

# 16 Recent Developments in In-Service Language Teacher Education in Oman

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## 1 BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Description of the training context

By in-service teacher training, we mean courses which are specifically designed to cater for the needs of in-service teachers. In-service programmes may be used to help to tackle inadequacies of pre-service training, to support the implementation of new changes in the curriculum or to promote teachers' continuing professional development. They can also provide opportunities for teachers to share experiences and learn from each other. The motivation behind any form of in-service teacher training (INSET) and development programmes is 'improving' the teaching-learning of English in schools either by introducing teachers to new curricula, materials and methods, or by enhancing teachers' professional development in some way" (Hayes, 2004: 63). Thus in-service teacher training plays an essential role in supporting the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

Within the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman there are a number of in-service teacher training courses run for English teachers with the general aim of upgrading teaching and learning in schools and of supporting the implementation of the new curriculum introduced as part of the Basic and Post-basic educational reform initiative. These courses are currently conducted by over 20 Omani trainers in eight regions around the Sultanate. Several of these trainers are University of Leeds BA (TESOL) graduates and/or holders of MAs in Education from the same university, while the Training Adviser is a former BA Regional Tutor with over six years' experience on the BA Project. Each course that trainers run has its own purposes and goals, and focuses on meeting the needs of a specific group of teachers. There are two types of training programmes; longer term courses (of between 50 and 80 contact hours taught over a period of a semester) and workshops (usually taught in a day or two).

The course participants are identified through Regional Supervisors of English and are taught in mixed gender groups of up to 25 teachers. Some are in their first year of teaching, others are experienced teachers. Despite an ongoing programme of Omanisation, there are still a number of teachers of different nationalities who contribute to the Omani education system, including teachers from South Asia and North Africa, hence not all participants are Omani. Training is always conducted in English.

## **1.2 Rationale for training programmes**

The longer term in-service teacher training courses in Oman are generally structured in one of two ways. Some are run intensively on a block basis. One block usually consists of a week of continuous training, where teachers are away from their schools. Others are structured on a day release basis, where teachers are released from school duties once a week for a whole semester. The rationale for this training format is discussed below.

Block training is considered to be more appropriate for training teachers intensively over a short period of time, and also for training teachers who are based in remote schools and who cannot travel daily to a training centre, possibly hundreds of kilometres away. However, based on our experience and feedback from participants, trainers and others, we tend to follow a day release structure wherever possible for several reasons. Firstly, a day release course is more convenient and practical for trainers as it allows time for them to reflect on taught sessions and adjust future sessions by responding to participants' needs and feedback. Moreover structuring training courses in this way allows time for the trainer to be more thoroughly prepared for each session. In addition, it is practical in terms of following up assignments and coursework and handing them back to participants. Also the trainer has more opportunity to discuss training issues such group dynamics and dealing with problematic situations, with co-trainers, to get feedback about his or her own training skills. Day release makes it easier to incorporate reflections on these issues into the next session. The trainer also can follow up administrative issues like absences.

From the point of view of participants, a day release course provides opportunities for them to go back into their classrooms and put their new knowledge/ understanding into practice, by for example trying out new techniques, which were explored in the sessions. It is therefore a way of connecting the classroom to the training room, especially if participants are asked to collect data from their classrooms, such as transcripts, their own reflections or their pupils' work. Such activities can build up teachers' confidence about using a new practice, help them to recognize the effectiveness of new practices and how to deal with difficulties which arise and thus help to develop a deeper understanding of whatever innovation is being introduced. More importantly, sharing and offering support to each other on a regular basis after trying out new practices hopefully helps them develop 'a pedagogic validity' for what they are doing and to become aware of the principles underlying the innovation (Hayes, 1995: 260).

Furthermore, day release results in minimum disruption to schools. It is easier for a school administration to move a teacher's lessons from one day and distribute them on the remaining school working days than to release a teacher for a whole week to attend a training course, an option which will result in students losing between 20 and 25 English lessons and will also lead to the teacher falling behind with the syllabus.

Finally, feedback from teachers shows that training courses operated on a block basis can be a very exhausting experience, and can often be too intensive to enable participants to absorb the new skills or information. In consequence, trainers on such intensive courses have often had to adapt and even reduce the planned activities.

