

# 6 Being a Regional Tutor on the BA Educational Studies (TESOL) Programme

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The provision of ongoing academic support to BA Educational Studies (TESOL) candidates widely dispersed throughout the Sultanate of Oman was the responsibility of BA Regional Tutors (RTs), work that it is generally agreed they carried out very effectively (see, for example, Freeman, 2007). Employed by the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman and operating from well-resourced Regional BA (TESOL) Training Premises, RTs were each primarily responsible for the academic and pastoral support of a group of BA students residing and working in a particular region of the Sultanate. The purpose of this article is to outline the various duties involved in a typical three-year RT posting and discuss some of the different roles RTs had to assume in the course of those duties. The author of this article served as an RT between 1999 and 2008, working with three consecutive cohorts in two regions of the Sultanate. The ideas and views expressed in this chapter are based on his experiences of providing academic and pastoral support to different regional cohorts and of working closely with other RTs, Ministry of Education personnel and University of Leeds staff during those years.

## 2 PROFILE

It should be noted at the outset that when RTs are referred to in this chapter in the singular, the male subject and object pronouns are used. This is because in all but one case, and that only for a year's duration, RT posts were filled by males, chiefly because it was felt that males would be more likely to stay in post for the duration of their contracts (for reasons explained more fully in Chapter 12). Most RT postings were outside the capital area and in some cases in fairly remote towns and regions, and so required postholders to be relatively self-contained in their lifestyles and able to function effectively without regular access to the kinds of educational, recreational and social amenities available in the larger urban centres of Muscat, Sohar and Salalah.

Postings in these large urban areas were generally, but not exclusively, reserved for married individuals with young families. However, all RTs had access to the capital when they attended meetings twice a semester. Furthermore, as Winter and Summer schools were mostly split between Muscat and Sohar (with Nizwa, 150 kms from Muscat, a third and only occasional venue), most did not feel too isolated. Only RTs residing in Ibri and Sur lived further than 90 minutes' drive from one of the large cities mentioned in the paragraph above.

Apart from their male gender, RTs shared a very diverse range of characteristics. As Richards & Rixon (2002) point out, they were all well-qualified, with teaching qualifications and Masters' degrees, and all had experience of teaching young learners, teaching English for Academic Purposes and teacher training. However, their interests varied, and they brought to discussions expertise in a range of topics and sometimes contrasting perspectives, which led to healthy and robust debates. Regarding experience, some had previously worked in exotic locations, such as the Solomon Islands, Nepal, Sudan, and Papua New Guinea, while quite a few had previously worked in the Middle East.

Despite the occasional hardships experienced by RTs residing in provincial locations, the job was generally perceived as highly desirable, and staff turnover was very low. Throughout the life of the project, there were never more than 14 RTs employed at any one time, and in total, between 1999 and 2009, when the project finished, there were only 23. The last RT new to the project was employed in 2003. Nine RTs completed at least two contracts and another 8 completed one (typically of three years' duration). Only 6 of the 23 resigned within a year. No fewer than 7 served at least 5 years and 2 RTs (including the author of this chapter) completed 9 years on the project. This high degree of continuity benefited students and management. There was also a high degree of continuity among staff at the University of Leeds. Clearly, this was a rewarding project to work on.

### **3 DUTIES**

The remit of RTs necessarily had to accommodate the expectations of both the Ministry of Education in Oman, who were their employers and who would be funding the BA Project, and those of the University of Leeds, who were the providers of the BA Educational Studies (TESOL) Programme and guardians of its academic standards. Negotiations between these two institutions determined the main duties of the RT. Among these were:

- To teach twice weekly Day Release sessions;
- To attend at lectures and deliver small-group seminars during the Winter and Summer intensive schools in Oman;
- To provide ongoing academic support to BA students within the limits permitted by the Ministry of Education and University of Leeds as set out in the Guidelines for Support;
- To keep accurate and up-to-date records of students' progress;
- To communicate and cooperate with the Project Manager and other RTs to ensure consistency in course delivery and academic support across the Sultanate;
- To be responsible for the running of BA Regional Training Premises, including all equipment and regional libraries;

- To cooperate and liaise with regional authorities and Ministry of Education officials in matters pertaining to the effective running of the BA course in the regions;
- To visit students in their schools once per semester for the duration of the course in order to observe teaching and encourage BA candidates to reflect on their practice and make links to course content;
- To write school visit reports, annual student reports and annual cohort reports;
- To attend RT meetings with the Project Manager twice per semester.

