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## The language planning situation in the Sultanate of Oman

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the language planning situation in the Sultanate of Oman with emphasis on the planning of Arabic, English, French and German, and their choice and spread in serving different interests and purposes. The paper explores the historical, social, political, and ideological processes and complexities of the language policy and planning (LPP) situation in the Sultanate. The discussion attempts to show that language planning, as carried out by the elites, is top-down and ideologically oriented and motivated, as it favors certain knowledge and traditions, while marginalizing and oppressing others. A brief introductory history of Oman is followed by an account of the language profile of the country. The paper then examines the role of Language in Education Planning (LEP) in the spread of Arabic, English, French, and German in schools and higher education. It concludes that there is an ideological struggle, contest, and conflict at the LEP level resulting in a lack of strategic planning and organized effort affecting language choice, language spread, language contact, language preservation, language maintenance, and language shift. Finally, the paper recommends avenues for further research and ways forward for LPP and LEP in Oman.

**Abbreviations:** AALIM: Arab American Language Institute in Morocco; ACTFL: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages; AFL: Arabic as a Foreign Language; ALT: Arabic Language Teaching; BES: Basic Education System; BTEC: Business and Technology Education Council; CA: Colloquial Arabic; CEFR: Common European Framework; CELTA: Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults; CfBT: Center for British Teachers; CFO: Centre Franco Omanais; CLS: Critical Language Scholarship; CLT: Communicative Language Teaching; CoE: College of Education; DAAD: German Academic Exchange Service; DALF: Diplôme Approfondi de Langue Française; DELF: Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française; DELTA: Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults; ELT: English Language Teaching; EMI: English-medium instruction; FPEL: Foundation Program English Language; EU: European Union; GCCC: Gulf Cooperation Council Countries; GFP: General Foundation Program; GPA: Gulf Pidgin Arabic; GUTech: German University of Technology; H: High; ICC: Intercultural Communicative Competence; IELTS: International

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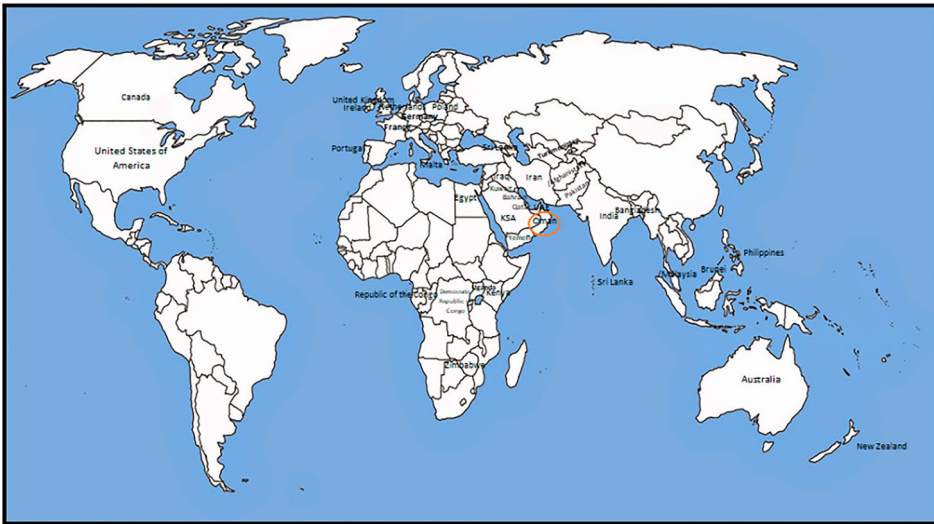
English Language Testing System; IESCO: Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; IGCSE: International General Certificate of Secondary Education; KSA: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; L: Low; LEP: Language in Education Planning; LPP: Language Policy and Planning; LWC: Language of Wider Communication; MENA: Middle East and North Africa; MoE: Ministry of Education; MoHE: Ministry of Higher Education; MSA: Modern Standard Arabic; NCATE: National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education; NRAA: National Records and Archive Authority; OAAA: Oman Academic Accreditation Authority; OIF: International Agency of La Francophonie; OPA: Oman Pidgin Arabic; OPEC: Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries; PDO: Petroleum Development Oman; PFLOAG: Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf; PHEIs: Private Higher Education Institutions; QA: Quranic Arabic; RWTH: Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule; SCPTT: Specialized Centre for Professional Training of Teachers; SQU: Sultan Qaboos University; TCF: Test de connaissance du Français; TEF: Test d'Évaluation de Français; TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language; TOEIC: Test of English for International Communication; TVET: Technological Vocational Education and Training; UAE: United Arab Emirates; UN: United Nation; UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization; ZD: Zertifikat Deutsch

## Introduction

### *The Sultanate of Oman: an historical overview*

The Sultanate of Oman is a relatively small country in south-west Asia, on the south-eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula (see [Figure 1](#)). Oman is a highly multilingual society with an extraordinarily rich and diverse history. Until the seventh century, Oman was dominated by Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. Its geographical location at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and on the Strait of Hormuz has historically made it attractive to foreign powers, due to its strategically important position on trade routes to the east. In modern times, this location has given Oman significant geopolitical importance. The Portuguese occupied Muscat, the capital, from 1508 to 1648, and fortified the city to protect their sea lanes. Shortly afterwards, the Ottomans drove out the Portuguese and occupied Muscat. However, they were pushed out themselves in 1741 by a Yemeni tribe (Sultanate of Oman, <http://www.omansultanate.com/history.htm>). After one last, brief invasion by Persia, in 1749 Oman was free of foreign occupying powers and has been self-governing ever since. Oman embraced Islam over 14 centuries ago (Royal Air Force Museum, <https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/an-enduring-relationship-a-history-of-friendship-between-the-royal-air-force-and-the-royal-air-force-of-oman/a-history-of-oman.aspx>).

In the late seventeenth century, the Imam of Oman, Saif Bin Sultan, began a process of expansion down the east coast of Africa. In 1749, the current Al Said dynasty came to power in Oman. By 1783, the Omani Empire had expanded as far as Gwadar in present day Pakistan (see [Figure 2](#)). Oman became a powerful regional maritime trading power and, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, built one of the most notable



**Figure 1.** The Sultanate of Oman (Political).

non-European empires, spanning both the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean (see [Figure 2](#)). It took control of the coasts of present-day Iran and Pakistan, colonized Zanzibar (now a semi-autonomous region of Zimbabwe) and Kenyan seaports, brought back enslaved Africans, and sent boats trading as far as the Malay Peninsula. In fact, Zanzibar paid an annual subsidy to Muscat and Oman until its independence in early 1964. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oman>).

A succession crisis in 1856 had seen the Omani empire divided into the Sultanate of Oman and Muscat and the Sultanate of Zanzibar. The name ‘Muscat and Oman’ was the result of a succession struggle between the sons of Sultan Said Bin Sultan Al-Busaidi and the mediation of the British Government under the Canning Award. Britain had made the decision towards the end of eighteenth century to back the Al Busaidi monarchy of Muscat. To protect its expanding empire, Britain signed a Treaty of Friendship with Oman in 1798 under which Britain guaranteed the rule of the Sultan while advancing its own political and trade interests. In 1891, Oman and Muscat became a British Protectorate. By the end of the nineteenth century, Muscat had become increasingly dependent on British loans and remained in an underdeveloped state. The British government maintained vast administrative control over the Sultanate: The defense secretary and chief of intelligence, chief adviser to the sultan and all ministers except for one were British. The British Political Agent, who resided in Muscat, described the influence of the British government over Muscat as completely ‘self-interested.’ No attention was paid to the social and political conditions of the locals, which began to alienate tribes in the interior of Oman.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were tensions between the Sultan in Muscat and the Imam in Nizwa (see [Figure 3](#)). This conflict was resolved temporarily by the Treaty of Seeb, which granted the Imam rule in the interior Imamate of Oman from Nizwa, while recognizing the sovereignty of the Sultan in Muscat and its surroundings. Under the 1951 Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation, Oman received independence from Britain. However, the years from 1954 to 1959 witnessed conflict between the



**Figure 2.** The Omani empire.

new elected Imam in Nizwa, and the Sultan in Muscat, due to the discovery of oil in the lands of the former. In what was known as the Jebel Akhdar War, and backed by the British government, which was eager to gain access to the oil wells in the interior of Oman, the Imam fought to protect the Imamate from the Sultan's occupation plans. The Sultan was then financed by a consortium of oil companies known today as Shell, Total, Exxon Mobil, and British Petroleum, the last of which was majority-owned by the British government. With the Imam continuing to keep a stranglehold on the interior, the British armed forces launched a decisive full-scale attack in 1959 to capture the Jebel (mountain) in Oman's Hajar Mountain sand enabled the Sultanate to win the war. This was followed by the Sultan of Muscat signing an unequal trade treaty which favored British interests. Moreover, the Sultan also signed a declaration in which he agreed to consult the British government on all important matters, including defense and foreign affairs.



**Figure 3.** The Sultanate of Oman (National).

Thus, the Sultanate became a *de facto* British colony. In the early 1960s, coinciding with the rise of anti-imperialism and pro-Arab-unity in the Arab world led by President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt and Iraq backed the Imamate's cause in the Jebel Akhdar War. The Imam, exiled to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, obtained support from his hosts and other Arab governments. The Imam's case for his sovereignty over Nizwa was argued at the UN as well, but no significant measures were taken. The 'Question of Oman' resolution was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1965, 1966, and 1967, calling upon the British government to cease all repressive action against the Omani people, end British control over Oman, and reaffirm the right of Oman to self-determination and independence ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jebel\\_Akhdar\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jebel_Akhdar_War)).

The discovery of oil reserves in 1964 and the completion of the first oil pipeline to the coast in 1967, which provided the ability to export oil, marked a turning point in the country's history. Vast revenues were invested in developing the country's physical infrastructure and modernizing its economic system. Thereafter, oil provided the impetus for the

rapid transformation of Oman from an under-developed, feudal, and isolated state into a modern, middle-income free-market economy under an absolutist monarchy. The door was wide open then for foreign expertise and labor from the Arab World and countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines to contribute to the country's development and modernization.

Several different dynasties have ruled Oman over the past 14 centuries. Between 751 and 1406, Oman was ruled by Imams. The Nabhani dynasty ruled the country from 1406 to 1624, followed by the Yaruba dynasty for the next 135 years. The Bu Saidi dynasty came to power in 1749 and has ruled Oman until the present day. The late Sultan, Sultan Qaboos, who died on 10 January 2020, was the 14th-generation descendant of the founder of the Al Bu Saidi dynasty. He received his primary and secondary education in Salalah and India, where he was the student of Shankar Dayal Sharma, the former president of India. When he reached the age of 16, his father sent him to a private educational establishment in England. He joined the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst at the age of 20. After passing out of Sandhurst in 1962, he joined a British infantry battalion on operations in Germany for one year and held a staff appointment with the British Army. After his military service, Sultan Qaboos studied local government at Oxford University and the British Military Academy and, after a world tour, returned home to Salalah where he studied Islam and the history of his country (Fattahi, 2018). Covertly assisted by the British and supported by MI6 and by civil servants at the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office and sanctioned by the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, Sultan Qaboos overthrew his father Said Bin Taimour Al Said in a bloodless palace coup and acceded to the throne on 23 July 1970 (Cobain, 2016). He moved to Muscat, the capital, where he declared that the country would no longer be known as the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman but would be united as the Sultanate of Oman.