## **2 DEVELOPMENT OF COURSES**

### **2.1 Previous courses and workshops**

Since the implementation of the Educational reforms in 1998, English training conducted by Regional Teacher Trainer Advisors (who were exclusively British until 2003, when the first Omani trainers were appointed) has focused on two areas. The first of these has involved supporting language ability, primarily in teachers who were preparing themselves to join the BA Programme. The second, and primary aim, has been to support the introduction of the new curriculum and teaching methodology implemented through Educational Reform. Thus, the work of Regional Teacher Trainers and BA Regional Tutors (RTs) intersected for a number of years, as the BA Programme contained language, methodology and research strands and supported curriculum renewal through capacity-building. Many of the BA students had colleagues in their schools on short courses run by the Regional Teacher Trainer, and the interactions between these two groups led to a continual sharing of ideas.

As has been described in this volume, the BA Programme was designed and developed by the School of Education, University of Leeds, and was taught by University of Leeds staff and locally based RTs. It not only successfully upgraded over 800 English teachers to degree level, but also played a significant part in the professional development of those teachers and in supporting the educational reforms generally. As it was a Project, it was delivered and managed separately from other training programmes, though it operated in collaboration with regional authorities and used the long-existing infrastructure of in-service delivery, particularly Day Release. Furthermore, besides encouraging a sharing of ideas, it impacted on training in the regions in other ways. Firstly it provided an excellent TESOL library for each region, which was used by Regional Supervisors of English and other interested professionals. Secondly, BA RTs themselves provided support for regional initiatives, including contributions to regional forums. Thirdly, it encouraged each region to raise the English language proficiency of its teachers to at least the minimum level required to study on the BA Programme.

Teachers whose language proficiency was not at the required PET level had to study on a Preparatory Language Course (PLC) within the region. This course was

originally 150 hours, but was later delivered in shorter (75- and 50-hour) and longer (300-hour) forms, depending on the level and needs of participants. From 1998 to 2006, the only language development offered to teachers in government schools in Oman was this lower intermediate course specifically designed to prepare teachers to study on the BA Programme. When the BA Project started its final cohort, there was no longer any need for this course and attention shifted to supporting new teachers, many of whom had graduated from a private university in a neighbouring country, and were entering Cycle 1 Basic Education schools with very low English proficiency. A 50-hour language course was developed by trainers and piloted in 2007.

Support for the introduction of the new Basic Education curriculum was at first provided through a 150 hour Primary Training course (PRIT). When it started in 1998, the main aims of this course were to prepare teachers teaching English to learners in grades 4 to 6 in Elementary schools to teach younger learners from grade 1 to 4 in the new Basic Education schools, and to adopt a more child-centred and activity-based approach to their teaching in line with the new curriculum. It was initially designed for Diploma-holders with a few years' teaching experience. Most of the females later joined the BA Programme. As the implementation of the reforms continued and these children moved to cycle 2 of Basic Education (grades 5-8), another training course was added to prepare experienced Preparatory and Secondary school teachers (both men and women, Omanis and expatriates) to teach the new curriculum (the Lower Secondary Course for Teachers, or LSCT). Both these courses were offered to teachers before they started teaching the new Basic Education curriculum.

In addition to these main courses, trainers in some regions supported Senior English Teachers (SETs) through running a 25-hour SET course and encouraging regular SET meetings. Trainers also visited schools on a regular basis to support effective links between training and practice.

By the end of the academic year 2007/2008, the BA Project had all but ended and all the teachers who needed to be re-trained to teach in Cycle 1 Basic Schools had been trained. Experienced Omani teachers were still attending Cycle 2 courses, while the only teachers participating in PRIT courses were now newly qualified teachers, with very different needs and demands from the experienced teachers the course was originally intended for. Teachers attending the PRIT and LSCT courses were also already teaching in the Basic Education schools, which again represented a very different situation from that existing when the courses had been developed. Although these courses had been adapted and improved over the years by Regional Teacher Trainers, responding to the changing contexts they worked in, further adaptation seemed necessary by 2008 to make these courses more suitable for the new trainees.

