

# Investigating English Language Teaching and Learning in Oman

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# Foreword

In 1995 the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman launched an ambitious programme of change to restructure and reform its educational system, creating a universally accessible ten year Basic Education system with two years of Post-Basic Education to prepare students for tertiary education, work and life. The reform is geared to a more learner-centred approach, encouraging learners to think more critically and be better prepared for life in the 21st century.

Such a reform requires not only the development of contemporary curricula but also competent teachers who will cope well with the reformed system. With this in mind the Ministry embarked on a human resource development programme to upgrade 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, aims to help the Ministry achieve the above-mentioned goal. The project targets the upgrading of Omani diploma-holding teachers of English to degree level, thereby providing the Ministry with a national cadre of more than 850 skilled graduates. The programme also aims to graduate teachers who are acquainted with current theories of teaching and learning, skilled in analysing their pupils' needs, experienced in planning and teaching English lessons, and able to read in depth about pedagogical issues in English. The Ministry trusts that such graduates will be well-equipped with new knowledge and higher skills that they will apply in the delivery of the reform initiative.

Alongside this human resource development programme, the Ministry recognized that an educational system in a state of change needs to be able to demonstrate that its decision-making is grounded in theory and that its practices are subject to the scrutiny of research. While there has always been an awareness of the importance of research as a tool for evaluating the educational process, there is now a broader consensus that research is something that 'good' teachers have always done informally to develop themselves, improve their teaching and uplift their pupils' learning. While establishing a broad-based research culture takes time, teachers in Oman are increasingly contributing to its development by acquiring classroom research skills, conducting classroom-based research, reflecting on the implications of their findings and making others aware of them. By creating more reflective, research-oriented teachers, the Ministry hopes to

- improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools,
- strengthen the motivation of graduates towards their profession
- develop a strong research culture.

Developing classroom research skills is an integral part of the University of Leeds BA (TESOL) programme. The current volume presents an edited collection of 20 of the best research projects conducted by teachers from Cohorts 3 and 4 of the programme for their dissertations; it sheds light on practical issues and daily concerns of teachers of English in Oman. Furthermore it demonstrates that the BA is genuinely enabling participants to develop research abilities, which they can apply in small-scale classroom-based research. It also illustrates a shift in research methodology. As the BA programme has evolved and understandings of research have developed, there has been a shift from more quantitative work towards qualitative, case study and action research approaches. This shift is reflected in the present volume. The collection of research also provides further evidence of the impact of the BA (TESOL) project on the professional development of teachers and shows that Oman is continuing its journey towards becoming a power in the field of educational research in the region.

The Ministry is delighted to publish and disseminate the work of its BA (TESOL) graduates and I have the pleasure of congratulating those whose dissertation work is included in this volume and to commend them for their high quality performance. In addition I would like to urge all graduates to continue working hard to support the educational reform in future, while pursuing their own professional development, particularly by engaging in classroom-based research as illustrated in this collection. It gives me great pleasure 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.

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

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# Introduction: Teacher Research in English Language Teaching

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## 1 ELT REFORM IN OMAN

Between 1999 and 2008, as part of a large-scale educational reform in the Sultanate, English language teaching in Oman was transformed into a graduate profession. During that time, the Ministry of Education in Oman enabled diploma-holding teachers of English to upgrade their qualifications to a BA Educational Studies (TESOL) degree from the University of Leeds in the UK, and well over 800 teachers did so. In 2006, a first collection of research papers by these graduates was published (Borg, 2006b). This current volume is the second in this series of research papers. It presents edited versions of original studies carried out by 20 Omani teachers of English who were in the third and fourth cohorts of the BA (TESOL) programme.

The educational reform mentioned above has radically changed both teachers' and learners' experiences of English language teaching and learning in Oman. At the time the research reported here was completed, the previous General Education curriculum (based on the coursebooks *Our World Through English*) had been phased out of most elementary classrooms (Grades 1-6) and was gradually being replaced at secondary level too (Grades 7-12). In its place, a new curriculum, embodied in a series of locally-produced course books called *English for Me*, was being widely implemented. This curriculum starts in Grade 1, when learners are six years of age, in comparison to the previous curriculum for English which started in Grade 4 at age 10. The new curriculum 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. It also draws on contemporary thinking in the teaching of languages to young learners, and one key goal of the reform has been to prepare teachers to teach English to younger learners than had previously been the case.

