to disagree (-2.03). This information demonstrates that the teachers generally looked favorably upon the new materials in terms of the statements regarding them, but one teacher was not so happy with them. Given the overall response, this constitutes good evidence of a successful piloting of the materials.

Information regarding the specific statements, however, is most instructive toward the improvement of the units and an interpretation of the teachers’ feedback. Table 5 shows the percentage of responses for each category using the raw data and the Rasch-calibrated item measures for all retained items from the questionnaire. High Rasch item measures indicate statements that respondents found more difficult to agree with, and low item measures indicate items that were easy to agree with. The information is presented in item measure order. Item statements followed by \* are negatively worded statements that were recoded, so the actual responses have been reversed for these items. To help in the interpretation of data, a visual representation of items and respondents via the item map is shown in Figure 3. This picture shows where different items and respondents lie on the same interval scale and helps provide more information on how to interpret how much agreement is represented by the different items. In this table, respondents are represented by “X,” and the items are represented by their item numbers. To make the agreement scale easy to understand, two lines have been drawn across the scale, and each of the three portions has been labeled with “disagree” on the left, “agree” in the middle, and “strongly agree” on the right. This makes it apparent that the great majority of items

**Table 5** Percentage of responses by category

Item number	Statement	Response % by category					Item measure
		1	2	3	4	5	
11	Overall the readings were good for FPEL 560/603/604 science	0	43	14	43	0	2.34
3	The readings were interesting for students to read	14	14	29	29	14	1.55
32	The activities in the book prepared students well for the reading tests.	0	29	29	43	0	1.55
24	Students were mostly able to answer or respond productively to the critical thinking questions	14	0	43	14	14	0.92
4	The readings were relevant to students	0	14	43	29	14	0.86
9	There were too many new words in the readings	0	29	14	43	14	0.86
27	The common collocations helped students to use the words correctly	0	14	57	29	0	0.86
33	Overall the activities in the book were good for this class	0	14	29	29	14	0.72
8	The readings were too difficult	0	29	14	29	29	0.24
14	Guessing the vocabulary from context <i>before</i> reading helped students read	0	14	14	57	14	0.24
21	Students usually answered the reading comprehension questions correctly	0	29	14	43	14	0.24
25	The critical thinking questions helped students to think critically	0	14	29	29	29	0.24
35	I found the layout of the book easy to follow	0	14	14	43	14	0.00
5	The readings were informative to students	0	0	14	72	14	-0.35
7	The readings were too easy	0	14	14	43	29	-0.35
10	There were not enough new words in the readings	0	14	14	43	29	-0.35
12	The questions <i>before</i> the reading were able to stimulate student conversation	0	29	0	43	29	-0.35
34	I found the book easy to teach	0	29	0	43	29	-0.35
17	Students asked about many words that were <i>not</i> in the glossary	0	0	14	72	14	-0.94
30	The activities in the book helped students to learn the reading outcomes of the course	0	0	29	43	29	-0.94
31	The activities in the book prepared students well for the vocabulary test	0	0	14	72	14	-0.94
28	Matching words to sentences helped students to learn the words better	0	0	0	72	29	-1.56
13	The questions <i>before</i> the reading helped students to think about the topic	0	0	0	57	43	-2.26
20	The reading comprehension questions helped students to understand the reading better	0	0	0	57	43	-2.26

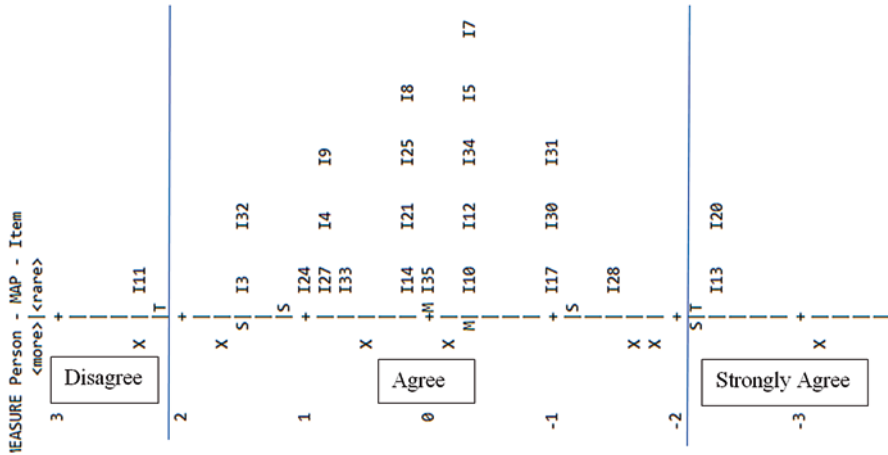


Fig. 3 Item map

fall somewhere on the “agree” continuum. Moreover, only item 11 represents “disagree,” whereas items 13 and 20 are “strongly agree.”

Beginning with the statements that exhibited the most disagreement, it is important to discuss item 11, “Overall the readings were good for FPEL 560/603/604 science.” Given that this item attempts to be an overall measure of how good the texts are, at first it is alarming to find that this item represented the only one that was equivalent to “disagree” on the measurement scale. However, it appears that the wording of this item was ambiguous as “readings” was interpreted to mean the units as a whole. This interpretation became evident in the numerous teacher comments on this item that called for more or varied activities or made other references to the accompanying materials as opposed to the texts. Therefore, rather than representing the *texts* as a whole, this item indicates that teachers felt the *units* needed a wider variety of activities or other items to accompany the texts. (This need was apparent before the piloting as greater effort was extended toward developing the texts initially than the materials to accompany them as a result of the limited time granted to work on the project.) Item 3 (“The readings were interesting for students to read”) is at the point on the item map that represents low agreement. This relatively low result is largely due to the dichotomy that exists between different programs using the book. Teachers in engineering, for example, commented that they liked the units on cell phone towers and DNA testing, while general science groups preferred the kingfish and Botanic Garden units. Item 32 (“The activities in the book prepared students well for the reading tests”) is at the same place as item 3 and likely reflects the general perception of teachers that the reading tests at the end of the level are not similar enough to the types of activities that go on in the class. This is a feeling that exists across programs and materials.

A look at statements that teachers found easiest to agree with (items 38, 13, and 20) reveals that they felt the vocabulary matching exercises, the pre-reading ques-

tions, and the reading comprehension questions were helpful to the students. Though not as easy to agree with as this group, item 31 ("The activities in the book prepared students well for the vocabulary test") is noteworthy as it indicates that the vocabulary test that accompanied these units was not perceived to be in a format for which students were unprepared.

Finally, those statements most relevant to the texts need to be considered as the primary objective of the project was to develop texts at the instructional level, so text-level feedback should be informative of teacher perceptions regarding this. Four statements directly targeted issues related to the complexity of the texts: 7 ("The readings were too easy"), 8 ("The readings were too difficult"), 9 ("There were too many new words in the readings"), and 10 ("There were not enough new words in the readings"). Of these, items 7 and 10 show relatively high agreement, item 8 shows near average agreement, and item 9 shows relatively low agreement.

Responses to item 9 are interesting as they seem to contradict the results of the investigation into unknown words outlined above that indicate very few students reading at an independent level, which is the condition when there are not enough difficult words. However, with at least one teacher, comments indicate that the issue was with the vocabulary list from which the vocabulary quizzes were derived, as opposed to the texts in general. For each unit, 20 words were selected that students must learn in preparation for a quiz. These words were selected based on their relevance to the text as well as their frequency, and since more frequent words were often chosen over less frequent words, this teacher felt that too many easy words had been selected for testing. Results of the vocabulary quizzes do not support this, however. On the two quizzes, one average score was 85% and the other was 75%. In the writer's view, these scores reflect adequate difficulty for an achievement test, and were too many easy words present, average scores would have been much higher on both tests. Furthermore, an important consideration involving vocabulary knowledge is students' *depth* of knowledge. The notion of depth of vocabulary knowledge is a well-established distinction in SLA and basically indicates that there are words that students know receptively and/or productively (Al-Busaidi, 2007; Schmitt, 2008), as well as several deeper levels of knowledge related to the form (what it sounds like, how its pronounced, recognizable word parts); meaning (what is included in the concept it refers to, what other concepts are associated with the word, what other words can be used to express the same meaning); and use (grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use) of a given word (Schmitt, 2008).

Depth of vocabulary knowledge is important in terms of the vocabulary tests because the tests require students to choose the correct word from options of the same part of speech in the context of a sentence, and some of the words have similar meanings (i.e., discuss, argue, debate) or special connotations that make them more or less appropriate for a given sentence. Surface level knowledge, such as the ability to recite a definition, does not capture this level of understanding. Thus, it is possible for teachers to have observed that students knew many words receptively and felt that the students "knew" the words, when, in actuality, the depth of their knowledge was still in need of work.



Aside from the Likert scale items, three open-ended response items were also included in the questionnaire. These are as follows:

1. Please write what you liked *most* about the book.
2. Please write what you liked *least* about the book.
3. Please write what you think the book doesn't have, but should have.

Responses to the first item included a preference for the first two units, two positive comments on the vocabulary focus, appreciation of the pre-reading activities, and a compliment on the layout and editing (several mistakes and typos were present in the old materials) and – from the teacher whose measure is lowest – that the levels of the texts are better than the previous book. Answers to the second item include *dislike* of the first two units, the need for more space for student responses to questions, a lack of reading skills practice, and the belief that the glossaries were too long and that the vocabulary was too difficult (the respondent also indicated that he had summer repeaters whose language abilities are known to be below par). Responses to the third category include adding exercises for word formation, printing the book in color, adding extra materials and links to websites, adding more fun activities and practice exams, and including more recycling of vocabulary.

### 4.3 *Improvements to the Units*

In response to teacher feedback, several improvements have been made to the units. These include adding more fun activities and having one large glossary at the end of the book instead of four separate glossaries after each unit. Two of the fun activities, moreover, involve recycling vocabulary. Another addition was to provide three separate practice tests that mirror the format of end of level reading tests and more space for student responses. Finally, links to websites that provide additional content related to the topics have recently been added. As they stand now, the units could still benefit from additional types of activities, and our program has been attempting to gather release time to achieve this.

## 5 Discussion

As the writer embarked upon the development of these texts, he was surprised by how little practical guidance exists for L2 materials developers who wish to adapt texts for a specific purpose or to a particular level of ability. Although this state of affairs is likely due to a number of different factors, two stand out as worthy of mention: the unpopularity of simplified texts among SLA researchers and the dominance of implicit learning theories among materials developers.

Despite their active use in the form of graded readers, simplified texts are generally frowned upon today. Specifically, when compared to authentic texts, it has been assumed that simplified texts omit connectives and thus lack cohesion (Blau, 1982; Carrell, 1987; Long & Ross, 1993), lack the redundancy that naturally occurs in authentic texts (Swaffar, 1985), and have high polysemy (the number of meanings a word has) and hypernymy (the number of levels a word has in a conceptual hierarchy) values as a result of using more common vocabulary (Crossley, Louwerse, McCarthy, & McNamara, 2007). Based on these assumptions, it is claimed traditional simplification techniques result in unnatural language which may make texts more difficult to understand (Blau, 1982; Carrell, 1987; Long & Ross, 1993; Swaffar, 1985), and impede language acquisition by removing crucial elements of language (Long & Ross, 1993; Swaffar, 1985). Thus, the current trend in language learning materials is to seek out authentic texts. Extending this notion of the importance of authenticity, corpus linguists in EAP have examined texts intended to prepare learners for academic contexts to determine how well they reflect the actual language used in those contexts (Miller, 2011). But are the above claims about simplified and authentic texts true?

Research is now available that would call all of these claims into question. To begin, Nation and Deweerdt (2001) pointed out that arguments for simplified texts resulting in decreased value for learning due to the omission of difficult items are actually criticisms of how well the texts are matched to the ability level of students, not of the texts themselves. They also acknowledged that there are poorly simplified texts which should be avoided yet affirm that plenty of well-simplified texts are available. Moreover, it has been argued that, from the students' point of view, these texts provide an authentic reading experience (Claridge, 2005). More tellingly, recent advances in computer technology, computational linguistics, and other fields have made possible the development of the Coh-Metrix computational tool (Graesser, McNamara, Louwerse, & Cai, 2004) which was used in two studies (Crossley et al., 2007; Crossley & McNamara, 2008) to either confirm or deny assumptions about the content of simplified and authentic texts in terms of linguistic features. Interestingly, the findings of these studies contradict every one of the assumptions mentioned by critics of simplification. Of particular note is the finding that authentic texts have significantly *less* coreferential cohesion than simplified texts. Additionally, because simplified texts rely on simpler syntactic structures and depend heavily on noun phrases, they exhibit a greater amount of noun, stem, and argument overlap. This means that simplified texts actually have *more* redundancy than authentic texts.

Furthermore, as expected, simplified texts use significantly more familiar and frequent words than authentic texts; however, claims that the use of such frequent words results in ambiguity of meaning are not supported by the results of the polysemy and hypernymy measures in these studies. Finally, although findings of studies on the relative comprehensibility of authentic and simplified texts are mixed with one exception (Blau, 1982), all cases where readability formulas have been used to indicate significant changes to the texts being compared find that simplified texts are the easiest for L2 readers to comprehend (Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; King,

1987; Long & Ross, 1993; Oh, 2001; Tweissi, 1998). (Blau's 1982 study is an exception because it deliberately removed important cohesive devices from the simplified texts in order to demonstrate how their removal can make texts harder to understand.)

The second factor is that the literature surrounding materials development is dominated by a point of view on language learning that favors implicit learning over intentional learning. For example, in the introduction to his book on materials development, Tomlinson (2011) makes it very clear that "Most of the chapters in this book take the position that communicative competence is primarily achieved as a result of implicit, procedural learning" (p. 4). This perspective on language learning postulates that more of it happens subconsciously as a result of attempting to use the language to make meaning or communicate than from any kind of conscious intentional practice to *learn* the language. In line with this theory, in his evaluation of ESL textbooks for EAP purposes, Miller (2011) looks to Grabe (2009) for the argument that the only way students may reach the level of vocabulary knowledge needed for academic study is through exposure to words in the context of reading. Obviously, this view of language learning lends itself to the idea of authentic texts as these are the texts that will expose learners to more language and thus engage those powerful unconscious processes busily at work behind the scenes. Unfortunately, however appealing these ideas may be, empirical studies that compare the intentional and implicit learning of rules (Norris & Ortega, 2000) and vocabulary (Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996; Laufer, 2005), consistently find intentional learning to be superior.

One important consequence of the prominence of implicit learning theories and authentic texts from the point of view of materials developers is that the idea of matching a text to a reader becomes either lost or terribly blurred. According to this school of thought, the idea is not to match the text to the reader so much as to make the text accessible, and issues of difficulty are thought of more in terms of task than text. Mishan discusses a number of tasks that might be appropriate for learners who are unable to fully comprehend a text such as scanning first sentences to get the main ideas. However, much of the tasks that are offered are more akin to coping strategies and do not reflect the depth of understanding of the subject matter that is required of students getting ready for college level reading. Furthermore, this approach raises the question that, if authentic texts require less demanding tasks, then when do more explicit comprehension related tasks come into play and with what texts?

In a similar way, use of corpus linguistics seems to lose sight of the reading ability of the student. To be clear, the idea of using corpus linguistics to uncover the kinds of language that learners will encounter in a particular language use context is clearly of great benefit. However, seeing how much of the AWL is being covered by a set of materials without first determining what percentage of the first 2000 words of the GSL learners know makes little sense. This is because, regardless of how common academic words may be in any given context, the first 2000 words of the GSL will be even more common. In this way, corpus linguistics needs to work hand

in hand with a diagnosis of L2 learners' vocabulary knowledge so that the appropriate word list is used as a guide to materials development.

Finally, the initial problem that teachers encountered with the course texts was the result of following the trend of the day and using authentic material with little or no simplification. With these texts, the learner is shown very clearly, "This is where you need to be." However, from the materials development perspective taken in this chapter, knowing the language that ultimately may need to be learned is less important than getting an idea of the language that is currently known if rapid development of reading ability is one's primary goal. According to this perspective, the more important first step is determining where learners are, and then meeting them at that place, not calling to them in a muffled voice from over the next hill. This is what instructional match is about: knowing where the students are and giving them the assistance being in that place requires (no more and no less) so that they can move forward from there as quickly as possible. This is a more compelling point of view to this writer than that espoused in the ELT materials development literature in that it has empirical research to support it (Cahalan, 2003; Treptow et al., 2007).

## 6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the problems faced by teachers using reading texts designed for science students to prepare them for credit level courses of study in an Omani university setting in the Arabian Gulf. It looked at these problems from the point of view of instructional match in terms of the percentage of known vocabulary words in a reading. It then described the process that was used to develop new texts designed to meet the instructional needs of students with a special emphasis on vocabulary difficulty and text cohesion. The main goal for the development of the texts was to attain the instructional reading level for as many students as possible. The chapter then described research into the percentage of words known by students using the texts that investigated how well the texts meet that goal. The chapter ended with the validation and interpretation of a teacher feedback questionnaire given to teachers who piloted the materials and discussed some of the changes that were made to the units in response to that feedback.

Overall, the texts developed for this foundation science program and the units that accompany them have been a success and are still in use today. Moreover, it is the writer's hope that the process followed for the development of these texts may be of use to other educators, particularly those working in university foundation programs that have a student population with limited vocabulary knowledge. The Range program (Heatly et al., 2002) is freely downloadable and easy to use. One possible limitation of the complexity of the texts discussed here is related to the length of the sentences. Researchers into text complexity have long been aware of the importance of both sentence length and vocabulary frequency and have largely agreed that the latter is the most significant predictor of complexity (Tweissi, 1998; Zhang, 2010). However, there are some researchers who have found that syntax,

which is often measured in terms of sentence length, is the more important factor (Shiotsu & Weir, 2007). In the case of these texts, sentences were not shortened as the primary issue appeared to be the percentage of unknown words, and shortening the texts would have resulted in lowering the specifications given for Level 6. Interestingly, when these texts are compared to those used in Level 5, it has been found that the vocabulary difficulty of Level 5 is higher but the FKG readability is lower due to shortened sentences. This has prompted some additional research into the relative importance of sentence length versus vocabulary density that is now nearing its completion and will hopefully shed further light on this issue.

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# Teachers' Attitudes Toward Alternative Assessment in the English Language Foundation Program of an Omani University



Christopher Denman and Rahma Al-Mahrooqi

**Abstract** Recent reforms to education systems around the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have resulted in the increased use of alternative forms of assessment across a number of subjects, including EFL/ESL. This is certainly the case in Oman, where alternative assessment assumes an important role in both the country's Basic Education schools and in English language foundation programs at the tertiary level. However, despite their growing importance, as of yet very few studies have examined how these forms of assessment are implemented and the challenges associated with them in an Omani context. For these reasons, the current exploratory study examined attitudes toward, and practices of, alternative assessment in an English language foundation program in Oman's Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). In order to do this, 10 English language instructors on SQU's Language Centre (now the Centre for Preparatory Studies) foundation program were administered a questionnaire featuring 13 open-ended questions. Results indicate that participants hold mostly positive attitudes toward alternative assessment though express a number of concerns related to cheating/copying, time requirements, and subjective marking practices. Implications of these findings for alternative assessment within the Omani and MENA context are discussed.

**Keywords** Alternative assessment · EFL · Foundation program · Oman

## 1 Introduction

Although conventional forms of testing have long been considered the “most reliable” way to assess student academic performance across a variety of classroom settings, these have recently drawn criticism for a number of reasons. These include the stress they create in learners, their inability to incorporate different intelligences and learning styles, their over-reliance on memorization and reproduction, and their adherence to the transmission model of education. Partly in response to these

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criticisms, alternative assessments have become increasingly popular across many subjects, including ESL/EFL. These assessment techniques, such as portfolios, interviews, student journals, and so on, are now employed in ESL/EFL classes in many parts of the world, including in the nations of the Arab Gulf where they are often prescribed by the language learning curriculum.

In Oman, the ministries of education and higher education recently mandated the introduction of alternative assessment techniques in schools and tertiary institutions. This was done, in part, due to a traditional over-reliance on high-stakes testing and evidence that Omani learners were struggling to compete with their international counterparts. The introduction of these techniques, according to Al Ruqeishi (2015), was also deemed to offer a more accurate view of student progress throughout the learning process and to promote more effective approaches to learning and teaching. In Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the implementation of these techniques for EFL has occurred since at least the introduction of the university's English language foundation program in 2010. This program emphasizes alternative assessment techniques, such as Moodle activities, portfolios, projects, presentations, role-plays, and teacher-student conferences, and positions these techniques as an integral part of the learning process.

By supporting these forms of alternative assessment, English language foundation programs across Oman, such as that offered by SQU, seek to offer learners and teachers a number of potential benefits as described in Dikli (2003), the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction (1999), and Hamayan (1995). Academically, alternative assessment is believed to help students assume greater responsibility for their learning, to allow them to develop authentic skills that are demanded by real-life communication, and to give them a chance to engage a variety of learning styles and intelligences. Linguistically and socially, being involved in alternative assessment allows students to develop their core English language skills while also increasing their self-esteem, confidence, and motivation. These forms of assessment can also help teachers to achieve complex objectives and instill lifelong learning skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills, in their students, while also allowing them to maintain accurate and detailed documentation of student progress across the course of a semester or academic year. Finally, using alternative assessment offers administrators, parents, and other concerned stakeholders a clearer picture of student achievement and of teacher classroom practice and competence.

Despite these advantages, Dikli (2003) and Janisch, Liu, and Akrofi (2007) state that a number of issues exist that may prevent teachers from effectively employing alternative assessment techniques in their classrooms. These are often related to issues of subjectivity, reliability, and validity. For instance, teachers' differences in evaluating student work and students' tendency to copy from others may mean that alternative assessment can, in fact, contribute to the creation of a less effective learning environment. Moreover, applying some forms of alternative assessment, such as portfolios and projects, is often time-consuming and requires a great deal of attention from both learners and teachers. In addition, students, especially in con-



texts such as Oman where midterm and end-of-semester exams have traditionally been dominant measures of achievement, may lack motivation to fully engage in these forms of assessment, instead preferring to concentrate on passing “high-stakes” tests that they believe will have a greater impact on their academic progress.

Despite these areas of potential concern, alternative assessment remains an integral part of English language foundation programs in Oman’s tertiary institutions. However, as of yet, very few studies have examined teacher attitudes toward, and practices of, these techniques in their English classes. The current exploratory study sought to address this by administering a 13-item open-ended questionnaire to 10 teachers of SQU’s English foundation program. In doing so, it explored attitudes, practices, and challenges associated with the use of these forms of assessment in the Omani context.

## **2 Literature Review and Background**

### ***2.1 Alternative Assessment: Background and Techniques***

As stated above, standardized tests have long been considered the most reliable tool for assessing student knowledge and academic progress. Chirumbu (2013) states that these tests are often primarily aimed at providing students with feedback on how well they are performing in class, thereby offering insight into individual strengths and weaknesses, in addition to measuring student progress across a specific period of time. However, despite their traditional dominance in education settings, by the late 1990s, the importance of alternative forms of assessment began to be stressed in the USA. This was due, in large part, to the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments which resulted in states across the country, led by early reforms in Maryland and Kentucky, establishing new systems for measuring “non-mainstream” student achievement (Quenemoen, 2008). Ysseldyke and Oslen (1997, cited in Quenemoen, 2008) state that notions of alternative assessment at the time often focused on the measurement of authentic skills through using a variety of methods for recording student progress over time rather than in a single assessment event. As a result of these reforms, by 2003, almost all states across the USA had started to employ at least one alternative form of assessment in their schools.

The growing popularity of these forms of assessment is often linked with the potential benefits they can offer stakeholders. For example, authors and organizations such as Dikli (2003), the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction (1999), and Hamayan (1995) state that alternative assessment permits students to perform, demonstrate, and construct authentic tasks that they might come across in their everyday lives. Because learning styles differ among students, alternative assessment gives them opportunities to employ different learning styles and to use

a variety of intelligences. They also allow students to gain a clearer view of their academic performance and, in this way, become more self-aware and independent learners who take greater responsibility for their own learning. Moreover, alternative assessment can also increase the interaction between students and teachers and among students themselves. Linguistically speaking, alternative assessment highlights the importance of all language skills and not only of reading and/or writing like more traditional forms of assessment. Moreover, since the focus of alternative assessment is on the demonstration of students' strengths, these techniques can support students by developing these abilities, boosting their self-esteem and self-confidence, and positively influencing their attitudes toward learning.

In addition to the potential benefits that these forms of assessment can offer students, teachers, parents, and administrators can also benefit from implementing alternative assessment. For example, alternate assessment allows teachers to gain a more accurate understanding of student progress while also facilitating the achievement of more complicated learning outcomes that are related to critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-reflection skills. Alternative assessment can also provide teachers with a framework for managing and arranging student work, as is perhaps best exemplified by student portfolios. Administratively, alternative assessment techniques allow teachers to gather concrete evidence of student and teacher accomplishments and of the way the teaching and learning process has developed over a period of time. These forms of assessment, therefore, can give parents a clearer picture of what their children actually do at school and can offer administrators greater insight into the quality of teaching taking place in the classroom.

In spite of these advantages, authors such as Law and Eckes (1995), Bailey (1998), and Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2000) offer a number of potential disadvantages that are often associated with concerns of subjectivity, reliability, and validity. For instance, the reliance on student-produced work often raises the question of whether the final assessment product is, in fact, the learner's own. When cheating or copying has occurred, it becomes almost impossible to gauge learner progress and achievement, and the entire system of assessment no longer has merit. Moreover, alternative assessment can be time-consuming and requires a great deal of active and informed commitment from both students and teachers. Finally, teachers often report that it is difficult to judge, grade, and evaluate student achievement on products arising from alternative assessment, especially when compared to conventional tests which are generally easier to assign a score to.

Janisch et al. (2007) also highlight external and internal restraints associated with alternative assessment. In terms of external factors, the authors maintain that a lack of support from parents, administrators, and even teachers, in addition to the anxiety that students experience when being assessed by certain alternative techniques, can create barriers to their effective implementation. Internal restraints, on the other hand, include a lack of available classroom time to effectively implement alternative assessment techniques and a lack of motivation among students and teachers to engage with these techniques in meaningful ways. This may result in learners not devoting sufficient amounts of time to fully engage with alternative assessment and in teachers viewing them as a necessary, if ultimately futile, part of

the curriculum that must be adhered to though which offer very little value to the learning process. Janisch et al. continue that students who are used to more conventional classrooms, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, are more likely to encounter difficulties when dealing with alternative assessment tasks. Finally, the resources required to effectively engage with many forms of alternative assessment, such as books, portfolios, and folders, may also marginalize learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Despite these potential issues, different forms of alternative assessment have gained in popularity in EFL/ESL classrooms over the past 20 years. Some examples of these, according to the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction (1999), include projects, presentations and role-plays, writing samples, interviews, journals and learning logs, portfolios, teacher observations, student-teacher conferences, anecdotal records, and audio and video recordings. Portfolios remain one of the most widely used forms of alternative assessment. Worley (2001) defines portfolio as students' collected work that demonstrates their learning progress. Besides developing writing skills, portfolios can encourage students to become better decision-makers and producers of knowledge based on their self-reflections and engagement in the learning process. Observations, checklists, audio and video tapes, copies of student work and tests, and anecdotal records are all examples of the materials that could be included in a student portfolio. For educational portfolios to be implemented effectively, Worley states they must explore students' learning progress, increase the interaction between students and teachers, occur in a context that enhances student reflective thinking, and take place over a sufficient period of time to allow the progress to be noticeable.

In addition to portfolios, writing skills can also be assessed through a variety of alternative techniques. Worley (2001) offers examples of these as including diaries, journals or learning logs, and writing folders. Diaries often involve asking students to summarize their engagement in the learning process by, for example, reflecting on matters they have studied, recording moments of import in their lives, brainstorming topics, and offering an avenue for written interaction with teachers. Such practices can help increase students' abilities to draw links between their writing and what they have studied, in addition to highlighting the importance of writing skills for achieving social and academic purposes. These forms of assessment also allow teachers to learn more about their students and their ways of thinking and to even use student feedback to reassess their instruction.

Classroom projects, especially when group based, allow students to perform a more complex piece of work and also give teachers insight into their learners' abilities to assume specific roles with a team (Hamayan, 1995). The process of effectively assuming a role in a project, in addition to the final product itself, is an important indicator of learner progress in an EFL/ESL classroom and, in this way, allows students to develop their academic, language, and social skills. Conferences can also be used to assess academic performance. These can be peer-based or teacher-student conferences. Peer conferences involve about 5–6 students gathered together to offer their feedback about a particular piece of student work, including what the student did well and what they could do to improve in the future (Worley,

2001). On the other hand, according to Brown and Hudson (1998) and Worley, teacher-student conferences usually involve students and teachers in discussing students' learning processes in general and/or a specific piece of work. Teacher-student conferences offer students direct feedback while also eliciting student perceptions of the task and the obstacles they faced in completing it. In this way, both these forms of conferencing encourage students to gain an overview of their learning progress through the feedback received and can help students to improve their self-understanding, self-esteem, and their English language proficiency and to obtain a clearer understanding of their strengths and areas of potential improvement.

In addition to these forms of assessment, Worley (2001) states that technological tools such as videotapes, audiotapes, photographs, and slides are practical for recording student work throughout the learning process. Using such tools, of course, usually will not help teachers to evaluate student work by themselves but can assist students in self-assessment while offering an immediate and easily storable record of learner progress. Other forms of alternative assessment include interviews, role-plays, oral reports, and storytelling (Tannenbaum, 1996). However, this list is far from exhaustive, and these are just a small sample of a large number of alternative assessment techniques (see Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018).

## 2.2 *Alternative Assessment in the Arab Gulf*

Barlow and Coombe (2000) state that many of the nations of the Middle East and North Africa, including the Arab Gulf states, have traditionally relied almost exclusively on standardized tests as a strategy for assessing students. However, due to recent reforms in education systems across the region, alternative forms of assessment are gaining more popularity, especially in Arab Gulf institutions. According to the authors, alternative assessment was initially suggested in the mid-1990s in the Arab Gulf at the UAE University (UAEU) as a means of helping students and teachers move beyond assessment types that stress memorization and reproduction. As a result, by 2000 around 10% of student marks in English classes at the UAEU were assigned for alternative assessment tasks. Alghamdi (2013) states that Saudi Arabia has also started to reassess the assessment of students' academic performance by establishing a project named *Tatweer* ("progress") which aims at encouraging Saudi teachers to implement alternative forms of assessment that focus primarily on critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The project encourages teachers to do this by incorporating a variety of alternative assessment techniques as discussed above.

In Oman, Al Ruqeishi (2015) claims the importance of alternative assessment has been recognized since the introduction of the Basic Education curriculum to the public school system from academic year 1998/1999. The author continues that the sultanate's Ministry of Education maintains that support for alternative assessment in the reformed school curriculum is based on the belief that it is capable of "providing useful information about learning, and supporting and encouraging effective teaching and learning strategies" (p. 3). In Basic Education English classes in the

country, 40% of all grades are now devoted to alternative assessment with commonly used techniques including portfolios, projects, presentations, observations, and so on.

In the English language foundation program of SQU's Language Centre (now renamed the Centre for Preparatory Studies), which is the current research site, alternative forms of assessment are used to evaluate students across all core language skills. According to the Language Centre's Curriculum Unit's (n.d.) *Foundation Programme English Language Curriculum Document*:

FPEL students carry out a variety of project types, ranging from creating a basic portfolio of their course work, making reports based on interviews and surveys, and doing individual research projects on a topic of their choice, to oral presentations and library/internet-based work. (p. 4)

At the research site, computer-assisted language learning materials are also used with many of these based on the Moodle platform including self-directed, online reading and vocabulary practice. Portfolios, as the above quote demonstrates, are commonly used in the English foundation program and are intended to develop learners' skills and independence in addition to encouraging their sense of ownership of their work. Foundation program teachers also employ student presentations, informal short talks, and longer academic talks to evaluate student progress. By the end of each semester, students are required to complete a project addressing a specific topic usually related to their major. These projects often involve research, interviews, and even, at times, pair and/or group work. The final product involves students demonstrating their results to the class in a formal presentation in addition to the submission of a project folder which contains a report and evidence of their engagement with each stage of the project process.

However, despite the extent to which alternative assessment is becoming more widely used in English classes in the Arab Gulf region in general and in Oman in particular, as of yet very little research has looked at teacher engagement with these forms of assessment. For these reasons, the current exploratory research involved administering a 13-item open-ended questionnaire to 10 English language foundation teachers at SQU's Language Centre to examine both their attitudes toward, and practices of, alternative assessment techniques.

### 3 Method

In order to examine these attitudes and practices, the following research questions were posited:

1. What forms of alternative assessment do SQU English language foundation program teachers employ in their classes?
2. What are teachers' attitudes toward alternative assessment techniques?

A two-part, open-ended questionnaire was distributed to participants. The first section elicited participants' demographic details, and the second section focused on attitudes toward, and practices of, alternative assessment techniques. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative research design was employed as it was considered more conducive to examining important trends and nuances that have not yet received focused investigative attention. However, the qualitative approach was limited to an open-ended questionnaire and did not employ interviews, observations, or other data collection techniques that can yield qualitative data. This was due to both the desire of the researchers to gain an overview of participant attitudes toward, and practices associated with, alternative assessment at the research site, and time constraints associated with conducting the research project toward the end of the academic year.

Items on the questionnaire were based on major themes in relation to alternative assessment that emerged from the literature. Each of the themes taken from the literature was then associated with one or two questionnaire items. These items were adapted to the local context based on both the authors' experiences as researchers and instructors at the research site and on their previous theoretical explorations of assessment issues (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018; Denman & Al-Mahrooqi, 2018). Once defined, these items were then presented to a panel of three academics which included professors of education and linguistics and academic English instructors who were employed at the research site, but who were not involved in the research, for their consideration. The number and wording of questionnaire items was modified in-line with the feedback received. Resultant questionnaire items were:

1. Can you briefly describe how students are assessed in the English language foundation program?
2. What do you believe to be the strengths of this assessment system?
3. What do you believe to be the weaknesses of the assessment system?
4. Do you believe alternative forms of assessment are an important part of the English classroom? Why or why not?
5. Can you describe what you believe to be the ideal relationship between traditional and alternative forms of assessment in the English classroom?
6. What forms of alternative assessment, if any, are used in the English foundation program?
7. What language and study skills, if any, can be developed through the use of different forms of alternative assessment?
8. Can you offer some specific examples of how different forms of alternative assessment have contributed to the development of your learners' English language and study skills?
9. In your experience, what forms of alternative assessment, if any, do students prefer?
10. Overall, how would you describe your students' attitudes toward alternative assessment?
11. How would you describe your own attitudes toward using alternative forms of assessment in your classroom?
12. What are the major challenges, if any, to the effective implementation of alternative forms of assessment in the English foundation program?
13. In your opinion, how can these challenges be overcome?

Participants were recruited through a process of convenience sampling. Although random sampling would have been preferable, the exploratory nature of the study combined with the relatively narrow timeframe for conducting it meant that this sampling approach was considered to be the most appropriate. In addition, the researchers' previous experiences with recruiting random samples at the research site had yielded very low response rates in previous investigations. Given the qualitative approach adopted and its associated expectations of greater participant input and time commitment than a purely quantitative approach based on, for example, the exclusive use of a closed-item questionnaire, the researchers believed that convenience sampling would offer the greatest chance of recruiting a dedicated sample with relatively low withdrawal rates.

For the sampling process, the researchers informed potential teacher participants at the research site of the nature of the research and invited them to participate. After being informed of the study's voluntary nature and of issues of anonymity and the right of withdrawal, a sample of ten teachers (seven females and three males) employed in SQU's English language foundation program was collected. Participants included three Omanis, two British, two New Zealanders, an Australian, an American, and one participant who did not indicate nationality. Eight participants had fewer than 4 years of teaching experience in total, while the two remaining participants had between 7 and 10 years. In addition to teaching in Oman, four participants had taught in the United Arab Emirates, while the remaining participants had not taught elsewhere in the Arab Gulf region.

The qualitative data collected by the questionnaire was analyzed through a framework analysis approach. In this approach, a framework comprised of understandings drawn from the literature and from the researchers' knowledge of assessment practices at the research site was applied. Emergent themes that developed through the application of this framework to the data were associated with specific codes and categories, with these then reapplied to the data to explore areas of overlap and divergence. This approach allowed for an understanding of a number of issues related to alternative assessment through participants' own perspectives. It gave sufficient time and space in the analysis process for some of the more nuanced topics that were explored in the questionnaire to be recorded and reported in relation to emergent themes. Themes and subthemes are reported below, in addition to examples of participant responses that highlight these.

## 4 Results

Participants were first asked to offer a brief description of how students are generally assessed in the university's English language foundation program and of the strengths and weaknesses of the current system. Respondents highlighted a combination of traditional and alternative forms of assessment. More traditional forms of assessment included midterms and final exams, which focus on the skills of reading, listening, and writing, in addition to reading and vocabulary quizzes. Alternative



forms of assessment that are currently used include portfolios, presentations, Moodle activities, and projects, in addition to marks assigned for student participation. Participants identified a number of strengths and weaknesses of this system. For example, two participants stated that midterm and end-of-semester exams are generally beneficial because they help prevent the cheating and copying often associated with alternative assessment at the research site. However, another respondent claimed that these tests lack validity because:

There seems to be a gap between what the students are taught or asked to practice and the mid-term exam style. For example, the students are taught listening via note-taking while in the exam the students listen to a clip and answer questions.

Participants also identified a number of concerns with alternative assessment at the research site. Four respondents claimed that alternative assessment lacks objectivity and reliability. That is, they maintained that teachers differ in how they evaluate and grade student-produced work. Some participants argued that alternative assessment techniques, such as portfolios, could hardly be considered learning tools because “everyone grades differently and many teachers automatically give 5 [the full mark] and never even read the portfolio.” In addition, two participants believed cheating and copying from other students also threatened the utility of alternative forms of assessment in the foundation program. One participant asserted that “students can collaborate (‘cheat’), portfolios also can involve some collaboration/copying and also some last minute completion of requirements which may not facilitate learning.” Participants also claimed that alternative forms of assessment were time-consuming and required online access which some students do not have off-campus. Some participants added that alternative assessment may deal with topics that are unrelated to the curriculum and/or to students’ majors.

Half of the participants believed that more traditional and more alternative forms of assessment in the foundation program are not complementary because they both assess the same outcomes. In addition to this concern, some respondents maintained that what is learned and acquired through the use of some forms of alternative assessment, such as vocabulary logs, does not help students enrich or develop their language skills because they merely copy information from a source without any real engagement. One participant claimed that, because students are given grades for the sake of helping them pass rather than as a way of enhancing their learning, alternative assessment cannot be effectively applied at the research site. On the other hand, five participants claimed that both traditional and alternative assessment can act together to cover course objectives and to develop specific skills. These participants stated that more traditional forms of assessment are associated with the development of specific skills in areas such as grammar and spelling, while alternative assessment broadly encourages the development of “productive skills” across the core skill areas. Similarly, other participants also claimed that the ability of alternative assessment to improve core language skills consequently helps learners to perform better in formal assessment.

Participants highlighted many different forms of alternative assessment that are implemented in the foundation program. Around seven participants use Moodle,



which includes online reading and vocabulary quizzes and activities that address different language skills such as grammar and listening. Portfolios are another form of alternative assessment that is widely used, while other participants stated that they used presentations and projects. Other forms of alternative assessment mentioned included reports, role-plays, and interviews. In terms of grades allocated to alternative assessment across the semester, three participants assign between 17% and 25%, while six teachers assign 26%–45% (the final participant did not specify marks offered).

Focusing on the language and study skills that could be developed through the use of different forms of alternative assessment, six participants claimed that Moodle online quizzes and activities develop vocabulary and reading comprehension, listening, grammar, and test-taking skills. Participants also believed that portfolios developed skills such as reading, vocabulary, grammar, researching, study skills, and writing. Two participants claimed that the skills developed through portfolio activities depend “on what options the teacher includes and what the students choose for their activities.” Eight participants believed that projects and presentations developed skills associated with vocabulary, reading, grammar, note-taking, paraphrasing, research skills, speaking, and study skills. Additionally, speaking assessment, such as interviews and role-plays, was maintained by participants to help develop skills of “grammar, fluency, accuracy, and vocab.” Other skills that were generally believed to be improved through the use of alternative assessment included being independent, critical thinking, essay writing, analyzing, summarizing, and being able to effectively collaborate.

Half of participants also identified projects as one of the most important ways in which research skills, such as finding relevant information, summarizing, paraphrasing, note-taking, referencing, and public speaking, etc., can be developed. In addition, three participants agreed that portfolios can have a positive impact on the development of time management skills, independent learning, and organizational skills. One respondent also stated that Moodle Reader is “good for teaching students how a (basic) library functions” while adding that doing a project and answering activities on Moodle teaches students computer-related skills. Due to the wide array of skills covered here, participants largely maintained that alternative forms of assessment can help learners to meet almost all prescribed course objectives as offered by the curriculum document, with projects and portfolios highlighted as being especially beneficial.

When asked about the forms of alternative assessment that students prefer, respondents maintained that such preferences were often largely based on individual learner traits. For example, respondents claimed that those learners who like speaking prefer presentations, while those who like writing prefer the written part of the project and so on. However, despite the individuality of preferences expressed here, several participants claimed that students generally prefer online activities, such as Moodle Reader and Moodle vocabulary activities, with two respondents highlighting how students “find the stories they read interesting.” Two participants also believed that presentations are favored by a majority of students, while three respondents claimed that students prefer doing projects since they are collaborative

and often can integrate multimedia resources. Participants also believed that students generally performed the best when they were engaged in their preferred forms of alternative assessment, even though this was tempered by the belief that some of this preference is associated with the ease with which students can copy or cheat during a particular alternative assessment technique.

In relation to student attitudes toward alternative assessment, five participants claimed that their learners hold positive attitudes. One respondent claimed that this positivity is most likely due to the similarity between these assessment techniques and the teaching techniques that learners encountered during Basic Education schooling. Another participant claimed that some students like working collaboratively in projects; however, two participants believed that students hold negative attitudes toward alternative assessment because “often they don’t want to do these assessments as they see them taking a lot of time, for few points. They don’t seem to link them to the fact that they may help their English abilities.” Three participants maintained that learners held neither positive nor negative attitudes toward alternative assessment, while others offered that good students will hold positive attitudes and low-performing students will generally see these forms of assessment as an opportunity to copy other’s work.

Regarding participants’ own attitudes toward the use of alternative assessment, almost all teachers claimed that they were generally necessary and useful in their classrooms. This positivity was associated with the belief that, although it may take some time for students to become aware of the importance and potential value of alternative assessment, they can nonetheless help “foster some independence” in learners. When asked about challenges associated with the implementation of alternative assessment at the research site, four participants thought that no barriers should exist if these assessment forms were properly implemented. The remaining six respondents, on the other hand, highlighted a number of challenges including teacher irresponsibility and incompetence with alternative assessment and subjectivity in marking. This final point is highlighted by one respondent who claimed:

I know one teacher who awarded every student in his class full marks for the portfolio because they all handed in a complete file. But the file should be checked to make sure the students are actually doing each part when and how they should – e.g. that they are doing weekly vocab. logging and they actually know the vocab.

Three participants highlighted the challenge, already offered several times above, of cheating and copying between students. These participants claimed that widespread cheating means alternative assessment in the research site lacks validity since there is no accurate evidence of student achievement. One participant also found it difficult to carry out some forms of alternative assessment with their class due to a lack of internet access in the classroom or “lab access hours.” Other challenges offered included teachers’ ages – that is, older teachers were believed to be not familiar with these forms of assessment – and fear of change. One participant declared that “if they are done properly by teachers and students then they’re great and accurate enough and useful, however if they’re not done properly then what’s the point?”

Participants offered a number of ways in which these challenges could be overcome. These included introducing different forms of alternative assessment at the beginning of each academic year to familiarize learners with the advantages they offer. A number of participants also maintained that teachers could seek to match these forms of assessment to students' different learning styles and preferences in order to make them more engaging and individualized and, in this way, decrease the possibility of copying or cheating. Furthermore, it was suggested that teachers should become familiar with the marks awarded to different forms of alternative assessment on their courses – including how these are broken down into different aspects of the assessment process – in order to discourage them from automatically assigning full grades to these forms of assessment.

## 5 Discussion

Results indicate that teachers in SQU's English language foundation program use a variety of alternative assessment techniques in their classes, including portfolios, projects, interviews, Moodle readers and quizzes, presentations, and so on. They also generally hold positive attitudes toward these forms of assessment. For example, almost all participants felt that alternative assessment techniques are necessary and useful and can promote learner independence. Participants also claimed that they can help meet almost all foundation program objectives while developing a wide variety of core language, higher-order thinking, and personal skills. Participants claimed that students largely hold positive attitudes toward these forms of assessment because they often involve collaborative work and may represent a continuation from the kinds of work activities they performed in their Basic Education schools. However, teachers also maintained that these attitudes may be dependent on learner ability, with higher-level learners preferring alternative forms of assessment and lower-level learners holding negative attitudes and being more likely to copy or cheat.

Participants described a number of potential challenges associated with alternative assessment. Many of these, following Dikli (2003), were related to issues of subjectivity, validity, and reliability. In particular, respondents highlighted how teachers automatically offering full marks for alternative assessment, in addition to widespread copying and cheating, mean that these techniques are not as effectively implemented in the research site as they could be. A lack of time was also considered another potential challenge to their effective implementation. Janisch et al. (2007) state that, for alternative assessment to be effectively employed, a great deal of time is necessary. However, participants reported that classroom time was often limited, thereby making the effective implementation of alternative assessment forms more difficult. Students at the research site often study between 18 and 24 h a week in the foundation program, including English, math, and IT, and the difficulties they have in balancing this already quite heavy workload may lead to a

lack of engagement with their alternative assessments and/or the apparently high levels of cheating that was reported to occur here.

Respondents also offered a number of steps that could be taken at the research site to overcome these areas of concern. These included familiarizing students with the alternative assessment techniques used on courses at the start of each semester, trying to individualize these forms of assessment as much as possible in order to increase learner engagement and decrease the possibility of cheating, and informing teachers about marks and marking criteria that apply to different alternative assessments to avoid them automatically assigning full marks to their students' work. Following these suggestions may help teachers at the research site overcome some of their reservations about alternative assessment, therefore helping ensure that they are more effectively employed in the English language foundation program.

Despite these suggestions, a number of limitations necessarily impact upon these. The 10 participants featured in the current exploratory research represent only a small part of the wider population of all teachers on SQU's English language foundation program (currently around 200), and so any claims of representativeness or external validity must necessarily be heavily qualified. Moreover, the research only sought the opinions of teachers and not of other stakeholders such as students, administrators, professors in SQU's colleges, and so on, thereby offering a necessarily narrow view of the issue. In addition, data collection only took place through the use of a somewhat limited open-ended questionnaire featuring 13 questions which necessarily limited the depth of data collection, while no attempts to triangulate data through interviews, observations, journals, or so on occurred. For these reasons, future research could adopt an expanded methodological approach that seeks the input of various stakeholders and also examines how the use of alternative assessment techniques actually contributes to learner progress and achievement.

## 6 Conclusion

Despite the potential impact of these limitations, the findings of the current exploratory study suggest that teachers on an English language foundation program in an Omani university are largely aware of the value of alternative assessment, even if they identify a number of potential barriers to its effective implementation. That is, many of the participants featured in the study understood the value of alternative assessment as an extension to classroom instruction processes, in addition to a way of motivating learners and giving them the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in real-life situations. However, despite these potential advantages, participants expressed concern about such issues as the reliability, validity, and subjectivity of alternative forms of assessment (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018).

Given the fact that instructors, students, and other stakeholders would all arguably benefit from a more systematic and well-defined approach to alternative assessment at the research site, it is important that its use is reviewed in order to address

these challenges and ensure that alternative forms of assessment are effectively implemented in ways that benefit all.

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# Teachers Doing Research with Their Own Students: A Blessing or a Curse?



Issa Al-Hinai

**Abstract** For teachers who conduct research with their own students in the Omani tertiary education context, having a dual role as both researcher and teacher may create power imbalances that could affect students' decisions about research participation. Although such an asymmetric power relation raises several significant ethical questions, this issue has received little attention in Oman in the past two decades. This paper critically discusses how some ethical principles (e.g., potential benefit to research participants, informed consent, and confidentiality) are undermined by such discrepancies in teacher-student power relations. It then offers recommendations for future practices addressed to teacher-researchers and to the organizations where these people conduct their work. These recommendations are offered as guidelines for instructors who conduct research with their own students and also seek to encourage researchers to explicitly acknowledge some of the issues associated with asymmetrical power relationships in the classroom.

**Keywords** Asymmetric power · Research participants' benefits · Confidentiality · English Language Teaching (ELT) · Foundation program · Informed consent

## 1 Introduction

Conducting research with one's own students in tertiary education contexts in Oman poses several significant ethical challenges which have a number of important ethical implications. Despite their importance, many of these ethical issues have received little attention in the literature in recent years (Putten & Nolen, 2007), with this especially being the case in Oman. In the words of the applied linguist Cicourel (2003, p. 361), "We often lack clear guidelines for designing and pursuing field research that would indicate the kinds of problems associated with gaining access, sustaining it and exiting gracefully."

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For Omani tertiary-level teachers who conduct research with their own students, performing the dual roles of researcher and teacher is one of the most significant challenges. In fact, the adoption of these roles in the classroom may create undue influences and power imbalances that could affect students' decision-making regarding their participation in research. According to Putten and Nolen (2007), students are often "unlikely to possess the independence needed to decline taking part in studies conducted by researchers on whom they are dependent for achieving learning outcomes and for assigning final grades" (p. 402). This asymmetrical power relationship that exists between teachers and students raises a number of issues that must be taken into account when tertiary-level Omani teachers plan research with their own classes.

It is for these reasons that I maintain that throwing learners straight into the deep end of their teachers' educational research studies – especially in the Omani context where many students even at the tertiary level have never been involved in any form of research before – will most likely result in panic and a real fear of ever participating in research again. Based on this belief, I offer a discussion of this issue so that teacher-researchers in the Omani context, and in other contexts where similar dilemmas arise, are better able to identify some of the issues concerned and to consider how these might be dealt with.

As such, this paper first provides an overview of the guidelines often provided to teacher-researchers to conduct their projects and discusses issues of power relations as dealt with in the literature. It then outlines some of the dilemmas that Omani teacher-researchers may encounter, with a specific focus on the issues of sampling, informed consent, and confidentiality. Bearing in mind that teacher-student power imbalances and even a lack of respect for student autonomy may contribute to the violation of a number of important ethical concerns in the Omani tertiary context, the paper then discusses how the rights of research participants (i.e., students) in Oman's tertiary education organizations could be protected through teacher-researchers being more aware of these issues and explicitly taking them into account when designing and implementing their research projects.

## **2 Literature Review and Background**

The first part of this paper considers the type of guidance often provided to teacher-researchers about how to conduct their studies in Oman's universities, colleges, and other higher educational institutions, while also exploring how issues of power relations are addressed in the literature. Educational research in the Omani tertiary education context has gained increasing attention during the last two decades. Teacher-led research is often seen as a practical, yet still systematic, approach that enables teachers to reflect upon different teaching and learning issues and the dilemmas they encounter during their everyday practice (Putten & Nolen, 2007). Unfortunately, there is, to the best of my knowledge, no single source of ethical guidelines for teacher-researchers in Oman that may help them plan and conduct



their research projects. As a result, teacher-researchers in the sultanate often follow the ethical principles that are endorsed by research associations such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011). BERA promotes ethical guidelines that are often concerned with themes such as harm, consent, privacy, and confidentiality (Punch, 1994). Central to conducting ethical teacher research is teachers' asymmetrical power relationships with their own students. Borg (2010, pp. 393–394) states that these relationships exist because “teacher-student interactions tend to take place in situations where the teacher holds dominance of the communication.”

Although there is a great deal of literature on educational research that addresses concerns related to ethical research conduct (e.g., Master, 2005; McKay, 2006; Mcnamee & Bridges, 2005), the work done on teachers' asymmetrical power relationships in these contexts has not adequately explored such concerns as students' rights of participation in their teachers' research projects and so on. The Omani context is no exception. However, the issue of teacher authority looms large in research by teachers as they conduct studies on their generally powerless – or, at least, highly dependent – students (Erickson, 2006). The argument regarding the application of this authority to achieve research goals remains controversial.

On one hand, Yee and Andrews (2006) believe that, though researchers might not be prepared to deal with all the dilemmas they encounter, such a powerful authority remains essential when conducting research. Mitchell (2004) and Borg (2010) assert that teacher-researchers are the most appropriate people to do research on their own students since external researchers are unfamiliar with their particular characteristics and needs. In this, I agree with Hull (1985) that external researchers' unfamiliarity with students could ostensibly raise several ethical questions about their presence in the classroom while also contributing to the possibility of a lack of valid and reliable data. Researchers such as Guillemin and Gillam (2004) and Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) also claim that, when unexpected incidents in fieldwork arise, they can often only be resolved by researchers who are in a powerful position and therefore who have the ability to immediately resolve them. Teachers being familiar with students could help make research access and communication about goals and results easier and could even result in the generation of more fruitful and pertinent results.

However, as Taber (2007) claims, there is also the risk that “if the teacher was also the researcher, and keen to collect the data, the students might feel under pressure to give up their free time and take part in an activity that may potentially make them feel uncomfortable” (p. 139). Therefore, in contexts where teachers hold authority over students and students are hesitant to express their objections, “the risk of involuntary consent-based participation might be relatively high” (Marshall, 2001, p. 243). This could be argued to be the case in Oman where teachers are still afforded a relatively high social status and where open disagreement between people is usually frowned up. Within this context, I believe an external researcher would probably be a good choice to carry out the research in a more ethical manner (Taber, 2007).

In brief, the approach taken to conducting research with instructors' own students should ideally fit both the particular context and the needs of the students



(Borg, 2010). Subsequently, in a context like Omani tertiary education settings, it is important that teachers should not simultaneously act as both researchers and as agents of authority (Hammack, 1997) as this may conflict with their primary roles of helping meet students' learning needs. Mirvis and Seashore (1982) noted that most ethical dilemmas that arise in studies conducted by teacher-researchers arise because the roles of teacher and researcher are often clearly inconsistent with each other. This often causes teachers to misuse their power over students in order to conduct their research.

### **3 Ethical Principles and Practices and Asymmetrical Power Relations**

At the heart of these ethical dilemmas is the fact that, when teachers in Omani tertiary institutions recruit their own students as research participants, they often feel torn between the professional demands of their roles as researcher and their sensitivity to, and understandings of, issues of researcher power (Yee & Andrews, 2006). This section explicitly acknowledges the source of tension and seeks to understand it through an exploration of some of the most important ethical issues that teacher-researchers need to take into account when planning and conducting their research in Omani institutions and colleges.

#### ***3.1 Benefit to Research Participants***

It has been argued that participation in research projects where teachers recruit their own students should be mutually beneficial for both the researcher and respondents (Marvasti, 2004). Hammack (1997) states that participation in a research study should not have any negative effects on participants and that "any risks or benefits that may follow must be communicated to potential participants before they agree to participate" (p. 254). Teacher-researchers in some cases, and perhaps especially in Oman given the relative lack of debate about many of the issues offered here, may often focus exclusively on the advantages that research participation can offer their students while neglecting the potential dangers involved. That is, they might believe that, when they recruit their own students, they are empowered as both students and people through such participation and that issues of power imbalances are not significant. This perspective is encapsulated by the belief that "the possible exploitation of students by teachers to gain benefits from research should not really be an ethical issue" (Mitchell, 2004, p. 1430) in those cases where the purpose of the research is to supplement the learning and teaching process.

Putten and Nolen (2007) expressed their disagreement with this perspective by highlighting constraints associated with student research participation, including

fear of the negative consequences of nonparticipation. For example, how would researchers deal with a situation when a participant could not do their preferred activity, such as watching TV after school, because their teacher has arrived to conduct an interview? In such situations, participants may think that their teachers are asserting control over their decision to participate, which leaves them powerless.

Another issue that might arise as a result of the asymmetric power relationship between students and teachers is the belief that teachers conduct research only as a means of achieving personal benefit and that there are no potential benefits for participants. For example, Smith, Thomas, Williams, and Moody-Ayers (2001) reported that students often expressed suspicion about the motives of investigators and believed these to center around their drive for money, status, and prestige. As this demonstrates, unfortunately not all potential participants are aware of the mutual benefit that research might accomplish, and many teacher-researchers do not make the effort to explain these matters to their students as they believe that they know what is best for their learners. Such an issue can be detected at the tertiary context in Oman as well, as it perhaps occurs more frequently in more traditional, teacher-centered classrooms such as those still often encountered across the sultanate. Here, I agree with Borg (2010) that teachers adopting an “I know best” attitude toward their students’ research participation could damage their trust and willingness to participate in future research.

### ***3.2 Informed Consent***

Informed consent is a principle of respect for research participants. BERA (2011) clearly states the requirement that participants in a research study, or their guardians, have the right to be informed about the likely risks and potential consequences involved in participation. However, from the perspective of some teacher-researchers, including those working in the Omani context, informed consent is often viewed as a significant burden because the task of creating the necessary documents to obtain it can be time-consuming, and the time delay can dampen the researcher’s enthusiasm for investigating a quickly emerging educational issue. Therefore, an argument exists among those teachers that consent does not necessarily extend to researching daily classroom activities. Moreover, the argument goes, as research on students is a natural part of the educational process and as it is of benefit to teachers, students, and society alike, there is no need to obtain students’ informed consent in educational setting where the researcher is also the teacher.