At the time Sultan Qaboos came to power, Oman was one of the most backward countries on earth (Scholz, 2013). It was largely isolated from the rest of the world and Omanis were banned from traveling abroad. They were also banned from owning or doing anything Sultan Said Bin Taimour Al Said considered decadent, such as owning a radio, wearing sunglasses or shoes, riding bicycles, and playing football (Cobain, 2016). According to Cobain, there were savage punishments and public executions for those who offended the Sultan's law. The Sultanate had only three primary schools and only 5% of the population of just under 725,000 could read and write. There were no secondary schools or tertiary education. There was only one hospital, which was run by American missionaries. The country was plagued by endemic disease, illiteracy, and poverty. The infant mortality rate was 75% and life expectancy was around 55 years (Cobain, 2016). Cobain holds that Britain was responsible for the woeful social, political, and economic conditions in Oman, which fueled the popular revolt which largely paved the way for the removal of Said Bin Taimour Al Said. Interestingly, with Oman being an isolated state, foreigners were effectively banned from visiting, while coastal inhabitants were forbidden from visiting the interior and vice-versa. One result of this situation was that it protected the vitality of the tribal languages.

Dhofar in the south of the Sultanate (see [Figure 3](#)) had been the site of rebellion by Arab nationalists since 1964, when a separatist revolt began in the province. Aided by communist and leftist governments such as the former South Yemen (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen), the rebels formed the Dhofar Liberation Front, which later merged with the

Marxist-dominated Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG). The PFLOAG's declared intention was to overthrow all traditional Persian Gulf régimes. The British actively supported the suppression of this rebellion to prevent any other colonial power gaining a foothold in the region (Cobain, 2016). Cobain described this act as a merciless and brutal suppression, in which thousands of civilians and innocent people died in order for the British government to prevent the new oil fields in the desert between Dhofar and Muscat from falling under communist control and guarantee British control over the Strait of Hormuz (see Figure 3) and the flow of oil.

Keen to maintain its interests in Oman, Britain gave advice, training, equipment, and funds to help Oman ensure political stability domestically and regionally. However, by the early 1970s the British economy was overburdened and experiencing difficulties caused by rapidly spreading inflation. Oman was also experiencing a cash flow problem due to the diversion of resources to the war in Dhofar (Worrall, 2014). Worrall commented that while prior to 1973 Washington had been content to let Britain make the running in Oman, 'in the post-oil shock world the U.S. began to wake up to Oman's strategic position and to its pro-Western Sultan' (p. 219). In 1972, the USA appointed its first ambassador to Oman and made it explicit to Britain that they wanted to be involved in the political running of the area. The American suggestion that it might be willing to help Oman with military training and the revolution in Iran, with which Oman had close ties,<sup>1</sup> and the collapse of the US-Iran relationship and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan quickened US strategic interest in the Gulf. This resulted in 1980 in the US and Oman signing a 10-year renewable arms-for-access military agreement, also known as the Facilities Access Agreement or Base Access Agreement (Kechichian, 1995). The aim of the agreement was to provide American military access to Omani bases under agreed-upon conditions. This helped Oman become one of the keys to the new military strategy the US pursued in the Middle East after the collapse of the US-Iran relationship (Kechichian, 1995; Owtram, 2004). It also helped a small country like Oman with a pragmatic and modern government to achieve survival and sovereignty in a seemingly dangerous neighborhood through acquiring a strategic ally and great-power patron or protector (Kechichian, 1995; Owtram, 2004). It is worth mentioning that the latest collection of declassified US government documents reveals a rare miscalculation by Qaboos that, if carried out as planned, would have had deadly consequences. In September 1980, the Sultan embarked on a risky mission with the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, to knock out the Iranian navy in the Persian Gulf and finish Ayatollah Khomeini once and for all. The operation could have engaged Oman's then small army led by British generals into a devastating war that would disrupt world oil supplies. An agreement was struck in 1980 to lobby for Iraqi access to Omani bases from which to attack Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunbs strategic islands in the Strait of Hormuz. However, the Americans intervened, and the risky venture was abandoned (Fattahi, 2018). Another equally important agreement related to establishing a Joint Commission for Economic and Technical Cooperation, located in Muscat, to provide US economic assistance to Oman. These two important agreements, which included commitment to economic as well as military assistance, were estimated at \$US300 million (Kechichian, 1995). This is in addition to \$100 million annually in various forms of security assistance.

The American interest in Oman has increased ever since to secure strategic allies and help maintain regional stability and supremacy over an extraordinarily rich oil-producing



region with a pivotal position and strategic location. Today, Oman is the largest producer of crude oil in the Middle East that is not a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Since the 1970s more than 70% of Oman's revenues have come from the export of crude oil and natural gas.

In late 1975, the rebellion in Dhofar was defeated and the region was secured for civil development. An immediate and urgent need was to establish basic welfare services and unite the tribes and bring them into the nation-building and modernization project. One of the Sultan's first measures was to abolish many of his father's harsh restrictions, which had caused thousands of Omanis to leave the country, and to offer amnesty to opponents of the previous régime, many of whom returned to Oman. Quoted in *Alwatan* newspaper in 2006, Sultan Qaboos described his situation thus:

I am working for Oman – the country and its people ... for me it is a delight to see my country and my people in the situation I imagined from the very first day I assumed power ... My dreams for Oman are many and big ... I feel that I am a man with a mission rather than a man with authority (*Alwatan*, 2006).

The statement was a clear message for the people to prepare themselves for a new era of local and global demands and challenges that would require joint effort, power sharing, and making decisions collectively to achieve national development. Valeri (2007) maintains that 'since 1970, building a new national identity by reunifying Oman's ethno-linguistic groups was at the heart of Sultan Qaboos's political project' (p. 479). In a post-colonial society Valeri labeled this as an important 'socio-political game' and described it as a part of the 'national unification' and an 'identity-building' process as it instilled group solidarity in the Omanis and made them depend on the state for their daily life. The role of the public was highlighted as a driving force for political and economic change, a philosophy which was non-existent prior to 23 July 1970. Clear emphasis was laid on living a collective life and abandoning any political conflicts and constraints in multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual Oman to help the country advance economically and put it on the map

## **Part I: the language profile of the Sultanate of Oman**

Oman is a multilingual society with a fascinating mix of languages ranging from the highly dominant to the critically endangered. Several local vernaculars are spoken throughout the country, on top of which are the indigenous minority codes or languages, which define the country's complex linguistic landscape and characterize Oman as a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural country. This section will open with a brief overview of the dominant languages and the minority and indigenous varieties.

### **Arabic**

All three main varieties of Arabic are spoken in Oman. In hierarchical order, there is Quranic Arabic (QA); Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or the High (H) variety, which is used in domains such as the media, political speeches, university lectures, writing poetry, and other official ceremonies, for example; and Colloquial Arabic (CA) or the Low (L) variety or dialect, which is used for conversations with family, friends, and colleagues and for folk literature. While there is only one MSA, there are several CAs

depending on the context in which that variety exists. Fishman (1985) thus describes the H and L varieties as ‘genetically related.’ In fact, Arabic represents the world’s most complicated diglossic situation (Kaye, 2002) and the situation of Arabic diglossia, according to Abd-el-Jawad (1992), is more complex than is suggested by the H-L dichotomy. All three varieties of Arabic compete for space internally and externally. This is the case in Oman as much as in other Arabic-speaking countries.

QA is considered the word of Allah (God), and hence is in a class of its own. History documents various attempts by some of those who reverted to atheism shortly after the death of the Prophet Mohammed to imitate some verses of the Holy Quran. However, none of these attempts succeeded. In the Holy Quran, Allah challenges followers to produce identical or even similar language to the language of the Quran. The Holy Quran has been in its unchanged form for the past 14 centuries or so, even though Islam has spread widely ever since and has reached various parts of the world such as Europe and China. Allah says in the Holy Quran that ‘It is We who sent down the Koran, and We watch over it.’

MSA largely derives from QA but is lexically and semantically not as rich and complex. However, MSA is prestigious in its own right, and is understood by all Arabs. There is only one variety of MSA. MSA is connected to the great history of Islam and Arabhood and its maintenance and spread are considered to be inevitable and essential. MSA is generally characterized by a more complex grammatical system than the CA or L variety and richer in lexicon (Zughoul, 1980). MSA or H is learnt and is the formal use of the language and its pure variety. According to Zughoul, Arabic speakers generally hold more positive attitudes towards MSA.

MSA sits at the heart of ‘Arabization.’ Arabization, as Abd-el-Jawad (1992) acknowledges, is ‘an agreed upon policy in most if not all Arab countries’ (p. 270). Arabization here is concerned with endorsing MSA as the medium of instruction in education. MSA was deliberately planned when it was codified during the early days of Islam. Unlike English, MSA is a neutral variety in the sense that it does not represent a single country, nation, or tribe, but represents the entire Arab World, which explains its acceptance universally (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992). Nassar (2002) states that it is important that the Arabic tongue is maintained if Arabic is to survive. He adds that there has been a strong desire to plan Arabic since 1990 in order to enable it to serve the scientific and research needs of the Arab World. Nassar acknowledges that 2001 witnessed ‘executive’ planning of Arabic at the Arab World level through joint efforts made by governments and various public organizations. The plan is believed to stretch over ten years and proposes to achieve a number of aims through conducting various activities. Examples of these executive planning activities are writing 30 dictionaries for human and applied sciences and arranging seminars to discuss Arabizing medical sciences.

Furthermore, in accordance with the United Nations General Assembly proclamation of the International Year of Languages in 2008, the Arabic Language International Council was established by the Arab universities association. The organization was formed within the framework of the United Nation’s (UN) effort to promote unity in diversity, and also in recognition of the UN’s push for multilingualism as a means of promoting, protecting and preserving diversity of languages and cultures globally, particularly in the paramount importance attributed to the quality of the organization’s six official languages. The founding of the Arabic Language International Council was participated in by more than 160

university rectors and presidents in a series of 41 conferences which took place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). At the same time, the council is supported and encouraged by the ministers of education in most of the Arab countries, the Secretaries General of the Arab League, Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Muslim World League, the Arab Gulf States Cooperation Council, the Arab Maghreb Union, and the Arab Economic Unity Council. This is in addition to the support and approval of the General Directors of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), the Arab League for Education, Culture and Science Organization, and the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States. In addition, strong support came from university rectors and presidents, and the secretaries-general of the Arab college associations in Arab universities (International Council of the Arabic Language, <http://resources.aldaad.org/resources/5345/>).

