

The Implications of the Teacher Training Program to the ELT Policy Implementation in Oman

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Second language teacher education is an important agency with a powerful capacity to impact student teachers' socialization. Like all other prospective teachers, second language student teachers go through various experiences while attending their initial training program and these experiences impact their beliefs, images, and thinking in relation to teaching and learning (foreign) languages.

This paper, hence, triangulates data from the *Philosophy and Guidelines for the Omani English Language School Curriculum* document (Nunan, Tyacke & Walton, 1987), which I will herewith refer to as the National English Language Policy/Plan (NELP), other policy texts, the pertinent literature, and semi-structured interviews conducted with various agents involved in the Omani English language teaching (ELT) system.

The paper critically discusses the different ideologies embodied in the various statements and draws conclusions about their implications to initial English language teacher education in Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman and other similar or identical parts in the world and to second language policy implementation.

Key words: NELP, policy, teacher training and education, teaching and learning English, second and foreign language

NARRATIVE

In September 1993, after I had returned from England, having successfully completed my Master of Arts degree program in Education at the University of London, I was appointed as a seconded English language inspector for Muscat Region for four months. This was until my papers were ready and I was transferred to the Intermediate Teacher Training College (ITTC) to become an initial teacher trainer. During that period I visited a good number of schools to inspect different Omani and expatriate English teachers. In many of those schools fresh graduates of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) – the only state-owned university in Oman – English language teachers were appointed and other student teachers were affiliated for their practicum.

I started visiting these novice teachers and soon felt shocked about their performance. I asked myself: After spending four years at university, how could these student teachers perform so poorly? They had several classroom management difficulties and problems, for most of the time followed the teacher's guide religiously, seldom if ever took any initiatives or made informed decisions about their learning/teaching contexts, in some cases taught "traditionally" – teaching grammar explicitly, teaching English through Arabic sometimes, and teaching through memorization and copying, for instance. Such traditional features are still in vogue in many Omani English language teaching (ELT) classrooms (Al-Issa, 2006a, b).

I further found out that they were sent to schools for their practicum every Monday, and that this commenced in the seventh semester only – one semester before graduation. In addition, no time was allocated to any block teaching practice. In fact, this field-based teaching practice situation has not changed until the present time.

Today, there is a general observation that many of the English language teachers graduating from SQU are "methodologically" poor at teaching English. However, no research has attempted to find out the possible causes of this problem. This is despite the fact that SQU was opened in 1986 and over 15 batches of English language teachers have graduated ever since and

appointed as full-time English language teachers in various schools throughout the Sultanate.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Student teachers' professional performance is the outcome of complex processes of socialization and enculturation (Zeichner, 1980; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1982; Zeichner, Tabachnick & Densmore, 1987). Teacher socialization has been described as a complex process due to the fact that it embraces more than one influential agent and agency (Zeichner, 1983; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Research has revealed that one of these agencies is the university where the prospective teachers receive their initial teaching preparation (Zeichner, 1983; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). University second language training programs include theoretical and practical aspects. They include linguistic and pedagogic aspects. The ELT program structure and the mode of delivery at university can shape the socialization of the trainees (Al-Issa, 2002).

Thus, a very important aspect of the overall knowledge the student teachers receive during their program is the "pedagogic content knowledge" (Day, 1993; Richards, 1991). It applies directly to the field-based practicum and includes knowledge like teaching TESOL skills and subskills, teaching grammar and vocabulary, preparing tests, evaluating programs and materials, discourses and error analysis, classroom management, methods and curricula, phonetics, and phonology. Al-Issa (2002) argues that if the practicum is short, student teachers fail to have the time to experience and test all these knowledge components since all these are applied inside the ELT classroom.

Al-Toubi (1998) criticizes the English language teacher training program at SQU by saying that it is very "academic" as it lays little emphasis on methodology and the time allocated to teaching practice is little and takes place only in the final (fourth) year.

Thus, Rivers (1983) discusses the time allocated to the practicum and

states that “the length of time in schools is frequently inadequate ... so that students have no opportunity to reflect on their experiences and then try to again in another setting” (p. 203). Al-Khateeb and Ashoor (1997) acknowledge that teacher training programs in the Arab World, which Oman is a part of, fail to provide adequate time for the practicum, while paying more attention to the theoretical aspect. In other words, they fail to strike a balance between exposure to theory and teaching practice, since they lack a proper theoretical framework and clear aims that guide their practices and activities. These writers claim that teacher training and education programs in the Arab World rest on the “incorrect” philosophy that the more the theoretical exposure the teacher receives the more knowledge s/he is likely to pass on to his/her students. Al-Khateeb and Ashoor see this as one of the limitations of the teacher training and education programs in the Arab World.

Johnson (1996) blames the teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) programs for providing limited opportunities for the student teachers to come into contact with school-based teaching practice and describes it as a “fundamental problem”. Johnson further states that most TESOL programs provide inadequate time for the practicum due to time constraints. Johnson believes that this limited provision of authentic preparation environment affects the professional development of the student teachers. Lack of professional development here has its implications for policy implementation, or otherwise.

Lack of professional development can be also present and result from lack of coordination between the teacher education institution and the cooperating school to which the student teacher is sent for his/her practicum. Al-Khateeb and Ashoor (1997) acknowledge that there is usually lack of coordination and communication between colleges of education and Ministries of Education in the Arab World in relationship to teacher training and education. They consider this as one of the shortcomings and problems initial teacher training and education programs suffer from in the Arab World.