However, I believe such an argument could lead to a lack of awareness among teacher-researchers in Omani institutions about the ways in which they present themselves to their Omani participants may affect both their ability to obtain consent in other research contexts and also the quality of their data. In such cases where teachers carry out research with their own students, it can be difficult to be certain whether students have voluntarily consented or if the teacher’s authority has compelled students to participate. A possible consequence of this is that students appear

to be willing to cooperate but actually only do so out of concern about how they will be graded if they do not consent.

Stocker's (2012) study about the ethical challenges faced by teacher-researchers in the Taiwanese higher education context reported that students' involuntary consent-based participation was high because teachers exercised authority over students and students were powerless to express their objections as this might have negative academic consequences for them. Al-Husseini (2005) also made similar claims about student participation in the Omani tertiary education system. The author stated that some Omani students might consent to participate in their teachers' research not only out of fear of potential negative academic consequences but also because they wished to please their teachers and to strengthen their relationships with them. This may be a particular issue in a nation like Oman which is perhaps the most traditional of the Arab Gulf states and where teachers are still generally accorded high levels of respect by their students.

In order to avoid some of these ethical dilemmas in contexts like the Omani tertiary environment, I agree with Marshall (2001) that teacher-researchers must develop research plans that include detailed and ethical methods for sampling that explicitly highlight how this can be achieved without placing undue pressure on their students. As one way of limiting the influence of the researcher's authority as a teacher over their students, Stocker (2012) recommends teacher-researchers seek student participation at the end of their courses when they have received their grades. I believe that such a course of action may reduce the conflict between the role of the teacher as a grade-giving authority and their role as researcher. Though Homan (2002) argues that delaying seeking participant consent until student grades are assigned might decrease the number of the respondents, I agree with Stocker that adhering to such timing would "significantly reduce any undue pressure on students to consent to participate in a teacher's research project" (p. 3). Within Omani tertiary contexts, where student grades are often dominated by high stakes end-of-semester testing, this may prove especially beneficial.

### ***3.3 Participant Confidentiality***

The issue of participant confidentiality is concerned with who has the right and eligibility to access participant data and with ensuring participant anonymity in all documents that arise from the research (Biggs & Milligan, 2001). Morrow and Richards (1996) argue that participants should be entitled to the highest degree of confidentiality and privacy in research. Accordingly, teacher-researchers in the Omani tertiary context should always strive to ensure that their participants benefit from the utmost confidentiality during the research process. In my experience, in Oman, teacher-researchers often obtain oral consent from their students individually in the classroom in the belief that this is sufficient for them to carry out their research projects. Some commentators, such as Morrow and Richards (1996), argue

that such a technique could help offer participants complete autonomy in deciding whether to participate in research studies conducted by their teachers or not.

However, other scholars view this course of action as asking participants to relinquish their autonomy while also giving legal protection for teacher-researchers from any possible future consequences (see Al-Badwawi, 2012). Al-Badwawi conducted a study with her own students in the Omani tertiary education context and reported that her previous good relationship with participants had a negative influence on their participation. That is, because of her position as a teacher, the author claimed her students were reluctant to explicitly express their views about issues they considered to be sensitive. These are examples of how ongoing teacher-student relationships may have either positive or negative histories and involve unequal power relationships between teachers and students.

These power differentials sometimes undermine teachers' efforts to ensure their students confidentiality. Confidentiality may be compromised merely by the fact that people within the field of the research community associate a teacher-researcher with a particular class of students during data collection, which means that they are likely to be able to easily identify participants. This makes reporting the research particularly difficult even with the use of pseudonyms and vague descriptions. This situation may also be quite common in the Omani context due to the relatively small size of the population and the strong family relationships that often exist between people in the same region. In these contexts, teacher-researchers must take special care to ensure their participants' confidentiality and/or anonymity (Zeni, 2001) and must also be aware that this can never be truly "guaranteed."

Online data collection instruments are becoming more commonly used in Oman with the increasing penetration of the Internet and other communication technologies across the country. However, when teacher-researchers conduct research with their own students but possess a limited understanding of what is sometimes still "new" technology to them, they may not be able to adequately protect the data from loss (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003). When this is the case, teacher-researchers must take steps to ensure that appropriate precautions are taken to protect the confidentiality of participant data such as using encrypted servers; password protecting all data files arising from the research; never explicitly linking identifying information, such as names and student numbers, to data; and so on. Teacher-researchers should also be aware of their institutions' guidelines about how long data should be stored and about the processes in place for destroying data once the mandatory storage time period has elapsed.

Many of the above dilemmas emphasize the need to understand research confidentiality from the students' perspectives (Williamson, Goodenough, Kent, & Ashcroft, 2005). The Omani student is no exception. Such an understanding may help to achieve this confidentiality as students in tertiary institutions in Oman must feel no implicit or explicit stress to participate, and they must also be made to understand that their decision about participation will not result in any negative social or academic consequences. To make sure that a teacher's authority does not compel their students to participate, a number of issues need to be taken into account. These are discussed below.

## 4 Recommendations and Implications

Perhaps the main question arising from the above consideration is: Can instructors in Omani tertiary colleges and institutions conduct research on their own students given the asymmetrical power relationship that exists between them? With proper planning and consideration, I believe that the answer is a qualified yes. I think that, for teacher-researchers to conduct research on their own students and to make it a legitimate knowledge creation exercise, they need to pay special attention to the issues of power relations discussed above. This is especially important in the Omani tertiary context.

For Omani teachers, it is preferable, given the dual and often conflicting roles of teacher and researcher and to ensure that participants benefit from research, to turn over the running of the research to an external researcher who does not have a pre-existing relationship with potential participants. This could help guarantee that students can decide to participate voluntarily and, if they decided to opt out of the research, that there would be no negative consequences. In addition, teacher-researchers in Omani contexts should construct consent forms that explicitly specify that there are no negative consequences for refusing to participate in their teacher's study and that student grades will not be affected by the decision to participate or not.

Regarding establishing as democratic a relationship as possible with participants, teacher-researchers in these tertiary colleges and institutions have to make sure that their authority does not compel or coerce students to participate in their research projects. By doing so, I believe that participants would be able to become active and informed parts of the decision-making process in all research phases, with this ultimately having a number of potential benefits for both researchers and students. Teacher-researchers in Oman should ensure that they are fully acquainted with the ethical issues associated with their asymmetric power relations with their students. When adopting dual or multiple roles, the researcher has to clearly foresee expected issues that may arise that are associated with the consent process (MRU Human Research Ethics Board, 2012). Teacher-researchers should consider basic human ethics issues, such as mutual benefits and data confidentiality, that are posed by their research.

Tertiary education institutions and research organizations, including those in Oman, should prepare and train their teachers and research professionals to deal with complex dual-role issues associated with conducting research. Creating forums and scholarly networks to provide such support and guidance could be a helpful aid. In addition, Omani tertiary institutions should teach their education students about ways in which they can gain consent in educational contexts without pressuring their future students through an exercise of asymmetrical power. Such steps may, I believe, help ensure their students' participation without any coercion or inducement. By doing so, any possible negative effects that may arise from teacher-researcher authority over students can be mitigated, and the ethical challenges of teachers conducting research with their own students can be better understood and

explicitly addressed. Further research should also be carried to address any Omani-specific ethical issues, including those related to sociocultural concerns, that may arise with teachers doing research with their students in Omani educational settings. Such research might develop ethical guidelines for teacher-researchers in Oman that can help them better plan and conduct their research projects.

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# Incorporating Intercultural Research into ELL/ELT in Oman



Gayane R. Hovhannisyan

**Abstract** Separated from the general paradigm of linguistic education by its volume and significance, ELT is widely recognized as a discipline with two traditional research spheres: the contents and the methodology. A policy aspect in many countries and regions is considered to be a meta-context for ELT, while in those nations where English is practically the only foreign language, it is identified as the relationship of L1 and L2 calling forth a sharper contrast within the context of language power and control. Oman faces the paradoxical situation of having both the need for, and resistance toward, English. This analytical chapter proposes an intercultural research perspective of three aspects – cognitive, communicative, and cultural – of not only teaching but also of learning as a process and consequence of cultural and historical premises. English language learning and teaching (ELL/ELT) research is proposed as an option to disperse and balance the potential conflict through the multilateral extension of research contents into its psycholinguistic depth and corresponding methodologies. The proposed outline of the principles of ELL/ELT research aims at providing language policymakers and curriculum developers with a conceptual basis for systematic content and methodology approach.

**Keywords** Language learning and teaching · Intercultural research · Culture · Cognition · Communication

## 1 Introduction

In the rapidly changing world, the content and structure of education, and particularly, higher education of any country, reflect the changing needs of its culture, policy, and economy. Language education as a separate paradigm in many countries and regions is analyzed within the larger context of education, language policy, and sociocultural development (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2015; Figueras, 2009; Sercombe & Tupas, 2014; Swaffar & Urlaub, 2014). Regarding the broader context

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of competency-based education and learning outcomes, language education has been one of the most advanced and flexible fields due to the expansion of communication technologies, globalization, and the clearly international role of the English language. Following the IT sphere, language education is apparently the only one that has developed several aspects of learning outcomes, assessment, and certification systems based on knowledge and performance descriptors. However, having their cultural and educational traditions, language and communication competencies for each country are formed of different sets of values – constants and variables – reflecting the actual and political perspectives of the field in the region or the state.

Oman, in this respect, stands among other rapidly developing countries with its strong tendency and potential for launching a unique language education policy through experiencing and incorporating the best of what the world can offer, searching for solutions to constraints and conflicts between imported and local values. Together with the import of the best practices of the West, having recognized the importance of the English language as an enabler of sustainable development (Nunan, Tyacke, & Walton, 1987), the government of Oman encourages and supports research in English language learning and teaching. However, research is not yet well rooted in many of the country's institutions: the infrastructure and communication channels still have to establish practices and perspectives. However, despite the awareness and sometimes implacable criticism of the ELL/ELT situation (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Al-Issa, 2015), the discursive study material collected from students and teachers – perceptions and opinions – is chronologically and objectively unstable. The critical analyses of contexts and situations propose further steps to the construction of a methodology that would be consistent with the ideologies and policies in practice (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2010; Al-Issa, 2015).

It should be noted that there are practically no concurrent foreign languages taught at the higher educational institutions of Oman, and English dominates as the main foreign component in higher language education. Thus, the problem of language education and policy from the perspective of higher education is equivalent to the problem of ELL/ELT within the context of L1/L2 correlation. This context, however, is multilayered and requires a differentiated approach to each of its aspects. There is an extensive cultural influx of different “circles of the English language-speaking world” (Kachru, Kachru, & Nelson, 2006) which has somewhat hazardous consequences in language teacher education. And, although a considerable amount of work has been done to analyze the skills and knowledge of English language teachers, the constructive part of teaching/learning research representing the *contents* of the language taught and the *attitudes toward* it is still to be raised, as it is as an equally important component of language teachers' professional competencies as language and communication.

Having succeeded in total implementation of ELT at postsecondary educational institutions through extensive training and the “import” of beginning and intermediate level teachers in the last decade, language education in Oman has accumulated a significant quantity of resources and expertise. Now it is the turn of taking not only formal but functional ownership of language education through the transformation

of quantitative resources into a quality system and completion of the “learning-research-teaching-learning” cycle by incorporating a variety of research methods into the research component of language teacher education (Al-Issa, 2014). Al-Issa (2015) maintains that:

Problems and solutions pertinent to teaching an international foreign language like English should not and cannot be merely confined to and perceived through the lenses of the teachers and students, confined to the micro world of the classroom, and through focusing on quantitative research methods. This is while insufficient attention is being paid to the macro world of ELT, which is complex and governed by various agents and agencies holding variable degrees of power and control and multiple layers of ideologies. (p. 583)

Admittedly, it is impossible to carry out feasible content research without a well-planned inclusion of the language educators’ growing generation who are supposed to be the decision-makers throughout the following few decades. Incorporating intercultural research into ELL/ELT implies, along with the native language and cultural priorities, a complex of competencies in intercultural awareness applicable to the spheres of “logos,” “ethos,” and “pathos” including, respectively, the language and speech, the system of values and attitudes, and the artifacts of culture and consciousness.

In the given sociocultural situation, ELL/ELT includes intercultural communicative competence, represented through attitudes, categorization, knowledge, and skills (Bennett, 2004; Hall, 1976). The awareness of cultural relativity and comparability is the first step to intercultural competency. And competencies are formed through hands-on experiences, analytical work, and transfer of acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes to feasible decisions. Through their own research experiences and broader awareness, local ELL/ELT professionals need to develop skills and abilities to make competent decisions for teaching and teacher education. In this respect, this chapter is addressed to ELL/ELT higher education specialists in an attempt to conceptualize general and if any, intercultural research perspectives of English language learning and teaching research in Oman. The study of professional competencies of language teachers regarding the transforming roles and contexts, as well as the manifestations, of English, will help us to define the need for changing attitudes on the way to setting our own methodological foundations of teaching and learning objectives, develop new research-based contents, and provide mobility to language assessment and evaluation.

## **2 ELL/ELT Research in Oman**

In order to gain some understanding of the system of ELL/ELT in Oman, one needs to observe and analyze its development over the last two decades at the least. ELL/ELT problems in Oman, as in any other non-English-speaking country, can be defined as universal and national. The universal problems are those that are discussed throughout the ELL/ELT world community and are related to the structure and “know-how” of ELL/ELT. National problems can be found in any country facing the necessity of global integration: they are common for those states which have

their unique system of culture and values, history, traditions, and demographic features. Although today the ELL/ELT “elite” is trying to abstract from the tough issue of cultural diversity through theoretically distancing itself from mother-tongue issues, data from cognitive linguistic research have long suggested that any new knowledge is integrated into a person’s consciousness and especially the unconscious world of his/her motor mechanisms and skills through the already existing structure and system of meanings. Theoretically, it is possible to separate the universal (all ELL/ELT), common (non-English-speaking countries’ ELL/ELT), and national (country ELL/ELT) aspects; practically, they are inseparable, as the universal ones deal with profession-specific micro-issues, while the common and national EFL perspectives may touch questions of infrastructures and policies.

Here, I have tried to involve the academic, research, and institutional aspects of ELL/ELT and general language policy, as well as models and ways for the institutionalization of ELL/ELT, and, last but not least, the most valuable source for understanding this – the research and critical analyses carried out by Omani ELL/ELT scholars. In trying to classify the published ELT research and some unpublished studies, such as dissertations and theses, I identified the following four main aspects of ELL/ELT research in Oman: language situation and policymaking, the sociolinguistics of English language learning and teaching, language teacher education, and problems of identity and bilingualism.

## ***2.1 The Language Situation and Policy***

The language situation in the context of Oman is marked by the central role English plays across many domains, with the language only coming after Arabic which is the language of the state and the mother tongue of the native population (Al-Issa, 2014; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2015). English, being practically the second language used at the institutional level, needs no proof of importance. It has been recognized through both internal and external expertise. Most of the publications on ELL/ELT in Oman contain a clear introduction of the structure and policy, informing the attitude toward English as a means of international communication. Especially thorough analysis can be found in Al-Issa (2009). ELL/ELT policies, however, reflect not only the sociolinguistic situation created partly spontaneously and partly as a result of country economic priorities but also echo the antagonized professional discourse which was shaped in the second half of the previous century, to isolate a large part of the world from the ELT market.

While traditionally the term professional discourse denoted only classroom language, in countries recruiting large numbers for the ELT workforce, this discourse has another, instrumental function in recruitment and management communication. The result is that such terms and phrases as “native speaker” and “recognized universities,” accompanied with the sometimes surprisingly low professional qualifications for teachers with US, UK, and Canadian passports, create a confusion in the professional rankings of specialists in Applied Linguistics and TESOL

(Holliday, 2006). Consequently, language policy overtly does not recognize the opportunity of utilizing the professional potential imported from countries where English *is* a foreign language, and there exists a well-grounded tradition of ESL/EFL teacher education. In the period of transition to the ownership of the teaching of English, of course, it would be more rational to turn to those who have the experience and results of speaking and teaching English as a foreign language. Avoiding the iconic capitalization of the phrase “teaching English as a foreign language,” I suggest viewing this phenomenon not as a market term but as a professional qualification describing the literacy, experience, and productivity of a specialist. Professional literacy, as it is known, besides the mastery of the subject, consists of other components, such as pedagogical, psychological, and methodological competencies – elementary knowledge of cognitive and psycholinguistic mechanisms of learning.

## 2.2 *Sociolinguistic Aspects*

The sociolinguistic situation of English language learning and teaching in Oman is analyzed in a number of studies separately through the perspectives of learners and teachers. It includes cultural and psychological aspects – the cons and pros – of ELL/ELT against such values as traditions of lifestyle and religion. In her study on student perspectives on low English proficiency in the country, Al-Mahrooqi (2012) presents a detailed reflection of student perceptions of ELT. According to this study, the drawbacks of the ELT system observed “are connected in one way or another, with pedagogic and linguistic inadequacy” (p. 265) of teachers. Many English teachers fail to develop in their profession and often, according to the author, “experience language attrition, a loss due to various factors, including environments where English is not spoken as a first language” (p. 265). In addition, the education system seems to discourage flexibility by requiring teachers to follow a preset curriculum and teaching methods which students find uninteresting. Low teacher motivation is reflected in their lack of care for those who are weak and despondent. Yet showing students care was suggested as the key strategy EFL teachers should use to motivate their students (Al-Mahrooqi, Abrar-UI-Hassan, & Asante, 2012).

The theorists also turn to the ELL/ELT content, its cultural and religious relevance and effects on identity issues. Eventually, this is the most disturbing question lying on the surface which the organizations aspiring for ELT leadership try to address through the fragmental adaptation of teaching materials to the culture of the region. The situation is objectively complicated also because of the social and, therefore, cultural, diversity between the capital and peripheries of the country. The patchwork stretching under the umbrella of communicative language teaching, however, fails in almost all of the nodal positions – from course to unified curriculum/program design and assessment – to create systematic knowledge of the language in the consciousness of learners.

English curriculum evaluation is acknowledged in Oman, and a corresponding structure started functioning in 2005 at the Ministry of Education. Moreover, throughout English teaching institutions, the tradition of creating in-house materials has been rooted. But their consistency and quality need frequent revision, which is practically impossible without constantly working centralized research bodies committed to the implementation of language policy. Al-Jardani (2012, p. 43) admits that “there is a need for a systematic Curriculum Evaluation to support practitioners in the field.” However, as Al-Jadidi (2009) summarizes, once English is regarded as an international language, there is no reason to privilege the cultural content of English-speaking countries. Bilingual teachers may be more adequate in teaching English for the transition to local cultural content and in using pedagogical approaches that are more appropriate to local cultural backgrounds “than the communicative language teaching (CLT) methods that are currently taught and recommended by Western universities” (Al-Jadidi, 2009, p. 50).

### ***2.3 Postsecondary Language Education***

Postsecondary language education can clearly be recognized as the strength of Oman in ELL/ELT. All postsecondary educational institutions – colleges and universities – have English language centers which provide English language skills development to students before and along with their major specializations (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2014). Teaching staff priorities in these language centers, in accordance with Omanization policies, are gradually evolving, shifting from mid-level certified native speakers of English to local and nonnative EFL context-grown specialists with higher professional educations. The country is developing its own system of language teacher education. Sultan Qaboos University offers a BA in English language studies in the Faculty of Education, and some private universities offer 2-year diploma courses in EFL with a subsequent opportunity for another 2 years leading to a BA. This model is familiar with those non-English-speaking countries which have developed their own ELL/ELT system and policies of educating and training local ELT staff. Its major advantage is that resources in language education are directed inward toward growing and developing local ELT standards and a sustainable workforce, instead of being directed outward to training a small number of specialists who become acculturated and certified in the so-called recognized universities while all the time being far from the target English-as-a-foreign-language context.

As outlined in Nunan et al. (1987), the new generation of Omani ELT teachers are capable of changing the system by showing more commitment to teaching. Of course, there is a need for the “self-upgrading” or professional development system which “would help Omani teachers to pursue their continuing expertise, and be able to reflect on all aspects of their work in the light of international best practice” (Al-Jadidi, 2009, p. 32). These trainings for in-service language teachers are held

continuously in different parts of the country for teachers with many years of experience. However, there is still little systematicity in the content and organization of these professional trainings.

## 2.4 *English Language Teacher Education*

The best formulation of language teacher education and in-service teacher training in Oman can be found in the conclusion of Al-Jadidi's (2009) doctoral research:

Clearly, the intensity of the effort to teach English to all of Oman's population, and include English as a component in all tertiary education and training, has created its own problems. One major problem is the shortage of Omani teachers of EFL and another is the lack of expertise in the English language and English language pedagogy of many teachers, including expatriate teachers, both native English speaking and non-native English speaking. (p. 34)

It can be stated that language teacher education, both preservice and in-service, is in the process of formation. And there is a question that needs to be thought over before proceeding to new solutions: how can the training system be best incorporated in the whole cycle of language teacher education? Having external experts study and assess the field is one of the strongest features of ELT in Oman. One remarkable example was the benchmarking document *Philosophy and Guidelines for the Omani English Language School Curriculum* (Nunan et al., 1987) created for the Ministry of Education. It recommends the country's new policy related to the role of English in secondary and postsecondary education. But attitudes to external experts also change as the needs of teacher training during the recent decade have extended from training teachers as "native-like speakers" to training teachers who master and teach English as a foreign language. In this respect, Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2010) write that language teachers are bound to acquire scholarship skills and abilities "to learn more about themselves and their context" (p. 42).

Theoretically, teacher education is a process of long-term decision-making within the frameworks of bounded rationality, counting on the investment made in the intellectual and cultural potential of the nation. In-service teacher training is part of ELT professional competencies just as the way the system of self-programmed upgrading is part and parcel of any operational system. However, in the current situation of diversity and high turnover of English language teaching staff in the country, a systematic teacher training program seems to be unrealistic. Even if secondary English language teachers are offered training, the philosophies and methodologies of this depend on the resources of randomly invited trainers, while what quality teacher training requires is a unified approach and training program, based on a single philosophy throughout the country.

It is notable that graduate and postgraduate studies in Applied Linguistics are often mentioned as a way of "rewarding the more capable teachers" with an opportunity, evidently, to study abroad. However, the language education system in Oman

is close to the realization of the subsequent step – the graduate and postgraduate levels of tertiary education. This would complete the system as a functioning whole with its ability of stable self-development.

In her doctoral research, Al-Jadidi (2009) also raises the necessity of linking L1 and L2 in taking ownership of language teacher education. Firmly stating the need for organized language policy and a system of teacher education, Al-Jadidi, however, does not outline a system or suggest an approach to handle the problem. Instead, she states the importance of incorporating L1 into the teaching methods and formation of bilingualism as an option of compromise between high quality language competency and culturally loyal language identity. Al-Jadidi also raises the question of modelling competencies for ELL/ELT for intercultural communication purposes. In the conclusion of her dissertation, with reference to Western research (McKay, 2003), she writes that:

there is no need, in the teaching of ELL, to base the content of teaching materials, the choice of teaching methodology or the ideal teacher on native-speaker models. Instead, each country in which ELL is being taught must take ownership of the language, selecting teaching content and methods that are appropriate to the local context. (p. 145)

It is worth mentioning that the selection of context- and culture-relevant content will also help to solve such a language learning and teaching problem as motivation. Although motivation is a personality and developmental issue and must be regarded within the broader context of education research, its language teaching aspect still has a potential to propose solutions to stimulating interest in learning and erudition by means of identifying the target sociocultural contents taking advantage of the fact that, in the context of Oman, English is clearly recognized as a key to personal and professional success in all social layers.

To summarize the overview of the ELL/ELT situation in Oman, we can claim that the identified fields of ELL/ELT are, in fact, united under a cardinal task of sustainable language teacher education and a self-developing system of professionals using the country's current potential. The start is given, and the consistent organization of foundations may entail a chain reaction toward harmonizing the whole process of ELL/ELT ownership. Al-Issa and Al-Balushi (2010, p. 45), having given high importance to teacher trainer roles, state that, "A key feature in the scholarship of teaching is having an understanding of how people learn." Thus, they highlight the task of understanding the psychological and philosophical foundations of learning in general and language education, in particular. This may be realized through a graduate ELL/ELT program of preparing not only teachers and teacher-trainers but also researchers, instituted in the very core of teacher education.



### 3 Stepping Ahead: Problems and Perspectives

In language teacher education, there apparently must be a certain intermediate period of transition when universities develop qualified language teachers with qualifications and competencies meeting contemporary requirements and train local teachers to upgrade their qualifications and competencies to the acceptable level of teaching according to international learning standards. However, in the case of English as a foreign language, there exists the problem of defining the subject taught. Although few people might come to ask this question, ELF teachers with teaching experience in different countries often face a few, still inevitable, questions associated with how to deal with the changes. The changes to be considered are often related to the objective change of the language and the change of subjective priorities.

#### 3.1 *Language Change*

What kind of English do we want to teach in Oman? The question seems to contain the answer: English as a foreign language. Is there any difference between the English taught by natives and the English taught by nonnatives? Certainly, there is. For a native language teacher, English is not a foreign language; she/he was born to map the world with a mother tongue as a tool of rationalization. The native of the language teaches the language she/he knows and uses unconsciously. It is her/his natural way of rationalization, her/his own natural way of understanding the world. In contrast, a nonnative language teacher teaches a language she/he has learnt to use as a second, “acquired” tool of communication. She/he uses it as an alternative or option of understanding the world. The advantage of language mastery, however, is only one side of language teaching. How deeply does the “average” native English teacher understand the working mechanisms of English as a foreign language? What learning experiences and self-reflections do they use while teaching? If compared, the “average” nonnative language teacher seems to be in an advantageous position, having the personal experience of learning English as a foreign language. Especially, if this language learning experience has gone through attested academic programs at institutions with ESL methodological schools and traditions, many illusions might disperse, especially, the confusion of “native” for “professional.” From the teaching point of view, the terms “native” and EFL/ESL do not collocate at all. What matters is teaching ability and how to comfortably adapt and use a language. Languages change in usage, and it is arguable how necessary it is to teach the imitation of native speech with its dependence on the deep structures – the logical, ethical, and emotional peculiarities of native cultures.

Still, the problem is not only in the not-always-sufficient level of teachers’ professionalism but in the changing English language itself. It has grown out of the home baby wraps and is wearing new styles and colors in its expanding domains



and varieties. To control this tendency, linguists try to foretell and even propose ambitious projects about the new status of English as a world international language, international auxiliary language, or a universal auxiliary language, announcing “the concept of an authorized and officially accepted IAL” (World Language Process, 2012, para. 2). Leaving the cultural and sociopsychological issues connected with this almost biblical hypothesis, I would rather discuss the pedagogical aspect of international English which practically boils down to the question of which variety of English we should choose to teach. The number of varieties has become countless, and the concepts “norm” and “standard,” as such, have become practically indefinable. Reflecting closely over the army of ELT certified specialists spread all over the world, one may suspect if there is at all any choice of variety taught and whether, or not, it is the variety that matters. A closer problem, rather than the question of creolization of English (Lightfoot, 2006), is the one that the ELL/ELT institutions face: the huge army of ELT certified specialists breeds its hierarchical “elite” and “periphery” – concepts which do not relate to the quality and effectiveness of teaching and the intention to take ownership of language teacher education through creating a country’s own system of sustainable academic traditions.

Although political considerations play an important part in language policy, they cannot ignore the facts of language change taking place throughout the world and the resulting change of attitudes across regions and countries. It is natural that expanding functions of any subject result in a shift of its concept, role, and status. From the teaching and assessment perspective of ESL/EFL, the problem of the language norm has long been standing in theory yet often ignored in academic practice. Even the attempts to explain the changing status of English (Aitchison, 2004; Bauer, 1994) end up in recording the facts of change across all levels of the language throughout the influence of time and location. Bauer (1994) writes: “Even if Standard English is not monolithic, there are problems with defining a single standard for all dialects of English” (p. 3). In her analysis, she concludes that, both regionally and functionally, English has become too broad to have a standard.

From this we can assume that, in order to state a norm for a regional or even country variety of English and set its standard, there should be someone who can study and introduce the complete system of changes in the language. This explains why there is an accepted norm of New Zealand English but not Indian English, though, in number and dynamics of expansion and influence, the latter is far more evident than the former. On the other hand, ESL/EFL teachers all around the world develop comparative studies of English with their native languages to improve the level of learning and teaching through consideration of differences and similarities between the languages spoken and learnt, to find out the spots of interference and eliminate or emphasize them in the teaching/learning process.

And these studies not only strongly affect language teaching and assessment methodologies but also state and explain this or that change of English under the influence of the learners’ native language. Solving, in this way, the conflict between the “requirements of norm and standard,” a concept of mere political influence, English language teachers make it possible to pursue their main goal of having

students become as skilled as possible users of English. Of course, one could see consumerism in this approach, but that is the fact happening as a natural consequence of the social and geographical expansion of English.

In teaching and learning contexts, this situation is reflected in the change of philosophies and practical priorities. It is worth mentioning that it is hardly possible to preserve any traditional philosophy if practical priorities have changed. And the priorities of specialists of intercultural communication who seem to have no questions concerning the standard of the international language are to take all kinds of language modifications as long as they meet the requirements of communication and understanding in a multicultural environment. However, only knowledge of the language and skills are still not enough to ensure effective communication in a multicultural dimension and in academic settings. The problem of discrete understanding of ELT for the purpose of intercultural communication is vital for the description of professional competencies of ESL/EFL graduates and quality management.

### ***3.2 Change of Priorities***

Although “native” English is traditionally welcome in EFL interactions, the fact is that it is “a ‘contact language’ between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication” (Firth, 1996, p. 240). Defined in this way, the role of English as a language of international communication is introduced under various wordings: “English as a global language” (Crystal, 2003), “English as a world language” (Mair, 2003), and “English as an international language” (Kachru, 1992). The traditional meaning of EIL, thus, comprises utilization of English within and across “circles,” for national interior as well as international communication. Oman is one of those countries where English serves partly as a language of education and as a lingua franca in its three main language communities: Arab, Indian, and English. Having its variety of native tongues as a language of intra-community encounters, the nonnative population ensures a wide use of English for both inside-the-circle and outside-the-circle communication. Thus, English infiltrates and, also is infiltrated by, most of the cultures acquiring new features from country to country.

The multicultural communities (Kachru et al., 2006) that speak ESL/EFL often assimilate and adapt it to their own language and thinking rules. Each of these representatives uses English to verbalize their own world and their own ways of mapping it. Nonnative English speakers bring their own mental constructions, grammatical and syntactical structures, idioms, and imagery that are often far from the understanding of standard English. Still, it works well with these constructions, many of them later becoming part of the regional variant of the language. Sometimes, the nonnative verbal thinking and grammatical features applied to English turn out to be quite comprehensive and functional in a multilingual community.

The last two decades were marked with calls for the recognition of emerging varieties of English, and what sounds more practical, to ignore certain features of

English in language teaching and assessment procedures. Seidlhofer (2005) suggests that the phonetic features of a global language, defined as difficult for nonnative learners, should be ignored. In other words, she suggests institutionalizing the adaptations and regional varieties of English. More EFL teachers and practices appear to ignore the rules of English grammar or syntax. For example, some online programs of Communicative English suggest asking questions by using only a change of intonation to avoid the confusing inversion of the interrogative. This approach is supported by at least two arguments. First, ESL/EFL learners are set to actively engage in communicative situations, fighting their confusion and emotions in the course of performance tasks. And, in honor of many language educators, it must be mentioned that these efforts are relevantly assessed. Second, in a culturally diverse communicative environment, these “language consumers” mutually agree to reduce the language rules to the minimum to express their thoughts and identities and reach understanding.

The natural communicative involvement imposes one critical necessity on multicultural communicants – and this is the only working criterion – to provide and obtain relevant understanding. This motivational circumstance often leads to such changes in language use as disappearing articles and auxiliaries and the loss of capitalization and vowels in some forms of written communication. On the other hand, there appear other new features which ESL/EFL teachers willingly ignore when it comes to the assessment of student learning and performance. Thus, the English we teach, eventually, is not the English we assess in our students. Finally, many language-teaching institutions restrict their goals to assessing oral and written communication skills, taking into consideration comprehension as the only criterion of assessment.

Indeed, nonlinguist users of English are the most exposed to intercultural encounters, and here they have to solve broader problems than language and communication skills, relying either on their intuition or erudition if proper education is missing. Given this circumstance, the task of language educators is multifaceted both from the socio- and psycholinguistic points of view: the change of the English language is evident in spatial and temporal, as well as social and pragmatic, dimensions. The number of ESL/EFL speakers far outnumbers the number of native speakers, which means that the functional scope of English is the widest among all the languages of the world. It has become part of the more general phenomenon of “English as an international language” (EIL) or “World Englishes” (Jenkins, 2003). The result of infusion of English by most of the languages in the world is that its structure and genre repertoire acquires new features. Thus, moving from geographical expansion toward the dominance in socioeconomic, political, financial, scientific, and telecommunication infrastructures, English has actually acquired the international communication language monopoly, and, therefore, besides formal features, language teaching focuses on its functional styles and varieties. This tendency of internationalization naturally leads to the abstraction of the language of common use from its ethnic, national, and cultural background. Due to this abstraction from cultural roots, English assimilates and finds realizations in the formal and deeper semantic and discourse layers of local, regional uses. It develops regional standards, which, though officially not recognized, become a norm of everyday communication.

Research and recognition of regional varieties, or at least the study of language interrelations and influence, would provide a series of support mechanisms to effective language teaching and intercultural communication. Interestingly enough, as a key to higher education and advanced knowledge, English, in the historical “regions of political isolation,” was taught with higher standards than in the English-speaking neighborhood. The former socialist countries attended it as a means of integration and cooperation. Moreover, separated by the “iron curtain”, the Soviet Union developed its own language learning methodologies and, particularly, the ELT system and strong didactics of linguistic and cultural adaptation of the language to local contexts based on contrastive and correlational studies. Due to the clear recognition of a language’s role as a store and reflection of its national culture, foundations of interlanguage and intercultural research methodologies, as well as rich comparative database, were created in the linguistic institutions of these countries. The emergence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in the late 1990s was, in a sense, prepared by the language situation of many regions and countries, and this is why descriptors of language competencies were welcomed and adapted by many European countries. Another step forward was the English Profile project (Cambridge University Press, 2015), which creates perspectives to develop regional norms of ELT and assessment or the so-called Reference Level Descriptions (Council of Europe, 2011). This perspective will become more realistic once enough research data is compiled in the region on the local variety of English.

Despite the control and restricting policies of language and the statements of scholars that English is not intended to become a part of identity, *any* language learnt and activated reshapes the mind and self-consciousness of an individual, hence changing identity to the extent of activity. English has entered youth slang and communication almost all over the world, which indicates its inevitable presence in the formation of an essential part of identity – verbal consciousness. This alternative of expressing emotions and attitudes eases the transformation of emotionally bound stereotypes and brings them a kind of semantic discharge, opening space for evaluations and attitudes based on individual experiences. When the individual learns and starts using a foreign language, it adds another functional facet to their personality with an opening opportunity to access the broader field of information and values while participating in and exchanging them. However, language acquisition studies indicate that, at earlier stages of mother tongue acquisition, identity is linked to the first language (Piaget, 2001). The emergence of verbal consciousness defines the rationalization patterns of perceived reality and the channels of mental constructs, networks of meanings, and associations.

When learning a second language, and then further languages, the individual’s identity alienates itself from the languages learnt because they begin to be perceived as one of the multiple channels linking the self with the outer world. Thus, together with alternative tools of communication, the learner’s identity acquires cultural immunity toward some of the unwanted influences of globalization. Although no experimental evidence supports this statement, and, at this stage, it can be considered an observation-based hypothesis, a common sense logical analysis might imply that the more languages we study, the less the threat of the loss of our national identity.

Of course, in the process of multiple communicative experiences, ethnic cultural identity crystallizes, preserving the best of human values in its cultural ethnic-coloring. The Armenian proverb says: “The more languages you speak, the more people you are.” As users of more than one language, we undergo personality changes depending on the context and functions we are involved in. However, historically, there are other than language, cultural binds, and values that keep our identities firmer and stronger than the tools we use. Eventually, we change our tools to have them work and serve us better. By institutionalizing this right, we first admit the real state of the art and, then, implement a systematic approach to our ELL/ELT problem based on the interests and the language policy program of the country.

Hence, eliminating the conflict of language and culture, meanwhile, remaining within our own cultural priorities, is possible through carrying out a conscious implementation and research of cognitive, communicative, and psychological aspects of language and culture relationships. The principles of multiculturalism and diversity are adopted by many higher educational institutions as a means of ensuring quality and sustainability. Multilingualism does not just mean the rejection of native values and intercultural ecology. Cultivating openness to diversity will lay the grounds for the development of research-based policies. A conscious account of the changes taking place is perhaps the only way to balance and control global language tendencies.

## **4 Conclusion and Recommendations**

Having outlined ELL/ELT research aspects in Oman in the context of the transformations of the English-speaking world, the paper analyzed the aspects of the integration of intercultural communication and language teaching, subject to research for educational, policy, and academic planning purposes. Certainly, research into students’ attitudes and teacher training are effective ways of closely studying the dynamics of cultural concepts in ELL/ELT, especially as tools of prognosis and diagnosis of higher education and its influence at entry and exit points. The outline of the dynamics of attitudes during the study span equips higher education policy-makers with feedback and assessment, which, in its turn, will serve as a correction tool when necessary. However, language and intercultural communication research cannot by any means be restricted to mini-studies aimed at reforming administrative procedures.

Long-term strategies require a systematic approach in the studies of values, beliefs, and knowledge. It is important that on all levels, courses respond to the ethical dimension of intercultural communication and to the professional needs of the student. The analysis defines ELL/ELT in Oman as a central tool of language policy. The provider of the concept and language policy is higher education, which produces and realizes expertise and knowledge of the situation. The context analysis of country ELL/ELT research suggests the following recommendations.

To begin, teaching English as a second/foreign language should necessarily contain a research-based learning component in the curriculum to inform students with hands-on expertise and knowledge in the psychological mechanisms of language acquisition and learning. Research is also a significant tool for the comparison between the L1 and L2 and the explanation of their interrelations and can also reveal the culturally bound structures of behavior and verbal consciousness, their interference and change, to facilitate communication both in the classroom and real-life situations.

However, restructuring ELL/ELT for the incorporation of an intercultural language instruction component is recommended to begin in a top-down approach, namely, starting with graduate TESOL programs or at higher levels, in order to maintain a balanced and controlled transition of the system based on the wave-expansion model of human resource policy. There are several conceptual criteria required for setting the pyramid of multilevel intercultural study objectives.

The first criterion is the language-cultural and professional identity of language educators which should be a central target of language learning and teaching research. Conscious and controlled construction of language identity contributes to EFL teachers' abilities to support students in positively controlling the inevitable acculturation. Research-based language and acquisition study helps ELL/ELT specialists maintain their own national identities as a firm background in intercultural communication and ensures that they become a part of the multicultural community of global English speakers through the encouragement of positive outcomes from foreign language and culture exposure. Thus, ESL/EFL learning and teaching of intercultural communication requires that the national identity of ESL/EFL learners is brought forward as a core condition for successful communication.

The concept of language identity can be studied, besides enquiries and discursive methods, within the frameworks of the developmental theory of consciousness (Piaget, 2001) which forms a methodological basis for intercultural pragmatics and cultural linguistics, thereby scaffolding intercultural research competency (Ufimtseva, 2014). Verbal consciousness reflects the phylogenetic and ontogenetic layers and facets of a language identity (Daniels, 2012); its gender, social, and even educational and economic statuses; and anthropological, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds from the phylogenetic point of view.

Then, research-based ELL/ELT should provide an active component of awareness and control over the changing language situation. The indicating concept or criterion here is the status of the language studied and taught – in our case English – and its changing role in the socioeconomic and cultural development of the region. Setting this indicator as a study objective will provide awareness of the changing values of the next generation, including its communicative needs and competitiveness in local and global socioeconomic contexts. Along with the theoretical studies in language change and its causes (Breivik & Jahr, 1989; McMahon, 2002), developing a line of comparative language studies and change prognosis is also highly important.

Setting the above criterion leads to the immediate next focus of attention. The existing language situation and the norms of language use have to be clearly conceived and considered from the teaching and assessment point of view, where assessment declares the state of art between real and desired status and ensures the procedural directions of teaching. Following the principle of balance between norm and criterion reference (CEFR, 2001), it would be reasonable to set out ESL/EFL teaching and assessment goals based on local learners' needs and interests, as well as on the region-specific variety of English, norms and models of intercultural communication.

Another focal criterion recommend here is related to what to study or the content of intercultural communication. The following three spheres in ELL/ELT need to be consistently developed to reflect the culture-specific content of the country and the region. These spheres are "logos," "ethos," and "pathos." "Logos" is the world of cognition and categorization, namely, the mental structures verbalized in idioms and imagery, associative and semantic structures, phraseology, narratives, and discourses. The world of communication, or "ethos," includes the rules and verbal models of polite communication, in other words, the pragmatic strategies of politeness and negotiations in various settings. Finally, the world of the irrational and emotions or "pathos" involves speech units and other means of expressing and communicating emotions and attitudes – idioms and metaphors, imagery and interjections, nonverbal communication, and bilingual interference.

Overall, intercultural communication is not merely a transactional skill but is also a complex of ethical and cultural competences, or a communicative "locus of control." Launching a series of courses in *Intercultural Pragmatics* can solve this problem through offering capacities and tools for a critical understanding of one's own standpoint within a range of language and culture interactions. The research component of ELL/ELT and IC curriculum must be planned to embrace the full range of communicative interactions typical of the country and culture, including the discourses and artifacts that are produced in cooperation with other cultures.

There exist various practices of implementing research into higher linguistic education, ranging from institutional to country scales (Balboni, 2006; Bouchard, 2017). Some universities even unite to develop regional projects incorporating the intercultural research component into their linguistic education programs. Regarding English education in Oman, implementing the intercultural research component in higher levels suggests at least two general stages. Given that the language competence is ensured at the undergraduate level, developing cognitive (conducting research) and communicative (reporting research) competencies can be designed at the graduate level. And, last but not the least, an important measure for enhancing research ownership is to expand the role of the local lingua franca. Oman has started taking measures to avail nonnative English language teachers with an opportunity of learning Arabic. On the other hand, an Arabic minor for local and foreign language students would double the value of degrees in language and communication.

Thus, in case the curriculum and program developers consider the concepts and steps recommended above, the traditional ideal of students imitating native-like



competence will transform into students mastering cultural and linguistic mediation in a multicultural environment through ESL/EFL. Research skills in intercultural comparison and contrast will develop knowledge, skills, and competencies for the critical and creative evaluation of intercultural encounters, contexts, and language uses.

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**Part II**  
**Student-Centered Issues**

# Student Evaluation of Their English Language Teachers in Omani Basic Education Schools



Faisal Al-Maamari and Rahma Al-Mahrooqi

**Abstract** This research addresses the qualities of English language teachers in Omani schools from the perspective of school students. Using a self-report questionnaire designed to measure teacher's various knowledge bases (i.e. content and pedagogical knowledge about teaching and learning, classroom management, teacher knowledge about both themselves and their students), the study specifically investigated the perceptions of 171 grade 9–12 school students of the qualities of their current English language teachers. The findings suggest that (1) the students perceived their teachers positively in all investigated qualities, (2) the students perceived teachers to be stronger in the affective domain (e.g. enthusiasm for teaching and fairness between students) than in the academic or cognitive domains (e.g. content and pedagogy) and (3) despite the absence of a gender effect, a significant academic achievement effect was detected. The final results suggest that teachers in grades 9 and 10 were perceived to possess more positive qualities by their students compared to teachers in grades 11 and 12. The study concludes by highlighting the importance of context in the education of English language teachers.

**Keywords** Basic Education · English language education · Omani schools · Teacher qualities

## 1 Introduction

This paper reports an exploratory study into the qualities of English language teachers in Omani schools. Student perceptions of those qualities were elicited through a self-report questionnaire. A basic assumption guiding the study was that

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understanding more about the qualities that make effective English language teachers/teaching will benefit both teacher educators and teachers in their efforts to improve and aid foreign English language instruction. The findings from such studies may induce reflection by teachers on their teaching practice in ways that could potentially bridge the gap in expectations between learner and teacher.

The justification for conducting a study of this kind is twofold: first, though it is believed that some qualities of instruction in general are universal, current research points to an assortment of distinctive qualities that are particular to the making of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) such as those relating to teaching methodology and student-teacher relationships (Borg, 2006). Another justification is one that is invoked by the context in which English language learning and teaching take place where it is equally reasonable to suspect that some qualities may be particular to certain cultures or groups (Abu Rahma, 2007). Taken together, these form robust grounds for conducting research into the qualities of English language teachers rather than merely being content with unquestioningly transferring research findings produced either in general education or language education and which may also be conducted in different contexts.

With these goals in mind, the study proceeded to give full consideration to these universal and context-specific qualities as compatible with good practice in the English language teacher literature. To achieve this aim, the paper is organized as follows. We first start by reviewing the literature pertaining to the qualities of English language teachers. We then outline the principles and procedures involved in conducting this research and finally present the findings with a view to discussing key issues and giving recommendations for policy and practice.

## 2 Literature Review and Background

The existing body of literature on the good/effective English language teacher dates back to at least the 1970s. Studies about the qualities of language teachers can be traced back to research conducted by Girard (1977) in which learners defined good English teachers as those who make their courses interesting, have good pronunciation, offer clear explanations, have a good command of spoken English, show the same interest in all pupils, encourage pupils to participate and have a great deal of patience.

Park and Lee (2006) investigated 339 students' perceptions of their English language teachers in Korean schools through the administration of a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three areas: English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge (i.e. the ability to teach English in English and to prepare lessons well) and socio-affective skills (i.e. the ability to reduce student anxiety and listen to students' opinions). Students ranked pedagogical knowledge as the most important quality. Variations also existed between high-achieving and low-achieving students in pedagogical knowledge and socio-affective skills, with the former group favouring preparing the lesson well and being helpful to students in and outside the classroom

and the latter favouring teaching tailored to students' proficiency levels/learning styles and having a good sense of humour. Finally, male students valued different qualities than female students in terms of socio-affective skills, whereby boys preferred teachers to have a good sense of humour and girls favoured the fair treatment of students by the teacher.

Borg (2006) focused on the distinctive qualities of foreign language teachers compared to teachers in content areas such as mathematics, history and science. The methodology involved asking 200 current and prospective language teachers about these qualities, in addition to eliciting the opinions of content subject teachers about the importance of these qualities in relation to the subjects they teach. Borg used a range of procedures to collect data such as group discussion, focus group interviews, workshop comments, essay responses and email. Findings indicated that the distinctiveness of foreign language teachers is defined in terms of the following parameters: the nature of language as subject (i.e. content and medium unity, complex and varied content), teaching methodology (maximization of communication and student involvement), teacher-student relationships (the use of personal themes as content) and differences between native and non-native teachers.

Babai Shishavan (2010) conducted a study to explore the potential effect of gender on 215 Iranian university learners' perceptions of the qualities of effective English language teachers using a 46-item questionnaire. Findings indicate a statistically significant difference in perceptions based on gender. That is, whilst male learners associated teachers' efficacy with the use of L1, female learners tended to emphasize interpersonal and social qualities and also tended to rank more favourably aspects leading to the reduction of anxiety and arousal of interest. Saafin (2005) conducted a mixed method research study using interviews and questionnaires to explore Arabic students' perceptions of effective English language teachers in UAE universities. One of the main findings of the study is that effective EFL teaching is related to two major qualities: instructional skills and human qualities. The former encompasses areas such as maximizing the use of English inside the classroom, classroom control and so on, and the latter relates to teacher friendliness, flexibility, etc. It was also reported that a combination of various pedagogical skills and human qualities helped to create a conducive learning culture in teaching EFL.

In addition, Taqi, Al-Nouh, and Akbar (2014) investigated the perceptions of 150 female EFL university students in Kuwait of effective university English language teachers. To achieve this, the authors employed a questionnaire with four main categories (proficiency, awareness, organization and communication skills and teacher social and emotional skills). Similar to Park and Lee (2006), findings indicate a significant difference between the perceptions of high- and low-achieving students. High-achieving students reported English proficiency as the most important teacher trait, whereas low-achieving students ranked socio-emotional skills (e.g. closer teacher-student relationship and teacher status) the highest.

Finally, Abu Rahma's (2007) comparative study of Egyptian, Saudi Arabian and Omani student teachers' perceptions of the qualities of English language teachers is one of the few to explicitly focus on the Omani context. Abu Rahma utilized a 69-item self-report questionnaire representing three categories: knowledge, teaching

skills and personality. The study indicated that students from the three Arab nations share areas of both overlap and divergence in valued teacher qualities. For instance, whilst the Saudi and Egyptian students tended to value similar qualities in knowledge and personality dimensions, they were different in regard to the teaching skills dimension. Overall, the qualities of good language teachers were seen similarly by both Egyptian and Omani participants across the three dimensions of knowledge (e.g. setting objectives, contributing to curriculum development), personality (being creative in/enthusiastic about teaching) and teaching skills (being prepared for class, giving proper feedback). There were also differences related to gender wherein female students consistently ranked aspects relating to knowledge, teaching skills and personality significantly higher than males.

Because there is little research in both the Arab Gulf region in general and in Oman in particular into this critical aspect of English language teachers and teaching, this study has aimed to examine two research questions with different foci:

1. How do Omani school students perceive their English language teachers? What qualities do they believe their teachers possess?
2. Do gender and grade level impact upon these perceptions?

### **3 Method**

This is a quantitative, questionnaire-based study, which aimed to investigate the perceptions of Omani school students of the qualities they perceived their English language teachers to have. The original research, of which this study forms a part, is a large-scale investigation exploring high school graduates' weaknesses in English proficiency in Oman. The 3-year-long investigation utilized different means to explore different stakeholder perspectives about this issue including students, teachers, supervisors, policymakers and parents. The current study aims to specifically offer a student perspective of the qualities of English language teachers at public schools in Oman.

The schooling system in Oman follows the Basic Education system first introduced on a gradual basis from academic year 1998/1999. Basic Education is divided into three cycles: Cycle 1 (grades 1–4), Cycle 2 (grades 5–10) and Post Basic Education (grades 11–12). Given the increasing importance of English worldwide, and given its centrality to the development of the sultanate, increasing attention has been given to English in school in the Basic Education system. English education begins in grade 1, and the amount of exposure to English at school increases incrementally in terms of content quantity and complexity as students progress through the grades.

### 3.1 *Participants*

The respondents to the questionnaire ( $N = 171$ ) consisted of Omani school students who were drawn from two cycles at four different grade levels of the Basic Education system: grades 9 and 10 (Cycle 2) and grades 11 and 12 (Post Basic). Respondents' ages ranged from 15 to 18 years old, and there were 44 males and 127 females. The selection of participants was based on convenience sampling (Patton, 1990, pp. 169–86) in that potential participants were conveniently accessible and were willing to take part in this aspect of the research. The imbalance in numbers of male and female participants reflects both a slight gender bias in the Omani schooling system and, more particularly, the greater ease of access female research assistants involved in the study had to female schools.

### 3.2 *Questionnaire Development*

Fundamentally, the concept of English teacher 'qualities' was not easy to delimit. Due to the absence of a clear methodological framework in the literature and the proliferation of areas which can be readily linked to this concept, such as pedagogical strategies, personal qualities, attitudes, skills, etc., an a priori decision was made to settle on a suitable methodological framework which can link the analysis of the study to existing research.

First, the development of the questionnaire followed the suggestions given by Devellis (1991): the general collection of item pools and their classification under categories, expert review of items and selection of the final items. At the start, the questionnaire which was used to compare the perceptions of Egyptian, Saudi Arabian and Omani students of high school teachers by Abu Rahma (2007) was adopted. The questionnaire consisted of 69 items rated across a five-point scale bearing the following values: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Not Sure (3), Agree (4) and Strongly Agree (5), and items were organized into three main areas: knowledge, teaching skills and personality. The items were subsequently reviewed by the research team, and, whilst the majority were retained with slight modifications, an alternative and novel approach borrowed from the field of teacher cognition in mainstream education and associated language education cognition research (see, e.g. the work of Simon Borg, 2006) was adopted in the categorisation, organization and analysis of items. Therefore, the concept of teacher qualities was operationalized through various items by reference to different teacher knowledge bases such as knowledge of pedagogy, knowledge of subject matter, knowledge of students, knowledge of management, knowledge of assessment and so on. In the end, the questionnaire contained the following seven categories with set items representing each category: content knowledge about teaching and learning, pedagogical knowledge about teaching and learning, knowledge about oneself (general qualities), knowledge about oneself (affective variables), knowledge about oneself

(professional development), knowledge about students and knowledge about classroom management.

The draft questionnaire underwent a content validity check through a process of validation conducted by two university professors and three experienced university English language instructors. During this process, members reviewed and revised the questionnaire items, debated item-category placement, refined some items and eliminated others. Although items 3, 49 and 62 concerning awareness of Western cultures, teachers having an acceptable appearance and being able to reflect on teaching effectiveness, respectively, were included in the questionnaire, those were the items which subsequently showed greater variability between respondents based on the standard deviation data. Therefore, any interpretation based on these should be taken cautiously. Further, item language was oriented so that questionnaire items specifically focused on the qualities of participants' current English language teachers as opposed to the qualities of English language teachers in general. A parallel Arabic-language version of the questionnaire was also developed, and three of the Arabic-speaking researchers from the aforementioned larger-scale study participated in its revision and in checking its equivalency to the English version. (The English and Arabic questionnaires are provided in the [Appendix](#).)

Following questionnaire finalization, the procedure for collecting data was established. After obtaining official permission to conduct the study from the Ministry of Education, two female research assistants contacted schools in one of the regions in Oman in order to seek approval from principals and teachers to enter classrooms to ask students to participate. The Arabic version of the questionnaire was administered to those students who agreed to participate inside their classrooms. Students were assured that their responses would be anonymous, that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could choose not to complete the questionnaire without suffering any negative consequences. A total of 171 students returned the questionnaires with a nearly 100% completion rate, but only data from 168 students was used to address research question 2 due to the fact that the demographic information section in three questionnaires was not completed. Descriptive analysis was performed to address the first research question, whilst independent samples t-tests were employed to explore research question 2.

## 4 Results

### Research Question 1

In order to answer the first research question regarding the qualities that participants believed their English teachers to possess, descriptive analysis with a focus on means and standard deviations was performed. Overall, students perceived their English language teachers to possess valued qualities across all categories. However, when qualities were grouped into two main categories relating to cognitive and academic aspects (categories 1, 2, 5 and 7) and affective and social variables



**Table 1** Questionnaire category means and standard deviations

Categories	Mean	Std. deviation
1. Content knowledge about teaching and learning	3.25	0.49
2. Pedagogical knowledge about teaching and learning	3.28	0.55
3. Knowledge about oneself—general qualities	3.47	0.59
4. Knowledge about oneself—affective variables	3.44	0.55
5. Knowledge about oneself—professional development	3.17	0.71
6. Knowledge about students	3.36	0.57
7. Knowledge about classroom management	3.25	0.80

**Table 2** Content knowledge

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
(2) Has a high level of English proficiency	3.63	0.64
(3) Is aware of Western cultures	2.72	1.02
(8) Is familiar with the social and cultural background of the learners	3.04	0.98
(10) Knows how to set objectives	3.19	0.85
(11) Knows how to evaluate pupils	3.46	0.80
(14) Is able to communicate well in English	3.56	0.45
(25) Is able to plan appropriate lessons	3.67	0.79
(65) Is able to contribute to curriculum development	3.27	0.88
(67) Is able to solve practical problems through conducting action research	3.11	0.95
Overall	3.25	0.49

(categories 3 and 4), it becomes apparent that students perceived that their English language school teachers were very strong in the affective domain, but that they were not as strong in the content and pedagogical domain (see Table 1).

This point will be explored in more detail at the end of this section. The following section presents a brief summary of the findings corresponding to each category of teacher quality investigated in response to the first research question.

#### ***4.1 Content Knowledge About Teaching and Learning***

Teachers' knowledge about teaching and learning was explored by nine items which collectively attempted to measure students' evaluations of teacher tendencies towards the language and towards teaching and learning. Items illustrative of this category were those concerned with proficiency in English and knowledge about assessment and curriculum development.

As shown in Table 2, all items with one exception (3. The teacher currently teaching me English is aware of Western cultures) have been viewed favourably by Omani school student participants. This means that students believed that their teachers pos-

**Table 3** Pedagogical knowledge

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
(4) Uses a variety of teaching methods	3.30	0.88
(7) Adjusts English input to match learners' proficiency levels	3.45	0.80
(9) Is aware of current teaching techniques	3.27	0.90
(12) Involves pupils in various activities	3.04	0.99
(13) Encourages learners' contributions	3.48	0.87
(17) Motivates learners using different instructional strategies	3.23	0.90
(18) Gives useful feedback on written work in appropriate ways	3.25	0.87
(20) Is aware of current trends in ELT	3.29	0.91
(22) Varies class interaction strategies (e.g. use group and pair work, drama, role play, debate)	3.30	0.92
(23) Implements teaching objectives set for the lesson	3.14	0.99
(24) Uses a variety of instructional resources effectively	3.17	0.94
(26) Is able to comment on pupils' responses appropriately	3.33	0.91
(27) Uses audiovisual aids/multimedia in teaching	3.08	0.97
(33) Selects appropriate supplementary materials	3.08	0.94
(35) Is able to present language using different techniques	3.67	0.52
(41) Varies teaching methods to suit different learning styles	3.21	0.96
(42) Is able to explain unfamiliar concepts in various ways	3.50	0.83
(43) Uses different techniques for presenting language	3.41	0.86
(44) Explains lessons clearly and confidently	3.61	0.65
(48) Creates a humorous and exciting class atmosphere	3.44	0.86
(50) Varies the tone of voice to attract students' attention	3.26	0.94
(55) Uses the latest technology in teaching	3.09	1.02
Overall	3.28	0.55

sessed moderate knowledge in all the areas investigated. Item 3, which received a mean of 2.72, is also important to consider. The item measured students' perceptions of their teachers' knowledge of Western cultures, with the low mean overall suggesting that students considered their teachers to lack knowledge in this area.