The Arabic Language International Council aims to educate the world about the importance of the Arabic language and its connection to different languages. It encourages organizations and workforce to support teaching Arabic as it is important for technology and economy in today's market. It also encourages research, professional development, and studies of the Arabic language. It further creates organizations and affiliations that are concerned with teaching Arabic (International Council of the Arabic Language, <http://resources.aldaad.org/resources/5345/>).

Since its founding, the council has been highly active in promoting the Arabic language. Together with UNESCO, it holds the annual International Conference for Arabic Language. This event also serves as an opportunity to forge partnerships such as the case of a memorandum of agreement signed by the council and the ISESCO, which outlined specific measures to effectively teach the Arabic language and highlight its role in preserving Islamic identity (International Council of the Arabic Language, <http://resources.aldaad.org/resources/5345/>).

UNESCO has declared 22 February of each year the 'Day of the Mother Tongue.' This can be used to promote the importance and maintenance of Arabic and to arrange regional and national seminars to discuss issues related to planning Arabic. The occasion is also used to experiment with allocating a week for promoting the Arabic language throughout the Arab World and the establishment of the Arabic Language Union, which attempts to raise awareness of the importance of the language. In addition, in 2010 UNESCO established World Arabic Language Day, celebrated annually on 18 December to celebrate multiculturalism and cultural diversity. The date coincides with the day in 1973 when the General Assembly approved Arabic as an official UN language. Nassar (2002) acknowledges that while there have been several attempts to raise public awareness of this issue, the time has come for actual reform and implementation. It is noteworthy that MSA faced threat and damage during the modern European colonization period (Benkharafa, 2013). While the French imposed their language as the only official language in their colonies, the British encouraged the spread and official use of the CA varieties at the expense of MSA (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992).

The Islamic context of Oman, its history as an Arab country and the powerful inter-relationship between Islam and Arabic have facilitated the mission of Arabic in bringing all speakers under the same social and linguistic umbrella. The adoption of MSA as the official and national language of the country is well justified since MSA is a 'comprehensibility' tool (Liddicoat, 2012). This is because all the Islamic practices and ceremonies are

conducted in MSA and the public is effectively educated in it about the messages of the Holy Quran. MSA has influenced and shaped Language Policy and Planning (LPP) for religious purposes (Liddicoat, 2012). According to Liddicoat, MSA's spoken and written forms in religious contexts and rituals, such as the Friday sermon or congregational prayers which involve preaching about different religious ideas, have given MSA a central role in the lives of Arab Muslims as a liturgical language. This further endorsed its position as a comprehensibility and 'sacrality' tool and gave it the status of holiness.

It is worth noting that there are different forms of Omani Arabic. The colloquial or national varieties do not have any normative value but are getting closer and closer to each other and 'resulting in the emergence of mixed varieties' (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992, p. 280). This is a clear demonstration of linguistic varieties crossing political boundaries. Satellite media is one major powerful reason behind the convergence of these varieties (see Table 1).

These varieties in Oman demonstrate 'horizontal' and 'vertical' dimensions of language patterns (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992). While the horizontal dimension is associated with dialects, which developed for geographical, social, and cultural reasons, the vertical dimension is associated with levels or stylistic varieties, which range from MSA to intermediate varieties to pure vernaculars. It is noteworthy that what distinguishes these vernaculars from English and MSA is their lack of standardization and lack of terminology to handle technical expressions.

Unlike the other two varieties, CA, which takes a different form in each Arab country, is acquired natively (Zughoul, 1980). It also has its literature and culture and is considered socially prestigious. The prestige given to a certain national variety derives from major centers of political entities (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992). In other words, a national variety can be considered prestigious because it is predominantly used in the capital city of the country or by the ruling family. CA is considered important and its literature receives high public recognition. However, it is not codified, elaborated, standardized, or even officially endorsed, yet it is popular and socially accepted as a norm for wider communication.

The CA varieties or dialects in Oman are classified geographically and socially (Rosenhouse & Goral, 2004). They are associated with regional identity, as different inhabitants of the different regions in Oman are identified by the CA variety they speak. Interestingly, the dialects used by Omanis occupying the northern, eastern, and western parts of the country differ and share mutual intelligibility with those dialects used by the citizens of the other five Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC): Bahrain, KSA, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). On the other hand, the dialect used in the southern part of the Sultanate shares more mutual intelligibility with that used by the people of Yemen.

**Table 1.** Colloquial Arabic varieties in Oman and their approximate number of speakers.

CA Varieties	Approximate number of speakers
Baharna	12,000
Dhofai	110,000
Gulf	700,000
Omani	2,500,000
Shihhi	12,000

Source: <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/om/languages>

Languages in Oman bear resemblance to social classes. They are arranged hierarchically and are not ‘distributed equally in terms of power, prestige, vitality, or attitude’ (Sridhar, 1996, p. 52). According to Sridhar (1996), pragmatic considerations, as represented by the role a language plays in a certain society, determine that language’s place in the social hierarchy. The domains of language use, therefore, mediate the value of the language. This complex situation brings us to the Omani vernaculars.

### *Indigenous languages of Oman*

Apart from Arabic, the official and national language of the Sultanate, there are 10 languages unofficially spoken by ethnic communities: Luwati, Baluchi, Swahili, Zadjali, Jibbali or Shahri, Mihri, Bathari, Harsusi, Hobyot, and Kumzari. These are spread over different parts of the country (see Table 2). These indigenous languages and their discourses are classified as ‘peripheral’ (De Swaan, 2001) and valued differently, and attitudes towards them vary. Al Jahdhami (2015) classified these languages into three groups: ‘Definitely Endangered,’ ‘Severely Endangered,’ and ‘Critically Endangered’ (see Tables 3–5). He based his classification on the number of speakers, their age, and the vitality of inter-generational transmission to younger generations. Al Jahdhami maintains that the social, economic, and educational attraction Arabic provides, and the decision made by speakers of those languages to shift from their respective ethnic group’s languages to Arabic, endangers such languages. He holds that this is more evident with the younger generations due to their intense exposure to Arabic. Al Jahdhami further attributes the language shift situation to the attitudes held by parents about the uses and values of their ethnic language as opposed to Arabic. An additional reason, as argued by Al Jahdhami, is identity. He suggests that ‘some parents wittingly do not pass their ethnic group’s language to their offspring so that their children harness to the Arab identity instead of the ethnic group identity’ (p. 106).

### *Definitely endangered languages*

It has been reported that the Baluchi connection with Oman dates from the tenth century when Persian was the language of the market place in Sohar (a major city on the northern coast of Oman) and was consolidated in the war against the Portuguese in which the Baluchi soldiers participated alongside Omani soldiers in 1698 (Al-Busaidi, 1995; Scholz, 1980; Wilkinson, 1987). Baluchis, who are mainly Sunni Muslims and who descend from Makran and Baluchistan in Iran, form 7% of the total population of

**Table 2.** Indigenous language distribution in Oman.

Region	Indigenous language
Muscat	Arabic, Lawati, Baluchi, Swahili, and Zadjali
Dhofar (Southern Oman)	Arabic, Jibbali, Mihri, Batahari, Harsusi, Shahari, and Swahili
Al Batina (Northern Coast)	Arabic, Lawati, Baluchi, and Swahili
Al Dhahira (or) Al Gharbiya (Western)	Arabic and Baluchi
Al Sharqiya (Eastern Oman)	Arabic
Al Dakhiliya (Interior)	Arabic and Swahili
Musandam	Arabic and Kumzari
Al Wusta (Central Oman)	Arabic, Swahili, Bathari, and Harsusi

Source: Al-Issa, 2002.

**Table 3.** Definitely endangered language in Oman and approximate numbers of speakers.

Language	Approximate numbers of speakers
Baluchi	320,000
Swahili	45,000
Jibbali / Shehri	55,000
Mihri	77,000
Bathari	200

Source: Al Jahdhami, 2015.

**Table 4.** Severely endangered languages in Oman and approximate number of speakers.

Language	Approximate number of speakers
Luwati	35,000
Kumzari	4,000
Harsusi	1,000

Source: Al Jahdhami, 2015.

**Table 5.** Critically endangered languages in Oman and approximate number of speakers.

Language	Approximate number of speakers
Zadjali	300
Hobyot	100

Source: Al Jahdhami, 2015.

Oman (Scholz, 1980, p. 59). They are mainly found on the northern coast of the Sultanate extending from Muscat to Sohar (Scholz, 1980) (see [Figure 1](#)). According to Scholz (1980), Baluchis also ‘represent the largest part of the population of Araqi, an oasis near Ibri’ (p. 59). Ibri is the largest city in the Dhahira Governorate in Oman close to the borders with the United Arab Emirates (see [Figure 3](#)). Scholz states that it is difficult to tell the difference sometimes between Baluchis and Arab Omanis in appearance and economic position since the Baluchis have ‘associated themselves with Omani tribes’ (p. 59).

The Baluchi language is an Indo-Iranian language and the most widely spoken language in this category (Al Jahdhami, 2018). While it is spoken by millions of speakers in countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan, it is spoken by less than half a million in Oman. In its spoken form, Baluchi incorporates Arabic, Persian, and Sindi. Although Baluchi has a written form, which was developed by some linguists using the Latin script (Al Jahdhami, 2015), it has never been a written language in Oman. The Baluchi language is divided into six regional dialects: The Eastern Hill, Rakhshani, Sarawani, Kachhi, Loutni, and Coastal (Al-Busaidi, 1995, p. 98). Al Jahdhami suggests that ‘the decrease in language transmission to younger generations and the fact that some children no longer learn the language as a mother tongue’ makes it a ‘definitely endangered language’ (p. 108).