Throughout the lifetime of the BA Project, English training posts in the regions became increasingly Omanised, meaning that where an Omani trainer was available and able to take on the responsibilities of training in a region, there would no longer be a need to employ a native English-speaking trainer. For the first time, there were a majority of regions where all English training was the responsibility of only

Omani trainers. A further change was the re-organisation of various aspects of the Ministry of Education and the shifting of responsibility and organisation of English training away from the Directorate of Curriculum to the Directorate of Human Resources. The purpose of this reorganization was to integrate the organisation and administration of the training of English teachers with the training of teachers of other subject areas and so to try to ensure consistency of support and evaluation of all training in the regions.

## **2.2 Recent course development initiatives**

During this period of change, the need arose to develop and standardize the courses being offered to support the implementation of the new English curriculum as part of the educational reform (renamed as the Cycle 1, Cycle 2 and Post Basic Education qualifying courses). It was decided that trainers should spend a year collaboratively developing and piloting new courses in the regions. Trainers, who were still at this time quite inexperienced, used their experience of working on, and evaluations of, previous training courses, and their knowledge of the educational context, to identify the needs of future participants. Trainers agreed on a suitable length for future courses balancing the needs of participants and the content to be taught against the practical implications of removing teachers from schools. Learning outcomes and content were agreed on and organized into the sessions available. Issues such as school visits and micro-teaching were also agreed upon. Trainers then took responsibility for transforming the detailed course outline into training sessions, and then teaching and evaluating those sessions. They were given input on the processes of planning and preparing sessions (Malderez & Wedell, 2007) and after delivering the courses, they met in materials development workshops and agreed on a core training content for the courses, along with detailed training notes.

Although challenging for the trainers, this experience resulted in a number of positive outcomes. Firstly, courses were developed collaboratively in the field, which resulted in a content that reflected the current needs of teachers and also resulted in trainers feeling ownership of these courses. Secondly, trainers networked closely with each other, sharing and shaping materials and ideas between the regions and developing a positive and supportive group dynamic. Finally, trainers had to explore new material and do a lot of background reading to support the development of their training materials. They reflected that this had been a challenging experience, but that they had developed professionally and personally as a result. Through engaging in this experience they developed skills that a number had first honed on University of Leeds BA and MA (TESOL) programmes.

As well as developing the methodology courses to support the curriculum reforms, the trainers and their Training Adviser engaged in developing other courses to support the continuing professional development of English teachers. One important development was the introduction of a research course for teachers. An original version of this 80-hour Research for Professional Development course was developed for the trainers and some supervisors to study on as part of their own professional development. They learned about small-scale classroom research

and qualitative data analysis while conducting research into their own practice as trainers (and supervisors). Having studied on the course, the trainers were involved in developing a revised version of the course to be taught by them in their regions to English teachers. Studying on the course not only helped them to explore their own practice, but also ensured they had the knowledge and confidence to teach the course themselves and support and supervise the research of teachers.

Another important course that has been developed is a revised course for Senior English Teachers (SETs). This has been expanded to a 75-hour comprehensive training for new SETs, designed to support these teachers through their first year of ensuring the quality of teaching and learning in their schools and being a mentor to their colleagues. Again, rather than develop this course centrally, it was decided to adopt a more inclusive model of course development. Both supervisors and trainers were involved in the development of this course and in teaching it to SETs. A writing committee was formed in Dakhiliya region composed of the two trainers, the Senior English Supervisor and another English supervisor from the region, as well as two SETs, one experienced and the other completing her first year as a SET. This committee used data collected in all the regions from SETs about their needs and their proposals for the content and structure of the course, to develop outcomes of the course, course content and structure as well as the training sessions. This course is being piloted, evaluated and revised in the 2009/2010 academic year.

### **2.3 Future course development**

While attention has understandably been focused on developing these longer courses, it is recognized that there needs to be more emphasis in the future on providing one-day workshops for specific groups of English teachers to meet specific demands (see Chapter 13). These workshops will be developed by trainers in their regions who will teach, evaluate and revise them before sharing them with colleagues in other regions. Within a very short period of time, it should be possible to build up a bank of tried and tested workshops. These workshops could also be taught in schools rather than in the training centre, bringing together teachers from a local cluster of schools. Senior teachers and supervisors can also become involved in the design and delivery of these workshops, and through this collaboration trainers can support the development of their understanding and workshop design skills.