## 4.2 Pedagogical Knowledge About Teaching and Learning

This knowledge type was operationalized by 22 items, making it the largest of all categories explored in the questionnaire. The items elicited participants' responses to their teachers' methodological knowledge and skills such as student involvement, use of teaching techniques and strategies and giving feedback.

As can be seen from Table 3, the overall mean for all items is relatively high ( $M = 3.28$ ). This indicates the students agreed that their high school teachers possessed a moderate level of pedagogical skills in the classroom. It is very interesting to note that items 12, 27, 33 and 55, which focused on teacher involvement with

**Table 4** Teacher general qualities

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
(38) Speaks audibly and clearly	3.65	0.73
(45) Is prepared for class	3.49	0.83
(51) Writes clearly and legibly	3.41	0.86
(52) Comes to class on time	3.33	0.94
Overall	3.47	0.59

their students, the use of visual aids and supplementary materials and the use of the latest technology in teaching, received amongst the lowest means here. This suggests that students think that their current high school teachers do not do enough to involve pupils in various activities, do not use visual aids, use few supplementary materials and make limited use of the latest educational technology inside the classroom.

### 4.3 Knowledge About Oneself—General Qualities

This is one of three categories that are directly related to teachers’ personal qualities as opposed to their classroom practices and behaviours. Whilst the other two related categories were concerned with affective variables and professional development, respectively, this category refers to general qualities pertaining to teaching skills such as intelligible speaking and writing and general preparation for, and attendance to, class.

Again, as Table 4 indicates, Omani high school learners believed their teachers possessed these general personal qualities and traits in moderate levels, with item means often as high as 3.47. In fact, this category received the highest overall mean of the seven investigated in this study.

### 4.4 Knowledge About Oneself—Affective Variables

This knowledge category featured 15 items, reflecting our emphasis on the affective and emotional aspects of EFL teaching which are extremely crucial, but which are also often neglected at the expense of other aspects such as cognitive factors. These items explore participants’ perceptions of their teacher’s self-control, patience, kindness, fair treatment, care, tolerance, etc.

The moderate item means featured in Table 5 indicate that learners agreed their teachers possessed satisfactory degrees of emotional investment in their students’ learning processes and exhibited moderate degrees of affection for their profes-

**Table 5** Teacher affective variables

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
(1) Is creative in teaching	3.49	0.81
(5) Is tolerant with students' incomprehension	3.54	0.87
(6) Is enthusiastic about teaching	3.56	0.80
(15) Is patient with pupils	3.42	0.85
(16) Is fun	3.29	0.90
(21) Is helpful	3.45	0.86
(36) Is kind	3.44	0.83
(37) Treats students fairly	3.61	0.78
(39) Cares about all students	3.59	0.81
(40) Treats students equally	3.58	0.78
(49) Has an acceptable appearance	3.11	1.06
(53) Is willing to repeat explanations or to modify strategies for weak students	3.40	0.89
(54) Is innovative in addressing students' difficulties and needs	3.38	0.91
(56) Always shows care about student comprehension and progress	3.42	0.84
(58) Is confident and has self-control	3.38	0.90
Overall	3.44	0.54

sional and teaching practice. Item 49 (The teacher teaching us in school has an acceptable appearance) received the lowest mean.

#### ***4.5 Knowledge About Oneself—Professional Development***

The inclusion of this category in the questionnaire was based on the theoretical premise that good language teachers seek professional development to upgrade their skills and enhance their teaching practice. This is an area that is often absent in research of this kind. Knowledge about professional development measures students' perceptions about whether their teachers not only sought ways to engage with professional development but also helped and encouraged their colleagues to achieve the same goal.

Based on Table 6, participants agreed that their teachers both sought ways, and encouraged their fellow teachers, to participate in and attend professional development activities. However, this is the area where students' perceptions of their English teachers' qualities were the least positive. This may be explained in part by the fact that this aspect of teacher practice is not immediately apparent to the student.

**Table 6** Knowledge about professional development

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
(34) Is actively involved in learning new skills to improve teaching	3.03	1.02
(57) Is able to co-operate with colleagues to improve current teaching practices	3.27	0.91
(60) Cares about developing professionally	3.25	0.94
(61) Has a positive attitude towards change and innovation	3.30	0.98
(62) Is able to reflect upon teaching effectiveness	3.23	0.93
(63) Participates in teacher professional growth events such as seminars, workshops, conferences, etc.	2.95	1.03
(66) Has the ability to help other colleagues to develop professionally	3.15	0.97
(68) Is ready to learn new methods and teaching strategies	3.24	0.97
Overall	3.17	0.71

**Table 7** Knowledge about students

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
(28) Has good rapport with pupils	3.51	0.85
(29) Understands learners' personalities, needs and learning styles	3.31	0.90
(30) Is able to assess learners' strengths and weaknesses	3.39	0.85
(31) Takes into consideration students' needs and interests	3.28	0.86
(32) Is able to raise students' interest levels in English lessons	3.47	0.79
(47) Has positive attitudes towards pupils	3.45	0.79
(59) Establishes a good relationship with students	3.41	0.90
(64) Has the skills to develop autonomy in learners	3.12	0.98
Overall	3.36	0.57

### 4.6 Knowledge About Students

Good foreign language teachers are knowledgeable about their students. This category elicited students' perceptions of their high school teachers' knowledge in this area. Item means here were related to teachers having good rapport with students; understanding students' personalities, needs and difficulties; having positive attitudes towards students; and encouraging the development of autonomy in students.

In Table 7, the overall mean for this category was 3.36 which suggests that participants agreed that their high school teachers were positively oriented towards them and that they were very satisfied with the positive and close relationship that they had with their teachers.

**Table 8** Classroom management

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
(19) Has effective classroom management skills	3.20	0.91
(46) Is able to manage the classroom properly	3.31	0.91
Overall	3.25	0.80

#### 4.7 Knowledge About Classroom Management

The final questionnaire category related to teachers' knowledge about classroom management. This category was represented by two items which measured teachers' degree of management skills and their knowledge of how to use these to aid language learning.

Consistent with the above trend, Table 8 demonstrates that students agreed that their teachers were generally good classroom managers who not only had high levels of classroom management skills but also knew how to use them effectively.

In sum, overall results suggest that participants agreed that their teachers possessed satisfactory to moderate degrees of knowledge relevant to teaching EFL. As offered above, if the seven categories are reduced to two broader categories corresponding to cognitive and academic aspects and affective aspects, then it becomes clearer that students believed their teachers had higher levels of interpersonal relationships with them than actual mastery of content knowledge and pedagogical skills.

##### Research Question 2

The second research question concerned the potential impact of the background variables of gender and grade level. In order to explore the influence of the first of these, two sets of independent samples t-tests were conducted. First, a series of t-tests was conducted to investigate potential relationships between gender and the seven questionnaire categories. Another series of t-tests was then run to investigate the potential effect of grade level (grades 9 and 10 and grades 11 and 12) on questionnaire categories. In order to adjust for the heightened chance of Type I Error, a more conservative p-value of  $p < 0.04$  was set.

As can be seen in Table 9, t-tests revealed no statistically significant differences based on gender for the seven questionnaire categories. This indicates that both male and female participants held similar perceptions about the qualities that their English language teachers possessed. To determine the potential effect of grade level on the seven questionnaire categories, it was decided to combine the four respondent groups corresponding to grades 9, 10, 11 and 12 into two groups: the lower group (grades 9 and 10,  $n = 98$ ) and the upper group (grades 11 and 12,  $n = 71$ ). Once this was achieved, another series of independent samples t-test was run, and the results indicate statistically significant differences between grade levels on all seven questionnaire categories at  $p < 0.04$  (Table 10).

Results indicate that students in the lower level grades (grades 9 and 10) see their teachers significantly more positively than do students in the upper level grades

**Table 9** T-tests for gender and seven questionnaire categories

	T-test for equality of means		
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Content knowledge about teaching and learning	0.535	67.75	0.594
Pedagogical knowledge about teaching and learning	1.047	72.90	0.299
Knowledge about oneself—general qualities	0.079	67.74	0.937
Knowledge about oneself— affective variables	0.234	72.70	0.815
Knowledge about oneself—professional development	0.840	78.71	0.404
Knowledge about students	-0.077	67.74	0.939
Knowledge about classroom management	-0.258	74.18	0.797

**Table 10** T-test of grade level and seven categories of teacher qualities

	T-test for equality of means		
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Content knowledge about teaching and learning	2.377	168	0.019
Pedagogical knowledge about teaching and learning	3.165	168	0.002
Knowledge about oneself—general qualities	4.600	168	0.000
Knowledge about oneself— affective variables	3.129	168	0.002
Knowledge about oneself—professional development	2.260	168	0.025
Knowledge about students	2.330	168	0.021
Knowledge about classroom management	4.515	168	0.000

(grades 11 and 12). This is especially apparent in four categories relating to pedagogical knowledge, general teacher qualities, affective variables and knowledge about classroom management.

## 5 Discussion

This questionnaire-based study aimed to explore Omani school students' perceptions of the qualities of their English language teachers. It examined these qualities in seven major domains relating to content, pedagogy, personal values and professional development and classroom management skills. It is, therefore, important to discuss these findings in connection to the more recent literature in the area in order to elucidate more fully its value and contribution to existing knowledge-based teacher education.

In Park and Lee's investigation (2006), Korean male students suggested a number of qualities of effective English language teachers that were different to those offered by female students in terms of socio-affective skills (i.e. treating students fairly, helping students in and out of class and so on). Similarly, Babai Shishavan (2010) reported that gender has some influence on perceptions of these qualities in that male university students associated teachers' efficacy with the use of L1

compared to female students who tended to highlight interpersonal and social qualities and rate more highly teacher qualities pertaining to anxiety reduction and interest arousal. Contrary to these findings, the current study found no gender effects across the seven questionnaire categories, which suggested that both male and female students perceived their teachers' qualities in similar ways. It is likely that the gender effect was introduced in the two studies above because students were evaluating both male and female English language teachers, and not their current English language teacher who, in the case of this study in Oman, necessarily involved female teachers teaching female students and male teachers with male students.

Further, in the literature, academic achievement levels have been demonstrated to be related to learner perceptions of the qualities of effective English language teachers. For example, based on the results of a mock language test, Park and Lee (2006) noticed some variations between their sample of high-achieving and low-achieving students in terms of perceptions of pedagogical knowledge and socio-affective skills. In addition, differences were found by Taqi et al. (2014) in their university-based study on students with high and low GPAs wherein the former reported 'English proficiency' as the most important teacher quality and the latter ranked socio-emotional skills (e.g. closer relationships and status) the highest. In the same vein, the current research found a grade level effect in relation to all seven questionnaire categories relating to content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, classroom management knowledge, general teacher qualities, knowledge of students, affective behaviour of the teacher towards their students and knowledge about professional development. However, it must be noted here that the association between high and low achievement was not based on a specific proficiency level or achievement testing, but that rather a relationship was established indirectly through grade level in such a way that grade 9 and 10 students were classified as having lower English levels compared to students who were in grades 11 and 12.

It is also important to note that, sometimes, students may not be able to judge accurately the professional development activities that their teachers may be involved in. As such, their low evaluation of this aspect of their school English language teachers in this study cannot be taken conclusively. For example, it may not be easy for students to determine if their teacher is actively involved in acquiring new skills to improve instruction, if they show interest in developing professionally, have helpful attitudes towards change and innovation, are able to reflect upon teaching quality and/or are ready to learn new methods and teaching strategies. What is even more elusive is for students to determine in any certainty their teachers' levels of collegial co-operation in order to improve their instruction, their participation in professional development sessions (e.g. seminars, workshops, conferences) and/or their ability to help other colleagues develop professionally.

Whilst the current research also has other limitations in the sense that it is restricted to one Omani region out of the many that could have been investigated, important implications for English language teacher education can still be drawn. Foremost, the support for the instructional and humanistic dimensions of English language teaching, and, therefore, teachers, cannot be ignored. In a study by Saafin



(2005) in Emirati universities, the association between effective English language teaching and the creation of English language teachers was established into two seemingly polarized qualities: instructional skills and human attributes. To the extent that these two are developed, the effectiveness of English language teachers is created and enhanced. A tentative conclusion may be that, since Omanis are often described as a warm and friendly people, it could be that those qualities exert a strong influence on, and even colour, the perceptions of Omani school students of their English language teachers in this manner. Teachers should be cognizant of the fact that students are not uniform beings, but each is a unique individual with special needs, a specific learning style and distinguished profile. This demands from teachers the individualization of instruction rather than adopting a default, one-size-fits-all approach to teaching.

Additionally, it may be possible to conclude that as students' educational levels grow, so do their expectations of their English language teachers. It is possible, therefore, that student participants drawn from grades 11 and 12 in this study—the two final years in Oman's schooling system before entry into higher education—rated their English language teachers' qualities more negatively because this group of students had higher expectations of the teachers due to the higher pressure levels that typify the pre-university education stage. This is especially important in the case of teachers who teach across grades. Further, one area where the students rated their teachers less positively is in the use of technology. Whilst it may be argued that this is a school-level factor wherein schools may not have been fully equipped to carry out technology-enhanced English language teaching, and thus it is an area which lays outside the teacher's locus of control, teachers may address this gap by exploring technology possibilities which do not require sophisticated capabilities or huge financial resources to augment their teaching in the English classroom.

## 6 Conclusion

The exploration of English language teacher qualities requires a multifaceted and complex approach. Because of the multidimensionality of the concept and the interplay of factors impacting upon it, such as teachers' personalities, teaching skills, the nature of the subject matter, and the contextual particularities of educational institutions and schools, including a qualitative component in the current study could have better highlighted the saliency of at least some of these contextual factors. Based on the quantitative evidence, however, the current study offers one major conclusion which is that the appropriate and careful placement of English language teachers and the preparation and in-service professional development of the teacher are necessary steps to satisfy the increasing demand for quality English language education in Oman.

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## Appendix: Questionnaires

### A Questionnaire for Surveying

#### The Qualities of a Good English Language Teacher as Perceived by Omani EFL Learners at the School Level

Identifying the qualities of a good language teacher is considered an important step for designing and implementing effective programs for teacher education. The aim of this questionnaire is to explore the views of Omani students on the qualities of a good language teacher.

This questionnaire has three sections. Please answer questions in all sections, and note **that you are evaluating the current English language teacher that you have now.**

We are grateful to you for your participation. We assure you of the confidentiality of your responses.

Please answer the following questions.

#### Part A: Demographic information (*Respond as appropriate*).

##### 1. Governorate:

- |                       |                          |                     |                          |                      |                          |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Muscat             | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. Al-Batinah South | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. Al-Batinah North  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Musandam           | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. Al-Buraimi       | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. Al-Dhahira        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Al-Dakhilia        | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8. Al-Wusta         | <input type="checkbox"/> | 9. Al-Sharqiya North | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Al-Sharqiya South | <input type="checkbox"/> | 11. Dhofar          | <input type="checkbox"/> |                      |                          |

2. Where do you live?      1. City       2. Village

3. Gender:      1. Male       2. Female

##### 4. Age (in years):

- 15 or below       16       17       18       19       20 and above

##### 5. Type of school:

1. Government (General Education)       2. Government (Basic Education)   
3. Private

##### 6. Name of school, if private: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Have you ever attended private school to learn English?      1. YES       2. NO   
If YES,

##### 8. How long?

1. A few days       2. A few weeks   
3. A few months       4. A year and above

9. Type of education: 1. General  2. Basic

10. English proficiency level [Rate yourself: score from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest)]:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11. Have you ever attended a language institute to get extra tuition in English?

1. YES  2. NO

If YES,

12. How long?

1. A few days  2. A few weeks   
3. A few months  4. A year and above

13. How often?

1. Once  2. Twice  3. More than three times

14. Have you taken English Skills in Grade 11? 1. YES  2. NO

15. Have you taken English Skills in Grade 12? 1. YES  2. NO

16. Mother's education level:

1. No formal education  2. School   
3. Diploma/Bachelor degree  4. Higher education degree

17. Father's education level:

1. No formal education  2. School   
3. Diploma/Bachelor degree  4. Higher education degree

18. Home language(s): -----

19. How many languages do you speak?

1  2  3 and above

20. Do any of your family members help you study English?

1. YES  2. NO

**PART B : Please indicate your level of agreement with the following qualities for the English language teacher that is teaching you English now at school are by circling the relevant number on a scale of 1-5:**

1 = I do not agree with the statement

2= I somewhat agree

3= Neutral

4= I agree

5= I totally agree

<b>The teacher who teaches me English now</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
1.	Is creative in teaching	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Has a high level of English proficiency	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Is aware of Western cultures	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Uses a variety of teaching methods	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Is tolerant of students' incomprehension	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Is enthusiastic about teaching	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Adjusts English input to match learners' proficiency level	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Is familiar with the social and cultural background of the learners	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Is aware of current teaching techniques	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Knows how to set objectives	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Knows how to evaluate pupils	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Involves pupils in various activities	1	2	3	4	5
13.	Encourages learners' contributions	1	2	3	4	5
14.	Is able to communicate well in English	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Is patient with pupils	1	2	3	4	5
16.	Has a good sense of humor	1	2	3	4	5
17.	Motivates learners using different instructional strategies	1	2	3	4	5
18.	Gives useful feedback on written work in appropriate ways	1	2	3	4	5
19.	Has effective classroom management skills	1	2	3	4	5

<b>The teacher who teaches me English now</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
20.	Is aware of current trends in ELT	1	2	3	4	5
21.	Is helpful	1	2	3	4	5
22.	Varies class interaction strategies (e.g. use group and pair work, drama, role play, debate)	1	2	3	4	5
23.	Implements teaching objectives set for the lesson	1	2	3	4	5
24.	Uses a variety of instructional resources effectively	1	2	3	4	5
25.	Is able to plan appropriate lessons	1	2	3	4	5
26.	Is able to comment on pupils' responses appropriately	1	2	3	4	5
27.	Uses audiovisual aids/ multimedia in teaching	1	2	3	4	5
28.	Has good rapport with pupils	1	2	3	4	5
29.	Understands learners' personalities, needs and learning styles	1	2	3	4	5
30.	Is able to assess learners' strengths and weaknesses	1	2	3	4	5
31.	Takes into consideration students' needs and interests	1	2	3	4	5
32.	Is able to raise students' interest levels in English lessons	1	2	3	4	5
33.	Selects appropriate supplementary materials	1	2	3	4	5
34.	Is actively involved in learning new skills to improve teaching	1	2	3	4	5
35.	Is able to present language using different techniques	1	2	3	4	5
36.	Is kind	1	2	3	4	5
37.	Treats students fairly	1	2	3	4	5
38.	Speaks audibly and clearly	1	2	3	4	5
39.	Cares about all students	1	2	3	4	5
40.	Treats students equally	1	2	3	4	5

<b>The teacher who teaches me English now</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
41.	Varies teaching methods to suit different learning styles	1	2	3	4	5
42.	Is able to explain unfamiliar concepts in various ways	1	2	3	4	5
43.	Uses different techniques for presenting language	1	2	3	4	5
44.	Explains lessons clearly and confidently	1	2	3	4	5
45.	Is prepared for class	1	2	3	4	5
46.	Is able to manage the classroom properly	1	2	3	4	5
47.	Has positive attitudes towards pupils	1	2	3	4	5
48.	Creates a humorous & exciting class atmosphere	1	2	3	4	5
49.	Has an acceptable appearance	1	2	3	4	5
50.	Varies the tone of voice to attract students' attention	1	2	3	4	5
51.	Writes clearly and legibly	1	2	3	4	5
52.	Comes to class on time	1	2	3	4	5
53.	Is willing to repeat explanations or modify strategies for weak students	1	2	3	4	5
54.	Is innovative in addressing students' difficulties and needs	1	2	3	4	5
55.	Uses the latest technology in teaching	1	2	3	4	5
56.	Always shows care about student comprehension and progress	1	2	3	4	5
57.	Is able to co-operate with colleagues to improve current teaching practices.	1	2	3	4	5
58.	Is confident and has self-control	1	2	3	4	5
59.	Establishes a good relationship with students	1	2	3	4	5
60.	Cares about developing professionally	1	2	3	4	5

The teacher who teaches me English now		1	2	3	4	5
61.	Has a positive attitude towards change and innovation	1	2	3	4	5
62.	Is able to reflect upon teaching effectiveness	1	2	3	4	5
63.	Participates in teacher professional growth events such as seminars, workshops, conferences etc	1	2	3	4	5
64.	Has the skills to develop autonomy in learners	1	2	3	4	5
65.	Is able to contribute to curriculum development	1	2	3	4	5
66.	Has the ability to help other colleagues to develop professionally.	1	2	3	4	5
67.	Is able to solve practical problems through conducting action research	1	2	3	4	5
68.	Is ready to learn new methods and teaching strategies	1	2	3	4	5

**PART C : What are the characteristics that an English language teacher should have to succeed in deliver information to students and to teach the language in a good way?**

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دراسة حول صفات معلمي اللغة الانجليزية من وجهة نظر الطلاب على مستوى مدارس التعليم العام والخاص  
في سلطنة عمان

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى التعرف على صفات معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية من وجهة نظر الطلاب للتعرف على أساليب تدريسهم وتقييم مدى كفاءتها. تضم هذه الإستبانة ثلاثة أقسام رئيسية. نرجوا التكرم بالإجابة على الأسئلة الواردة في كل قسم واضعين في إعتباركم أنكم تتجولون أستاذ اللغة الإنجليزية الحالي وما إذا كان يقوم بالأعمال المدرجة في الإستبانة أو يحصل بالصفات المذكورة فيها.

□ اقراني قرأت ورقة المعلومات اعلاه والمعدة لهذا البحث وافر على موافقتي للإجابة على هذه الأسئلة. كم إنني افهم أن تعبئتي

لهذه الاستبانة دليل على موافقتي في المشاركة في هذا البحث (ضع علامة √)

لمعلومات اضافية حول هذه الدراسة، نرجو التواصل مع المديرية العامة للتربية والتعليم في المحافظة التي تقعون بها

القسم الأول: بيانات سكانية ( اجب في المكان المناسب).

1- المحافظة/ المنطقة:

- 1. مسقط □ 2. الباطنة شمال □ 3. الباطنة جنوب  
□ 4. مسندم □ 5. البريمي □ 6. الظاهرة  
□ 7. الداخلية □ 8. الوسطى □ 9. الشرقية شمال  
□ 10. الشرقية جنوب □ 11. ظفار

2- اين تسكن ؟

- 1. المدينة □ 2. القرية

3- الجنس:

- 1. ذكر □ 2. انثى

4- العمر (بالسنوات):

- 1. 15 أو ادنى □ 2. 16 □ 2. 17 □ 3. 18 □ 4. 19  
□ 5. 20 أو أكثر



## 5- نوع المدرسة:

1. حكومية (تعليم عام)  2. حكومية (تعليم أساسي)  3. خاص

6- اسم المدرسة، إذا كانت خاصة: .....

7- هل سبق أن درست في مدرسة خاصة لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية:

1. نعم  2. لا

8- إذا كان جوابك نعم، كم هي المدة:

1. أيام قليلة  2. أسابيع قليلة  3. أشهر قليلة  4. سنة أو أكثر

9- نوع التعليم:

1. عام  2. أساسي

10- مستوى تحدثك باللغة الإنجليزية (قيم نفسك: نقاط من 1 (الأضعف) إلى 10 (الأقوى):

- 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

11- هل سبق أن انضممت إلى معهد لغة لاكتساب تعليم إضافي في اللغة الإنجليزية؟

1. نعم  2. لا

إذا كان جوابك نعم،

12- ما هي المدة؟

1. بضعة أيام  2. بضعة أسابيع  3. بضعة أشهر  4. سنة أو أكثر

13- كم هي عدد مرات انضمامك؟

1. مرة  2. مرتان  3. ثلاث مرات أو أكثر

14- هل درست مادة مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية في الصف 11؟

1. نعم  2. لا

15- هل درست مادة مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية في الصف 12؟

1. نعم  2. لا

16. مستوى تعليم الأم:

1. غير متعلمة  2. تعليم عالي  3. دبلوم/بكالوريوس  4. تعليم مدرسي

17- مستوى تعليم الأب:

3. دبلوم/بكالوريوس  1. غير متعلم   
 4. تعليم عالي  2. تعليم مدرسي

18- اللغة (اللغات) المستخدمة في المنزل: .....

19- كم لغة تتحدث؟

3. ثلاث لغات وأكثر  2. لغتان  1. لغة

20- هل يقوم احد من افراد العائلة بمساعدتك في مذاكرة اللغة الانجليزية؟

2. لا  1. نعم

#### القسم الثاني

الرجاء الاشارة الى مدى اتفاقك مع العبارات التالية عن طريق وضع دائرة حول الرقم المناسب 1 – 5

1= لا أتفق أبدا مع العبارة

2= أتفق إلى حد ما

3= محايد

4 = أتفق

5= أتفق تماما

					المعلم الذي يدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية	م
5	4	3	2	1	مبدع في التدريس	1
5	4	3	2	1	لديه مستوى عال من الكفاءة في اللغة الإنجليزية	2
5	4	3	2	1	مطلع على الثقافة الغربية	3
5	4	3	2	1	يستخدم لطرق تدريس متعددة	4
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على التعامل مع ضعف الادراك والفهم لدى طلابه	5

5	4	3	2	1	متحمس للتدريس	6
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على تكييف المادة اللغوية لتناسب مع مستوى الطلاب	7
5	4	3	2	1	مدرك للخلفية الاجتماعية والثقافية للطلاب	8
5	4	3	2	1	ملم بأساليب التدريس الحديثة	9
5	4	3	2	1	ملم بكيفية وضع الأهداف	10
5	4	3	2	1	لديه المعرفة بكيفية تقييم مستوى طلابه العلمي	11
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على اشارك الطلاب في الأنشطة المختلفة	12
5	4	3	2	1	مشجع لإسهامات طلابه في الصف من اجل تعلم اللغة الانجليزية	13
5	4	3	2	1	لديه القدرة على التواصل باللغة الانجليزية شفويا وكتابة	14
5	4	3	2	1	صبور على طلابه	15
5	4	3	2	1	لديه حس الفكاهة والمرح	16
					<b>المعلم الذي يدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية</b>	
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على حث طلابه على استخدام استراتيجيات تعلم مختلفة	17
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على اعطاء طلابه تغذية راجعة مناسبة لأعمالهم الكتابية	18
5	4	3	2	1	لديه مهارات فعالة لضبط الصف	19
5	4	3	2	1	مطلع على الجديد في تدريس اللغة الانجليزية	20
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على تقديم المساعدة لطلابه	21
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على أن ينوع من استراتيجيات التفاعل الصفي ( مثال : العمل الثنائي والجماعي والتمثيل والمناظرة)	22
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على ان ينجز الأهداف التعليمية المحددة لكل درس في المقرر	23
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على استخدام العديد من المصادر التعليمية بفعالية	24
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على التخطيط الجيد للدروس	25

5	4	3	2	1	قادر على التعليق على اجابات الطلاب بطريقة مناسبة	26
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على استخدام المعينات السمعية البصرية والوسائط المتعددة في التدريس	27
5	4	3	2	1	لديه علاقة طيبة بطلابه	28
5	4	3	2	1	على دراية بأنماط شخصيات طلابه واحتياجاتهم وأنماط تعلمهم	29
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على تقييم مواطن القوة والضعف لدى طلابه	30
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على ان يضع في اعتباره احتياجات الطلاب و رغباتهم	31
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على رفع مستويات اهتمام الطلاب في دروس اللغة الانجليزية	32
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على اختيار مواد تعليمية اضافية مكمل للدرس	33
5	4	3	2	1	يشارك في نشاطات يتعلم من خلالها مهارات جديدة لتحسين التدريس	34
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على تدريس اللغة باستخدام تقنيات مختلفة	35
5	4	3	2	1	ودود في تعامله مع طلابه	36
5	4	3	2	1	عادل في تعامله مع الطلاب	37
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على التحدث بصوت واضح ومسموع	38
5	4	3	2	1	مهتم بجميع طلابه	39
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على ان يعامل طلابه بمساواة	40
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على ان ينوع من اساليب التدريس لتناسب أنماط التعليم المختلفة لطلابه	41
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على شرح المفاهيم غير المعروفه لدى الطلاب بطرق مختلفة	42
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على استخدام طرق مختلفة لشرح اللغة	43
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على شرح الدرس بوضوح وثقة	44
5	4	3	2	1	حريص على التحضير الجيد للدرس	45
5	4	3	2	1	قادر على ضبط الصف بطريقة جيدة	46

5	4	3	2	1	47	لديه اتجاهات ايجابية نحو طلابه
5	4	3	2	1	48	قادر على خلق جو دراسي يسوده المتعة وروح الدعابه
					<b>المعلم الذي يدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية</b>	
5	4	3	2	1	49	مظهره مقبول
5	4	3	2	1	50	قادر على تنويع نبرة صوته لجذب انتباه الطلاب
5	4	3	2	1	51	يكتب اللغة الانجليزية بخط واضح
5	4	3	2	1	52	ملتزم بحضور الحصة الدراسية في وقتها المحدد
5	4	3	2	1	53	مستعد لإعادة شرح الدرس للطلاب الضعاف
5	4	3	2	1	54	مبدع في تلبية احتياجات الطلاب وتحديد الصعوبات الدراسية التي يواجهونها
5	4	3	2	1	55	قادر على استخدام احدث التقنيات في التعليم
5	4	3	2	1	56	حريص على استيعاب الطلاب وتقديمهم الدراسي
5	4	3	2	1	57	متعاون مع زملائه في تطوير ممارسات التدريس الحديثة
5	4	3	2	1	58	واثق من نفسه و قادر على ضبط نفسه عند الغضب
5	4	3	2	1	59	قادر على اقامة علاقات جيدة مع طلابه
5	4	3	2	1	60	مهتم بتطوير نفسه مهنيا
5	4	3	2	1	61	لديه اتجاهات ايجابية للتغيير والابتكار
5	4	3	2	1	62	قادر على التفكير مليا في فعالية التدريس
5	4	3	2	1	63	مشارك بصفة مستمرة في فعاليات التنمية المهنية ( المشاغل و المؤتمرات)
5	4	3	2	1	64	لديه المهارة لتطوير الاعتماد على النفس لدى الطلاب
5	4	3	2	1	65	قادر على المشاركة في تطوير المناهج
5	4	3	2	1	66	قادر على مساعدة زملائه على التطوير والنمو المهني

5	4	3	2	1	قادر على حل المشكلات عن طريق عمل البحوث العلمية	67
5	4	3	2	1	مستعد لتعلم طرق و استراتيجيات تدريس جديدة	68

### القسم الثالث

ما هي الصفات التي يجب أن يتحلى بها معلم اللغة الإنجليزية ليكون ناجحاً في أداء مهمته بإيصال المعلومة للطلاب وتعليمه اللغة بشكل جيد؟

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# Learning for Real – Voices from the Classroom



Alina Rebecca Chirciu and Tulika Mishra

**Abstract** The field of second language education has long been solely focused on skills training and the achievement of programme learning objectives. While this is necessary in order to measure learning effectiveness, it represents only a small part of the possibilities English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has to offer in terms of ethical and moral values, lifelong learning and social awareness. These are not only integral parts of higher education graduate attributes but can also be said to characterize well-rounded individuals. This research aimed to investigate the relationship between second language classroom learning and students' real-life experiences. The study examined the implementation of literature and critical literacy-oriented materials and teaching and learning techniques in two English language classrooms in an undergraduate programme at a higher education institution in Oman. To elicit participants' voices, students were asked to record their views in weekly diaries and to respond anonymously to an online survey. Results indicate that literature and critical reading pieces help students connect their classroom learning with their lived experiences.

**Keywords** Multiple voices · Literature · Life skills · Critical reading · EFL

## 1 Introduction: Students and Teachers – Voices from the Classroom

The concept of voice has always presented a fascination for us as educators, first and foremost because it conjures images of empowerment in ourselves and our students. In the courses that have served as our research context, we have attempted to

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provide students with a platform where their voices could be heard by their peers and by us with the aim of extrapolating this experience to real-life settings. One hundred years ago, John Dewey was already asking teachers to listen to student voices and to tune into their thinking and learning experience (see Dewey, 2010). This project constitutes an attempt to represent those voices and their reactions to a different learning experience aimed at reclaiming the connection between students' real lives and their classroom learning.

The present paper is thus written in multiple voices, as voice here represents not only an opportunity to speak out and make oneself heard but also a step towards the construction of a dialogic experience (Benesch, 2001) in teaching and learning and the facilitation of a deeper understanding of the crucial role students' perspectives play in the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process (Cook-Sather, 2006). The paper thus attempts to present students' perspectives on a critical, democratic approach to learning shaped by Deweyan and Freirian principles (Dewey, 2004; Freire, 1998) through pedagogical tools that facilitate a connection between students' lived realities and classroom experience. At the same time, the teachers'/researchers'/authors' multiple voices are present in the text as they represent the ambivalence of our roles while also standing as evidence of both the existence of the classroom dialogue created through this teaching and learning approach and of the complexity and honesty of our professional and personal classroom experience (Tierny, 1997).

This paper adopts a highly self-reflective tone as a result of our focus on sharing our, and our students', classroom experiences in order to give primary importance to the idea of "voice" or, rather, "multiple voices". Our bias is, thus, not only clearly stated but also testimony to the reality of our classroom and of real-life experiences where narratives are co-constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), negotiated and in a constant dynamic. Although this could represent a limitation of the current study, it is, we believe, also one of its strengths as we tried our best to provide thick descriptions of how we and our students perceived the learning for real experience.

### ***1.1 Teachers' Voices from the Literature Classroom***

We have always believed that the role of academia is to create well-rounded people who are evolved human beings in terms of knowledge, behaviour and thought process and whose conduct indicates much more than the mere transfer of content knowledge and skills. What is required for the twenty-first-century learner, we believe, is a mix of content with "real-life knowledge" because the ultimate use of knowledge is to make life worthwhile for the individual and society at large.

The importance of skills training and the achievement of learning objectives in the field of second language education cannot be overemphasized since these are essential measures of learning effectiveness. However, too much focus on this achievement has taken away the beauty of educating students holistically – a sacrifice that has occurred as teaching the mechanics of a second language has taken



precedence over real-life learning. The responsibility of academia to produce well-rounded human beings in second language classrooms, however, is still in place and can be achieved through balanced pedagogy and curriculum which pay attention to the importance of sociocultural awareness and lifelong learning. One of the ways to achieve this is by adopting varied pedagogies and by teaching language through literature (Chirciu & Mishra, 2015).

## ***1.2 Language Acquisition Has a Purpose***

Language learning can have many purposes. However, historically, foreign languages were learnt either to understand more about foreign lands and peoples or to engage in the literature that those lands produced. Now that the world is becoming one global village, it requires more global citizens as opposed to citizens of a particular country. Hence, it is important to enrich students' cultural understandings and to help them realize the beauty of cultural diversity. Religious intolerance and/or ethnocentrism is a hindrance to personal and professional growth. Literature, however, has the ability to help learners move beyond their self-designed and self-established beliefs and to reach out globally with open-minded approaches and enthusiasm. Identifying and helping overcome any kind of mental, cultural or social barrier that a learner may have is, in our opinion, the first duty of an academic. Fortunately, literature can do this due to its rich bank of enjoyable, engaging and authentic material.

The purpose of language teaching should not only be helping students achieve linguistic output but should also encompass the achievement of a holistic learning experience. Dewey (1938, cited in Shellman, 2014) stated that, for learners to understand the world, they need to interact directly with the experiences that the world can offer. Thus, language learning cannot be said to be complete in the absence of intellectual, linguistic and emotional competence. The development of these competencies can start with extensive reading in the target language. This, of course, requires reading materials that students find enjoyable and interesting. For example, if an interesting short story, novel or poem is distributed to students, it will be received differently and effortlessly by them. Such aspects of these texts as appealing storylines, characters, narratives and so on all combine to take students into a new world of learning through language. They also contribute to the development and use of deeper, higher-order thinking skills, in addition to the use of imagination, analysis and personal response. The use of literature allows students to relate to the conditions presented in the text and to learn to see things in their ambiguity while also understanding how to deal with different situations and gaining insight into human nature. These materials, therefore, become logically more authentic (Collie & Slater, 1987).

Literature is thus an important means of achieving a number of academic and social ends. It plays an important role in developing vocabulary and oral and written communication skills and simultaneously exposes learners to situations, issues and

emotions encountered in their lives. In doing so, literature can help develop both learners' academic and life skills – the basis for lifelong education.

### ***1.3 Voices from a Critical Reading Classroom***

The education system that we experienced as students was based on the positivist ideals of rationality, objectivity and truth (Carr & Kemmis, 2004; Giroux, 1997). This legacy of rationality as prevailing over lived experience made its way to the social sciences from a long tradition of research on the physical world whereby causal links could be easily established. For long, this tradition of research and practice was associated with scientific rigour (Carr & Kemmis, 2004). As educators, we found ourselves experiencing this paradigm again which, in fact, activated our problematizing sense and opened our eyes towards critical theory. Critical theory appeared as a reaction to the dominance of positivist scientific thought in the twentieth century with the aim of renewing the long-lost relationship between theory and practice. This, according to Carr and Kemmis (2004, p. 132), “required recovering from early philosophy the elements of social thought” which was concerned with integrating judgements and values in a scientific framework. The authors continue that “Critical theorists returned to the work of Aristotle and considered his conception of ‘praxis’ as ‘doing,’ rather than making... and the disposition to be cultivated was phronesis; that is, a prudent understanding of what should be done in practical situations” (p. 132).

Ethics, politics and education were considered by Aristotle to be practical arts where only the above-mentioned principle of phronesis could be applied. Millennia later, education is no longer a space of phronesis but, rather, a space for prescriptive practices, end results and key performance indicators. Thus, all the tools of education starting from the materials that teachers and students use and ending up with an imposed iPad-driven methodology have all only moved further from the relevance of education to “what should be done in practical situations”.

## **2 Literature Review and Background**

### ***2.1 Critical Language Pedagogy: Connecting the Classroom to the Real World***

Critical language pedagogy is the result of an interaction between theories and practices; they imply action from both students and teachers towards addressing problematic aspects of their lived realities (Crookes, 2013). It is what we call an attempt to reclaim the lost Aristotelian art of phronesis. Critical pedagogy is rooted in what Pennycook (2001) defines as “critical theory as problematizing practice” (p. 341).

Giroux (2011) talks about critical pedagogy as a reaction to the unchallenged “common sense” teaching practices that have led to a legitimization of a “dominant culture at the level of classroom instruction” (p. 3).

According to Freire (1970, cited in Morgan, 2002), critical pedagogy “has two aspects: first, students learn to perceive social, economic and political contradictions in what they know and what they are told. Second they learn to take action against the oppressive and dominant elements within those contradictory situations” (p. 6). At present, the fields of ELT and education in general are very much outcome-driven and goal-oriented. The great desire to emulate the Western standard and accountability-driven education systems has been, in our view, detrimental to contextualized materials and pedagogies. This is particularly the case with language education. We, as ELT practitioners in Oman, have also experienced different barriers to the implementation of critical pedagogy strategies due to student expectations of either focusing on neutral, happy topics or of following the textbook without deviation, in addition to institutional expectations about fulfilling a set of standardized objectives and learning outcomes.

These challenges taken into account, it is not by all means impossible to implement and sustain critical pedagogy in language education in this particular context, though it can be done by keeping in mind that “critical pedagogy involves an ever-evolving working relationship between practice and theory” (Mochinski, 2008, p. 10). This demands a constant reflection and reconceptualization, a constant reworking of the opportunities and challenges a classroom has to offer. This being said, critical pedagogy puts the classroom context into a wider social context; hence, “what happens in the classroom should end up making a difference outside the classroom” (Baynham, 2006, p. 28, cited in Akbari, 2008). This was, in fact, the main objective of implementing critical pedagogy in our classrooms and connecting the classroom learning space with real-world issues.

## ***2.2 Teaching Critical Reading Critically***

Critical reading, critical writing and critical thinking are constructs that originated in L1 US education at the primary and secondary levels and were soon imported into second language education and ELT fields (Atkinson, 2011). Defining critical thinking poses many challenges, especially when imported into non-Western contexts, as critical thinking presupposes “notions of the primacy and the individual” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 11) and does not necessarily apply in cultures where thinking and acting are conceptualized within a sociocultural system. This conceptualization of critical thinking, however, can be defined as narrow or weak (Romanowski & Nasser, 2011) as it is largely based on logic and recognizing fallacies, false inferences and bias from fact and opinion. On the other hand, a strong conceptualization of critical thinking involves applying critical thought throughout one’s life. This is associated with a strong sense of questioning the world and its givens. It is what Freire (1998) called “critical consciousness”. It is, in other words, a way of

understanding important issues and understanding oneself in relation to these. This change in oneself particularly can only be brought about through exposure to various and contrasting discourses or points of view. Interpreting reality exclusively from the perspective of religion or tradition can create a regime of truth which stands as the antithesis of critical consciousness (Romanowski & Nasser, 2011).

So, how can a critical reading and writing classroom go beyond the exploration of the weak version of critical thinking? We believe that this can be achieved by bringing in multiple perspectives of world issues while engaging students in a participatory approach to classroom decision-making. Our journeys as educators and as learners in the critical reading classroom started by asking students to suggest real-world topics or, in other words, real-world problems that could be explored and discussed through various media and continued from there with a continuous engagement in alternative metanarratives. Thus, when talking about terrorism, for instance, students heard the perspective of a former terrorist along with the perspectives of victims of terrorism. In this way, students thus have access to alternative discourses in order to help them develop critical thought. This helps them to move beyond simply being consumers of knowledge to become creators of knowledge and of new ways of thinking.

In an era where globalization and increasing levels of diversity raise a number of important issues in countries all over the world, engaging with various perspectives in educational contexts is a means of involving students in the process of analysing and questioning the world around them. This helps learners become vectors of change for themselves and their lived realities. We intended this paper to reflect the voices in our classrooms – both of our students and ourselves – in the form of a critical and self-reflective discourse. It is thus a journey of exploration and discovery where we essentially aim to answer the following question: What were the students' views on the learning for real approach?

While our own experiences are pervasively reflected throughout the paper, student experiences were recorded in the form of reflective diaries out of which we offer excerpts in the following sections. We felt that the focus should be primarily on students' experiences through the encouragement of reflection, discussion and dialogue (Cook-Sather, 2006).

### **3 Method**

#### **3.1 Context**

The study was conducted at a higher education institution in the Sultanate of Oman during a level 2 critical reading course and a level 3 literature course of a language arts programme. Due to the nature of the programme, students who take part in it tend to generally have higher linguistic abilities than the general student population as they go through the institution's foundation programme in addition to one additional semester of English language preparatory courses. Class sizes tend to be

small as the high-level theoretical English courses at the institution represent a filter which leads to lower enrolment numbers.

Another factor for the low enrolment is that students often perceive limited recruitment opportunities, as graduates from this course usually turn to a career in teaching and/or journalism/writing. These potential career options are often not highly valued by Omani tertiary students, with this being especially true for male students. For this reason, the programme often contains classes that are composed almost exclusively of female students. The programme offers a diversity of courses that cover linguistic, literary and social aspects of the language, and, due to this variety, it has earned a good reputation in the sultanate.

### ***3.2 Participants***

Our sample consisted of approximately 15 students from level 2 and level 3 in an undergraduate programme at a higher education institution in the Sultanate of Oman. Due to the nature of the programme which is related to the arts stream, the student population is composed mainly of females. The sample was entirely purposive (Silverman, 2001) as both student batches from the literature and critical reading classes took part in this project. We made it clear to students that their participation was voluntary and that their identity would remain anonymous. The students who chose not to take part in the project were still required, however, to take part in classroom activities, although we did not collect data from them. By exposing students to real-life issues and to issues of social justice and cultural taboos in both literature and critical reading classes, we intended to change the status quo of teaching practice at the institution by bringing students' lived realities into the classroom.

### ***3.3 Procedure***

As the project focused on real-life learning, we believed action research was the most appropriate research methodology. Action research represents the integration of research and action in a series of cycles through an integrative process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. It involves planning and the introduction of strategies deemed to bring about change to the current status quo and results in providing solutions to existing problems and evaluating resultant changes through further data collection, analysis and interpretation (Somekh, 2006). Action research methodology was also considered the most appropriate choice due to its democratic nature where evidence of trustworthiness is related to the portrayal of the community of participants. This portrayal involves transferring representation from the "I" in the person of the action researcher to "we" or "us" in the collective voices of the researcher and participants.

The main data collection method involved student diaries which allowed participants to reflect on their lived classroom experiences. We believe diaries offer a snapshot of students' inner voices as they are not guided by researcher discussion but rather emerge from the real-learning approach taken in class (Farrelly, 2015). For triangulation purposes, we also used an eight-item questionnaire containing both open-ended and closed questions. The questionnaire was created and distributed in Google Forms and did not follow a specific pattern, but rather focused on students' opinions of classroom activities, topics and materials. The closed questions typically required a yes/no response or offered a multiple choice for several items such as language skills and so on. Since the questions were about the general learning experience in each of the modules and not necessarily focused on specific content, we decided to administer the same questionnaire to participants from both modules and to keep it entirely anonymous as we wanted students to be as truthful as possible without fear of revealing their identity.

The data was analysed through the development of categories and codes. In coding, the inductive method was followed (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 2005) where categories were chosen after scrutinizing the data and, hence, were derived from the data. We coded the data during several sessions as the categories revealed themselves to us. Our constant dialogue throughout the data analysis allowed for our voices to become part and parcel of this study, even though they do not represent a formal data source. During the coding process, certain elements of pattern analysis used in order to look for commonalities in the discourse and certain elements of dilemma analysis which looked for contradictions in discourse were employed (Altrichter et al., 2005). All participant excerpts offered below have not been edited for grammar or spelling.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 *Student Voices from the Literature Classroom*

#### 4.1.1 **Literature as a Psycholinguistics Dimension and as a Means to Enhance Emotional Quotient**

Gardner's (1999) theory of multiple intelligences put forward the concept that linguistic and logical intelligences are not more important than intra- and interpersonal intelligences. The term "Emotional Intelligence" coined by Goleman (2012) argued that emotional quotient (EQ) mattered more than intelligence quotient (IQ). The same argument was reiterated by one of our participants, Zainab, who writes, "I like literature modules because it helps me to think out of the box. It helps me to post my own view points where I do not need to worry about crossing any barriers in terms of my perspectives". She further adds:

We all have a sense of understanding in us and we all have notions about various matters of life. The level to which we have them inside us and the level to which it is pushed, that

distance is what literature has brought in. I have personally started looking at things more on the brighter side, i have also started becoming more sensitive and warm as a person to others and the situations I face or see. This is only due to the amount I read in the past few months and how it has made me look onto the side where practicality and logic isn't everything, sometimes emotionally thinking can also be correct.

The same sentiment was echoed by another participant, Ruwaida:

One of the many skills that can be acquired through literature is knowing how to react to situations. Reading permits children and adults to experience different scenarios vicariously and to think of what they would do. It helps in building logical and critical thinking skills, interpretation and writing skills. Literature offers a unique educational experience in itself, as it represents a myriad of worldly perspectives and emotional insights. This not only increases a reader's ideational vocabulary but also expands the range of thoughts and notions he/she possesses.

#### 4.1.2 Literary Materials as Authentic Materials

Authentic materials are often abundant in highly complex structures and are also equally often culturally alien to students who find them difficult to decode (Richards, 2001, p. 253). Literature, on the other hand, with its authentic and interesting contexts, often proves a better tool for teaching vocabulary and structures without the learner being conscious of actually being taught. Simultaneously, learners engaging in literature are also able to infer the unstated meaning contained in these texts, thereby learning to think critically in an utmost natural way. The texts of literature stimulate learners' imagination with their plots and ambiguities, and learners often try to submerge themselves in varied emotions while becoming better acquainted with the issues the world literature portrays. As Carter and Long (1991) contended, the use of literature in teaching language is mainly for the purpose of stimulating learners' perspectives which enables them to better understand various cultural values and ideologies. Above all, all literature that motivates and enthuses a learner to read and understand can be called "authentic" irrespective of present-day trends. This is a perspective that was supported by the study's participants. For example, Houryia notes:

I find literature texts to be more authentic because of how they are created. They are born in the deepest recesses of a writer's combined conscious and subconscious, and through the writer's emotions and ability to sense the world around him, eventually giving form and life made of language. Literature does not continue because of the work of a single individual, the writer's works are adopted by others and becomes a shared experience in the end.

Similarly, Zahra adds that:

Literature texts are more authentic because as an individual there is more that you can relate to. Since literature deals with either personal experiences or situations of the modern day world, it helps me to understand and relate better in terms of other modules that are more theoretical and fixed.

### 4.1.3 Literature as a Means to Connect with Real-Life Issues

As stated above, education and educators should aim for higher goals rather than merely imparting a subject's technical knowledge. While it is important to learn core technicalities to master a subject (in the case of language study, the four core skills in addition to vocabulary and grammar), it's also equally important to teach things a learner actually needs to enhance their quality of life. If the learner is taught a society's most valuable knowledge, its norms and culture, they would be better equipped to face the modern world and its many complex challenges. A learner cannot remain isolated in the twenty-first century, and, as a result, they need not only to connect with the world but also to relate to it, respect it and be able to interact with it as a global citizen. Literature's ability to expose learners to different cultural settings enables them to be educated for life and to succeed in the workplace. At the same time, literature encourages the acquisition of language rules and helps learners to be more aware of the structures and scope of interpretation which can link to the role of stylistics in the study of a literary text (Alderson & Short, 1998). Some of these themes were apparent in participants' perspectives on literature. For instance, Badryia states:

A poem invites a reader to feel and to respond. A good poem seizes your intellectual capacity and makes you attend to it. In simpler terms, it makes you think. It makes you think about why, what, how everything the subject of the poem is. It can be something as simple as daffodils, but it could reach levels of haunting loneliness and conformity. What's amazing is how poetry utilizes the common currency of our daily lexicon and uses words we all know, however the rhythm and sequence with which they are penned illuminates our lives. Reading and writing poetry helps you see that beneath the surface of everything there is a deeper meaning and significance. Poetry makes you dig for that meaning and helps you express that meaning. In a world that seems increasingly meaningless, poetry helps you dig deep. All of these things, thinking and digging deep about the meaning of life teaches invaluable lessons that cannot be described.

The same view was echoed by another participant, Alya, who claims:

Poetry helped me to see the other side of the field. As a member of the youth, we tend to look at situations in a particular manner and we always tend to find ourselves right. Reading various kinds of poems, helped me to understand simple and complex matters in a better and practical way. Literature is more useful because as mentioned above it helps us to connect better with the real world and put to use a lot of ideas and thoughts that we need to in the world we live in.

### 4.1.4 Literature as a Better Choice for Learning Language and Life Skills

A large amount of research has been conducted to find strategies for better ways of teaching second and foreign languages as learning a second/foreign language is a stressful process. Literature is often suggested as one important means of teaching



other languages due to its appealing and interesting content. In support of literature's values in the classroom, Jawaher writes in some detail:

I could write essays even novels about why I love literature. However, to provide a succinct idea of why I prefer learning literature rather than going for other subjects is because it makes me think. Due to the phenomenal expansion of science and technology, the world has become an arena where resulting disintegration of knowledge into countless parcels and compartments occurs creating specializations. Specializations do reap several benefits, however, the negative side of the story becomes how specialists who have delved deep in subjects for years lose touch with humanity. For example, a medical student in America is required to study medicine for 7 years, do their residency and post-graduation for the next 5 years and then look for a speciality. This unquestionably creates a learned and erudite individual, however, it eradicates the human traits that allow men and women to communicate and co-exist... No matter how varied our careers, our locations, personal issues or even future plans, literature enables all to transcend on a different level. As individuals who read Cervantes, Keats, Shelley, Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, Tennyson, Tolstoy, Wordsworth and Kipling, we understand each other across space and time, we connect to each other as members of the same species because we realize that in all the different works that these different writers have created, the commonalities that make us all human. Literature guards a human being against the inanity of racism, prejudice, sectarianism by spreading the essential message that everyone is equal. Nothing teaches us better than literature to adore the gleaming richness that is deep within every soul of mankind. Pleasure reading even, is an experience of learning of who we are and how in our human imperfection, with our personal demons, we still exist. This is why I love literature modules.

Another participant, Bodoor, states along similar lines, "I like literature modules because it helps me to think out of the box. It helps me to post my own view points where I do not need to worry about crossing any barriers in terms of my perspectives".

## ***4.2 Student Voices from the Critical Reading Classroom***

### **4.2.1 Opportunities for Questioning and Analysis**

In the critical reading classroom, students in this study found opportunities to develop questioning skills which they reported as being essential for their lives. As one student, Zulaikha, states, these skills can be a:

Very excellent addition to our knowledge as students. It benefits as in our lives in the side of our studying. It increased our awareness of being critical for example, it made as looking at the matters or the issues in terms of counter arguments. It made us looking at the things before we insert them into our minds and believe them directly. It gave as the skill of how to judge. It gave the skill of how to look beyond the matter or the issue itself. It is one of the best materials of learning the students how to add their voices inside the judgment process. It made as independent in our judgment and the way of looking at the things. Also, it presents the essential aim of educating people which is how to benefit them in their lives to change them better ways. It must be there in every human been lives.

This student thus identifies in herself the ability to develop critical awareness in the guise of independent judgement and expressing her own voice in writing. Another student, Alyia, mentions the module's contribution to the development of her academic skills:

The module helps us think critically about various articles and issues. Analytical skills are developed to a great extent. Helps us look at social issues around us with an in-depth view and also from various perspectives. Also we are able to clearly form an opinion for ourselves on academic articles, videos, songs etc.

#### 4.2.2 Forming a Different Perspective

Critical awareness brings forth a shift in one's perspective, an opportunity to see oneself differently in relation to the world. For instance, Rawyia, mentions that:

It's a good idea such a module like this where you got to know many new things which you didn't know before and I really enjoyed this module a lot. Because it's not about reading and writing it's about how you see things from a different lens.

Another student, Tanitia, also adds that the module provides opportunities for discussion and collaboration which, in turn, helps build not only speaking skills but also, as she puts it, more powerful forms of thinking and speaking:

It provides a platform for discussion between peers from different backgrounds on various matters like social issues, academic articles, lyrics etc. Exchange of ideas and opinions lead to greater enlightenment on the subject which is the basic aim of the module. And yes the module is very useful because apart from studying the theoretical aspect of it, it makes us more confident in our thinking and speech as individuals. We now know the power of an opinion and the power of speech.

Other students mentioned in the open-ended section of the questionnaire the overall benefits of the module for their holistic learning and for a general broadening of their horizons. For example, Adnana states:

Yes, It is useful because the topics we were given are very interesting and makes you feel thankful and grateful of the life you had. this modual helped me alot to understand new topics which i had no idea about them before.

Another student, Bushra, mentions an entire list of benefits gained from the critical reading classroom:

1. Because the discussed issues are from or lives.
2. Because it is multiple, and enjoyable also.
3. Because we can see and feel them in the reality.
4. Of course, because it taught me how to look beyond the topic and to see if there are counter arguments in it or it is one sided approach.
5. Because the students must have issues that they are in there lives not issues from the past only, and it is the chance of being aware about the students' perspectives to see if they are in the right direction or they can be good addition to the major knowledge about something.
6. Because they are the materials that we as 21 century students are using.

It is perhaps in this last testimony that Baynhem's (2006, cited in Akbari, 2008) classroom learning extended to real life becomes evident. Language teaching thus translates to a profound connection between words and worlds where the social dimension of language learning is not only acknowledged but embraced.

## 5 Discussion: Voices in Unison

As mentioned above, we wanted students to feel completely free to express their opinions and hence decided to adopt a collective questionnaire that would elicit students' views on the realistic, social dimension of language teaching that we adopted in our classrooms. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items, out of which 6 were close-ended questions and 4 open-ended. The results suggest not only that students felt that the topics presented are related to real life, but also that this teaching and learning approach provided them with an opportunity to develop all their language abilities.

Thus, out of the 11 students who responded to the questionnaire, 10 said that the topics dealt with in class are related to real life and that they found the teaching approach useful. Furthermore, the majority of students ( $n = 10$ ) acknowledged that they had developed the ability to understand and engage with multiple perspectives in the literature and critical reading modules. In the same questionnaire, students were asked which skills they felt they improved, such as reading, writing, listening, speaking or all of these, to which the majority ( $n = 6$ ) answered that the course provided them with the opportunity to develop all four language skills.

The data gathered, however, was limited as the questionnaire was distributed towards the end of the course and student attendance was low. We are aware of the fact that the limited sample size is not sufficient to yield generalizable results; however, as we mentioned in the introductory section, our focus was on painting a thick picture of students' lived experience as a way of capturing their unfettered voices. This is also the reason why we decided to include such extensive testimonies from student diaries as we believed that they provided an insight into their learning and lived classroom experience.

As far as our own experience goes, we believe that learning a second or foreign language cannot happen in a neutral, sanitized environment that is divorced from the classroom. In today's high-tech, fast-paced world, we produce – and we emphasize this choice of words, as it is often used in the education lingo – tech-savvy, driven students who are, unfortunately, oftentimes emotionally illiterate and unable to manage communication obstacles in real-life situations. Students' voices, when stating that literature made them think and how emotional thinking was as important as logical thinking or how critical reading helped them integrate their voices into the reading process, resonated with us. They made us realize that we have managed to teach them something as, if not more, important than a foreign language. We taught them the language of humanity, of understanding, of respect for differences and of dialogue.

