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# Playing the Blame Game: English Education in Omani Government Schools

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# Playing the Blame Game: English Education In Omani Government Schools

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## **Abstract**

Given that the Omani government has undertaken in recent decades a massive education reform to improve, among other things, the English level of Omani students, it is now time to evaluate how the system is faring, where it is failing and why. Under the new Education system enacted in 1998, Omani students begin learning English from grade one with the aim that, by grade twelve, students know enough English to be able to study at a university level in English. Unfortunately, a vast majority of students who enter university in Oman are forced to enroll in one to three semesters of intensive English classes, simply to get them up to a functional English level before starting credit courses. This study sought to investigate why, with all the control that the government exerts over the education of its students, and, with the twelve years of English education that Omani students undergo, Omani students still struggle with the English language.

**Topic Codes: Education, English Education, Education Policy**

## **Introduction**

In our ever-globalizing world, nations are forced to adapt in order to place their citizens in a prime position alongside the rest of the world. The countries in the Arabian Gulf are no exception; with their extensive dependence on wealth from natural resources, in recent years there has been an emphasis on long-term investments in human capital—educate your people and you guarantee their livelihood for generations to come. Oman, a country with a rich and long history, has been in the throes of a renaissance that began in 1970 with the ascension of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said to the throne. With the change in power came modern Oman's current path—one equipped with sophisticated infrastructure, an educated and generally literate society, and huge potential for the future.

As an increasingly vital language, proficiency in the English language is a valuable skill—one that gives a competitive edge in this global world. To capitalize on this advantage, the Omani government has decided that its students should be exposed to and proficient in English; thus, Omani students study English all the way through their pre-university schooling, from grade one until grade twelve. Once in university, students in most specialties take all of their classes in English. Omani students have been learning English in schools for decades and, yet,

many are still not functional, upon entering university, in the English language. This research sought to investigate why this trend exists.

### **History of English Education**

When His Majesty Sultan Qaboos took the throne, there were three schools educating some nine hundred select boys—today there are thousands of schools educating tens of thousands of students. In 1998 the government implemented a new system for primary and secondary school. Named “Basic Education”, it lengthened class hours, almost doubling the number of hours in the school year, and mandated that English language instruction begin in grade one, as opposed to grade four under the prior system. Instruction in Basic Education (grades one through ten) and Post-Basic Education (grades eleven and twelve) in government schools is entirely in Arabic—excluding the one English class students take each term. The system was phased in, and more than a decade later, the results are mixed.

The advent of the Basic Education system brought with it several large changes to how English was taught in Omani schools. The expectations for students’ English levels were substantially raised: the goal for the end of Grade 10 for students was set at 4,500 vocabulary words. More specifically, students should have an active mastery of 2,500 and a recognition vocabulary of an additional 2,000 words. By the completion of grade 12, it was determined that students should know 6,000 to 7,000 words to be adequately prepared for university studies (Curriculum Framework, 10). Students thus ideally acquired 4,500 words in a span of 10 years but are then expected to acquire anywhere from one-third to double the number of words that they already know in a matter of two years. By Grade 7 they are expected to know 750 words; by Grade 12, 6,000. By the end of Grade 7, with their limited vocabulary of 750 words, students

should also have acquired the microskills of skimming and scanning, be able to write correctly in cursive and be able to compare and contrast (New English Curriculum, 7).

Once students enter university the language of instruction switches almost exclusively to English—with the exception of certain majors, such as Commercial Law. Because students will be studying in English upon entering university, the Basic and Post-Basic Education years are intended to prepare students for that time. The government, through its various ministries, has a great deal of control: it writes and distributes the curriculum—which is used in every government school in Oman—, it hires the English language teachers, it mandates how many hours of English are in a school year, and writes the crucial National Exam that Post-Basic graduates take and whose scores determine the universities and majors allowed to these graduates. Once in university, students must sit for an English exam and, if they do not prove themselves proficient, they must enroll in one to three semesters of an intensive English program entitled Foundation Year. This program seeks to strengthen students' English skills and to prepare them to enroll and succeed in their credit-bearing courses.

First inaugurated in 1986, Sultan Qaboos University is the very best university in Oman; the only government university and free to those who attend, a spot at SQU is highly coveted. Those who are accepted at this fine university must demonstrate that they are among the most talented in the country, with the highest marks across all subjects, including English. Thus, it is shocking that, of the incoming first-years, in the Fall 2011 class—the third year of Basic Education graduates—some 2,451 students had to enroll in Foundation Year, leaving a mere three hundred or so first-years who were able to directly begin credit-bearing courses (Daniels, 2011).

Given that the government exercises such vast control over policy, this research project aims to investigate how it comes to be that the vast majority of students that do go on to higher education, must enroll in the Foundation Year Program. Universities must then expend resources to hire qualified English professors, often expatriates, and students must then spend anywhere from an extra semester to three extra semesters in university. This study will, then, focus holistically on the factors that together prevent students from effectively acquiring the English language in the twelve years of study.

## **Literature Review**

### Teacher Training

As effective teachers are vital to successful language acquisition, it is crucial that the people who will become the conduits for knowledge be well-trained, satisfied and constantly improving themselves. As the premiere university in the country, teachers-to-be who participate in the Teacher Education Program at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) enter as some of the very best students in the country. They then graduate as some of the most prepared and well-equipped teachers in the workforce. In a 2003 study of former students of this program, Al Shihi investigated teacher's perceptions of the Teacher Education program at SQU. She found that students generally found the role of their advisors to be inadequate (Al Shihi, 60). Almost one quarter wanted more speaking and teaching practice; Supervisor's generally rated students as moderately competent teachers (Al Shihi, 70). If students from the foremost university themselves admit to not having had enough speaking and teaching practice—in a profession composed almost entirely of those two things—one has to wonder at the quality of the English instructors throughout the country.