Within the Ministry of Education's overall reform, the BA (TESOL) has

played a central role in this preparation and a significant amount of the work on the programme focused on teaching English in young learner classrooms. The final piece of work teachers on the course do is a research project in which they identify an area of professional practice of relevance to their own work and systematically investigate it by collecting, analyzing and interpreting empirical data. The papers presented here are based on these projects and, as readers will see, they address a number of key challenges which teachers of English in Oman face as they continue to make the transition from the old curriculum to the new one. These challenges are in many cases relevant to teachers of English to young learners in contexts outside Oman.

## **2 CONDITIONS FOR TEACHER RESEARCH**

The papers in this volume are examples of teacher research in the sense that they were conducted by ELT practitioners on issues chosen by them and which were of relevance to their own professional practices. Teacher research has undeniable benefits for teachers and learners alike, but it is at the same time a challenging activity for teachers to engage in. Time is a particularly powerful constraint, given that doing research adds to teachers' already busy professional lives (Borg, 2007). However, even when time is available, there are a number of other conditions which need to exist for teachers to engage productively in research (Borg, 2006a). They need, for example, an awareness of the value of research for themselves and their learners; they also need the skills and knowledge which competent research demands; and they need motivation to initiate and sustain the research project. These and other facilitative conditions were available to the teachers whose work is reported here; in particular, they received support from the Ministry of Education by being released from their normal duties for one day a week. This still left the teachers with a substantial workload, but did send out the message that the Ministry was supportive of their research and willing to provide practical support for them. I mention the various conditions which enabled the research presented here because it is important for readers to recognize not only the value of the investigations themselves but also the facilitative framework which existed and which made these studies possible. It is unreasonable to expect teachers to produce good quality research without any support, and the Ministry of Education has clearly recognized this.

## **3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VOLUME**

In Borg (2006b) I noted several ways in which the first collection of research papers from BA (TESOL) graduates was significant; these remain true for this publication. It continues to demonstrate the Ministry's commitment to promoting research among teachers of English in Oman and to making it available to a wider readership. It also adds to the growing, but still relatively small, volume of published accounts of teacher research in ELT which are available, regionally and internationally (e.g. Borg, 2006c; Coombe & Barlow, 2007; Warne et al., 2006). And thirdly, it provides further international exposure for a substantial and innovative

ELT reform project. Additionally, this volume presents further evidence that Oman is a leading regional presence in ELT teacher research.

## **4 CONTENTS & ORGANIZATION**

In editing the original reports, 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, although readers wanting to replicate studies are encouraged to contact the authors via the Ministry of Education in Oman in order to request further details of the research instruments used.

The research in this collection was conducted in both Basic and General Education schools. Details of the specific contexts and participants studied are provided in each chapter. Methodologically, the studies are diverse. They make use of questionnaires, test papers and scores, observations, audio recordings of lessons, interviews, think-aloud protocols, and analyses of instructional materials. There are quantitative, qualitative and mixed method studies here.

Thematically, this collection is more diverse than the previous one (Borg, 2006b); this diversity reflects changing concerns in ELT in Oman, with, for example, less focus on classroom discourse (a major theme in the previous volume) and more attention to issues such as storytelling, interactive learning and assessment.

The first three chapters explore the use of the L1. Collectively, Talal Al-Alawi Moza Al-Buraiki, and Abdullah Al-Hadrami provide insight into the extent that Arabic is used in English lessons, the reasons why it is used, and what teachers' beliefs about its use are. These studies highlight the value of both qualitative and quantitative analyses of this important issue; overall, they suggest that the teachers involved in their studies shared the belief that the L1, used judiciously, can play a useful role in the teaching of English.

Chapters 4-6 focus on the use of pair work and group work. Sultana Al-Farsi's study compared the use of pair work and group work in a Grade 2 classroom. Using observations, she identified both similarities and differences in the kinds of interactive behaviours which pair and group work promoted. Through interviews with learners, she found that they generally had positive attitudes towards interactive work in learning English. This study provides support for the continued use of pair and group work with young learners. Rashid Al-Maqbali conducted a survey with Grade 5 teachers and explored ways of promoting group work in his own class. The survey identified teachers' views about a range of advantages and disadvantages of group work, while the study of lessons provided practical insights into how group work might be implemented more effectively. Using action research, Mohammed Al-Marzooqi examined the potential for group work to promote oral interaction among learners of English. The outcome of this study was a list of practical suggestions for how group work might be used to increase the amount of spoken interaction learners engage in.