## 6 Directions for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to provide a platform for student voices and to explore how learners perceived a more socially connected, realistic learning experience. Although the study does not provide generalizable findings as it is deeply entrenched in its context and the experiences of the learning communities in our classrooms, we believe it nonetheless provides scope for more research into the aspect of voice and human experience in second and foreign language learning. One might say that a socially oriented, realistic approach to teaching and learning may come naturally in a literature or a critical reading classroom but not in a grammar or phonetics classroom as their highly technical content might not leave room for such an approach. We believe this approach is not only possible in the above-mentioned examples, but that it is also highly necessary as, in the present social, collaborative and information era, students might fail to perceive the relevance of a knowledge transmission-oriented classroom. This study has showed us that we have merely opened the door to endless possibilities waiting to be explored.

Although the learning for real approach may seem potentially risky due to its seemingly revolutionary ideas, its democratic/dialogic nature prioritizes student voices and contributions and, hence, it is more likely to gain acceptance than a fixed, inflexible, un-negotiated curriculum. We believe we have a duty as educators to tap into our students' potential and capture, in their own words, "the gleaming richness that is deep within the soul of mankind... It must be there in every human being's life".

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# An Exploration of the English-Language Reading Habits of Omani University Students



Rahma Al-Mahrooqi and Christopher Denman

**Abstract** Despite the many advantages that developing reading skills can offer, countries in the Arab world, including Oman, are often characterized as not having well-developed reading cultures. This exploratory research aimed to gain a clearer picture of the reading habits of tertiary-level students in a public university in Oman. Ninety-five participants were administered a 5-item open-ended questionnaire eliciting information about various aspects of their English reading habits. Results indicate that around half of participants read sometimes and most claimed reading to be one of their hobbies. In addition, a majority of participants claimed to be aware of reading strategies that could enhance their reading skills, and also believed that it was important to develop their core language skills and vocabulary ranges, even though the influence of teachers in this was considered minimal. Implications of these findings for reading instruction in Oman and the Arab world are discussed.

**Keywords** Reading · Oman · University students · EFL/ESL

## 1 Introduction

Reading offers a number of benefits to people. It can promote the development of a diverse range of intellectual skills and capabilities, expand individual perspectives, and allow readers to grow psychologically, socially, and academically. Rebuck (2015) and Clark and Rumbold (2006) state that reading can increase a person's self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-confidence while also enhancing their planning and decision-making abilities. Reading can enhance communication skills and cultural knowledge and understanding and also increases awareness of the different ways people live and interact with the world (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Holte, 1998). Further, reading has a number of potential physical benefits, such as reducing

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readers' heart rates and decreasing their anxiety levels and tension (National Library of New Zealand, n.d.).

In terms of academic benefits, authors, such as Noor (2011), Loan (2009), Palani (2012), Shoebottom (2015), and Guthrie (2008), and the National Endowment for the Arts (2007), claim that reading increases student knowledge and the ability to argue and reason. Reading also contributes to educational achievement through developing a variety of academic skills such as previewing, extracting specific details, identifying main ideas, paraphrasing and summarizing, inferencing, predicting, understanding the structure of an argument, and so on. Reading allows people to explore various perspectives, increase their memorization and comprehension skills, develop a wider range of vocabulary, and understand different grammatical forms and their correct usage. These are all skills and abilities that can be transferred from a first to a second or foreign language, with reading abilities in a first language in this way greatly aiding in the acquisition of an L2.

Despite these potential advantages, a number of authors contend that many of the nations of the Arab world largely lack reading cultures and that Arabs often hold negative attitudes toward reading (O'Sullivan, 2010; Rajab & Al-Sadi, 2015). Within the Sultanate of Oman, Al-Musalli (2014) reported that limited reading among students is due to a variety of reasons including the shortage of libraries, parental illiteracy, and student overload. In terms of reading in English, Bell (2001), Cobb and Horst (2001), and Shmais (2002) claim that students' lack of interest in reading in the language is associated with low levels of English proficiency, poor English teaching methods, and limited awareness of appropriate reading strategies.

Given the nature and extent of these challenges, the current exploratory research sought to gain a clearer picture of the reading habits of students in a public university in Oman. In order to achieve this, 95 students from Oman's Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) were administered a 5-item, open-ended questionnaire designed to gain an overview of their English-language reading habits, including their level of engagement in reading, the strategies they used to improve reading skills and expand vocabulary ranges, and the influence of their teachers on developing reading skills.

## **2 Literature Review and Background**

### ***2.1 The Benefits of Reading***

Reading assumes an important role in many people's lives. Without reading, people may find it difficult to enhance their understandings of themselves and the world around them and to subsequently explore different perspectives and ways of being. Authors such as Rebeck (2015) and Clark and Rumbold (2006) claim that people who read tend to experience a large number of benefits, including increased levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, more stable moods, enhanced decision-making and planning abilities, and better intercultural and interpersonal communication

skills. Holte (1998) maintains that reading can increase understanding of the value of life and can even promote cultural heritage. Moreover, reading also offers a number of physical benefits which include slowing a person's heart rate and reducing their stress levels and tension (National Library of New Zealand, n.d.).

Reading is, of course, an essential element of students' academic lives. It allows students to learn new information and to gain the knowledge that is vital for their educations while also enhancing personal perspectives and decision-making (Loan, 2009; Noor, 2011). Being an active reader has also been associated with the ability to identify and understand ideas and arguments, the development of learning skills and larger vocabulary ranges, and better academic achievement in terms of test scores and grades (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007; Shoebottom, 2015).

Guthrie (2008) and Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2014) maintain that students who read regularly and widely tend to be higher achievers than those who do not. This is supported by Worthy and Roser (2010) who state that more reading, in terms of frequency, amount, and diversity, increases learners' background knowledge and levels of academic reading achievement. Scholars such as Palani (2012) and Miller (2013, cited in Afterschool Alliance, 2013, p. 6) add that active readers tend to have better developed comprehension and thinking skills while also being better at spelling and writing than their peers who are less inclined to read.

## 2.2 *Reading in the Arab World and Oman*

It is often claimed that reading cultures largely do not exist across many of the nations of the Arab world. For example, Ayish (2010) reported that an average person in Europe reads around 35 books a year, while the equivalent of only 1 book is read by every 80 Arabs in the same period. This is supported by the admittedly contested claim put forth by the Arab Thought Foundation Fikr that the average Arab child only reads for a total of around 6 min a year compared to the average Western child's 12,000 min (Al-Yacoub, 2012).

Arab EFL learners have been described as having difficulty with reading due to several factors (Bell, 2001; Cobb & Horst, 2001; Shmais, 2002). These include the lack of a reading culture, limited English-language proficiency levels and vocabulary, ineffective use of reading strategies, and poor teaching methods. In addition to reading in English, students' reading in Arabic has also been reported as being underdeveloped which, according to authors such as Al-Mahrooqi and Asante (2010), Al-Mahrooqi (2012), O'Sullivan (2010), and Bouzenirh (1991), negatively affects the positive transfer of reading skills from Arabic to English.

A 2015 study of EFL tertiary-level students in Saudi Arabia found that these learners generally did not enjoy reading either fiction or nonfiction, with this lack of enjoyment being especially true for reading in English (Rajab & Al-Sadi, 2015). In the UAE, O'Sullivan (2010) found similarly negative attitudes toward reading among college students while also reporting that these learners were largely unaware of effective reading strategies. These factors, O'Sullivan continues, are associated



with below-average reading skills in English and Arabic. In support of this, a recent report based on online English testing reveals that 12 of the 13 Arab countries that took part, including Oman, had very low English proficiency levels (Education First, 2015).

The lack of reading culture and negative attitudes toward reading reported here as characterizing many of the countries of the Arab world are also witnessed in the Sultanate of Oman. Al-Musalli (2014) reported that factors contributing to limited reading among Omani students include the lack of libraries, high levels of parental illiteracy, and the heavy homework load that students are burdened with. To this list, it is possible to add the relative newness of the formal education system, the continued prevalence of a strong traditional oral culture, and Arabic's diglossic nature (Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; Emam, Kazem, Al-Said, Al-Maamary, & Al-Mandhari, 2014; Wyatt, 2012).

Given the nature of these obstacles and reports that Omani students largely do not read in either Arabic or English, the current research sought to gain a clearer picture of the reading habits of students in a public university in Oman. To do this, 95 SQU students were administered a 5-item, open-ended questionnaire that examined various aspects of their English-language reading habits, including their level of engagement in reading, the strategies they used to improve reading skills and expand vocabulary ranges, and the influence of university teachers in developing their reading skills.

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Participants

Participants formed part of a convenience sample in that the researchers had permission from their instructors in various SQU colleges to approach them to take part in the study. After gaining ethical approval to conduct the study, the researchers were given class time to ask potential participants to complete the open-ended questionnaire. All potential participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of the research, its anonymity, and that their choice to participate or not would in no way affect their standing in their respective courses.

The resultant sample consisted of 95 first year students from SQU who came from seven governorates: Al Batinah ( $n = 28$ ), Al Sharqiyah ( $n = 19$ ), Al Dakiliah ( $n = 16$ ), Al Dhahira ( $n = 11$ ), Muscat ( $n = 6$ ), Dhofar ( $n = 3$ ), and Musandam ( $n = 1$ ). Eleven participants did not indicate the region they came from. Forty-seven participants were female and 45 were male with 3 not indicating gender. Seventy-five respondents studied in Oman's General Education system at the school level, while the remaining 20 studied in the Basic Education system. After enrolling at SQU, only three participants were not required to enter the English language foundation program as they were tested as having English skills that were equivalent to an IELTS band 5.0 or higher.

Students were enrolled in a variety of SQU colleges, including the College of Education ( $n = 36$ ), the College of Engineering ( $n = 20$ ), the College of Agriculture and Marine Sciences ( $n = 19$ ), the College of Arts and Social Sciences ( $n = 17$ ), the College of Science ( $n = 10$ ), and the College of Medicine and Health Science ( $n = 1$ ). All participants reported speaking Arabic, while 73 also regarded themselves as being at least somewhat fluent in English. Other languages spoken by participants included Jabbali ( $n = 4$ ), Bulushi ( $n = 3$ ), Urdu ( $n = 2$ ), and French ( $n = 2$ ). One participant each also reported speaking Shehi, Swahili, and Japanese. In terms of high school English results on the General Certificate, around 50.1% received an A grade (a grade that represents a range of 90–100%), 22.3% received a B (80–89%), and 27.6% received a C (65–79%). None of participants received an Accepted (D) or Failed (F) grade, while one respondent did not indicate their grade.

### ***3.2 Data Collection Instrument***

Due to the exploratory nature of the research, a short open-ended questionnaire was employed to investigate various aspects of participants' reading habits. The first questionnaire section focused on the demographic details reported above, while the second focused on participants' reading habits and featured five open-ended questions. These were:

1. How much do you read in both English and Arabic?
2. Is reading one of your hobbies?
3. How do you try to improve your English reading comprehension and speed?
4. What strategies do you use to learn English vocabulary and to remember new words?
5. What role does your university teacher have in developing your English reading (and other core language) skills?

Data was analyzed through a process of thematic analysis that involved coding, categorization, and analysis. The initial codes were drawn from the literature and then applied to the data to create descriptive, multidimensional categories (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Hoepfl, 1997). In this way, words and phrases that represent similar themes were grouped into categories, with these categories examined for areas of similarities and divergence between them, and between them and the literature, in order to highlight themes that emerge from the data.

## **4 Results**

The first question asked about students' reading frequency in both English and Arabic. Around 41% of participants claimed that they only read a little, 40% claimed that they read sometimes, and about 17% claimed that they read a lot (the remaining

2% did not respond to this question). In terms of the number of books read, most participants stated that they read one to three books a month or around one to ten pages a day, while the remaining participants either read one to two books a day or one to two books a week. Most participants either claimed to read one to five times a week or between one and three times a month. Again, only a small number of participants reported that they read around one to three times a day. Although these figures indicate that most participants read only a little or moderately, 68.1% stated that reading was one of their hobbies, while 31.9% said that it was not. Students who read as a hobby claimed that they were interested in reading about a variety of topics. These included sports, science, education, and psychology. In addition, participants also claimed that they read short stories, novels, and biographies. Those participants who did not read as a hobby, on the other hand, claimed that they either did not like reading or had stopped reading since attending SQU.

Almost all participants stated that a variety of reading strategies were important to help improve their English reading comprehension and speed. Only around 5.4% of participants did not believe such strategies were important, rather claiming that reading skills develop naturally and do not need to be based on any particular technique. In terms of specific strategies for improving English reading, around 83.7% of participants considered reading various literary forms, including stories, newspapers, magazines, articles, and e-books, to be most beneficial. Some participants also suggested such strategies such as reading silently, out loud, quickly, and slowly and reading without a concern for understanding every word or for making mistakes were also beneficial.

Another strategy posited by 7.6% of participants was learning new English vocabulary, either from words encountered in texts or as part of an independent vocabulary learning activity. A total of 5.4% of participants also suggested listening to people talking, either in real life or on TV, the Internet, and the radio, as a way of gaining the vocabulary they need to improve their English reading skills. Similarly, speaking English was also mentioned by 64.3% of participants as a way of improving reading skills in that it exposed learners to different vocabulary, grammar, and ways of expressing ideas. A total of 3.3% of participants also believed that attending English-language courses outside of their university could enhance their reading comprehension and speed, while using computer software and watching movies were also offered.

Participants were then asked about specific techniques they use to learn and retain new vocabulary. These techniques included writing the new words with their meanings and examples, applying the new words in speaking and writing, reading and reviewing new vocabulary, using various memorizing techniques such as repetition, and maintaining a vocabulary log. Around 57.9% of participants employed this last technique, with these logs often reported as containing definitions, word forms, and example sentences. About 31.6% of participants also reported using the new words frequently in their daily lives when speaking or writing in English. Reviewing the words entered into a vocabulary log, either daily or as much as possible, was also employed by 11.6% of respondents, while one participant even claimed that reviewing these words before sleep was the best way to retain them. Other vocabulary

learning and memorization techniques used by participants included guessing meaning from context, drawing pictures, using flashcards, highlighting new words, and dividing new words into syllables.

When asked how they tried to improve their English across the four core skills including reading, around 35.8% of participants stated that it was important to practice all core language skills as much as possible. Examples of activities across these areas included reading books and other stories, researching a variety of topics, speaking with others, watching movies, preparing presentations, and surfing the Internet. A total of 11.6% of participants stated that they tried to improve their English away from the classroom by watching TV or videos, by playing games, or by learning through mistakes they have made in their class work.

When asked about the role of university instructors in developing their English reading skills, 22.1% of participants believed that their teachers had a significant influence. Activities employed by teachers to help learners develop reading skills included language modeling and practice, reading comprehension activities, and exposing learners to a variety of text types and genres. However, around 4.2% of participants emphasized deficiencies in the teaching strategies that their instructors used and claimed that they only focused on lecturing and correction. Another 7.4% stated that their instructors taught English through traditional teacher-centered methods and that student engagement was mostly limited to using the textbook.

## 5 Discussion

The current research explored SQU students' English reading habits in terms of frequency, strategies employed to improve reading skills and enhance vocabulary, and the teachers' influence on the development of these skills. Results indicate that around 40% of participants read sometimes, while about another 40% only read a little. Most participants also claimed that they read either around one to three books a month or about one to ten pages a day. This finding suggests that most participants read between 12 and 36 books a year, with this being only slightly lower than Ayish's (2010) estimate of the average European person reading 35 books a year, and thereby indicates much higher levels of engagement than the 6 minutes a year that Al-Yacoub (2012) reported. In addition, results also indicate that participants held somewhat favorable attitudes toward reading, with around two-thirds claiming it as a hobby. This finding not only stands in contrast to the Saudi and Emirati students who were reported by Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015) and O'Sullivan (2010) as holding negative attitudes toward reading but also to the results of Al-Musalli's (2014) investigation in Oman which suggested a lack of reading among Omani students in both English and Arabic.

Participants maintained that the best way to develop English reading skills is through practice, learning new vocabulary, listening and speaking with others, and attending English courses outside of SQU. More than three-quarters of participants maintained that reading widely and often results in the development of more

effective reading skills. This belief is supported by Palani's (2012) contention that reading comprehension is significantly improved by putting reading skills into practice. Students' beliefs in the value of expanding their vocabulary ranges as a means of enhancing reading skills are well supported by the literature (see Grabe, 2008), with participants here offering a wide array of techniques that can help them to learn and retain new words including mnemonic devices, maintaining a vocabulary log, and so on. Moreover, participants' support for the value of listening and speaking as a way to improve reading was justified in terms of the ability of these skills to expose them to a greater variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures, while also allowing them to see how different people express ideas in a variety of ways. The value of integrating listening, speaking, and writing skills into reading instruction has been highlighted by authors such as N'Namdi (2005).

Participants also highlighted a number of ways in which they sought to improve their core English language skills to enhance their reading abilities. These included researching topics, watching movies, preparing presentations, using the Internet, learning from mistakes that they made in class, and so on. Interestingly, while about one-quarter of respondents claimed that their university English teachers had played an important role in helping them develop their reading skills, around 7% thought that their instructors generally adopted traditional, teacher-centered approaches. Moreover, around another 4% of participants stated that their teachers did not employ effective teaching strategies to improve their English reading skills, but rather simply relied on lecturing and correction. This is a fairly common characterization of Arab classrooms, with authors such as Bell (2001), Cobb and Horst (2001), and Shmais (2002) offering poor teaching as one factor affecting Arab students' limited English reading skills.

## 6 Conclusion

Findings suggest that, despite a number of authors claiming Arab students usually hold negative attitudes toward reading and that reading cultures do not exist across much of the Arab world, around half of participants read sometimes and most participants claim reading to be one of their hobbies. Moreover, a majority of participants appeared to be aware of a number of reading strategies that could help enhance their reading skills and also managed to see the value of developing their core language skills and vocabulary ranges as a way to increase their reading levels. These findings, therefore, tend to contradict those of Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015), O'Sullivan (2010), and Al-Musalli (2014), who all reported negative attitudes toward reading among Arab, including Omani, learners. Finally, only about a quarter of participants believed that their teachers had a significant positive impact on the development of their English reading skills, while around 11% thought that their instructors created teacher-centered classrooms where effective reading instruction did not occur. Al-Jadidi (2009) described the continued prevalence of teacher-centered approaches across a variety of education settings in Oman, with this still apparent despite the

Basic Education reforms that promote student-centered instruction in the country's schools.

While these findings may offer a somewhat favorable picture of the reading habits of Omani university students and a less positive portrayal of university English instructors, a number of limitations must be taken into account. Perhaps the most important is the fact that participants are enrolled in the most academically prestigious university in the country and that their self-reported English grades were quite high. This indicates that students are perhaps more academically successful than most of their peers and that seeking to generalize the reading habits of these relatively high achievers to other university students in Oman or, indeed, across the Arab world, is deeply problematic. Moreover, the exploratory nature of the research and the somewhat limited data collection instrument mean that the current research merely sought an overview of the issue and did not attempt to examine it in greater detail. While this exploration was considered important given the relative lack of topic-related research at the tertiary level in Oman, it is, nonetheless, necessary for further research to explore the reading habits of Omani students in greater depth, especially if reliable assertions about learners' reading habits and the influence of teachers are to be made.

Despite this, it is perhaps possible to claim that university students at SQU may have reading habits that are more similar to the average European than the average Arab as described by authors such as Ayish's (2010) and Al-Yacoub (2012). If this is the case, then it appears as though many of the obstacles that have been identified as hindering the development of reading cultures in Arab countries and in Oman, such as parental illiteracy, a lack of libraries, heavy student workload, and so on (Al-Musalli, 2014; Bell, 2001; Cobb & Horst, 2001; Shmais, 2002), may not have had as strong an effect on these participants, even if poor teaching has been raised here as a potential concern. Or it may also be possible to argue that the rapid increases made in literacy levels in Omani society since the introduction of a formal education system in 1970 mean that students are now far less likely to have illiterate parents. This could be associated with the growing realization of the importance of education for future employment and the availability of books from various sources, including book fairs, bookshops, and college libraries – all of which might have had an impact on students' attitudes toward reading and their reading habits.

However, before such suppositions can be supported, it is necessary for future research to examine the reading habits of Omanis, both in academic and other settings, in greater depth. Through such research, challenges and opportunities associated with the development of a genuine reading culture in Oman can be identified.

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# Remediation in College: Some Preliminary Considerations for Establishing Support Schemes for Omani At-Risk Students



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**Abstract** For approximately 20 years, the government of the Sultanate of Oman, under the leadership of Sultan Qaboos, has sought to lay the foundations for Oman's transition to a knowledge society. Great improvements have been made in this direction, and the country has enjoyed continued development across almost every area of its social and economic life during this period. However, there is still work to be done, especially in the area of human capital and co-citizenship, with this being particularly true in relation to education. For instance, the fact that almost all students leaving secondary education need foundation programs reveals that they are not really "college ready." They require remediation and support, especially in English, mathematics, and IT. This paper looks at some preliminary concepts and concerns which could be beneficial to Omani colleges seeking to set up support, or remedial, programs, and structures, before discussing the ways in which such programs can have a positive impact on students who may otherwise not complete their studies.

**Keywords** Remedial · Remediation · At-risk students · College · Oman

## 1 Introduction

Modern Oman has shown in its 47 years of existence an unswerving commitment to investing in education, and especially higher education, both at home and abroad through scholarships (David et al., 2017). According to a report published by the

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British Council which covers 38 countries around the world, Oman is a strong performer in terms of international student mobility and international research engagement and is very strong in transnational education (Ilieva, Killingley, Vangelis, & Peak, 2017). Moreover, Oman seems to be in good company in the Middle East, together with Israel and the UAE, which are the regional leaders in internationalization. However, as pointed out by Ilieva and Peak (2016), the emphasis on the universal provision of higher education and cross-border education policies does not always guarantee quality assurance at higher education institutions (HEIs). In fact, if one were to judge the quality and effectiveness of Omani education based on ratings like this, the emerging picture would not quite represent the reality. Educational outputs are improving, but much must still be done.

A diagnostic analysis of foundation programs across the country based on students' output (e.g., results on placement tests, samples of essay writing, language knowledge exercises, performance on speaking exams, IELTS results, and so on) would tell a different story about the seam, or gap, between secondary and tertiary education. However, this lacuna is not only a question of output but also of coordination and conceptualization. Al-Mamari (2012) described it in no unclear terms:

More than 80% of students entering HEIs in the Sultanate of Oman are first required to take a general foundation program. This program is designed to raise the academic capabilities of students prior to their formal entrance into higher education studies. Foundation programs are excluded from national higher education quality management systems since they are not regarded as higher education. Neither do they fit in secondary or other post secondary quality management systems. (p. 1)

Each year, high school graduates apply for college admission in the hopes of being welcomed into their desired programs. In Oman, many of these students that have been accepted into universities and colleges around the country are perceived as not being college ready. That is so despite their having successfully completed their secondary education. In other words, they often do not perform well on their university placement tests and are placed in General Foundation Programs (GFP) for English, math, and/or IT. Students leave school with inadequate English language proficiency and, consequently, require remedial or intensive courses before they can start tertiary level study programs (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a; see also Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012).

Oman's Ministry of Education (MoE) seeks to ensure that students with weak skills across one or more of these three areas complete their GFP studies before taking their college-level courses. This insistence at the ministerial level implies that the MoE is aware of the rather high level of at-risk students in the sultanate. However, what is less widely recognized is the fact that certain high school graduates are not only not college ready but are also not even "GFP ready." That is, somewhat paradoxically, these students are in need of remediation to help them get through the GFP remediation structures.

The classroom population of Omani schools and colleges is culturally, socially, and academically not as diverse as would likely be encountered in more Western contexts such as Canada, the USA, the UK, and most of Western Europe's larger cities. This means that, contrary to Slavin's (1992) contention that at-risk students

are those unlikely to complete high school because of socioeconomic, first language, family, and/or health factors, at-risk Omani students are often those who struggle with achieving English language proficiency. Since most college and university programs in Oman have adopted English as a medium of instruction (EMI), high school graduates who are not proficient in the language are potentially at risk of not benefiting from their courses and, therefore, not achieving their full learning potential. Hence, as Bushman and Hass (2001) note, “All students are at-risk to some degree” of not being “college ready” (p. 21). This is a situation that requires explicit attention from decision-makers, educators, and students. However, the at-risk predicament cannot be completely overcome at the college level – it can only be remediated – because it has its roots in secondary education and ministerial policies, including the language of instruction prior to and during college, the secondary school English language curriculum, the teaching methods in use, and so on.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance that colleges recognize in an intake which students are more at-risk than others. This especially applies to Oman’s Colleges of Technology, which receive the academically weaker graduates from secondary schools, and to private colleges and universities which, at times, represent the last hope for students who forfeited their right to subsidized tertiary education – those who have failed a foundation course twice. Accordingly, Omani higher education institutions and the relevant ministries need to acknowledge the existence and extent of this systemic problem and make provisions to redress it.

However, Al-Mahrooqi (2012a) finds that students are also part of the problem. For example, she reports that they are not motivated enough to learn English due to a number of factors, including their negative perception of the language and Westerners. Also, many students lack appropriate study skills and depend on memorization, a strategy which is transferred from the traditional Arab way of learning.

Needless to say, the verdict that students are not quite up to the task – that they are not “college material” – is also essentially related to what colleges are meant to exist for and what skills students are expected to have acquired before admission and graduation. In other words, the concepts of *college success* and *college failure* are not independent of the definition of education which governments adopt in their educational planning and legislation and which colleges translate into curricula and assessments.

## 2 Background

Education is both a need and a service. In order to meet educational needs and render educational services, educational institutions must have a clear picture of their target population (Bulger & Watson, 2006). At present, educators know that many students “enter college with varying levels of academic competency” (Boyer, Butner, & Smith, 2007, p. 606) and that programs must accommodate students who are not adequately prepared for studying a higher education curriculum (Bahr, 2012; Boyer et al., 2007). This is not only true of Oman but of education contexts around

the world. For example, American postsecondary students often lack necessary academic skills in reading, writing, and math.

To address this situation, American colleges often seek to identify those students who are academically at risk and subsequently set up remedial programs to serve them. Nonetheless, it is not always clear why some students succeed and others fail at the tertiary level. One of the reasons is that “initial low-skill” students need more time than their “initial high-skill” peers to acquire the necessary academic knowledge base and skills during the remediation time span. In other words, as Bahr (2012, p. 663) states, “For any two students who remained in the system for the average amount of time, the high-skill remedial student had an excess of time to achieve college-level competency, while the low-skill remedial student had barely enough time to accomplish the same end.” The author continues that the distance between the two groups seems to increase as the initial low-skill students repeatedly experience skills, course, and non-specific attrition; in other words, with each experience of inadequacy, deficiency, or failure, their perceived and/or actual inability to catch up with high-skill students increases along with their sense of the purposelessness of their efforts.

Mpofu et al. (2010) view remedial education as a historical corollary to the introduction of universal education. When all children started going to school, it was only to be expected that some of them would need extra support. Furthermore, since colleges now enroll students who would previously not have been able to go on to higher education (Rosenbaum, Becker, Cepa, & Zapata-Gietl, 2016), often as a result of well-meaning and (justly) inclusive policies (Nunan, George, & McCausland, 2005), it is no wonder that many of those students are failing and dropping out. Additionally, remedial education can currently also be linked to economic globalization and cultural pluralism (Mpofu et al., 2010, p. 806), in that colleges are hosting increasingly diverse student populations, and, as a result, these students’ needs require different support measures, one of which is remediation.

The situation is no better in Oman where students are made to study in a language (namely, standard/formal English) which most of them are not proficient in. In addition, their academic lives call for skills for which their secondary education has often not adequately prepared them, such as situation- and case-based problem solving; learning from a range of formal written sources; approaching sources analytically, comparatively, and critically; writing in a logical and abstract fashion; and avoiding plagiarism. Consequently, most foundation programs in Oman could be described as being remedial in their entirety. Hence, at-risk students are an intricate part of the configuration and role of Omani colleges. However, since many of the students cannot cope with their (generally) “remedial” courses, they are “doubly remedial” or twice at risk.

### 3 Defining “At-Risk Students”

The international discourse about at-risk students has been characterized by the stress placed on two general values: economic rationalism and social justice (Mosen-Lowe, Vidovich, & Chapman, 2009). On the one hand, whenever students drop out of college for reasons other than their not being suitable for college, talent and money are lost. In today’s knowledge societies, unschooled youths are a liability. On the other hand, it is unfair that some students have to opt out of formal education because of the unequal distribution of societal opportunities.

However, the very label of “at-risk students” can refer to different groups. It can be used about students who fail to access a college education, do not gainfully partake in it, or drop out of it. Their predicament is often believed to be the result of their being “poorly equipped to perform up to academic standards” (Quinnan, 1997, cited in Bulger & Watson, 2006, p. 24). However, the issue of at-risk students is broader than mere enrollment or graduation statistics (and the fees which colleges lose due to the situation). As a result, Kaufman and Bradbury (1992) suggested expanding the definition to include students who are likely to risk “failure to achieve basic levels of proficiency in key subjects” (p. 2). In other words, the focus of the discussion has shifted to contributing factors and possible solutions. The literature has elucidated three main sets of factors correlated to the creation of at-risk students – contextual, internal, and environmental factors.

In relation to contextual factors, Ruff (1993) found that language, culture, family background, and socioeconomic status were predictors of college failure. These are the factors most commonly blamed for the problems of at-risk students. However, Baker (1999), following Werner (1986), saw risk as a construct used to designate a high probability of poor developmental or school outcomes. Moreover, Baker believed that students’ performance was influenced by school variables, including both instructional and administrative factors, coupled with student variables such as academic and personal competencies (see also Wang and Gordon, 1994). In other words, the text of the students’ lives cannot be fully comprehended without their social and educational context.

In the context of Oman, research findings indicate that the environment often discourages the use of English outside the classroom in GFPs (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a). On the one hand, students struggle with their own language attrition (Al-Mahrooqi & Sultana, 2012). On the other, especially in the interior of the country, students do not find situations where people use the kind of English which they need in the classroom. They can practice their receptive skills using online tools, but the productive skills remain dormant. Even in class, Arabic remains the language in which they communicate to discuss issues and academic tasks. In some cases, students who attempt to use English with their fellow students might be either mocked or seen as show-offs (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012b). In addition, the administrative staff

usually interact in Arabic, which reduces opportunities for students to experience English in natural contexts and settings (Brown, 2000; Oxford, 1994). The school-student interplay reflects itself, for example, in the sense of alienation and disenfranchisement from the culture of the school that some at-risk students experience (Fine, 1986). Hence, students' perceptions of interconnectedness at school and their sense of belonging to the school culture have been associated with academic engagement and psychological well-being (Goodenow & Grady, 1992; Wentzel, 1994). This sense of belonging includes the teacher-student relationship, which has been found to enhance students' expectations, and a classroom climate characterized by encouragement and support (Bernard, 1991; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Therefore, it is important for educators, administrators, and policy makers to be aware of the potential impact of these contextual factors, even if these may not necessarily have the same levels of influence on at-risk students within Oman.

In addition to contextual factors, Bulger and Watson (2006) add internal, or personal, factors. Essentially, students who are not academically ready for college are in real danger of failing. This can be due to the lack of college readiness, which these students failed to develop during their high school studies, or even to a lack of recent experience for mature-age students who returned to formal education after having been away for a considerable time. In addition to these scenarios, physically and/or emotionally impaired students may experience a more difficult trajectory through college due to the specific challenges they may face (Malnarich, 2005; McCabe, 2003).

Some internal factors can be more psychological in nature. For example, at-risk students in the USA include those who have unrealistic goals and believe that they will be able to achieve them almost instantaneously without exerting a great deal of effort. These learners are more likely to become disappointed with their progress and to give up on their educational aspirations.

In these cases, it is important for educators to note that, although educational aspirations are primarily of a psychological nature, they are also influenced by socioeconomic status (Horn, 1997) and are not independent of self-image. Moreover, unlike successful students who are usually motivated, goal oriented, and well prepared, at-risk students often come with a background of failure and academic struggle. In other words, their egos may have been bruised before, both at school and in the larger society. As a result, their self-confidence, especially in relation to academic achievement, is not strong, and they do not perceive themselves as true agents in their own lives but rather as victims of circumstances – what Hiroto and Seligman (1975) term “learned helplessness.”

Environmental factors can also be associated with at-risk students. Bulger and Watson (2006), citing the Learning Skills Council (2004), highlight some of these factors as including the time and cost of travel, the lack of suitable courses for different kinds of students, the unavailability and/or lack of affordability of appropriate accommodation, the lack of access to educational resources, and the lack of practical learning opportunities (e.g., for placements and internships). Another important environment factors is that of course schedules. That is, because most higher educa-

tion programs target full-time students, part-time students, who usually have careers and/or families, often cannot attend more traditionally scheduled lessons. This can be addressed through the implementation of different schedules and modalities. However, not every major is available through evening and/or weekend courses and seminars, and, although becoming more common, not every course is available through distance, blended, or virtual learning platforms. This is especially true in Oman, where distance and virtual learning is still often viewed with suspicion by some at the college administrative level.

### 4 An Overview of Factors Contributing to College Retention

Table 1 lists factors that can potentially hinder college success and/or retention. Information contained is based upon the suggestions made by Bulger and Watson (2006), Kaufman and Bradbury (1992), Horn (1997), Topping and Maloney (2005), Boyer et al. (2007), and McKeachie and Svinicki (1994).

**Table 1** Overview of factors contributing to college retention

Personal	Micro-context	Macro-context
Ethnicity (as a personal feature)	<i>The family</i>	The curriculum (level of difficulty and interest)
	Family makeup (e.g., single-parent family)	
	Parental engagement in education	
	School success rate in the family	
	Socioeconomic status (SES)	
Expectations	<i>Acquaintances and friends</i>	Assessments (whether students are being assessed in ways that only give chances of passing to a particular kind of student)
	Peer influence	
Self-confidence and self-esteem	<i>The school</i>	Ethnicity (as perceived by others, especially as a stereotype)
Educational continuity (previous changes of school)	Teacher attitude and expectations (e.g., whether teachers are purposefully or inadvertently pushing students out of college)	
Grades (e.g., average grades of Cs or lower from sixth to eighth grade)	Teacher competencies and student-teacher “match” (the right teacher for the students)	
Previous success rate (repeated or passed grades or courses)	College characteristics (the right college or program for the students Whether the college is elitist or inadvertently racist, sexist, etc.	
Truancy and absenteeism		



Different students may be potentially at risk due to one, two, or more of the above factors. For example, in the cases analyzed by Horn (1997), switching schools was the most common risk factor, while students from families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were also at risk. This latter finding had received previous support in the literature by authors such as Kaufman and Bradbury (1992). While the literature offers a number of cognitive, behavioral, and socioeconomic factors that are associated with at-risk students, Agada (2001) cautions readers about the potential dangers associated with assuming a learner's "predisposition" to failure thus:

The notion of 'predisposition' to school failure is a contradiction in terms. Since a basic tenet of learning theory is that all students can learn, those lacking in the acknowledged prerequisites for optimal learning require learning resources adapted to meet their unique needs. Labeling such students as at-risk of failure is not only self-defeatist on the part of the educational system, but sets in place a self-fulfilling prophecy that ensures eventual failure. Current analyses of student failure advocate a shift from the student deficit to interactionist perspective, focusing on the mismatch between students' and institutional attributes. (p. 82)

In this way, Agada (2001) continues, the academic performance of these students may be more a representation of the school's lack of valorization of their cultural capital, rather than their individual competence.

## 5 The Need for More Comprehensive Definitions

Agada's (2001) observations point to the need for a redefinition of the at-risk label. Students cannot be clustered only in terms of college enrollment, entrance, stay, and exit. Graduating cannot be the only demarcation line between success and failure. The parameters could be expanded to encompass the future performance of students as (world) citizens academically, socially, professionally, and emotionally. From this perspective, some students who graduate even with good grades could be considered at risk if they were assessed more holistically. As highlighted above, the causes of college failure may not always be exclusively student-related. Other factors, such as schools and colleges, educational policies, curricula, assessment tools, and, above all, the social realities that frame and condition the (under)performance of both students and institutions, must also be taken into account.

Rosenbaum et al. (2016) offer the example of students having unmet expectations about their college experience as potentially being at risk. If these students stop believing that a degree will help them obtain a respectable job with a comfortable salary, they will be less prone to commit to college. In other words, low "institutional confidence" can be, according to the author, a reason for students to give up on their studies completely and drop out of college. As this example demonstrates, students' expectations go beyond the curriculum and necessarily encompass the idea of doable and timely progress and positive employment prospects. In the case of Oman, the loss of institutional confidence among male students who are academically weaker, often leads to these learners leaving college to join the police or



armed forces, even as early as during their GFP studies. The situation is made worse by the implicit message that anybody can succeed in college and every student has the right to graduate that is often conveyed by low admission requirements and flexible grading criteria.<sup>1</sup>

Once the parameters of the discussion about at-risk students are expanded, and the issue is placed within discourses about the sustainable development of knowledge economies, educators and policy makers might have to start thinking not only in terms of *at-risk students* but also of *at-risk nations* (Mosen-Lowe et al., 2009). Furthermore, as some scholars have already suggested, “students who fail to learn adequately when young, whatever the etiology, often develop later problems that may encompass school disengagement, retention, participation difficulties, alienation, social maladjustment, and mental health problems” (Mpfu et al., 2010, p. 806).

Furthermore, the question must also be asked whether all current or prospective college students should actually be in college at all. Are the current college programs – be they professional or academic – really the best environment for those students to thrive in and to forge a future for themselves? If the wrong type of student is made to feel that they must be in college, a double harm can be done. On the one hand, the youngsters’ expectations will probably be blown out of proportion, and this can easily lead to frustration and a waste of time. On the other hand, whenever the group of students who are objectively not “college material” is considerably large, the advancement of the rest of the students and the quality of the education being offered will probably be jeopardized. This could be argued to be the case in certain segments of the Omani higher education system. Therefore, whatever the reason why students can be at risk of educational failure, the literature suggests that both success and failure do not stand alone. This is a predicament that colleges must not lose sight of while designing remedial paths to foster success.

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<sup>1</sup>Young Omanis’ sense of educational entitlement is comparable to the idea held by some that the citizens are almost naturally entitled to a job and their employers are obliged to keep them in employment regardless of how well or badly they perform. This “culture of entitlement” is naturally not present only in the sultanate but also in some parts of Europe and elsewhere (Kaufman, 2011; MacDonald, 2005). Its defining characteristic and the dangers involved in redressing the situation have succinctly been described by Kaufman (2011): “In a culture of entitlement there is the belief that one deserves certain rewards, rights, and privileges based on tradition or past achievements. In contrast, in a culture of accountability rewards, rights, and privileges are only earned based on the merits of one’s current behaviors and actions and the measurable results they produce. The transition from a culture of entitlement to a culture of accountability is a perilous journey because rights and privileges are no longer automatic, and the “entitled party” usually feels disappointed, angry, or mistreated” (p. 299).

## 6 College Success Involves More than Just Students

The most widespread form of remedial education is the segregated remedial approach. Segregated programs may run parallel to regular programs, students having to take part in both, or as alternatives, whereby students leave regular classes to attend their own special or transition classes (Frattura & Capper, 2006). Although such programs can obtain a certain degree of success, one of their disadvantages is that they often cost more in terms of financial resources and/or of teachers' teaching load (especially when instructors volunteer for these programs on top of all their other tasks). Another disadvantage is that the impression can be given that only remedial teachers must adapt their teaching styles to ensure the success of at-risk students. The fully segregated approach has also been criticized for being "analogous to parking an ambulance at the bottom of a cliff to assist people who fall off the cliff. Students are placed in them once they have failed academically, socially, or behaviorally" (Frattura & Capper, 2006, p. 358).

On the other hand, some researchers and educators favor more integrated, comprehensive remedial approaches. They view education – including remediation – not only as a personal issue but also as a systemic one. Consequently, there are educators and planners who want to deal with college remediation at a school level, i.e., as an attempt to raise the academic achievement of the whole student population by delivering "integrated comprehensive services (ICS) in heterogeneous environments for all learners" (Frattura & Capper, 2006, p. 356). Therefore, ICS include both at-risk and gifted students. In cases such as this, the word *services* is not predicated only of specially designed and designated classes but also of curricula, assessment tools, coaching schemes, and so on. ICS are meant to counter what Frattura and Capper term the "segregation of inclusion" (p. 359). The proponents of this approach are fundamentally against students or teachers being segregated in the name of inclusiveness.

Consequently, proponents argue that comprehensive remedial planning should involve not only individual variables, such as student motivation and teacher attitude, but also institutional ones, both at the college and ministerial levels. Moreover, since the best way to deal with problems is usually by preventing them from happening, integrated, comprehensive remedial planning must start with prevention. Following this, newly designed "remedial" trajectories should be offered to all students who think that they need them, and not only to a "labeled few." Eventually, their personal output will be better, and they will feel more confident in their own potentials. In this way, self-determination and agency can be enhanced (Frattura & Capper, 2006, see esp. p. 359). Supporters of ICS prefer to equip all classes with a rich, flexible, and multilayered curriculum which different students can tap into at their own level, individually as well as in small and large groups, based on their needs, preferences, and content areas. Also, all groups are given the opportunity to work in an array of learning environments (on and off campus), and not always in the classroom or the lab. In this way, more flexibility could be built into programs so that students self-regulate more and make use of the support that really helps them.

However, it could be argued that such an inclusive approach requires a different curriculum, a new style of textbooks and teaching aids, different buildings, and teachers who feel able to simultaneously do things in as many different ways as there are students. In addition, ICS necessitate effective coordination and special forms of assessment so that students are not just allowed to roam around, waste time, join the groups where their friends are, or take the easy way out.

All in all, whatever strategy a college may adopt, educators and policy makers have to accept that, apart from student and curriculum variables, and constructivist and instructionist factors (Johnson, 1998), the school culture also plays an important role in the success of at-risk students, as well as of programs meant to scaffold their learning. Here, school culture refers to “the beliefs, norms, and values of school personnel” (Mpofu et al., 2010, p. 808). It is these beliefs that affect the allocation and use of resources and how students are assessed. In response to the ongoing recalibration of remediation in colleges, some prefer to recast remediation as Learning Support Programs, instead of using other labels with at-risk connotations. Through this approach, they seek to avoid the further stereotyping of students who are already struggling.

Moreover, whether the support programs are segregated or integrated, the general paradigm shift in the field should be reflected in the instruction principles of at-risk programs. As early as 1998, Johnson put forward 20 principles of instruction for at-risk learners which continue to be equally valid today. These principles can be used to design remedial trajectories as well as to evaluate existing ones, in Oman and elsewhere, especially in foundation programs. These principles are:

1. Maintain high expectations
2. Make use of praise: minimize criticism
3. Capitalize on learning technologies
4. Balance direct instruction with challenging activities
5. Teach learning strategies
6. Accommodate student learning styles
7. Establish an experiential base for learning
8. Teach vocabulary directly
9. Focus on meaningful skills, concepts, and activities
10. Use examples and demonstrations
11. Actively involve the students
12. Encourage cooperative learning
13. Ask and encourage questions
14. Teach self-monitoring and self-management
15. Provide creative opportunities for practice and review
16. Integrate skills and concepts throughout the curriculum
17. Build student interest and enthusiasm
18. Manage the instructional process efficiently
19. Celebrate cultural diversity in the classroom
20. Facilitate parental involvement with the school

Assessment is an important aspect of education. It is meant to reveal how well (or badly) students are learning. However, assessments are a controversial issue. On the one hand, they often fail to contain components that test problem-solving skills (Boyer et al., 2007), without which students cannot excel either in education or in the knowledge economy. On the other hand, given the factory-like style of many education systems, exams are exactly what turns an at-risk student into a failed one. Exams are often the way out of college, rather than moments of self-knowledge for growth. Moreover, since competency-based exams (Boyer et al., 2007) zoom in on students' performance of "carefully specified objectives" (McKeachie & Svinicki, 1994, p. 105), the value of grades will very much depend on the competencies that were selected to be tested and on the ways chosen to evaluate them. For example, by giving a privileged position to interpreting abstract texts rather than art or graphic designs, some students will be put in disadvantageous positions in comparison to their colleagues. For these reasons, it is important to view the potential impact that a program's assessments can have on creating, rather than identifying and seeking to help, at-risk students.

## 7 Culturally Relevant Data About Omani At-Risk Students

Currently, there is an almost complete lack of research about Omani at-risk college students. Given the number of social and cultural differences between Oman and Western nations like the UK and the USA, it is difficult to determine whether findings from these research contexts can be applied to the sultanate. For example, could we also assume that Omani students with older siblings who dropped out of college will also be more likely to be weak students, as seems to be the case in the USA (e.g., Kaufman & Bradbury, 1992, p. 13)? Also, in the USA, scholars speak of social capital dissonance (Agada, 2001) between students from minority groups and those from more established majority groups. In other words, the majority culture remains the paradigm for North American educational establishments, curricula, and exams. Is something similar happening in Oman in terms of dissonance between home and college cultures?

Educators and researchers in Oman often intuitively understand that results from the international literature are not always relevant to the Omani context. For example, it is often assumed that, "At-risk students are often the first generation in their family to attend college" (Horn, 1997, p. 9). If we took this assumption as our point of departure, we would have to accept failure as the rule since a great many students are first-generation college goers due to the relatively short history of the country's tertiary education system. Consequently, we should celebrate success "as rather unexpected by international criteria." Moreover, this sense of surprise could increase if we took into account the levels of objective preparedness for college upon enrollment. Furthermore, unlike students in the USA, Omani at-risk students do not necessarily have a deflated sense of their own capabilities. On the contrary, in the experience of the authors, they often have an ungrounded academic self-image which can be the result of inflated results in pre-tertiary education.

Another example involves the social connotations of large families abroad and in Oman. Probably with the exception of Mormon students in the USA, students who “come from large families are perhaps more likely to come from low-SES backgrounds” (Kaufman & Bradbury, 1992, p. 13). In Oman, most of the current college student population come from large families, but they are not necessarily “poor” (at least, not in the same sense and way that their American “counterparts” are in low-SES families).

## 8 Planning Remedial Services in Omani Colleges

Omani colleges are starting to realize that they need to set in place mechanisms to help students that are failing. This applies especially to subsidized colleges. Generally speaking, there are some measures which colleges and ministries can take to enhance the chances of success of at-risk students. These include:

1. The formulation, planning, and implementation of a system for academic advising and (learning) support, where support includes both remediation with a view to helping students succeed in college and advising for helping them to find educational or training alternatives which better suit their talents, skills, personality, and personal circumstances.
2. The adaptation of curricula and instruction to better meet the learning needs of at-risk students, for example, by promoting differentiation in input, output, assessment, and grading, by simplifying and diversifying the format of tasks and assessments, and by creating and using more adaptive resources and instruction strategies (Westwood, 2005)<sup>2</sup>.
3. The promotion of collaborative learning across the curriculum, for example, by acquainting students with peer and cross-age tutoring and mentoring schemes (Mallon, 2005).
4. The kind of systemic change that empowers schools and colleges to creatively plan and execute schemes and strategies which are in tune with the needs of their own student population. (This is important in countries such as Oman where a number of government colleges must operate in complete synch, which can at times become an obstacle to ensuring higher levels of local creativity and efficacy.)
5. The recognition of cultural factors which influence access to, and the chances of success of, support services. For example, the issues of gender and nationality may not be ignored in Oman. Female Omani students tend to feel more comfortable when they are being advised or coached by female faculty members. On the

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<sup>2</sup>Nunan et al. (2005) have spoken of “curriculum justice” (p. 250) in this respect: “This construction of inclusivity has as a focus not just the factors directly affecting access, participation and success but also the criteria for judging success, and by whom and how success is determined. It is not just concerned with representing the full range of views (clearly an untenable position given the limitations of time on a curriculum) but in ensuring that the decisions about what is included are made according to criteria which affirm the basic human values of participation, democracy, equality and emancipation” (p. 252).

other hand, the educational expectations of non-Omani teachers, who often studied in tougher and more demanding learning environments, can color their predisposition toward their Omani advisees. At the same time, in some cases of a personal (“shameful”) nature, Omani students might prefer to talk to foreign advisors and coaches, rather than Omani ones, to reduce the possibilities that other Omanis – including their families – come to know about their predicament.

In what follows, we will suggest several concrete steps that could help colleges in Oman to conceptualize and plan learning paths for failing or at-risk students.

### ***8.1 Learning Support Services Coordinator***

To ensure that something is done to help address the needs of at-risk students, a Learning Support Services Coordinator should be appointed (within a unit or center which has been designed in function and staffed for professional academic advising and support).

This person would be in charge of (a) liaising with the registration and admission office, heads of centers and departments, and teachers to identify and follow up students to whom the college would like to offer additional assistance; (b) deciding what kinds of support services will be rendered in general and to each specific student in particular; and (c) negotiating with faculty and administration about which staff members will play an active role in the scheme, in addition to what will be done, where, and when.

### ***8.2 Identifying the Target Population***

First and foremost, students need to be monitored throughout their stay in college through different instruments and methods. Failing and at-risk students can be identified by analyzing assessment data, especially of those who underperform on quizzes and exams.

In Oman, our experience suggests that another way to spot potential at-risk students is by asking instructors to submit a monthly student report, including absenteeism, academic performance in the classroom and on assessments (e.g., difficulty with course content, poor study skills, or unsuccessful learning strategies), and other relevant nonacademic problems which teachers might be aware of. Other important diagnostic tools can include results of the college placement tests and continuous assessment performance across the first 4 weeks of semester.

Once the results of the placement test and midterm exam are known, students can also be reassessed and recategorized. Potential categories for at-risk students based on this information could include (1) weak but capable (e.g., scoring around 50% on

their exams and otherwise performing well in class), (2) cognitively challenged (both in English and Arabic based on all sources of information available), and (3) uncommitted to learning (e.g., on the basis of absenteeism rates, neglect of homework, poor performance on continuous assessment and exams, etc.). Based on the placement of at-risk students into these categories, support services can be designed to assist students throughout the remainder of the semester.

### ***8.3 Identifying the Type of Support to Be Provided***

Based on the data collected, colleges will have to opt either for comprehensive, integrated services or for segregated remedial classes and activities. Although CIS would be the ideal approach in the long-term, segregated strategies might be easier to set up in the beginning.

### ***8.4 Identifying the Right Instructors and What Will Be Done, When, and Where***

Not all college instructors have been trained to teach, let alone to properly identify and support at-risk students. Few instructors in college actually have a background in teaching or in educational studies. In fact, most instructors, lecturers, and professors are teaching probably because of their professional qualifications (e.g., in linguistics, business, IT, or engineering) and are, therefore, seldom equipped to provide at-risk students with adequate pedagogical support. Providing instructors and support staff with professional development and training opportunities is one way in which this issue can be addressed.

### ***8.5 Recording the Process***

Although support schemes are usually a matter of choice, an attendance list should be maintained to measure the students' levels of commitment. All the marks of in-class preparatory quizzes and exams should also be filed so that future instructors can continue supporting these learners. Files can also be used for college statistics and quality assurance purposes. Ideally, failing and at-risk students should be followed longitudinally until they have completed their educations or have otherwise left college.



## 9 Conclusion

Remediation is not always an obvious part of college planning. Some would argue that it is the students' own duty to ready themselves for college or take care of their weaknesses once they are already in college – especially in places like Oman, where public higher education is free for all nationals and students are paid a government allowance to study. However, others would support the integration of remedial programs into the curriculum either out of a sense of responsibility for the future or shame for the systemic inequalities that have, in many cases, caused the problems in the first place. Be that as it may, remediation itself is always based on value judgments; for example, the values which are encapsulated in curricula and endorsed by exam writers. Furthermore, even when they are considered necessary, remedial programs may be set up as segregated or integrated endeavors. Or, in the words of Parsons (2005):

Careful consideration needs to be given to what is seen as an 'effective school' and effective for whom. Currently the effective school is seen in government and research terms as one with good academic results - learning is proven to have taken place. The 'good' school may be different, placing an emphasis on its caring role (without detriment to its academic functions). The 'very good' school, very much a moral project, may be the inclusive school which keeps its clients and retains the responsibility to cater for their needs – however demanding these may be. (pp. 141–142)

In Oman, the various tertiary-level foundation programs function as massive remedial programs meant to help students fill their knowledge gaps and develop academic skills (Carroll, Razvi, & Goddliffe, 2009). However, the deficiencies are at times so profound that some of these students require support programs to help them cope with the general foundation programs themselves. In other words, they need remediation to succeed in the remedial programs. Obviously, such a situation calls for a thorough revision of precollege education. Yet, that would require years of review and evaluation even before any attempt at reform could be made and would not help current students in need of support here and now. Therefore, in this chapter, we have suggested some pointers for remedial curriculum designers. Educators and students in Oman should understand that remediation and remedial schemes are not bad or shameful. They are signs of the system's – especially the teachers' – commitment to making sure that students get the help and coaching, both within and beyond the classroom, which they need to succeed in college. Additionally, instructors and lecturers should be trained to identify learning disabilities and other causes of problems. Furthermore, colleges should look into developing longitudinal research and feedback to follow at-risk students and should remain aware that remediation is not a one-off intervention. In all of this, much more research needs to be conducted in Oman to inventory the issues, what has been done to redress them, and the gains and losses which have been booked.

Finally, the fact that graduates are often asked to "pass" both the IELTS test and content exams during recruitment procedures for more desirable companies in the country suggests that employers still do not quite trust Omani qualifications. In



other words, “despite of all efforts taken by the government and HEIs to improve quality of education in Oman, HEIs have been criticized for producing graduates having low skill and knowledge” (Baporikar & Shah, 2012, p. 15). Right now, it would seem that remediation schemes are needed to bridge the many gaps in the system: between schools and college, as well as between college and the workplace.

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# English Language Proficiency and Communicative Competence in Oman: Implications for Employability and Sustainable Development



Rahma Al-Mahrooqi and Christopher Denman

**Abstract** Within the Sultanate of Oman, English, as the country's only official foreign language, is in great demand by the job market. The language is taught in the majority of government schools from the first grade and is the dominant medium of instruction at the tertiary level. However, despite the huge amount of human and financial resources the government channels into supporting English language instruction, this investment has apparently failed to deliver the expected gains with both secondary- and tertiary-level graduates often reported as being weak in the language and as having communication skills that are inadequate for the workforce. This lack of English proficiency and communicative competence is commonly cited as one of the major causes of the high levels of unemployment among Omani graduates. This paper examines a number of issues related to the ways in which English language proficiency and communicative competence are developed in Omani schools and universities, with a focus on the challenges that exist within the government education system. The implications of these challenges for graduate employability and sustainable development are explored, before recommendations for bridging the gap between graduates' English language skills and the demands of the workforce in Oman are discussed.

**Keywords** English proficiency · EFL/ESL · Oman · Employability

## 1 Introduction

English is the dominant language of a diverse array of fields (Altbach, 2010; Bisong, 1995; Crystal, 1992, 1997, 2002; Graddol, 2006; Phillipson, 1992). It is due to the links between English and social and economic development that the language is integrated into education systems in various nations worldwide. This is certainly

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true of the Arab Gulf states, where English acts as a lingua franca for communication between the Gulf Arabs and the non-local “expats” and “host workers” that often numerically dominate their societies. Within this context, English is taught as a school subject from the first grade, with instruction either in or about the language usually continuing up until the postdoctoral level.

In the Sultanate of Oman, English is urgently required by the job market. Al-Issa (2007) states that “Oman needs English – the only official foreign language in the country – as a fundamental tool for ‘modernization’, ‘nationalization’ and the acquisition of science and technology” (pp. 199–200). Hence, the government has spent a great deal of resources on supporting English instruction in the country since a formal education system was introduced in 1970. However, this huge investment has yet to yield the expected gains (Al-Issa, 2011; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; Moody, 2009, 2012). In particular, tertiary-level graduates are often reported as being weak in English and with communication skills that are inadequate for the job market. This lack of English language skills is commonly cited as one of the major causes of the high unemployment rate among Omani graduates.

Unemployment due to graduates’ lack of the kinds of skills demanded by the job market, including those involving proficiency in English, presents a serious challenge both in Oman and the other Gulf states. A lack of employment opportunities has been described as a root cause of numerous national, social, political and psychological problems. According to Siddiqi (2011), social deprivation resulting from unemployment “fuels unrest, which in turn, leads to even higher unemployment as new private investments are deferred or cancelled” (p. 34). Unemployed youth, Siddiqi continues, run a “significant risk of demoralization, loss of self-esteem and mental health problems” (p. 34). Hence, unemployment’s impact is far-reaching and serious.

In the Arab world, this issue has been magnified by the events of the Arab Spring starting in 2011. Unemployment and social deprivation have together produced the spark that triggered popular demonstrations and/or civil war and the ousting of Arab leaders in Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. In the Arab Gulf, demonstrations did not reach these proportions. However, the region has a high rate of unemployment in some counties, and, given their relatively small populations, this might prove to be problematic in the not too distant future. There is particular reason to worry since the Arab Gulf is currently facing two main challenges that may exacerbate the issue of unemployment: a booming young population and rising socioeconomic challenges due to globalization, accelerating modernization and, more recently, unstable oil prices.

In the face of these challenges, Maclean (2010) states that it is vital for educators and trainers and the world of work to cooperate to achieve sustainable development. Sustainable development can be conceived of as a construct that involves pursuing development that will improve the quality of life now while also protecting the planet for the future (Nnabuo & Asodike, 2012). Central to achieving sustainable development is the provision of quality education for all, with a particular focus on

the development of the kinds of literacy skills that are required for people to actively participate in society and in the decisions that affect them.