In their final year at SQU, students have set contact hours of teaching in government schools, overseen by their supervisors, to give them exposure to the environment they will be entering upon graduation. Unfortunately, students in their final semesters are only teaching once or twice weekly, less contact hours than in other countries, thus depriving students of valuable preparatory time (Ahoud, 20). Furthermore, even though on paper the steps of evaluation and supervision are clear and fair, in practice, supervision is occasional at best and students are thus not given the feedback they need (Ahoud, 22). Thus, though the program at SQU is undeniably the best in the country, it is still lacking in several very important areas—to the detriment of the quality of teachers that graduate and enter the workforce. All this comes together to form a picture of students graduating from this prestigious program at the best university in the country not as well-trained as they should be and only moderately competent in teaching the language that they will be charged with passing on to the next generation.

When newly-hired teachers begin work, it is critical that the school system compensate for anything that was lacking in the education of new teachers. Considering that the aforementioned deficiencies exist in the country's best university, one can only imagine what is lacking in the education of graduates from lesser-renowned universities. In 2006, Al Rasbi performed a study on the needs of teachers in Oman. Newly hired teachers are provided with pre-service training to help them adapt to the curriculum, the environment and to teaching in general. In-service training is provided to current teachers to improve their professional knowledge—usually in the form of conferences and workshops (Al Rasbi, 6). Her study found that teachers and supervisors alike perceive the greatest need for teachers to be in the form of teaching writing; supervisors thought that teachers needed more training in the area of English language proficiency (Al Rasbi, 51). Her study also found that among the complaints of teachers



was that they were not consulted in the planning and implementation phases of in-service programs (Al Rasbi, 53).

When combined, these two facts compose a concerning trend. While still in university, students are often not as well-prepared as they should be to enter the workforce as teachers; once in the workforce, the training that should be compensating for the gaps in their education is not effective. Teachers then find themselves having a harder time adjusting than is necessary, amplifying their anxiety and making for less efficient use of classroom time.

### Teacher Motivation

Teachers' methods of instruction, not to mention their enthusiasm and energy, are very important in helping students engage with and grasp the information. Thus, truly motivated teachers are likely to pass along their passion and interest for the language, onto their students. In her 2004 thesis Al Hashmi investigated the motivations that teachers had for choosing their profession and the factors that influence these motivations. She found that Omani teachers were generally "very highly motivated in terms of satisfaction, confidence and autonomy (Al Hashmi, 46)." That said, they are not satisfied with their salaries and with the inadequate support from the community and their students' parents (ibid). Teachers are generally motivated and satisfied with their jobs—happy teachers can more easily make their students happy. The factors that do displease them can be solved by efforts on the part of the Ministry and students' parents.

What teachers believe about language acquisition affect the way that they teach and how open they are to experimentation. In her 2003 thesis Al Nadabi sought to document Omani teachers' perceptions about learning English in Oman. Teachers saw four dimensions—detailed in descending order of importance—as affecting learning acquisition: firstly, they agreed that

contextual variables, such as time spent learning English in schools, group work, and students' forgetting material during holiday breaks, played a large role in learning English in Oman. Secondly, they attributed great significance to the motivation and attitude of students—essentially teachers felt that students should feel a very strong need to learn the language in order to succeed at learning it. Thirdly they placed importance on the learning strategies employed by students. Finally, they recognized the influence of learner's anxiety on a student's performance and learning of English (Al Nadabi, 44). With the exception of the first part of the first perception, what teachers see as influencing students' ability to learn the language are largely student-based—the teacher seems to play a rather small role in teachers' perceptions of student language acquisition. This belief in a lack of teacher centrality must then play an interesting role in how teachers treat students that do not seem to fit their perceptions.

Teachers have a curriculum that they must follow but, even in the most rigid of curriculums, they have some space to decide where to focus the lesson. Upon completion of Post-Basic Education, students must take a massive cumulative exam that tests them in several areas, including English. These scores determine the universities that students can attend and thus the future careers that they may hold. With the pressure to improve students' scores in mind, Al Lawati sought to investigate, in her 2002 Master's thesis, if teachers of grade 12 found themselves gearing their focus towards the end of the year towards materials that would be on the exam. Her results showed that teachers did in fact shift the focus of their lessons in the direction of the exam: if grammar and vocabulary were strongly emphasized in the pre-test materials, then teachers tended to spend more time on grammar and vocabulary (Al Lawati, 46). If teachers tend to “teach to the test”, then their students may do well on the exam but, upon

entering university, they may not have skills that they will need that may not have been reflected or even tested on the exam—such as speaking and listening skills.

### Student Motivation

Students understand that upon graduating from Post-Basic Education the university they attend and the specialty they attain will have a significant impact on their post-university prospects. Because students' scores and not the students' themselves dictate their future opportunities, it is crucial that they do well on the Post-Basic Education exam. Al Lawati found that just as teachers were gearing their teaching toward the exam, students were gearing their learning towards the exam—a focus of the exam on grammar and vocabulary prompted a similar focus on students' parts on grammar and vocabulary (Al Lawati, 67). This backwash effect is not exclusive to English studies—students and teachers feel this pressure in all areas, making the phenomenon difficult to address and correct. While vocabulary and grammar are important aspects of the English language, an impressive grasp of them will not be as useful as a more-than-basic ability to read, write, listen to and speak English.