Another minority language in Oman is Swahili or Kiswahili, which belongs to the Bantu language family (Al Jahdhami, 2015). Swahili is a major African language and is reported to be widely spoken in Oman. This is mainly attributed to the ‘early commercial contacts between Omanis and inhabitants of the islands of Pemba and Zanzibar, the

coastal people of Mombasa, and other areas in East Africa' (Al-Busaidi, 1995, p. 91). Scholz (1980) states that African Omanis, who are a mixture of Sunni and Abadhi Muslims and who make up 8% of the total population of Oman, came to Oman many generations ago mainly via the slave trade. Scholz reports that these East African Omanis, who now enjoy Omani citizenship rights, are found mainly on the northern coast of Oman and in Salalah, the largest city of Dhofar Region in the south of Oman close to the border with Yemen. Africans were reported to have been found in Muscat, the capital of the Sultanate, as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. The same applies to the use of the Swahili language. Afro-Arab integration occurred as a result of intermarriages between the migrant Omanis who settled there and the Zanzibaris. Zanzibar was governed by twelve Al-Busaidi Sultans for about 132 years. This rule ended on 12 January 1964 (Al-Busaidi, 1995). Due to the educational system implemented in Zanzibar during that time which gave priority to English as a medium of instruction for all school subjects, Omanis returning from Zanzibar can be described as having an edge over the other Omanis with regard to English language proficiency. Nonetheless, Swahili, like the other languages described above, lacks official status in the Sultanate. Al Jahdhami (2015) suggests that:

Several languages are believed to have contributed to the making of Swahili such as Portuguese, Hindi, Persian, German and English in addition to Arabic, namely the Omani dialect, which has enriched Swahili with a considerable number of lexical items (p. 108)

Unlike most minority languages spoken in Oman, Swahili has a written form. It was once written in Arabic script until this was replaced by Roman script for unknown reasons. While Swahili has hundreds of millions of speakers using it either as a mother tongue or as a lingua franca in African countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, Congo, and Uganda, 'it is a dispersed language spoken by thousands of speakers in the province of Muscat and other cities all over Oman' (Al Jahdhami, 2015, p. 110). However, according to Al Jahdhami, the number of younger speakers of Swahili particularly is decreasing, which causes the language to be classified as definitely endangered.

Dhofar, in the southern region of Oman, has been the traditional center for the Jibbali language and the other indigenous languages (Al-Busaidi, 1995). Jibbali is spoken by the Jibbalis who are Abadhi Muslims and have been described as non-nomadic pure Bedouins who have settled in ten different tribes (Ward, 1987). Today Jibbali is found to have a 'strong admixture of Arabic' (Al-Busaidi, 1995, pp. 102–103). Jibbali, also known as Shihri, cannot be understood by speakers of other languages used in the same region. Hawley (1995) states that Jibbali are associated with 'the culture which stretched from the Wadi Najran to the Wadi Hadhramaut' (p. 194) in Yemen 'from roughly the ninth century BC to the sixth century AD.' He states that 'etymological evidence, holds that the Shihri were once the exclusive possessors of Dhofar' (p. 195). He acknowledges that these languages do not have a written form and that they are 'Semitic' and bear resemblance to each other. He also points out that 'Dhofari languages have features of pronunciation not known in modern Arabic' (p. 195).

Hawley (1995) points out that 'the name Shihri indicates the speech of a mountain people, since *Shher* means "mountain" in Jibbali' (p. 194). Jibbali literally means the 'language of the mountain,' while Shihri is 'a name that is given after the Shihri tribe that makes the bulk of its speakers' (Al Jahdhami, 2015, p. 108). Al Jahdhami writes that:

Unlike other Modern South Arabian Languages, Jabbari/Shehri is not peculiar to speakers of one single tribal community or ethnic group for it is spoken by different tribes and clans that dwell in the province of Dhufar. It has thousands of speakers with several dialects that entail some lexical differences. However, the number of its speakers has been on the decrease. (p. 108)

Al Jahdhami (2015) suggests that Jibbali is classified as definitely endangered due to the lack of motivation to learn the language by the younger generation, which continues to affect its speaker base.

In the same region, Dhofar, a second language is used. It is known as Mihri and spoken by Maharas, Abadhi Muslims who moved into Dhofar from Yemen about three centuries ago. Yemen shares its northern border with Oman, (see [Figure 1](#)). Al Jahdhami (2015) writes that Mihri belongs to the 'Modern South Arabian Languages' (p. 109). Bathari and Harsusi are two dialects of the Mahri which probably developed as a result of nomadic activities (Al-Busaidi, 1995). According to Hawley (1995), the Mihri language is 'a survival of the ancient Himyaritic' (p. 194). Hawley mentions that the Mahra are split into a western and an eastern group, each derived from a different ancestor. These two sections of Mahra differ in terms of their social practices. Hawley writes that 'the eastern sections are mainly nomadic and used to gather the frankincense during the harvest season whilst the western Mahra have long been settled and are coastal people' (p. 194).

Like all the languages spoken in the province of Dhofar, Mihri belongs to the family of Modern South Arabian languages. It 'shares some structural and lexical resemblance with nearby languages like Harsusi and Bathari' (Al Jahdhami, 2015, p. 109). According to Al Jahdhami, Mihri is widely spoken in Dhofar, when compared with the other languages spoken in the same province. It is also spoken in other nearby countries such as Yemen, Somalia, and some Gulf countries. Nonetheless, Al Jahdhami (2015) suggests that the number of Mahri speakers continues to shrink since some of the tribe members have lost interest in learning the language, so it is classified as definitely endangered.

According to Al Jahdhami (2015), Bathariis 'one of five Modern South Arabian Languages spoken in Oman' by a tribal community called Al Batarhah and 'scattered over different cities in the provinces of Dhufar and Alwusta' (p. 107). Al Jahdhami writes that though it has some structural and lexical resemblance with other nearby languages spoken in the vicinity such as Harsusi and Mehri, it is 'a language of its own for mutual intelligibility among these three languages is impossible' (p. 107), which makes it a definitely endangered language.

### *Severely endangered languages*

The Lawatiyas or Khojas, who are Shia'at Muslims, are now recognized as one ethnic group. They were cited as being part of a mercantile class in Mutrah in the nineteenth century and have lived in a 'tightly-knit community ever since' (Al-Busaidi, 1995, p. 99). There are no data in the literature about how the Lawatiyas settled in Oman. Nevertheless, their settlement can be largely attributed to the business and trade links between Oman and the Indian subcontinent at that time. According to Scholz (1980), the Lawatiyas, who are 'a group of merchants of Arab descent' (p. 60), make up under 5% of the



overall population of the Sultanate and are settled mainly in Muscat Region on the northern coast of the country.

Luwati is an Indo-Iranian language. It is close to Kutchi, which is spoken in a community found in India and Pakistan. The Luwati language has a written form. It is heavily influenced by Arabic and Urdu and is now losing ground to Arabic as the new generation of Lawatiya children are growing up as Arabic monolinguals. Almost all Lawatias in Oman are multilingual and can speak Hindi, Urdu, and English in addition to Arabic and Luwati. The Luwati language has extremely restricted domains of use and practice that are confined to home and family-run businesses. According to Al Jahdhami (2018), 'speakers with high language proficiency in Lawati are mainly part of the elderly age group' (p. 47). Luwati is hence slowly declining and is being replaced by Arabic and English in those domains. It is a severely endangered language and facing death.

Another indigenous linguistic group is the Shihuh who are a mixture of Sunni and Abadhi Muslims and who live in the northern region of Oman, known as Musandam. This part of Oman is separated from the Sultanate by part of United Arab Emirates. According to Hawley (1995), 'the Shihuh are the people of the Musandam governorate, which until very recently was all but totally isolated from the rest of the area – even from the main part of Oman' (pp. 126–127). He states that 'some people consider that the Shihuh are the remnant of the original population of the Arabian Peninsula, who were driven into their mountain fastnesses' (p. 127). He adds that 'although the majority of the Shihuh speak their own form of Arabic, the Kumzaris have a distinct language, a compound of Arabic and Persian ... the Kumzaris are a distinct group within the Shihuh confederation' (p. 128).

Al Jahdhami (2016) writes that 'Kumzari is a member of the South Western Iranian language group' (p. 28). He states that 'Kumzari is a polysemic term used to refer to the language and its native speakers alike' (p. 30). The writer adds that Arabic and Persian were the main substratum languages that significantly influenced the lexicon and structure of Kumzari. Kumzari does not have a written form. It is spoken by a tribal community in the northern part of the Sultanate. Kumzar is an isolated village inhabited by less than 5000 people. It is surrounded by steep mountains on three sides and the sea on the fourth. Al Jahdhami argues that the future of Kumzari, like the rest of the minority languages is 'not very promising' (p. 32). He classifies it as a severely endangered language since there is an evident decrease in the number of proficient speakers. Al Jahdhami classified Kumzari speakers into four different categories by their language proficiency:

There are those who speak the language fluently, those who do not really have good grasp of the language and thus would make use of Arabic to compensate for the lack of native vocabulary, those who have passive knowledge of Kumzari and those who literally cannot communicate in their ethnic group language. For the worse, there are some speakers who do not identify with Kumzari as a local language, and thus they show no concern to inter-generational transmission. (pp. 32–33)

Harsusi, as suggested by Al Jahdhami (2015), is a 'Modern South Arabian Language spoken by the Harsusi tribe in different parts of Alwusta' (Al Jahdhami, 2015, p. 108). According to Al Jahdhami, although Harsusi 'has some lexical similarity with Mehri and Bathari,' it 'is a language of its own' (p. 108). Thus, Hawley states that 'a speaker of one of these languages can understand most of what speakers of the other two say'

(p. 194). However, the number of speakers continues to decrease, which makes it a severely endangered language (Al Jahdhami, 2015).

### *Critically endangered languages*

Zadjali is the name of the language that is spoken by a tribal community which migrated from Pakistani Baluchistan, Pakistani and Iranian Makran, and Sind (Peterson, 2004). Al Jahdhami (2018) suggests that the word Zadjali means 'the language of the ancestors' (p. 48). According to Al Jahdhami, 'Zadjali is an Indo-Iranian language that exhibits lexical and structural resemblance to several Indo-Iranian languages such as Baluchi, Sindi and Persian' (p. 50). Al Jahdhami states that the main speakers of Zadjali are a few hundred elderly people and that attitudes about passing it to the younger generation are negative, which makes it confined to the home domain. In addition, and according to the writer, many 'Zadjali speakers have shifted to the nearby cousin language, Baluchi,' which has left it in a 'critically endangered state' (p. 50).

Al Jahdhami (2015) classifies Habyot, another language spoken in Dhofarin a coastal mountain area near the Omani-Yemen border by 'a few hundred speakers, most of whom are from the elderly age group,' as a 'Modern South Arabian Language' (p. 108). According to Al Jahdhami, Habyot is believed to be a hybrid of both Mehri and Jabbali spoken in nearby areas owing to the structural and lexical resemblance incurred by its proximity to both languages spoken in the vicinity. It is, however, intelligible to none of them which gives support to its distinctiveness from both languages (p. 108). Al Jahdhami (2015) suggests that Habyot is classified as a critically endangered language due to the very small number of speakers.

It is important to acknowledge that despite the complex linguistic, ethnic and cultural landscape of Oman, the government has worked hard to prevent ethnicity from dominating within national identity. The Intelligence Department keeps records about each Omani and which ethnic background s/he originates from. Nevertheless, everybody is treated as an Omani citizen and ethnic background information remains relevant for security reasons only. There are ethnic minorities, which are represented by fewer than ten tribal names, while there are other ethnic minorities which are represented by tens of tribal names. Statistics are available in this regard, but these are classified and inaccessible to the public and to researchers.