This paper acknowledges the vital link between educators and the world of work in decreasing unemployment and promoting sustainable development by examining issues related to one of the most important graduate skills demanded by private industry in the region: English language proficiency and communicative competence. In doing so, it presents several theories of language proficiency and communicative competence before exploring the ways in which these are developed in Omani schools and universities. A number of challenges arising from the teaching of English in these contexts are highlighted, with implications for employability and sustainable development, including recommendations for bridging the gap between graduates' English language skills and the demands of the workforce, discussed.

## **2 English Language Proficiency and Communicative Competence**

Communication is a complex process which cannot be removed from its sociocultural context (Craig, 1999). The act of communication is affected by a speech community's social and cultural norms, with sociocultural competencies – including stylistic appropriateness, non-verbal communication and so on – as important for meaningful communication as the actual exchange of linguistic symbols itself. Consequently, language instruction in outer and expanding circle nations is often as concerned with the explicit development of sociocultural understandings of the target language culture(s) as it is with core language skills. In many contexts where EFL/ESL instruction occurs, language learner communicative competence has become one of the main teaching goals (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006, 2008).

Communicative competence is concerned with the development of language learners' sociolinguistic and discourse skills in addition to their overall linguistic proficiency (Van Ek, 1986; Widdowson, 1983). Richards (2006) highlights four main aspects of communication competence including knowledge about the ways language is used to achieve different purposes and functions, understanding how setting and participants impact language use, the ability to both produce and understand a variety of text types and understanding different types of communication strategies learners use to overcome limitations in their language abilities.

Linguistic knowledge is central to almost every model of communicative competence. According to Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), linguistic competence is comprised of grammatical and discourse competence. The former is concerned with learner knowledge of lexical items, morphology, phonology, syntax and so on, while the latter is related to the ability to create logical and meaningful written and spoken texts. Linguistic knowledge is essential for learners to improve their language proficiency, though they also need pragmatic competence, or the

ability to use the language effectively and appropriately in real-life settings (Ji, 2008), to develop communicative competence.

Bachman (1990) claims that pragmatic competence involves both illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. The former encompasses the ability to create meaning in a communicative event and to understand the intended meaning of a message, while the latter is concerned with socially appropriate language use in different contexts. Authors such as Thomas (1983) and Leech (1983) further divide pragmatics into pragmalinguistics, or the resources that a language provides for conveying specific illocutions, and socio-pragmatics, which relates to the “sociological interface” of pragmatics. Following Van Ek’s (1986) addition of sociocultural and social competence to Canale and Swain’s (1980) model, authors such as Coperías Aguilar (2009), Kramsch (1993), Savignon (1972, 1983, 2002) and Tedick and Walker (1994) accentuated the importance of cultural features in their conceptualization of communicative competence.

Within multi-national and multi-cultural contexts, multidialectal proficiency (Canagarajah, 2006; Sharifian, 2009; Sharifian & Jamarani, 2013) is also central to communicative competence. Multidialectal proficiency relates to an awareness of different dialects and language varieties based on geographical, socioeconomic status and/or membership of a certain social group. Prominent examples include the different varieties of Arabic across the member states of the Arab League or the stereotypically different pronunciations between people from the United States’ northern states and those raised in the “Deep South”. Differences, as these examples suggest, are often associated with word choice, grammatical structures, pronunciation, intonation and so on.

As stated above, English plays a prominent role across Arab Gulf societies (Charise, 2007). It can be seen as a gatekeeper to academic and social success by helping determine access to education and employment opportunities (Findlow, 2006). In Oman, English is in great demand in the job market in both the public and private sectors. This is due to a number of reasons, including Oman’s strong historical ties with Britain, government policies identifying English as a strategic resource that can be exploited for economic benefit, the links between English and the acquisition of knowledge and technology, the widespread use of English as a lingua franca, if not a second language, across many parts of Omani society, and English’s dominance as a language of instruction at the tertiary level (Al-Issa, 2007; Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Renard, 2010).

While government policy and education institutions largely recognize the importance of English to Omani society, the country’s citizens are often reported as having low levels of English communicative competence (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Moody, 2009). As a result, Omani school and college graduates have been characterized as having limited English skills to the extent that this negatively impacts upon their levels of employability (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2014). This issue hampers graduates’ chances of finding suitable jobs in both the private and public sectors after graduation so that policies of Omanization that seek to replace foreign workers with nationals are seriously affected. It also results in high levels of youth unemployment



and a lack of economic development and workforce effectiveness, with the former concern highlighted by the fact that, in a country of around 4.8 million people, the Omani workforce features around 1.8 million foreign workers (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Al Mukrashi, 2017) who largely use English as their dominant means of communication. This is a trend that raises concerns about long-term economic growth and social stability in the country, with unemployment being a pressing concern especially in light of the events of the Arab Spring.

In order to increase the pace of Omanization and economic growth, the Omani government places heavy emphasis on teaching English in schools and universities. The national government recognizes the importance of English for employment across almost every sector of the economy – a situation that is likely to intensify with the push for economic growth in more service-oriented industries and a move away from an over-reliance on fossil fuels – and seeks to equip school and university graduates with outstanding English communicative skills, especially in speaking and writing (Al-Jadidi, 2009).

### **3 English Proficiency and Communicative Competence in the Omani Education System**

As described in the introduction to this book, formal education arrived in Oman relatively recently and did not truly take hold in the country until Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970. With the spread of a free universal government education system, the focus gradually shifted from ensuring that almost all of Oman's people had access to schooling to the quality of education provided. As a result, by 1998 the General Education curriculum started to be phased out in favour of the new Basic Education curriculum in which English is taught from the first grade of primary school.

Issan and Gomaa (2010) state that the Basic Education system was introduced in order to create a skilled local workforce that can operate successfully in an increasingly competitive and globalized economy. Part of the enhancement of Omani students' skills is the development of their English language abilities in order to ease their transition to the workforce and higher education institutions where English is the dominant language of instruction (Mustafa, 2012; Roche & Harrington, 2013).

The Basic Education system features ten grades across Cycle 1 (grades 1–4) and Cycle 2 (grades 5–10), with these being complemented by Post-Basic Education (grades 11–12) which is the “bridge” between Basic Education and the demands of higher education and the workforce (Ministry of Education (2004, 2010a, 2010b). In order to do this, the Post-Basic Education system, according to Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2012), focuses on developing learners' social, communication, interpersonal and information technology skills. English is taught from the first grade in Basic Education, as opposed to grade 4 in the General Education system. English classes in Basic Education are aimed at developing students' communicative competence and, in this way, could be seen as a response to the traditional teacher-



centered, hierarchical classrooms that have been described as characterizing teaching in the country.

However, despite these reforms, Basic Education is yet to yield the expected results, with students' English language achievement continuing to fall behind international standards. The failure of Basic Education to equip learners with adequate English language proficiency and communication skills has been widely reported (Al-Issa, 2011; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Moates, 2006; Moody, 2009, 2012). The inability of government schools to develop their learners' English language proficiency can be seen in the high percentages of school graduates who are required to enrol in tertiary-level English language foundation programs before commencing their majors. For instance, Al-Mahrooqi (2012) reported that around 70% of all students entering Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) – the only public university in Oman and its most prestigious tertiary institution – do not display sufficient English language proficiency on an entrance exam to bypass compulsory enrolment in the English foundation program. As SQU generally accepts the best students in the country, it is perhaps no surprise that this figure increases to 90% in some private tertiary institutions (Al-Mahrooqi, Abrar-ul-Hassan, & Asante, 2012).

Once these students complete their studies in the foundation program, they often do not seem to appreciate the importance of English for their current studies and future careers. Hence, a majority of students often do not spend adequate amounts of time developing their English proficiency. Universities and colleges across the country have been described as not equipping students with the communicative and other skills demanded by the workforce (Al-Dhafiry, 2003; Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2012a, 2012b; Al-Shaqsi, 2012). This not only directly impacts these graduates' chances of obtaining a post-graduation job, but also creates a considerable burden on the national budget and the availability of skilled and trained personnel available for the job market.

In addition to these university graduates, high school leavers seeking employment with no other qualification than their diploma also often fail to find suitable jobs, especially in the private sector, due largely to their inadequate English skills (Al-Dhafiry, 2003; Al-Mahrooqi et al., 2012; Al-Shaqsi, 2012). In this way, secondary- and tertiary-level graduates with low levels of English proficiency and communicative competence often swell the ranks of the young and unemployed which can have a deleterious effect on national development, threaten social stability and hinder sustainable development (Gonzalez, Karoly, Constant, Salem, & Goldman, 2008; Issan & Gomaa, 2010).

## **4 Employment in Oman and Sustainable Development**

Due to Oman's strong historical ties with Britain, English has had a long presence in at least the country's urban areas since before the period of modernization beginning in 1970 (Al-Busaidi, 1995). This presence became to widen after the current ruler, Sultan Qaboos, came to power. As stated above, the language is now taught

from grade 1 in the Basic Education system and is also the dominant language of higher education and the lingua franca across Omani society. English is also extensively used in the private sector, while more government jobs now require the language (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; Al-Mahrooqi et al., 2012; Tuzlukova & Al-Mahrooqi, 2011). Proficiency in English has, in this way, come to be associated with social mobility and professional success within the sultanate. However, it is equally true that a lack of proficiency in English can be a huge disadvantage to graduates.

As discussed above, the consequences of high unemployment in any given society can be disastrous. These, according to Siddiqi (2011), can include widespread social, political and psychological problems in a country or community that faces high rates of unemployment, and may even result in the kinds of political unrest that have been witnessed across much of the Arab world, in addition to certain areas of Europe, since 2011. However, it must be noted here that limited English language skills alone are not the sole reason for the lack of job opportunities for many graduates in the Gulf region. The literature suggests that unemployment in the region is associated with the following factors:

1. Low-quality education (Siddiqi, 2011)
2. Shortage of skills needed by the job market (Siddiqi, 2011)
3. Problematic work ethics (Siddiqi, 2011)
4. Nepotism (i.e. getting a job is not based on individual meritocratic achievement) (Ediagbonya & Oyadongha, 2013)
5. A sense of entitlement to well-paying office jobs among citizens (Siddiqi, 2011)
6. Dependence on hydrocarbons for national income and subsequent lack of economic diversification (Siddiqi, 2011)
7. Availability of cheap foreign labour (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010)
8. A bloated or saturated public sector because most nationals prefer to be employed by the government rather than in the private sector (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010; Siddiqi, 2011)
9. Private sector preference for a cheap expatriate workforce (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010)
10. Public sector provision of more secure work, with better pay, benefits and more generous pensions (Siddiqi, 2011)
11. Inadequate collaboration between the public and private sectors (Voith, 2013)
12. Lack of consistent and reliable statistics on the number of unemployed individuals in many of the region's countries (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010)

While a number of social, historical and political factors contribute to many of these issues, it is clear that a major element needing urgent reconsideration and evaluation is the region's education system. This should, as is the hope of Oman's Post-Basic Education system, prepare future generations for a smooth transition from school life to university and the workplace. It is important to equip school and college graduates with both qualifications (theoretical or academic knowledge) and practical, technical and/or vocational skills since the job market needs basic skills

and workplace competencies. For example, adequate literacy skills are of fundamental importance, not only for employment but also for lifelong learning. They underpin all employability skills and have a direct connection with people's happiness and success, including their "economic well-being, aspirations, family life, health and civic/cultural engagement" (Clark & Formby, 2013, p. 1). Hence, they are vital for any job market (Macey, 2013) and are also essential in fostering a society capable of achieving sustainable development.

Nnabuo and Asodike (2012) state that education for sustainable development is a lifelong process that results in the creation of an informed and involved citizenry that possess the knowledge, values and problem-solving skills to "participate in decisions about the ways we do things, individually and collectively, locally and globally, that will improve the quality of life now without damaging the planet of the future" (p. 4). To achieve continued sustainable development, the authors contend that concrete steps must be taken to increase the level of numeracy and literacy in society as, without these, development and its sustainability cannot be realized. A UNESCO report focusing on the issue of education in Afghanistan (n.d.) argues that, while education in general is central to the process of lifelong learning that is a necessary component of sustainable development, it is the development of literacy skills in particular that most actively contributes to this through increasing the ability of people to actively participate in society and thus contribute to societal happiness and general well-being.

## **5 Conclusion: English Language Proficiency and Sustainable Development in Oman**

Clearly, sustainable development cannot be achieved in the Gulf region without addressing a plethora of social, cultural and political issues that have been presented above. Chief among these is the provision of quality education that equips learners with the kinds of English and Arabic language proficiency skills and communicative competence that is required to find jobs after graduation and to actively participate in society by shaping the important decisions that affect them.

One clear focus of achieving these literacy skills is, of course, the education system. Employers in the Gulf and around the world believe it is the job of educational institutions to equip their graduates with the vital skills listed above. Remedial training provided by employers, while potentially beneficial, has a limited effect due to constraints on time and exposure to new skills. The link between the rising generation and employment, therefore, has to start from school. In the words of Voith (2013):

The primary goal of education should be to provide young people with the means to lead an independent and self-supporting life. This includes preparing them for a career. In addition to teaching general knowledge subjects, schools should offer opportunities to explore career choices, be these academically or practically-oriented. Young people must early

discover what skills they have, what work they would like to do, and whether their skills are compatible with the labour market. (p. 4)

Voith (2013) suggests the provision of school- or center-based career counselors and adds that education systems should build “networks with real life employers to provide students with opportunities to find out what their options might be” (p. 4). She also recommends providing apprenticeships through a dual-track education system of vocational and professional education and training – a system that has proved effective in Switzerland by reducing unemployment there to around 3% at the time of writing, while it remains much higher across many other nations in Europe.

Taking this, and the particular exigencies of Omani society highlighted above and developed elsewhere in this book, into consideration, suggested solutions to increase employment among new graduates and help bridge the gap between graduates’ skills sets, including their English proficiency and communicative competence, and the demands of the workforce include raising awareness of the importance of new graduates accepting employment in any job while looking for more appropriate or promising opportunities. This is an important issue in Oman and, indeed, across many of the nations of the Arab Gulf, where graduates believe that they are automatically entitled to relatively high-paying office jobs upon graduation. While these expectations are perhaps less apparent in Oman than in some neighbouring nations, it is nonetheless important that family and community attitudes towards graduates taking “beginner level” jobs for graduates change. Not only will this reduce graduate unemployment levels, but it will also allow Omani graduates to develop skills and knowledge across all levels of their industry/organization, which will form the basis of career progression and efficiency during the rest of their careers. Graduates taking lower-level positions within an organization should also be provided with graduate skill training that will allow employees to upgrade their skills in line with shifting industry trends and organizational needs. These could be complemented across Oman by the provision of critical intensive upskilling courses for unemployed graduates which can be provided in training centers across the country.

In addition, it may also be necessary for Omani education systems across all levels to be revamped by integrating employability skills, including English language proficiency and communicative competence, into them. Many of the studies reported above highlight the gap between the skills that graduates develop and those demanded by the workforce in Oman. This is especially true for English language proficiency, with graduates’ levels of English often reported as being insufficient for successful performance in the private sector in particular.

By implementing these, and similar, steps, educators and the world of work can act together to decrease graduate unemployment by ensuring that all those who come through the Omani education system are ready to actively participate in society and are equipped with the kinds of skills demanded by employers. Macey (2013) offers these employability skills as including:

- Self-management – readiness to accept responsibility, flexibility, time management, readiness to improve [one’s] own performance

- Teamworking – respecting others, cooperating, negotiating/persuading, contributing to discussions
- Business and customer awareness – basic understanding of the key drivers for business success and the need to provide customer satisfaction
- Problem-solving – analyzing facts and circumstances and applying creative thinking to develop appropriate solutions
- Communication and literacy – application of literacy, ability to produce clear, structured written work and oral literacy, including listening and questioning
- Application of numeracy – manipulation of numbers, general mathematical awareness and its application in practical contexts
- Application of information technology – basic IT skills, including familiarity with word processing, spreadsheets, file management and use of Internet search engines etc.

It is interesting to note that, of these employability skills, communication and literacy, numeracy and problem-solving have all been highlighted as of vital importance in contributing to lifelong learning and to the achievement of the kind of citizen participation in societal decisions that is at the very heart of sustainable development. Of course, focusing exclusively on developing learners' English language proficiency and communicative competence runs the risk of ignoring the importance of the literacy skills required in their first language/s and also of the many concerns about employability of Arab Gulf and/or Omani graduates highlighted above. However, as English is so central to educational, and eventual professional, success across many domains in Oman and the wider Gulf region, there can be little doubt that taking concrete steps to help develop learners' English language proficiency is one important key in decreasing graduate unemployment and contributing to the formation of a societal context in which sustainable development can take hold.

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# Understanding Higher Education Attrition in English-Medium Programs in the Arab Gulf States: Identifying Push, Pull and Fallout Factors at an Omani University



Yogesh Sinha, Thomas Roche, and Manisha Sinha

**Abstract** Attrition rates are typically higher in English-medium university programs in the Arab Gulf States than in programs offered in Arabic. This paper reports on the results of a study of academic engagement at a private regional university in the Sultanate of Oman. The longitudinal study sought to identify causes of attrition, including push factors such as financial difficulties, pull factors such as marriage or employment and fallout factors such as disillusionment and lack of academic progress. The study used a 45-item Arabic-language five-point Likert scale response key questionnaire featuring 15 dimensions of beliefs about university education with students and semi-structured interviews with a subset of students who dropped out. The first round of data collection in academic year 2013–2014 included 48 participants in the questionnaire stage, while the second round in academic year 2014–2015 included a subset of 18 questionnaire participants in addition to 18 semi-structured interviews with participants from the first stage who had dropped out. Results suggest a number of pull factors such as employment and family proximity, as well as fallout factors such as disillusionment with teaching and learning culture, were major contributors to dropout rates.

**Keywords** English-medium instruction · University attrition rates · Student beliefs · PELA

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## 1 Introduction

This paper extends work on the academic achievement of undergraduate students in English-medium universities in the Sultanate of Oman previously undertaken by Roche, Sinha and Denman (2015). As noted in that study, increasing numbers of universities are offering English-medium degrees throughout the Arab Gulf States. Between 2000 and 2007, approximately 40 Australian, British and American branch campuses commenced enrolments in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates alone (Weber, 2011). Further afield, national agendas in countries throughout Asia, such as Japan and South Korea, also encourage participation in English-medium programs. However, many research projects from Asia have noted that English as an Additional Language (EAL) students struggle with the transition from learning about English at high school to learning through English at university (Roche et al., 2015; Taguchi & Naganuma, 2006).

High school to university transition difficulties can be measured in a number of ways, such as through the number of students leaving a course of study, referred to as attrition, or by the poor performance of students as measured against recognised benchmarks. In the Sultanate of Oman, reported first year foundation program attrition rates range from 20% at a private regional university to 28.6% at a prestigious state-run metropolitan university (Roche et al., 2015). In other Arab Gulf States, rates as high as 42.3% at a public metropolitan university in Kuwait have been reported (Ghanboosi, 2013). One Omani study focusing on retention reported that 86% of female and only 44% of male students finished their first year at a public metropolitan institution in the country (Al-Busaidi & Al-Shidi, cited in Al-Jardani, 2017). Given the negative consequences of these rates for individual students, the institution and society at large (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Coleman, 2006), it is important to address these high rates of attrition in English-medium university programs in the Arab Gulf States.

## 2 Literature Review and Background

Attrition research with a focus on high schools in the USA has led to the establishment of a widely used framework to explore reasons why students drop out (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). Adverse situations which force a student to leave are described as push factors, while external factors which attract a student to leave, such as employment, are pull factors. Jordan, Lara and McPartland (1994) and Watt and Roessingh (1994) added a third factor called falling out of school, which occurs when a student does not show significant academic progress in schoolwork and becomes apathetic or even disillusioned with school completion. In Australia, where up to 30% of commencing undergraduate students drop out of their studies (Lomax-Smith, Watson & Webster, 2011), researchers have identified that multiple factors can operate either alone or together to cause attrition. These include push factors

such as mental and physical health problems, lack of connectedness to staff, students and the institution (Baik, Naylor, Akoudis, & Dabrowski 2017), and pull factors such as work opportunities and family commitments (Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009). These factors have been shown to cause attrition in undergraduate programs in the United Kingdom (Trotter & Roberts, 2006) and be particularly salient in attrition research in enabling foundation programs where novice students are transitioning to university study (Willans & Seary, 2018). Researchers studying attrition in English-medium or English as a lingua franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2007) university programs have attributed EAL student transition difficulties to low levels of English language proficiency in both Hong Kong (Evans & Morrison, 2011) and the Sultanate of Oman (Harrington & Roche, 2014; Roche & Harrington, 2013), in addition to a poor understanding of institutional culture and policy (Roche et al., 2015). In addition to language proficiency, English as Additional (EAL) user's understanding of academic literacy practices in the contemporary higher education sector, particularly their digital literacy skills have been shown to impact on success and completion rates in English medium programs (Roche, 2017). Lee (2010) and Peacock (1999) found discrepancies between students' expectations of educational practice and also identified educational culture as a factor contributing to poor educational outcomes in ELF university programs staffed by expatriates in Japan and Hong Kong, respectively.

Over 30 years of research in the field of additional language learning influenced by Horwitz's (1985, 1999), Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) has shown the importance of both student and teacher beliefs about learning and their impact on educational outcomes. Numerous scholars (e.g. Borg, 2006; Dahl, 1995; Lee, 2010; Nunan, 1995; Roche et al., 2015; Wenden, 1999) have shown how understanding student beliefs can help teachers empower learners to succeed in a range of programs. This research also highlights the variety of student beliefs about learning in ELF programs across the globe. For example, students in an undergraduate EFL program in Hong Kong were often focused on accuracy-based grammar activities at the expense of other tasks which focused on content and fluency (Peacock, 1999), whereas students at an Austrian university studying business English were more inclined to request communicative learning activities (Trinder, 2013).

The current longitudinal study aims to explore the relationship between student beliefs about education and attrition. It seeks to achieve this by focusing on student beliefs in one university in Oman and evaluating the relationship between student beliefs and progression rates to examine whether students' conceptions of how university classrooms should operate contribute to attrition. As research across the Arab Gulf States indicates that attrition rates are a potential cause for concern (Al-Busaidi & Al-Shidi, cited in Al-Jardani, 2017; Ghanboosi, 2013), and the reasons for attrition across the region are still poorly understood, this study aims to provide some understanding of contributing pull, push and dropout factors in Omani university attrition.

### 3 Method

In order to further understand pull, push and dropout factors within an Omani university EFL context, the study addresses the following questions:

- 1) What are the push, pull and fallout factors contributing to attrition in the English-medium programs of the research site?
- 2) How do student beliefs about university classroom practice relate to attrition?

To address these questions, data was gathered through questionnaires and interviews of students who left their studies between academic years 2013–2014 and 2014–2015. These direct reports were used to generate a list of factors that students identified as contributing to their exit from university study in order to examine the first research question. The second research question aims to highlight conceptual misunderstandings of, and concomitant maladapted approaches to, university education, while also identifying beliefs held by students who continue with their studies.

#### 3.1 *Participants and Data Collection*

A cluster sampling technique using naturally occurring units (Fink, 1995) – here, classes – was employed to gain access to participants. Round 1 of data collection took place in academic year 2013–2014 and Round 2 in 2014–2015, while semi-structured interviews were held with participants who dropped out of their studies in the period between Round 1 and Round 2. Participants' informed consent to take part in this study was formally obtained in accordance with the research site's institutional ethics guidelines.

Participants for the first round of the survey phase of this study ( $n = 48$ ) in academic year 2013–2014 were all Arabic first language users aged 17–24 and enrolled in year one of their undergraduate studies. Round 1 demographic details indicate a predominance of female participants ( $n = 34$ , 74%) with only 12 male participants (24%). Two respondents did not complete any demographic data. Thirty-one participants (67%) reported being from urban areas, 12 (26%) from semiurban areas and only three (7%) were from rural areas. Thirty-two respondents (70%) came from Oman's Al-Batina region, seven (15%) were from Muscat, four (9%) from Al-Dahira and one participant (2%) each came from Al Sharqia, Al-Dakhiliyah and Musandam.

Round 2 data was collected in the second semester of 2014–2015 at the research site. Out of the 48 students involved in the Round 1 questionnaire stage, only 18 responded to the questionnaire in this round. Round 2 demographics indicate that 12 (67%) participants were females and 6 (33%) were male. Thirteen (72%) reported coming from urban areas, while 4 (22%) came from semiurban areas, and only 1 (6%) came from a rural area. Most of Round 2 participants ( $n = 13$ , 72%) were from the Al-Batina region, two (11%) were from Muscat, and one (6%) each were from the Al-Sharqia, Al-Dakhiliyah and Al-Dahira regions.

In addition to the questionnaire, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were also held either in person or over the phone with 18 participants who had discontinued their studies from the Round 1 to Round 2 data collection stages. Questionnaire prompts are described below.

## 3.2 *Instruments and Analysis*

### 3.2.1 **Semi-structured Interviews**

A series of semi-structured interviews with participants who discontinued their studies was held in Arabic either face-to-face or over the phone. Interviews were conducted by an Omani research assistant. These were digitally recorded with the participants' permission before being transcribed. Transcriptions formed the data for thematic analysis. The semi-structured interview prompts were:

- Why have you discontinued your studies?
- What challenges did you face studying at university?
- How could teachers do better in the classroom? Was the way they taught effective?
- Was the program effective?
- How could the program be better?
- Were the exams/assignments too hard?

### 3.2.2 **Questionnaire**

Following scholars such as Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010), Lee (2010) and Nunan (1992), three items per dimension were used in this study. As in the study by Roche et al. (2015), a 45-item, five-point Likert response scale questionnaire was employed to examine 15 dimensions of effective teaching practice. The questionnaire was constructed by building an item pool (De Vellis, 2003) following an analysis of the literature on Arab EAL student beliefs (e.g. Al-Busaidi, 2003; Farquharson, 1989; Mustafa, 2012), and employed questions from established questionnaires (Borg, 2006; Horwitz, 1988; Lee, 2010) alongside others which the research teams' experience suggested were culturally relevant. The resulting questionnaire dimensions were:

- A. Teachers' English proficiency
- B. Teachers' use of relating English to real-world issues beyond the classroom
- C. Teachers' use of discussion
- D. Teachers' use of group work
- E. Teachers' display of enthusiasm for English
- F. Teachers' approachability
- G. Teachers' use of varied activities in class

- H. Teachers' punctuality
- I. Teachers' focus on assessment rules/criteria
- J. Teachers' use of memorisation-based activities
- K. Teachers' use of training for exams
- L. Teachers awarding pass grades to students who perform poorly
- M. Teachers' use of set readings beyond the classroom
- N. Teachers' similarity to high school English teachers in Oman
- O. Teachers keeping genders separate during class activities

Respondents were requested to select the response that best described their perceptions from the following options: (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neutral; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly Agree. All questionnaire items were presented in mixed order (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010) with negative as well as positive formulations used to help avoid acquiescent response bias.

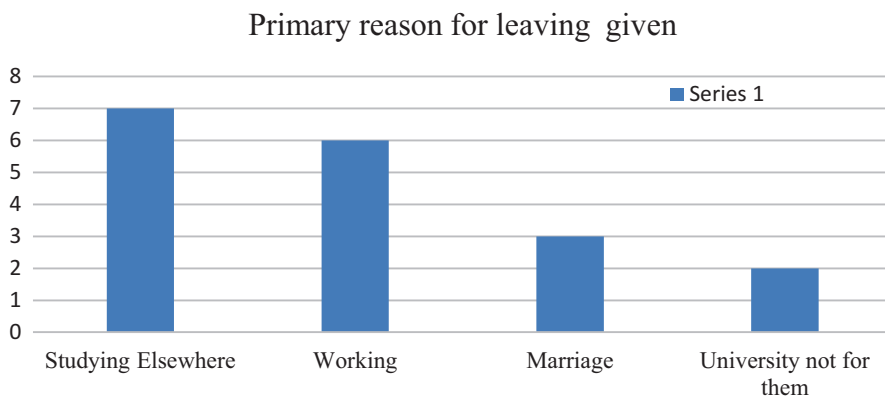
Part two of the questionnaire consisted of one open-ended item that gave participants an opportunity to provide further communication on their beliefs about good EAP teaching. In consideration of Harkness' (2008) recommendation that better survey results are obtained in additional language research if administered in the students' first language, an L1 Arabic speaker with a PhD in Applied Linguistics from university in Oman translated the questionnaire into Arabic. To establish the accuracy of the translation, another L1 Arabic speaker with an EAL teaching background performed a blind back translation. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative questionnaire data.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Interview Results

As stated above, 18 participants who dropped out of their studies at the research site were interviewed. Primary reasons given by these participants for leaving the university are presented in Fig. 1.

As the figure indicates, seven (39%) participants stated that they dropped out of their studies at the research site to study elsewhere and often reported that they did this to be closer to their family homes (a pull factor). However, a small number of these participants claimed that they were unhappy with the teaching practices at the university (a fallout factor), a point which is discussed below. The next most commonly cited reason for leaving offered by six (33%) participants was gaining employment (a pull factor). A recruitment drive for the Royal Oman Police and Royal Armed Forces during the study period attracted a number of young students. Three (17%) participants identified marriage (getting married, moving domicile or having children) as the cause of their withdrawal (a pull factor); though not explicitly



**Fig. 1** Primary reasons for leaving the university

stated, this may also signify financial issues (a push factor). A small number of participants ( $n = 2$ , 11%) noted that they decided university study was not right for them at this point in their lives (a fallout factor). Many of those who left due to pull factors had no negative comments about their studies at the university, and most of them made positive comments about their experience such as “The way they taught us was effective” and “The teachers were good. I liked their way of teaching”.

About half of the students interviewed commented that they felt the university assessments were too difficult, that they were over-assessed or that the curriculum was too demanding. One former student suggested the university should change its approach to assessment: “They [the university] should be more flexible with the students. If a student is doing his best but could not score high marks in exams, teachers should help him pass”. The notion that teachers should help students who are failing to pass by modifying marks has been reported in previous research on beliefs in higher education in Oman (Roche et al., 2015). It is considered here a fallout factor and is discussed below.

Some students felt that using English as the sole medium of instruction in their programs was not beneficial to their learning and is likewise a fallout factor. Comments here included, “The teachers use English only. I think there should be some Arabic especially with fresh students”. This was identified by around 33% of participants as contributing to their dissatisfaction with their studies. It was not only the idea of having a foreign language as the language of instruction but also foreign teachers themselves, which concerned a small number of students as evidenced in the following: “I did not like the idea of having only foreigner teachers. No Arab or Omanis teachers taught me. The way they taught was not effective” and “The majority of the teachers were foreigners. They used English only. They didn’t care whether I understood or not”.

One participant claimed that the most effective teachers were Arabs: “The majority of the teachers were very good. Their way of teaching was very effective. We benefited a lot from them. They were Arab teachers and taught very well”. Though

the interview data could not support further analysis of why Arabs were considered better or the non-Arab teachers worse, this dissatisfaction could represent a cultural difference in pedagogical approaches – an issue explored below. It is also of note that some of the students who left due to pull factors felt the opposite was, in fact, true. For instance, one commented that, “I liked the teachers at university very much. I liked the native English teachers more because their way of teaching was better. I benefited from them more”.

Other, less frequently reported issues discussed in the interviews included the belief among some participants that the policy of keeping an attendance register and reprimanding students for poor attendance or low levels of engagement was counterproductive: “Some teachers are very strict and this makes us hate studying”. Others felt the administrative procedures were overly complicated and a disincentive for continuing to remain enrolled. Once again, these fallout factors might be related to a lack of understanding of institutional culture and policy as noted in Roche et al. (2015). Trends emerging from the interviews were triangulated with both rounds of questionnaire results.

## 4.2 *Questionnaire Results*

### 4.2.1 **Students’ Beliefs in Rounds 1 and 2**

Questionnaire Dimension A (see Table 1) is related to teachers’ knowledge of English. Item 1 “An Effective teacher has excellent knowledge of the English language” recorded a mean average in the first round of 4.33 with this increasing to 4.39 in the second round. In Round 1, around 92% of participants indicated some level of agreement with this item, with this figure being 94% in Round 2. Item 15 “An effective teacher has a basic knowledge of English” recorded a mean average of 4.44 and 4.28 across both rounds. In response to the first round, 94% of participants expressed some form of agreement with this item, while 4% were neutral and only 2% disagreed. Similar results were noted in Round 2 where 89% of participants expressed agreement, although rates of neutrality increased to 11%. The final item from this dimension was Item 18 “An effective teacher uses and explains English to a high standard”. This item received a mean average of 4.04 in Round 1 and 3.61 in Round 2. Here, around 79% of respondents expressed some form of agreement with this item in the first round, although 19% were neutral and 2% disagreed. In the second round, 61% agreed, 22% were neutral and the remainder disagreed.

In response to Dimension B (see Table 2) which was concerned with teachers’ approaches to English in terms of focusing on its relevance beyond the classroom, Item 2 “An effective teacher relates English taught in the classroom to the outside world” recorded a mean average of 4.04 in Round 1 and 4.17 in Round 2. Around 77% of participants agreed with this item across both rounds, with only between 17 and 19% being neutral. Similarly, Item 14 “An effective teacher uses English examples drawn from real life or their own experiences” received a mean average of 4.23 in the first round and 4.17 in the second with agreement levels being 81% and



**Table 1** Dimension A – teacher’s knowledge of English – excellent/sufficient (Items 1, 15 and 18)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty															
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA			A			N			D			SD			
<b>1</b>	4.33	4.39	0.78	0.78	48	18	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2
							n = 22	n = 9	n = 22	n = 8	46%	50%	44%	6%	0%	6%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%
<b>15</b>	4.44	4.28	0.68	0.67	48	18	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2
							n = 25	n = 7	n = 20	n = 8	42%	39%	50%	4%	11%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>18</b>	4.04	3.61	0.74	0.98	48	18	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2
							n = 13	n = 3	n = 25	n = 8	52%	17%	44%	19%	22%	17%	2%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%

*Item 1*: An Effective teacher has excellent knowledge of the English language  
*Item 15*: An effective teacher has a basic knowledge of English  
*Item 18*: An effective teacher uses and explains English to a high standard  
R1 Round 1, R2 Round 2, SA Strongly Agree, A Agree, N Neutral, D Disagree, SD Strongly Disagree

**Table 2** Dimension B – teacher’s approach to English – relevance beyond the classroom (Items 2, 14 and 21)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty																	
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA			A			N			D			SD					
							R1	R2	%	R1	R2	%	R1	R2	%	R1	R2	%	R1	R2	%			
2	4.04	4.17	0.82	0.92	48	18	31%	44%	46%	33%	19%	17%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
14	4.23	4.17	0.93	0.62	48	18	n = 15	n = 8	n = 22	n = 6	n = 9	n = 3	n = 2	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0
21	3.63	3.22	0.87	0.81	48	18	n = 23	n = 5	n = 16	n = 11	n = 7	n = 2	n = 1	n = 0	n = 1	n = 0	n = 1	n = 0	n = 1	n = 0	n = 1	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0
							n = 5	n = 1	n = 25	n = 5	n = 15	n = 9	n = 1	n = 3	n = 2	n = 2	n = 3	n = 2	n = 1	n = 3	n = 2	n = 2	n = 0	n = 0

*Item 2:* An effective teacher relates English taught in the classroom to the outside world  
*Item 14:* An effective teacher uses English examples drawn from real life or their own experiences  
*Item 21:* An effective teacher teaches English as a system of rules

89%, respectively. The third item under Dimension B, Item 21 “An effective teacher teaches English as a system of rules”, received a mean average of 3.63 and 3.22 across both rounds. In Rounds 1 and 2, 62% and 34% of the sample expressed agreement to this item, while 31% and 50% remained neutral, respectively. Interestingly, while roughly 6% of participants disagreed with this item in Round 1, this figure increased to 17% in Round 2.

Dimension C (see Table 3) was concerned with teachers’ use of discussion. Item 3 “An effective teacher keeps discussion to a minimum” received a mean average of 3.50 and 3.17 across both rounds. In Round 1, almost 58% of participants expressed agreement with the item, with 31% being neutral. For Round 2, however, only 33% agreed with the item, and 50% expressed neutrality. Item 16 “An effective teacher creates a safe climate for all students to participate regularly in discussion” received a mean average of 4.29 and 4.61 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively. Here, 85% of participants in Round 1 and 95% in Round 2 agreed, with only 6% being neutral in both rounds. The third item from Dimension C, “An effective teacher encourages students’ frequent contributions”, received a mean average of 4.13 and 4.56 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively. Around 77% expressed some form of agreement with this item in Round 1, with this increasing to 94% in Round 2.

Table 4 features items from Dimension D which is related to teachers’ focus on the use of group work. Item 4 “An effective teacher makes students work primarily individually” recorded a mean average of 4.00 and 3.94 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively. In Round 1, around 45% of participants agreed with this item, with this increasing to 50% in Round 2 and only 28–29% being neutral in both rounds. Item 20 “An effective teacher creates many exercises using English in small groups or pairs” received a mean average of 3.90 and 3.94 across both rounds. In Round 1, 75% of participants agreed with the item, with only 17% being neutral and 8% disagreeing. For Round 2, 84% of participants agreed, while 11% were neutral and only 6% disagreed. The third item associated with Dimension D was Item 23 “An effective teacher organises classes so students work mostly in groups or pairs”. This item received a mean average of 4.00 and 3.94 in Rounds 1 and 2, with 79% agreeing in the first round and 77% in the second.

Dimension E is related to teachers’ approach to English in terms of enthusiasm (see Table 5). Item 5 “An effective teacher can be easily approached by students to discuss difficulties” recorded a mean average of 4.38 and 4.28 across both rounds. Here, 91% of respondents expressed some form of agreement with this item in Round 1, with this increasing to 94% in Round 2. Item 22 “An effective teacher keeps a professional distance to students” received a mean average of 3.57 and 3.56 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively. In response to this item, for Round 1, 69% of participants expressed agreement, while 17% were neutral and 15% disagreed. In Round 2, 61% of respondents agreed with this item, while 22% were neutral and 17% disagreed. The third item from Dimension E, Item 24 “An effective teacher shows an understanding of student issues and difficulties”, reported a mean average of 4.08 and 4.39 across both rounds. In response to Round 1, 77% of respondents agreed with this item, while 19% were neutral. In Round 2, agreement rates increased to 94% with the remaining participants being neutral.

**Table 3** Dimension C – teachers’ use of discussion (Items 3, 16 and 35)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty																
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA			A			N			D			SD				
							R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	
<b>3</b>	3.50	3.17	0.80	0.71	48	18	4%	0%	54%	33%	31%	50%	8%	8%	8%	17%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
							n = 2	n = 0	n = 26	n = 6	n = 15	n = 9	n = 4	n = 4	n = 4	n = 3	n = 1	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0
<b>16</b>	4.29	4.61	0.92	0.61	48	18	52%	67%	33%	28%	6%	6%	8%	8%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
							n = 25	n = 12	n = 16	n = 5	n = 3	n = 1	n = 4	n = 4	n = 4	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0
<b>35</b>	4.13	4.56	1.02	0.62	48	18	46%	61%	31%	33%	15%	6%	6%	6%	6%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
							n = 22	n = 11	n = 15	n = 6	n = 7	n = 1	n = 3	n = 3	n = 3	n = 0	n = 1	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 1	n = 0	n = 0

*Item 3:* An effective teacher keeps discussion to a minimum  
*Item 16:* An effective teacher creates a safe climate for all students to participate regularly in discussion  
*Item 35:* An effective teacher encourages students’ frequent contributions

**Table 4** Dimension D – teachers’ use of group work (Items 4, 20 and 23)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty														
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA			A			N			D			SD		
							R1	R2	n	R1	R2	n	R1	R2	n	R1	R2	n	R1	R2	n
<b>4</b>	3.27	3.56	1.05	1.15	48	18	100%	28%	35%	22%	29%	21%	28%	21%	22%	4%	0%	0%			
							n = 5	n = 5	n = 17	n = 4	n = 14	n = 5	n = 5	n = 10	n = 4	n = 2	n = 0	n = 0			
<b>20</b>	3.90	3.94	0.93	0.73	48	18	25%	17%	50%	67%	17%	6%	11%	6%	6%	2%	0%	0%			
							n = 10	n = 3	n = 24	n = 12	n = 8	n = 2	n = 2	n = 3	n = 1	n = 1	n = 0	n = 0			
<b>23</b>	4.00	3.94	1.03	1.06	48	18	33%	33%	46%	44%	15%	0%	6%	0%	17%	6%	0%	0%			
							n = 16	n = 6	n = 22	n = 8	n = 7	n = 1	n = 1	n = 0	n = 3	n = 3	n = 0	n = 0			

*Item 4:* An effective teacher makes students work primarily individually

*Item 20:* An effective teacher creates many exercises using English in small groups or pairs

*Item 23:* An effective teacher organises classes so students work mostly in groups or pairs

**Table 5** Dimension E – teacher’s approach to English – enthusiasm (Items 5, 22 and 24)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty																				
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA			A			N			D			SD								
							R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2							
5	4.38	4.28	0.92	0.57	48	18	55%	33%	36%	61%	4%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	
22	3.57	3.56	0.95	1.10	48	18	n = 26	n = 6	n = 17	n = 11	n = 2	n = 1	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 2	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0
24	4.08	4.39	0.85	0.61	48	18	n = 7	n = 3	n = 26	n = 8	n = 8	n = 4	n = 6	n = 4	n = 2	n = 2	n = 6	n = 4	n = 4	n = 6	n = 2	n = 1	n = 2	n = 1	n = 1	n = 1	n = 1
							35%	44%	42%	50%	19%	6%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
							n = 17	n = 8	n = 20	n = 9	n = 9	n = 1	n = 2	n = 1	n = 2	n = 2	n = 2	n = 1	n = 1	n = 2	n = 2	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0

Item 5: An effective teacher can be easily approached by students to discuss difficulties

Item 22: An effective teacher keeps a professional distance to students

Item 24: An effective teacher shows an understanding of student issues and difficulties

Table 6 features items associated with Dimension F, which is concerned with teachers' approachability and empathy. Item 6 "An effective teacher shows enthusiasm for the English language" recorded a mean average of 4.29 for Round 1 and 4.00 for Round 2. In relation to the first round, 86% of respondents agreed with the item, while 84% expressed agreement in the second round. Item 26 is "An effective teacher shares their opinion of the English-speaking world and English". The item received a mean average of 3.63 in Round 1 and 3.89 in Round 2. In the first round, 68% of participants agreed with the item, with 19% being neutral and around 12% disagreeing. In Round 2, 73% stated some form of agreement with the item while 28% were neutral. The third item from Dimension F is Item 33 "An effective teacher expresses no personal opinion of the English language". In Round 1, 33% of respondents agreed with this item, with 25% being neutral and around 41% disagreeing. In the next round, only about 22% agreed with this item while 33% disagreed and 44% expressed neutrality. The mean average for this item across both rounds was 2.92 and 2.67.

Dimension G (see Table 7) was related to teachers' use of varied activities. Item 7 "An effective teacher changes the types of activities often" recorded a mean average of 3.85 and 4.33 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively, with almost 67% agreeing with the item and 25% being neutral in the first round. In Round 2, 88% of respondents indicated some form of agreement, while all other participants were neutral. Mean averages for Item 28 "An effective teacher repeats the same types of activities over and over" were 2.54 and 1.94 across both rounds. In Round 1, only 21% of participants expressed agreement with the item, while 23% were neutral and around 56% disagreed. For Round 2, only 12% agreed with the item and 77% disagreed. The final item from Dimension G – Item 39 "An effective teacher uses a wide variety of learning material throughout the course" – received a mean average of 3.85 in Round 1 and 4.28 in Round 2. Here, 73% of respondents expressed agreement with the item in the first round, while only 15% were neutral and 12% disagreed. In Round 2, the level of agreement fell to 33%, with 28% being neutral and 39% disagreeing.

Table 8 features items associated with Dimension H, which was concerned with teachers' punctuality. The first item from the dimension, Item 8 "An effective teacher starts teaching sessions on time", received a mean average of 4.40 and 4.39 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively. Respondents indicated an 89% level of agreement with the item in both Rounds 1 and 2. The next item was Item 11 "An effective teacher covers all material on exams in the classroom". The mean average for Round 1 for this item was 3.75 and 3.44 for Round 2. Around 65% of participants agreed with this item in Round 1, with 23% being neutral. However, in Round 2, only 44% expressed agreement with the item while 50% were neutral. The third item associated with Dimension H, Item 32 "An effective teacher begins class exactly when planned", recorded a mean average of 3.08 and 2.78 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively. Only 42% of respondents agreed with this item in the first round, while 31% were neutral and 27% disagreed. In Round 2, the level of agreement fell to 23%, while 39% disagreed and 39% were neutral.

**Table 6** Dimension F – teacher’s approachability/empathy (Items 6, 26 and 33)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty											
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA		A		N		D		SD			
							R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2		
<b>6</b>	4.29	4.00	0.71	0.91	48	18	44%	28%	42%	56%	15%	6%	0%	11%	0%	0%		
							n = 21	n = 5	n = 20	n = 10	n = 7	n = 1	n = 0	n = 2	n = 0	n = 0		
<b>26</b>	3.63	3.89	0.94	0.68	48	18	10%	17%	58%	56%	19%	28%	8%	0%	4%	0%		
							n = 5	n = 3	n = 28	n = 10	n = 9	n = 5	n = 4	n = 0	n = 2	n = 0		
<b>33</b>	2.92	2.67	1.18	1.08	48	18	10%	0%	23%	22%	25%	44%	31%	11%	10%	22%		
							n = 5	n = 0	n = 11	n = 4	n = 12	n = 8	n = 15	n = 2	n = 5	n = 4		

*Item 6:* An effective teacher shows enthusiasm for the English language  
*Item 26:* An effective teacher shares their opinion of the English-speaking world and English  
*Item 33:* An effective teacher expresses no personal opinion of the English language



**Table 7** Dimension G – teachers’ use of varied activities in class (Items 7, 28 and 39)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty																	
	R1		R2		R1		R2		SA			A			N			D			SD			
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2
7	3.85	4.33	0.92	0.69	48	18	27%	44%	40%	44%	25%	11%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
28	2.54	1.94	1.29	1.16	48	18	13%	6%	8%	6%	23%	11%	33%	23%	33%	23%	33%	23%	33%	23%	33%	23%	33%	44%
39	3.85	4.28	1.13	0.89	48	18	31%	22%	42%	11%	15%	28%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	17%
							n = 15	n = 4	n = 20	n = 2	n = 7	n = 5	n = 3	n = 4	n = 3	n = 3	n = 3	n = 3	n = 3	n = 3	n = 3	n = 3	n = 3	n = 3

Item 7: An effective teacher changes the types of activities often

Item 28: An effective teacher repeats the same types of activities over and over

Item 39: An effective teacher uses a wide variety of learning material throughout the course

**Table 8** Dimension H – teachers’ punctuality (Items 8, 11 and 32)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty																
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA			A			N			D			SD				
							R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	
8	4.40	4.39	0.79	0.70	48	18	54%	50%	35%	39%	6%	11%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
							n = 26	n = 9	n = 17	n = 7	n = 3	n = 2	n = 2	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0
11	3.75	3.44	0.96	0.86	48	18	23%	11%	42%	33%	23%	50%	13%	11%	11%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
							n = 11	n = 2	n = 20	n = 6	n = 11	n = 9	n = 6	n = 2	n = 2	n = 2	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0
32	3.08	2.78	1.07	1.06	48	18	4%	6%	38%	17%	31%	39%	17%	28%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%
							n = 2	n = 1	n = 18	n = 3	n = 15	n = 7	n = 8	n = 5	n = 5	n = 5	n = 5	n = 5	n = 5	n = 5	n = 5	n = 5	n = 2

Item 8: An effective teacher starts teaching sessions on time  
 Item 11: An effective teacher covers all material on exams in the classroom  
 Item 32: An effective teacher begins class exactly when planned

Dimension I was related to teachers' focus on assessment rules and criteria (see Table 9). Item 9 "An effective teacher provides clear assessment outlines and rules about that assessment" received a mean average in Round 1 of 4.10 with this being 4.00 in Round 2. In the first round, 83% of participants agreed with the item, while only 15% were neutral. In Round 2, 72% of respondents indicated agreement with the item, while the remainder were neutral. The next item from the dimension – Item 34 "An effective teacher explains exams and assignment rules criteria" – received mean averages across both rounds of 4.21 and 4.33, respectively. Around 88% of participants agreed with this item in the first round, while only 8% were neutral. In the second round, 88% of respondents expressed agreement, with the remainder being neutral. Item 45 "An effective teacher spends no time on explaining rules, exams, and assignments" received a mean average of 2.02 in Round 1 and 1.89 in Round 2. About 73% of respondents disagreed with this item, with only 17% agreeing and 10% being neutral. In Round 2, 77% of participants disagreed with the item and 11% were both neutral and expressed disagreement.

Table 10 features items associated with Dimension J which relates to the teacher's use of memorisation-based activities. Item 10 "An effective teacher gives lists of words and sentences for memorization" received a mean average of 4.02 and 4.28 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively. In the first round, 77% of respondents expressed some form of agreement with the item, with only 17% being neutral. A similar trend was noted in the second round, with 94% of participants agreeing and the remaining 6% being neutral. Around 51% of respondents disagreed with the next statement in the first round, Item 38 "An effective teacher gives poems or stories to be learnt by heart", while 31% agreed and 35% expressed neutrality. In the next round, 50% of participants disagreed, 22% agreed and the remaining 28% were neutral. This item received a mean average of 2.92 in the first round and 2.61 in the second. The final item from this dimension was Item 42 "An effective teacher lets students chose the language issues that are learnt". This item recorded a mean average of 3.33 and 3.11 across both rounds. In Round 1, 48% of participants expressed some form of agreement with the item, with 33% being neutral and around 19% disagreeing. In Round 2, 34% of respondents agreed with Item 42, while 44% were neutral and 23% disagreed.

Table 11 features items from Dimension K with items concerning teaching to the exam. Item 11 "An effective teacher covers all material on exams in the classroom" received a mean average of 3.75 and 3.44 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively. In the first round, 65% of respondents agreed with the item and 23% were neutral. In the second round, only 44% of participants agreed, while 50% neither agreed nor disagreed. Item 29 "An effective teacher includes questions based on work done outside of the class" received a mean average of 3.23 in the first round and 3.17 in the second. In Round 1, 52% of participants agreed with the item, with 23% being neutral and 26% disagreeing. In the next round, agreement with the item was expressed by 39% of participants, with 44% being neutral and only 17% disagreeing. The third item associated with Dimension K was Item 40 "An effective teacher covers main ideas but examines material also not covered in class". This item recorded a mean average of 3.58 in Round 1 and 3.00 in Round 2. Here, 60% of participants expressed

**Table 9** Dimension I – teacher’s focus on assessment rules/criteria (Items 9, 34 and 45)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty																				
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA				A				N				D				SD				
							R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	
9	4.10	4.00	0.72	0.77	48	18	29%	28%	28%	54%	44%	15%	28%	2%	28%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
34	4.21	4.33	0.85	0.69	48	18	48%	44%	40%	40%	44%	8%	11%	2%	11%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
45	2.02	1.89	1.16	1.02	48	18	2%	0%	15%	11%	10%	10%	11%	29%	33%	44%	44%	21%	21%	21%	21%	21%	21%	21%	21%	21%	21%

Item 9: An effective teacher provides clear assessment outlines and rules about that assessment

Item 34: An effective teacher explains exams and assignment rules criteria

Item 45: An effective teacher spends no time on explaining rules, exams, and assignments

**Table 10** Dimension J – teacher’s use of memorisation-based activities (Items 10, 38 and 42)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty										
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA		A		N		D		SD		
							R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	
<b>10</b>	4.02	4.28	1.00	0.57	48	18	35%	33%	42%	61%	17%	6%	4%	4%	4%	0%	0%
							n = 17	n = 6	n = 20	n = 11	n = 8	n = 1	n = 1	n = 0	n = 2	n = 0	n = 0
<b>38</b>	2.92	2.61	1.22	1.29	48	18	10%	11%	21%	11%	35%	28%	17%	28%	17%	22%	22%
							n = 5	n = 2	n = 10	n = 2	n = 17	n = 5	n = 8	n = 5	n = 8	n = 4	n = 4
<b>42</b>	3.33	3.11	1.19	0.96	48	18	15%	6%	33%	28%	33%	44%	6%	17%	13%	6%	6%
							n = 7	n = 1	n = 16	n = 5	n = 16	n = 8	n = 8	n = 3	n = 6	n = 1	n = 1

*Item 10:* An effective teacher gives lists of words and sentences for memorisation

*Item 38:* An effective teacher gives poems or stories to be learnt by heart

*Item 42:* An effective teacher lets students chose the language issues that are learnt

**Table 11** Dimension K – teachers’ approach to teaching to exam (Items 11, 29 and 40)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty																
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA			A			N			D			SD				
							R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	
<b>11</b>	3.75	3.44	0.96	0.86	48	18	23%	11%	42%	33%	23%	50%	13%	11%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
							n = 11	n = 2	n = 20	n = 6	n = 11	n = 9	n = 6	n = 2	n = 6	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0
<b>29</b>	3.23	3.17	1.17	0.86	48	18	8%	0%	44%	39%	23%	44%	13%	11%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%
							n = 4	n = 0	n = 21	n = 7	n = 11	n = 8	n = 6	n = 4	n = 6	n = 1	n = 1	n = 1	n = 1	n = 1	n = 1	n = 1	n = 1
<b>40</b>	3.58	3.00	1.22	1.41	48	18	25%	22%	35%	11%	21%	28%	10%	22%	8%	17%	8%	8%	8%	8%	8%	8%	8%
							n = 12	n = 4	n = 17	n = 2	n = 10	n = 5	n = 4	n = 4	n = 5	n = 3	n = 4	n = 4	n = 4	n = 4	n = 4	n = 4	n = 3

*Item 11:* An effective teacher covers all material on exams in the classroom

*Item 29:* An effective teacher includes questions based on work done outside of the class

*Item 40:* An effective teacher covers main ideas but examines material also not covered in class

agreement with the item, while 21% were neutral and 18% disagreed in the first round. In the second round, 33% of participants agreed, 39% disagreed and 28% were neutral.

The next questionnaire dimension was Dimension L which is related to teachers' awarding pass grades to students who perform poorly (see Table 12). Item 12 "An effective teacher fails students who perform poorly" received a mean average of 3.50 and 3.33 across both rounds, with only 12% disagreeing, 44% agreeing and the remaining participants being neutral in Round 1. In Round 2, 11% disagreed, 39% agreed and 50% were neutral. Item 41 "An effective teacher gives extra marks to help students having difficulty with English" received a mean average of 3.10 in Round 1 and 3.00 in Round 2. In the first round, 40% of participants agreed with the item, while 31% were neutral and only 30% disagreed. In the second round, 34% of participants expressed agreement with this item, 34% disagreed and the remaining 33% were neutral. The final item from this dimension was Item 43, "An effective teacher very rarely fails students who try", which received a mean average of 3.02 and 3.06 across rounds. In the first round, 38% of participants expressed agreement with the item, with 31% being neutral and around 32% disagreeing. In Round 2, most participants (44%) were neutral in response to this item, while 34% agreed and 22% were neutral.

Table 13 features items associated with Dimension M, which is related to the teachers' use of set readings beyond the classroom. Item 13 "An effective teacher minimizes reading to only that which is necessary to pass the course" recorded a mean average of 3.69 in Round 1 and 3.61 in Round 2. Here, 71% of participants agreed with the item, while 15% were neutral and 14% disagreed in the first round. In the second round, 62% still agreed with this item, while 33% were neutral and 6% disagreed. Item 17 "An effective teacher sets many reading tasks outside the class" received a mean average of 3.46 and 4.11 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively. Around 55% of participants agreed with the item in the first round, while 31% were neutral and 14% disagreed. In Round 2, the level of agreement with this item increased to 78%, with only 6% disagreeing and the remaining 17% being neutral. The final item from this dimension was Item 30 "An effective teacher encourages students to read in English about topics of interest". This item recorded a mean average of 3.98 and 4.22 across both rounds. In Round 1, 70% of participants expressed some form of agreement with the item, while 23% were neutral. In the second round, participant levels of agreement with this item again increased to 83%, with the remaining 17% expressing neutrality.