In the same way that teacher methods of instruction and enthusiasm play a large role in student acquisition of English, so too do student motivation and desire play a substantial part. In his 2003 study on Omani secondary school students' attitudes toward learning English, Al Abri sought to investigate whether Omani students are motivated to learn English. His results showed that, generally, students understand the importance of learning English to their lives (Al Abri, 44); they generally have moderate attitudes toward learning English. The results also showed that the higher the student achievement, the more positive the attitude toward learning English (Al Abri, 55). So, according to Al Abri's study, Omani students see learning English as important

and the higher their grades, the more they want to learn English. If the problem, then, lies not mainly with the students, then it must lie elsewhere, perhaps in the curriculum or the teachers.

Another key factor affecting students' English acquisition is the textbooks from which teachers teach. Students within Basic Education learn from a textbook series entitled *English for Me*. Despite the fact that Basic Education has been in place for over a decade, the first attempt at evaluating the textbooks was made in 2008 by Al Abri (Al Abri, 28). In his Master's thesis he sought to evaluate teacher perspectives on the textbooks used during Basic Education. He found that along the areas of Language Input, Activities and Tasks and Non-Textual components, teachers generally felt that all areas were represented to some extent (Al Abri, 76). Of the teachers who chose to answer, a majority of teachers felt that they should be professionally consulted, as they are the ones who have to implement it (Al Abri, 73). Without adequate textbooks that reflect the needs of students and the people that teach them, it is unrealistic to expect students or teachers to reach their highest potentials in the classroom.

In his 2011 Master's thesis, Al Kharusi investigated the performance of Basic Education students versus General Education students in grade 11. The Ministry qualifies the minimum required level of performance as fifty percent (Al Kharusi, 65). Al Kharusi tested both groups of students' English speaking, listening and writing skills and found that Basic Education students' outperformed General Education students on all three indicators, with both groups faring badly in writing but surpassing the fifty-percent mark on reading and listening. While this may seem a positive indicator, reading and listening are considered easier tasks than writing, because the former are receptive skills (Al Kharusi, 73). That both groups failed to achieve the fifty-percent mark in writing is a worrying trait. Though both groups passed minimum requirement levels for speaking and writing, the requirement was incredibly low—and the highest score that the Basic

Education group received in their best indicator was a mere 75% (Al Kharus, 74). Omani students are still not excelling at the English language.

There seems to be a lack of connection between what the Ministry decrees and what teachers experience, with no clear avenues for teacher input into what are considered solely Ministry decisions.

### **Sampling**

Given that the scope of the issues that Omani students face with acquiring English, I knew that this project would have to investigate the problem along several fronts. My interview pool thus consisted of participants in all levels of the process: this included one Cycle 1 teacher, two Cycle 2 teachers, one ministry official, two Foundation Year professors at Sultan Qaboos University and two students enrolled in the Foundation Year Program at Sultan Qaboos University. Everyone interviewed except the Foundation Year professors were Omani citizens who had studied in Oman all the way through university.

The Basic Education teachers I interviewed were all Omani and thus did not have the experiences of expatriate teachers. Thus, it should be taken into account that these teachers are endowed with a legitimacy that some expatriate teachers lack and that may make, in this respect, their classrooms run more smoothly. By that same token, because the Foundation Year professors that I interviewed were entirely expatriate, entirely native speakers of English, they did not share in the experience of Omani, or even general Arab, teachers in Foundation Year—namely sharing the same mother tongue as students and thus having it as a potential crutch for low-level students.

All the interviews took place in Muscat and the interviewers all lived and studied or worked in Muscat. I chose to focus on the capital both because of time restraints and because this is where the Ministry of Education is located and where changes to the curriculum and such happen first. Additionally, Muscat is where the most English-speakers would be found, giving students more opportunities to use it, and, thus, ideally, improving it. Furthermore, the Foundation Year students interviewed had both attended school in Muscat: private schools for some time, but they spent six to seven of their last years of school in Basic and Post-Basic Education in government schools. I chose to focus on students and professors from Sultan Qaboos University because it is in Muscat, because it is the only government university and because it is the first choice—in-country—for the best students in Oman. I assumed that, because students who are accepted in SQU must have very high scores in all subjects, including English, that if the level of English is still sub-par, then it can only be worse in other colleges and private universities.

The interview pool is thus skewed in that it was limited by time constraints and by ability to find willing participants—usually through mutual acquaintances. Thus, opinions of those who do not know the people that I know, who were not willing to be interviewed, or who did not respond to requests, were not integrated into this study. Additionally, the teachers that I interviewed had been teaching for anywhere from eight to seventeen years and thus had not very recently been through teachers training or the education or higher education system—thus, though they have more experience, their perspectives on this subject are limited.

My interview pool was further limited to those who spoke adequate enough English to be able to participate in an interview alongside a native speaker. Even though these are people who have been trained to teach English, there are still teachers whose English is not adequate

enough to conduct an extended conversation with a native-speaker in English. Most of the teachers' English was excellent but I occasionally had to rephrase the question in simpler terms and, with one particular teacher, I often had to simplify my questions because she did not understand them. The teachers I interviewed at the pre-university level were entirely women and thus my study lacked the perspective of male teachers and also of all-boy schools, where almost surely the environment was different. Due to time constraints and due to bureaucratic procedures that I could not fulfill, I was not able to speak with current students enrolled in government school. As such, a crucial perspective, that of the students who are currently experiencing the system, is lost. This is a perspective that should be investigated further.

