

An Ideological Discussion of the Impact of the NNESTs' English Language Knowledge on ESL Policy Implementation

'A Special Reference to the Omani Context'

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Biography:

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Abstract

Knowledge of English to the non-native speaker English teachers (NNSET) is crucial and fundamental, and its importance has been highlighted by various writers over the past few decades. This research paper, therefore, examines from an ideological perspective the importance of English language knowledge to the NNEST and the implications it has for English as a second language (ESL) education design, teacher education and policy implementation in the Sultanate of Oman. The paper triangulates data from the Philosophy and Guidelines for the Omani English Language School Curriculum document, which I will herewith refer to as the National English Language Policy/Plan (NELP) (Nunan, Tyacke & Walton, 1987), some other relevant policy texts, semi-structured interviews conducted with different agents involved in the Omani language education system and the pertinent literature. The paper draws conclusions about the powerful impact of the linguistically incompetent English teacher, as produced by the ESL education system and teacher education, on the ESL policy implementation.

Narrative

In 1989-90 the first cohort of the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) final year ELT student teachers were at my school for their practicum. SQU is the only state-owned university in the Sultanate that produces over 100 male and female Omani ELT teachers annually. I was the Head of the ELT Department staff at the oldest and largest secondary school in Muscat Region – the capital – then. As a Head of Department, I was asked to arrange the timetable for the student teachers and to ask my colleagues in the Department to cooperate with the SQU practicum supervisor. This involved attending classes taught by those student

teachers and providing them with necessary support and feedback. The Omani education system did not have an official mentoring system then.

I observed those student teachers and gave the required help and guidance when and where necessary. My colleagues and I were worried about the linguistic abilities of these student teachers. They made all sorts of language mistakes. I asked myself: After spending four years at university, how could these student teachers perform so poorly?

Four years later and after I 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 ELT inspector for Muscat Region for four months. This was until my papers were ready and I was transferred to the Intermediate Teacher Training College 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 SQU ELT student teachers were appointed as fresh graduate teachers and others were affiliated for their practicum. My curiosity was aroused once again. The old memories about the first ELT SQU cohort were revived. What concerned me most was the need to find out how different the subsequent university batches were from the first one. There appeared to be hardly any differences or change.

English in Oman

English in Oman has “institutionalized domains” like business, the media and education (Al-Busaidi, 1995). English is taught in its general form in public schools from Grade Four, while it is taught from Kindergarten One in the private schools. English is also the medium of instruction in all the private and public higher education/post secondary institutions throughout the Sultanate.

English is an effective tool for ‘modernization’. It receives political, economic and legislative power and substantial attention from the government, which determines its place on the social hierarchy (Al-Issa, 2002). English is considered as a resource for “national development” (Wiley, 1996) and its choice has been based upon “transition” purposes (Fishman, 1969). English is considered as a fundamental tool that facilitates ‘Omanization’ (Al-Issa, 2002) – a gradual and systematic process through which the expatriate labor force is replaced by a qualified Omani one. It is a prerequisite for finding a white-collar job (Al-Busaidi, 1995; Al-Issa, 2002). English is, hence, central to Oman’s “continued development” (NELP, p. 2) and is **“a resource for national development as the means for wider communication within the international community”** (NELP, p. 2) [emphasis in original].

Furthermore, *the Reform and Development of General Education* document prepared by the Ministry of Education (1995) states that:

The government recognises 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 for Science and Technology is also English as are the rapidly expanding international computerised databases and telecommunications

networks which are becoming an increasingly important part of the academic and business life (p. A5-1).

It has been found that students in Oman learn English for purposes like pursuing higher education inland or abroad, cultural analysis and understanding, acquiring science and technology, finding a white-collar job, communicating in English inland and abroad and traveling (Al-Issa, 2002).

