

Classroom Research in English Language Teaching in Oman

Edited by
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*Ministry of Education
Sultanate of Oman*

Foreword

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has stressed the Sultanate's commitment to human resources development as a key priority for enhancing the process of education in Oman. The Ministry of Education of the Sultanate of Oman has therefore over the years initiated various educational programmes and projects with the aim of providing continuous professional development for its teachers. The BA (TESOL) Project, implemented by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the University of Leeds, UK, between 1999 and 2008, is considered to be one of the most successful of these educational reform initiatives. It is expected that the Project will eventually provide the Ministry with a national cadre of more than 850 skilful teachers and researchers, graduates of the University of Leeds BA in Educational Studies (TESOL) Programme, and well qualified to participate in the process of reform and renewal in the future.

The current volume represents an edited collection of 20 of the best dissertations written by participants from Cohorts 1 and 2 of the BA (TESOL) Programme. The Ministry is delighted to have the opportunity to publicise and disseminate the work of its BA graduates and it is my great pleasure both to congratulate those whose dissertation work is celebrated here and to commend them for their high quality work. I hope that they will exert their best efforts in continuing to support the educational process in future and in continuing their own professional development, particularly by engaging in classroom research, such as is illustrated in this collection, and publishing the results. I hope that this collection will motivate students of other Cohorts to achieve best practice in their own dissertations and to continue to develop themselves as classroom researchers.

It is also my great pleasure to thank all those who have been involved in supporting BA participants throughout their studies, particularly the Regional Tutors of the Ministry of Education and lecturers from the University of Leeds, School of Education, as well as all those who contribute to the management and administration of the project, both from the Ministry of Education and the from the University of Leeds, for their great efforts in helping project goals reach fruition. I would particularly like to thank Dr Simon Borg for editing the collection, and Fahad Al-Adi, who was responsible for layout. Without them this publication would not have been possible.

The dissertations summarized in the present volume provide evidence that the BA Programme and the BA Project are having the kinds of influences we had hoped for. In particular they demonstrate that the BA is enabling participants to develop research abilities, which they are capable of applying in carrying out small-scale classroom-based research. The collection also provides evidence that Oman is becoming a leader in educational research in TESOL in the region. It is planned that this will be the first of three

dissertation collections, which, together with other publications resulting from research on the BA Programme and Project will, it is hoped, not only enhance the impact of the Project, but also guide and inform future professional development planning within the region and enhance the international research profile of the Ministry of Education of the Sultanate of Oman.

I hope that efforts will continue to be made to ensure that the BA Project continues to be a success, for the benefit of present and future students. I pray to Allah the Almighty to help us serve this country under the wise and dynamic leadership of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, may Allah protect him.

Her Excellency Dr Muna Al-Jardany, Under-secretary for Education and Curriculum, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman

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Classroom Research as Professional Development

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ELT REFORM IN OMAN

The Sultanate of Oman has in recent years been implementing a programme of educational reform which is gradually transforming learners' experience of all facets of the curriculum. Nowhere has this reform been more evident than in the teaching of English. Two strands in the development of ELT in Oman are particularly relevant to this collection of papers. Firstly, a new curriculum – embodied in a series of locally-produced course books called *English for Me* (EfM) - is being phased in. In this new Basic Education curriculum children start learning English at the age of 6 (Grade 1). The curriculum also aims to reflect contemporary thinking in ELT by, for example, emphasising meaningful and purposeful language use, promoting self-assessment, and providing a variety of interactive and motivating language learning experiences. The older General Education curriculum, which continues to be taught in higher grades while the new curriculum is being introduced, is based on the series of course books called *Our World Through English* (OWTE). In this curriculum, learners started studying English at the age of 10 (Grade 4). While providing opportunities for oral practice, its primary focus is on the development of reading, writing and grammatical knowledge. The majority of Omani teachers of English will have taught OWTE for a number of years, and the transition these teachers are now making to EfM is being supported by the Ministry of Education through a programme of in-service training.

This brings us to the second aspect of the reform in ELT which is relevant here. In addition to locally-run training courses which prepare teachers to use the new curriculum, a major step by the Sultanate has been the decision to make ELT a graduate profession and to give all of its diploma-holding teachers of English (around 1000 individuals) the opportunity to obtain a Bachelor's degree from the University of Leeds in the UK. This BA Educational Studies (TESOL) programme has been running since 1999 and around 400 individuals have already graduated from it. The chapters in this volume represent research conducted by graduates from the first two cohorts of this programme.

ELT RESEARCH IN OMAN

The publication of this work is significant in a number of ways. Firstly, as part of its broader educational reform, the Ministry of Education in Oman

is aiming to promote amongst teachers a culture of inquiry. The potential benefits to teachers of engaging in classroom research have been widely discussed in education generally as well as in ELT more specifically (e.g. Burns, 1999; Freeman, 1998; Kincheloe, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Such activity, for example, can promote a deeper understanding in teachers of the events and processes that occur in their classrooms; it can enable teachers to explore ways of supporting their learners more effectively; doing research can also help teachers interpret curricula more critically. The Ministry is keen to promote and acknowledge research as a form of professional development among teachers of English in Oman and this publication reflects this intent.