### **Methodology**

The research process involved four sets of semi-formal interview questions specifically designed for pre-university government school teachers, for Foundation Year teachers, for Foundation Year students and for Ministry of Education officials (see appendices). The interviews were administered to each person individually, with the exception of the Foundation Year students who, due to time restraints, were interviewed together. This may have affected the honesty of the respondents' but, as they were friends and, as our time together was limited, there was no other choice. The questions in each set were the same but some freedom was allowed for follow-up questions, depending on the situation, and for the rephrasing of the question, in the event that there was some misunderstanding. Certain questions were omitted if the participant had answered it previously or if it was clear that they did not know or understand.

In the event that interviewees did not seem to understand the question, I usually rephrased the question and often used examples. A leading question was occasionally necessary,

thereby introducing the risk of providing them with an answer that was not entirely original. As I conducted more interviews, I began to recognize the questions that often caused confusion and would rephrase them the first time in simpler and, what I hoped were still, objective ways. This confusion mostly occurred with vague or abstract ideas and, once I had clarified, the interviewees usually understood and could answer the question.

Interviews began with an introduction to me, my research project, the purpose of their interview, and what would be included. I then asked for their consent to have the interview be recorded and informed them of their rights to anonymity and to end the interview at any time.

Because I interviewed people from four different aspects of the system, I used four separate interviews. With the pre-university teachers, the interview began with preliminaries establishing what levels they have taught, and whether they enjoyed and chose teaching as a profession. The interview then continued to focus on teacher perceptions of the adequacy of available materials and resources, of teacher training and of classroom time devoted to teaching English. These sought to understand whether or not teachers found that the Ministry of Education provided them with enough, on a basic level, to perform their jobs adequately—basically, whether or not the Ministry works as a strong enough support system and outlet for teacher needs and comments. The interview questions then focused on teacher perceptions of student motivation as that has a direct effect on their learning and on teacher motivation as well, both of which can affect language acquisition. Interviews then finally moved to seek teacher perceptions of what is lacking in the educational system, why students do so poorly, and what can be improved.



The interview for the Ministry of Education official began with introduction questions about the position held, and the responsibilities of the position. It firstly sought to clarify what exactly the Ministry wants from its graduates, in terms of English language; the focus then moved to whether or not the students are meeting those goals and, if not, why not. I sought to understand what status English plays in the schools, whether it holds a special place because it is so absolutely crucial to students' continuing education. Furthermore, I needed to understand how the system of passing and failing classes operates in government schools. The interview then focused on what resources the Ministry provides to teachers and how the Ministry hires teachers. Finally the interview shifted to what sort of oversight and accountability the Ministry practices over its teachers, its students and both of their progressions during the school year. As education is so centralized and as the Ministry holds so much power, the interview questions sought to understand if the Ministry was wielding that power effectively and to the benefit of those it is entrusted to help.

From the Foundation Year professors the interview questions sought to gain a clearer picture of where the very best Post-Basic graduates enter, the focus being on their English ability. The interview began with preliminaries about what level of Foundation they had taught and for how long and whether or not they spoke Arabic. This latter question was to clarify whether or not they had Arabic as a second option for students that just did not understand something and also whether or not English was the only language of instruction. The interview finally asked professors to give a general overview of their students' level and their motivation level. As these professors are the first point of contact for recent graduates, they have the best idea of where these students' English levels are and how far away they are from being able to study university-level courses in English.

The interviews with the Foundation Year students sought to glean information from the unique perspectives of students who had gone through the Education system in Oman and who had then managed to gain entry into the most prestigious university in the country—only to have to face off with their inherited deficits in the English language prior to beginning their course-load. The questions began with the preliminaries of clarifying how many years of English they had taken, what level they had tested into at SQU and what level they were at now. The questions then moved on to their experience learning English in schools, the effectiveness of the teachers, curriculum and teaching method. The questions then asked them about their opinion of the importance of English, and their past opinion of its importance, followed by their opinion of why their schooling did not prepare them to study in English, and how it could have been better.

The variety of perspectives worked well in some respects, but acted as a hindrance in others. It allowed for a greater understanding in the diversity of opinions and in diversity of factors that clearly play a role in the issue. Unfortunately, when it came to certain questions whose answers I had assumed were objective and clear—such as a question about how many classes a student was allowed to fail and still pass the year—I received different answers from the Ministry and from teachers. This occurred a number of times and gave a clearer idea of how confusing and constantly changing the situation in the schools really is.

## **Findings**

### Teacher Perspective

#### *A. How does the Ministry help you do your job?*

When the interviewees were first hired, they all remarked that it was very simple to begin working as a teacher—in fact, for some of them, teaching was not their first choice but, because

of the plethora of jobs, they became teachers. Once hired, all the respondents agreed that the Ministry provided excellent training in how to teach, the methodologies and how to handle a classroom. Unfortunately, as one Cycle 2 teacher reported, this training often happens after a teacher has already been teaching for some years: “they don’t give it to me at the beginning, maybe after teaching two, three years, so I know the curriculum already...one of my colleagues took it after five or four years of teaching and she know everything about it.” So, although the Ministry seems to be doing a stellar job on preparing teachers for the job...the most important aspect of the training—that it happens before teachers enter the field—is often overlooked. As a result, teachers have to find their own way, at the expense of their students, who are forced to learn from a novice teacher.