ELT in Oman

The authors of NELP thus describe language as a “complex, multifaceted, multifunctional entity” with various factors governing its development. They would, hence, like to see teachers in Oman teaching English communicatively. The three writers look at grammatical competence as very important and consider it a part of the overall communicative competence demonstrated by the language user. However, they do not see that it should be taught *per se*. Functional use of the language, according to the authors of NELP, is considered to include expressing attitudes, feelings, persuasion, imagination and social and informative language. These uses require complex language capacity from the teachers in fields other than ELT and education.

In addition to the important role of teachers in language development, Nunan et al. discuss the importance of education technology, as a means to provide “naturalistic samples” of contextualized language, and time allocated to English on the national curriculum. They 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 as low as “500-600 hours” (p. 3) of formal English language instruction. Restricted contact with English is considered to result in poor chances for genuine communication and interaction.

Nunan et al. would like to see teachers as critical reflectors, needs analysts, competent language users and professionals, skilled and autonomous decision makers. In other words, they like to see teachers resorting to their epistemic repertoire and designing and selecting varied motivating and meaningful tasks for their students, which arouse their motivation and engage them in using the language interactively and analytically, as language learning and acquisition have multiple paths and means. Nunan et al. consider language as a “living entity” and not a fact-based school subject, which can be memorized for exam purposes, which is typical of the Omani education system. Teachers, therefore, need to be proficient and competent language users. They themselves need to be able to use the target language communicatively, prior to training their students to do so.

This paper, hence, examines from an ideological perspective the importance of English language knowledge to the NNEST and the implications it has for ELS education and policy implementation in the Sultanate of Oman.

Literature on ESL teacher education ‘theoretically’ discusses the importance of English language knowledge to the NNEST (Wilkins, 1974; Edge, 1988; Al-Mutawa & Kailani, 1989; Medgyes, 1992; Lafayette, 1993; Cullen, 1994; Murdoch, 1994; Skehan,

1996; Peyton, 1997; Liu, 1998; Liu, 1999; Medgyes, 1999), but falls short of offering any ‘ideological’ discussion of the importance of English language knowledge to the NNEST and its impact on ESL policy implementation.

Data Collection and Analysis

A major source of data collection in this paper is the different agents involved in the Omani ELT system. Their various discourses about the importance of English language knowledge to NNESTs and its role in influencing second language policy implementation or otherwise reflect their diverse but direct and explicit systems of thought and conceptions of the world – ideologies.

However, 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 texts and discourses – sources of data – which reveal knowledge, ideas, beliefs and experiences will be used to contribute to the construction of a theory about the importance of English language knowledge to NNEST and its role in influencing second language policy implementation.

Here, semantic and syntactic content analysis contributes to my 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 the issue under investigation in this paper.

Findings and Discussion

The following private school principal thinks that a good English teacher is the one whose English is “... correct, clear and free of pronunciation mistakes and errors”. She adds that “this is especially important in the early years of teaching. If the child picks the right pronunciation of letters and words ... he will do well”.

The mention of “pronunciation” is because most Arab and Asian teachers of English (Indians, Pakistanis and SriLankans) have an accent, which she considers affects their pronunciation. These teachers are found in large numbers in all the private schools throughout the Sultanate. The figures obtained from the database of the Ministry of Education indicate that there is a total of 186 non-native English teachers in the Omani private education schools who come from countries like Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Jordan, Syria, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and Oman. In Oman teachers of English are expected to be models and infallible sources of the target language (Al-Issa, 2002).

However, Liu (1998) argues that an “excellent command of English does not mean native-like pronunciation, which few ESOL students ever achieve, and which is often not necessary in most EFL situations” (p. 7). The Teacher’s Guide for the Elementary Level (1997-98) stresses modeling pronunciation and intonation and expects the teacher to be a good language model.

Moreover, the same principal states that she had an Indian teacher of English whose "... language was perfect". She also states that "the kids were able in nine months ... to use very good English ... and were able to understand it properly". There are powerful ideologies here and above about the competence of the NNEST English teachers and the way they can influence the students' second language learning and acquisition.