Dimension N (see Table 14) is concerned with teachers' similarity to high school English teachers in Oman. The first item from this dimension was Item 25 "An effective teacher is like my teacher for English in high school for *tanawaiya*". *Tanawaiya* is the national Omani university entrance test sat by high school students in their final year. This item received a mean average of 2.50 in Round 1 and 2.44 in Round 2. In the first round, only 21% of participants agreed with this item, while 23% were neutral and 56% disagreed. In the second round, 34% of respondents agreed while 61% disagreed. Item 31 "An effective teacher uses the same methods used in Omani high schools to teach English" received a mean average of 2.52 and

**Table 12** Dimension L – teacher’s approach to pass/fail (Items 12, 41 and 43)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty																			
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA			A			N			D			SD							
							R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2				
<b>12</b>	3.50	3.33	1.01	0.77	48	18	21%	6%	23%	33%	44%	50%	10%	11%	2%	0%	n = 10	n = 1	n = 11	n = 6	n = 21	n = 9	n = 5	n = 2	n = 1	n = 0
<b>41</b>	3.10	3.00	1.31	1.03	48	18	17%	6%	23%	28%	31%	33%	13%	28%	17%	6%	n = 8	n = 1	n = 11	n = 5	n = 15	n = 6	n = 6	n = 5	n = 8	n = 1
<b>43</b>	3.02	3.06	1.31	1.06	48	18	15%	6%	23%	28%	31%	44%	13%	11%	19%	11%	n = 7	n = 1	n = 11	n = 5	n = 15	n = 8	n = 6	n = 2	n = 9	n = 2

*Item 12:* An effective teacher fails students who perform poorly

*Item 41:* An effective teacher gives extra marks to help students having difficulty with English

*Item 43:* An effective teacher very rarely fails students who try



**Table 13** Dimension M – teacher’s use of set reading beyond the classroom (Items 13, 17 and 30)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty									
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA		A		N		D		SD	
					R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2
<b>13</b>	3.69	3.61	1.01	0.70	48	18	17%	6%	54%	56%	15%	33%	10%	6%	4%	0%
							n = 8	n = 1	n = 26	n = 10	n = 7	n = 6	n = 5	n = 1	n = 2	n = 0
<b>17</b>	3.46	4.11	1.03	0.90	48	18	13%	39%	42%	39%	31%	17%	8%	6%	0%	0%
							n = 6	n = 7	n = 20	n = 7	n = 15	n = 3	n = 4	n = 1	n = 3	n = 0
<b>30</b>	3.98	4.22	0.98	0.73	48	18	35%	39%	35%	44%	23%	17%	4%	0%	2%	0%
							n = 17	n = 7	n = 17	n = 8	n = 11	n = 3	n = 2	n = 0	n = 1	n = 0

*Item 13:* An effective teacher minimises reading to only that which is necessary to pass the course

*Item 17:* An effective teacher sets many reading tasks outside the class

*Item 30:* An effective teacher encourages students to read in English about topics of interest

**Table 14** Dimension N – teachers’ similarity to high school English teachers in Oman (Items 25, 31 and 37)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty									
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA		A		N		D		SD	
					R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2
<b>25</b>	2.50	2.44	1.17	1.38	48	18	6%	6%	15%	28%	23%	6%	35%	28%	21%	33%
							n = 3	n = 1	n = 7	n = 5	n = 11	n = 1	n = 17	n = 5	n = 10	n = 6
<b>31</b>	2.52	2.28	1.22	1.13	48	18	6%	0%	13%	17%	38%	28%	15%	22%	29%	33%
							n = 3	n = 0	n = 6	n = 3	n = 18	n = 5	n = 7	n = 4	n = 14	n = 6
<b>37</b>	3.56	4.00	1.32	1.19	48	18	31%	50%	27%	11%	17%	33%	17%	0%	8%	6%
							n = 15	n = 9	n = 13	n = 2	n = 8	n = 6	n = 8	n = 0	n = 4	n = 1

*Item 25:* An effective teacher is like my teacher for English in high school for *tanawaiya*  
*Item 31:* An effective teacher uses the same methods used in Omani high schools to teach English  
*Item 37:* An effective teacher is different from my teacher for English in high school

2.28 across both rounds. In Round 1, only 19% of participants expressed some form of agreement, with 38% being neutral and 44% disagreeing. In the next round, only 17% of participants agreed, while 55% disagreed. The final item from Dimension N was Item 37 “An effective teacher is different from my teacher for English in high school”. This item received a mean average of 3.56 and 4.00 across rounds. In Round 1, 58% of participants agreed with the item, with only 17% being neutral and around 25% disagreeing. In Round 2, 61% of participants agreed with 33% being neutral and only 6% disagreeing.

Table 15 features items from the final questionnaire dimension which was related to teacher mixing of genders in the classroom. Item 19 “An effective teacher sometimes mixes male and female students together in groups” received a mean average of 2.83 and 3.22 in Rounds 1 and 2, respectively. In the first round, almost 42% of participants agreed with this item, while 44% disagreed and 15% were neutral. In the next round, 44% of participants agreed with the item, while 28% disagreed and a further 28% were neutral. Item 36 “An effective teacher always separates boys from the girls in class” recorded a mean average of 2.90 in Round 1 and 2.28 in Round 2. In Round 1, 30% of participants agreed with this item, while 33% were neutral and 38% disagreed. In the second round, only 12% of participants expressed some form of agreement with the item, with 28% being neutral and 61% disagreeing. The third item associated with Dimension I is Item 44 “An effective teacher never mixes the girls and boys in activities together”. The mean average received for this item was 2.77 in Round 1 and 2.18 in Round 2. In the first round, only 30% of participants agreed with the item, while 26% were neutral and around 45% disagreed. In Round 2, only 6% agreed, 47% were neutral and 47% disagreed.

## 5 Discussion

The above results help contribute student voices to research on university attrition in the Sultanate of Oman. Participants who had discontinued their studies reported a numbers of factors which attracted them away from their English-medium studies at the research site. These pull factors included gaining employment and relocating to study in other higher education institutions, with this often being associated with the desire to be closer to their family homes or to get married. Competing commitments to work and family were also found to contribute to attrition in the United Kingdom (Trotter & Roberts, 2006) and Australia (Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009; Willans & Seary, 2018). It was of note here that the majority of students who left due to these pull factors expressed no explicit dissatisfaction with their studies. In addition, a number of important fallout factors were also identified. For instance, while a minority of students left their studies after deciding that university was not right for them at that point in their life, a number of students explicitly expressed dissatisfaction with such areas as the use of English in teaching/learning, teaching styles, assessment practice and institutional policy.

**Table 15** Dimension O – teacher mixing of genders (Items 19, 36 and 44)

Item no.	Mean rate		Standard deviation		Sample size		Level of difficulty														
	R1	R2	R1	R2	R1	R2	SA			A			N			D			SD		
							R1	R2	n	R1	R2	n	R1	R2	n	R1	R2	n	R1	R2	n
<b>19</b>	2.83	3.22	1.48	1.40	48	18	15%	22%	27%	22%	22%	15%	28%	15%	15%	28%	11%	29%	17%		
							n = 7	n = 4	n = 13	n = 4	n = 7	n = 5	n = 2	n = 7	n = 5	n = 2	n = 2	n = 14	n = 3		
<b>36</b>	2.90	2.28	1.22	1.13	48	18	13%	6%	17%	6%	33%	28%	33%	23%	28%	33%	15%	28%	28%		
							n = 6	n = 1	n = 8	n = 1	n = 16	n = 5	n = 6	n = 11	n = 5	n = 6	n = 6	n = 7	n = 5		
<b>44</b>	2.77	2.18	1.22	1.07	47	17	9%	0%	21%	6%	26%	47%	6%	28%	47%	6%	17%	41%	41%		
							n = 4	n = 0	n = 10	n = 1	n = 12	n = 8	n = 1	n = 13	n = 8	n = 1	n = 8	n = 7	n = 7		

*Item 19:* An effective teacher sometimes mixes male and female students together in groups

*Item 36:* An effective teacher always separates boys from the girls in class

*Item 44:* An effective teacher never mixes the girls and boys in activities together

More specifically, students who dropped out often expressed frustration at learning through the medium of English and with the requirement to be assessed through English. This resonates with research undertaken in the region showing that students with lower levels of proficiency (particularly with insufficient vocabulary knowledge, reading and writing skills) are likely to be at risk of failure at university (Harrington & Roche, 2014; Roche & Harrington, 2013). Furthermore, they felt the teachers' rigorous assessment practices, including the provision to fail students, were at odds with their academic progress. For the students interviewed here after discontinuing their studies at the research site, the use of English combined with an approach to teaching which they often characterised as too great a departure from Omani high school teaching practice, was repeatedly identified as disheartening and confusing. This subsequently created a learning context in which these participants felt they were unable to achieve academically. This suggests that more must be done to address the difference between teacher-led high school learning and the more independent, critical approach to learning required at university. Embedding more explicit information on the culture of learning and institutional policy at university in the students' first language, Arabic, may be one way to address this gap.

In addition to these findings, results here also suggest that there is a relationship between students' expressed beliefs and expectations about English-medium university learning contexts and their attrition. A number of students' expressed beliefs in this regard were uncontroversial and in keeping with existing research dealing with EAL student beliefs in universities in the Arab world. These include students' beliefs in the importance of memorisation (Farquharson, 1989) and a desire to see classroom language learning related to real-world issues (Al-Busaidi, 2003). Some of the participants in this study, for example, noted that, though English was the medium of instruction, they felt they were not developing English for professional (i.e. real-world) contexts. Similar findings on the (workplace) relevance of the language taught in English-medium universities in Oman have been raised elsewhere (see Al-Mahrooqi, Tuzlukova, & Denman, 2016).

As with previous research at this institution (Roche et al., 2015), a high number of students surveyed felt that university staff should teach using methods employed in Omani high school classrooms. This was nowhere more evident than with students who dropped out of their programs. It is of note that research exploring Omani high school students' and Omani high school teachers' beliefs about the characteristics of a good EFL teacher are principally shared by those groups, even though they may differ in the extent to which those beliefs are held (see Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, Al-Siyabi, & Al-Maamari, 2015). This shared system of beliefs seems to end with the transition to university, where a different culture of teaching and learning is operationalised. This difference exists, despite the fact that comparable rates of Omani (40%) to non-Omani (60%) staffing exist in both sectors (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012) and are played out in a concrete manner through the execution of institutional policy in teaching and learning practice. This once again points to the importance of raising the students' awareness of the culture of learning in contemporary higher education, which puts a premium on independent learning and critical thinking rather than memorisation.

Despite attempts by the Omani Ministry of Education to reform school education in the country through initiatives such as the Basic Education Curriculum which promotes the use of student-centred, communication-focused language learning activities and independently oriented project work supported by a variety of media, recent research indicates that some Omani English language high school classrooms are still characterised by rote memorisation, teaching towards exams and limited opportunities to produce spoken or written English (see Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2017). Students who believe in the efficacy of such methods are likely to experience failure in task-based, problem-solving-focused university learning contexts and classrooms where English is used as a medium to communicate rather than a system of rules to be studied. In addition, participant beliefs, expressed by around half of the sample, that male and female students should be separated in university classrooms in ways that follow gender-segregated high school education, may here contribute to dissatisfaction and disillusionment with institutional culture and ultimately their withdrawal.

One interview question asked of participants who had discontinued their studies about their beliefs about the role of assessment in university programs. Related to the issue of assessment criteria are beliefs about pass/fail practices. We found that more participants believe teachers should pass learners who perform poorly than those who do not. Only around one-third of questionnaire participants believe that students who receive poor scores on their assessments should be awarded fail grades; while around a quarter of respondents disagreed that poor achievement should be reflected in low grades. In fact, in response to an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire, a number of respondents expressed similar sentiments in statements such as “The pass mark should go down to 40%”. Some comments by students indicate the belief may echo previous educational experiences where some students relied on the kindness of teachers to help them negotiate the secondary educational system and where fail grades are rarely awarded. In this regard, the findings of this study highlight Omani students’ lack of awareness of how assessment functions in university programs and point towards a lack of understanding of institutional culture and policy on assessment which could result in their decisions to drop out of their studies.

There are limitations that restrict the external validity of the results presented here. Barcelos (2003) points out that survey questions are always at risk of being too vague or difficult for respondents to understand. Despite efforts taken to make questions intelligible and the use of respondents’ L1, some questions may not have been worded clearly enough for students. Dörnyei and Csizér (2012, p. 86) encourage SLA researchers to produce generalisable findings and encourage them to extend interpretations to a general population if there are reasons to assume that the results apply. While there is a reason to believe the results here are indicative of student populations at ELF higher education programs in Oman, we acknowledge a cluster sampling technique of existing classes was used, meaning that respondents were not randomly sampled. However, we can infer that similar responses are likely to be found across similar-aged cohorts in university foundation programs in Oman. Though the authors also suspect that similar findings might be found in foundation programs in neighbouring Gulf States due to the comparable educational histories

and broader cultural similarities, in order to draw conclusions about student perceptions of effective practice in EFL universities in other Gulf countries and their links with attrition rates, more research is necessary.

We are not arguing that belief alone is responsible for attrition, but that, as previous research has indicated, belief is linked to behaviour and, ultimately, attrition is a kind of modified behaviour which will have the biggest impact on the way educational planning can be undertaken in any state as it affects the allocation of resources to the sector concerned. Based on our findings, we suggest that all university foundation programs in the Sultanate of Oman include an orientation program that explicitly draws newly enrolled students' attention to differences between high school and university classrooms, particularly in relation to assessment (the use of criteria-based assessment and pass/fail policies), classroom practice (that students will be required to actively participate, i.e. produce spoken and written English rather than memorise passages) and expectations of students outside the classroom (e.g. that they will be expected to read material outside of class). Such orientations are common in university programs in countries such as Australia, where newly enrolled students from foreign countries joining foundation programs are required to not only attend orientation sessions but also to sign and acknowledge student agreements that they have been made aware of the program's assessment, attendance and participation policies.

Such a formalised induction may be a first step to addressing Omani students' poor performance in university classrooms and resultant decision to drop out of the education system, at times, by helping at risk students develop an explicit understanding of the differences between high school and university English classrooms. Beliefs are unlikely to change through one orientation session, and this message must repeatedly be given explicitly to students throughout their foundation studies. As Littlejohn, Beetham and McGill (2012, p. 550) write, academic practices involved in the culture of higher education are acquired through "continued development and refinement in different contexts, not through one off instruction". How foundation programs embed this focus on the culture of university in their teaching is an issue which requires its own exploration, though it is clear many of the students who dropped out of their studies seemed to not be well prepared for their studies or the expectations of the programs they were enrolled in.

Though this study identifies students' beliefs and the institutional role in better preparing learners for contemporary university contexts, we also recommend that incoming academic staff are prepared for the exigencies of the Omani higher education classroom. We also recommend that incoming expatriate teachers are made aware of the prevailing belief systems of Omani students. This research could serve as a partial basis for that induction, helping those teachers develop an informed understanding of which aspects of current university classroom practice Omani students are likely to lack an understanding of (e.g. need reading outside the classroom, focusing on assessing criteria sheets, the absence of memorisation, etc.). When academics have then developed an awareness of Omani students' belief systems, they will be able to reiterate points covered in the orientation throughout the semester, making explicit those beliefs which underpin university practice in their classrooms affecting the rate of attrition in a positive manner in the long run.

## 6 Conclusion

As ELF university enrolments increase across Asia and, in particular, the Arab Gulf States, institutions are likely to face larger numbers of students discontinuing their studies before graduation and need to find ways of addressing the issue of attrition. To increase student retention rates and improve the performance and progression rates of students, it is essential that we develop a context-sensitive understanding of the push, pull and fallout factors contributing to attrition at our institutions. This study represents one such undertaking. Pull factors were found to include employment opportunities, moving closer to family and marriage. These factors sit externally to the university, and are difficult if not impossible for institutions to impact upon. The next most commonly cited reason for why students failed to progress to their next level of study was a fallout factor best described as a mismatch between students' expectations of educational practice and how it operationalised in classroom practice and institutional policy. It is in dealing with this factor, that we believe institutions are most likely to be able to address attrition rates.

Studies in various settings have shown that students' beliefs about effective education are influenced by a range of factors, such as proficiency level (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Hu & Tian, 2012; Trinder, 2013), the nature of the program (e.g. business English vs. general English) (Trinder, 2013), cultural context (Daif-Allah, 2012) and gender (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Siebert, 2003). This research has contributed to our knowledge of the relationship between belief and performance with Omani students in an ELF university setting. We have argued in this paper that not only do many Omani high school graduates have a limited understanding of the expectations of the higher education system but that the beliefs they hold are counter-productive and responsible to some degree for attrition in their foundation programs. This claim could be further explored by tracking students' beliefs and performance over time, an endeavour which the research team is now undertaking.

The results of this study suggest that university students' limited understanding of university classroom practice (learning and assessment strategies required) should be explicitly addressed with some urgency. A formal orientation program and explicit focus on these issues as described above could form the first step in addressing this issue. Further studies would need to be conducted to gauge the impact and effectiveness of any such undertakings. Through our interviews with former students, it was also apparent that institutions play an important role in retaining students who develop an understanding of the difference in their own belief systems regarding effective teaching.

As one of the most important links in the different dimensions of belief explored in the study, teachers also need to be made aware of the importance of repeatedly articulating the policies and requirements of their institution's university program, making its goals transparent to their students. As Phipps and Borg (2009) and Woods and Çakir (2011) have argued, teachers should strive to provide learning experiences which can help shape students' beliefs about effective language learning. In taking the steps outlined above, university programs can greatly facilitate students'



development of university required language skills and importantly academic literacy practices, thereby improving their classroom performance on route to study in ELF university programs. This research claims that learners' beliefs about effective teaching may be one of the major factors that influence their decision to remain or leave a program.

The present study addresses the causes of ELF university program attrition from a student perspective. Our findings, however, are limited by our response sample. A number of students who withdrew from the university did not respond to calls, emails or other attempts to interview them to find out why they left their program of studies. Without their feedback, it is still possible that other push, pull or fallout factors have played a role in student attrition that we have failed to capture here. The absence of clearly articulated push factors reported here does not mirror research on high school attrition in the USA, and, as such, it is conceivable that unidentified push factors are playing a role. This issue remains to be explored in future research.

It is also of note that our findings are based on data collected at one private regional university in the Sultanate of Oman at the time of the study. While the socio-economic similarities of the individuals surveyed here as compared to students at other higher education institutions across the sultanate and, more broadly, to other students enrolled in ELF university programs across the Arab Gulf States may be numerous, further longitudinal research on attrition in those institutions would develop a more fine-grained and locally relevant understanding of attrition and retention in those programs. This remains an issue for further research and subsequent action for those institutions as they work to improve the educational outcomes of their students.

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# Readiness for Autonomy Among EFL Students in Oman



Gladson Chikwa, Tareq Al-Damen, and Priya Mathew

**Abstract** There is an overwhelming consensus in Omani English language tertiary settings about the importance of developing autonomous learners. This chapter discusses findings from a small-scale study conducted in Oman that explored the extent to which EFL students on a foundation program in a private university college were inclined toward learner autonomy. Student preferences were elicited by the use of a questionnaire administered to a self-selected sample of 173 students currently enrolled in the university college's English foundation program. Descriptive analysis focusing on frequency counts and item means were used to analyze the data. Results indicate that the majority of participants rely excessively on their teachers in the language learning process and that, as a result, they display low levels of autonomy and little inclination toward developing as autonomous learners. The reasons for this situation within Oman are explored before ways in which greater autonomy can be encouraged in learners are explored.

**Keywords** Learner autonomy · Autonomous language learning · English as a Foreign Language (EFL) · Foundation program

## 1 Introduction: English Language Learning – Are Students Autonomous Learners?

Currently, higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman use English as the medium of instruction for a number of courses including engineering, medical sciences, and business studies (Al-Issa, 2002). In an effort to prepare students for higher

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education, basic education schools teach English as a compulsory subject to pupils aged between 7 and 16. After basic education, most students are required to undertake English studies in their tertiary institutions' foundation programs before enrolling in their undergraduate studies. The English language component of these foundation programs provides an opportunity for students to enhance the English skills they need in their undergraduate studies (Al-Husseini, 2004). Kobeil (2005) states that English foundation programs in Oman are important for various reasons, including increasing students' chances of getting a job in international organizations, facilitating travel to English-speaking countries, and improving prospects of pursuing postgraduate studies. To this list, Al-Jamoussi and Al-Bedwawi (2005) add that foundation programs develop students' English language linguistic abilities – a necessity in a country where English is the dominant language of higher education and a sought-after skill in the job market. However, despite the language's importance and the amount of resources devoted to teaching it, it is widely accepted among the teaching community that, in many cases, students lack intrinsic motivation to learn English and this results in the limited development of English language proficiency (Al-Husseini, 2004).

Several studies conducted in Oman have reported that most Omani students seek to learn the language through memorization with the sole intent of passing their English exams (Al-Balushi, 1999; Al-Issa, 2002). These findings are backed by anecdotal evidence, with the authors of this paper observing that the majority of students in our college do not have an adequate understanding of the English language when they embark on undergraduate studies despite the fact that they have graduated from their foundation level studies. While memorization may help these students pass their English foundation exams, surely this could not be considered an appropriate approach to language learning if students are to make tangible contributions to the society in which they live and work. In fact, almost 30 years ago, Nunan, Tyacke, and Walton (1987) highlighted the importance of English for Oman and Omanis in the following way: “The English language skills of the Omani nationals must be seen as an important resource for the country's continued development... a means for wider communication with the international community” (p. 2). If anything, the centrality of English to almost all domains of academic and professional life in Oman has been fortified since Nunan et al.'s quote, although many language learners in the country continue to display low levels of interest in engaging with it. One way to help address this is through supporting the development of autonomous learners in the English language classroom.

As very little research has been conducted on learner autonomy in English language instruction in Oman, or, indeed, the greater Middle East region, this paper reports a study that sought to examine the preferences for learner autonomy among the EFL students on the English language foundation program of a private university college in Oman. One hundred and seventy-three student participants completed an online, Arabic language questionnaire that examined the extent to which they were inclined toward autonomous versus teacher-centered learning practices.

## 2 Literature Review and Background

### 2.1 *Autonomous Learning and Language Learning*

Scholarly work on learner autonomy in language learning has been a feature of the literature for decades. In 1981, Holec provided what has become a widely accepted definition of learner autonomy – “The ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). Trebbi (1996) claimed that it was this ability that was a prerequisite for successful learning to occur. This is a stance that has been supported by a number of scholars since, including Littlewood (1999) and Wang (2011).

The ability to learn autonomously has perhaps assumed an even more important role in the current era of continuous social and technological change. Sercu (2002) noted the relationship between change and knowledge by observing that “changes in working-life, new technology, internationalization and the complexity of environmental issues impose new demands on people’s knowledge and ways of working” (p. 65). There is, therefore, immense pressure on educational institutions to ensure that they produce graduates who are autonomous and capable of adapting and providing solutions to new social issues and challenges. In other words, there is a need to ensure that all graduates are able to think critically and be socially proactive and productive.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (1991) argue that students should develop the capacity to question and look for more than one way of solving problems. Similarly, Jarvis (2001) states that learners should be reflective and reflexive; that is, they should think and decide and be able to apply knowledge to manage challenges. Goodwin-Jones (2011) argues that technology can be considered one of the key enabling factors in learner autonomy by claiming that “The dramatic increase in online resources, network services and educational software, together provide new opportunities for self-directed learning” (p. 4).

The development of learner autonomy has attracted the attention of educators around the world. This can be witnessed in the increasing popularity of learner-centered pedagogies worldwide and in greater efforts to accommodate student diversity. In language education, many instructors agree that learner autonomy is important for students to develop proficiency (Benson & Voller, 1997; Little, 2004; Oxford, 1990). In addition to helping learners build their English language skills, focusing on learner autonomy is also associated with the development of critical and creative thinking skills, which are of great importance in the current era of large-scale social and economic change. This stance is encapsulated by Sercu’s (2002, p. 72) claim that “Current societal developments compel us to move away from a teacher-led learning approach”. Arguably, by moving away from teacher-centered approaches, efforts to develop learner autonomy can be enhanced, and this should be a priority not only in language learning but across all disciplines.

It is true that for education to remain relevant, it has to respond in a well-thought-out manner to new challenges and prepare individuals for their lives. Changes in the current labor market should be reflected in the choice of content and methods of

delivering that content and in the way educational institutions conduct their day-to-day business in partnership with other stakeholders. Employers have very clear expectations of the types of graduates they want to employ. Key graduate attributes include the ability to solve problems and make independent decisions, a commitment to lifelong learning, flexibility, and adaptability to new situations. These are attributes that are not necessarily developed by more traditional teacher-centered classrooms where learner autonomy is not considered as important as memorization and adherence to the rules. With this in mind, surely it cannot be business as usual; educational institutions need to help address society's emerging challenges, and one of the best ways in which they can do this is through ensuring their graduates develop those skills demanded by the workforce – including autonomy and an interest in lifelong learning.

A number of factors impact upon learner autonomy, with these being associated with cognitive, social, and psychological elements. For example, autonomy, or “feeling free and volitional in one's actions” (Deci, 1995, p. 2), can be conceived of as an important human need. As such, learner autonomy is linked with an individual's motivation to learn, with this connection obviously having a number of important pedagogical implications. Students are motivated by being given the opportunity to plan and come up with individual decisions regarding their own learning. Little (2004) maintains that students can further develop their intrinsic motivation if they are allowed the opportunity to manage their own learning in line with personal goals. This relationship between learner autonomy and motivation contributes to an interesting question: What should we prioritize, the development of motivation or learner autonomy? This is like a chicken and egg scenario, and different views naturally exist (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002). Lamb (2007) discusses two ways of interpreting autonomous learning:

Management and self-regulation of one's learning

The psychological need to experience behavior as self-determined

If learner autonomy is considered in terms of management and self-regulation of one's learning, then motivation becomes a prerequisite. Students can engage in meta-cognitive activities when they are well motivated. On the other hand, it can be argued that the psychological condition of personal agency is vital for someone to be truly motivated. Little (2007) adds that, for autonomous language learning to occur, it is important to create conditions for learners to engage, reflect, and make use of the target language.

Kumaravadivelu (2003) highlighted two views of learner autonomy regarding its aims and objectives – the narrow and the broad view. Essentially, the narrow view of learner autonomy focuses on preparing students to identify tools and strategies to use in order to achieve their goals. The broad view of learner autonomy emphasizes language learning as a means of encouraging learners to be free to make their own informed and independent decisions.



Another way in which learner autonomy can be understood is by examining what it is not. Authors such as Wang (2011) and Kumaravadivelu (2003) claim that learner autonomy is not:

Synonymous with independence. Students still need to work as part of a team in partnership with their peers and teachers without forgetting the important role of parents.

Context-free. In real-life situations, the practice of autonomous learning is influenced by the biological, psychological, and social characteristics of the learner.

Holec and Huttunen (1997) suggest that learning opportunities should be designed in ways that promote reflection and the ability to conduct self-evaluation and peer evaluation, including the ability to work collaboratively. A similar view was offered by Jarvis (2001) who stated that learners must be critical thinkers who can use information to make important decisions in their learning journey – also an important attribute that employers seek as discussed above. Real-life situations require learners to be open-minded and to explore different ways of solving problems. Language learning should, therefore, provide opportunities for learners to become autonomous.

Teacher autonomy plays a pivotal role in the development of autonomous learners. Karlsson, Kjisik, and Nordlund (2007) emphasize the importance of having autonomous teachers by arguing that if students are provided with opportunities to actively engage in their own process of learning, they can easily appreciate the application of their learning experiences in real-life situations. They argue that:

A learner who has the capacity to engage in the process of learning where they are able to consider their own needs and objectives, select the way they prefer to learn, and reflect on and act upon the results and to foster a social community of autonomy can be said to be autonomous. (p. 47)

The journey toward developing learner autonomy is not an easy one. Karlsson et al. (2007) claim that “Most students have been used to teacher-centred methods throughout their learning lives, and the idea of planning and carrying out their own program is a novel one” (p. 54). This is certainly true of Oman, where teacher-centered, hierarchical classrooms have been a dominant feature of the educational landscape since the introduction of a formal education system in the country and despite continued efforts at reform.

### 3 Method

In our effort to understand the preferences for autonomy of the EFL students on a foundation program in a private university college in Oman, we conducted a small-scale study featuring a 31-item questionnaire about learner autonomy and teacher-centered practices. Participants were asked to respond to each item on a 5-point Likert-response scale with possible responses ranging from strongly disagree to



strongly agree and with a middle option of neutral. The questionnaire was administered in Arabic using Survey Monkey to all students enrolled in the English language component of the college's foundation program. On the program, foundation students are placed in different levels depending on the score they achieve in the placement test administered prior to enrolment. Students with the lowest marks are placed in level 1, average performers are placed in level 2, and the high performers are placed in level 3.

A total of 173 students, from the approximately 600 students enrolled in the English component of the foundation program during the year of the study, completed the questionnaire within the data collection period. Twenty-five percent of the participants were in level 1 at the time of the study, 45% in level 2 and 30% in level 3. The study did not seek to establish differences in preferences for autonomous learning among students placed in different levels, but rather sought to understand the general preferences of all foundation students in this regard. A significant majority of participants were female (61%), with male students only constituting 39% of the sample. The sample consisted of 98% Omani nationals with only 2% non-Omani nationals, which reflects the composition of the student population on the college's foundation program. Most participants (90%) were aged between 17 and 22, and only 10% were 23 years or older. This is a result of the fact that most foundation students at the college – and, indeed, countrywide – are high school graduates directly entering tertiary education. One hundred and sixty-five participants (95%) were enrolled at the college on a full-time basis, while only 5% of mostly mature-aged students studied part-time.

To help gauge student preferences in relation to autonomous learning, the questionnaire contained two main categories. The first included 12 items that sought to examine the extent to which students were in favor of teacher-centered learning. These items focused on learner dependence on teachers in the language learning process with items here based on such concepts as the teacher's role as a source of knowledge and the dominant figure in the language learning process. The second questionnaire category contained 19 items that were aimed at establishing the degree to which students were in favor of learning autonomously. These covered such concepts as student ability to take initiative in the learning process and to make decisions on the content and methodology to use in the learning process. To facilitate participant understanding of the questionnaire, all items were translated into Arabic. The data were analyzed descriptively using frequency counts and item means. The study was approved by the college's research ethics committee, and all participants were informed of its voluntary and anonymous nature.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Teacher-Centered Learning

Participant responses to the first questionnaire category concerning preferences for teacher-centered learning are contained in Table 1. As the table indicates, more than 50% of participants responded in ways that indicated overdependence on teachers

**Table 1** Preferences for teacher-centered learning

Item	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not sure (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Weighted average
1. I think that the teacher should explain all the learning material to us	22.54	8.09	3.47	30.06	35.84	3.49
2. I prefer teachers who adapt their teaching methods to our learning style	26.01	9.25	5.20	24.28	35.26	3.34
3. I like teachers who give us activities to do at home	10.98	28.90	28.90	23.70	7.51	2.88
4. I need a lot of help from my teacher in my learning	16.18	13.87	17.34	30.64	21.97	3.28
5. I want the teacher to tell me all my language errors	24.86	8.67	7.51	24.86	34.10	3.35
6. I am not confident to learn on my own	13.87	28.90	25.43	23.70	8.09	2.83
7. I think it is important for teachers to give us some comments and advice each time we submit our work	22.54	12.72	7.51	31.21	26.01	3.25
8. I think it is important for English teachers to encourage us to learn	28.32	5.78	4.05	19.08	42.77	3.42
9. For me passing or failing depends on the teachers' effort in teaching the subject	11.56	26.59	32.37	17.92	11.56	2.91
10. I think that the teacher's main job is to give us all the information and to help us to pass the subject	20.23	12.14	8.09	32.37	27.17	3.34
11. I think attending classes and reading the notes given by the teacher is enough for me to pass	17.34	14.45	15.03	27.75	25.43	3.29
12. I think it is not my responsibility to choose materials or methods used by teachers in English language classrooms	15.03	21.97	26.59	23.12	13.29	2.98

for their learning. For example, the majority of participants indicated that they want their teachers to:

- Explain everything to them.
- Give them a lot of help in their learning.
- Encourage them to learn.
- Transmit knowledge and help them to pass the subject.
- Give them sufficient notes in class to enable them to pass the subject.

Although most of the results in Table 1 indicate a strong inclination toward teacher-centered learning, some, nonetheless, suggest a desire to assume more responsibility and independence in English learning. For example, most participants demonstrated an awareness of their learning styles by agreeing that teachers should vary their teaching styles to meet their needs. They also agreed that teachers should identify all of their language mistakes to enable them to learn. Around 31% of participants agreed that they would like their teachers to give them some work to do at home. Similarly, almost a third of participants agreed that they were confident learning on their own.

The second questionnaire category examined students' preferences for autonomous learning. Results in Table 2 present a somewhat mixed picture with some students indicating their agreement with the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning while others did not think that it is their responsibility to plan and be in control of their own learning. Participants whose responses indicated a preference for autonomous learners stated that they would like to have opportunities to:

- Select the content and the method to be used in learning.
- Choose learning materials, for example, books that suit them in language learning.
- Set their own goals.
- Correct mistakes in their own work.
- Collaborate with their peers.
- Work independently in class.
- Give their opinions in class.

These participants' responses also indicated that they make use of different strategies associated with learner autonomy including using their free time to study, checking their own understanding by answering sample examination papers that they have selected, practicing English outside the classroom, correcting friends' work, and using modern technologies to help them learn the language. More than 57% of participants indicated that they knew what areas of English they were good at and what areas they needed further assistance with. Responses also suggest that participants were capable of evaluating the methods used by their teachers to support their learning. For instance, in response to item 6, 46% of participants agreed that the methods used by their teachers helped them to learn English, while 22% indicated that their teachers' methods inhibited their learning.

**Table 2** Preferences for autonomous learning

Item	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not sure (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Weighted average
1. I think teachers should allow us to choose the topics we want to learn	12.72	18.50	16.76	32.37	19.65	3.28
2. I use some of my free time to study English on my own	10.40	13.87	17.34	36.99	21.39	3.45
3. I think teachers should allow us to learn English the way we want	9.83	17.92	26.59	29.48	16.18	3.24
4. I think it is important for the teacher to explain why we have to do the activities they give to us	17.34	13.87	10.40	35.26	23.12	3.33
5. I check my understanding by answering exam papers that I select	15.61	13.87	21.39	35.26	13.87	3.18
6. The method used by my teacher does not help me in learning	12.72	34.10	30.64	14.45	8.09	2.71
7. I practice and learn the English language outside the classroom	13.29	10.98	20.23	34.68	20.81	3.39
8. I enjoy activities involving working with friends such as pair/group discussion, role play, etc.	17.34	11.56	11.56	24.28	35.26	3.49
9. I know my strengths and weaknesses in English language learning	17.34	10.98	13.87	36.99	20.81	3.33
10. I choose my own books which suit me when studying English language	15.61	13.87	13.87	36.42	20.23	3.32
11. I cannot set my own learning goals	21.97	28.32	24.28	19.65	5.78	2.59
12. I have a clear idea about what I need to learn in English language	16.18	13.29	10.98	25.43	34.10	3.48
13. I learnt a lot from correcting my friend's mistakes in class	18.50	10.98	12.72	32.37	25.43	3.35
14. I enjoy correcting mistakes in my own work	15.61	8.09	12.72	32.37	31.21	3.55
15. I do not like being told how to learn by the teacher	24.28	28.32	20.23	16.76	10.40	2.61

(continued)

**Table 2** (continued)

Item	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Not sure (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Weighted average
16. I ask my friends for help in my studies	19.08	6.94	12.14	36.42	25.43	3.42
17. I make use of modern technologies to support my learning of the language	21.97	7.51	9.25	28.90	32.37	3.42
18. I think teachers should allow us to work more in class on our own	18.50	15.03	10.40	32.37	23.70	3.28
19. I like teachers who ask us to give our own opinions in class	24.86	9.25	6.94	25.43	33.53	3.34

On the other hand, responses from another group of participants suggested that they were overly dependent on their teachers in the learning process. Members of this group did not agree that they should participate actively in their own learning and instead believed that this is the teachers' responsibility. Based on the number of participants who disagreed or expressed neutrality in response to the positively worded items featured in Table 2, it appears as though a large proportion of students in the current study did not agree that they should be autonomous learners.

## 5 Discussion

Findings reported here indicate that students on the English language foundation program at the research site are largely inclined toward teacher-centered learning and that only a small number display preferences that are indicative of autonomous learners. The teacher-centered participants appear to assume a passive role in their learning while they expect their teachers to play a pivotal role in the process. This group of students expected to be "spoon-fed" by their teachers by being given all the necessary learning materials and other help that they required to pass the program. These participants expected their teachers to explain everything in class, encourage them to study the language, and give them notes focused on ensuring exam success. These students do not think that it is their responsibility to search for information or to take the initiative in their learning. This is a worrying finding as it is often assumed, as discussed above, that students learn more when they actively participate in the learning process (Prince, 2004).

Results also suggest that there is a small group of autonomous learners who are keen to take the lead and to be self-regulated in their learning process. Responses from these students indicate that they are prepared to make decisions regarding the content, method, and the amount of time necessary to learn. They also appear to enjoy collaborative learning opportunities either inside or outside the classroom. More importantly, this group of participants offered responses that suggested a high

level of self-awareness about their English language strengths and weaknesses. As a result, they report employing different strategies to enhance their engagement with the language. These participants also agreed that they use a number of strategies to learn English, including working outside the classroom, using part of their free time to study, seeking help from their peers, and independently practicing examination papers.

The importance of learner autonomy cannot be overemphasized (Benson, 1997; Little, 1995; Oxford, 1990). The results from the current study provide some important insights into the characteristics of students on the English language component of a foundation program in a private college in Oman. If it is true that most of the students lack a preference for autonomous learning, as the results here suggest, then some important questions can be raised regarding the way students are taught in schools before they join higher education institutions. In particular, it may be time to ask why, despite the basic education reforms that sought to build learner autonomy across their primary and secondary schooling in English and all other subjects, high school graduates are seemingly so ill-prepared for assuming the kinds of autonomy that are necessary for academic and, later, professional success.

Another important question that can be raised is whether Omani students interpret learner autonomy in the same way that it is interpreted from a more Western perspective. According to Benson (1997), most of the definitions of learner autonomy focus on the importance of personal autonomy and view actions and decisions undertaken collectively as an indication of a lack of autonomy. This view appears to be dominant in language learning in Europe (Benson, 2001; Benson & Voller, 1997), but it is possible that, in the Arab Gulf region, traditionally collectivist, hierarchical societies interpret the concept – and even the value – of autonomy entirely differently.

## 6 Conclusion

This study explored EFL students on the English language component of a foundation program in an Omani private college with a view to understanding their preference for activities and environments that are associated with greater learner autonomy. The study concludes that the majority of participants appear to rely excessively on the teacher in the language learning process. These students appear to be accustomed to teacher-centered learning which might be a reflection of their learning experience in secondary education. However, as Sercu (2002) argues, changes in today's society make it imperative for education systems to adopt autonomous learning approaches. The need for graduates who can make decisions and solve problems in different ways cannot be overemphasized. It is, therefore, necessary to explore the strategies that teachers need to promote autonomous language learning both within Oman and across the wider Middle East region.

Given that the current study was conducted in a single university college, it is not possible to make broad generalizations from the findings. Despite this limitation,

some key pedagogical implications can be inferred. For instance, the analysis and interpretation of the findings could inspire English language teachers to reflect upon their teaching and learning and be encouraged to improve their practice. Arguably, teachers can learn from experience through reflection and explore new strategies to promote the development of learner autonomy. Professional development opportunities for current and future teachers should be framed in such a way that the teachers themselves can become autonomous in their teaching practice. School administrators can identify areas for future investments aimed at raising more opportunities for teachers to develop professionally. For instance, the use of new technologies plays an important role in developing learner autonomy. As a result, both teachers and students should have access to these new technologies. Parents can also support their children in a number of ways including by providing them with space to make personal decisions and encouraging them to be independent problem-solvers within the home environment.

To further develop opportunities for learner autonomy, it is worth examining and rethinking the existing English language curriculum at different levels including in Oman's foundation programs. An effort should be made to ensure that the curriculum presents opportunities and learning activities that promote learner autonomy. The findings of this study resonate with previous studies as described above and help show that promoting the development of learner autonomy requires all key stakeholders, including teachers, students, administrators, and parents, to work collaboratively.

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**Part III**  
**Teaching-Centered Issues**

# Integrating Content-Based Instruction in a Foundation Program for Omani Nursing Students



K. Thomas Baby

**Abstract** The General Foundation Program is mandatory in all institutions of higher education in Oman. It seeks to enhance quality and to bring uniformity to tertiary education. English language, information technology, and basic mathematics and science are the common components of the Foundation Program conducted by various higher education institutions in the country. This paper analyzes the different teaching components included in the general foundation course conducted by the Ministry of Health. The purpose of this research is to analyze and evaluate how content-based instruction (CBI) can enhance and promote effective language learning strategies. The first part of the paper presents various theories of CBI and their development while also analyzing the practical implications arising from the actual practice of this method in classrooms. The second part consists of a critical analysis of the components of the Foundation Program in order to determine how CBI can be integrated effectively for enhancing learner competence. This is followed by a comprehensive analysis of the IELTS component in Oman's Ministry of Health Foundation Program. Finally, an alternative proposal in which CBI plays a predominant role in foundation programs is proposed.

**Keywords** Content-based instruction (CBI) · General Foundation Program · EFL/ESL learners · Critical analysis · Learner competence

## 1 Introduction

Integrating CBI in the Foundation Program of Omani tertiary institutions is a challenging task because the program is essentially a skill-oriented course intended to develop the language skills of students who are about to enter their professional studies. This paper offers a proposal for implementing CBI in the teaching methodology of the Foundation Program implemented by the Ministry of Health, Oman. The program consists of English, information technology, and mathematics,

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although the scope of this paper is limited to the English language component. A critical analysis of this component gives rise to the current proposal of integrating CBI into the English curriculum. In doing so, it challenges the existing system and methodology of teaching by opening up new avenues for exploration in the territory of higher education.

CBI has become an effective tool in the field of EFL/ESL instruction. Recent research in this field has supported the efficacy of CBI in developing the linguistic proficiency of language learners. It is for this reason that an examination of the basic postulates and essential characteristics of CBI is so important. This new methodology of language instruction enables students to learn a language from the academic context of a specific subject instead of acquiring language in isolation or out of context. In other words, it is a method of teaching language through the medium of an academic subject rather than teaching language directly in a descriptive manner within the framework of grammatical rules. According to Davies (2003), CBI has nothing to do with directly acquiring or teaching language skills. It is essentially learning an academic subject through the medium of a second or foreign language. In the process of studying the academic subject, the linguistic features of the second language are absorbed by the learner. This method has been practiced effectively in the USA and Canada through ESL immersion programs.

The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota launched content-based language teaching through technology with the specific aim of creating a resource center to cater for the growing demand for materials and training that could bring about radical changes in EFL/ESL instruction. Instead of specific grammar and language instruction, this method promotes appropriate and meaningful communication that is suitable for specific contexts. To achieve this goal, it was necessary to modify the EFL/ESL instruction methods used in the institution to suit students' specific needs. This modification should enable learners to employ their skills in authentic real-world situations. CBI equips learners with the necessary skills to interpret and understand the multiple nuances of the communicative functions of a language. In short, the primary aim of CBI is to equip students to use language correctly and communicate confidently in real-life situations.

The primary aim of content-based instruction can be defined as "the integration of particular content with language teaching aims" (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989, p. 3). This concept is based on the belief that successful EFL/ESL acquisition takes place only when students are provided with ample opportunity for acquiring information and knowledge. As a result, content material provides the scaffolding or the organizing principle from which the learner can figure out linguistic structures, vocabulary, and grammatical functions through their naturally occurring mental skills of perception analysis and integration. Specific linguistic features can be presented, where necessary, as a way to enhance content understanding. The professed aim of CBI is to prepare students to acquire language from the learning context itself through the application of naturally occurring mental skills. Therefore, it is basically a learner-centered teaching methodology. As Krashen (1981) points out, "Language acquisition, first or second, occurs when comprehension of real messages

occurs, and when the acquirer is not 'on the defensive'... language acquisition does not require conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill" (p. 26).

The success of CBI, therefore, depends on dynamic teachers and enthusiastic learners in addition to the identification and utilization of authentic materials. As discussed above, CBI is based on the fact that learners are expected to acquire language from the learning context itself through the application of the naturally occurring mental skills of perception, analysis, and integration. In this sense, this methodology is a significant departure from the traditional method of language instruction where teacher input is absolutely central to the learning process. It is this learner-centered approach, or the "focus on the learner," that accounts for the increasing popularity of CBI worldwide.

CBI can be very effective in the development of the learners' speaking and listening skills because language is acquired from authentic discourse in real-life situations. The authenticity of the content or the study material contributes directly to the development of learners' language skills including their power of comprehension. In spite of the popularity and success of this innovative learning methodology, a critical analysis is necessary to ascertain its efficacy with regard to productive skills such as writing and speaking. Unlike the skills of comprehension, writing skills require competence in grammar and a high level of language awareness. However, adopting CBI in the development of writing skills raises a number of important questions, including as follows: Can the learner achieve this competence without specific and direct input from the teacher? What is the role of grammar in CBI? Can a learner achieve the desired level of writing skills from content-based materials alone? These questions encompass some of the issues discussed in this paper. In order to deal with them meaningfully, it is necessary to present a brief analysis of the methodology of CBI.

There are three different models of CBI which are the sheltered model, the adjunct model, and the theme-based model. The sheltered model provides special assistance to help learners understand their regular classes by giving them special attention. Mostly, assistance is provided by two teachers who work together to give instruction in a specific subject. While one of the teachers is a specialist in the content area, the other teacher gives special attention to linguistic aspects of the content material and is essentially an EFL/ESL specialist. They can teach the class jointly or separately by dividing class time between the two teachers. Usually, the content specialist gives a short lecture on the subject which is complemented by the EFL/ESL teacher who elaborates upon the linguistic aspects of the content material.

In the adjunct model, classes are most often handled by the EFL/ESL teachers. These classes are aimed at adequately preparing L2 students for mainstream classes. Once the L2 learners acquire a sufficient grasp of the subject through a specific focus on the linguistic features of the content, they proceed to join native English speaker learners for classes with the content specialist. Adjunct classes can be compared to EAP/ESP classes in which learners acquire specific target vocabulary. In addition, L2 learners are given training in study skills sessions to familiarize them with such essential skills as listening and note-taking. They are also taught reading skills such as skimming and scanning. Adjunct classes are often taught during the summer months before regular college classes begin. However, sometimes these classes are also conducted concurrently with regular college sessions.

The theme-based model is commonly employed in almost all EFL/ESL contexts. Most often, it is taught by an EFL/ESL instructor who usually works in coordination with a content specialist. Initially, the content specialist introduces the topic and explains the subject matter in detail without any specific reference to the linguistic or grammatical properties of the content material. This is followed by the input of the EFL/ESL instructor who revises the content with a special focus on the linguistic and grammatical properties of the content. This method is often reported as being very effective for L2 learners because content material is effectively employed for the purpose of L2 language acquisition. In this way, teachers can jointly create a course of study designed specifically to enhance learners' linguistic skills by selecting appropriate content materials.

According to Alejos Juez (2006), the rationale of CBI essentially rests on the premise that language is best learned when used as a means or medium for studying content. Following this approach can eliminate the artificial separation or dualism between specific language instruction and studying academic subjects separately. The introduction of CBI can effectively eliminate this basic dichotomy that is present in most educational settings today. In doing so, CBI can shift learners' attention from language per se to specific content material. This process of shifting the focus to content material can bring about radical changes in learner perception which paves the way for linguistic competence. The chief benefits of theme-based CBI are considered to be the following:

Focusing attention on relevant discourse contexts can naturally empower students to acquire useful language embedded within the context.

CBI helps students to acquire language skills while learning relevant content materials.

CBI helps learners to establish connections between real-life and real-world skills.

CBI promotes learner-centered approaches and incorporates effective communicative skills.

CBI advocates learner autonomy through allowing greater flexibility in the curriculum.

CBI gives learners a considerable amount of motivation in language learning by exposing them to authentic and meaningful content. It allows students to explore stimulating content through innovative language learning activities. By delivering complex information through interesting contexts, CBI encourages students to assimilate content in the most appropriate manner with this contributing to their levels of intrinsic motivation. Finally, contextualized learning helps students to realize the importance of language and its connection to real life. As a result, students can develop the following language skills automatically:

Predicting by using their own knowledge and visual clues

Observing, classifying, comparing, and contrasting

Arranging information based on priority

Retaining, interpreting, and analyzing information

Framing questions and hypotheses

Making inferences and discerning cause and effect

## 2 Analysis and Evaluation of CBI

There are a number of similarities in the methods and approaches of CBI with other instruction methods commonly encountered in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs. In both of these methods, the emphasis is laid on learners' vocational or occupational needs. The primary similarity of the sheltered and adjunct models of CBI discussed above with ESP and EAP is that both equip learners with linguistic skills within the context of a particular academic subject. The adjunct and sheltered models of instruction are essentially teacher-centered. This, in turn, restricts learner autonomy and puts the entire responsibility of the learning process on the shoulders of the teacher. Furthermore, for this to be successful, the teacher should have both excellent knowledge of instructional strategies and great insight into L2 learning processes.

On the other hand, the theme-based method in CBI promotes a student-centered approach that emphasizes student involvement and the role of the learner in the learning process. In theme-based classrooms, students do not always depend on their teacher to acquire knowledge, and, as a result, they do not always necessarily consider the teacher to be the sole source of information. As a result, in CBI, teacher input is only one source of knowledge and information among the several different inputs that facilitate the learning process. In addition, CBI can also enhance learners' active social roles in the classroom through the implementation of an interactive learning process. Another important aspect of theme-based language instruction is that it can be implemented easily in any institutional setting by selecting topics that sustain learner interest. As a result, it is the theme-based model which has proved most effective and successful over the past decade. Therefore, it is most suited for implementation in the Foundation Program conducted by Oman's Ministry of Health as discussed below.

## 3 Theoretical Foundations of CBI

The theoretical foundations of CBI can be based on three main theories of language. According to Davies (2003), language is essentially a text or discourse because the primary mode of language acquisition depends on meaning and not on form. The second postulate is that language can be learned only by employing integration of skills. Finally, Davies advocates that language is always purposeful. This three-dimensional focus of CBI helps EFL/ESL students to perceive meaningful connections with life and reality in the context of language acquisition. Moreover, it offers learners an opportunity to integrate their skills effectively to acquire language from authentic sources along with knowledge of the academic culture. The theoretical foundations of CBI rest firmly on the premise that learning does not always depend on teacher input alone. To a great extent, learning takes place through active and meaningful social interactions within the classroom. Finally, a clear understanding

of the target language, including its ethnicity and social identity, is integral to second and foreign language acquisition (Franson & Holliday, 2009). Since theme-based CBI promotes the integration of skills, language learning becomes a composite procedure where the mental faculties of a learner naturally undergo a proactive transformation oriented toward internalizing the nuances of a second or foreign language. Therefore, theme-based CBI has the ability to lay a solid foundation for the acquisition of a second or foreign language from authentic texts and discourses.

For many learners, grammar is often considered the most important element of a second or foreign language. Many learners constantly strive to speak and write the language with high levels of grammatical accuracy. Musumeci (1997) states that, today, many language teachers and learners believe that grammar is merely a set of rules prescribed by grammarians for the purpose of learning a language. Following this definition, the primary emphasis of language instruction should be studying the morphological and syntactical implications of a language. A comprehensive definition of grammar should take into account various components including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Since all the world's languages are characterized by these components, it necessarily follows that language cannot have an independent existence without its grammatical features. In other words, we can say that language does not exist without grammar or that grammar is inseparable from language. From this perspective, learning a language necessarily includes learning grammar that is embodied in the text or the content. Following this stance, it could readily be argued that the best method of teaching language is through content because this naturally encompasses the functions of language in addition to the primary purpose of meaningful communication.

#### **4 Practical Implications of CBI**

Since CBI largely ignores explicit grammar instruction, it is necessary to examine different ways in which learners' grammatical knowledge and skills can be developed. Ellis (1990) suggests that it is necessary to obtain explicit grammatical knowledge through formal instruction because explicit knowledge of grammatical features greatly helps learners to infer implicit knowledge from the learning context through the application of their mental faculties. Furthermore, he argues that explicit knowledge of a grammatical feature makes the learner recognize this feature and record it as implicit knowledge which can be later used to construct and monitor utterances.

Long (1989) identifies four different types of effective tasks for developing learners' grammatical understandings in CBI classes. They are planned tasks, closed tasks, convergent tasks, and two-way tasks. Planned tasks are extremely useful for learners because they provide avenues of linguistic exploration and negotiation that are devoid of any external pressure. The best example of a planned task is the prepared speech of a learner. In this context, learners prepare their speech in advance and think about what they want to say. In closed tasks, effective linguistic negotia-

tion is encouraged because they require definite and specific answers. Negotiation is also promoted in convergent tasks because there are definite answers and/or clear solutions that can accommodate multiple and divergent views. Finally, two-way tasks also positively contribute in enhancing learners' explicit knowledge of L2 grammatical features because such tasks are designed to make the exchange of meaning obligatory and usually produce a greater number of multiple meanings than one-way tasks.

In short, utilizing grammar tasks in CBI has a number of distinct advantages. Firstly, it can help learners develop explicit knowledge of L2 grammatical features, and, secondly, it promotes communicative skills through content material. The most important aim of grammar tasks is to raise learner awareness about the grammatical properties of the second or foreign language. Similarly, content material should also be aimed at promoting the communicative competence of L2 learners. In order to achieve this, it is extremely important to choose relevant and interesting topics. These topics should be explicitly designed to meet the academic and language needs of learners.

## 5 The Proposed Model

The English curriculum of the Foundation Program in the nursing institutes under Oman's Ministry of Health is offered here as an example of ways in which CBI can be implemented in an Omani tertiary context. Instead of teaching grammar material from a general grammar book, the topics for language instruction could be taken from the work environment or the field of nursing activity. The subject matter should be related to the hospital environment in general and about the functioning of different departments in addition to the duties of doctors, nurses, and other staff who work in the hospital. The teaching materials can also include episodes of accidents, the functioning of emergency departments, and the procedures of hospital admissions and so on. A whole range of grammar topics can be taught through the medium of authentic texts created from real-life situations related to a hospital setting. Tenses, passives, reported speech, question forms, etc. can be taught as end-of-lesson exercises in reading passages designed to support learners' reading comprehension skills. For example, if a nurse has to record the details of patient care in the medical records, he/she needs to know how to use passive sentences. This can be incorporated into a reading text about nursing care as follows:

The patient was given a bath at 9 am.  
His temperature was taken at 10 am.

The student has to use reported speech to give information to the doctor, such as:

The patient complained of chest pain last night.  
She wanted to know if she could take painkillers.



When a patient is admitted, the nurse has to ask questions to record relevant information in the medical records. This may include:

What is your name?

Have you been taking any medication?

The above examples are offered to show that the best method of teaching grammar in the classroom context is incorporating interesting content-based materials that are relevant to the learner in the EFL/ESL curriculum. Grammar lessons can be easily included in an interesting manner in the content materials designed for reading comprehension. Grammar exercises can be done that involve offering answers to comprehension questions as illustrated above. Teaching grammar through CBI can be motivating and challenging for students because motivation is aroused through the content material and by the challenge of comprehension and responding to questions. After completing these two stages, students can be exposed to instruction about grammar rules from the context of the reading passage. The task-based activities offered above are taken from a hospital environment. Such grammar lessons can be very useful in the initial stages of a Foundation Program in the institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. This is due to the fact that the material used for teaching grammar is taken from authentic hospital situations. Moreover, the grammar is taught through content material which can be highly beneficial for the students at Ministry of Health institutions as, upon completing their educations, they will work in a hospital environment in the future.

## **6 Modification of IELTS Reading and Listening Component**

The IELTS examination is the culmination of the English language component of the Foundation Program for nursing students, and learners need to receive an overall IELTS score of 5.5 in order to join the nursing program conducted by Oman's Ministry of Health. The textbooks which are presently used for the IELTS course could be replaced with authentic texts from medically related topics from a hospital environment. The restructuring of the syllabus for IELTS course books should be designed by keeping in mind the future requirements of nursing students. The modified learning material would be highly beneficial to students because it is relevant to their future studies. Moreover, it can promote the development of all four language skills in an effective manner. Reading and listening materials should be developed first because they involve receptive skills. Once a learner comprehends a reading passage from a medically related field, they should not find it difficult to comprehend a general passage which does not employ specialized vocabulary.

There are many potential benefits of incorporating medically related topics for reading skills for nursing students in Ministry of Education-supervised institutions. First of all, students will learn specialized vocabulary that they will need in their future careers. This will be motivating for them as they can see a real-world application of the vocabulary. This will also inspire them to expand their vocabulary range.

The argument that learning from specialized texts in order to prepare for the IELTS reading component can negatively affect learner performance is unsustainable because a student who can master specialized vocabulary should be able to easily comprehend vocabulary that is usually encountered in general reading passages. In addition, such an approach can help address the current problem of difficulty in comprehending medical textbooks by Ministry of Health students who are taking various diploma programs in health-related specialties. Since all students in the Foundation Program conducted by the Ministry of Health are required to choose various specialties related to health and the hospital environment, the modified IELTS component could be extremely useful for learners' future studies and careers.

Another IELTS component which can be specifically restructured for Oman's Ministry of Health students is the listening component. Since listening is a skill of comprehension, if a learner is trained to comprehend specialized discourses from the medical field, such as the conversation between two doctors or between a doctor and a patient, he/she should not find it difficult to comprehend a discourse that is more general in nature. Since there are four different types of listening activities in the IELTS, medically related conversations can be integrated into the curriculum taking into account learners' levels and specific requirements. The first two sections of the listening component can be kept unchanged as they deal with conversations from everyday situations. However, the last two sections deal with a conversation between two or more speakers and a formal-style monologue. In these sections, medical topics can be incorporated that are related to students' future academic and professional needs. Since writing and speaking are skills of expression, they generally have wider contexts and more general applications. Therefore, this paper argues only for the current restructuring of reading and listening skills. This stance is based on the fact that these two skills primarily deal with the development of comprehension and thinking skills which are undoubtedly more complex than other mental activities. Once learners train themselves to comprehend difficult medical topics through the practice of reading and listening skills, they will be able to perform similar skills without difficulty from topics of general nature.

For the English component of Ministry of Health Foundation Programs, a student is considered to have completed their foundation studies only when they achieve the required band on their IELTS examination. It is a necessary precondition for them to join any course in their higher studies in nursing. Since all students in the Foundation Program conducted by the Ministry of Health are required to take up various specialties in health-related fields, the ministry can restructure its IELTS curriculum in the model outlined in this paper to better suit its students' future requirements. As all these students will eventually work in different hospital departments, a modified IELTS syllabus would have direct applications for their lives and future careers. Under these circumstances, it is extremely beneficial for these students to study authentic textbooks related to a hospital environment in addition to patient-related topics. The functioning of different departments and the routine of a hospital can also be included as topics in the IELTS textbooks. The textbooks should be designed to suit learners' levels while also keeping in mind IELTS band requirements.