Additionally, even though teachers are well-trained towards their beginning of their career, the Ministry is not doing enough to keep improving teachers’ quality. Once teachers have been hired and trained, it is imperative that their own skill as teachers and English speakers be continually improved so that their students are learning from the most qualified teachers. Though the Ministry does provide some workshops and conferences, one teacher recalls that “[she] always tell[s her] supervisor to send the teachers for workshops in teaching English, new techniques, it’s something useful for teachers but it’s very very limited—maybe one in a whole semester, we have only one or two workshops, not that much.” So, though the Ministry does try, they are not doing enough to guarantee that the teachers they are hiring are regularly improving themselves—a concerning fact as compared to the ease with which teachers were hired in the past...regardless of qualifications.

*B. Why are Omani students struggling with English?*

Of the teachers interviewed, the prevailing feeling about teaching was one of exhaustion. Teachers' tasks include planning, implementing and marking lessons, providing remedial lessons to struggling students, giving and marking portfolios and exams—all in addition to any administrative work that comes with the territory. One teacher is also charged with teaching all the four skills—there are no separate or additional classes to focus on reading, writing, speaking and listening specifically. This is especially detrimental when applied to students in Cycle 1 who have very short attention spans and who need constant repetition and stability; this results in teachers rushing to get through the skills at a loss to students' complete comprehension.

Furthermore, not only are class sizes on the larger size—often over thirty pupils in a class—but teachers often have multiple classes. Within each class the English level of the students is always variable and the majority of students are almost always below where the curriculum says they should be. One Cycle 2 teacher commented that “when they reach grade 10, sometimes we have students who can't read, actually...maybe large number in one class... So the teacher will have a problem. [She] can't follow the same students as we have large number, 36 in one class, from the beginning she needs to start from zero.” Thus, teachers find themselves back-tracking for slower students, providing extra materials for the few outstanding students and trying to balance the differences enough to keep the class on schedule.

Student motivation is sometimes also an obstacle—pupils often give up easily and do not always see the point of learning English; teachers then have to spend time creating extra exercises and trying to engage these pupils. Some of the teachers reported anxiety at seeing students struggle but being unable to help because their workload is so heavy that they do not have time. Additionally, even though English was reported as the language of instruction most of the time, teachers found it difficult to stop students from speaking in Arabic. This was both

because the weak students do not have a wide enough English vocabulary and because all of their other classes are in Arabic and it is obviously their mother-tongue.

*C. What role does the Ministry play in their underachievement?*

All interviewed teachers reported that they found the curriculum to be inadequate. Parts of it—in Cycle 2 especially—baffled teachers, in terms of relevance, and were clearly not challenging or engaging enough for students. Respondents found that it lacked a sense of continuity of skill level and that it often entirely misjudged students' English level. In some respects it was far too easy but in others, it expected too much of students. One Cycle 2 teacher remarked that “really I was surprised when they asked them to write a haiku poem—they don't know how to write a paragraph, you're asking them to write a poem!” That then puts teachers in a difficult position because they have to reconcile what the curriculum mandates that they do and what students are capable of. Besides being slowed down by the varying student levels in one class, teachers are also burdened by the fact that there is too much material to cover in a semester, too much pressure to finish, that teachers often find themselves rushing through the material, putting students at a disadvantage in the following semester, because maybe they did not have time to fully comprehend a concept.

Furthermore, as there is rarely enough classroom time, and, as the curriculum is sometimes out of touch with students needs, teachers find themselves needing to provide extra-curricular activities to assist students, further occupying their time. What often happens is that, when rushed for time, either the Ministry cuts the last unit or teachers finish the material the next semester. If teachers are forced to skip the last unit then, when student start the next book in the series, they are at an automatic disadvantage because they are missing information. If teachers

simply finish the material the next semester, then the cycle will just repeat itself because there will not be enough time to finish again and students will perpetually be behind the curriculum.

From teachers' observations, the Ministry both seems to place a large burden on their shoulders without granting them the responsibility to make significant decisions. Ministry committees are often in the school, randomly checking students' progress and making their presence known—but not often in a way that lends itself to listening to teachers concerns. When asked if the Ministry seemed receptive to her concerns, one teacher responded that “I cannot say that. We told them... they wrote our points, they discussed that with us but nothing was done till now.” Though teachers are the main point of contact with students, they are not charged with making the final decision about whether or not a student passes or fails the English class. One Cycle 2 teacher recalled a particular year when “there [were] a lot of students failing in grade 7, I think the percentage was about forty-seven or something like that. So they came from the Ministry, asking, why did the students fail and...they were asking us why the students fail as if it was only our fault.” This accusative position not only causes teacher anxiety but it also puts pressure on the teachers to focus on improving grades and getting through the material—rather than ensuring student comprehension. Before the end of the year, once the exam results are in, Ministry committees come into the schools and double check students' scores, their portfolios, their tests, before deciding that students truly did deserve to fail, as if teachers are not qualified to make that decision.

#### *D. What should the Ministry change?*

The interviewed teachers had several suggestions to improve the Ministry and its interactions with its teachers. Firstly, it needs to be more responsive to teacher needs and

concerns; it also needs to be clearer about focusing and narrowing teacher responsibilities so that teachers are given the time and ability to excel at their work—instead of just demanding that teachers do as told. As for hiring practices, once hired, teachers go through one hundred and fifty hours of training that focus on language improvement and on methodology. The teachers all agreed that training was very helpful—if only tardy. Training also needs to be more continuously applied during a teacher’s career to ensure that teachers are constantly improving their teaching ability.

As for the curriculum, as is teachers generally find it to be inadequate; they believe the Ministry should do more research on what would be relevant and believe that they should be consulted about what goes into the curriculum because they understand students’ levels and interests better than the Ministry seems to. Essentially, teachers want a seat at the table to better enable them to effectively do their jobs.