Robinson (1999) emphasizes that educators have a crucial role to play at this stage in the sense that they should not see their role as confined to

visiting classes and evaluating the performance of the student teachers. Rather, they need to communicate with their students and understand the impact of the school environment upon them. Schools are powerful sites and agencies for socialization and enculturation (Al-Issa, 2002). This triad as represented in the student teachers, the tutor, and the school requires better channels of communication and collaboration. Teacher educators here can become a key link between the school and the student teachers and can facilitate their students' development during the practicum through getting themselves engaged in understanding and explaining any issues of relevance. Such initiative can contribute to bringing about change and to the creation of a healthy English language teacher education environment. Change should be seen as a comprehensive process where all agencies participate in bringing about.

It can be argued, therefore, that poorly prepared teachers can negatively impact the implementation of the language policy. Much of the success of educational programs, as Sibayan (1983) argues, depends upon the teacher's competence. Sibayan further holds the second language education programs responsible for producing inadequately trained and professionally retarded teachers.

Crandall (2000) acknowledges that "traditional" language teacher education programs have often considered teachers as recipients of knowledge rather than as dynamic generators and skilled manipulators of knowledge. This obviously has its implication for teaching where teachers fail to play their role as efficient agents of change and informed decision makers.

Second language teacher education programs can hence prepare student teachers to become effective agents of change by engaging them in meaningful activities, which foster their "reflectiveness" (Zeichner, 1994). Teaching is ever evolving (Collier, 1999) and this requires teachers to systematically and constantly reflect on their practices in order to understand their students' needs and interests and be able to tune their teaching accordingly (Al-Issa, 2002).

Literature on second language teacher education provides examples of

activities like journals, narratives, diaries (Richards, 1991; Thorne & Qiang, 1996), autobiography (Pennington, 1990; Richards, 1991), action research (Gebhard, 1998), and self-observation and observation of other teachers (Gebhard, 1998) that can facilitate self-reflection.

These activities help teachers see and act beyond the mandated “interested knowledge” (Pennycook, 1989) and “selective traditions” (Williams, 1989) imposed by the “dominant group(s)” in the society. Reflective teaching is thus a life-long activity and skill, which facilitates professional development of knowledge and skills and trains teachers and student teachers to become dynamic examiners and active thinkers (Seidlhofer, 1999). Reflective teaching helps teachers access their beliefs through questioning and assimilation of roles (Collier, 1999). Reflective teaching further trains prospective teachers and teachers to critically analyze their own performance (Calderhead, 1989).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Within this context, the following research questions are asked:

1. What are the key discourses in NELP about ELT and the English language teachers in Oman?
2. What discourses and ideologies inform the views of the different agents involved in the Omani ELT system about learning to teach English?

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The Omani situation under investigation maybe unique in itself and a similar situation to it may not exist anywhere else. The aim of this paper is thus not to provide statistical generalizations or enumerate frequencies. Rather, it is to expand and generalize a theory and to suggest complexities for further future research. The aim of this paper is thus to make some contributions to the target context via employing multiple sources of evidence

– interviews, “critical” content analysis, written texts and documents, and the pertinent literature.

All these sources of data entail “ideologies” and “discourses” – two key concepts in this paper. Ideologies, within the context of this study mainly refer to systems of thoughts and conceptions of the world, and are general, abstract, collective, and socially and historically positioned, developed, produced and reproduced through communication and discourse (van Dijk, 1998). Ideologies are represented in texts and discourses and are considered to construct the human behavior and the social world in which we live (Gee, 1990). Gramsci (1971) writes that ideologies are articulated and produced by different social classes and are the result and the product of different social practices and history, and that the articulation and production of ideologies occurs via discourses. vanDijk (1998) thus writes that “discourses allow direct and explicit expression of ideologies” (p. 193). Texts and discourses do not unproblematically reflect truth and reality. Texts and discourses reveal knowledge, ideas, and beliefs about a particular notion held, or a situation experienced by a particular person or a group of people (Gee, 1990).

The major source of data collection in this paper is thus the agents involved in the Omani ELT system – fourth year SQU student teachers and professors, Ministry of Education teachers, inspectors, and teacher trainers. The reason behind choosing fourth year students only was due to the fact that they have exposure to more theoretical input and experienced more teaching practice time than the first, second and third year students. The agents, who are all inhabitants of Muscat Area – the “cosmopolitan” capital of Oman, were selected on the basis of their gender, age, and experiences to guarantee ideological diversity. Factors such as their linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds were also taken into consideration for the aforementioned reason. All agents were given an interview protocol letter to read, which states the aim of this research and their role in it. They were also asked to fill out a descriptive information sheet, which requested different personal details pertinent to the study.

All the agents in this research are involved in the SQU English language

teacher training process directly or indirectly and represent various social, cultural, academic, and educational backgrounds. Their various discourses about learning to teach English reflect their diverse but direct and explicit systems of thought and conceptions of the world.

The four main questions, which constructed the semi-structured interviews and aimed at stimulating the agents' thinking, experiences, perceptions and attitudes and eliciting their statements about learning to teach English are:

1. How did you learn/are you learning to teach English?
2. What influenced/is influencing your training most?
3. What did/do you like about your fieldwork experience?
4. What did/do you not like about your fieldwork experience?