The following English Language Curriculum Department (ELCD) Assistant Director – Ministry of Education, believes that a good English teacher is the one who has "... a good command of the language". She goes on to say: "I'm not saying you cannot make mistakes. You could make mistakes, but there are ways to overcome these mistakes". Similarly, the following ELT Sudanese inspector thinks that "a good English teacher should be good at English. He or she should in the first place sufficiently master the language".

Lafayette (1993) argues that language proficiency is the most important component of content knowledge to the foreign language teacher. Peyton (1997) writes that a good foreign language teacher needs "a high level of language proficiency in all of the modalities of the target language-speaking, listening, reading, and writing" (p. 2). Peyton further writes that a good foreign language teacher needs to possess "the ability to use the language in real-life contexts, for both social and professional purposes" (p. 2).

The following SQU Curriculum and Methodology Department ELT teacher trainer thinks more in line of the influence of the teacher's language on his/her students. He believes that a good English teacher has

... To have an excellent command of English. Unless they have that they couldn't possibly function as teachers. They wouldn't be confident. They'll make errors and the students will acquire those from them.

Being "confident" here refers to the ability to analyze the language, the materials at hand and meeting the students' needs and abilities through attending to their various inquiries about language.

Confidence in exhibiting good language knowledge and use is an integral part of the initial teacher education program for non-native speakers of English (Edge 1988; Medgyes 1992; Murdoch 1994). Cullen (1994) acknowledges that NNESTs are under pressure and are expected to use English naturally and spontaneously in the language classroom, especially in situations where "... English is not the medium of instruction but a compulsory foreign language on the school curriculum" (pp. 163-164), as it is the case in Oman and a large number of other countries round the world. Pressure and spontaneous use of the language are primarily related to both, the classroom situation and the outside environment. A poor command of English language can sometimes cause embarrassment for the teacher due to the unpredictable nature of the classroom situation (Wilkins, 1974). Lafayette (1993) argues that a sound command of the target language equips the teacher with a high degree of confidence and with the ability to meet their students' various demands through concentrating on what the students do not know, rather than what they know.

The following Omani English teacher, who is in her 30s and has obtained her First

Degree from Jordan and has been teaching for over five years narrows her statement down to the teachers of English in Oman and uses herself as an example. She believes that teachers of English in Omani schools are linguistically unable to teach the language since their exposure to and practice of English is limited. She believes that their English is not proficient enough and does not qualify them to become English teachers. She thinks that it becomes embarrassing for the teacher to make language mistakes in front of his/her learners, especially if some of these learners are good enough to identify such mistakes.

Here in Oman we have English teachers, most of them they just didn't practice much language except at school and at universities. So, the amount of language, which they know, I don't think it allows them to be as English teachers. Myself I don't think I'm qualified of being English teacher, enough qualified. Okay, I can teach the syllabus which I have here, but in front of foreigners you find they're much better than us, because their background, the English they have ... you know, they have very good English and I feel the teacher should have really, really, really good English. The students we have nowadays they are so smart. They come from background, which they are pushed by their parents. Actually they come to us they know English. So, if you make any mistake it embarrasses you.

The new generation has better and more access to English, especially with the spread of satellite TV, which has become a necessity in Oman rather than a luxury. There are over 20 free-to-air satellite TV channels that broadcast various English-medium programs like pop songs, films, dramas, comedy serials, documentaries, soap operas, chat shows, quiz programs and the news almost on daily basis. There is also sophisticated technology as represented in the Internet and computer software, which are too a necessity in the Sultanate. Students today are exposed to more English than they used to a decade ago and understand that the uses and values of English are beyond what is offered in the Omani ELT classroom.

Curtain and Pesola (1994) and Tedick and Walker (1996) state 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. They further state that the cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic and academic diversity typical in today's student population requires foreign language teachers to work with students whose needs and educational experiences are different.