During their tenure, RTs were mentored, managed, monitored and advised by the BA Project Manager, based in Muscat. Communications between RTs, the Ministry of Education and the University of Leeds were normally channeled through the Project Manager.

#### **4 ORIENTATION**

Following recruitment by the Ministry of Education and the University of Leeds, RTs appointed at the start of Cohorts 1-3 had a period in which to become familiar with the demands and expectations of the professional cultures of both the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman and the School of Education at the University of Leeds.

To facilitate a smooth transition into the professional culture of the BA Project and the wider context of the Ministry of Education in Oman, RTs had several days of briefings from the BA Project Manager upon their arrival in Muscat, followed by several weeks in their regions to meet local officials, visit prospective BA candidates in their schools, and organise their training centres and Regional Libraries. Most RTs had experience of working in the Arab world and so were already sensitive to cultural factors relating to living and working in Oman.

Orientation into the professional and academic culture of the School of Education was facilitated by a two-week visit to Leeds, during which RTs met their colleagues-to-be at the University of Leeds, received briefings on the content of the course, modes of assessment and the quantity and quality of academic support they were expected to give. It was also established during this two-week period that RTs would assume a mentoring role in relation to their students in order to facilitate their professional and academic development and their integration into a western academic community.

#### **5 THE BA (TESOL) PROGRAMME**

The BA (TESOL) Programme exposed candidates to a number of different learning experiences designed to replicate, as far as circumstances allowed, those enjoyed by students attending a similar course at the University of Leeds in the UK. RTs were directly involved in guiding and supporting their regional cohorts through all of these, with the exception of the Summer School in Leeds. It should be stressed that over the duration of the nine-year period under discussion, there was considerable evolution in the various aspects of the BA Project and Programme. As

time went on, those RTs who remained in post for more than one cohort became more familiar with the workings of the education system in Oman, with the mindset of Omani English teachers, with the needs and abilities of Omani school children and with the content of the course. This growing experience naturally fed into their work, generally making them more effective operators in their respective regions and more skilled mentors and mediators of course content. Over time, the reputation of the BA Project grew around the Sultanate, and with this came even more enhanced cooperation from regional Ministry of Education officials and school administrators. Over the six cohorts, there was also considerable adaptation and refinement of the BA Programme materials and modes of delivery. The University of Leeds were always receptive to the views of RTs, students and other interested parties and regularly adapted, deleted or expanded various elements of all modules in the programme. While a cohort-by-cohort analysis of the running of the project is outside the remit of this chapter, this section will attempt to identify some of the salient learning experiences the course offered to students and highlight some of the roles they required RTs to perform.

### **5.1 The Pre-sessional Course**

Once back in Oman from their orientation in Leeds, RTs returned to their regions to conduct a two-week Pre-sessional course with their regional cohorts. Although not part of the BA programme proper, the Pre-sessional course was provided by the University of Leeds with the purposes of giving BA candidates grounding in basic academic literacy and introducing them to the rigours of study at undergraduate level in a western academic tradition. For RTs and candidates, there was the additional imperative of initiating cooperative and professional group and individual relationships that would be central to the success of both students on the BA course and RTs in supporting their academic development.

### **5.2 Winter School**

Almost immediately after the completion of the Pre-sessional, the BA programme proper began with a two-week intensive course, which students from the various regions attended at one of two main training centres, depending on the size of the Cohort. This was staffed by both University of Leeds teaching staff and RTs. Main input sessions were led by Leeds staff, with RTs in a supportive role, while review and practice sessions were fronted by both Leeds staff and RTs. During this first intensive course, BA candidates studied the bulk of the main input sessions for two modules and were familiarized with the pattern which delivery of material would follow for the duration of the BA course. At the end of the two weeks of study, students received their first assignment question.

It was during this first opportunity to work together that professional relations between RTs and University of Leeds staff were largely established. Being more familiar with the materials to be taught, and in some cases being the authors of those materials, Leeds staff initially assumed the roles of leading lectures and delivering the bulk of the course content. RTs, on the other hand, a number of whom had previous experience of Arab and Omani educational systems, believed that their

knowledge of the local culture and appreciation of students' needs and abilities complemented the strengths of Leeds colleagues and expressed a willingness to take on a fuller than expected role. Happily, a compromise was reached whereby Leeds staff and RTs, paired together, could negotiate their own modes of running lectures, which in most cases, involved team teaching. This *modus operandi* was to continue for the whole nine years of the BA Project.