The government believes in treating all Omanis equally and has established this since it came to power in 1970. This involves a 'melting pot' assimilationist strategy that is premised on the establishment of a single national identity. The prime aim of the Omani government has been to build a prosperous nation that can contribute to the overall good and development of the Sultanate. This policy has been successfully implemented thus far. Debates over issues revolving round ethnic minority are considered to create cultural insensitivity, divisions, and conflicts and cause subsequent damage to the overall national development policy implementation. This is applicable at all levels and walks of life in Oman, and education is no exception. Students in schools are all treated alike and equally. Sometimes the tribal name indicates the ethnic minority students originate from, while at other times it is just misleading. There have been mixed marriages and settlements throughout the very long history of the country and when Oman was an empire, various members of the society went as far as borrowing elite tribal and family names to signify their

membership. It is, therefore, a hard task, and an impossible one sometimes, to distinguish between the ethnic origins of the various members of the Omani society.

### **English**

Shops and road signs in Oman are written in Arabic and English to facilitate language contact, language spread, and language maintenance, as goals of LPP. This facilitates business and tourism, which are two significant sources of income and economic growth for a developing country like Oman. Although Arabic and English share certain domains of discourse in Oman and both serve as a global lingua franca for a number of people in the region, the fact is that Arabic remains far more dominant than English in terms of domains of discourse and practice, even though English has more linguistic and functional power and value worldwide.

Because of the global power of English, it is an economically viable force. It is widely used in business, particularly in the private sector, as represented in shopping malls, banks, chemist shops, medical clinics, showrooms, general trade stores, hotels, restaurants, factories, real estate offices, legal offices, insurance agencies, finance companies, oil and gas companies, telecommunication companies, transport companies, shipping companies, data post companies, wholesale and retail trading agencies, and import and export companies. This widespread use of English in these places is due to the fact that the private sector is largely dominated by a non-Omani and non-Arab labor force. English in Oman is also important for tourism, which has flourished since the beginning of the current millennium. In addition, figures obtained from the database of the Ministry of Tourism show that recent years have witnessed growth in the number of tourists from non-Arabic and English-speaking countries.

English, when compared with the minority languages, is in an increasingly powerful position. The Sultan on more than one occasion emphasized the role of the private sector as a strategic partner with the government in building modern Oman. The private sector in turn responded and stretched out both hands. One of the aspects of this collaboration was linking education with the needs of the job market. Another aspect was the creation of jobs for Omani graduates of higher education institutions.

English is thus highly valued by the Omani government and considered a tool for modernization and nationalization, also known as Omanization. This is an ambitious state policy and scheme enacted by the Omani government in 1988. It aims to gradually replace the skilled foreign labor in the private sector with properly trained and qualified Omani personnel, bearing in mind that the Arab and non-Arab expatriate work force has almost reached 47% of the overall population, with workers from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan making up over 85% of the total work force. Lack of English and specialized knowledge are hence considered by some elite Omanis and the government to be a serious impediment to Omanization.

### **Part II: language spread**

'Hegemonies have ideological dimensions' (Fairclough, 1992, p. 95) and ideologies are formed and constructed as a result of exposure to and contact with everyday events and experiences (Gee, 1990). Therefore, the aim to consolidate beliefs about the role

and importance of certain languages is achieved by maximizing exposure to and contact with these languages at the expense of others through spreading, expanding, encouraging, and imposing their written and spoken texts and discursive practices. Efforts to promote the spread of Arabic and English in Oman have been made primarily through formal education.

Spolsky (1978) best describes the power of education with regard to language policy implementation by stressing that ‘education is the strongest weapon for enforcing language policy’ (p. 64). Fishman (2006) sees education as ‘a very useful and highly irreversible language-shift mechanism’ (p. 320) due to being obligatory, focusing on the young, and a tool for social mobility. Education allows language to spread and penetrate the society. Education is the field in which language policies as theories and ideological representations convert into actions. Kaplan (1990) emphasizes the role of education in relation to LPP and describes it as ‘a powerful instrument of change’ (p. 9). He points out that ‘it has been suggested that language planning should be a function of the government at the highest level but that, in fact, it is most commonly the function of the education sector’ (p. 9). Finally, Baldauf (1990) emphasizes the role of education as an ‘important variable in most language planning situations’ (p. 22). Barkhuizen and Gough (1996) stress that ‘the success of language-in-education policy is measured by the effectiveness of its implementation’ (p. 461). The field of education is hence a kind of testing field where solutions to language problems are expected to be found.

On its website, the Diwan of Royal Court,<sup>2</sup> Sultan Qaboos higher Centre for culture and science, states that

The Sultanate has attached a great importance to the education sector, which witnessed remarkable development during the recent forty years on the level of school education and higher education, by providing the learner with the necessary skills and enabling them to coexist with the developments of life in the twenty-first century.

Today, according to figures published by *Oman Daily Observe* newspaper in August 2019, for the population of 4.7million (<https://www.unocha.org/middle-east-and-north-africa-romena/oman>), there are 1,166 public schools in various governorates of the Sultanate catering to 643,770 students and 56,717 teachers. There are further 650 private schools catering for 106,000 students. Moreover, there are five colleges of technology, seven colleges of applied sciences, one college of banking and financial studies, one college of sharia (Islamic Law) science, one military college, one college for armed forces, and one public university. There are also nine private universities and 22 private colleges offering different under – and post-graduate programs in science and arts majors. In addition, the adult literacy rate in 2018 reached 95.65% (<https://knoema.com/atlas/Oman/Adult-literacy-rate>)

### **Arabic language teaching**

Arabic Language Teaching (ALT) was introduced into the Omani education system when the Sultan took up the reins of power in 1970. ‘Arabic’ here is synonymous with MSA. Teaching MSA, according to the *Philosophy of Education in the Sultanate of Oman* (2017) document, is viewed as instilling citizenship and involving a feeling of belonging to the country and to its Arabic and Islamic identity. Omani citizenship and identity, in other words, are developed by providing ‘a sound background in Islamic ideology’ and

helping 'students master the Arabic language and to feel pride in it' (p. 20). MSA is used for instruction in all Arabic-medium subjects taught at school and higher education academic institutions. Nonetheless, students have suffered from weaknesses in the four language skills, which in turn affected their attainment in the other subjects as well. Such problems were attributed to the Arabic teachers, who were found lacking adequate training (Ministry of Education, 2011/2012).

In 1997, the Ministry of Education (MoE) decided to revolutionize education in Oman through introducing the Basic Education System (BES). This is concerned with the integration of theory, practice, thought, work, education, and life. The main objective of the BES is to promote quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of the education system in order to produce outcomes of an international standard. It encourages more efficient usage of updated teaching methods and updated assessment and evaluation systems. It decreases emphasis on theoretical concepts in education and increases emphasis on practical applications. An additional feature of the BES is smaller class sizes to ensure the provision of more care and guidance to students. The BES also emphasizes providing in-service training opportunities for teachers and other personnel involved in the project.

While ALT started with teaching imported syllabi from Qatar and then Jordan during the 1970s and 1980, the MoE opted for writing their own national textbooks. Moreover, on average, six periods a week have been allocated to ALT. Most schools are equipped with a resource center, which includes laptops and personal computers with access to the internet to vary exposure to, and facilitate acquisition of, a wide range of knowledge and information and to help students improve their reading and writing skills. However, over 10 years later, in an empirical study conducted by the MoE in 2011/2012, it was found that students continued to suffer from weaknesses in the four skills, particularly reading. They were also found to suffer from a lack of problem solving and critical thinking skills. The national syllabus to a lesser degree and teachers to a larger degree were found responsible for the persistence of these problems and the emergence of new ones. Teachers' pre-service teacher training and education was found to be inadequate, bearing in mind that only three institutions train Arabic teachers: Rustaq College of Education; the College of Education (CoE) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the only national university in the country established in 1986; and A'Sharqiya University, which is a private university established in 2009. Such inadequacies included teaching methods and proficiency in MSA. In its executive summary of the National Strategy for Education 2040 (2018), the Education Council stressed that one of the challenges education faces in Oman is related to low level of school graduates in the Arabic and English languages, and problem solving and critical thinking skills. Hence, the study made a number of recommendations: First, adopt criteria for teacher selection to control quality; second, train teachers to meet a certain set of criteria; third, provide learning resources for teachers and students; and finally, increase professional development courses for teachers.

### ***The specialized center for professional training of teachers***

According to Ball (1998), new educational reform policies 'feed off and gain legitimacy from the deriding and demolition of previous policies' (p. 125) and their failure is always attributed to the failure of certain agents such as teachers in implementing the

policies due to a lack of competence, for example. Therefore, Ball (1998) argues that policies are manipulative since by blaming teachers for policy failure, for example, they are sacrificing teachers and hence encouraging ‘changes in organizational practices and methods’ and the ‘adoption of new social relationships, values and principles’ (p. 125).

The MoE saw the need to improve teachers’ and supervisors’ skills to satisfy the needs of the Omani labor market and help improve students’ attainment to meet the global challenges. Thus a ministerial decision stipulated the opening of The Specialized Centre for Professional Training of Teachers (SCPTT) in Muscat Governorate in 2014. Drawing on internationally researched experiences, SCPTT provides short and strategic programs designed by experts in the field and reflecting best practice. According to Al Shabibi and Silvennoinen (2017), SCPTT programs ‘are designed to achieve sustainable change in the daily work of the participants’ (p. 16) and stretch over one or two years and embed knowledge, skills, qualities, and values ‘using the most up-to-date and effective methods of improving students’ outcomes’ (p. 16). Al Jabri et al. (2018) write that:

All programs have been developed around a set of professional standards built on three broad areas: (1) professional attitudes and values; (2) professional knowledge and understanding, and (3) professional skills. The standards are described at four levels: poor, standard, good and outstanding. All the programs focus on practical implementation of new methods and strategies, underpinned by an adequate understanding of the research and rationale behind them. Workplace learning tasks have specific requirements for classroom practice, evaluation and sharing experiences with colleagues. (pp. 90–91)

SCPTT also follows the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) National Qualifications Framework to license the programs and issues certificates under a University College of London endorsement process. SCPTT additionally hires 46 Omani trainers, and two British and one New Zealander experts to design and deliver strategic training programs. SCPTT offers three types of programs: Strategic Training Programs, Short Training Programs, and Future Strategic Training Programs. While the first two types target Arabic Language, Maths, and Science teachers, the last type targets English teachers. The program for this type stretches over 30 months and is divided into two parts. The first is concerned with helping new teachers to improve their command of the English language. The second part is related to helping teachers improve their teaching methods and strategies. The program commenced in the academic year 2016–17. Its English language program includes 800 teachers and targets 80% of schools.