Another area that requires further development is the support of English teachers' own language proficiency. Currently there is a 50-hour course provided at a lower-intermediate level to support teachers struggling to deliver the Cycle 1 curriculum due to their poor language proficiency. However, all teachers require continuing language development, especially those teaching in the upper grades of Cycle 2 and Post-basic education (see Chapters 7, 10, 11 and 14 for discussion of the language issue in relation to BA graduates). While the Omani trainers enjoy delivering the lower intermediate course, they are less confident about teaching on upper intermediate or advanced courses. Teachers too enjoy the input of native-speakers at this level, so a possible development may be to employ a native-speaker language instructor for each region, who would be solely responsible for supporting

and developing the language proficiency of English teachers in their region.

Equally important to the development of courses and workshops for English teachers has been the development of the trainers.

### **3 DEVELOPMENT OF TRAINERS**

#### **3.1 Omanisation of training positions**

There has been a slow but steady policy of introducing Omani trainers with the eventual aim of completely Omanising the training of English. Omani 'Trainers in Training' were originally asked to 'shadow' a native speaking Regional Teacher Trainer/Adviser for a whole year; developing an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the trainer through observation and discussion. The Omani trainer then gradually became involved in planning and teaching training courses. However, a different model of trainer training has been introduced now, as we outline below.

#### **3.2 Professional development and support of trainers**

The current system is that new trainers are provided with a 25-hour (one week) trainer training course in which they explore the theoretical and practical issues of training and being a trainer. The outcomes of the course aim to ensure the trainers are able to:

- Distinguish between briefing and training
- Use underlying theories of teacher education to inform practice and decision-making
- Analyse and design training tasks that are effective in developing teachers' knowledge and changing practice
- Structure and sequence coherent training sessions and courses
- Use techniques and routines to ensure effective group dynamics and a positive social environment
- Use a variety of skills and strategies to manage a variety of training situations
- Identify the challenges of being a multilingual trainer and be able to use a variety of strategies to overcome them
- Conduct school visits that support training and are more effective in developing teachers' knowledge and practices
- Use different methods of reflecting on learning

During their first year, trainers also develop a portfolio that includes a record of work done, reflections on that work in the form of a reflective journal, examples of materials designed, responses to a number of reading tasks set, reflections on being observed and the post-observation discussion and a case study into the perceptions of a participant on one of their courses. This portfolio should be a record of achievement as well as a record of learning and forms the basis of the end of probationary year discussion with the training adviser.

In addition to attending the trainer training course and developing their portfolio, new trainers are also visited and observed on a number of occasions and

have the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their training skills with the Training Adviser. This discussion provides an opportunity for trainers to reflect on their progress and identify personal objectives for further development with the support of an experienced trainer who understands the process they are going through. Wherever possible, they are also supported on a day to day basis by a more experienced colleague who adopts the role of mentor. There is no period of 'shadowing', with new trainers expected to take responsibility for teaching (increasingly larger) parts of training sessions. The process of planning sessions and reflecting on sessions is viewed as an important part of their professional development.

Trainers also attend regular meeting with the other trainers. This not only allows important issues to be discussed, but ensures close personal contact between the trainers in different regions and develops a positive and supportive group dynamic. It also results in greater consistency and standardization of training provision. Trainers are provided with their own teacher education mini-library, which is added to annually. Finally, trainers are given the opportunity to attend conferences, and are encouraged and supported to present at conferences themselves.

### **3.3 Multi-lingual training issues**

There are a number of issues to do with being a multi-lingual trainer that have had to be explored to support the continuing professional development of Omani trainers. We use the term 'multi-lingual trainer' to describe a trainer who trains in a language other than their L1. A distinction has been made between Native English Speaking Teachers/Trainers (NESTs) and Non-Native English Speaking Teacher/Trainers (NNESTs) (Medgyes, 1994; Maum, 2002). However, we consider it unhelpful to define something by what it is not, and see it as more positive to identify somebody by what they are doing; training in a language that is not their L1.