To improve questionnaire quality, reliability and validity, the interview questions were piloted on six volunteers from SQU and the Ministry of Education, who represented different backgrounds and held different experiences, notions, values, perceptions, beliefs and thoughts respecting learning the teach English.

Other equally important and substantial sources of data are the literature and the official texts and documents, which represent the ELT policy/plan as inscribed by the Ministry of Education. These texts entail all sorts of information that form a rich and a fertile basis or source of data for this paper. All these sources of data reveal knowledge, ideas, beliefs, and experiences and are used to contribute to the generation of a hypothesis and construction of a theory about learning to teach English.

The data extracted from the aforementioned sources was analyzed to identify key lexical items structuring the discourses of the agents, the pertinent literature and the various policy texts, and to help identify any intertextual similarities, agreements and harmony. Here, semantic and syntactic content analyses contribute to the author's general thinking and interpretation and the development of relevant hypothesis. There is a substantial amount of relevant information about the political, social, and cultural forces influencing, driving, and shaping learning to teach English in the Omani schools.

THE IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSION IN NELP AND OTHER PERTINENT POLICY TEXTS

English in Oman is the only official foreign language and has institutionalized domains like the mass media, business, and education (Al-Issa, 2005b, c; 2006a, c). English is the medium of instruction in the science-based majors in all higher education institutions throughout the country. It is taught from Elementary Four in the public schools and from Kindergarten One in the private schools. English in the Sultanate receives considerable legislative power and attention from the government. This appears evident in the following policy excerpts.

The English language skills of the Omani national must be seen as an important resource for the country's continued development. It is this recognition of the importance of *English as a resource for national development and as the means for wider communication within the international community* that provides the rationale for the English in the curriculum (NELP, p. 2) [emphasis in original].

Moreover, the Reform and Development of General Education (1995) states that

The government recognizes that facility in English is important in the new global economy. English is the most common language for international business and commerce and is the exclusive language in important sectors such as banking and aviation. The global language of Science and Technology is also English as are the rapidly expanding international computerized databases and telecommunications networks which are becoming an increasingly important part of the academic and business life (p. A5-1).

The authors of NELP describe language as a “complex entity” and, therefore, support teaching the world's first international language – English – via integrating the four skills and considering and treating them as equal. The three writers further like to see English taught communicatively to help

the students enjoy learning English as well as gain language skills relevant for purposes beyond the classroom.

As far as the teachers are concerned, the writers of NELP like to see teachers varying their students' exposure to English and knowledge, as they do not believe that teaching English from one textbook contributes to the students' overall language competence. They would like to see the teachers increase students' interaction time and engage them in meaningful and functional tasks that promote language practice and use and stimulate their motivation and interest. The authors of NELP are supportive of the student-centered approach, which falls under the humanist/progressive model that puts the learner at the heart of the learning process and respects and values his/her intellectual repertoire. The three writers would like to see teachers reflect on their practices, take initiatives and making informed decisions about their teaching and their students' learning to help facilitate the introduction of positive change.

THE IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSION IN THE AGENTS' STATEMENTS

In his case study of ELT in the Sultanate, Al-Issa (2002) thus found that people learn English in Oman for purposes like finding a white collar job, acquiring science and technology, establishing contact with the culture of the target language, pursuing their post-secondary and higher education inland and abroad, and using English for other relevant and important communicative purposes like traveling to English-speaking and non-Arab countries, for instance.

Curtain and Pesola (1994) and Tedick and Walker (1996) thus write that one of the factors that make the teaching of foreign languages especially challenging is the variety of reasons students have for learning foreign languages and the cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and academic diversity typical in today's students population, which requires foreign language

teachers to work with students with variable educational experiences and needs. Doyle (1979) stresses that pupils are significant and powerful socializing agents and that their influence “ranges from the general teaching methods and patterns of language that teachers use in classrooms to the type and frequency of teacher questions and feedback given to individual students” (p. 139).

However, this can easily fail to materialize in a strictly and rigidly centralized education system, like the Omani one, which is characterized as textbook-based, teacher-centered, memorization and exam-oriented and product and transmission-based (Al-Issa, 2006a, b). Language in the controlled Omani education system is subservient to knowledge, values and beliefs (Al-Issa, 2005c, 2006a). In other words, language is not taught *per se*. It is rather a tool through which selective traditions and interested knowledge, which represents the interests of the dominant groups are emphasized and presented to the students via certain pedagogical models in order to guarantee all students receive common and fundamental knowledge through exposure to certain authorized and prescribed texts (Luke, de Castell & Luke, 1989).

Al-Issa (2005c, 2006a) argues that textbooks in Oman are “sacred” and are the center of the entire education process. Their centrality guarantees that students are refrained from any attempts of critique and analysis of any values and beliefs presented by the textbook. This in turn encourages and stresses adopting the “banking” system of teaching whereby teachers “deposit” knowledge in their students’ minds (Freire, 1974).

These are thus characteristics of the traditional approach to teaching and learning foreign languages, which stresses non-communicative and non-interactive concepts and practices, and which confines exposure of particular knowledge to limited sources – the textbook and the teacher.

The following ELT private education Indian inspector, who is in his 50s, was exposed to teaching literature and the traditional methods when he was an English student teacher.

We were taught how to teach English prose, English poetry, grammar, composition, what is the traditional method of teaching English, what is

the Direct Method of teaching English, what is the Situational Method of teaching English.

