

Understanding English Language Teaching and Learning in Oman

Edited by
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Foreword

Since 1995 the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman has been engaged in a programme of restructuring its educational system. Its aim has been to develop a system that will successfully prepare students for life in the 21st century. Achieving this aim has required far-reaching changes. In particular learner-centred curricula have been developed, which promote the development of critical thinking, reflecting and problem-solving skills and which recognise the importance of valuing individual differences and of nurturing a wide range of talents and interests.

In addition to curricular reform, the Ministry embarked on a human resource development programme aimed at upgrading the qualifications and skills of Omani diploma-holding teachers of different school subjects to degree level. The BA (TESOL) Project, implemented in collaboration with the University of Leeds, UK, from 1999 to 2008, was geared towards helping the Ministry to achieve the above-mentioned goal. To date more than 800 English teachers have successfully graduated with a BA in Educational Studies (TESOL) degree from University of Leeds, while more than 50 have completed Masters degrees there. The BA Project has therefore provided the Ministry with a national cadre of skilled graduates who are familiar with current theories of teaching and learning, confident in their practices as teachers, capable of carrying out investigations in their own classrooms, skilled in analysing their pupils' needs and able to keep up to date with pedagogical issues in English. The Ministry considers these graduates, equipped with their new knowledge and skills, to be well-positioned to develop the critical thinking, reflecting and problem-solving skills that the new English curriculum envisages and thus capable of delivering the reform initiative effectively.

Alongside these structural, curriculum and human resource development initiatives, the Ministry also wishes to encourage teachers to take an active part in the process of change through their own investigations. By investigating teaching and learning issues of day-to-day concern in their own classrooms, teachers will become more reflective and research-oriented, and the Ministry hopes this will also improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools, strengthen the motivation of graduates towards their profession and develop a strong research culture in the Sultanate.

Developing classroom research skills has always been an integral part of the University of Leeds BA (TESOL) programme. The current volume exhibits the efforts of Cohorts 5 and 6 of the BA programme, being an edited collection of 20 of the best research projects conducted by teachers from those cohorts. As with volumes 1 and 2 it features research on practical issues that illustrate the daily concerns of teachers of English in Oman and demonstrates that BA graduates of Cohorts 5 and 6 have developed research abilities, which they can apply in carrying out their own classroom-based research. The research projects reported on here employ various approaches and methods which show that Oman is continuing to develop its expertise in the field of educational research.

I am delighted to congratulate those whose dissertation work is included in this volume and to commend them for their high quality performance. I hope that the investigations reported here will prompt other teachers to realize that they too can engage in classroom-based research in order to investigate issues of importance with the aim of improving teaching and learning in their classrooms.

I would like to extend the Ministry's thanks and appreciation to all those whose support and efforts have been evident in the success of this project.

I pray to Almighty Allah to help us serve this country under the wise and dynamic leadership of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, may Allah protect him.

H.E. Dr Muna Al-Jardania, Under-secretary for Education and Curriculum, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman

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Introduction: Classroom-Based Inquiry

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1 THE BA TESOL PROJECT

This is the third in a series of publications through which the Ministry of Education in Oman is disseminating the research projects of graduates of the University of Leeds BA TESOL. The BA TESOL teacher education project (as part of a broader educational reform in Oman) ran from 1999 to 2009 and was completed by over 800 Omani teachers of English. The programme evolved over the years but one constant was that all teachers on the programme were required to complete, as their final piece of work, an empirical dissertation. A selection of the research conducted by graduates in Cohorts 1 and 2 of the BA TESOL was published in Borg {2006}, with a second volume for Cohorts 3 and 4 appearing two years later {Borg, 2008}. Both these publications are available on-line at the Ministry of Education website at

http://www.moe.gov.om/portal/sitebuilder/sites/EPS/English/MOE/baproject/MAIN_BAGE.aspx and this current volume – which includes work from Cohorts 5 and 6 - will in time appear there too.

This volume reflects the continuing commitment shown by the Ministry of Education to recognizing the achievements of teachers who did the BA TESOL. A second recurrent theme which was recognized in the earlier volumes in this series is the Ministry's aim of promoting research more widely in ELT in Oman. The availability of collections such as this make accessible to a wider audience research conducted on a range of ELT issues across Oman. It is also hoped that such accessibility will prompt ELT professionals around the Sultanate to engage in investigations of their own, prompted by particular findings that are reported here.

The studies in this volume are all classroom-based and in the vast majority of cases the researchers are investigating aspects of ELT with their own learners (in classes from Grade 1 to Grade 10). There is a strong sense here, then, of teacher research - of practitioners using systematic investigation to further their understandings of their own teaching. In many cases, the studies are driven by a

desire to understand the relative impact of different pedagogical strategies on aspects of English. Another common feature here is that none of these studies set out to produce results which are generalizable in a statistical sense; the samples investigated are often small and the volume of data often modest. This is in keeping with the spirit of teacher research. Nonetheless, I am confident that there is much here that is of relevance to other teachers of English in young learner settings not just in Oman but more generally.

Methodologically, a range of qualitative and quantitative strategies have been employed in this work, with a greater tendency towards the latter. Observation and tests are widely used in assessing the impact on learners of pedagogical interventions, while there are also examples of interviews, retrospective verbal protocols, and document analysis.

2 CONTENTS & ORGANIZATION

The 20 chapters presented here are edited versions of BA TESOL dissertations completed by Omani teachers of English. The original reports were on average 8,000 words long and in editing them I have standardised their organization and layout; I have also presented the material more concisely, particularly in the literature review. I have retained as much detail as possible of the research procedures that were followed. I have also made editorial adjustments to language and style as required.