SCPTT is additionally equipped with state-of-the-art technology and resources. It also trains teachers to conduct research and construct professional learning communities of practice to help share and exchange ideas and information relevant to ELT and to take responsibility for their own professional development. The Center offers a face-to-face training session or uses an electronic platform. The Center also conducts specialized programs for students. It also encourages competent teachers with innovative teaching ideas to try out their ideas in the microteaching classrooms and participate in international forums and events to disseminate their ideas.

More efforts made by the MoE took the form of holding seminars and conducting empirical studies to better understand the problems of the national syllabus. These efforts recently led to the development of a new national syllabus based upon different

criteria that promote innovative and creative teaching and are adopted from a wide range of empirical studies conducted by international agencies and organizations.

### ***The national Council for accreditation of teacher education***

Moreover, in an important attempt to control and benchmark the quality of ALT graduates, theCoE at SQU pursued accreditation and international recognition from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) for seven years (2016–2022), to become one of very few universities outside the USA that has achieved NCATE accreditation. NCATE, which was founded in 1954 to ensure and raise the quality of educators' preparation for their profession and to accredit teacher certification programs at colleges and universities in the USA, is recognized by the US Department of Education as an accrediting organization. Today NCATE is a coalition of 33 member organizations of teachers, teacher educators, content specialists, and local and state policy makers, and represents over three million individuals.

Nonetheless, Ball (1998) was critical of the economic ideology underlying 'quality assurance' and viewed it as a commodity being marketed by 'policy entrepreneurs' to ministries of education during visits and in conferences. Ball and Youdell (2008) viewed benchmarking as a form of hidden privatization and an unethical policy and tool of governance and control supported by think tanks in a particular institution. Ball (2001) problematized quality assurance and situated it within a 'performativity' context. He viewed it as a perfect representation of the neo-liberal and meritocratic ideologies where more business-oriented roles and relationships had been introduced into education. Ramirez (2015) also problematized quality assurance and considered it as a characteristic of local contexts. He further viewed academic accreditation as a form of imperialism. He argued that US academic accreditation agencies compete with each other to attract candidate institutions from around the world and use issues such as 'collaboration' with non-USA academic institutions and 'international capacity building' to justify their gatekeeping of such activity during the new political economy age totally driven, controlled, and dominated by the USA. Ramirez invited leaders of non-USA academic institutions seeking academic accreditation to reflect on their choices as a means of self and institutional empowerment.

### ***English language teaching***

English Language Teaching (ELT) was first introduced into the Omani education system when the Sultan ascended the throne in 1970. Since then English has been receiving growing international and global recognition, growing in status, and gaining more ground in Oman and worldwide. This drove the government to revolutionize ELT to meet the present and future challenges and demands of the local and global market. Therefore, handsome investments were made in the theorization and implementation of teaching English through the BES through arranging national and international conferences, forums, seminars, symposiums, and workshops. Also, different foreign experts, advisors, and writers, mainly from English-speaking countries, were invited and recruited to evaluate and report on and write materials and provide technical advice about the different aspects of this national reform project.

However, prior to this, a team of three international experts representing Australia, Canada, and the UK was invited to the Sultanate in the mid-1980s to visit various regions in the Sultanate and talk to different officials and conduct a needs analysis. This effort resulted in outlining a policy document entitled *Philosophy and Guidelines for the Omani English Language School Curriculum* (Nunan et al., 1987). The document formed a guideline for curriculum and syllabus designers in Oman and laid the theoretical foundations for the Omani national ELT school curriculum and the proposed means of implementation. Nunan et al. considered education and educated nationals central to modernization since a good level of education in the English language could lead to improved preparation of productive citizens and subsequently impact the country's economic progress. A strong economy was viewed as leading to prosperity and national unity. They also acknowledged the role of English in relation to modernization and national development. Nunan et al. classified English as an international language and the language of science and technology and acknowledged the importance of science and technology for a developing country like Oman. To help achieve this aim, the authors suggested increasing formal instruction time, writing a functional/communicative syllabus to provide naturalistic samples of contextualized language, introducing criterion-referenced assessment into the system, incorporating technology into ELT to maximize exposure and contact time, building flexibility into materials to provide teachers with more breathing space, and encouraging and attracting Omani teachers to join the teaching force and retaining them in the system. Nunan et al. suggested providing financial incentives and in-service teacher training sessions to allow teachers to reflect on all aspects of their work and learn ways of exploiting the learning opportunities, which arise spontaneously in the classroom and supplement the existing materials. They also suggested giving teachers a reasonable workload to help them follow a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)-based syllabus. The authors further suggested involving parents and students more in the understanding of curriculum objectives. The document was adopted as policy for ELT in Oman, with the MoE responsible for pursuing its full implementation to guarantee achieving the country's economic goals.

### ***Problems of the basic education system***

With the BES having been followed for over a decade, different researchers investigated different aspects of this nationwide innovative project. Results of the different studies conducted during this decade came as a shock in the sense that despite spending a fortune on the ambitious BES, the project had failed to satisfy the national requirements and aspirations, which negatively affected policy implementation and continued to create a disparity between theory and practice. Al Jabri et al. (2018) held that 'one of the biggest problems with the quality of teachers is the heterogeneity of teachers in terms of their initial preparation and their dedication to the profession' (p. 86). This is particularly the case among male teachers, with expatriate teachers from the Philippines, Indian Subcontinent, and different Arab countries such as the Maghreb, Egypt, Sudan, and Jordan outnumbering their Omani counterparts. To be more precise, the number of male expatriate teachers in the public schools reached 1350 compared to 728 Omanis in 2018. Moreover, Al Shabibi and Silvennoinen (2017) attributed the low morale of Omani English teachers to low salaries and benefits, lack of support from appropriate induction and professional



training programs, lack of systematic recognition of teacher achievements, the absence of an inspirational environment, and a disparity between teacher preparation and the real teaching situation. Al Jabri et al. (2018) commented on the last point by holding the English language teacher training and education agency responsible. The authors held that such agency had always 'lacked logic' and had been 'narrow.' Other researchers maintained that such agency had been more academic than practical, top-down, and mostly irrelevant to teachers' needs (Al Shabibi & Silvennoinen, 2017). Al Jabri et al. (2018) asserted that students bring different levels of ability to classrooms. However, teachers have struggled to demonstrate sophisticated skills to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the individual students they teach and make the right instructional decisions and choices accordingly.

Other researchers (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Al-Mahrooqi et al., 2016; Sergon, 2011) investigated more aspects of the BES and reported different unsatisfactory and disappointing findings. First, teaching continued to be textbook based, despite equipping most schools with a resource center. Second, students were asked to memorize lexical items and structural rules. Third, students continued to be trained for exam purposes. Next, English continued to be taught through Arabic. Moreover, English was taught too formally. In addition, teachers were overloaded with teaching technical and administrative responsibilities and duties. Furthermore, teachers were poorly trained and qualified. Last but not least, teachers lacked English language proficiency. All these findings exposed the BES and stripped it of its credibility and accountability (Al-Issa, 2019; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012).

### ***The academic international English language testing system***

In its effort to partly control the quality of teachers and teaching, the MoE decided to take an important and highly controversial measure to safeguard the implementation of the BES. Towards the end of the 2000s, it sanctioned Band 6 on the Academic International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as a condition for enrolling graduates from SQU and other institutions in Oman and abroad into the ELT profession. It decided that Rustaq College of Education, Dhofar University, a private university which was established in 2004, should also train English language teachers. Proficiency in English is a prerequisite and particularly important for non-native English-speaking teachers since they are bound to face multiple and diverse challenges, demands, and expectations in and out of the classroom. Such situations have important implications for their confidence, self-efficacy, identity, and pedagogical performance and for their students' attainment and success (Canh & Renandya, 2017; Gu & Papageorgiou, 2016; Richards, 2017). The decision made by the MoE coincided with the graduation of over 1000 Omani English teachers from Ajman University, a private university in the UAE. However, their language proficiency was too low to handle an English classroom. Teachers willing to join the field were asked explicitly by the MoE to take the IELTS exam and present their certificates as evidence of achieving the required score. Freeman et al. (2015) and Richards (2017) are critical of the fact that certain developing countries use imported tests and benchmarks to measure teachers' general level of language proficiency and correlated it with their teaching competence. They maintain that language

proficiency and teaching ability are two different things and that the relationship between them is indirect and complex.

### ***The American council on the teaching of foreign languages***

More efforts to control the quality of ELT graduates were made by the CoE at SQU since the vast majority of teachers found in the market today are graduates of SQU. The CoE pursued its accreditation and international recognition from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) for seven years (2016–2022). ACTFL is an American organization aiming to improve and expand the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction. It is an individual membership organization of more than 12,500 foreign language educators and administrators from elementary through graduate education, as well as in government and industry. ACTFL is the national association for language education professionals from all levels of instruction and representing all languages. With more than 12,000 active members, it provides professional development opportunities, acclaimed training and certification programs, and widely cited books, publications, scholarly journals, research studies, and language education resources. As part of its mission and vision, ACTFL provides guidance to the profession and to the general public regarding issues, policies, and best practices related to the teaching and learning of languages and cultures. On its website (<https://www.actfl.org/news/press-releases/actfl-and-nccsfl-release-new-cando-statements>), ACTFL states that it ‘sets standards and expectations that will result in high quality language programs.’ The website further states that:

The ACTFL Can-Do Statements provide a set of examples and scenarios that show how learners use the target language and knowledge of culture to demonstrate their Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). These statements guide language learners to identify and set learning goals and chart their progress toward language and intercultural proficiency; guide educators to write communication learning targets for curriculum, unit, and lesson plans; and guide stakeholders to clarify how well learners at different stages can communicate.

However, Richards (2008) problematized the concept of quality in ELT and acknowledged that ‘there is no internationally recognized specification of English language teacher competencies’ (p. 13), although different countries and professional organizations have specified and produced certain ‘essential teacher competencies’ (p. 13). Richards was critical of the program standards developed by NCATE and ACTFL and viewed them as ‘largely based upon intuition and are not research based’ (p. 13). He additionally stated that the US initiated ‘standards movement’ had brought its standards into education from fields like business and organizational management, which reflected ‘a reductionist approach in which learning is reduced to the mastery of discrete skills that can easily be taught and assessed’ (p. 13).

### ***Private schools***

There are three types of private schools in Oman: monolingual, bilingual, and international schools. The latest figures released by the Ministry of Education in 2018 indicate that the total number of these schools has reached 309, with a student population exceeding 76,000 and a teacher population exceeding 7500 and representing a wide range of

nationalities including Omanis. However, once again, expatriate teachers outnumber their Omani counterparts by a huge margin, 1742 Omanis as opposed to 5851 expatriates.