This inspector's exposure was confined to the "traditional" methods, which mainly support textbook-based teaching and rote learning and advocate the teacher-centered approach. He was further exposed to English literature and was taught English in a decontextualized manner. In other words, he was taught the various aspects of the language, like grammar and writing, for example, independently and *per se*.

Like the Indian inspector, the following Omani public education ELT teacher, who had received her initial training in Jordan, enjoyed her training. However, it entailed different characteristics from the ones stated by the Indian inspector.

We used to teach government schools, private schools. We started with low levels, then we went to the intermediate then we went to the secondary. We used to go to private schools teaching ... I thought that what we did was really good. They wanted to show us all levels of teaching, because in government schools it was a little bit easier. When we go to the private school it's completely difficult for our level, because the English was tough. We used to teach them things we couldn't imagine.

This teacher's program prepared her to come into contact with all levels and schools in both sectors (private and public) in order to form a broad idea about the underlying philosophy behind ELT in the country and perhaps try out and test various theories, as this is one of the objectives of the field-based practicum (Dufficy, 1993). It is, hence, important that the formal training program provides chances for the student teachers to experience this, as it becomes a part and parcel of the necessary knowledge and skills they need to acquire.

Thus, student teachers in Oman in general and in SQU in particular teach only in public schools and teach Preparatory and Secondary Levels only. Their training does not include Elementary classes nor does it include private schools.

A vast majority of the private schools in Oman thus focus more on teaching English from an imported textbook whereby knowledge external to the mandated textbook is more varied and accessible. On the other hand, they rely much less on the national textbook, or even ignore teaching it altogether. Thus, Shor and Freire (1987) argue that “education is much more controllable, if the teacher follows the standard curriculum” (p. 11). Apple (1993) also argues that standardized textbooks have an ideological dimension.

Teachers further have more freedom in the private schools with regard to supplementing the syllabus. These schools believe that English should be presented in a challenging and interesting form to the students through the use of a wide range of imported materials like *The Way Ahead* or *Headway*, for example.

These schools also start teaching English from nursery school and some schools teach up to eight periods of English per week as opposed to five in the public schools. Lightbown (2000) writes that “the most important reason for incomplete acquisition in the foreign language classroom settings is probably the lack of time available for contact with the language” (p. 499). Furthermore, Al-Toubi (1998) conducted a research study, which included 82 teachers representing eight different nationalities and found that 36 teachers said that time allocated to ELT on the curriculum is insufficient for second language development.

The authors of NELP are thus supportive of the notion that the Omani school year is shorter than many other academic years around the world, which hinders second language development. They stress the importance of giving English instruction more time.

Nunan *et al.* (1987) compare Oman with the Province of Ontario in Canada, where French is taught as a second language, and view the situation in Oman as far from realistic. “The students need in excess of four thousand hours of French to reach the level of proficiency needed for university study through the medium of French” (p. 3). This is while the Omani students receive over the nine years of ELT formal instruction as low as “500-600 hours” (p. 3).

These low 500-600 hours are mostly dominated by the teacher in a more or

less non-communicative and non-interactive classroom. The teacher is mainly concerned with transmitting the language of the mandated textbook to his/her students.

Hence, while spoon feeding is a salient feature in the Omani classroom in general (Al-Issa, 2006a, b), in a communicative language teaching (CLT) classroom teachers are expected to play a role similar to the one described by this inspector. Teachers in CLT thus assign tasks to their learners and get them to work in pairs or groups, while they direct, help, guide, and supervise the flow of the work. In other words, they do not explain aspects of the language, or dictate the situation verbally. They neither spoon feed the students with predefined knowledge through the chalk and talk method. Al-Toubi (1998) and Al-Issa (2006a, b) criticize the traditional teacher-centered approach of Omani preuniversity ELT and holds it responsible for producing passive learners.

Dove (1986) attributes the lack of teachers' ability in undertaking activities other than those, which involve "familiar and safe teaching routines" (p. 59) to the inadequate training they receive. Teachers, therefore, are not supposed to relinquish their craft to methods, packages, and textbooks. They should rather demonstrate a high degree of professional development, flexibility, and skill (Al-Issa, 2005b, c; 2006a).

The following private education inspector holds positive beliefs about her training course and believes that her course taught her how to be an effective teacher through maximizing her students' talking time, while minimizing her talking time.

I think from the three courses that I did the one in London and the two in Ireland. Those training programs had a huge influence on my approach, because prior to that I had fallen into the trap of using a lot of TTT [teacher's talking time]. But through those courses I learned to totally minimize my TTT through facial gestures.

Second language teacher education programs can block change through failing to provide sufficient time for practice and testing out theories (Al-Issa,

2002). Classrooms are about realities and cultures (Holliday, 1992, 1994) and this can be explored through testing theories and trying out various approaches and methods. Positive change and innovation do not materialize if teachers receive theories but fail to test them and make decisions about their usefulness and appropriateness (Al-Issa, 2005b).

The following Omani fourth year SQU ELT student teacher faced difficulties testing and trying out theories during his practicum. He had the will to try out and apply instruction from a theory course. However, he was indirectly blocked.