Students, hence, have a powerful impact on the teacher's socialization (Doyle, 1979). Doyle stresses that pupils are significant 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).

Furthermore, the level of English required for Elementary classes is not like the level required for Secondary classes. In other words, there is more challenge involved in teaching the latter than the former. Therefore, the language used by the teacher becomes more complex.

The following Sudanese ELT inspector believes that the university SQU student teachers' language level is problematic and that they

... Need the language improvement component. Because the level they are supposed to teach at requires a slightly higher level of English than what they have actually ... but the majority need to improve their language to be able to teach proper things.

The ELT Inspectorate at the Ministry of Education thus organizes in-service training courses, which also entail a language improvement component. These courses are particularly designed for Omani teachers of English such as SQU graduates. They combine language improvement and methodology and aim at establishing a coherent framework for the professional development of the Omani teachers. These courses are RELIC (Regional English Language Improvement Courses), PICOT (Professional In-Service Course for Omani Teachers), SIC (Summer Intensive Courses), HOTDC (Higher Omani Teacher Development Course) and GARLIC (Graduate Advanced Regional Language Improvement Course).

The same Sudanese inspector then goes on to describe the student teachers ... The inspector expects the teacher to be able to handle higher Preparatory students and then from experience they know that many of those teachers are still having some difficulty in satisfying this purpose. And for that reason these courses are organized and planned to improve their English in the first place plus their teaching methodology, which is less problematic than their English usually.

There are powerful ideologies at work here about the role of the English teacher as someone who is in a position to demonstrate competence and skill in language use and teaching methods and techniques. This has its implications for the mixed-ability communicative classroom.

Al-Mutawa and Kailani (1989) thus write that if the teacher does not have a practical command of the target language, lacks a sound knowledge of the English sound system, grammar and lexis, lacks knowledge and has difficulty in communicating fluently, s/he will fail to teach communicatively. In other words, teachers influence the implementation of a method that requires high communicative skills like communicative language teaching (CLT). Cullen (1994) argues that communicative teaching/learning materials and methodology "... demand the teacher a higher level of proficiency in English than in the past" (p. 165). Skehan (1996) and Babrakzai (2001) write that teacher's poor level of proficiency in language productive skills leaves the teacher no choice but to depend on the materials in the textbook, which can result in limiting the students' language input.

This has its implications for the training and preparation of these student teachers at SQU. In other words, it is considered the sole responsibility of the university program to prepare linguistically and technically developed teachers, who can influence positive policy implementation.

Lafayette (1993) blames institutions of higher learning and university foreign language departments for giving little attention to helping the student teachers achieve sound levels of language proficiency. He argues that there is a tendency of laying more emphasis on the literature component at the expense of the courses that enhance the oral, written and structural abilities of the student teachers. Lafayette argues that a good level of knowledge of the latter type of courses reminds the student teachers of their needs to become foreign language teachers.

During their four-year eight-semester First Degree in Education program ELT student teachers at SQU have two compulsory and seven department elective literature modules as opposed to 14 compulsory courses related to language improvement, which deal with grammar, vocabulary, reading, speaking, listening and writing.

Similarly, the following Omani ELT inspector claims that the SQU student teachers are weak in English when they join the teaching force.

... Some of the students who finish Third Secondary [General Certificate of Secondary Education – GCSE] ... can't write a kind of paragraph or two or three sentences together without mistakes either grammar or spelling or arranging the right order of words.