These schools implement an English-medium instruction (EMI) approach for science-based subjects, while they teach subjects such as Arabic Language, Islamic Education, and Social Studies in Arabic. They also adopt the internationally recognized and accepted Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) program for Grades 7–10, which is studied in more than 120 countries worldwide. It is an international qualification for 14–16-year olds. In Grades 11 and 12 students can opt for either A-Levels or the Omani General Education Diploma.

Cambridge IGCSE is similar to the older O-Levels English qualification and is provided predominantly by private international schools for expatriate children around the world. It provides a broad and flexible study program and covers over 70 subjects from a variety of areas: Languages, Humanities, Social Sciences, Mathematics, Creative, Technical, and Vocational. It is an English language curriculum offered to students to prepare them for the International Baccalaureate, A Levels, and Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) Level 3. The examination system of Cambridge IGCSE is designed to make it suitable for students with varying levels of ability. Cambridge IGCSE allows teaching to be placed in a localized context, making it relevant in different regions. It is intended to be suitable for students whose first language may not be English, and this is acknowledged throughout the examination process.

In addition, private schools in Oman are better furnished and equipped. Class sizes are smaller (20–25 students) than those found in public schools. They also hire native English-speaking teachers and use imported textbooks published by worldwide publishers such as Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Longman, McMillan, Pearson, etc. Ball (2012) documents the involvement of Pearson (the world's largest education company) as an 'edu-business' agency to facilitate achieving policy implementation. He notes that it has established itself as a 'globalizing actor' through its involvement in publishing, assessment and qualifications system, ELT, and administration products.

Fees charged by these schools vary from one school to another depending on the status of the school (bilingual or international), resources available, quality of teachers recruited, quality of imported textbooks, and student-teacher ratio. While the lowest fees charged are approximately USD \$4,000 per student per academic year, the highest are in the range of USD \$12,000.

Privatization of education, which takes English as a base, brings issues of equality and social justice in education into question. In other words, knowledge of English is becoming a dividing and differentiating factor that contributes to creating social hierarchies, gaps, and segregation amongst students, where some become socio-economically more advantaged than others (Ball & Youdell, 2008).

### **Higher education**

More attempts were made by the government to spread the English language through teaching it in all public higher education academic institutions such as the College of Banking and Financial Studies, Institutes for Health Sciences, Higher Colleges of Technology, Colleges of Education/Applied Sciences, and Technological Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

As far as private higher education is concerned, the Sultan addressed the nation on 21 October 2003 to stress the strategic role of the private sector in advancing higher education qualitatively and quantitatively and the developmental process in the country through providing and creating jobs in its companies and establishments. On 14 November 2006, he declared a strategy through which the government had decided to help and encourage the private sector to play an effective role in advancing theoretical and practical knowledge in higher education in Oman and linking them together to achieve civilization and modernization. With oil production being on the decline and the likely depletion of reserves within the next decade or two, the need for an alternative economy is inevitable and requires an educated citizenry. Therefore, the government decided to invest in expanding its higher education system, largely by promoting and subsidizing private higher education to reduce the enrollment pressure on public institutions and reduce the associated fiscal pressures on government. The Sultan endowed a royal grant of USD \$44 million to Omani-owned private universities. This is in addition to a number of financial incentives that exempted Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) from paying certain taxes and fees.

As a result, Oman has witnessed the opening of a total of 36 private universities and colleges since 1995, with a student enrollment exceeding 50,000 in all colleges. All these institutions and the public ones have an English Language Centre, which is equipped with state-of-the-art technology and offers courses in English language improvement at the foundation and post-foundation levels to their students. They use EMI and imported textbooks. They also hire teachers from different backgrounds and nationalities, including North America, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand.

These private colleges and universities are affiliated to internationally-recognized academic institutions in the English-speaking countries and offer mostly science-based programs such as Business Studies, Education, Engineering, Information Technology, and Medicine at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, which are all taught in English. In addition, Nizwa University offers a Master in TESOL; Dhofar University has a two-year Diploma, four-year Bachelor degree, and a Master degree in ELT Curriculum and Instruction; and Sohar University offers a four-year Bachelor's degree in ELT Curriculum and Teaching Methods and a Master degree in TESOL. Issan (2016) is critical of the duplication and repetitiveness of these programs and sees them as lacking diversity and lacking alignment with the requirements of the job market.

Most of the colleges started as, and still are, university colleges. They have been affiliated to different universities in different English-speaking countries to help guarantee offering quality higher education. Issan (2016) states that the MoHE encourages private higher education institutions 'to choose highly reputable universities as partners in academic affiliation agreements for the purpose of monitoring and improving quality, diversifying program offerings, and increasing the prestige of the degrees awarded by private higher education institutions' (p. 212). However, Al Harthy (2011) is critical of the total reliance of these institutions on academic affiliation to ensure quality since foreign universities 'mostly focus on the quality of contents or programs and courses' (p. 322) and not modes of delivery and resources.

Both westerners and non-westerners have been critical of the privatization of higher education in the developing world, which the Sultanate of Oman is part of. Ball and Youdell (2008) describe it as 'a feature of a broad process of globalization,' or

‘westernization’ (p. 37), rather than of introducing reform and facilitating modernization. Ball (1998) is additionally critical of all forms of cultural and political dependency on the West and on agencies ‘who “sell” their solutions in the academic and political market-place’ and through ‘academic channels’ (p. 124) to ministries of education. Ball et al. (2011) are further critical of the inclusion of what they call ‘outsiders’ or ‘edu-business’ for policy processing, interpretation, and implementation purposes.

Similarly, Ismail and Al-Shanfari (2014) and Al Harthy (2011) are critical of the quality of staff recruited and instructional practices adopted in PHEIs and see it as jeopardizing their continuation as education service providers due to the poor delivery of the academic programs. Al Harthy is more specifically critical of these institutions’ total focus on ‘making profit for financial investment, rather than making profit to enhance the educational process’ (p. 320), which is affecting their public image, accountability, and credibility. Ismail and Al Shanfari see PHEIs as commercializing education by allowing access for low-income students, while reducing enrollment opportunities for academically eligible students. This situation, according to Ismail and Al Shanfari, has promoted a market-oriented approach in higher education and failed to address the needs of society. They assert that, for these reasons, PHEIs potentially face the risk of failure and closure.

Interestingly, the Omani Centre for Human Rights recently wrote on its official website that the rate of unemployment has exceeded 17% of the total Omani population, ‘a proportion that is growing constantly as more young Omanis graduate from schools, colleges and universities’ (Oman Centre for Human Rights, <https://ochroman.org/eng/umemployed/>). The website goes on to state that ‘journalists’ reports and international data suggest that the rate of youth unemployment could be as high as 50%, and that 70% of females remain outside the labor market.’ An article in the Muscat Daily newspaper highlights the disparity between policy and practice in Oman and how education has failed to meet the needs and demands of the job market. It points out that many students graduate with a lack of skills leading to the failure of Omanization to provide opportunities for Omanis to compete for and secure emerging job openings in an equal and effective manner, and especially that the number of foreign workers has reached almost half of the population (*Muscat Daily.com*, 2012, <https://muscatdaily.com/Archive/Oman/Unemployment> Oman2). Barnawi (2018) too discusses the gap between the education sector and job market needs and how this has resulted in ‘creating high underemployment and unemployment among young Omanis today’ (p. 111). He attributes this socio-economic problem to ‘a lack of collaboration and partnership among government bodies, different education sectors and the private sector employers’ and calls for ‘immediate harmonization of education with job market needs’ (p. 112).

Barnawi (2018) comments that contemporary ELT policy reform in Oman is viewed as central for accessing economic development and social mobility, despite the creation of social inequalities and failure to resolve unemployment issues. While communicating in English sits at the heart of the skills that graduates need, higher education academic institutions have failed to adequately equip graduates of tertiary education with communication skills, which are ‘vitaly needed in a global job market with multinational workforce’ (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014, p. 485). Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2016), Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova (2014), and Barnawi (2018) hold that this has

important implications for aligning instruction with the needs and demands of the job market to enhance graduates' levels of employability since it has had negative implications for students' attainment leaving Grade 12 (Barnawi, 2018).

### ***Oman academic accreditation authority***

In an attempt to monitor program quality and standards and align instruction with the needs and demands of the job market to enhance graduates' levels of employability, a Royal Decree was issued in 2010 establishing the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA). Based upon international literature and international benchmarks, OAAA decided that students enrolling in any higher education academic institutions are required to attend a General Foundation Program (GFP) as a compulsory entrance qualification for Omani degree programs. For 6–12 months they study English Language, Maths, Computing and General Study Skills as these four areas provide a comprehensive intellectual base that is relevant to all further study and to the development of broad thinking and life skills in general. However, students are exempted from undertaking a component of a GFP if they have already met the required learning outcomes for that area of learning. If students satisfy the standards for English (an IELTS score of at least 5.0 with none of the four areas of writing, speaking, listening and reading below 4.5, or a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score of at least 500), Maths, and Computing during entry testing then they will be awarded the certificate of attainment for the entire GFP. Therefore, public higher education academic institutions functioning under the MoHE, Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Awqaf<sup>3</sup> and Religious Affairs, and the Central Bank of Oman as well as all PHEIs are required to align their students' standards with the IELTS. In other words, they prepare their students for the IELTS through using in-house materials and mock exams which are very similar to the IELTS. Alternatively, students who fail to score the required mark can take the IELTS at a recognized institution and score Band 5 to secure a place in the bachelor's program.

Authors such as Templer (2004) are critical of the 'cultural capital' of the IELTS and its use as a credential that defines and controls knowledge of English and determines 'future study and career pathways' (p. 191). Ball (2001) is critical of how students are being increasingly 'commodified' in the era of globalization and 'positioned differently and evaluated differently in the education market' (p. xxxv) due to market economy issues. Templer (2004) and Khan (2009) question the decision of some educational administrators, or 'performance managers' or 'contract commissioners,' as Ball calls them, for enacting such policy and adopting the IELTS as an 'efficient' and 'scientific' option. Both authors subsequently call for education agencies in developing countries to develop local norms of proficiency and free themselves from educational imperialism and post-colonial education.

It is worth noting that over 90% of students leaving school in Oman have to attend the Foundation Program English Language (FPEL) at any public or private higher education academic institution, despite spending 12 years learning English at school (Barnawi, 2018). This is justified when one finds out that there is a lack of alignment between the content and format of the IELTS and that found in the Omani ELT curriculum (Al-Issa et al., 2017b).