### **5.3 Day Release**

The first block of Day Release began shortly after the Winter School. Regional cohorts were divided into two groups, with each group attending their Regional Centre one day per week. Day Release sessions consisted of a total of five contact hours, the first three of which were usually devoted to completing the input sessions of modules taught during the preceding intensive course, unpacking and revising course content, clarifying the requirements of the assignment, and exam preparation. During the second part of a Day Release session, students had the opportunity to access library resources, use computers, engage in private study, while the RT conducted small-group or individual tutorials and took care of such administrative matters as monitoring attendance, issuing warnings to those at risk of falling below 80% attendance on a module, making informal checks for plagiarism, keeping records of performance and recording library withdrawals and returns.

It was during this initial block of Day Release that the first challenge of the BA course was revealed, namely the gap between the expectations of the candidates regarding the quantity and quality of assignment support that should be offered by the RT on the one hand, and the quantity and nature of support that RTs were actually permitted to give, as set out in the Guidelines for Support document, prepared by the Ministry of Education and revised by the University. Understandably, students viewed the approaching deadline for submission of the first assignment with considerable trepidation. Almost none had ever written a text of 3,000 words in English and so most felt insecure about their abilities to achieve such a task. Many had difficulties actually understanding the language of the assignment question and so were confused about what exactly they were required to do. Significant numbers had a satisfactory understanding of the requirements of the assignment, but struggled to organize their ideas in a coherent way. Almost all were unfamiliar with library research and with reading long texts in English and so had difficulties in supporting their work. How were RTs to respond to this situation?

In the early cohorts of the BA Project, some RTs responded by addressing the academic needs of their students in order to enable them to submit work of a satisfactory standard. This meant helping candidates to understand the specific requirements of the assignment, encouraging them to identify, understand and use technical vocabulary relevant to the topic of the assignment, modeling paragraph writing, cooperating on developing an outline for the assignment, helping them to identify relevant texts, and modeling introductions and conclusions. Other RTs chose to adhere strictly to the Guidelines for Support and were less flexible in

addressing their students' needs. The divergence of results between regions that resulted necessarily led to concerns being expressed by the University of Leeds about parity of support and in some cases raised concerns that some RTs were offering excessive support. But when the results for the first assignment came out, there was a clear relationship between scores and the amount of support that students had received. Furthermore it was apparent that without considerable support, especially in the early months, many students would not succeed. These issues were addressed, at least in part, by an overhaul of the Guidelines of Support, a process in which RTs were integrally involved and which produced more explicitly stated tutor 'do's' and 'don'ts'. Although issues of support and parity across regions remained a matter of debate right through to the final cohort, it may be said that RTs became more conscious of the modes and amounts of support they offered and more cognizant of what was permissible and what was not. Of course, disparity of results across regions may also have been due to other factors, such as disparities in RTs' expertise and experience in given module areas, or varying levels of motivation across regional cohorts.

Results for the first and subsequent assignments were conveyed to students by their RTs. While most candidates accepted their grades with equanimity, there were not infrequent cases of students becoming upset about their results. In such circumstances, RTs were required to listen sympathetically to students' perceived grievances, mediate the feedback received from the university, which often involved reviewing the submitted work to identify and highlight problematic areas, and suggest courses of action to be taken to avoid future disappointments. In the early stages of the course, some students were reluctant to accept responsibility for their failures, but as the course progressed, it was pleasing to note that candidates generally became more conscious of their ownership of their work and consequently more willing to take responsibility for it.

While delivering disappointing grades to students could be problematic for tutors, informing them that their work was suspected of plagiarism not only entailed dealing with the emotional response of the student involved but also initiated a long and onerous administrative process for the students concerned, for their RTs, for the Project Manager and for the School of Education staff in Leeds. Plagiarism is of course an issue of paramount importance with regard to the integrity of qualifications offered by any educational establishment and therefore one which the University of Leeds took with the utmost seriousness. Plagiarism caused by deliberate attempts to deceive, which were few, and those resulting from lax referencing or careless use of material sourced from the internet, were treated with equal severity by the university. In cases falling into the latter category, the penalties were often viewed by the students concerned as incomprehensibly harsh. RTs had to tread a narrow line between publicly sympathizing with such individuals and ensuring that the plagiarism penalties were adequately addressed on the one hand, while privately yet unequivocally supporting the university's tough stand on the other. Plagiarism, I believe, was the one issue that automatically overrode the close bonds of loyalty and friendship existing between RTs and their students.