The student teachers might have learned a great deal about the rules and the system of English. However, the scarce application of these rules in genuine interactive situations results in failure to use the language communicatively and purposefully. This is typical of contexts where ELT is characterized as textbook-based, teacher-centered, exam and memory-oriented, product and transmission-based and top-down (Al-Issa, 2002). The aim of the textbook in particular and the rigidly and strictly controlled and centralized education in Oman in general is to sabotage the world's first international language and use it mainly as a tool to present and emphasize "selective traditions" (Williams, 1989) and "interested knowledge" (Pennycook, 1989), which represents the interest of certain individuals and the dominant group(s) through exposure to certain authorized and prescribed texts (Luke, de Castell & Luke, 1989) and predefined and controlled modes of knowledge delivery. English is treated like any other fact-based subject on the curriculum where the students more or less fail to see its relevance. The mid-semester and end-of-semester exams, which are largely, if not entirely, based on the syllabus, drive and determine the students' motivation to a great extent in Oman. Such exam-based system makes language subservient to knowledge, while prevents teaching it per se. Education conducted in this manner is much more controllable and facilitates quantitative measurement of learning (Shor & Freire, 1987). Students in Omani schools are refrained from thinking critically and analytically, while they are merely spoon-fed by the prescribed "official knowledge" (Apple, 1993) found in the school textbook.

Furthermore, it has been found that time given to ELT on the school curriculum is insufficient (Al-Issa, 2002). Wilkins (1974) attributes the underlying the unsatisfactory command of English language shown by non-native English student teachers to two reasons: First, the limited and rare exposure to English. Lightbown (2000) writes that "the most important reason for incomplete acquisition in foreign language classroom setting is probably the lack of time available for contact with the language" (p. 449). In his research study, which included 82 teachers of English representing various nationalities in Oman,

Al-Toubi (1998) found that 36 teachers agreed that time allocated to English in the curriculum was not sufficient. This is a problem mainly created by the ESL education system.

Second, the quality of instruction the student teachers receive at their early stages of education (Wilkins, 1974; Shublaq, 2000) can have a strong negative impact on the student teachers' language capacity. Al-Toubi (1998) found that 74 teachers thought that teaching through the Audio-Lingual Method was 'good'. Al-Toubi, hence, writes that "teachers emphasize form over meaning and accuracy over communication" (p. 65) in Omani ELT classrooms.

The same Omani inspector then goes on to give details about how much English these student teachers pick at SQU.

... When these people are at the university, they have four years of taking English, which I think are very intensive courses they have, but still when they come here we feel they don't fit to go directly to Secondary Schools. Sometimes you have students at schools who are sometimes better than the teacher himself or herself.

The SQU program is viewed as responsible for preparing student teachers of ESL to become proficient language users. Literature on ESL teacher education believes that university courses are responsible for equipping the student teachers with a good language competence and suggests various ways for implementing this (Cullen, 1994; Murdoch, 1994).

Al-Toubi (1998) criticizes the SQU ESL teacher training program for being too 'theoretical' as it lays little emphasis on developing the student teachers' communicative ability. Moreover, Babrakzai (2001) criticizes the drift between the language activities students carry out inside the teaching common at SQU and real life and attributes it to the considerable focus on declarative knowledge. He believes that this is counter to language internalization and acquisition. He also writes that the ELT courses and those in the credit programs at SQU, which specifically include all language skills, are taught with the target of preparing students for exams. He argues that "language according to such syllabi, is a divisible construct, which can be taught and tested in bits and pieces" (p. 22-23).

Babrakzai further criticizes the system at SQU and says that "... all tests at the credit level are summative in the sense that they only assess students' knowledge" (p. 23). He argues that such tests do not have pedagogical values because, as language tools, they fail to develop and improve the students' language. Babrakzai states that such type of teaching does not produce autonomous learners with "critical appreciation of knowledge" (p. 24). He writes that SQU students rather memorize exam questions and English forms after translating them into Arabic. This is a situation that is largely similar to the one found in the local literacy in Omani schools where learners acquire study skills and strategies and retain them at the university level.

The same Omani inspector then goes on to describe SQU student teachers' level in English:

I think it is a little bit above Third Secondary [GCSE], but I can say not in all skills. When these people come into a class teaching, they know the methodology; they are very familiar with it. But the main problem is the language. I mean even if you have got methods you don't have language you are not a good teacher. I mean even if you have got the language and you don't have the methods it cannot go through the pupils very well ... they might be good in, let us say speaking, but they might not be good in writing.