## 7 Conclusion

The above proposal to restructure IELTS textbooks and other materials for nursing students in Ministry of Health Foundations Programs in Oman may be challenged on the grounds that IELTS is a proven international language testing system which ensures that an EFL/ESL student who wants to attend higher-level studies achieves a certain level of English proficiency. Moreover, traditional IELTS textbooks include materials from different subject areas, and the emphasis is always on general, common, and largely interesting topics. However, I believe that replacing commercial IELTS textbooks with texts focused on medically related topics can enhance learner motivation because the content is related to the learners' future academic and professional careers and the topics are drawn from real-life situations which learners encounter on a daily basis. Traditional IELTS textbooks, such as those used in the IELTS course of the Ministry of Education's English Foundation Program, incorporate topics from diverse subjects which are often of little relevance for Omani nursing students' future academic and professional needs. The justification for the selection of these textbooks may be based on the fact that the aim of IELTS is not to teach any one particular subject through a second language but to teach the general linguistic skills necessary for students' professional and social needs in the learning environment.

The above argument is highly useful in a General Foundation Program of a university where students opt for diverse subjects for their higher studies. In the context of students opting for nursing and allied health sciences, however, it is necessary to modify the IELTS textbooks with topics taken from medical and hospital contexts. However, the efficacy of this course of action needs to be examined through a pilot study and a limited introduction of medically focused materials into IELTS classes. While acknowledging the need for this pilot study to occur, the proposal for reform offered in this paper is based on solid theoretical foundations related to the potential effectiveness of theme-based CBI. That is, research in various contexts suggests that CBI can be more effective than more traditional language instruction approaches in helping learners develop their English language skills. Therefore, the argument offered in this paper is based on the belief that grammar is inseparable from language, and the best method of teaching language is through content because such an approach takes into account the functions of language and the primary purpose of meaningful communication in EFL/ESL contexts.

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# Tasks: Effective Ways of Accommodating Learners' Identities in Higher Education Oman



Muhammed Ali Chalikandy

**Abstract** Learners in higher education in Oman, like learners the world over, have multiple identities and mixed abilities. Therefore, neither a whole class approach nor one-on-one teaching can always be truly effective as the former neglects individual differences in the classroom and the latter is not practical because of the large number of students. Individualized teaching requires meticulous preparation and careful planning; furthermore, classroom management becomes a great concern. Given the nature of these challenges, this chapter argues that task-based learning/teaching can accommodate learners' multiple identities and individual learner differences and needs in the classroom as tasks provide learning opportunities for each individual learner and can create supportive group work situations by encouraging learners to interact with their peers. This chapter offers examples of some of the ways in which tasks can be employed to accommodate Omani higher education learners' multiple identities and differences in the process of learning a second or foreign language.

**Keywords** Individual · Identity · Tasks · Learning · Learner differences

## 1 Introduction

Facing an English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom for an English language teacher is an important moment because it usually involves interacting with a diverse range of individuals at the same time. The individuals in an ESL/EFL classroom have multiple socioeconomic and cultural identities. They are male or female, citizens, or born overseas. They belong to different ethnic and linguistic groups, and they come from a diverse array of families. They are also different in their needs, beliefs, previous learning experience, and preferences. In spite of all these differences, they have come to the class with a common purpose, i.e., learning a language. One of the biggest challenges of

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teaching is how to effectively incorporate these multiple individual identities and differences into the learning process. The most important question is how far teachers' classroom approaches and techniques can accommodate ESL/EFL learners' dynamic and multiple identities. Adopting a traditional whole class approach, as is quite often the norm within an Omani context, can be problematic since there are individual learners who are neglected in the process of language learning. It is for these reasons that this chapter argues that introducing task-based teaching into Omani classrooms is one way in which learners' multiple identities and individual differences can be accommodated.

## 2 Learning, the Learner, and the Classroom

Learning takes place in the minds of learners as a result of either planned or unplanned instruction. It involves interaction between existing knowledge and skills and new knowledge and skills. This interaction is different from learner to learner since each learner brings different personal agendas to the classroom. The classroom is the place where learners' varied needs are to be recognized and addressed within very specific, predetermined timeframes. It is an exciting and dramatic venue in which learner or teacher potential can be developed or crippled, and language use can be encouraged or discouraged. According to Taylor (2011), the learning environment plays a decisive role in developing learners' skills in acquiring a second language. In reality, the classroom is the only place where most ESL/EFL learners within an Omani context gain exposure to academic and subject-specific English. Beebe (1983) describes learners in the classroom in the following terms:

They fear looking ridiculous; they fear the frustration coming from a listener's blank look, showing that they have failed to communicate; they fear the danger of not being able to take care of themselves; they fear the alienation of not being able to communicate and thereby get close to other human beings. Perhaps worst of all they fear of a loss of identity. (p. 40)

Classrooms can help alleviate learners' fears by establishing an adequate framework in which students feel comfortable to take their first step in the strange world of second language or foreign language learning.

### 2.1 Learner Identities in an ESL/EFL Classroom

How do we consider ESL/EFL learners? Do they have a single unitary identity? Or do they have multiple identities? Each learner is distinct and different from others. Tomlinson (2005) states that it is simply misleading to believe that a foreign language learner will be the prototype of their culture. The term identity has been defined differently by a number of scholars. Kidd (2002) defined identity as a reflection of the distinguishing traits or qualities that the people have in a society.

According to Hogg and Abrams (1988), identity relates to people's self concepts of themselves. Jenkins (1996) views identity as encompassing the qualities of individuals or groups which make them different from others. Cultural differences in understanding identity are also apparent. Ha (2008) points out that there is a considerable difference between the nations of the East and the West about the concept of identity. That is, while Western people often view identity as "hybrid and multiple," those from the East may define it more in terms of "a sense of belonging" (p. 64). For example, the Japanese may often consider group membership and solidarity to be more important than individual identity, whereas many Americans may believe individual identity to be more important than group solidarity or affinity. Post-structuralism considers identity as dynamic and projects learners as individuals with multiple identities (Pavlenko, 2007). In other words, identity is multiple, diverse, dynamic, and contradictory.

It is commonly believed that ESL/EFL learners have to minimize their multiple identities and adopt a single identity (native speaker identity) in order to be successful learners. In the words of Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), learning a second language or a foreign language is not mere acquisition of phonological, lexical, and syntactical components by learners, but it is rather a reconstruction of learners' selves. Similarly, Richards (1985) stated that language teaching is not merely the presentation of materials but is a complex activity that necessarily encompasses a diverse number of sociocultural, linguistic, and individual factors. Another common belief about ESL/EFL learners is that they are non-native learners of English having a unified and unwavering aim of learning English. While somewhat intuitive, this perception can be misleading since learners bring various aims and motivations to the classroom.

According to Tomlinson (2005), cultural overgeneralizations of ESL/EFL classrooms are harmful since we, as teachers, instruct culturally diverse learners who are not a homogeneous cultural group. Learners' natures are multidimensional and non-unitary. Learners have to negotiate their multiple identities within their ESL/ESL educational contexts, which can be a daunting struggle on any number of levels. In the process of learning another language, learners either try to assimilate or resist the features of the second/foreign language and its related cultural values. Siegal (1994) offers the example of how Western women learning Japanese in Japan often resisted the polite forms of Japanese feminine speech patterns since they believed these not to be compatible with Western concepts of gender equality.

In short, learners' identities are multidimensional, fluid, and ever changing, a site of struggle in most cases. Identity construction and reconstruction is an ongoing process that involves negotiating learners' sense of their selves – including their places in the classroom and in the world. However, learning a second or foreign language does not necessarily mean that learners should give up their multiple identities in exchange for a single and unified identity as a language learner. English language teachers need to explicitly acknowledge the multiple nature of learner identity and seek to support its construction in the classroom. Acknowledging the presence of multiple learner identities in the classroom will not only reflect teachers' abilities to identify and support them but will also contribute to our success as language teachers.

## ***2.2 Learner Variables in the Classroom***

In addition to learners' multiple identities, there are also a large number of learner variables which magnify the teachers' challenges in the classroom. If teachers sought to specifically analyze all learner characteristics, they would be presented with a list of more differences than they could deal with. These variables are the result of a combination of learners' characteristics, their varied interests, and their academic and nonacademic needs. According to Scrivener (2005), learners are distinguishable individuals with diverse personalities whose skills, aptitudes, knowledge, language levels and proficiency, beliefs, and past learning experiences are quite often very dissimilar. They have different learning styles and they prefer different teaching styles. Their pace of learning, topics of interest, sense of humor, types of motivation, and degrees of focus and distraction are also varied. This level of diversity is also apparent in classrooms that may appear "homogenous" to outside observers, such as those found in Oman.

Within the Sultanate of Oman, higher education classrooms are quite often different from those classrooms encountered at the school level. That is, school learners are often drawn from the same village, and most of them know each other since they are often either relatives or friends; furthermore, public schools beyond the primary level are single-sex. In contrast, tertiary level learners in Oman are often much more diverse than those at the school level. Learners in Omani higher education institutions are mostly from different towns and villages around the sultanate, and classrooms are coeducational. Since the allocation of students is centralized, each higher education institute receives students from different parts of Oman. Moreover, private higher education institutes also receive a small but significant number of international students. To illustrate this, a typical classroom in Oman's Al Buraimi University College has students from all of the country's governorates; from other Arab countries such as the UAE, Jordan, Syria, Qatar, Sudan, and Egypt; and from South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. As a result of this diversity, learners' needs, beliefs, and attitudes toward learning and toward the English language, their current language levels, past learning experiences, degree and type of motivation, their preferences for certain teaching, and learning styles, in addition to many more factors, are varied.

## **3 Factors Affecting Learner Identities in the Classroom**

An efficient craftsman is the one who knows how to use their tools skillfully in the right place and at the right time. In a similar way, teachers have to use their teaching tools in ways that are most suitable for learners. Important factors that are related to the recognition and expression of learners' identities in the classroom include teaching and learning approaches, teachers' pedagogical approaches and techniques, and textbooks and materials. Learners' success in acquiring a second or foreign



language depends, to a large extent, on how well classroom teaching matches learners' needs, expectations, styles, and values and how far it accommodates learners' individual identities in the classroom (Richards, 1985).

There is no culturally universal approach in English language teaching since both teaching and learning are culturally specific. What works in one culture may not work in another. Therefore, teachers must be sensitive to their learners' needs. A lack of attention to learners' individual needs and identities will result in limited learner involvement in the teaching and learning process. According to Scrivener (2005), if we look at a class from a distance, we may see it as a group which has a single unified identity such as non-native language learners, i.e., ESL/EFL learners with the single objective of learning English. However, when we take a closer look at learners, we can realize that this seemingly homogenous group is made up of different individuals with multiple identities and varied needs and learning styles. This fact necessarily leads to a number of questions. What should the teacher do differently to accommodate learners' multiple identities and differences? What alternatives are available to the whole class approach and individualized teaching to help accommodate these differences? One of the most effective options may be task-based teaching since tasks can act as a bridge between the whole class approach and individualized one-to-one approaches.

#### **4 Task-Based Teaching and Learning**

Due to the popularity of communicative language teaching, task-based teaching/learning has become an important focal point in language teaching. The idea of task-based learning (TBL) was popularized by Prabhu (1987) who believed that students would learn a language better if they were exposed to a nonlinguistic problem than if they specifically focused on particular language items. According to Nunan (1989), "Task Based Teaching and Learning is teaching and learning a language by using language to accomplish open ended tasks. Learners are given a problem or objectives to accomplish but left with some freedom in approaching this problem or objective" (p. 49). Willis and Willis (2001) expanded upon this by arguing that TBL includes the systematic presentation of communicative activities that help students to use the target language. Scrivener (2005) claimed that "TBL is a general term for some more variations on the 'exposure-test-teach-test' lesson structure" (p. 281). The development of competence in a second or foreign language requires not just the systematization of language inputs or maximization of planned practice but the creation of conditions and contexts in which learners make an effort to engage in meaningful and purposeful real communication. TBL is centered on this concept.

## 4.1 *Task*

The term “task” is defined differently by different scholars. Nunan (1989) defined it as an “activity (or technique) where students are urged to accomplish something or solve some problem using their language. Preferably, this activity is an open ended; there is no set way to accomplish their goal” (p. 49). Tasks are the activities that help learners learning a language (Robinson, 2011). According to Willis (1996), a task is a goal-oriented activity with a clear purpose. His model of TBL has three stages: the pre-task, the task cycle, and language focus. Tasks are the central component of TBL. These three components of TBL create conducive conditions for second or foreign language acquisition and thus provide rich learning opportunities for different types of learners. Nunan (2004) divides tasks into two types: real-world tasks and pedagogical tasks. Real-world tasks are the activities that require participants to use language in real-life contexts, whereas pedagogical tasks are those that make the learners use the language inside the classroom. Scrivener (2005) argues that a task is “something that learners do that involves them using or working with language to achieve some specific outcome” (p. 41). He further observes that the outcome may be related to the real-world use of language such as a role play that involves ordering food in a restaurant or may have a learning purpose like a gap fill activity. This chapter is based on this broad concept of a task.

## 4.2 *Rational for Using Tasks*

Tasks are either communicative or linguistic. Linguistic tasks focus on language forms or structures, whereas meaning is primary in communicative tasks since a communicative task is “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (Nunan, 1989, p. 10). As communicative tasks force learners to share their information and encourage them to negotiate meaning to complete tasks, they lead to second language acquisition while, at the same time, accommodating learner differences. According to Porter (1986), learners themselves can give the opportunity for real or authentic communication to other learners, which will enhance their language acquisition.

Long (1981) argues that learner interaction and negotiation during tasks generate good data for second or foreign language learning and the input becomes more comprehensible to learners. The learners not only need to understand their peers but also have to express their ideas to them to complete their tasks. Thus, tasks provide a natural and meaningful context for language learning and language use (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Tasks provide opportunities for both language comprehension and production. Negotiation and exchange of meanings are central in the TBL since the focus is on communication while completing a given task.

A task enhances learners' language competence as they work with more competent peers to complete the task by taking risks and adopting different roles. Language skills and systems can be taught using tasks. For example, grammar can be integrated in communicative tasks by focusing on meaning and language use (Fotos, 2002). The task-based approach can also improve oral skills since oral pair work or group work is the basis of tasks (Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996). Task-based language teaching is considered an effective method for improving learners' speaking skills through appropriately designed tasks (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Tasks not only promote oral skills but also promote written skills since they can help gain student attention to structures (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). According to Pica (2005), information gap tasks get students to simultaneously focus on form, function, and meaning. Interactive information gap tasks demand learners to transfer information to their peers or partners who do not have access to it (Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993). Reading skills and vocabulary are integrated effectively through tasks. Furthermore, learners' sociolinguistic competence can also be increased if there is a native speaker in the task group.

A number of studies have demonstrated that TBT improves learners' language proficiency. Lee (2002) reported that the combination of online interaction and task-based instruction increased learners' communication skills. Lochana and Deb's (2006) study in a school in Bangalore, India, reported that TBT could enhance learners' language proficiency. McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) investigated teachers' and learners' reactions to a task-based EFL course at a Thai university and found that both teachers and the learners believed the course encouraged learners to become more independent while also addressing their real-world academic needs. Ruso (1999) conducted a piece of action research using a questionnaire, diaries, and semi-structured interviews and found that a TBL approach in EFL can enhance language learning and improve learners' language production significantly since tasks encourage and ensure students' involvement.

## 5 Significance of Tasks in Higher Education in Oman

It is important to note that, having finished 12 years of schooling, Omani higher education learners of English are expected to be proficient users of English since they have studied English as a foreign language for 8–12 years. However, most students graduating high school in Oman cannot communicate effectively in English. This is often an issue that means those students entering university have to undertake between 6 months to a year of compulsory foundation English in order to improve their English language skills. Since learners have not had enough opportunities to practice and use English at school, they need rich and real-life learning experiences in higher education. This can be done by creating meaningful contexts through tasks for learners to employ their understandings of English that were developed at the school level though which have often not been used. Tasks provide students with the opportunity to reactivate previously learned language items

(Carless, 2007) since tasks create natural contexts for language use and specific language items emerge according to learners' needs. Willis and Willis (2001) argue that language use is the driving force in TBL. Thus, tasks engage learners cognitively, linguistically, and communicatively. Above all, tasks satisfy learners' needs and promote group interaction. Learners can use language skills, systems, and knowledge while also experimenting with language to see what works and what does not by communicating, sharing, exchanging, negotiating, and collaborating with others.

Language learning needs a non-threatening and relaxing atmosphere where mutual confidence and trust foster learner interaction. Tasks can promote group cohesiveness which builds learner confidence in using the language as learners feel safe in a group. Tasks provide a genuine reason for learning by accommodating individual learner identities and setting common group goals. The positive group atmosphere that the learners can develop during a task can have an everlasting effect on their morale, motivation, and self-image. Furthermore, TBL can develop positive attitudes toward second or foreign language learning. Ultimately, it fosters supportive and cooperative group attitudes since the "central notion of communicative tasks is the exchange of meanings" (Willis & Willis, 2001, p. 173).

The members of a group can ask each other to clarify things that they do not understand. They help one another by drawing out quieter group members and assisting weaker ones. Trust is developed, and empathy for each other's points of view is maintained throughout the tasks, which helps group members to acquire sociolinguistic competence. Learners are neither singled out nor exposed in front of the class since learning is a non-threatening shared experience. Learners learn interdependently as they have to give as much as they get or even more to complete tasks. Furthermore, they also have to negotiate for themselves as well as for the group.

Learners can monitor and evaluate their own progress and the progress of others since they are learning from each other by interacting with other group members. During a task, the teacher walks around the classroom and gains an opportunity for a little one-on-one teaching with students who need some individual attention. The teacher also has the chance to guide groups in dealing with errors and language difficulties. Since tasks establish good classroom dynamics and the class works together as a team, classroom management becomes easier.

As sharing is encouraged among members of task groups, mutual understanding among learners is fostered. Working together boosts learners' confidence about their ability to learn. Tasks enable learners to learn language functions when they are given the chance to communicate with other users of the language (Ellis, 2005). As a result, learners are presented with the opportunity to reconsider their attitudes toward second or foreign language learning.

TBL is considered here to be an ideal approach for Omani EFL classrooms as these have been often described as traditional, teacher-centered environments. The tasks presented below have been designed for second or third semester students of

English language and literature at the Department of English at Al Buraimi University College, Oman. The students that were part of the classes where these tasks were employed have studied English for more than 14 years: 12 years at school and 2 years at the tertiary level. They have also studied different types of paragraphs, essays, and a number of linguistic structures.

## 6 Practical Applications of Tasks

This chapter is neither a study nor action research. It is purely based on the author's professional experiences in Omani higher education EFL classrooms. In other words, it is the informal self-reflection of a teacher with reference to the theoretical framework detailed above. The objectives for designing tasks are:

1. To accommodate individual identities in the process of learning
2. To include learners' individual differences in the classroom in a positive manner
3. To enable learners to use the learned items in meaningful contexts
4. To create a natural context for foreign language acquisition
5. To reduce learners' fear and anxiety
6. To satisfy individual learners' specific needs
7. To develop mutual understanding among learners
8. To develop collaborative learning
9. To promote independent learning

The first step in developing these tasks involved evaluating the prescribed EFL textbook and adapting materials to suit learners' needs and individual differences. Next, suitable tasks were designed based on these materials. Finally, the tasks were employed in the classroom for those students who were studying Essay Writing and Freshmen Composition with the author. The main focus of the tasks presented here was real communication. Two sample sets of tasks are offered here to illustrate how tasks are used in the classroom.

### 6.1 *Sample Unit 1: Cause and Effect Essays*

This is a writing task which requires students to write a five-paragraph cause and effect essay about the causes of happiness.

#### **Task 1**

**Instructions: Work individually and make notes on the things that make you happy.**

<b>Things that make you happy</b>
What makes you happy? Make notes on it then discuss responses in your group. Decide whether you have similar or different ideas about happiness.
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In this task, first students work individually to write their notes, then in pairs, and, finally, in groups to compare and contrast their ideas. Weaker students can gain confidence from this task since they are able to organize their ideas and practice describing and defending these before interacting with their pairs and groups.

### **Task 2**

**Instructions:** Read the poem *Enchanted Shirt* by John Hay and discuss these questions:

1. Why couldn't the doctors cure the king?
2. What did the couriers see while they were looking for a happy man?
3. Did they find the happy man? If yes, who was he?
4. How did the beggar react to the royal messengers' request for his shirt?
5. Did the beggar help the king? If yes, how?
6. Who cured the king? How?
7. Do you think that the king was really sick? Give your reasons.
8. What is the message of the poem?

### **The Enchanted Shirt**

The King was sick. His cheek was red  
 And his eye was clear and bright;  
 He ate and drank with a kingly zest,  
 And peacefully snored at night.

But he said he was sick, and a king should know,  
 And doctors came by the score.  
 They did not cure him. He cut off their heads  
 And sent to the schools for more.

At last two famous doctors came,  
 And one was as poor as a rat,  
 He had passed his life in studious toil,  
 And never found time to grow fat.

The other had never looked in a book;  
His patients gave him no trouble,  
If they recovered they paid him well,  
If they died their heirs paid double.

Together they looked at the royal tongue,  
As the King on his couch reclined;  
In succession they thumped his august chest,  
But no trace of disease could find.

The old sage said, 'You are as sound as a nut.  
'Hang him up,' roared the king in a gale;  
In a ten knot gale of royal rage,  
The other leech grew a shade of pale.  
But he pensively rubbed his sagacious nose,  
And thus his prescription ran,  
King will be well, if he sleeps one night  
In the Shirt of a Happy Man.

Wide o'er the realm the couriers rode,  
And fast their horses ran.  
And many they saw, and to many they spoke,  
But they found no Happy Man.

They found poor men who would fain be rich,  
And rich who thought they were poor;  
And men who twisted their waists in stays,  
And women that short hose wore.

They saw two men by the roadside sit,  
And both bemoaned their lot;  
For one had buried his wife, he said,  
And the other one had not.

At last as they came to a village gate,  
A beggar lay whistling there;  
He whistled and sang and laughed and rolled  
On the grass in the soft June air.

The weary couriers paused and looked  
At the scamp so blithe and gay;  
And one of them said, 'Heaven save you, friend!  
You seem to be happy today.'

'O yes, fair sirs,' the rascal laughed  
And his voice rang free and glad  
'An idle man has so much to do  
That he never has time to be sad.'

‘This is our man,’ the courier said;  
 ‘Our luck has led us aright.  
 I will give you a hundred ducats, friend,  
 For the loan of your shirt tonight.’

The merry blackguard lay back on the grass,  
 And laughed till his face was black;  
 ‘I would do it, God wot,’ and he roared with the fun,  
 ‘But I haven’t a shirt to my back.

Each day to the King the reports came in  
 Of his unsuccessful spies,  
 And the sad panorama of human woes  
 Passed daily under his eyes.

And he grew ashamed of his useless life,  
 And his maladies hatched in gloom;  
 He opened his windows and let the air  
 Of the free heaven into his room.

And out he went in the world and toiled  
 In his own appointed way;  
 And the people blessed him, the land was glad,  
 And the King was well and gay (Hay, 1917, pp. 52–56).

First, the learners identify difficult words and then look up their meaning in a dictionary. Then, they discuss the poem in a group to construct the meaning and to explore their answers by analyzing the poem. This task provides authentic exposure to the English language in addition to developing skills in using a dictionary.

### Task 3

**Instructions:** Form a group of four. Each member should take one of the following role cards. Use the role cards to make a role play based on the characters from the poem *The Enchanted Shirt*. How do you think the characters will interact with each other? What will they say?

Student A  
 You are the king

Student B  
 You are the old doctor

Student C  
 You are the fat doctor

Student D  
 You are the beggar



**Task 4**

**Instructions for Part A: Read the following sentences and decide which part of the sentence discusses a cause and which part discusses an effect. Next, identify the cause and effect connectors that are used. Put these connectors into the appropriate columns in the table below.**

1. Fatima’s laptop didn’t work, so she couldn’t finish her assignment.
2. Shyma fainted in the class because she skipped breakfast.
3. Our teacher is not well; therefore, we may have to cancel the presentation.
4. Since you like the book, I can give it to you for a week.
5. Sara had an accident. As a result, she missed the exam.
6. This medicine didn’t adhere to quality health standards. Consequently, the government banned it.

No.	Cause	Effect
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

**Instructions for Part B: Now study the example sentences below. Discuss how they are different from the sentences in Part A.**

1. Because of the rain, the flight was cancelled.
2. Due to heavy traffic, he couldn’t come on time.
3. The girl lost her mother as a result of the doctor’s mistake.
4. He didn’t get a good grade because of his carelessness.

**Instructions for Part C: Now identify the connectors used in the sentences in Part B, and put them in the appropriate columns in the table below.**

Cause connectors	Effect connectors

This is a self-discovery activity which encourages learners to use books and the Internet and to talk with others in order to begin exploring rules associated with cause and effect sentences. This task helps learners to become more independent.

**Task 5**

**Instructions: Combine the sentences below using the connectors in the box. Each connector must be used at least once.**

consequently	because	due to	because of
as a result	therefore	since	as a result of

1. I got a free ticket. I went to the fair.
2. Sara did well in the interview. She got the job.
3. I didn't meet him last week. I was away.
4. Ali was not selected for the team. He had an injury.
5. All the classes were cancelled. There was a staff meeting.

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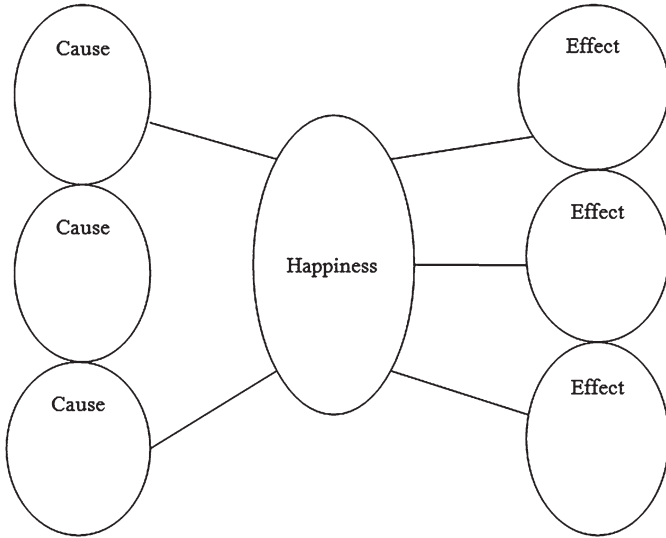
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**Tasks 6**

**Instructions: Think about the topic of happiness. Brainstorm ideas and vocabulary related to the cause and effect of happiness. Work in a group to complete the diagram below.**



**Task 7**

**Instructions:** Work in groups to complete the table below with verbs, adjectives, and nouns related to the topic of happiness.

Verbs	Adjectives	Adverbs

**Task 8**

**Instructions:** Work individually to write an essay about the causes of happiness. Write the first draft, and then reread the draft and make any necessary changes by expanding upon ideas where necessary or changing and deleting others if irrelevant.

**Task 9**

**Instructions:** Now you are going to correct your partner's writing. In order to do this, you have to decide what items you are going to correct and prepare correction codes of the grammatical and structural mistakes that you are most likely to encounter. Use your codes and correct your partner's essay.

The students prepare the codes based on what they have studied in their study skills classes. Examples of possible codes include:

Sp = spelling  
 Gr = grammar  
 PM = punctuation marks  
 WV = wrong verb  
 WT= wrong tense  
 λ = something is missing

**Task 10**

**Instructions: Rewrite the peer-corrected essay. Once finished, submit the rewritten essay to your teacher.**

**6.2 Sample Unit 2: Process Analysis Essays****Task 1**

**Instructions: Read the following newspaper article about an accident, and answer the questions below.**

**Eight Emiratis killed in Sohar road mishap**

This mishap has raised many questions about safety standards for the trucks that have been increasingly causing fatal accidents. Observers say that traffic laws are not strictly followed by the drivers and that they are also not strictly implemented by the authorities. They complain that many of these heavy duty trucks and even smaller transport vehicles are seen lumbering along the main roads during the peak hours, causing huge traffic snarls and sometimes accidents.

Oman continues to struggle to control the high incidence of road accidents. There were 4177 road accidents in Oman in the first 6 months of 2012, up 14.7 % from a year earlier, and 539 deaths which was up 20.3 %.

According to ROP statistics, 1051 people were killed and 10,046 injured in 2010. In 2011, 7719 accidents resulted in death of 1056 people and 11,342 others were injured.

1. What caused the accident?

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2. What are the main causes of accidents according to the observers?

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3. How many accidents happened during the past six months and how many lost their lives?

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4. Complete the table with statistics from the article.

Year	Number of accidents	Injured	Died

**Task 2**

**Instructions: Read the article again and underline the verbs that you see. In your group, discuss which verbs are presented in an active voice and which ones are presented in a passive voice. Put these in the appropriate columns. Be prepared to justify your answers.**

Verbs in Active Voice		Verbs in Passive Voice	
Present	Past	Present	Past

**Task 3**

**Instructions: Work in groups to complete the following:**

- Discuss the reasons why the writer of the newspaper article used the passive voice instead of the active voice in some instances.
- Write rules for how to use the passive voice.
- Compare and contrast the uses of active and passive voices in terms of both grammar and purpose. Find examples of each.

**Task 4**

**Instructions: Rewrite the following active voice sentences in the passive voice.**

1. Jamal watches filmseverySaturday.-----
2. ThepeopleofSpainspeakSpanish.-----
3. Childrenlikecomics.-----
4. Heboughtapples.-----
5. Thepolicearrestedthethief.-----
6. FarmersgrowbananasinSalalah.-----
7. Hecanusethecomputer.-----
8. Childrenshouldrespecttheelderly.-----
9. Youmustlearnexamtechniques.-----
10. Someonehasstolenhisbike.-----

**Task 5****Real play**

This task is a variation of the more commonly structured role play activity in which the context and characters are taken from the real world or from the learners' life experience (Scrivener, 2005). A participant who has experienced or witnessed an accident explains the incident to others in their group. Then, each group member decides on their roles in explaining the accident. For example, one student could be the witness who explains how the accident happened, two students can act as police officers who ask questions to investigate the accident, and the fourth student could be a newspaper reporter who collects information in order to write a news report.

**Task 6**

**Instructions: Work together to write the news report about the accident based on your real play. After you have finished writing, report your news to the class.**

**Task 7**

**Instructions: Reread your group's news report from Task 6. Rewrite it using the passive voice wherever it is relevant.**

**Task 8**

**Instructions: You are part of a TV debate about the ways in which the number of road accidents can be decreased. Chose a role card and prepare your position. Be prepared to defend your position with examples and reasons.**

Student A

You are the moderator. You control the discussion about how to reduce accidents by inviting each person to talk. You can interrupt the debate if you think it is necessary.

Student B

You are a police officer. You explain what the authorities are doing to reduce accidents and how effective these actions have been.

Student C

You are an accident victim. You tell others how the accident has changed your life.

Student D

You are a health worker. Give your point of view about how to best reduce accidents.

Student E

You are an everyday person. Explain what you think the causes and effects of accidents are and how they can be decreased.

**Task 9**

**Instructions:** Now work individually and write an essay about how to reduce the number of road accidents. Write the first draft and then reread and make necessary changes by adding more ideas, changing and deleting irrelevant ones, correcting your grammar and spelling, and so on.

**Task 10**

**Instructions:** Now correct your partner's essay from Task 9.

**Task 11**

**Instructions:** After correcting, rewrite the peer-corrected essay and submit it to the teacher.

## 7 Conclusion

The learners' multiple identities, along with their varied needs, learning styles, and many other individual learner factors, can all make teaching a highly demanding task. A traditional approach of lengthy explanation followed by individual practice time, as is still often reported to be widely practiced in Oman, will neither be able to accommodate multiple learner identities nor result in meaningful language learning because learners need to practice language in genuine settings in order to improve their efficiency. The writing tasks reported here have helped the author to provide learners with opportunities to practice their language and communication skills and to involve them in learning without alienating or embarrassing any learner. Tasks, such as those featured here, can provide the base for the teacher to accommodate learners' multiple identities and to integrate these into the classroom in a positive and constructive way. These tasks have, in the author's experience, exposed learners to authentic examples of language that have stressed both form and meaning making. These tasks have helped to create natural contexts in which both independent and collaborative learning can take place. Moreover, these tasks have also enabled learners to reactivate their knowledge of language structures and vocabulary that they have been exposed to, though which they did not necessarily use, during their school-level English studies. Furthermore, these tasks also encourage learners to express and continue to develop various aspects of their identities by giving them the opportunity to express their ideas in ways that influence learning. In this way, these writing tasks have helped bridge the gap between the whole class approach and individualized teaching by working at every learner's level, accommodating learners' multiple identities, and addressing their divergent needs.

## 8 Future Research

Further study could provide empirical evidence for the claims made in the chapter. Since this chapter is based on classroom practice, future studies could examine the effectiveness of task-based teaching in higher education classes in Oman. Both teacher and student attitudes toward task-based learning/teaching need to be explored. Furthermore, the challenges faced by teachers while implementing TBL in Omani classrooms and the students' difficulties and their concerns during tasks could further be investigated. However, with the need for further research explicitly acknowledged, I firmly believe that TBL is capable of successfully accommodating students' multiple identities within the EFL classrooms of Oman.



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# Comics in the Omani EFL Classroom: Boosting Student Vocabulary, Reading, and Motivation



Robert Hoffman

**Abstract** The pairing of text with images to form a narrative (comics) has been successfully used to reach otherwise reluctant language learners for decades. However, though a number of studies have supported the effectiveness of comics as a multimodal text in the classroom, limited research on their effectiveness has been done in the Arab Gulf region, including Oman. This paper reports the results of a quasi-experiment involving the use of comics over two trimesters in the large English foundation program at a military engineering college in Oman. It examines whether the use of comics is associated with increases in intra- and post-trimester scores on reading quizzes and exams as well as improvements in student motivation. Results suggest positive participation and feedback by students and staff even though improvements across various measures of linguistic proficiency were not apparent.

**Keywords** Comics · EFL · L2 · Motivation · Visual literacy

## 1 Introduction

Comics are fun. And they are everywhere. Newspapers, magazines, graphic novels, and the comic books themselves are all full of what a leading comics theorist describes as, “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, p. 9). Children and adults alike gravitate toward this medium where images and (usually) text combine to convey a message. All manner of disciplines, from history to journalism to political science, have recognized the value of comics as a teaching/learning tool and have co-opted them at many levels of education. The teaching of language has been no exception, as primary schools, secondary schools, and universities have increasingly found a place in their ESL/EFL curricula for comics in one form or another (DeHaven, 2012).

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The key difference between reading a wall of text in a book and “reading” a comic is that the audience or student brings with them a lifetime of visual experience that allows them to view an image and instantaneously empower said image by attaching meaning (Jaffe, 2015). This can happen in as little as 13 ms, much faster than the brain can decode written language (Potter, Wyble, Haggmann, & McCourt, 2014). Whether in a single panel political cartoon, a traditional newspaper “strip” of multiple panels telling a story or delivering a joke, or full pages from a comic book or graphic novel, the reader is required to process both the concrete and abstract messages being delivered and to be fully engaged while doing so.

It is the multimodality of the form which facilitates this engagement and allows for a diverse audience to easily interpret objective and personal meaning. Furthermore, today’s learners exhibit a “visual literacy” that dwarfs that of previous generations, whereby they are capable of interpreting/decoding icons and symbols such as “emoji” or other visual conceptual representations resulting in a sizable visual vocabulary (Derrick, 2008). English language education, indeed the teaching of any language, seeks authentic materials to engage students and activate the schemata they will need to combine with grammar forms in order to produce assessable results. There are many ways to do this; however, this paper will look at the medium of comics as a fun and efficient way to motivate students while simultaneously boosting vocabulary, reading, and grammar skills, specifically in the Omani EFL classroom environment.

The author determined through class observations and dialogue with academic staff that a majority of students in the large English language foundation program at an engineering college in the Sultanate of Oman were not properly motivated to learn when solely using the materials outlined in the curriculum. After coming across the work of Cohn (2013), who describes reader comprehension of sequenced images (as in a comic strip) as analogous to the processing of syntactic structure in sentences, an experiment was developed and administered over the course of two trimesters whereby single-page comics were matched with each unit of the existing intermediate level textbook.

The comic pages were specifically chosen to support the topic and grammar points being taught (e.g., a unit on *City Life* teaching the present continuous might be paired with a Batman page as he swings into action on the rooftops overlooking Gotham City, whereas a unit on *design* that teaches comparatives and superlatives might be matched with a cleverly laid out page from a Tin-Tin comic that shows multiple protagonists and antagonists grappling over a precious object). Making use of multiple e-learning platforms, students would be exposed to the comics for the purpose of vocabulary and grammar quizzing, topic-based discussion, and class exercises and games previously found in the literature as having been successful in catching and keeping student interest.

A reading survey was administered to the entirety of the intermediate level cohort to establish the existence, or lack thereof, of a reading culture among the student body. Both pre- and post-trimester interviews with students and staff were administered to determine levels of interest and past/present exposure to the medium of comics in any form. Throughout the final trimester, all quantitative data on in-class

spelling, vocabulary, and grammar quizzes was collected for both a control class not directly involved in the research and several others participating in the experiment at similar levels of engagement. Results for both the trimester midterm and final exams were also collected in search of signs of improvement specific to grammar and vocabulary.

## 2 Literature Review and Background

The available literature on using comics as an educational tool has grown significantly over the past several decades. The unexpected awarding of a special Pulitzer Prize to the 1992 collected work *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* further boosted the growing literary appeal of graphic novels started in the previous decade by the collected works, *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. The “big three,” as they are now referred to, signaled a shift in comics toward a more adult audience in the United States. These books are credited with bringing the terms “graphic novel” and “comics for adults” into mainstream consciousness (Sabin, 1993, p. 246). And, as a proposed tool to teach storytelling and literature, the academic community has paid increasing attention.

However, when narrowing the field to the world of teaching English as a foreign language, the number of studies drops precipitously. Even more so when the research focuses specifically on using comics to teach EFL in the Arab world and across the Middle East and North Africa region. Although there are currently three peer-reviewed academic journals dedicated solely to the study of comics, it is rare to find serious work done in language classrooms anywhere, let alone in the Arab world. The question of how comics can both increase student and staff motivation and boost grammar and vocabulary scores in a Middle-Eastern classroom is beset with specific issues revolving around previous exposure to the medium (and to reading for pleasure in general), societal norms, and leader support for innovation. While analyzing such research in a nation like Oman, which contains a comparatively monocultural educational identity, it is helpful to look backward and across borders to see what has and has not worked in realizing EFL classroom learning outcomes.

As already stated, the research and other scholarly work published on comics in the classroom are significant and still continue to grow. However, it has been conducted largely outside the Middle East. In looking at the range of research done on comics specific to language teaching and learning, one finds a majority of the more extensive works conducted and produced to be almost entirely over the past several decades and to come mainly from North America (Bitz, 2004; Cary, 2004; Krashen, 2004; Monnin, Edmunds, & Elder, 2014; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Yet, thoughtful and detailed work is now happening in journals and as postgrad work in places as far removed as South Korea, Nicaragua, and Iran (Bennet, 2011; Drolet, 2010; Yunus, Salehi, & Embi, 2012). With global sales of graphic novels skyrocketing from tens of millions of dollars in the mid-1990s to well over half a billion

dollars in 2015 (Miller, 2016), this diaspora of academic work on the topic is very likely to increase in the coming years.

In places like Western Europe and Japan, comics have been such an established and accepted part of the culture for so long that their value as a tool for learning was questioned far less due to positive (or neutral) associations existing with the medium. In contrast, comic books in North America have had to recover from negative perceptions due to aggressive congressional attacks in the 1950s which were represented in the academic world by psychiatrist Fredric Wertham and his book, *Seduction of the Innocent*. Perhaps as a result, the bulk of writing on the medium in locations outside the United States and Canada appears to have revolved more on form and history rather than applied use in education.

The literature on comics in the language classroom is quite consistent in its findings on motivation and production. Comics are (almost always) images in a sequence, with or without text, arranged to convey a narrative. Most educators acknowledge that these “chunked” and manageable pieces of information are ideal for the scaffolding of concepts and word lists. Through the use of comics, anxiety is almost always said to become lower, while confidence is boosted. Stephen Cary, teacher and author of *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom*, points out that even the simplest comic, when introduced properly, makes it possible to generate very large amounts of language production. A regularly remarked upon result of comics being used in the language classroom is a reduction of those affective filters which so often block language learners’ progress (Cary, 2004). A more tangible result of comics use is a noted increase in student comprehension and retention as described in Krashen and McField’s (2005) work on input and filter hypotheses, in addition to Liu (2004), Recine (2013), and Short, Randolph-Seng, and McKenny (2013), among others.

When looking broadly at whether or not comics succeed at fulfilling the needs of language learners, people like Bennet (2011) and Englers, Hoskins, and Payne (2008) reference Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, arguing that, while schools have generally focused on the learning styles of verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical, they function most strongly in combination with other intelligences, and comic activities are able to naturally tap into all of these intelligences with relative ease.

In the United States, where much of the existing research was performed, Common Core State Standards were long held as the principle gauge by which to determine effectiveness in teaching critical thinking in multiple disciplines, including the language arts. Although the field-wide focus on these standards has slightly waned, comics (in the form of graphic novels (GN)) have been shown by Jaffe (2015) to fulfill those standards in many ways including, but not limited to, word-image pairing, paired prose and GN texts, and sequencing. The author explains that using comics helps weaker language learners to decode information and empowers those with shorter attention spans while simultaneously asking a lot of the reader. This aspect is often described in the literature as such: “The reader has to work relentlessly to interpret the images, and infer new information from the ways in

which the images and text work together to communicate a message” (Blake, 2013, section 3, para. 4).

This has led to a debate between researchers. While some authors, like Drolet (2010), Krashen & McField (2005), talk about comics in the language classroom as leading to harder reading, others such as Blake (2013) and Recine (2013) make the point that, besides the participative learning inherent in a “hot” medium like comics, the actual number of rare words determined necessary for fluency has been found to occur just as often (if not more often) in the most popular graphic novels being used in schools programs. Furthermore, the actual number of words in most of these graphic novels was found to match the amount found in a typical novella like those already prescribed in most literature curriculums (Blake, 2013).

Librarians appear regularly in the literature as some of the loudest cheerleaders for the use of comics in all their forms. They land on both sides of the debate on whether comics are merely a springboard to “higher” reading or if they are in and of themselves a valid and effective medium for increasing vocabulary and overall literacy. More often they appear to argue for the latter. In personal correspondence with the author, Cindy Jackson of Virginia Commonwealth University proposes that “Comics are actually difficult to read, and it’s a learned skill to catch the visual cues and combine that with the text and art to gain meaning and narrative” (personal communication, 27 July, 2016). Similarly, Elizabeth Thompson of the North of Boston Library Exchange (cited in Smith, 2006, p. 7) states, “Visual communication is rich, evocative, and immediate, and transcends barriers that language sometimes raises.” Utilizing such a medium would appear to be of obvious benefit to language educators seeking more efficient and popular means to reach learners. Thompson continues, “When pictures and words are used together to communicate, the result can be much greater than either alone could produce” (p. 7).

Several of the studies cited have not only involved enthusiastic teachers but also strong school leaders supporting data collection and access to resources. The works of Bitz (2004), Cary (2004), and Monnin et al. (2014) have also emphasized student-made comics as a means of achieving greater language learning. A rearrangement of Bloom’s taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001) places “creation” at the top of the pyramid, with the goal of jump starting students’ evaluation, analysis, and application in a motivating, student-led manner. Much of the research makes efforts to utilize a variety of different types of comics content (e.g., graphic novels, Japanese “manga,” and newspaper strips), accessed physically or via technology, and across age groups, class groups, and school terms.

Additionally, the large surveys of Ujiie and Krashen (1996) and Worthy et al. (1999) add some substance and corroboration to what might otherwise be a lot of qualitative praise that does not easily translate when developing a school curriculum. Quantitative data is often lacking or absent in many studies on comics’ effectiveness in schools over time. Although this is not an immediate sign of poor research, it may do a disservice to those seeking a rationalization for conducting their own broader experiments. For good or ill, duplication in the research rarely presents itself because so many variables have been studied at play in the comics language classroom. However, again, there remain glaring comics’ research gaps in



developing regions of the world. These places, where English language learning often exists as a far more pronounced part of academic and daily life, could benefit greatly from increased attention and research on the topic.

The Oman experiment is immediately similar and dissimilar to the majority of research in terms of both student motivation and previous exposure. As so often appears in the literature, Omani students were quick to participate in class and profess enthusiasm when interviewed post-trimester. There was a sense of relief among the vast majority of students as they explained that the comics exercises were “new” and “fun,” unlike the bulk of their language class hours. Yet, most of those same students showed nothing like the level of exposure to comics that their western counterparts displayed in the research of Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) or Worthy et al. (1999). This may speak again to the allure and effectiveness of the medium.

It would be impressive for a relatively large sample of students to be swayed in unison by any single thing. Perhaps the general lack of past exposure to comics offered the excitement of something new. Additional studies in the Middle East might take a look at the cultural/social implications in reducing or increasing the appeal of comics in regional classrooms. The researcher believed it was important to fill a quantitative gap in the literature but recognized the importance of qualitative feedback on the topic in order to rationalize its use. Therefore, a mixed methods approach was designed to cover the needs of more future researchers on the subject of comics in EFL both in general and more specifically in Oman and the greater Middle East and North Africa region.

### **3 Method**

#### ***3.1 Design***

This research on the ability of comics to engage otherwise uninterested students and to increase students’ grammar and vocabulary skills sought both quantitative and qualitative data from which to extrapolate results. The quasi-experimental design was chosen as a way to maintain an appropriate range of data and feedback through surveys, preterm and post-term interviews, and pre-midterm and post-final exam quizzing among four distinct groups of intermediate level English foundation students.

A reading survey with questions pertaining to the quantity and type of outside reading being done by students and their immediate families was administered to all intermediate classes over two trimesters in order to establish a level of exposure to reading (text) in general and to gain an idea of students’ perceptions of “reading for fun.” These were followed by pre-interviews with participating teachers and a sample of students to determine previous exposure to comics in the classroom, along with their attitude to allowing class time for comics-based games and exercises. Physical samples of the various types of comics widely seen and available worldwide were provided so that students in particular would not have any doubt about



the subject matter. With a trimester consisting of 11 teaching weeks during which 7 units are covered, it was decided that the introduction of comics materials into the e-learning and class exercises would be delayed until week 3 (for the start of unit 2) and end with week 9 (during unit 6). This would provide a module-wide base of scores from which to begin.

Classes labeled 5.1 (14 enrolled students), 5.2 (15 students), and 5.3 (14 students) would continue with 1–1.5 h of complementary comics activities fitted into the schedule each week, whereas class 5.4 (14 students) would act as the comparison group (control sample) using the standard curriculum materials in place from previous trimesters. All groups would take bi-weekly quizzes focusing on that unit's grammar and vocabulary, as well as spelling quizzes from the unit vocabulary list. Grammar and vocabulary (along with cumulative) results were collected from the midterm exam and again for the final exam. Finally, post-trimester interviews were again held with both staff and students to ascertain success or failure in maintaining student and staff motivation, as well as the *perception* of whether or not they improved in certain skills as a result of the comics support activities.

There is a large, established pool of effective games and activities from which teachers and students can draw when engaged in using comics in EFL classrooms. As this experiment ran through intermediate level classes, the most basic and tried and tested activities as found in the existing literature were compiled and used with the three participating groups. Some examples can be found often in the literature, such as sequencing (or “jigsaw”) games where students had to arrange comics panels previously cut by the teacher and justify their “story” making use of unit grammar and vocabulary to narrate the action. Another regularly used activity was the “cloze” passage exercise where text was digitally erased from word balloons. Students made use of context clues and unit vocabulary to make sense of the passages and then applied the unit's grammar points when presenting to the class. Student groups consisting of three members were unilaterally assigned for the activities, whether physical, in-class games or scheduled e-learning comics work. When comics were uploaded to Moodle or My Study Space (both tested and recognized as effective platforms for quizzing and topic discussion by the college staff and administration), students would work together on an additional comic also related to that unit's theme and grammar points. Quiz questions testing vocabulary, grammar, and general understanding of the comic scene were designed and uploaded in advance for each unit.

The teachers involved with the comics project were given instruction on basic use of comics in the classroom, as per the examples listed above. Otherwise, they were encouraged to be as creative and expansive with the materials as they wished so long as they stayed within the general allocated time frame for comics work in order to avoid disproportionate exposure for one group over another. In order to maintain the “e-learning” element throughout the trimester's comics work, PDF and MS Word versions of the comic pages were made available to all participants via the school's shared “H” drive located on the internal server. Panels were pre-cut, copied, and pasted into new Word document folders so that students would be able to approach the interactive white board and rearrange panels into a story that best suited their group's language production.

Finally, support material was developed and also made available on the “H” drive in the form of dozens of single-page, textless comics arranged not by units from program textbooks but by general topics common to the EFL classroom (e.g., jobs, transportation, tourism, personality, etc.). It was noted that the construction of a comic strip is so universal that the only pre-teaching necessary before starting the class activities was to clarify if the pages were to be read in the western format of a “Z” shape across the page where the top left panel is the starting point or if, as with Japanese “manga” comics, reading should begin at the top right. Besides a positive and collaborative experience between staff members, school leaders gave full support in the manner of vocal interest, allotted hours for research, and opportunities to present the experiment and its findings (to that point) via professional development sessions for all teaching staff.

### ***3.2 Instruments and Participants***

The goal of this experiment was to increase the motivation to read and learn, along with the grammar and vocabulary skills, of mid-to-lower level students in a large English foundation program. As described in the previous section, the qualitative data was acquired through short interviews with staff and students at the intermediate level at the start and end of the trimester built around predetermined questions on familiarity and exposure to comics, along with final impressions on comics’ effectiveness in achieving the level’s learning objectives. The quantitative data sets were amassed via in-class spelling and unit (grammar and vocabulary) quizzes, as well as through midterm and final exam results. However, before any of the above marks and results were collected, every intermediate student in the experiment trimester, and in the one immediately preceding it, was asked to complete a nine-question reading survey. The questions ranged from very concise “yes or no” answers on enjoyment and frequency of reading outside of school to broader notions of how students go about acquiring new information.

Instruments used in study were:

Instrument 1 – General “reading” survey administered in English to 198 intermediate level students in English foundation program. Completion of surveys was done in class with a teacher nearby for students in need of any translation/explanation. All data remained anonymous. Answers, whether “yes or no” or “short answer,” were analyzed as frequency percentages.

Instrument 2 – Pre- and post-trimester interviews with staff and students were held only by request and at the teachers’ and students’ convenience. Instruction included the request for either positive or negative feedback. Teachers were clearly informed that participation in this study should not interfere with class priorities toward achieving learning outcomes, thus eliminating undue pressure to allocate unavailable class time to the comics experiment.

Instrument 3 – Comics pages were used as complete single pages (printed or displayed) or cut up into sections (physically or digitally) for class activities. Participation points were awarded to individual students and their groups. As the activities were part of a study and not mandated in the curriculum itself, teachers were instructed to allow those students who showed no interest or disdain for the comics to work independently on other content. Note: there were no reports of any student taking this option during the trimester.

Instrument 4 – Moodle, an open source learning management system, was already in use to some extent for all taught levels. Comics were uploaded to each unit's section along with quiz questions requiring students to process both the grammar point(s) and vocabulary in the context of the comic. Moodle assignments were given as class work and homework, but not marked as part of the student's cumulative marks toward their final grade.

Instrument 5 – My Study Space, a learning management system used with the course textbook, was used for forum type activities and as a place for limited writing on unit topics. Comics were uploaded to each unit's section along with instruction and questions.

Instrument 6 – Unit quizzes tested grammar and vocabulary bi-weekly. Administered in class by each group's teacher, scores were entered into outside spreadsheets as they were not part of the students' final grade. Participation points were awarded as motivation for effort and completion.

Instrument 7 – Spelling quizzes were short, bi-weekly tests administered in class by each group's teacher. Scores were entered into outside spreadsheets as they were not part of the students' final grade. Participation points were awarded as motivation for effort and completion.

Instrument 8 – The midterm exam was administered module-wide under formal exam conditions simultaneously to all groups of intermediate level students.

Instrument 9 – The final exam was administered module-wide under formal exam conditions simultaneously to all groups of intermediate level students.

## 4 Results

The initial batch of data collected and analyzed was that from the reading surveys. When asked if they enjoy reading (in any language), 50 of the 198 student participants (26%) in this part of the study replied with a definite "no." Although a ratio of 1 in 4 students preferring not to read for pleasure may seem high, it is common for students in Oman to very frankly and unabashedly admit that they do not read anything "unnecessary." When asked about their proficiency level in reading English and Arabic, responses varied as expected but with an interesting range. While many student participants admitted to being "just okay" or at best "pretty good" when reading English, more than 73 students (37%) claimed to be only "just okay" or "pretty good" at reading in even their native Arabic. This may speak to the difficulty of mastering "proper" Arabic, as one would need to do to be considered truly literate.

In using comics, the subject matter is often (though not necessarily) fanciful or fantastic. When probing students' openness to works other than nonfiction, the survey's number one response to the question of reading material outside of the classroom was "stories." It is unclear if this is in reference to works of fiction or biographies and other true "tales." However, the next four most popular choices listed were all nonfiction material (news, history, sports, and "real" stories). Interestingly, when asked what sorts of material students do *not* enjoy, the answers were spread evenly across the genres of poetry, fantasy, technical writing, news, and history, seeming to indicate a well-rounded sample of students with individual views and preferences.

When asked if anyone in their family reads a lot, a clear majority of students responded in the affirmative, but the answers showed it was the male members of the home, like fathers and brothers, who were most often seen reading. Again, the material reported as being read regularly to semi-regularly was almost entirely nonfiction in the form of newspapers and history books. Or, as in the case of several students' responses, it appears as though a significant percentage of students' family lives is compartmentalized to the extent that they are unaware of relatives' personal interests as suggested by the following response, "...maybe. I don't know a lot about my family."

This lack of reading role models may act to compound the regional disinterest in what those from a book culture would consider "fun" reading and, ultimately, in the markedly lower percentages of liberal arts students (Pinker, 2011). Of particular note were the responses to the questions on *how* one would acquire new knowledge or skills. Although there was overlap between responses as students were given space for multiple answers, 82% of respondents (163 students) said that they would learn a new skill (exclusively or in addition to reading) by watching videos on YouTube, jumping right in and practicing, or asking others. When the question shifted to learning about a new *thing*, results skewed in virtually the same percentage toward "reading" as the preferred method of knowledge acquisition (83%).

The data for the quizzes and exams was collected weekly throughout the term among the four class groups. As stated above, the experiment began in week 3 of classes (unit 2 in the textbook) and ended at unit 6 in week 9. The midterm exam was administered in week 5, with a final (progress) test in week 12. Raw scores for the targeted weeks in the experiment schedule were compiled from the previous trimester's unit quizzes, leading to a cumulative average of 17.1 out of a possible 40 (42.75%). By the end of the 7 weeks of active comics lessons, the control group (5.4) with no exposure to comics exercises and comics e-learning earned a similar average score of 17.3 (43.25%) (see Table 1). Although there was no marked increase in quiz scores from units 2 and 3, by unit 4 there was a jump of three to four raw points (7.5%–10% increase) for all but the control class. This encouraging boost, however, would be lost with the start of the Ramadan holiday which led into two more holidays before the trimester was done. With the exception of class 5.2, all averages plummeted in this time by between one and six raw points (2.5–15%) per group.

**Table 1** Weekly vocabulary and grammar quiz results across trimester – averaged by class and out of 40 possible points

<i>Group</i>	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	<i>Average</i>
5.1	15.6	14.4	17.4	18.6	12.3	20.5	16.5
5.2	14.0	14.2	17.1	18.4	21.6	18.8	17.4
5.3	15.1	17.3	22.3	21.0	17.4	20.0	18.9
5.4 (control)	15.5	16.6	16.8	19.6	16.5	18.8	17.3

**Table 2** Spelling results across trimester – averaged by class and out of 10 possible points

<i>Group</i>	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	<i>Average</i>
5.1	6.8	6.6	7.0	6.0	6.1	7.4	6.7
5.2	7.1	7.1	8.2	8.2	7.1	7.8	7.6
5.3	8.5	9.0	9.1	8.8	7.6	7.8	8.5
5.4 (control)	9.1	7.8	7.6	8.2	8.3	8.2	8.2

Though class attendance was low in this period, the students who did arrive for the final week's quizzes were likely the sort to make more of an effort, and this resulted in a final bump across classes 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 to nearly match the previous high levels in weeks 3 and 4. While each group had several students whose spelling scores improved, all but the control group also had scores that slightly decreased or even, in two cases for class 5.3, plummeted. Due to a lack of priority for spelling quiz results in the module outline, results were collected on an external spreadsheet. One third of students in all three comics groups (5.1, 5.2, and 5.3) showed slight to large decreases in spelling scores across the trimester, whereas there was no decrease in the control group (see Table 2). The control group showed steady progress with one quarter of its students having slight to large increases in spelling scores. This would be of more interest if the score increases in the comics groups had been by a negligible margin, but those increases were often significant at 20% or more. Even with a nearly one-point difference between class averages at the end of the trimester, it was noted that three of the four groups saw a dip in results at holiday time (weeks 7–9). This erratic pattern of spelling marks is difficult to link entirely to in-class forces as the comics work focused primarily on understanding topics, grammar points, and related vocabulary.