There are some obvious challenges to being a multi-lingual trainer, mainly linguistic. Trainers generally feel embarrassed about making errors in English. They feel that they are expected to know everything about English and how to use it as it is their field of expertise and their knowledge base. There are several areas where this is problematic. A key area is that Omani multi-lingual trainers are often reluctant to write on the whiteboard, especially when collecting and organizing ideas in plenary. This is simply because they are concerned about making spelling mistakes, and as a result often choose not to write. Another important area is knowledge of vocabulary. The trainers sometimes can't recall vocabulary items, or feel unable to explain vocabulary adequately. Occasionally they don't know vocabulary items used by participants, and feel that sometimes they are even being tested by participants. They also worry about making grammatical mistakes, especially when writing reports.

The Omani trainers also feel that they have some problems in their ability to communicate in English in a number of important areas. These include explaining ideas and concepts to participants, paraphrasing and summarizing ideas in oral communication, on the whiteboard for example, and when reading articles and



books, being over-elaborate and unable to be concise and precise in how to explain ideas.

However, there are a number of distinct advantages to being an Omani English trainer identified through observation and articulated by the trainers themselves. Firstly, there are advantages related to having a shared context and culture such as having an understanding of the educational context, the educational system, the needs of participants and the cultural issues that influence the content and processes of training. There are also distinct advantages related to having a shared language. There seems to be a more relaxed learning environment with participants feeling more secure, thinking that their language isn't being judged. Also they feel they can challenge and question ideas being discussed, something teachers might feel hesitant about doing with a native English speaker trainer. Having a shared first language also means the trainer can predict areas of difficulty, for example, which articles will be challenging or easy. The trainer's pronunciation and sentence structure also seems familiar and easy for participants to understand, and trainers can understand participants. Issues and ideas can be discussed and explained in both L1 and L2. Finally, a multi-lingual Omani trainer can be a positive role model for participants, who see their trainer as functioning effectively in an L2. This motivates them to also achieve more and creates a 'can do' attitude in the training room. There have been a number of examples of participants who want to become a trainer as a result of attending a training course run by an Omani trainer.

Although there are some obvious challenges faced by the Omani trainers, these can be overcome through awareness-raising and developing some specific strategies. The positive aspects for training confirm how important it is to continue to support and develop the Omanisation of English training in the Sultanate. However, there are a number of issues that continue to make it difficult to appoint and retain Omani trainers.

### **3.4 Attracting and retaining trainers**

Attracting experienced and skilled teachers and supervisors to the post of trainer is surprisingly difficult. When a trainer is appointed, they actually lose allowances they received for being a Basic Education teacher or a supervisor. There are no comparable allowances attached to the post of trainer. This effectively means that they receive a salary cut to become a trainer. The situation is further complicated by the fact that they are allocated the title 'Training Specialist', a title also given to staff in the training centres who follow up the administration of training. Retaining high quality individuals against competition from the Ministry of Higher Education and the new private institutions is also difficult. Experienced Omani trainers are in high demand as colleges and universities attempt to increase the percentage of Omani nationals employed in their institutions, and they are able to pay much higher wages.

In addition to the issue of salary and allowances, there is the more basic problem of title and promotion structure. The role of an Omani trainer is new, and although trainers in other subject areas are now being appointed, English trainers are already in the field training. To attract and retain these trainers, they need to be provided

with a title that matches their job description and a pay and promotion structure commensurate with the demands and the status of their job.

Trainers also need to be provided with other incentives of professional development to ensure that the job of trainer is perceived positively. This should include regular opportunities to attend conferences and courses as well as the opportunity to study for an MA. It should be said that these areas are currently being well supported by the Ministry of Education.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

This is a very exciting time for English language and language teacher training in the Sultanate. It is a time of change and development of training programmes and trainers themselves. Although there are many challenges in the form of developing the competencies of trainers, the quality of courses and the status of trainers, there is enough experience, skill and enthusiasm amongst the training team to ensure these challenges can be met.

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