Al-Toubi (1998) and Al-Issa (2002) found that the current national syllabus does not integrate the four skills, lacks a variety of authentic practice activities and materials, focuses heavily on the local culture and environment and gives usage an edge over use.

Similarly, another Omani ELT inspector believes that the SQU graduate student teachers' level in speaking is satisfactory, but overall accuracy is necessary and essential, but is missing. She says that the Inspectorate design language and methodology courses because the student teachers

... Come from SQU with the level of language average. So, we think that they need courses, because when we go to the schools and we observe the lessons the language sometimes, they make a lot of errors, especially in grammar. I don't see that we must be perfect, but at least the basic things we have to be good in using them.

She defines the word "average" by saying:

... That you can understand them when they communicate you can understand them, but grammar, most of the time grammar is unbalanced, it's not properly used. It's understandable but in schools we don't want only to communicate, we're learning here. For that reason we have to use accurate language, accuracy is important.

The use of "when they communicate you can understand them" signals the powerful role of English for functional and interactive purposes and the importance of proficiency in the target language for achieving multiple purposes.

Moreover, students in Oman occasionally ask teachers to explain grammatical terms. Arab students of English value the role of grammar and see it as the most important part of language. This is in fact the case in the Arabic language classes, where grammar is discussed, analyzed and taught explicitly.

There are also powerful ideologies about the role of the teacher as a language model. The 'traditional' methods look at the teacher as a language model and a main source for SLA since teachers in these classes are ultimate authority figures. This is of course counter to the progressive/humanist model forwarded by the authors of NELP about placing the students at the heart of learning-teaching process to help produce independent, intellectually dynamic and resourceful learners, who can contribute to the Sultanate's national development.

The following ELT inspector thus has worked for some time with some of the graduate student teachers. She administered tests in 1993 that indicated their language proficiency levels were inadequate.

In 1993 when I got the first GARLIC. I decided to give them a test and I gave them an Oxford Placement Test [OPT] and on the OPT the vast majority of them were in Upper Elementary – Lower Intermediate. I've been told that they were exiting the scores of 6.5 on the IELTS [International English Language Testing System]. There was an absolute dilemma at the Ministry. I gave a copy of those tests to the Head of the ELCD and it was a shock. At that time the people who had performed best on the OPT were those students who had gone to the ITTC [Intermediate Teacher Training College] and then transferred to SQU and they were best teachers by a long stretch.

It is noteworthy that the students who were enrolled in the ITTC on completion of GCSE to become ESL teachers had studied English language and methodology for two years only and graduated as Elementary school English teachers. In other words, the SQU student teachers receive more formal contact hours of English language instruction than their ITTC counterparts.

Moreover, the Chief Inspector at the ELCD thinks that while the student teachers' level of English varies, there are still very weak students teachers, who make lots of errors. There's a spread there from pretty weak students to students who can communicate with me extremely well and can write a good piece of English. It's quite a wide range of level. Let's try and put it in IELTS terms. Probably maximum they would get 4.5 on the IELTS scale and the minimum would be probably 2.5 I think. It's quite low. The best graduates are good, there's no doubt about it. The weaker ones, they make grammatical errors, their writing is not very good, they can converse fairly fluently, but it's got lots of mistakes.

It is perhaps worth considering *The IELTS Handbook* (1998) where an interpretation of the score bands is provided. Those who score Band Two are described as intermittent users who have “no real communication ... except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs”. They are also described as to have “... great difficulty understanding spoken and written English” (p. 18).

Those who score Band Three are described as “extremely limited users” who can convey and understand “... only general meaning in very familiar situations” and that they have “... frequent breakdowns in communication” (p. 18).

Those who score Band Four are described as “limited users” who possess “basic competence” which is “... limited to familiar situations”. They “have frequent problems in understanding and expression”. They are “... not able to use complex language”.