### Ministry Perspective

#### *A. What are Ministry expectations for students?*

I interviewed the Deputy Director for the English Curriculum in the Ministry of Education. When asked what the Ministry wants for the students that graduate from its Basic and Post-Basic Education system, she replied that, by the end of grade 10, students should be equipped with sufficient enough English to be able to join the market and, by the of grade 12, they should be able to score IELTS 4 to 5. She referenced this several times and changed her number several times, interchanging 4 to 5 and 4.5 to 5, begging the question of whether there is a concrete goal that the Ministry of Education is trying to achieve. Without a concrete goal, one wonders how the Ministry sets achievement goals. The IELTS exam is the most widely used

English exam in the world, accepted at universities everywhere. A score of 5 is considered a “modest user” of the language, while one of 4 is considered a “limited user” (IELTS). That those are the expectations of the Ministry of Education is puzzling because a university-level education in English—at the best university in the country—must necessitate more than, at best, a “modest” ability in English.

*B. Why are Omani students underachieving?*

When questioned about Omani students’ lackluster performance in English upon entering university, she placed the majority of the responsibility on the teachers. She said that “sometimes we have these kinds of teachers who don’t have this initiative, they are not initiators and...they are getting everything ready, like the course-book everything, but still not interested on teaching” In placing most of the blame she almost entirely excuses any Ministry responsibility to teachers, in the way of providing a support system. Additionally, if this teacher truly is so indifferent to teaching and helping his or her students, the Ministry must then answer for hiring them in the first place. Since the Ministry is responsible for hiring qualified and effective teachers, why was this teacher even hired? And knowing that some teachers are not interested in teaching, why are they still teaching? When she refers to the students who are still entering Foundation Year in droves, she mentions it as an aside: “... If they are joining still, some of them, are still joining the Foundation Year, we didn’t conduct an actual research...” This comment seems out of touch with reality—a simple trip to any college or university would prove that obviously large numbers of students are still enrolling in Foundation Year. The conditional “if” connotes doubt at the fact, a confusing remark from someone whose job it is to know this information. Furthermore without any research into how Omani students are faring in the English goals the Ministry set for them, there is no way to improve the practices of the Ministry, of the teachers and of the students.



The remaining part of the blame, she saw as being on students' shoulders—some students just do not want to learn the language. She pointed out that, when the curriculum is written, there are many sections about the importance of learning English, about reading for pleasure, and so on. Furthermore, certain subjects, like IT and Life Skills have English terms integrated into them, in order to make English less of an isolated subject.

*C. What is the school policy toward failure?*

School policy on failing classes was very difficult to decipher. The Ministry said that current policy is that, if you fail one course, you repeat the whole year but that you can fail up to three “under-study” courses—non-essential courses of which English is not one. A Cycle 2 teacher claimed the policy was that if you fail in up to two or three secondary subjects—of which English used to be one—then then you pass, but if you fail in two main subjects, you must repeat the whole year. A Cycle 1 teacher said that there are no examinations in Cycle 1—but that this year they might be re-implementing them. With no examinations, students have no motivation to study, no motivation to take English study seriously. Combined with the fact that English is so different from Arabic and that they do not use it in other classes, students can only be expected to have low motivation. That teachers do not have a clear idea of failing policy, or that failing policy is not clear, is a worrying sign of the amount of control that the Ministry has over its schools.

*D. What is Ministry policy for hiring teachers?*

In the past, almost anyone could be hired as a teacher. In recent years, though, the Ministry is becoming more stringent about its requirements. Because students must reach IELTS 4 or 5, teachers must be able to score IELTS 6. Unfortunately, this is not always enforced

because, as more graduates apply from lesser colleges and private universities, the Ministry can no longer be assured of the quality of the teachers being hired. When asked why the Ministry would hire anyone who did not achieve the set requirement of IELTS 6, the Deputy Director replied that it's "because it comes from higher authority, it's not us." This unspecified higher authority wants to set a positive image for the country, that it is hiring its own graduates and such. The solution, then, is to hire these unqualified teachers and teach them better English and train them while they are already working. Noble as this idea is, it only hurts the students who have to learn from ill-equipped teachers and only further perpetuates the cycle of underachievement and failure.

### Foundation Year Teachers

#### *A. What are incoming students' levels?*

Foundation Year professors provide the first entry point to the university system; SQU Foundation Year professors are the first ones to see the culmination of twelve years of the Omani education system. As the professors I interviewed were all native English-speakers, they know perfectly where students should be in terms of grammar, accent and so on, in a way that even fluent English non-natives may not. When asked what the problem with students was, one teacher replied that students rarely got to practice the language—they may know the grammar better than a native-speaker...but they cannot use it. In one professor's class, the students still have issues with listening to English that is not tailored to their level. His students had definite problems with word order and sentence structure. When asked about their writing, he replied that "They can write a pretty competent paragraph on a very basic topic". After twelve years of

English instruction specifically designed to prepare them to not need his class, Omani students still struggle immensely with English.

### Student Perspective

#### *A. How do Omani students like English classes?*

The two interviewed Foundation Year students were in their second semester of their first year; they provided insights into what the very people the system was designed for—the students—think about the system. The interviewed students felt that much of their enjoyment and their learning depended on their teacher, their grasp of English and on their openness to experimentation and to student opinion. Both students were very bored by the material because it was very easy and because certain teachers strictly taught what was in the book, without making it apply to their lives. One of the students hardly ever felt engaged while learning English in school; rather, she said, “I feel I get the English from the life more than school and teaching.” The other interviewer remarked that, in the schools, learning English is about the marks, it is about doing well and graduating, it is never about loving the language—which makes it boring.