In the university here we learn theoretical things. These theoretical things we are learning here in the university we don't really apply them in the school, not at all, because there I ask the teachers: Do you follow the teacher's guide when you teach the students? They say yes and we must use it. We have to use it. We are obliged. The main purpose for us is to finish our activity book, which we are given. Our purpose is to finish it, because if we don't finish it, we will be punished from the inspector or the ministry. I think this is not good, because we study here theoretical things ... there is a difficulty for us. We're really confused whether to follow what we have studied in the university or to follow the teacher's guide in the school.

One of the very important agents with formal sanctioning power over TESOL student teachers can be the mentor or the cooperating teacher. Although external to the student teachers and the university, cooperating teachers or mentors have been reported as highly influential as far as the prospective teachers' professional growth is concerned (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Duquette, 1994; Hawkey, 1997; Stanulis, 1995; Zeichner, 1992).

Al-Issa (2002) argues that there is lack of coordination and collaboration between teacher education as represented in the SQU and the Ministry of Education as represented in the schools and school administrations in terms of arrangements made for the practicum. Robinson (1999) argues that without dialogue and communication between the school and university "... there is a high risk of teacher education becoming a disintegrated experience

for students” (p. 198).

Hence, there is a strong need for the school and the university to work closely. The school management needs to be aware of the overall goals and philosophies of the initial teacher training programs. The school management needs to demonstrate will and interest in communicating with the university about initial English language teacher education. Such activity should receive high priority on the part of the school. Schools have been accused of showing limited if no interest in such activity (Robinson, 1999).

The following Sudanese Public Education inspector remembers that his mentor tried to block his attempts to try out a theory that he had come across during his practicum.

What I did not like was that my teacher asked me to use the mother tongue in the class. He asked me to explain certain terms in the mother tongue. When I told him let me use some aids and experiment he told me they [the students] will not understand. He had a negative attitude. He didn't realize that if we teach completely in English one day or another they will get it. Because later in my training in the last two weeks I used English and most of the students understood.

A method like Grammar Translation stresses using the mother tongue to teach the target language. The mentor insisted on explaining “certain terms in the mother tongue”. This explanation of terms is most likely related to vocabulary and grammar. Teaching vocabulary and grammar here is expected to be conducted explicitly.

Teachers are responsible for facilitating their students' acquisition of English by using the language purposefully and communicatively inside the classroom. This is particularly the case in contexts like Oman, where resources allotted to ELT are not satisfactory, English is treated like any other fact-based school subject, motivation is almost entirely driven by mid semester and end-of-semester exams, classrooms are barrack-like (35-50 students), time allocated to ELT is insufficient, and product teaching as opposed to process teaching is in full swing (Al-Issa, 2002).

This Inspector further believed that teachers should be able to make decisions about using “aids” and supplementary resources to help the students understand and think in English, instead of rely on translation. Use of supplementary aids helps the teacher to move beyond the mandated syllabus and vary exposure to and contact with the target language. This is something that the writers of NELP would like to see the teachers in Oman doing.

Thus, while the role of theory has been considered significant by the last two informants, a balanced teacher education program can help teachers address theoretical and practical issues evenly. This is from the perspective of the following native speaker English teacher, who has some negative feelings and attitudes about the content of the TEFL program she attended. She thinks that there was excessive theory delivery, which came at the expense of practice.

I felt that maybe we should have had less theory and a lot more practice. I mean practice even within the classroom rather than being taught. For example, right back they taught us grammar from present simple all the various tenses, they taught us this, but I thought that they should have actually, okay it's fine to teach us the past simple to the difference between the past simple and the present simple, but they should have actually given us ideas about how to present this in the classroom. So, I felt at times the course was too theory oriented and it wasn't practical enough.

Arguably, teachers need knowledge about the language at the linguistic and language structure level, as the literature on second language teacher education suggests (Al-Issa, 2005a; Day, 1993; Fradd & Lee, 1998; Lafayette, 1993). However, they also need to know how to help their learners understand all these linguistic and structural items and be able to use them communicatively and meaningfully inside and outside the classroom.

The following private education inspector, who has been in Oman for over 12 years, believes that the SQU training program pays considerable attention to English language development at the expense of practical experience.

I never had the possibility of viewing what they did at SQU, but from what I gleaned it would appear that there's quite a bit of focus on language ... I think if they decided to, okay we're going to do this specifically for the people who want to go in and teach Prep and Secondary Level, then I think it's perhaps the B.A. TESOL program and with a lot of emphasis given to practical work ... a lot more focus on the practical nature so that when the teachers go to the schools, they have a lot of techniques because what I have discovered as well that the teachers who had gone to the ITTCs – two years program after General Secondary Certificate] were the ones that had excellent techniques of teaching ... but the people who hadn't had the facility and hadn't gone to the ITTCs were very weak in methodology.

Teaching practice at SQU does not entail a block practicum period. By contrast, students at ITTC used to have one week of block teaching practice in the third semester and two weeks in the fourth semester, bearing in mind that the ITTC program was a two-year (four-semester) program. It is important that student teachers spend time at the cooperating school to be able to understand and analyze various events and contexts as teachers.

Thus, whatever occurs within the school boundary contributes either positively or negatively to the classroom events and processes and the sociocultural context of the school has a strong impact on the student teachers' socialization process (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Denscombe (1980) writes that "the school organization provides dilemmas and imperatives, possibilities and opportunities, and it is these which explain the existence of particular strategies in the classroom" (p. 290).