Those who score Band Five are described as “modest users” who have “... partial command of the language in most situations”, though they are “... likely to make many

mistakes”. However, they “should be able to handle basic communication in own field” (p. 18).

It is interesting to see that students falling between Band Two and Band Five cannot initiate complex interaction or use language functionally. These are fundamental characteristics of the communicative competence forwarded by the authors of NELP, which teachers need to possess in order to help their students achieve.

I said above that one of the reasons students learn English in Oman is for science and technology acquisition, which encompasses complex knowledge. These two realms require complex language, which teachers require to have in order to be able to convey knowledge through to their students. The same is applicable to literature, which is a fundamental part of culture teaching and which has its own linguistic and knowledge structure that requires a particular degree of language competence.

Curtain and Pesola (1994) and Tedick and Walker (1996) stress that one of the factors that make the teaching of foreign languages especially challenging is the emphasis on thematic learning, which demands that teachers be skilled in the thematic areas explored, competent in the vocabulary related to these areas and responsive to student interests in the various topics.

The Chief Inspector justifies the inclusion of a language improvement component in the in-service courses designed for those student teachers by saying

The simple answer is that the English of the majority is not high enough, it’s not bad and certainly improved over the years, but each of our intakes from university improves year on year. It was certainly felt during this decade, the 90s that the level of English was satisfactory, but really it needs to be improved in general. To be able to cope particularly with the secondary level, some of them were struggling.

The 1990s witnessed growth and expansion in the domains of English language in the Sultanate. Sophisticated technology like the Internet, computer software and satellite TV have become accessible to almost everyone. These technological items are a rich source of contact with interactive, natural and contextualized English. This appears to be impacting on motivation and perceptions about the role of English as an international means of communication and interaction. The writers of NELP view these sources as having a positive impact on the students’ perceptions about English and encourage including them in the curriculum.

Conclusion

The discussion revealed some powerful ideologies about the importance of English language knowledge for the NNEST (SQU graduate teachers). These ideologies have linked language proficiency with self-confidence, competent teaching and impacting on curriculum innovation, which has been considered as a fundamental part of effective policy implementation.

These ideologies have looked at the competent language teacher as one who demonstrates competence in using all four skills equally professionally. Teachers in Oman

have been considered as models and sources of SLA, which has its implications for their ESL education.

The ESL education system has been found responsible for producing linguistically retarded teachers, who in turn negatively impact their learners' second language learning and acquisition.

However, the degree of linguistic proficiency the SQU graduate teachers acquire from the University and continue developing can help prepare students for the present and future, local and global and economic and social challenges and demands.

Books and papers have been published, which stress teaching English communicatively and functionally and the important roles teachers can play in this respect so as to give ELT life and meaning and equip the learners with marketable skills necessary for tomorrow's competitive and shrinking world. This is bound to fail, if SQU graduate teachers demonstrate incompetence in ESL. As a very important higher education agency in the Sultanate, if not the most important, SQU is therefore, responsible for producing linguistically competent teachers of English, who can positively influence ESL policy implementation. Claims have been made by different key ESL practitioners about the role of SQU in failing to equip the prospective teachers with the necessary English language repertoire, which calls for an in-depth investigation and can form a basis for future empirical research.

To end, there seems to be a pressing need for SQU and the Ministry of Education to joint efforts and work closely. The focus of this work, or collaborative research, needs to be a thorough needs analysis and a detailed scrutiny of the students' problems and weaknesses in English, the presumably multiple reasons leading to their existence and ways of overcoming all the identified problems and weaknesses. The uses and values of English have evolved in accordance with the speedy political, economic and social events emerging on the world arena. Times have changed and so have the reasons and needs for learning and using English and the methods of learning it. Within this context, the success of the Omani higher education in delivering quality (language) education is largely, if not entirely based upon the efficiency of the school system. This has been a major finding of this paper.

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