#### *B. How should the English system be fixed?*

Both students were in favor of making the curriculum and the teaching methodology more engaging and relevant to their lives. They argue for a sense of linguistic continuity—both mentioned several times how difficult it is to have to switch from learning math or science in Arabic to have to re-learn the terms in English. They agreed that it would be wise to study math and science in English starting in school. One of the students mentioned that it was disruptive to have so many different language levels in on class. Instead of having all twelfth graders in one

class, they should have all intermediate level English learners in one class—there should be a placement exam for students.

### **Conclusions**

The Sultanate of Oman has been able to achieve in less than fifty years the kind of development that took most nations' centuries. With the amount of control that His Majesty the Sultan and his government exert, they have the potential for an efficiency that is absent in democracies. Unfortunately, even within autocracy, bureaucratic confusion and sluggishness are still alive and well. As such, goals that should be simple and clear and relatively straight-forward to implement become complicated and slow.

When I began this research, I was not so naïve as to expect that the issue would be so apparent and neat as to necessitate a similarly apparent and neat solution; even still, the amount of miscommunication and disagreement on things that should be simple surprised me. I began the process by reading up on the relevant literature and was taken aback by how much had already been written by the issue; considering how old some of the literature was, I was a little taken aback that the Ministry had not done more to try and fix the system.

My central question in my research project was why, despite the twelve years of schooling specifically designed to teach them English, Omani students still struggle with English. The Ministry sees the problem as one to do with the teachers and the students. Try as they might to provide teachers with adequate materials and resources, some teachers are just not interested in teaching English. The remaining part of the blame, according to the Ministry, lies with student motivation. Some students just do not want to learn. The reasoning that the Ministry uses to explain away the problem fails to take into account the fact that the Ministry is

responsible for hiring qualified and interested teachers—any failing on their part is an even greater failing on the Ministry’s part. The Deputy Director for English curriculum admitted that the Ministry does not do studies on how many students are still enrolling in Foundation Year. As such, perhaps the Ministry does not realize that the gargantuan number of students who still need Foundation Year must reflect more than a lack of motivation—at some point, student failure stops being the fault of the students and becomes a problem with policy.

It should be noted that the expectations that the Ministry has for students are often too low. When Basic Education was first implemented the goal for students’ English upon graduation was IELTS 4 or 5. An IELTS level 5 is considered a “modest user” of the language and this is a very low bar to set for students who will be studying in English in university. As Al Kharusi mentioned in his Master’s thesis, the Ministry qualified a required minimum level of performance as being fifty percent. So while his results show that Basic Education is a definite improvement over General Education, the Ministry’s expectations for its students are exceptionally low. That performance expectations are so low is an indicator of an overriding trend in the Ministry of Education of setting low achievement goals for their students and of not doing enough to achieve even those goals.

Interviewed teachers provided me with a more concrete image of how much teachers—who are charged with implementing Ministry policy—must do to try and meet the constantly changing Ministry goals. Their tasks seem endless, ranging from administrative work, to arranging and implementing remedial classes, to marking exams, and so on. With all this teachers simply do not have time to get through the curriculum—which in and of itself is comprised of too much material—and help struggling students and also accomplish all of their other tasks. Furthermore the interviewed teachers often felt ignored by the Ministry. The

prevailing attitude was that the Ministry did not provide enough resources or time for teachers to be able to adequately and efficiently do their job.

In terms of resources, if a teacher has a problem that needs the Ministry's attention, there is a procession of seven people—Senior Teacher, Supervisor, Senior Supervisor, Chief Supervisor, Head of the Supervision Department, Undersecretary, Minister—through whom it can go through; this dense bureaucracy does not work in a teacher's favor. Though the Ministry claims to have many open channels for teachers, when asked, teachers felt as if the Ministry never followed through on teacher suggestions and concerns—they felt they were not being heard. The Ministry also claims that, when changes to the curriculum are made, that all relevant parties—including teachers—are consulted; any comments to the changes, though, are usually editorial. This then begs the question of how hard the Ministry works to seek a diversity of opinions because all of the interviewed teachers took issue with the curriculum—their views were not represented or heeded.

Former students of the Basic Education system were also not satisfied. Often their English teachers' accents were unclear, and they were not open to student participation in class. The interviewed students did not find the material to be engaging and felt that the focus in schools was on grades and on getting through the book; they also found the various levels in one class disruptive and not efficient. They also said that, as a subject, English felt very isolated and that it was very difficult to switch from learning all subjects exclusively in Arabic to learning everything in English. One student recalled that she felt her English class was uninspiring—she learned English from movies, from songs, from her life. Furthermore, it was difficult to take English seriously because everything else was in Arabic, her classes, her family-life, so she

never saw the use for English. Once in university this caused significant stress for the students because, though they may know the material in Arabic, they do not know the terms in English.

From all sides there is substantial frustration and discontent with the system. Basic Education was introduced over a decade ago, it has almost completely been phased-in and it is clear that the Ministry still has a way to go to ensure that its students are getting the best education. Thirteen years provides enough retrospection to be able to take what lessons history has provided and apply them to better the educational system in Oman. Based on the views of the Ministry, teachers and students, a number of recommendations are made to improve the system.

### **Recommendations**

Within the Ministry:

- 1) Hire more qualified teachers: If a teacher cannot achieve the requirements that you set for them, do not hire them.
- 2) Have more concrete and more realistic expectations: Level 4 or 5 on IELTS is not sufficient for university level studies.
- 3) Perform more research as to your students' levels: Without knowing students' levels you cannot set accurate and reasonable expectations for their progression.
- 4) Have more concrete and realistic policies for failure: ensure that all the schools are using the same system and that it is a system that does not allow students to continue to the next level in English without passing the previous level.
- 5) Have more concrete and realistic expectations for teachers: Narrow their job description so that they do not have to scramble to do everything and so that they can do their job well.