## **5.4 School visits**

Another important aspect of the RT's responsibilities was that of mentoring BA participants in their schools. The RT visited each of his BA students in their school once per semester for the duration of the three-year course, a total of six visits per student. For tutors with large regional cohorts, this constituted the main part of their weekly duties. The main purpose of these visits was to observe lessons, encourage teachers to reflect on what happened in their classrooms and to help them make links between their practice and ideas and concepts met during their studies on the BA course, with secondary purposes of discussing assessment and course-related issues and offering pastoral care. There was the additional benefit for RTs of keeping abreast of issues relating to the classroom in Oman, which could be used to explain or illustrate BA course content during Day Release.

RTs' estimations of the value of school visits and the quality of learning that they led to tended to vary, though anecdotal reports suggest school visits were generally viewed by most tutors and by many participants as an extremely valuable part of the programme. However, in the early years of the project, a culture of evaluative observation still existed. The experience of being observed in the classroom by Senior English Teachers, Supervisors and other educational professionals was familiar to all teachers prior to joining the BA course and for some it had on occasion involved strong criticism and reprimand, leaving them upset, frustrated and misunderstood. As such feelings would not be conducive to the fostering of professional development, it was necessary for RTs to clarify from the outset the non-evaluative purposes and intended outcomes of their observation visits. Of course, it is difficult not to walk into classrooms and see things which we might do differently. Added to this, when teachers themselves, through years of conditioning, expect and in some cases even demand judgments on their lessons, attempts by RTs to steer pre- and post-lesson discussions along a more facilitative route were initially met with some resistance. Fortunately the wide-ranging educational reforms taking place in the Sultanate in recent years included development of the area of educational supervision, with the result that by the time the project reached the later cohorts, more supportive and facilitative supervision was the norm and RTs were reporting much more positive experiences of school visits. Indeed some RTs, particularly in the latter years of the project, e.g. Wyatt & Arnold (2005), applauded the innovative practices they observed while visiting teachers. It is gratifying to note that a sizable proportion of Supervisors of English in the Sultanate today are BA graduates.

## **5.5 Summer Schools in Oman**

Coming at the end of a grueling Day Release block and during the hottest part of the year, the summer intensive courses in Oman during the first and third years of each cohort were demanding for BA participants and RTs alike. As this was the first face-to-face meeting with Leeds colleagues since the previous Winter School, it was not unusual for concerns over such issues as assignment support, assignment deadlines, assignment feedback, assessment schedules, timetables and Summer

School workloads to be raised in the staff-room. This led to sometimes lively debate.

As in the first Winter School, individual Leeds staff and RTs paired together negotiated the roles they wished to assume during input sessions. An important, though unofficial and not always appreciated, role of RTs during intensive courses was the signalling of culturally sensitive or inappropriate course material.

## **5.6 The Leeds Summer School**

Although RTs were not directly involved in the Leeds Summer School, they were involved in preparing students for some of the work to be undertaken there and in helping students process and clarify the material following their return to Oman. One of the functions of the Summer School in Leeds was to provide participants with opportunities to develop their Dissertation research questions and research approaches through one-on-one tutorials with University of Leeds staff. Students were therefore expected to have identified their topic of research and to have a rationale for their study by the time they travelled to the UK. With earlier cohorts, the lukewarm reception which some of these provisional research proposals sometimes received from staff in Leeds again revealed the wide gap between what BA candidates were capable of and what the university expected. In later cohorts, however, it was generally accepted that identifying worthwhile topics for research, framing research questions and developing appropriate research methods was perhaps not so straightforward a task as was initially conceived.

## **6 ROLES OF THE RTS**

Having considered the key learning experiences of BA candidates, this chapter will conclude by highlighting specifically the different mentoring roles assumed by the RTs during the three years of each cohort. These are based on the mentoring roles discussed by Malderez (2001).