Secondly, while much classroom research is conducted in ELT around the world, it is often the case that this work is not made public. Dissemination is an important characteristic of research; it not only allows the research to be subject to public scrutiny, but also increases the possibility that readers will be motivated to engage in research themselves. I hope that this publication achieves this latter goal. By making the work presented here publicly available, it is hoped that teachers of English in Oman and further afield will be inspired to inquire into similar or related matters in their own classrooms. One characteristic of the studies presented here is that they are small-scale; in this sense, they represent a feasible model for busy teachers who may feel that research is not something they have time for.

The reform in ELT taking place in Oman has yet to receive much international exposure. Another reason why this publication is important, then, is that it marks the start of a dissemination phase during which the outcomes of various research projects being conducted in the context of this reform will be publicised. The educational authorities in Oman recognise the importance of such research in both sustaining educational development and in raising the ELT profile of the country. Finally, but importantly, this volume celebrates and acknowledges the achievements of the contributors whose work features here.

CONTENTS & ORGANISATION

These chapters represent abbreviated versions of the dissertations written by the contributors while they were on the University of Leeds BA Educational Studies (TESOL) programme. In editing the original reports, I have standardised their organisation and layout; I have also reduced significantly the space originally allocated to the literature review. I have, though, aimed to retain as much as possible of the account of the research procedures which originally appeared, though for reasons of space I have generally removed references to the methodological literature originally cited. There was, however, a common core of research methods texts which the teachers had access to and used; those most often referred to were Nunan (1992), Bell (1999), Blaxter et al. (1996), Swetnam (2000), and Hopkins (1993).

This collection represents research conducted in a range of ELT classrooms in Oman, both in General Education and Basic Education.

Methodologically, the studies are diverse too, using questionnaires, tests, observations, lesson recordings, interviews, and document analysis in both naturalistic and more interventionist ways. The volume is divided into three parts.

Part 1 contains seven papers which examine facets of classroom discourse. In Chapter 1, Sarah Al-Balushi examines the impact of wait-time on her learners' participation. Chapter 2, by Mohammed Al-Hinai, focuses on the role of the L1 in the ELT classroom. Chapters 3-6 all focus on the use of questions by English language teachers. In Chapter 3, Hussein Al-Muani studies the impact of referential questions on learners' contributions in class, while in Chapter 4 Zaki Al-Kharbush presents a descriptive study of the types of questions used by teachers in elementary General Education classrooms. Nawal Al-Farsi's paper in Chapter 5 also analyses the types and purposes of teachers' questions, but in this case the focus is on Grade 4 Basic Education classrooms. In Chapter 6, Naseeb Al-Omrani compares questioning strategies in General Education and Basic Education classrooms, while in the final chapter of Part 1 Hamed Al-Fahdi examines the kinds of oral feedback used by English language teachers teaching a range of levels.

The eight papers in Part 2 focus on reading and writing. In Chapter 8, Salma Al-Mandhari examines the impact on learners' performance of different types of written feedback. In Chapter 8, the focus is also on writing, and Abdullah Al-Abri examines the kinds of writing difficulties which secondary students have. Chapters 10 and 11 focus on the teaching and learning of spelling. First Shakir Al-Hassan examines a 'graph paper spelling' approach to spelling as an alternative to the approach typically used in General Education classes. Fallah Al-Jabri then examines the types of spelling errors made by Grade 5 learners. In Chapter 12, Marwan Al-Yafae examines the role of syntactic knowledge in reading comprehension, while Salim Al-Siyabi, in Chapter 13, presents an analysis of the challenges in learning to read faced by learners who come from a non-literate environment. The final two chapters in Part 2 relate to reading. Zahra Al-Abri's study compares the respective impacts on learners' comprehension of silent and oral reading. Abdullah A-Hooqani, in Chapter 15, reports on a survey of English language teachers' attitudes towards the use of big books.

Part 3 contains five chapters which cover a range of other curricular areas. In Chapter 16, Khalid Al-Jardani reports on his experience of using self-assessment with Grade 5 Basic Education learners, while in the following chapter Mohammed Al-Alawi analyses the characteristics of the speaking materials in one of the course books used in the General Education curriculum. In Chapter 18, Mahmoud Al-Harrasi examines the oral communication strategies used by learners, while the final two chapters in the collection focus on vocabulary. Nasra Al-Mamary focuses on the role songs can play in promoting vocabulary learning, while Rashid Al-Azri compares the impact on learning of different strategies for presenting vocabulary.

In addition to the substantive findings it reports, this collection also provides useful insight into the processes of learning to do research. The work

reported here represented for each of the contributors their first substantial effort at planning and conducting an independent inquiry, and in many cases what they learned about doing research was at least as important as the actual findings of their study. This work, therefore, can also provide the basis of very instructive reflections on the challenges novice researchers face.

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