- 6) Let students fail: how else would they learn?
- 7) Have more consistent workshops and conferences to better teachers: this way both teachers' and students' performances improve.
- 8) More directly involve teachers in the creation of the curriculum: they know best the level of their students.
- 9) Have smaller classes.
- 10) Change the curriculum: make it more relevant, more palatable and more realistic within the time-frame of a semester.

For Teachers:

- 1) Teachers must take charge of their teaching: make sure that they are doing their research and that they are always up to date on new theories of learning; always work to better themselves.
- 2) Work harder to motivate students: Use creative methods to involve and engage students.

### **Topics for Further Study**

As this research took place within one month, it only just touched upon the surface of the issue. More focus needs to be placed on teachers' opinions, on a grand scale, and on student views on the issues of the English education system. This is a key perspective that needs to be tapped into. Studies should also be made into the differences between the level of English in girls versus boys schools as there must be differences in gender learning. Overall, though, a more detailed study, one that can hone in on several aspects of the issue, must be undertaken to better understand how to best help Omani English students thrive.



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## Teacher Interviews

Preliminaries: how long have you been teaching, did you always want to be a teacher, what led you to teaching, what level do you teach, etc.

\*Did you want to be a teacher or did your scores qualify you for that field?

Do you enjoy your job?

Do you feel like the curriculum, if followed exactly, is effective in English language teaching?

\*Do you see the problem with Omani students and English as a problem to do with the curriculum or a problem of motivation on the part of the students?

Does the curriculum evolve or is it static?

Do you feel like you have a say in the evolution of the curriculum?

\*If you had a suggestion for improvements to the curriculum or to the system, does the MOE seem willing to listen and act on it?

In terms of teaching methods, is there a specific suggested/mandated teaching method or do teachers have the freedom to experiment?

Did you go through in-service training when you first became a teacher?

\*If so, what was your experience with it?

\*Was it effective?

\*Did it adequately prepare you for teaching?

Does the Ministry have adequate methods of relaying your needs/grievances...and actually acts on them?

What happens if you fail a student? Is failing a student a simple process or are there large consequences for it?

Do most students usually enter your class at the level that they're supposed to be at, or are they usually behind?

\*Are all the students usually at the same level within one class?

\*How do you balance students at different levels?

\*If a student is struggling is the protocol to simply continue on with the class or take time out to help them?

Do students generally understand the importance of their learning English?

\*Is an effort ever made to make them understand the importance of English for their future?

How motivated are your students generally?

\*How do you deal with students who are not motivated?

\*Do you see a lack of motivation as influencing students' performances in your class?

Is there time devoted to helping struggling students?

\*If so, is this actively encouraged? How are students informed about it?

\*If not, what efforts are made to help struggling students?

What is usually the language of instruction?

\*If it is not English, why not?

\*Would it be feasible to teach an English-only classroom?

\*How would students react to an English-only classroom?

Does it feel like there is enough time in a year/semester to cover all the materials and to make sure that students understand the concepts?

\*If not, do you find yourself slowing down for the students or speeding through the material? How do you balance it?

How does the MOE make sure that you and your students are progressing as they should be?

\*Is there an annual English test?

\*When are students' English levels's measured?

Do you think your university program prepared you to teach an English-only classroom?

What was the process of getting a job as a teacher? Was it simple?

### Foundation Year Teacher Interview

Preliminaries: how long have you been teaching, where did you learn English, do you speak Arabic, how and why did you choose English, why Foundation Year?

What level of Foundation do/have you taught?

\*How do you rate the students that come into your class?

\*Where are they strong? Weak?

Is the primary language of instruction English (if you speak Arabic)?

\*If so, do students usually understand you enough to function in your class?

How strong does their motivation to learn English seem?

How is Foundation year different from the years of English that students have previously taken?

\*Do you think is Foundation is successful where twelve years of English instruction have failed?

### Foundation Year Student Interview

Preliminaries: how many years have you taken English, what level of Foundation did you test into, what level are you in now?

Do you like learning English?

\*Did you always like learning English?

How was your experience learning English before university?

\*Did you do well in school?

\*Why or why not, in your opinion?

Do you think English is important?

\*Did you always think it was important?

Where do you rate your English level in terms of speaking, reading, writing and listening?"

\*How effective was your pre-university English language education?

\*How were the teachers?

\*How was their teaching method?

\*How was the curriculum?

Do you find Foundation year difficult?

How do you see Foundation as different from your prior English classes?

Do you think your English classes didn't prepare you for university?

\*Were the teachers just not very good?

\*Did you just not work hard?

\*How could your English classes have been better at school?

## Ministry of Education Interview

### **General English Questions**

What do you want from secondary school graduates, in terms of their English level, in terms of the four skills?

Do you think your students in general accomplish the goals you set for them by the end of their schooling?

Is English considered the same as the other courses?

\*Do students have to pass English?

\*What happens to the students if they fail English?

\*What happens to teachers if they fail a student?

Can a student graduate without showing English language proficiency?

### **Curriculum**

Can teachers affect/shape the curriculum?

\*Are there avenues through which teachers can voice their input?

Are there set guidelines for what a teacher must teach their students by a certain point?

How do you ensure that a teacher is adequately following the curriculum?

### **How Teachers are Hired**

What sort of training is provided to hired teachers?

What avenues do teachers have to relay their grievances or needs?