Within this vein, Holliday (1994) argues that (TESOL) classrooms lie within a complex and interrelated cultural network, which also consists of the host institution, students, professional-academics, wider international education-related and national cultures. These cultures are major contributors to the classroom, but which are external. The classroom cannot be considered as a separate entity. It is rather a microcosm of a wider society. Holliday (1994) argues that the environment of the (TESOL) classroom is also affected by the educational environment, which the teachers, students, materials and resources form part and parcel of this environment.

Similarly, the following public education ELT inspector has negative feelings too, but about other aspects of the two training courses she attended. She attended two different ELT courses and has had mixed beliefs about them. She completed her undergraduate diploma teacher education course at the ITTC, while attended her first degree program at SQU. She thinks that the course offered at SQU places more focus on the “pedagogic knowledge” (Day, 1993) as in subjects like psychology. She believes that this comes at the expense of the teaching and training aspect. She first describes her experience at the ITTC.

I enjoyed the training because the materials were different ... and we went to the schools, we practiced and there was a block teaching practice for two weeks. I remember I held a class for two weeks totally with everything. The teacher was out and I was the teacher for two weeks and that was very good because it's a real situation, not only once a week go and take the class and the students don't know you.

Lack of familiarity with the school context, hence, leads to lack of knowledge and understanding about the importance of how and why certain things inside the classroom and outside it take place. Schools in general and classrooms in particular are governed by political, social and economic practices and ideologies and exposure to and understanding of this can contribute to the prospective teacher's knowledge about the sociopolitical context of the school and its role as a powerful socialization agency (Al-Issa, 2002). It is, therefore, the task of the second language teacher education program to facilitate change and innovation by providing sufficient contact hours with school-based teaching.

Thus, the following SQU ELT fourth year student teacher and Omani graduate English teacher of SQU talk about their SQU practicum experience respectively and describe it as providing insufficient contact. The student teacher says “since we go just once a week to school, so what I teach them this week they will forget until next week. What I teach them this Monday, they will forget it next Monday”. The English teacher says “... I graduated

also from SQU ... and the actual practicing of teaching was not that much; twice a week maybe, or once a week in the whole semester”.

Teachers are expected to analyze and understand their students' needs and interests and attempt to influence their perceptions and arouse their motivation (Al-Issa, 2006a, b). The authors of NELP consider this important for facilitating positive change.

The same Omani public education ELT inspector, who obtained her first degree from SQU, compares her positive experience at ITTC, where she obtained her undergraduate diploma, with the one she had at SQU.

I think the Teacher Training Colleges are much better than the SQU, because they are looking at the language part, the methodology part, not other subjects. In the university they concentrate on subjects, which are not sometimes related to the teaching area. I know psychology is very important, but if you give limited hours for this and you concentrate on teaching, and especially microteaching, teaching practice outside in the school and teach the students how to make visual aids and to prepare everything by themselves, it's much better.

The authors of NELP like to see teachers implementing activities that promote functional use and practice of lexical items. They are, for example, against teaching vocabulary implicitly and *per se*. They consider language as complex and that its learning and acquisition are governed by more than one factor.

However, the university program supervisors encourage teaching language in a decompartmentalized manner, rather than a whole and are supportive of the notion of teaching from one textbook and reserving and protecting the cultural traditions, beliefs, norms, and values stressed by the syllabus. This is because most of the vocabulary in the national syllabus represents the local culture (Al-Issa, 2005c).

This is of course counter to what the writers of NELP support. The writers of NELP look at language as serving functions beyond memorization and copying and as a tool for social and economic functions. The university

program here is working against the philosophy forwarded by the writers of NELP and is blocking positive innovation and change.

She then continues describing her experience at SQU.

But in university my experience was that I did microteaching only once in the whole semester and it's not enough, because I was a teacher before, I told them it's not enough. They said you have to be patient and we know that you entered the field. Let the others know all the theory and practice the theories. But still, they didn't practice the theories also because of the time maybe, I don't know. I taught only three words: build, building and one word I can't remember. It was not enough because I didn't practice writing, I didn't practice how to teach listening, reading, nothing at all. Then they said okay go to the schools and they gave me a class to teach. For me that was okay because I taught for two years, but for the others it's a new experience and they gave them the class go and teach. Everybody was afraid. How can we enter a class without preparation, teaching a class is different than microteaching, it's the real situation.

While the literature on second language teacher education emphasizes microteaching as a tool that facilitates self-reflection and self-awareness (Richards, 1991), the SQU program does not seem to give it sufficient importance. Reflection can very well encourage critique and critical investigation and examination of existing knowledge, cultural values and beliefs and practices (Al-Issa, 2002). The authors of NELP like to see teachers reflecting critically on their practices in order to influence change. While microteaching can be organized on or off-campus (Wallace, 1991), at SQU it is organized only on-campus. While microteaching is designed to help focus on the lesson, or an activity as a whole, rather than specific skill (Richards, 1991), this informant was asked to teach a specific lexical item at SQU.

Thus, while SQU is equipped with state-of-the-art technology, the use of the video as a tool that promotes and encourages self-reflection is missing. Microteaching should be viewed as an opportunity for the student teachers to try out ideas and materials instead of teaching from the mandated textbook

(Al-Issa, 2005b).

This inspector's statement is further corroborated by the following fourth year SQU ELT student teacher who says "last year and this year we had two courses in methods and microteaching. I think it's not enough". Moreover, the following Omani SQU ELT graduate teacher describes her SQU college-based microteaching experience.