Chapters 7-9 examine three different aspects of assessment. Mohammed Al-Ghafri examined teachers' and learners' views about portfolio assessment. Two key findings relate to learners' limited awareness of portfolio assessment and teachers'

varied understandings of the criteria used in such assessment; addressing these issues, the study concludes, is important if portfolio assessment is to fulfil its potential in the Basic Education curriculum. Hamdoon Al-Handhali examined the characteristics of teacher-designed progress tests for secondary learners. His analysis of five tests concluded that they were high on validity but that reliability could be improved through more specific marking criteria. A questionnaire also identified aspects of test design and administration which could provide the focus of in-service training for secondary teachers of English. Salima Al-Sinani's study aimed to develop the self-assessment skills of her Grade 4 learners. By examining her own practices and her learners' work in self-assessment, she introduced a number of changes to her teaching which, the study concludes, improved both her learners' awareness of the purposes of self-assessment and their ability to assess themselves reliably.

The next three chapters share an interest in the use of stories in ELT. Sheikha Al-Qamshoui compared storytelling using printed big books and using video; a number of measures were used to assess learners' comprehension and enjoyment for each method and the results - contrary to the researcher's expectations - were that the learners who were taught stories using big books seemed to understand and enjoy the lesson more. Omar Al-Sawafi examined how stories might be used to promote speaking skills in a Grade 9 General Education class. Using action research involving the analysis of a series of lessons, the study concluded that stories motivated learners and, supported by various meaningful activities, gave learners opportunities to practise and develop communicative speaking skills. The third study to examine storytelling was also comparative; this time the strategies being compared were printed big books and PowerPoint. Bati Al-Shkaili compared the effect on Grade 6 learners of lessons using each of these storytelling strategies and found that learners reacted positively to PowerPoint and that their reading comprehension following PowerPoint lessons was better than it was on big book lessons. The study concludes that PowerPoint can be usefully added to English teachers' instructional repertoires for telling stories.

Chapters 13-17 cover the teaching of speaking, reading and writing. In Chapter 13, Fatima Al-Farsi explored how communicative tasks can be used to promote speaking skills. This study suggests that such tasks can play an important role in developing Omani learners' speaking skills in English. They provide an opportunity for learners to practise English in a meaningful and interesting way and may increase learners' motivation to use English in the classroom. Ali Al-Mamari examined oral reading in Grade 7. Using miscue analysis, interviews and think-aloud protocols, he identified and classified the kinds of errors learners make during oral reading. The study also suggests that the learners could benefit from learning to make better use of the context to work out the meanings of new words in reading texts. Sharifa Al-Sheedi's study also focused on reading; she implemented an extensive reading programme for Grade 4 learners and analyzed its impact on their attitudes to English and to reading. The results showed that, overall, there were improvements in learners' vocabulary knowledge after the extensive reading programme. Some learner attitudes to reading and to English also

changed after the programme, though a number of others did not.

Chapters 16 and 17 examine writing. Maryam A-Jardani studied the introduction of process writing in a Grade 6 class. This work suggests there is value in making learners aware of process writing strategies and giving them opportunities to use these. The learners in this study were able to apply the strategies they were taught and to produce writing that showed improvement in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity. Nasra Al-Shukaili analyzed the handwriting difficulties of Grade 3 learners, focusing in particular on forming and joining English letters. The overall conclusion of this research is that young Arabic learners of English may need more time than they receive at present to practise English handwriting. This practice also needs to be based on an awareness of specific handwriting difficulties which Arabic learners of English may experience.

The final three studies in this collection deal with motivation, mediation theory, and vocabulary learning strategies respectively. Fatma Al-Barami studied a Grade 2 learner of English who was able but lacking in motivation. She worked with his teacher to implement changes in English lessons aimed at motivating him and reported some success in doing so. Hunaiza Al-Jahdhmy explored Feuerstein's mediation theory as a way of enhancing the learning of English. She outlines this theory and describes how she incorporated it into her lessons. The study reports that the learners experienced three major general learning benefits: increases in autonomy, self-esteem and motivation. The final study here, by Asia Al-Tai, analyzed the vocabulary learning strategies used by Grade 7 learners. A range of strategies were identified which the learners studied used; in particular, comparisons between good, average and weak learners highlighted similarities and differences in their use of strategies for learning vocabulary. Weak learners, for example, used a smaller range of and fewer strategies.

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