In Chapter 1, Khalifa Al-Asalam investigates the introduction of self-assessment with one of his classes. While self-assessment is an integral part of the new Basic Education curriculum in Oman, it does not feature in the General Education curriculum which, while being phased out, continues to operate around the Sultanate. This study illustrates how self-assessment can be introduced into an ELT context and provides evidence of its positive impact on learners and their learning.

Chapters 2-4 share an interest in communication between teachers and learners. In Chapter 2, Ashraf Bait Darwish reports how he worked with colleagues to examine and enhance their use of gesture in teaching English. He organized a workshop to raise teachers' awareness of the value of teachers' gestures in supporting learners' understandings and found evidence that this workshop supported the teachers in using gestures more effectively in their teaching. In Chapter 3, Nasra Al-Rubkhi analyzed the use of teacher questions in four Grade 4 classrooms and found that while these teachers used questions for a range of purposes they tended to use display questions more than others. Fahad Al-Shaibani also examined teachers' questions, though his focus was on the form of these questions – particularly their grammaticality. This study raises some interesting questions about what counts as a grammatical question in English.

Five studies in this chapter focused on aspects of speaking. In Chapter 5, Amna Beit Khalifa examines the use of posters as a way of encouraging Grade 1 learners to speak English. She concludes that posters pushed the learners to participate confidently in speaking activities and to produce accurate language. In Chapter 6, Sumaya Al-Badi examined the motivation of Grade 2 learners to speak English. A key finding here was that learners' perceptions that their own ability in English

hindered their willingness to participate in oral activities in the classroom. Fatma Al-Senaidi studied another dimension of oral proficiency – communication strategies. In Chapter 7, she investigated the extent to which explicit instruction in communication strategies, such as asking for clarification, had an effect on learners' use of these in oral activities. This study suggests that explicitly teaching communication strategies can have some impact on learners' interactive speech in English. There was more turn-taking among learners here after the strategy training than before, though there was limited evidence that the quality of learners' speech improved. Still on the theme of oral English, Chapter 8 reports Sameera Al-Senaidi's investigation of how role plays might be used to promote the oral fluency of Grade 4 learners. This study suggests that learners became more fluent as they progressed through a series of role plays, though the design of the study does not permit the conclusion that it was the role plays that were responsible for this improvement in learners' speech (not being able to conclude that improvements in learner performance were caused by a particular pedagogical intervention is a limitation which several of the studies in this volume acknowledge).

Chapter 10 examines the relationship between learning environment and learner participation. Fatima Al-Mashani compared learners' participation in classroom lessons with how they behaved in lessons taught outside the classroom – and in one case outside the school. She reports higher levels of participation in the lessons outside the classroom and, while not suggesting that classroom lessons should be abandoned, she does draw some implications from her research for how lessons in the classroom can be made more engaging for learners.

The next four chapters focus on ways of enhancing the learning of L2 vocabulary. In Chapter 11, Badriya Al-Salmi compares flashcards and shared reading as two strategies for teaching vocabulary in Grade 1. She concluded that the use of shared reading supported the learning of receptive vocabulary more effectively than teaching the same vocabulary using flashcards. Huda Al-Shizawi, in Chapter 12, explored the use of PowerPoint to teach vocabulary, also in Grade 1. The results of this study provide support for the claims in the literature that PowerPoint can motivate learners; more specifically, learners taught vocabulary using PowerPoint performed better on immediate and delayed vocabulary tests than learners taught using flashcards. The third study of vocabulary here, by Ghania Al-Aliyani in Chapter 13, focused on the impact that games had on Grade 3 learners' receptive knowledge of vocabulary. Here, the learners who experienced the games did much better on subsequent vocabulary tests than those who learned vocabulary in the manner suggested by the coursebook, although design limitations in the study are acknowledged when these findings are discussed. Another interesting finding here was that not all learners responded equally positively to all games. Chapter 14 presents the final study of vocabulary here. Aliya Al-Sarhi explored the relative impact on vocabulary learning of stories taught via audio recordings plus the textbook on one hand and through shared reading on the other. The test scores for the shared reading group were, except in one case which is discussed, consistently better than those for the audio recording plus textbook group.

Chapters 15-17 analyze aspects of writing. In Chapter 15, Hikmat Al-Hadrami analyzed the mechanical writing errors of Grade 5 learners. The study identified a range of basic errors to do with writing posture and handwriting which presented a serious challenge to the development of the learners' ability to write in English. Hamed Al-Mezeini's study in Chapter 16 examined the impact on learners' spelling of explicitly teaching them spelling rules. The disappointing but still interesting conclusion here was that teaching learners spelling rules did not enable them to spell more correctly. Chapter 17 also focuses on English spelling. Sheikha Al-Yahyai examined the types of spelling errors her Grade 4 learners make and introduced a series of activities with the aim of improving the learners' spelling. While girls generally performed better than boys on the vocabulary tests administered after the pedagogical interventions in this study, the overall conclusion once again was that the focused spelling activities used had little effect on learners' spelling ability.

The final three chapters here examined storytelling and reading. In Chapter 18, Sharifa Al-Biloshi investigated whether parental involvement might support the development of reading with two Grade 2 learners. The results were mixed; in one case the parental support requested was not forthcoming while in the second case there was some evidence that parental support can support children's reading in English. In Chapter 19, Amna Al-Ma'mari combined her interests in technology and storytelling to examine the impact that presenting stories through PowerPoint had on her Grade 1 learners. Her results suggest that learners were motivated by and responded well to storytelling supported by PowerPoint; test scores also suggested that PowerPoint stories might support learning more effectively than stories told using big books. The final study, by Hafheedha Al-Homidi examined how learners respond to challenges they face when reading narrative texts. This study identified a range of reading strategies and reading knowledge that learners utilized during the reading process.

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