They gave us the book and they tried to teach us how to form the aims and the objectives of the lesson. Then we choose any lesson from the book and then we try to explain to them, to all students and the doctors. After we finish they'll, I mean the doctors try to criticize on some of the points, the good points and the bad points. Then after that they let us come to schools, to real environment.

Formal training conducted in this manner has its negative implications for policy implementation (Al-Issa, 2005b). Teachers are made totally dependant on the mandated syllabus and the feedback from their trainers. The trainers are dictating the context and are passing judgments about the "best" and "worst" or "right" and "wrong" ways to teach English. They are passing what can be described as "ideals" about ELT. The channels of feedback and interaction are confined to the teacher trainer and the student teacher. Knowledge goes from the trainer to the trainee and is expected to be embraced by the latter. There is lack of negotiation, discussion, and analysis. These are characteristics of the Omani ELT system, which the authors of NELP believe defeat effective language development that can have its positive impact on the Sultanate's national development.

In other words, student teachers are refrained from and not trained to reflect critically on their respective contexts. They are expected to take what is given to them.

The ELT Chief Inspector at the Ministry of Education thus thinks that critical reflection is an important characteristic of the good English teacher.

The good teacher will provide variety of different activities in the

classroom ... Will think critically about the activities, which are given to them on plate in the course materials. Think critically and try to improve those in various ways, will bring his own experience to language teaching situations.

Preparing competent and skilled student teachers at SQU is thus bound to help these future teachers produce linguistically skilled and capable students, who will in turn join SQU and other universities and colleges to pursue their education in English and take an effective part in the Sultanate's economic growth. English is thus fundamental for "Omanization" – a process through which the expatriate skilled labor is replaced by an Omani force. A large number of technical and skilled jobs, particularly in the private sector and where English language competence is a prerequisite, are filled by European Union, American and non-Arab Asian expatriates like Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans and Philipinos. Babrakzai (2001) writes that

It is quite obvious that SQU graduates are expected to find jobs and to launch careers, and play vital roles in building the nation's economic strength. That means, among others, learning marketable skills necessary for tomorrow's competitive world (p. 21).

Teachers' discussion and observation are two integral and largely integrated ways leading to the "critical thinking" stressed and encouraged by the Chief Inspector above about the analysis and development of materials and curriculum, for instance, and benefiting both the students and the teachers. Naidu, Neeraja, Ramani, Shivakumar and Vismanatha (1992) state that teachers "... possess a vast repository of classroom experience, which when shared with other teachers can lead to a body of theoretical insights and practical procedures" (p. 262). Moreover, Crandall (1998) writes that "peer observation can be a powerful source of insight and discovery" (p. 4). Furthermore, Cosh (1999) writes that observation of others "... stimulates awareness, reflection, and a questioning approach, and it encourages experiment; it also may make us aware of exciting techniques that we are

temperamentally unable to implement” (p. 25).

This comes as a result of teachers demonstrating capacity to think analytically and dynamically and to possess knowledge about their students and contexts. It further comes via observing working cooperatively with other teachers. Colleagues and other student teachers are “significant” others at school or on the program who can influence and facilitate reflection on the various aspects of knowledge and practices.

The training program attended by the next private education inspector and SQU Faculty of Arts English language professor respectively provided observation chances for both and helped them add to their professional growth.

... Found by going and sitting in people’s classes, teachers sitting in other people’s classes and discuss it together in a friendly cooperative manner, that of course affect your training and training is not something that you do and stops there. You know, it’s an ongoing process and it never stops.
... I don’t see anything wrong in a teacher observing another teacher because things you would see that perhaps you could use them in your own class perhaps you never thought of using before. You were never aware of the possibilities of that kind of teaching and you do by observation.

Second language teacher education programs can contribute to change through varying channels of contact with teaching and through varying exposure to teaching models, as it is the case with this informant. Activities like cooperative learning, which promote cooperative development (Edge, 1992) and group discussion have their impact upon the teachers’ professional growth and allow room for critical reflection, which in turn facilitates analytical examination of existing knowledge and can lead to gradual and positive change.

The following ELT teacher trainer at the Ministry of Education had a positive training experience. She remembers learning from the members of the group she worked with during her practical experience, which facilitated critical inquiry, development of open-mindedness, acquisition of experience

and promotion of reflective teaching (Zeichner, 1983; Zeichner & Teitlebaum, 1982).

There was a very strong sense of feeling of a group working together on something and we did a lot and I think that's very positive experience and I think that helped through in the way I organized my teaching afterwards and how I saw working in the staff room and that's all part of teaching, working with others, not working in isolation, sharing ideas, sharing any problems.

While the aforementioned training programs provided chances for observation and cooperative learning respectively as means of reflection and critical inquiry and examination, the training program attended by the following private education ELT inspector provided her with journal writing chances and helped her add to her professional growth. She was trained to keep a journal to help her keep a record of her lesson.

You know after each class I always had a little section in my preparation book 'how did it go?' and I would fill that in for myself, even though very busy I was. I just give it a few minutes to think about it. If I had my way I would make teachers keep a record, keep like a little journal and write in it on daily basis how their teaching went and what they learned from it, what they need to think about more and how they could sort of adapt it.