If the bi-weekly unit and spelling quizzes were to be the gauge for class improvement in grammar, vocabulary, and spelling, then the midterm (with a section titled: Grammar and Vocabulary) would provide a solid ground from which to compare the performance between groups and validate quiz results. With a raw midterm score average of 20.7 out of 35 (59%), the control group again placed third in performance alongside the other “comics” classes, with classes 5.1 and 5.3 flipping their first and fourth place positions. However, the results of the final exam in week 12 would take the control group up to first position with an average raw score of 31.6 points out of 50 (63.2%). The grammar section present in the midterm was unex-

pectedly dropped for the final exam due to issues of mark distribution across the entire trimester. This alone was not a cause for large concern as grammar had not been taught explicitly as a section of the module but rather implicitly as part of other skills. As a result, it was decided to measure students' total scores from all sections of both exams. Nevertheless, a strong means for gauging student progress was lost. It should be noted that the four groups' average scores in the final exam were extremely close at less than 2 raw points difference (<4%) from highest to lowest. The sought out statistically significant variance between midterm and final exam results never materialized, with the numbers not following an entirely predictable path for any of the four classes.

The scores and averages for the quizzes and exams do less than anticipated to support the effectiveness of comics in this context; however, the in-class experience for students and teachers, documented via the pre- and post-trimester interviews offers high levels of support for the experiment. Before the term began, 20 students from across the 3 groups were interviewed on a volunteer basis and were shown a large variety of comics strips, comic books, and graphic novels. They were then asked if they had seen/read comics at any point in their lives, if their teachers had ever used them in classrooms, and how they would feel about using comics to learn. Seventeen out of 20 (85%) had been exposed to comics in some form, mainly at newsstands and in grocery stores. Although only a few had ever seen comics used in a classroom, 18 of the 20 (90%) voiced enthusiasm for the concept.

As far as predicting an increase in ability, 19 of the 20 (95%) participants in this stage believed that their vocabulary and grammar scores would go up and were very motivated to begin. The interviewees described learning with comics as "different," "new," "faster and easier," and "fun!" Several students stated that they would, "Probably learn and remember the vocabulary and grammar rules faster" with the added visual elements of a picture narrative. Meanwhile, the pre-interviews with participating and interested teachers returned predictable results as all were from western countries with a history of comics in pop culture and the arts. All had been exposed to comics from a young age, often in a school environment, and all five (from England, Ireland, Australia, Canada, and the United States) identified moderate to great value in incorporating comics into EFL classrooms to "cement words and concepts as images," "liven things up," and "use as a tool for memory activation."

In the post-interviews, the students unanimously enjoyed the experience. Two thirds felt more confident and believed their scores had increased. As seen in the data analysis above, that was not always the case, but it appears student morale was boosted due to the use of comics regardless. Several students and staff added the request for longer stories for use in independent learning, and even cautious staff deemed the practice "worthwhile." Teachers reported that even the more disengaged students would always participate in the comics exercises and that their classes would "actually request and try to negotiate for more comics time."

## 5 Discussion: Issues and Areas to Develop

Despite constructing a large comics database that was matched specifically to the grammar and vocabulary of each textbook unit topic well in advance, along with forethought on logistical, thematic, and cultural issues, there arose a multitude of minor to significant issues during the running of the experiment. These can be divided into (a) those issues out of the researcher's control; (b) technical or other physical restrictions due to class/school structure, holidays, etc.; and (c) difficulties arising from the student end of the experiment (which appear to be quite easily solved in future, similar research at the same institution).

Although nothing should be considered “unfixable,” there were certain realities around which the experiment had to be designed and run. Firstly, overall expectations as far as completion of varied activities in line with module outcomes (along with considerable, weekly administrative work on the teachers' end) meant that students would only get limited exposure (60–90 min) of “comics” class time per week. It can be argued that a more densely packed course outline is superior to the inverse situation where teachers might be grasping for activities. However, as comics activities are so often student-led, there is an inherent need to slow down and let the class explore the content for meaning. A more expected, immovable issue was that of the variance in difficulty in vocabulary and grammar points between units based on the overarching topic. This certainly affects the consistency and hoped for chronological improvement in student quiz/exam marks. Further, detracting from the clarity of trimester vocabulary and grammar marks among the sample classes was the unexpected dropping of a separate grammar section in the final exam, making it difficult to gauge improvement in that area.

Many of the technical issues, along with accompanying restrictions, might be easily dealt with in future research as they were specific either to the Sultanate of Oman or to the college itself. Class sizes remained steady throughout the trimester at between 14 and 15 students per class, a reasonable number across the industry for a university-level foundation English classroom. However, incoming students were placed in already existing class groups based on a general English proficiency placement test that rated and averaged between grammar, writing, speaking, and listening scores. This resulted in the incoming cohorts of new, younger, and more nervous students alongside students more experienced in the structure and expectations of the school. It would also naturally result in groups of students with mixed comfort levels. Finally, had the experiment been run during the middle trimester rather than in the third and final trimester of the academic year, student focus and results may well have shown greater consistency and improvement as multiple, long holidays landed back-to-back in the academic calendar. The arrival of Ramadan, the Eid holiday, and the National Renaissance Day all in a period of less than 2 months resulted in large numbers of absent and/or tired students.

Just as the above issues might be easily worked around, or even be non-issues, in another country or region, there appeared several very adjustable barriers during the experiment. Quiz and exam conditions were not only understandably different, with



the former being perceivably less stressful than the latter, they were also weighted at such extremes as to be possibly less effective at testing students' true capabilities. Where the midterm and final exams accounted for a full 70% of the final mark and class portfolios making up another 25%, that left a mere 5% for participation and quiz marks to be accrued by students. Additionally, student survey responses, end of trimester participation, and homework all suffered to some degree.

Given the pre-intermediate to intermediate level of participants, it was to be expected that some of the survey answers would be blank or incomplete. Also, expectedly, a class that reduces in size by half or more (due to holiday disruption) will naturally display a different dynamic and energy level. Lackluster homework completion might be in an area all of its own in this research. It is quite normal for students at the target college to report that they did their homework in groups of five or more. Whereas a western teacher might immediately infer signals of copying or other academic malfeasance, Omani students do not immediately recognize anything inappropriate in the situation. Besides being a culture of people who, even in the Gulf region itself, are recognized as friendly, communal, and welcoming, it has been said that "There is no concept of privacy among Arabs. In translation, the Arabic word that comes closest to privacy means loneliness!" (Nydell, 2002, p. 33).

A final note could be made that the sudden introduction of a medium that was new to some in the classroom would benefit from supplementary training and guidance. Teachers were largely left to their own devices, and, although feedback was mostly positive, the process may have benefited from extra teacher enthusiasm as a result of more training and prep time with the comics material and with the master lists of effective comics exercises themselves. Although proper lab conditions do not appear to be a realistic goal of in-class, action research, additional pre-study and understanding of the material would, in this case, possibly result in data sets with higher jumps in improvement.

## 6 Conclusion

In summary, comics are not "easy," but they appear so to students. They must be "decoded by students in a process whereby they empower the story and create meaning by applying their own experiences to the text" (Monnin et al., 2014, p. 17). This extremely powerful scaffolding tool can act as a conduit to higher reading and to overall ability in an EFL setting (Drolet, 2010). The Oman experiment described here attempted a difficult goal by simultaneously addressing the lexical and the grammatical in a fun, relevant, and relatable way. The actual effectiveness was found lacking (or inconclusive at best) so far as boosts in classroom vocabulary and grammar scores were concerned but much more supportive of the research when looking at staff and student motivation over the course of the trimester.

The pedagogical implications in achieving success with comics in a language classroom in Oman are many, but two that resonated strongly throughout the experiment were related to "21st century learning" and "leader support." Regardless of the



program, a strong push is generally evident for the development of online resources, or “e-learning.” Comics, in their pre-chunked boxes on the page (or screen), are deliverable in easily scaffolded pieces for use in all manner of online platforms. Teachers are now able to make use of shared comics resources online, which have been purposefully chosen to pair with pre-existing topics/textbooks and formatted for easy upload to Moodle or to whichever e-learning system is in use. Today’s students, as previously stated, maintain a large and fluid visual vocabulary, often making them more confident in front of a screen than peering through printed text. The experiment validated the fact that introducing comics into a digital classroom directly results in increased student confidence and motivation, the surest pathway to future learning.

Meanwhile, the second implication, “leader support,” requires more than technical skills. When approaching a school leader with the intention of gaining support for the use of comics in a Middle-Eastern classroom, being proactive and positive proved beneficial to the argument. Omani social norms will implicitly, if not always directly, prohibit a lot of material that would be acceptable in much of the rest of the world due to political, religious, sexual, historical, or otherwise “questionable” content deemed dangerous to the local culture. Significant vetting of comics pages/excerpts is necessary for the Sultanate of Oman and indeed for the majority of Middle-Eastern and North African countries. However, choosing attractive, “clean,” and universal material, and citing research specific to the Gulf, can go a long way toward winning over the principal or head of department to whom comics are an unknown element.

Student response and testing results suggest that, though not a magic cure for low results, comics in the Omani EFL classroom might become an effective tool for local educators if correctly implemented. The cases of students overwhelmed by a comic assignment and unable to focus are extremely rare in the literature with this mirrored in the Omani classroom. The beautification of language textbooks over the decades has paired many images with topics in written excerpt or short article form, but using image-text *narratives* may be a broader step in effective language delivery and absorption.

A final comment on restrictions of content in the Gulf region might serve to help future researchers avoid wasted effort. Societal and religious norms will likely disqualify many currently respected and lauded graphic novel works due to issues of content. However, there is the opportunity for massive language production even when using single-page excerpts from various works as was accomplished in the current study in Oman. More research on the topic of using comics in the EFL classroom actually undertaken in the Middle East, especially of the quantitative sort, would be helpful in building a regional comics footprint which could be used as a means to draw the attention of curriculum designers in the Sultanate of Oman, perhaps leading to robust reform of the local language classroom.

The art of storytelling has been increasingly democratized in the twenty-first century via expanded training in, and access to, software and technology both inside and outside the classroom. This has resulted in a visual literacy among today’s younger learners that far surpasses that of previous generations. Yet the research

into comics in the EFL classroom does not look at the medium in the purely aesthetic sense but as a tool for conveying and decoding narrative. The striking global rise in the popularity of conventions revolving around movies, television, comics, and video games appears to be unsurprisingly proportionate to the increase in academic research on the subject of using comics in schools. Such gatherings of fans, creators, and educators, sometimes by the hundreds of thousands, are essentially celebrations of storytelling. If a tool like comics, arguably more participative than any of the other listed mediums, can be successful in engaging learners regardless of culture or society, then language teachers should pay attention. Put simply, comics are fun.

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# Teaching Sound-Spelling Coordination as a Part of Productive Skills: A Case of Arabic-Speaking Undergraduate Students



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**Abstract** Speaking is the manifestation of a learner's proficiency in the target language, and it is often assumed that a learner who is a fluent speaker of a language can also write well. However, unlike speaking skills, writing skills involve mastery of a combination of vocabulary, grammar and spelling to attain proficiency in learning English as a Second Language (L2). Development of writing skills was found to be a challenge for the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Arabic-speaking undergraduate and graduate students of Oman's Dhofar region. The present study investigates the case of a group of Dhofari undergraduate students learning English as an L2 who are disfluent speakers of English both in terms of their linguistic and communicative abilities. Participants are a homogeneous group of EFL students with a common age, cultural background and proficiency level in both spoken English and their mother tongue. The analysis and inferences offered here are based on the researcher's observation of learners, the assessment of their written performance in class and their academic progress over the course of a semester.

**Keywords** Articulation · Grapheme · Phonology · Pronunciation · Spelling · Substitution

## 1 Introduction

Santoro, Coyne, and Simmons (2006) claim that spelling is much more than a purely mechanical skill as it involves the integration of complex perceptual and cognitive (brain-based) processes. An investigation of the history of writing systems from hieroglyphs to shorthand and text-to-speech systems indicates that there is a strong connection between sounds and spellings. This is a language-specific phenomenon. For instance, spelling is very clear in written languages such as Italian and Finnish, where there is almost entirely regular correspondence between letters and sounds (Davis, 1999; Upward & Pulcini, 1994). Such languages are referred to as having

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‘shallow orthographic depth’ and can be contrasted with ‘deep’ languages where grapheme-phoneme correspondences are much less predictable. Contemporary English is considered a language with a deep orthography since it consists of words that are borrowed from or influenced by other languages.

The English language has as its foundation a 26 letter alphabet and 44 sound phonemes. Each letter represents more than one sound to accommodate all 44 sounds used in the spoken language. There are some spellings which do not conform to a logical explanation of the process of word formation. In addition, developments in electronic text messaging and short messaging systems have given rise to many acronyms, short forms and contractions using unconventional spellings. They defy all the traditional morphological rules of English. Examples include the use of ‘u’ for ‘you’, ‘r’ for ‘are’, ‘btw’ for ‘by the way’ and so on. These have been referred to as ‘textisms’ by some authors (Westwood, 2014).

The purpose of teaching speaking skills is to improve learners’ communicative competence in terms of being able to speak better and as a result, write better, so that the learner is able to express himself clearly, accurately and appropriately in meaningful contexts. While speaking accurately and appropriately encompasses linguistic abilities, speaking clearly is related to the ability to articulate speech sounds. The learners’ ability to correlate the sounds of the target language with spellings is the objective of speaking exercises and activities practised in the classroom, such as dictation, listening comprehension exercises and word games. Some students have the ability to articulate speech sounds clearly, while a few others can use the language easily and fluently without hesitation or pausing to find appropriate vocabulary. There are also learners who are not fluent in their spoken skills, but who are reasonably proficient in their writing skills. There is another group of learners who are fluent speakers of English but who are generally incompetent writers. As a part of their difficulties in writing, their spellings are also often error-ridden due to any of the following reasons:

- Searching for one-on-one correspondence between sounds and spellings – e.g. *laugh*.
- Trying to spell every sound pronounced in the spoken words – e.g. *psychology*.
- Ignoring letters occurring at syllable and word boundaries which are not pronounced due to elision or assimilation – e.g. *penknife*.
- Misspelling the words in consequent syllables where there is a liaison between words – e.g. *trustworthy*.
- Trying to use spelling where there are muted sounds in the spoken words and intervening vowels, as in the case of syllabic consonants – e.g. *bottle, button*.

In addition, there is also another type of learner who can write very well with an appropriate choice of vocabulary and accuracy in grammar and syntax. This type of learner often lacks the confidence to speak using his linguistic knowledge. Therefore, he needs to be carefully assessed in writing in terms of content, organisation and vocabulary, on the one hand, and spelling on the other.

EFL students spend different stages in learning English spellings in the process of acquiring a new language. One of the stages in this process is developing phonemic awareness through knowledge of the alphabet and understanding the logical letter-to-sound correspondence. During this stage of learning, they recognise orthography, associating the way words are spelt and the sound combinations that individual letters can represent or vice versa (e.g. recognising the distinction in the sound of 'ch' as in *chair* and *choir*). While this stage is important in acquiring spellings, it is also crucial to distinguish between different sounds represented by the same letter or letters. That is, learners connect their prior knowledge of the alphabet and depend only on logic-driven learning, which can lead to false analogies and inaccuracies in spelling individual words in the target language.

In a language like English, spellings of homophones like *feat* and *feet* are arbitrary, and they are often not predictable. Therefore, the practice of using phonic information that learners obtain through analogies needs to be revised and corrected constantly in effective ways. This is possible through regular and systematic instruction which builds a sound orthographic base for developing and improving the learners' writing skills. This, in turn, can automatically progress towards understanding the morphological structure of morphemes and words. Furthermore, this will help EFL learners to look beyond sounds, syllables and words and to notice the importance of syllables across words and phrases (juncture).

## 2 Approach

The main objective of this paper is to identify problem areas in associating pronunciation and spellings in writing among a group of Arabic-speaking undergraduate EFL learners. Participants belong to a common ethnic group from the Dhofar region of Oman and were between 19 and 21 years of age at the time of the research. They undertake a common curriculum within their institution. Thirty-five participants in three groups of 10, 12 and 13 students were assessed through writing tasks across the course of one semester. Although the present study involves learners from the Dhofar region, the analysis and results are extendable to similar groups of learners from other neighbouring regions in the South of Oman with similar sociocultural backgrounds.

The writing tasks consisted of writing a three-paragraph essay on a given topic and were spread out as classroom activities of 1-h duration each. Five randomly selected writing samples from each group of participants for each session were collected. That is, 50% of the samples from the first group, about 41.7% from the second group and 38.5% from the third group were selected for the study. Around 80–100 of the most commonly misspelt words were identified from these samples and were subsequently listed and analysed.

## 2.1 Some Common Errors Found in Spelling English Words

In learning English as a Foreign Language or a Second Language, mispronunciation of sounds generally occurs either due to L1 influence or the inability of the learner to pronounce words correctly. This affects their spellings in writing, leading to orthographic errors and difficulties in distinguishing between minimal pairs of the kind: e.g. *ships/chips*, *bit/pit*, and *jet/get*. Apart from distorting meaning, these orthographic errors can also interfere with fluency in oral communication.

Among the group of learners observed, the most common orthographic error occurs in spelling the words with [p] and [b] because, in Arabic, a single grapheme represents the two sounds. This is also the case with [g] and [dʒ] where the grapheme 'g' represents both these sounds. As a result, words with the letter 'g' in spelling are often misspelt with the letter 'j' or vice versa, leading to written forms like *jjrl* and *geans*. Similarly, where orthographically the sound [s] is represented both by the grapheme 'c' and 's' and [k] is represented by 'c' and 'k', there is a tendency among Arabic EFL learners to use the grapheme 'c' everywhere, as in the case of the English word *saw* [sɔ:] being written as *caw* and *cow* [kau] written as *kow* because the initial sound is pronounced as [k].

Spellings of the kind, *moll* (mall), *wanderfull* (wonderful), *bark* (park), *fainaly* (finally), *bast* (best), and *mounten* (mountain), are commonly encountered in participants' writing. The reasons for these orthographic errors could vary from one individual to another. One of the common reasons for these errors of spelling occurring in their writing is mispronouncing the words and incorporating the same pronunciation in their spellings as in the word *went* pronounced as *want*. Differences in pronunciation arise both at the segmental and suprasegmental levels (e.g. word stress showing different parts of speech, 'object (N) and ob'ject (V) which can have also have a serious impact on learners' writing). The most often heard examples of mispronunciation in the Dhofari EFL classroom are those arising out of:

- Substitution of a different phoneme (e.g. *chip/ship*)
- Non-distinction between voiced and voiceless sounds (e.g. *pit/bit*)

Swan and Smith (2001) observe the following problem areas in the acquisition of pronunciation by Arabic-speaking EFL learners:

- Vowel length – short vs. long vowels leading to confusion between *when* (English) and *weyn* meaning 'where' in Arabic (p. 201)
- Non-use of junctures while producing consonant clusters as in *next spring* [nekstsprɪŋ] pronounced as [ˈnekspɪŋ] with the elision of [t] at the word boundary (p. 199)
- Attempting to pronounce every written letter (e.g. *foreign*) (p. 198)

In respect of vowels, errors of using a wrong vowel, a misplaced and an inserted vowel (where it does not exist in the original word) were found in most of the samples. Errors of using a wrong consonant and a missing consonant were found to occur less often.



These are some of the errors arising due to problems in perception of sounds, leading to problems of production. A list of words commonly misspelled by participants is featured in the [Appendix](#). Errors of spelling can be categorised broadly into the following types (the number in parenthesis refers to the serial number of the word in the [Appendix](#)):

1. Interchanging of letters present in the original word (1, 2, 4)
2. Inserting a new vowel (6, 36)
3. Omitting letters (20, 22)
4. Substituting a letter (24, 25, 28)
5. Following the sounds in pronunciation (30, 31, 37)
6. Using the wrong letter for the sound (35)
7. Using letter/consonant clusters for a familiar sound (25)
8. Using wrong past tense forms (67)
9. Misspelling as a result of misperception of sounds (49)
10. False analogies (61, 75, 78)
11. Overgeneralisation (63, 73, 74)
12. Using letters with similar sounds (65, 79)
13. Combining individual spellings in a compound word (80)
14. Using wrong plural forms (15, 45, 52)

These problems also impeded the participants' reading skills and were reflected in their writing. Reading skills were also affected negatively by:

- Identifying individual sounds and sound combinations from the orthography
- Reading identical graphemes with mirror shapes like /p/ and /q/ and /b/ and /d/
- Reading letters within words from left to right, instead of from right to left, and using this incorrect order in their writing as in *tow* for *two*.
- At the sentence level, the word order of the kind VSO (Arabic) for SVO (English); Adj + N in place of N + Adj as in *A book blue* for *A blue book*.
- A tendency to omit the different forms of *to be* (am/is/are) in the present as in, e.g. *I a student of Dhofar University*. (There is no verb 'to be' in the present tense in Arabic.)

Non-distinction between voiced/voiceless plosives /p, b/, /t, d/, /k and g/, on the one hand, and fricative/affricate distinction /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ and /ʒ/ and /dʒ/, on the other, results not just in problems of intelligibility, but it also leads to semantic ambiguity between words like *shoes/choose*.

A similar trend is observed in acquiring vowel sounds and the written representation of these sounds. This is evidenced by spelling tests like dictations in the classroom and listening comprehension exercises in the language laboratory. The exercises used for listening practice are more content-based than pronunciation-based, focusing minimally on the pronunciation pattern of the syllables and isolated words.

Very often at the segmental level, students face problems in articulating vowels. Where rounded vowels are followed by /r/ or /l/, vowel rounding is affected by articulating the final /r/ or /l/. The lip rounding is insufficient with rounded vowels leading



to pronouncing /ɔ/ for /a/ or /o/ for /a/. This is also the case with stricture features, where the open vowels are pronounced as close-mid as in /ɔ/ or /a/ as in *bus* being pronounced as *bas*. The most common orthographic error occurs in spelling the words with /p/ and /b/ and /g/ and /dʒ/, where the grapheme ‘g’ represents both sounds.

A few examples of confusion in spelling which can occur even among fluent speakers of English are discussed here. These include past tense forms ending with [d], [t] or [ɪd], e.g. *played*, *laughed* and *wanted*. An easy rule to overcome this problem is to learn that regular verbs with a single syllable ending in vowels or some consonants like plosives, fricatives and affricates take /-ed/ as the suffix to form the past tense. They are allomorphs of the morpheme *-ed* pronounced as [d], [ɪd] and [d], respectively. In order to understand this rule, learners must be familiar with three term labels in phonetics. A basic instruction in the phonetic alphabet would be useful, along with a knowledge of the fundamentals of English grammar. Exceptions to this rule can be dealt with gradually as the learners advance in their English studies. Next, learners should be made aware that some letters are written but are not pronounced, e.g. *know*, *knee* and *wrong*. Finally, it is important for learners to understand that sometimes more than one letter in spelling can give one sound, e.g. *phone* and *pharmacy*. In such cases, the familiar grapheme ‘f’ often replaces ‘ph’ in the spelling.

Another instance of mispronunciation that participants displayed in their writing is the final sound of numerals ending in either the vowel sound [i:] or the single nasal consonant [n]. This type of error frequently shows in the loss of distinction between the numbers 16 (*sixteen*) and 60 (*sixty*). Focusing on clarity in articulating the final syllable while learning numbers can help improve learners’ proficiency in spelling such word pairs.

Interestingly, where consonant clusters are concerned, the cluster is invariably written with either a vowel between them or preceding the cluster. More specifically, if the consonant sound [s] clusters with any other consonant sound word initially, as in *spread* or *street*, a [i] sound is often introduced before the [s]. So, in the beginning stages of learning to spell words and in learning to write, it is written as *ispread* and *estreet*. And, medially within a word, a *table* is written as *tabel* and *suitable* is written as *suitabul*. At the suprasegmental level, participants’ errors in vowel length distinction (short versus long vowel) is a striking feature observed very often in their speaking and writing, leading to mispronunciation of minimal pairs like *fit/feet*, *took/talk*, and *went/want*, which can result in orthographic errors leading to distortion of meaning.

## 2.2 Sound-Spelling Coordination

Although it is often claimed that spelling in English is largely arbitrary and random, it has been found that only 4% of English words are irregular and require learning visually by repeated writing. Nearly 50% of the words in English are predictable,

based on sound-to-letter correspondences, and another 34% are predictable (Joshi, Treiman, Carreker, & Moats, 2009; Templeton & Morris, 2001).

Therefore, the application of prior knowledge of the sounds of English or phonic knowledge is a strategy which is effective for more than 80% of words, provided that these words are perceived clearly and pronounced correctly by learners. In fact, there are relatively few irregular spellings in English, and studying the sounds within a word can give sufficient clues to its spelling. Jackson (2008) points out that many polysyllabic words are easier to spell than monosyllabic words in English. Further, when learners begin to identify words and the sounds which compose them, they evolve their own rules of spellings, unifying them with more words in the language and the way individual words are spelt. However, it is not easy to make reliable rules to apply to new words, especially for EFL learners as is the case with participants in this study.

Ladefoged (2012) suggests that, for words with similar sounds and which differ in their spelling and meaning, learners must use contextual clues to decode the intended meaning. Given the fact that participants selected for the present study are not exposed to spoken English sufficiently and have limited opportunities to communicate in the language, learning word meanings in context is a more complex issue as they are not familiar with English usage to be able to decode or negotiate meaning from a given context. With Arabic-speaking undergraduate participants, sound-spelling confusion occurs mostly due to mother tongue interference. Therefore, a quick look at the Arabic sound-spelling system is in order. Some of the characteristics of the sound system of Arabic are:

1. Arabic has two types of sounds – vowels and consonants which perform different functions in a syllable.
2. Sometimes sounds occur in groups or clusters, i.e. two or more consonants occur within a syllable.
3. The phonology of Arabic permits [p] and [b] interchangeably.
4. The two phonemes [l] and [r] do not exist in some varieties of Arabic. Where they exist, they are allophonic. That is, the two sounds can be substituted for each other without changing the meaning of the word, and the [l] used is a clear [l], with the exception of the word *Allah* (God).
5. Sounds are connected with their neighbouring sounds in the syllables and words or across words without pausing. Then, the sounds are linked. Arabic does not have linking glides, and it uses glottal stops to separate vowel from vowel and vowel from consonant in consecutive syllables or words.
6. In Arabic, no word begins with a vowel. As a result, a glottal stop [h] always precedes the vowel.
7. The phoneme [ʒ] does not occur in Arabic. Therefore, the sound is sometimes confused with using the letter ‘z’ everywhere. This leads to spellings like *vizion*.
8. English permits longer consonant clusters and sequences than Arabic. The difficulty areas are three consonant clusters initially as in *street* and two consonant clusters finally as in *against*.

9. The words with s + consonant clusters pose greater difficulty as in *sprain* or *struggle*. In these cases, s-p-r and s-t-r are pronounced inserting a vowel in words like *sixty* (pronounced as *sikisty*) and *first* (as *ferest*). Further, *asked* is pronounced as *aseked*, *against* as *'gainest*, *excuse* as *execuse* and so on.
10. Balasubramanian (2012) observed that Standard Arabic has fewer vowels than English and no diphthongs. As a result:
  - /ɪ/ and /e/ are pronounced alike creating ambiguity between words such as *bit* and *bet*.
  - /ɛ/ and /æ/ as in *bet* and *bat*; /ʌ/ and /æ/ as in *but*/*bat* are mispronounced.
  - /ɔ/ and /ou/ are pronounced as /o/.
  - The 'schwa' sound occurs in stressed syllables in Arabic. As a result, it is also stressed in English words in a way that does not occur in the unstressed syllable in English.
11. /p/ is not aspirated in Arabic.
12. /θ/ and /ð/ are substituted for /s/ and /z/, respectively.
13. /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ are interchanged.
14. /r/ is pronounced as a *trilled* or *rolled* /r/.
15. Words such as *sing* and *ring* are pronounced with the final /g/ found word finally in the spelling.
16. In terms of weak forms, a few monosyllabic words like articles and prepositions are often reduced in connected speech. These are similar to contracted negative forms called weak forms.

### 2.3 Factors Which Affect Learning Pronunciation/Spelling

Kenworthy (1990) offers a number of important factors as potentially influencing language learning. For example, the author states that it is often assumed that students learn best until they are around 19 years old after which language learning becomes more difficult. Secondly, the nature and characteristics of the learners' mother tongue also have an impact on L2 acquisition. Another important factor is the amount of exposure to the target language. That is, a language is learnt better in an immersion setting than in a formal classroom setting with little exposure to the language outside of class time. All these factors may have influenced the results reported here.

For instance, it has been noticed that some of the participants could articulate speech sounds reasonably well, although they have difficulty relating these to corresponding spellings. Participants' difficulties in these areas could be associated with a lack of familiarity with the English language's structure and vocabulary. A third factor is learner motivation and attitude towards learning. Here, the most important factor is motivation to learn and concern for good pronunciation. The learners involved in the present study were generally highly motivated and usually participated enthusiastically and actively in language activities in the classroom.

These activities helped in integrating multiple skills, as with oral presentations, collaborative writing, dictation, activities focused on reading and dictionary skills and so on. The only constraint was that participants were often hesitant to speak for fear of mispronouncing words; however, they appeared to be more inclined towards writing activities which is often not the case with many Omani EFL learners.

### 3 Pedagogical Implications

It follows from the discussion of the common learning problems apparent among participants that, apart from assessing the content, knowledge of grammar and spelling in writing, it is also necessary to consider affective factors such as the students' attitudes towards spelling, whether they look at accuracy in spelling as being important, and their confidence in spelling correctly. Loeffler (2005, cited in Westwood, 2011) claims that discussing spelling errors in writing with individual students can be an effective way of minimising such errors. The author states that "Often the discussion with an individual student can focus on relevant work samples from his or her daily writing, and can involve some degree of self-assessment" (p. 44). After discussing spelling errors individually, if students are able to identify errors in their writing based on the feedback given by the teacher, they are more likely to learn and correct the spellings of difficult words by themselves. Eventually, this self-learning and self-correction can be seen as a significant marker of learner progress towards becoming more competent writers.

One of the best ways to improve pronunciation is by familiarising learners with the functional use of the language they are learning. For instance, identity and attitudinal factors can be focused on in the classroom in order to highlight the importance of good pronunciation. Teachers can try to motivate learners by persuading them about the importance of good pronunciation for ease of communication and by not overly emphasising 'native-like' pronunciation. Since intelligibility and communicative efficiency are realistic goals, providing good and varied models of pronunciation is a good strategy to adopt in the classroom. Above all, by showing concern for pronunciation and monitoring learners' progress in learning the language, learners' motivational levels can be enhanced significantly.

During the present study, it was observed that, with the exception of a very few learners, there is a resistance to speaking English, either with instructors or with other non-peer interlocutors. As has already been mentioned, it is quite surprising that learners' writing abilities are apparently better developed than their speaking abilities – somewhat of a rarity within an Omani education context. After a few sessions of instruction on sound-spelling correlation, pronunciation patterns and a few general guidelines on speaking, there was a significant improvement in participants' spoken language skills in the sense that their confidence levels improved and they succeeded in overcoming their initial inhibitions to speak in a mixed gender peer group. This is true of the majority of participants whose motivation levels were somewhat low in the beginning of the semester.

According to Moats (2010), when testing students' spelling, it is important to go beyond simply marking words as right or wrong. The author suggests that assessment should be an opportunity to evaluate students' understandings of sounds and conventional spelling patterns. The kind of letters that students miss, the types of errors they make and the relevance of words they choose are all important in evaluating spelling achievement. The teacher has a key role to play in this task as an instructor in class and as an evaluator in assessing the learners' proficiency level attained. Following Westwood's (2014) recommendations, three best practices can help overcome spelling problems among the EFL learners: regular assessment and appropriate activities to rectify problems; classroom observations, regular marking of students' assignments, testing and talking with students about their confidence levels and discovering strategies students use in spelling; and error analysis to identify areas of specific difficulties and to find accurate and spontaneous solutions.

Monitoring students' writing regularly, randomly checking their work and providing constructive feedback can help determine their levels of improvement achieved and the types of errors they make. In addition, encouraging learners to identify and correct their errors themselves not only promotes self-learning but also ensures better retention of corrected spellings. One effective way to achieve this is to administer standardised spelling tests. These can help determine learners' development of spelling skills based on test scores, percentile ranks, in addition to any learning difficulties they may encounter in writing and spelling. To help make learners more independent spellers, Westwood (2014) suggests the use of visual imagery to write and check familiar words. He believes that "independent spellers are good at self-monitoring and make flexible use of a wide range of spelling, proof reading and self-correcting strategies" (p. 42). Another useful approach is using word groups that share common phonological and morphophonemic features, like word formation rules, in parts of speech and in using suffixes. This will enable students to learn the sound sequence versus letter sequences in words.

According to Davis (2013), using word groups, also called word families, helps to establish an awareness of spelling structures and letter sequences that can generalise a multitude of similar sounding words. Learners usually learn groups of words of the same sound patterns observing the similarities and differences in the individual phonemes which occur in the syllables and the structures of syllables making up the words, as in the case of adding affixes to form new word groups.

In a classroom composed of students with the type of learning problems discussed, successful learning can be achieved by exposing learners to individual phoneme categories of sounds through audio-visual techniques demonstrating the articulation of sounds and sound combinations which the learners find challenging. One effective way of creating an awareness of the learners' pronunciation is by letting them record their pronunciation individually and playing it back to improve their perception and identification of their errors. This has been found to promote their interest to perform better based on a model provided to them. Practicing the transcription of individual words, and introducing activities involving words of different grammatical categories like homophones and homonyms, can also help break the monotony of repetition activities. The use of drills in spellings with dictations has proved to be a very useful technique. It can be used along with regular reading

practice using juncture and other morphophonological features like liaison, elision and assimilation. Regular practice in reading unseen passages consisting of unfamiliar words placed in different contexts can have a twofold advantage for learners as it develops pronunciation skills and increases fluency in reading, in addition to enhancing their abilities to decode meaning from context.

## 4 Conclusion and Future Research

To sum up, the study of Dhofari EFL learners indicates that a majority of spelling errors occur at the word level due to improper perception of basic sounds of English, incomplete learning or insufficient practice of the rules of word formation and sound combinations, which is an area of concern for teachers and learners of English alike. Writing samples from tests administered in formal exam conditions were also used to examine spelling errors, which reconfirmed the occurrence of the same errors found in the writing samples used for the study. This further suggests that learners were not aware of the errors they made in their writing tasks. These errors could also be attributed to a lack of focus on the part of teachers on pronunciation and correlating it to spellings.

Modifying the teaching strategy of illustrating the distinction between the sounds of L1 and L2 may bring about the desired result among the learners. The study also reveals that some learners are unable to distinguish between individual sounds like voiced and voiceless stops and between fricatives and affricates. Vowels are modified to sound closer to the stricture of the preceding or the following sounds. Spellings are often modified to appear closer to words and sounds familiar to learners. Learners' variation in pronunciation can also be accounted for by a lack of perception of correct sounds leading to the inability to produce accurate spellings in their written work, a lack of awareness of the basic rules of English spelling, the influence of the mother tongue, a lack of attention to correct pronunciation, incorrect learning habits, negative attitudes towards learning correct spellings or even a lack of interest in learning the language in general.

The present study has its limitations, including the fact that writing samples were drawn from the speakers of only one demographic group. As such, it is suggested that the study be replicated with a similar group of Arabic-speaking EFL learners in a wider setting in order to extend the applicability of the present findings. It is recommended that formal assessment in language proficiency includes pronunciation as a component of speaking/reading skills development. A basic knowledge of English sounds and sound combinations is necessary for understanding the underlying concepts in sound-spelling coordination. Once this basic instruction is imparted to learners, exceptions to the general rules can be provided to bring about a better understanding of the concepts of spelling among EFL learners. Modifying the curriculum and planning the material accordingly can prove to be a valuable contribution to EFL learning. This could eventually become an effective way of overcoming spelling errors by EFL learners in general and Arabic-speaking L2 learners in particular.

## Appendix

### List of words commonly misspelled by participants

No.	Incorrect	Correct
1.	Beucase/becose	Because
2.	Tabel	Table
3.	Suitabul	Suitable
4.	Litel	Little
5.	Speceil	Special
6.	Contry	Country
7.	Eduction	Education
8.	Becom	Become
9.	Finely	Finally
10.	Pepole	People
11.	Feastival	Festival
12.	Alwas	Always
13.	Want	Went
14.	Restaraunts	Restaurants
15.	Citys	Cities
16.	Ourselves	Ourselves
17.	Importent	Important
18.	Diferent/different	Different
19.	Plases	Places
20.	Wather	Weather
21.	Than	Then
22.	Seted	Seated
23.	Rid	Ride
24.	Conclution	Conclusion
25.	Relashionship	Relationship
26.	Employes	Employees
27.	Countres	Countries
28.	Anythink	Anything
29.	Mane	Many
30.	Throuh	Through
31.	Larning	Learning
32.	Stody	Study
33.	Befor	Before
34.	Beliding	Building
35.	Bassines	Business
36.	Happyy	Happy
37.	Fucher	Future
38.	Pragraf/bargraph	Paragraph
39.	Techers	Teachers
40.	Discirbe	Describe

No.	Incorrect	Correct
41.	Subjcat	Subject
42.	Cafeteria	Cafeteria
43.	Only	Only
44.	Booys	Boys
45.	Leedays	Ladies
46.	Tempreture	Temperature
47.	Addition	Addition
48.	Calabrating	Celebrating
49.	Pinting	Painting
50.	Holliday	Holiday
51.	Monthes	Months
52.	Toies	Toys
53.	Pitcher	Picture
54.	Mean	Men
55.	Chanse	Chance
56.	Allmost	Almost
57.	Frinds	Friends
58.	Visted	Visited
59.	Wher	Where
60.	Freetim	Free time
61.	Wiche	Which
62.	Understant	Understand
63.	Traval	Travel
64.	Togather	Together
65.	Flite	Flight
66.	Enjouyable	Enjoyable
67.	Heared	Heard
68.	Sutch	Such
69.	Butiful	Beautiful
70.	Taked	Talked
71.	Forgeat	Forget
72.	Resens	Reasons
73.	Ceak	Cake
74.	Separat	Separate
75.	Juse	Juice
76.	Swecu	Switch
77.	Imporent	Important
78.	But	Put
79.	Musike	Music
80.	Comefort	Comfort



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# Corpus Linguistics and the Classroom: Avenues for Innovation



Iain McGee

**Abstract** In this paper, I describe three ways in which corpus linguistics research and findings have influenced my own classroom practice over recent years in the Arabian Peninsula, including Oman, whether this be in general English language classrooms or in linguistics classes. The three general skill areas considered along with the specific corpus-based focus are vocabulary (specifically, synonym differentiation), grammar (a comparison of a function of *going to* and *will*) and writing (editing with shell nouns). I suggest that exposing students to corpus-based insights can make language and linguistics study more engaging and that the iconoclastic nature of some corpus-based findings can be a catalyst for significant learning moments in our classrooms.

**Keywords** Corpus linguistics · Data-driven learning · Semantics · Shell nouns · Grammar rules

## 1 Introduction

The field of corpus linguistics has been defined in a number of ways. A fairly representative definition is the following provided by Bennett (2010, p. 2): ‘Corpus Linguistics approaches the study of language in use through corpora (singular: corpus). A corpus is a large, principled collection of naturally occurring examples of language stored electronically’. Like all definitions, there are some points of contention in how Bennett defines this field. Firstly, there is the issue of size. Stating that a corpus is, by default, *large* is not necessarily true. This requirement is largely related to the issue of function. As Francis (1982, p. 11) noted, a very small corpus can help determine the relative frequencies of letters, their typical combinations and the use of punctuation marks. Further, Sinclair (1991, p. 100) suggested that one million words of data would suffice to document a language’s grammar. This would certainly not be considered to be ‘large’ in corpus linguistics studies today. The

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issue of size has become particularly important in relation to phraseology studies. De Beaugrande (1999), for example, suggested that a 200 million word corpus was too small to study phrases containing ‘couldn’t help...’. In sum, the ‘large’ requirement in Bennett’s definition must be understood and interpreted with regard to one’s own research interests.

The second contentious issue is that the data collected in the corpus be *principled*. Specialised corpora are principled: a ‘Works of Shakespeare’ corpus will contain the works of Shakespeare and only his works; a learner corpus will *only* contain language produced by learners. The issue becomes a little more complex when we consider general corpora, in which the data are mixed (e.g. spoken and written or from a variety of written sources). The designers of the British National Corpus (BNC), a large general corpus, have made much of its claim to representativeness and the principles behind the collection of data (see, e.g. Aston & Burnard, 1998; Leech, Rayson, & Wilson, 2001), but there are clearly issues: spoken language constitutes just 10% of this corpus. Is this ‘principled’? It is, more accurately, ‘pragmatic’: spoken data is more expensive to transcribe and tag than electronic text. Like the word *large*, *principled* is open to interpretation. One last comment is in relation to the Internet. Is it a corpus? Some linguists have indeed called the web a corpus (e.g. Kilgarriff & Grefenstette, 2003), while others prefer to call it a text collection (e.g. Stubbs, 2000). The reason for this difference may well be over the issue of the ‘principled collection’ of data definitional requirement noted by Bennett (2010). Beyond these two contentious points, however, Bennett’s definition is as good a starting point as any other.

Data from corpus linguistic studies are already informing what goes on in the second language classroom. A well-known series (Touchstone, see McCarthy, 2004, on the corpus-based nature of this series) is just one of many corpus-based text series, and though organised in a fairly traditional way, it contains elements which have been directly informed by corpus data in areas such as frequency of usage information, more ‘natural’ conversational exchanges and collocation or lexical word combination pattern information.

The utilisation of corpus data to inform the creation of text materials is typically termed an *indirect*, as opposed to *direct*, use of corpus data. The term *direct* is typically reserved for learner interaction with corpus data, and it is this specific use of corpus data which I wish to focus on in this paper. The three different skill areas I wish to consider are vocabulary, grammar and writing.

## 2 Vocabulary: Corpus Data and Synonym Differentiation

The first issue where I believe corpus data can help our students is in the study of semantics and vocabulary. The first response of teachers to student questions about differences between synonymous words tends to be paradigmatic in nature: two words are contrasted in terms of their denotational (i.e. difference in meaning), connotational (attitude) or stylistic (formality) differences (see Inkpen & Hirst, 2006).

So, a teacher may respond to his or her student that *tiny* is smaller than *small*, *slim* is more positive than *thin* and *purchase* more formal than *buy*. So far, so good. The problem is that there are many word pairs, or groups of synonymous words, for which such attempts at differentiation are not quite so straightforward. Students in my own classes in Oman have, at times, suggested to me that *large* is bigger than *big*. From where have they got these ideas – their teachers? It is, of course, possible that students have never really considered the syntagmatic environment of words, and this may explain such attempts at differentiation. It may also be that synonym exercises present in school books do not really help students think in the right way about words and their relationships. Engagement with corpus data can enable students to explore what the differences really are. Responding to student questions with corpus data is a good strategy, partly because student interest will be higher and partly because it begins to help students to try and answer their own questions. The specific advantage of corpus data when it comes to resolving issues of word meaning is that it enables us to expand our interest away from purely paradigmatic or narrowly semantic considerations of a word to the syntagmatic environment of the word. Rather than attempting to ‘understand’ a word in isolation, one can observe its environment and see how it is used, rather than merely consider what it ‘means’. Indeed, whether words actually mean anything out of context is an interesting subject of debate (see Kilgarriff, 1997). Below, I contrast dictionary information from the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) with corpus data information for the words *study*, *report* and *research*.

*Study*: A piece of work that is done to find out more about a particular subject or problem and usually includes a written report.

*Report*: An official piece of writing that carefully considers a particular subject and is often written by a group of people.

*Research*: A serious study of a subject that is intended to discover new facts or test new ideas.

The semantic differences presented here between *study*, *research* and *report* are rather contrived and artificial. A simplistic understanding of the semantic information provided for these words suggests the following:

- *Research* is characterised by its seriousness which, in turn, suggests that research is of high quality – which we know not to be true of all research.
- The focus of a *study* may be on a problem, whereas research is not so focused (and yet much research is problem-focused).
- It suggests that a *study* (alone) is written, whereas *research* is not – which, again, is rather confusing.
- The key characteristics of a *report* are that it is a group effort (but we know that most hard science research is multi-authored) and that it is official (suggesting that governments and government bodies do not research, per se, but, alternatively, ‘carefully consider’).

Clearly any student attempting to understand the differences between these words is likely to come out of the dictionary page either in a state of confusion, or,

- ▶ .....in the following case **study** of a secondary school where the distribu
- ▶ In a subsequent longitudinal **study** which observed the development of 7
- ▶ audited throughout the pilot **study** by the A&E registrar, who examined all
- ▶ .....An in-depth **study** of a particular system will also be rese
- ▶ weakens the claim of literary **study** to be a coherent and self-sufficient disci
- ▶ they prepared a comparative **study** to show that the lockout was far more
- ▶ Shafir made a detailed **study** of comprehension levels by the suppose
- ▶ .....in 1978 after a feasibility **study** in Ness in 1976, and is financed by the
- ▶ . ey (1989a) report a further **study** (experiment 3) in which the procedures

**Fig. 1** Concordance lines for *study* from the BNC

- ▶ .....The annual **report** of the Social Fund Commission
- ▶ according to a government **report** published yesterday.
- ▶ .....Extracts from an official **report** on last summer's Marchioness ri
- ▶ s in the consortium's interim **report** projected revenue in 1993, the y
- ▶ .....The Committee's final **report** was published in 1977 but even
- ▶ document was a progress **report** during an inquiry into possible co
- ▶ ..... A medical **report** estimated she had a mental age
- ▶ ..... This time, the audit **report** was heavily qualified, or rather, t
- ▶ fact the select committee **report** identified Liverpool Bay as a prim
- ▶ .....The Bullock **Report** offered clear support for langua
- ▶ decade after the Scarman **report** on Brixton and on the evidence f

**Fig. 2** Concordance lines for *report* from the BNC

possibly worse, with a highly questionable, wooden and ultimately inadequate understanding of these words. Below, I provide a number of concordance lines from the BNC for each word (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

When students are given such data, they will notice different things about how these words are used. Indeed, I am constantly pleasantly surprised at the various insights provided by different students in my classes in Oman. I have found students quite open to sharing with myself and their peers what they have found and indeed being excited to do so. A helpful categorisation scheme (though just one suggestion) is to think about the words' collocation and colligation patterns and finally the words' meanings.

*Collocation* The adjectives collocating with *study* and *report* indicate that reports are often connected to who authored or sponsored them – words such as *government*, *audit* and *committee* indicate this. *Study*, on the other hand, seems to be more associated with the type of research which has been conducted, rather than who

- ▶ .....Market **research** shows at least 3,500 practices plan t
- ▶ .....ADUTCH **research** project, beginning this month, hopes
- ▶ .....that Glaxo would set up a **research** centre and co-market Imigran with
- ▶ derwater navigation as part of a **research** programme at Loughborough Univer
- ▶ .....There is even a whale **research** institute in Tokyo which contributes
- ▶ .....A report by the Medical **Research** Council concluded that the levels we
- ▶ Investment in scientific **research** and development has fallen from 0.3
- ▶ tudentship, doing postgraduate **research** under H. E. Armstrong [q.v.] at the
- ▶ .....Any attempt to withdraw **research** funding on the basis of the argument
- ▶ s) were undertaking empirical **research** into women's employment 2014 res

Fig. 3 Concordance lines for *research* from the BNC

Table 1 A colligation matrix for the words *study*, *report* and *research*

	Study	Report	Research
Part of a larger noun phrase			✓ (Very strong tendency)
...into			✓
...on		✓	
...of	✓	✓	
In past tense context	(Some)	✓	(Not clear)

conducted it, per se, e.g. *literary*, *detailed* and *feasibility*. *Research* has fewer adjective or attributive nouns connected with its usage, though some may strike us as very strong pairings (e.g. *market research*, *empirical research*).

*Colligation* What can we notice about the grammatical patternings? This can be more easily investigated through the use of a matrix (see Table 1).

It should be noted that the conclusions drawn from analysing such data are tentative, being that the data are limited. However, with the data we have, we can note that *research* has quite a different grammatical patterning when compared to *study* and *report* and that for preposition patterns all the words are rather different from each other. Concerning meaning, one might, on consideration of the data in the table and figures, consider *research* to be what makes up part of a *study*, which might, in turn, be published as a *report*.

So, how exactly can students’ analyses of the collocation and colligation patterning help them understand the differences between synonyms? Firstly, the data point to tendencies (e.g. in the semantic field of the collocates with which the node words occur or the colligational patternings) rather than absolutes: dictionary definitions tend to be too precise. In addition, the provision of concordance lines is a good way for students to pick up some very prototypical combinations: the focus on the word is balanced by the focus on the word’s environment. Setting up tasks where students investigate the differences between *big* and *large*, and *happy* and *glad*, for example,

put students in the driving seat and empower them to become the authorities in the classroom, rather than their teachers. This healthy reversal of roles is often called for in the literature.

### 3 Grammar: Corpus Data and Referring to the Future

Insights from corpus linguistics research are affecting our views of grammar, though it would be more accurate, in today's climate, to speak of the grammars of language (see, e.g. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999). Tensions between sentence-based and discourse-based grammar have been documented in the literature (e.g. Cook, 1989; Hughes & McCarthy, 1998), and I do not wish to focus on these here, beyond stating that a key strength of discourse-based grammar is that it allows us to examine, with more care, functions and usage patterns.

As an example case, we can consider how *will* and *going to* are traditionally taught in a decontextualised, sentence-based approach, and then contrast this with an inductive (corpus-driven) discourse-based approach. A fairly typical way of differentiating 'will' and 'going to' is given below from New Headway Plus (Pre-Intermediate): "Going to is used to express a future decision, intention, or plan made before the moment of speaking... Will is used to express a future decision or intention made at the moment of speaking" (Sorars & Soars, 2006, p. 136). As EFL teachers, we have probably all taught the above and, perhaps, religiously corrected student 'mistakes' accordingly. There are, of course, instances where the rule 'holds'. However, corpus data indicates that there are many cases where it does not. The following extracts, found on the Internet after just a few minutes' search, do not fit in well with the above-noted differentiation.

#### Extract 1 (Political News)

*"On Thursday, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland is going to visit Ukraine, along with several foreign ministers of European countries," the agency quotes. Head of EU diplomacy Catherine Ashton and European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Stefan Füle will also visit Ukraine this week. (Voice of Russia, 2014, para. 1)*

#### Extract 2 (Rolls Royce Board Meeting)

*So I'm going to give you an overview of our performance in 2013 and provide some longer-term context, and then I'm going to cover guidance for 2014..... and I'm going to spend a few minutes explaining them. Mark will then talk you through the numbers, and then we'll have a Q&A. (Thomson Reuters Streetevents, 2014, p. 2)*

#### Extract 3 (Sports News)

*And how does Ehlers plan to celebrate his birthday?  
"I'm going to school and then to practice and then I'll open some gifts when I get home," he added with a smile. (Metronews, 2014, para. 9)*



#### Extract 4 (Entertainment News)

*I'm working on some new songs for a new record that I'm going to start recording, hopefully in late April. In July, I've got a tour out to the Pacific Northwest. Then I'll come back here,.... (Opoien, 2014, para. 11)*

In all of these instances, the speaker or writer begins talking about the future with *going to* and then switches to *will*. The key question that must be asked of the data is whether, functionally, *will* is being used differently from the initial *going to*. On balance, I would suggest not: it seems to be used to achieve the same function. The only difference appears to be that *will* does not open the series of plans, whereas *going to* does. On the basis of this admittedly small set of data, we could, therefore, hypothesise the following:

When people have, or report on, a number of sequentially related plans, they start with *going to* and then might switch to *will*.

This hypothesis would, of course, need to be investigated on a larger data set. What the above kind of mini-study suggests is that we are probably too 'tight' and overly prescriptive, in some aspects of our grammar teaching: the rules we present to our students may actually be at variance with the data. From these data, we can see that *will* is indeed used for pre-arranged plans, contrary to the grammar point noted earlier.

An inductive corpus-based approach to teaching and learning grammar may well help students develop more 'reasonable' and, ultimately, more accurate ideas about grammar usage. The alternative for our students is an awful lot of 'unlearning' and then relearning. Indeed, my own students in Oman have expressed their deep concern when faced with such data. Having placed great hope in the rules they were taught in school, they are brought face to face with data which challenge the rules and, at the same time, challenge parts of their previous learning. This is not a helpful state of affairs. With data and guidance from the teacher, students can begin to form their own hypotheses about functional differences in English tense and aspect usage.

## 4 Writing: Corpus Data and the Encapsulation/ Interpretation of Previous Discourse Elements

The final area of teaching I would like to touch on is writing, more specifically editing, and how corpus data insights can help in this area. When we consider the kind of feedback typically given to students on drafts of reports or term papers, we normally consider the following:

- Grammar issues (e.g. run-on sentences)
- Signposting (e.g. conjunctions)
- Mechanics (e.g. punctuation, spelling)
- Lexical issues (e.g. collocational and colligational issues)
- Organisation



These are all legitimate and useful areas to consider. However, in addition, an area I have explored with my own students in Oman and across the Arab Gulf when at the editing stage of their writing is the use of shell nouns. Some of the most common nouns in the English language are abstract nouns (e.g. *idea, problem, situation*), and corpus studies have not only highlighted their frequency but also their use. A key function of these words is often underutilised by our students, i.e. the shell noun function. Schmid (2000, p. 4) defines shell nouns as ‘an open-ended functionally-defined class of abstract nouns that have [...] the potential for being used as conceptual shells for complex, proposition-like pieces of information’. What these nouns do is encapsulate, and possibly interpret, previous discourse of various sizes ranging from units larger than the noun phrase to the paragraph. The common anaphoric use of these shell nouns should be noted. However, in addition to having a backward-focused orientation, authors also utilise these nouns to move the argument forward as well. Exercises such as the one noted below, using corpus data, can help students realise the importance and function of these nouns.

### Example Exercise

*Which of the following nouns goes into the following gaps?*

plan/situation/achievement

1. The skills required to build such systems were rare and also the required combinations of software and computer hardware were expensive. This \_\_\_\_\_ has more recently been reversed.
2. The growth in revenue enabled a total of £25,000 to be spent on research and development. This \_\_\_\_\_ was unheard of in the company’s history.
3. The IBA hoped to raise half the capital for a new company from Midlands money, with ATV providing the rest. This \_\_\_\_\_ failed on two counts.

In drafts of reports, I have required students to use shell nouns and highlight their usage to me through underlining. Additionally, students can be asked to develop the interpersonal element of their writing, often in a later draft, through the use of attributive adjectives before these nouns. The exercise below was developed to address this specific point and to give students the opportunity to invest personal opinion in the text they are writing.

### Example Exercise

*Match the adjectives on the left with the nouns on the right with which they typically co-occur.*

1. Great, real, welcome, remarkable	A. Plan
2. Unsatisfactory, encouraging, existing, unusual	B. Situation
3. Ambitious, original, controversial, strategic	C. Achievement

While students may face challenges in using these shell nouns accurately (see McGee, 2009), appreciating the facilitating function of these special nouns, and using them intelligently, is an essential part of making writing more natural and facilitates the flow of written discourse. Students can also be encouraged to examine previously published written work for its usage of shell nouns, see how they are

used by their authors, and begin to use them in their own writing. I have done such with my own students in Oman: getting students to actually notice such usage and appreciate how this can improve the quality of their own texts is critical.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have touched on three possible uses of corpus data in the classroom – uses to which I have put corpus data in my own teaching in the Sultanate, and which, I believe, have been reasonably well-received by students. In terms of considering the pedagogical implications from the experiences described above, I believe that the following are amongst the most significant:

1. Synonymy is a minefield: Moving away from single word synonym pairs and raising awareness of collocation and phraseology can only be a good thing for our students.
2. Teachers do not know it all: Our attempts to explain differences between words can, quite frankly, be embarrassing. Corpus data show teachers and students what is typical and frequent/infrequent. As such, they can only be helpful for students (and teachers, too).
3. Real texts and corpus data must live in harmony with our ‘rules’: If students can see the disparities, we should too. The implications of disharmony should impact our teaching approach and assessment.
4. Inductive learning will not disappoint: Learners of (overly simplistic) rules will always be troubled with language data. This is not because there are no rules, but because the rules are more subtle than we typically state. This is a fact to which the data eloquently point.
5. Cohesive linking in texts needs more focus: The power of shell nouns to manage discourse flow, allow interpersonal engagement, and add to the quality of written text needs to be appreciated by students.

In closing, it is important to stress that corpus data are not the panacea of English language teaching. Corpus linguistic information is simply another tool which can be employed by teachers for the benefit of their learners. I am not suggesting that corpus-based insights be adopted wholesale into our teaching. Corpus data is not a methodology, and the pedagogical implications of these data are not entirely clear: simplification, teachability, motivation, assessment, etc. are all additional areas which must be considered and valued in our classrooms and institutions.

Various attempts to consider how corpus data can inform teaching are being made. For example, a special issue of the journal *ReCALL* (14 February 2014), entitled *Researching uses of corpora for language teaching and learning*, is devoted to the same focus as this paper with a number of papers specifically considering the links between corpus data and how they can help in teaching and learning writing skills. These are important developments which instructors and students in Oman and, indeed, across the entire world, would benefit from becoming more familiar with.

Finally, it is my own conviction that corpus data are not just of use for students – teachers too can experience ‘significant learning moments’ in their classrooms, together with their students, as they consider corpus data. One way to keep fresh as a teacher is to challenge cherished beliefs on a daily basis, whether they be about vocabulary, grammar and writing, and corpus data constantly do this.

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