### **6.1 RTs as models**

While it is generally the case that Omani BA candidates were already thoroughly professional in their school duties, many found it challenging to cope with the added demands of study on the BA course. The ability to balance one's personal and family life, one's school duties and the demands of the BA was one of the main keys to success. In addition to the frequent advice offered to students by RTs on the necessity of time management, RTs also modeled the skill of multi-tasking just by carrying out their daily and weekly duties. A typical Day Release session might involve the RT in teaching and reviewing course material, discussing assignment issues, providing individual and group tutorials, administering library withdrawals and returns, dealing with individual plagiarism cases and providing IT support. Such multi-tasking did not escape the notice of students and, in my own case, not infrequently drew comments such as, "You are like a juggler." Several RTs also managed to initiate PhD studies while in post, which one can assume reinforced the notion among BA candidates that a lot can be achieved in a limited amount of time if that time is managed effectively.



## **6.2 RTs as acculturators**

Omani BA candidates were already highly experienced in the Omani education system when they joined the BA programme and needed no advice or guidance from RTs in this sphere. In fact, BA candidates sometimes acted as acculturators to those RTs who were new to Oman or unfamiliar with regional administrative procedures. However, Omani BA candidates had little or no knowledge or experience of the academic culture of a British university and it was in this sphere that RTs assumed the role of acculturators. This role involved familiarizing students with the conventions of academic writing, the importance of supporting one's work, referencing conventions, examination strategies and procedures, effective use of feedback from the university, research ethics and methods, the seriousness and consequences of plagiarism and, in a few unhappy cases, dealing with charges of plagiarism. While it may be supposed that the workings of the British academic community remained obscure and mysterious to a proportion of BA candidates even after completing their course of study, the fact that those BA graduates who went on to do MAs in Leeds generally fared very well indicates that RTs' efforts as acculturators were at least in part successful.

## **6.3 RTs as educators**

Clearly the primary role of the RTs was that of educator, one that extended far beyond just delivering or reviewing course content. A primary objective of the BA (TESOL) Programme, though not necessarily one universally recognized by students, was to develop reflective skills and thereby to develop competencies through reflection on practice. By broadening students' theoretical understanding of teaching and learning processes, it was hoped that they could be encouraged to use this expanded knowledge to reflect deeply and meaningfully on their own classrooms and make informed decisions about their classroom practice. This was clearly challenging for teachers for whom strict adherence to prescribed teaching procedures was the norm. As alluded to earlier in the chapter, initial visits to teachers in their schools revealed that most teachers were unused to engaging in non-evaluative discussion and reflection on the observed lesson. Clearly most teachers were used to being told what was good about their lesson and what was not, and given quick-fix solutions to their shortcomings. However using such techniques as showing them pieces of data collected during the lesson observation (short transcripts, interaction pattern diagrams, descriptions of individual pupil behaviours, etc.) and asking them to comment helped develop a more reflective and analytical approach, while facilitative questioning by the RT encouraged teachers to make links to course content. There were, of course, a few cases where no amount of effort on the part of the RT could nudge the teacher in the direction of reflection, but in most cases there were significant developments in teachers' abilities to describe what had happened in their lessons and reflect on possible causes and reasons with a pleasing degree of fluency and lexical complexity.

## 6.4 RTs as supporters

Another important role of the RT during school visits and the BA course in general was that of supporter. Teachers in Oman, as with everywhere else, face challenges from many different directions. Heavy workloads, boisterous pupils, demanding school administrators and supervisors are ubiquitous in education systems the world over and can appear onerous to teachers. Having a sympathetic pair of ears to listen to problems can have an ameliorating effect. RTs, being well experienced in different educational roles and contexts, were able to empathise with the plight of teachers and so were in a position to fill this role at least to some degree.

The fifth role for mentors, as proposed by Malderez (ibid), is that of 'sponsor'. RTs, as outsiders in the Omani educational community, were never in a position to adopt this role, except in representing students to Leeds staff when they had personal problems which required official resolution (e.g. extensions to assignment deadlines).

## 7 CONCLUSION

As highlighted throughout this chapter, the relationship between RTs and their students, as defined by the Ministry of Education and the University of Leeds, was to be that of mentor and mentee, but in reality it turned out to be much more than that. It is testament to the legendary warmth and hospitality of the Omani people that RTs were very quickly embraced by their regional cohorts, enabling them to establish warm, cooperative and friendly relationships early in the programme. Sharing meals together, visiting some students in their homes, meeting their families, sharing personal problems and concerns and generally being available to listen and help out all impacted positively on the group dynamic, served to sustain both RTs and BA students during the arduous three years of the course and made the experience more personally and professionally enriching and more enjoyable for all concerned.

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