Moon (1999) and Beattie (2001) acknowledge that journals are commonly used as a vehicle for reflection and development of professional knowledge. Therefore, in the absence of peer observation and cooperative development for one reason or another, reflection on one's own performance by keeping a record of the daily practices, which are driven by beliefs, images, personal theories of teaching and learning, and then critically analyzing that performance becomes vital. Teachers here become committed to professional development as they become their own mirrors. This has its positive implications for the overall success of the language education policy implementation.

IMPLICATIONS

In this part of the paper I discuss a number of implications which have been drawn from the study and which are pertinent to the implementation of an effective ELT policy implementation in Oman in particular and in similar or identical contexts to Oman in general.

Inspectors

Inspectors are powerful individuals in the education system. They can influence change through the instructions and directives they give their school teachers. Their training can influence the implementation of ELT policy and create an ideological conflict (Al-Issa, 2002). In other words, such powerful individuals can block positive change from occurring due to the ideologies they hold, which are sometimes counter to the ones stressed by the ELT policy, and which call for teaching purposefully and communicatively and giving the student knowledge and the teacher power and edge over the textbook.

The way teachers are trained, guided, and supervised worldwide, and not only in Oman, should be compatible with the way ELT has been revolutionized and knowledge has been rapidly growing, where considerable emphasis is being laid on purposeful, communicative, and interactive teaching.

Well trained and qualified inspectors can encourage and empower teachers and give them some space and freedom to create and innovate and take initiatives and continuously test theories through the guidance and supervision they provide, which are built upon their thorough understanding of the philosophy underlying ELT in that particular context and worldwide.

Critical Reflective Thinking and Practice

Student teachers need to be trained to keep a journal as a means to help them reflect systematically and meaningfully on their classroom practices,

which are partly or in some cases largely derived from their beliefs, images, perceptions, and personal agendas. Journals can include comments and feedback about the student teachers' own performance, or their colleagues' teaching or other student teachers' work.

Keeping a journal and observing other teachers or student teachers in action are thus two fundamental parts that help teachers to confront their images and beliefs and lead to and provoke critical reflective thinking. Critical reflective thinking and practice thus form a part and parcel of what can be labeled as "progressive" training of teachers at present. Training should equip teachers with such an effective tool to help them develop professionally even in the absence of an inspector or in-service training courses and in rigid and centralized systems like the Omani one and many others round the world.

Microteaching

Microteaching is an important component of the overall teacher education program structure and a tool that prepares student teachers for their practicum. Microteaching should be designed to train student teachers to be critical reflectors and dynamic practitioners, who see beyond the classroom context and initiate change accordingly.

Microteaching should be designed and structured in such a way that helps student teachers to grasp their role as critical thinkers, powerful agents of change, and informed decision makers.

Microteaching, if well implemented, can facilitate cooperative development. In fact, it can train student teachers to work and develop cooperatively. Teachers learn equally from good and bad lessons and from good and bad teachers. However, there are ways for acquiring and conveying knowledge during and after observing other lessons and teachers. These ways can be best introduced and practiced during microteaching.

Practicum

Schools and classrooms are complex political, social, and cultural sites. Hence, the practicum needs to be given sufficient time whereby student teachers spend more time at schools and classrooms in order to analyze and understand the context and what is beyond at more depth and breadth.

While spending months and years receiving exposure to theory about language learning and teaching at the teacher education institution is important for prospective teachers, spending sufficient time at the cooperating schools helps the student teachers increase their exposure to ELT practices, which in turn helps them to sharpen their skills and gain more knowledge about the respective ELT classroom cultures they are assigned to teach.

Teacher Trainers

When teacher trainers are outsiders/foreigners to the context they have been selected to work in and lack familiarity with its underlying philosophy, the likelihood of conflict between their personal theories and the ELT philosophy of that particular context becomes high (Al-Issa, 2002). Trainers are powerful and influential professionals, who play a fundamental and inspiring role in their trainees' social, academic, and professional lives. It is imperative hence that considerable care is given to the selection of teacher trainers. "Selection" here can apply to their training background and range of field experience, and not merely to their academic qualifications and scientific publications, which not necessarily a yardstick for professionalism (Al-Issa, 2002).

The competence of the teacher trainers can be reflected through the design of the teacher education programs and the components they decide to teach to their student teachers and the way they plan to teach these components and the amount of exposure to theory as opposed to the time spent at the cooperating school for the practicum. It can be further reflected through the effort they exert to bridge the gap between their institutions and the

cooperating schools their student teachers are affiliated to for their practicum.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussion revealed that second language teacher education, through its program can be a determining factor in policy implementation, or otherwise.

The discussion further revealed that there are claims about the student teachers at SQU as being trained to adhere to textbook-based teaching while refrained from critically reflecting on their practices and from taking any initiatives, which promote innovation and creativity. This has been found counter to what the writers of NELP suggest and stress. The three writers are supportive of teachers as showing skill and competence to help give language learning life and meaning and to enrich their students' language repertoire to help produce effective language users capable of contributing to building a modern Oman.

Since this research used qualitative analysis, quantitative methods should also be conducted, as the limitations of the qualitative studies are recognized. A broad quantitative survey may further assist to the understanding of student teachers' perceptions toward their ELT training in SQU.

However, regardless of the limitations found in this study, the researcher believes that the findings add to our understanding of the agents' perceptions toward English language teacher education in general & in SQU in Oman in particular. These perceptions need to receive attention in order to make certain progress in assisting Omani ELT student teachers in becoming better teachers.

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