Furthermore, research showed that the FPEL has failed to cope with the different teaching and curriculum challenges it encountered in public and private higher education academic institutions like SQU, Colleges of Applied Sciences, Sohar University, and Majan College, despite the large investments these institutions and others nationwide made in the program (Al-Issa & Al-Mahrooqi, 2017). Teachers were found to be at the heart of this failure, which mainly resulted from a lack of mapping in the policy documents produced by OAAA and their failure to capture all that occurs in 'enabling education' (Al-Issa & Al-Mahrooqi, 2017). The documents further failed to identify the enacted, experienced, and hidden curriculum for teachers to help them achieve alignment between program attributes, unit learning outcomes, and assessment. This situation created policy-practice disparity. Barnawi (2018) comments that the failure of the FPEL has resulted in exhausting higher education academic institutions' resources and strategically delayed the progress of Omanization.

Authors such as Sivaraman et al. (2014) analyzed the problem differently. They found that teaching English as a school subject and for 'general' purposes did not help students cope with the challenges presented by EMI at higher education academic institutions. They argued that despite offering a bridging course in the form of FPEL to prepare the students for the Engineering programs at the private Caledonian College of Engineering, it was observed that the students were not comfortable in classes taught through EMI. This was reflected in their understanding of the modules, class participation, exam preparation, and their overall performance and study experience. Sivaraman et al. (2014) concluded that a lack of proficiency in English language was a major barrier for students. The authors recommended that 'it is imperative that innovative schemes are introduced by the MoHE and college authorities to motivate the students so that they willingly take the journey to become more proficient in English language' (p. 32).

Authors such as Al-Bakri (2013) took a more radical approach to analyzing the problem. She found that the use of EMI created numerous obstacles and challenges for students to cope with the necessary strategies to employ English in their studies and hence affected their understanding of the subject. Al-Bakri further criticized EMI and saw it as perpetuating social and economic inequalities, especially that Omani graduates might be less adequate than their expatriate counterparts in their specialization and linguistic ability, which might make it difficult for those graduates to replace them. The author concluded that Oman will consequently continue to lag and remain dependent on an expatriate workforce because such graduates cannot develop themselves.

These institutions are additionally required to use the Common European Framework (CEFR),<sup>4</sup> which was criticized for being descriptive and generic and lacking validity, contextualization, and support by research (Fulcher, 2004). Fulcher further found that CEFR required professional practitioners with deep knowledge of the existing context to generate tasks to define the test construct and score test takers using the prescribed scales.

As the body responsible for regulating the quality of higher education in Oman to ensure the maintenance of a level that meets international standards and to encourage higher education institutions to improve their internal quality, the OAAA established a Quality Audit Manual for Institutional Accreditation in 2008 ([http://www.oaaa.gov.om/QAM\\_2008\\_FINAL2.pdf](http://www.oaaa.gov.om/QAM_2008_FINAL2.pdf)). The Manual was benchmarked against international higher education quality audit systems and its content was subject to a lengthy consultation process. It states in its introduction that:

Quality Audit is an internationally respected method for facilitating improvement efforts by providers of higher education, and for providing the public with a level of assurance that the quality of our higher education institutions is being attended to through external review. By participating in this process, Oman joins with many of the leading higher education sectors of the world that practice public Quality Audits. (p. 1)

Nonetheless, more problems pertinent to teachers' competence in higher education appeared. Al-Ani (2017) holds that the decision to opt for TVET as alternative education heavily relied on memorization and repetition and discouraged students from pursuing critical thinking and knowledge questioning. However, the author points specifically to teachers' incompetence in promoting students' learning and increasing their self-esteem, which widened the gap between educational outcomes and labor market demands, and failed to serve Oman's strategic plan, economic aspirations, and future vision.

### **Scholarships**

The Sultan addressed the nation on 26 November 1975 to bring to the people's attention the implementation of some of the policies in the education sector and how such implementation could significantly shape Oman's political and economic aspirations. There was an explicit mention of the English language as a tool for acquiring science and technology from countries such as the UK and USA to facilitate Oman's development. Explicit reference was made to the USA as the only selected 'friendly' non-Arabic speaking country where a number of candidate students could pursue their post-secondary education.

Approximately 10,000 external and internal scholarships are provided annually by the MoHE, bearing in mind that each student studying abroad costs the government in the range of USD \$20,000–25,000 per year. Many of these students, especially at the undergraduate level, require a language improvement component prior to embarking on their respective academic programs. The cost of these English courses (tuition fees) ranges from US\$ 5,000–10,000 per calendar year. There are also additional fees paid by the government to the students on these scholarships for living expenses, airfares, books and clothes. It is worth mentioning that the expenditure on education during this decade exceeded 4.0% of the country's GDP.

English is the medium of instruction in all relevant overseas study destinations, which makes the choice of such destinations purposeful and beneficial in some contexts at the expense of others. Countries listed in the system for external scholarships are the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Malaysia, Brunei, and Malta. Scholarships to the English-speaking countries are competitive and the MoHE keeps a list of the recommended institutions in all study destinations. Places are offered to students according to the order of merit list. Eligible students will be offered the highest choice they are entitled to according to their exam results, admission requirements, and the number of available places assigned to particular programs of study. Hence, all external scholarship applicants are required to sit for the IELTS as an internationally recognized English language proficiency test to determine their level of English proficiency and to decide whether they need to take an English language improvement course, or can immediately enter a GFP or undergraduate degree program, bearing in mind that different institutions require different band scores. Scholarship recipients



who fail to meet the minimum English proficiency requirements of the foundation program will be provided with an opportunity to take an English pre-session course and will have to complete this course within one year.

In addition, applicants can apply for University of Oman external undergraduate scholarships, GCCC grants in Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE, SQU, Colleges of Applied Sciences, Rustaq Education College, College of Technology, and Vocational Training Centers and Fisheries Training Institutes. Additionally, there are full internal grants sponsored by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) and internal social security scholarships. English is the medium of instruction in all the science-based majors in all these study destinations and once again students are required to take the IELTS to determine their language proficiency level.

While the IELTS was designed for acceptance into university, research has shown that it suffers from a host of validity and reliability problems, which makes it unfit and problematic for a context like the Arab World (Al-Malki, 2014; Alshammari, 2016; Freimuth, 2013, 2016; Karim & Haq, 2014). Examples of these problems, which cause negative wash-back, are a lack of content validity in the reading and speaking tests. The IELTS also suffers from systemic validity and consequential validity. While in the former case it lacks alignment with the implemented classroom activities, it fails to drive instruction in the latter case. The speaking test of the IELTS further suffers from inter-rater reliability problems. The IELTS additionally suffers from parallel-forms reliability problems when compared to tests conducted in the Arab World.

### ***French language teaching***

The Omani MoE and the Centre Franco Omanais (CFO), or the Omani French Centre (OFC) collaborated to launch a pilot project in 2012 to teach French as a third language. French is currently being taught in Grade 11 and Grade 12 in four public schools as an elective subject: two in Muscat Governorate and two in Al Batinah Governorate. Out of the two schools in each governorate, one is for boys and one is for girls. Approximately 20–25 students are registered in each class. Students are taught four periods a week with each period lasting 45 min. Teachers use imported textbooks from French publishers. Teachers are also encouraged to incorporate educational technology and any relevant supplementary materials such as graded readers, which are provided by the CFO and bought annually from the Oman Book Fair to enhance students' learning. A total of six teachers teach French at the four schools, five Tunisians and one Omani. They all hold a first degree in teaching French as a foreign language. The CFO collaborates with the MoE to assess teachers' performance. To assess students' performance, the MoE uses nationally written tests in addition to the TCF for benchmarking purposes.

While French started to be taken as an elective subject in the first semester of 2017–18 at the Gulf College, it is taught at the Department of Tourism, College of Arts and Social Sciences, SQU as a major elective for Bachelor of Arts students. In addition, French has been taught at the University of Nizwa since 2007. The University of Nizwa is a private university which was established in 2002 and is recognized by the MoHE. The French Section in the Department of Foreign Languages at the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Nizwa offers a Bachelor of Arts and Diploma qualifications in French and Translation. Students study History of French, French literature, comparative

linguistics, linguistics, sociolinguistics, grammar, phonetics and phonology, semantics, semiotics, stylistics, communication skills, business communication, and translation and interpretation during their four-year Bachelor of Arts program. In addition to taking short quizzes and tests, students are also required to complete a project in translation. By contrast, the Diploma program is of a more practical nature and focuses more on teaching French communication skills. Both programs are taught by four expatriate teachers representing different backgrounds. While students are required to pay approximately USD \$30,000 to complete a total of 132 credit hours for the undergraduate program, they are expected to pay around USD \$19,000 to complete a total of 72 credit hours for the postgraduate program.

### ***German language teaching***

Like French, German is also taught as an elective subject in three schools in Muscat Governorate and two schools in Al Batinah Governorate. Around 20–25 students are registered in each class. They are taught using textbooks imported from German publishers, technological aids, and any relevant supplementary materials found on sale in the annual Oman Book Fair. There are currently nine Omani teachers teaching German in the five schools. They were trained by Goethe-Institut in Muscat for two years. They were also sent to Germany to attend a training course for three months. Goethe-Institut, which signed a memorandum of understanding with the MoE, supplies the five schools with supplementary teaching materials and aids and provides consultancy advice regarding teacher assessment. Students are assessed using nationally written tests and *Zertifikat Deutsch (ZD)* for benchmarking purposes. The latter test is designed to gauge candidates' proficiency in the German language and is promoted and supported by the German government.

German is taught at three Omani universities – SQU, the University of Nizwa, and the German University of Technology in Oman GUtech. The German Language Centre in Muscat, operated by *Goethe-Institut*, also runs German classes at different levels, holds exams, and issues language certificates. The University of Nizwa offers a Bachelor of Arts and Diploma programs in German and Translation. Students are required to take the same courses, complete the same number of hours, and pay the same fees as for the French and Translation programs. Identical means of assessment to those used in the French programs also apply here.

### ***Immigrants and language distribution in Oman***

It would be unfair to overlook or neglect Indians, who have resided in Oman since the sixteenth century (Allen, 1987) and have constituted a thriving commercial group (Landen, 1967; Risso, 1986). This has been in part due to their better command of English compared with most Omanis. The existence of Indians in Oman, according to Landen, is not confined to the import of skilled labor and implementation of technology. The presence of Indians in Oman has contributed to the spread of Hindi and the maintenance of English (Al-Busaidi, 1995) in the Muscat area specifically. See [Tables 6, 7 and 8](#) for figures recently released by the Ministry of Manpower.

**Table 6.** Labor force in the public sector by nationality and gender.

Nationality	Male	Female	Total
Omanis	114,556	81,371	195,937
GCCC	3	45	48
Egyptians	5,302	3,520	8,822
Sudanese	980	806	1,786
Jordanians	310	205	515
Other Arabs	3,010	859	3,869
Indians	10,580	4,990	15,270
Pakistanis	1,340	336	1,676
Other Nationalities	2,494	2,389	5,338
Total	138,480	95,081	233,561

Source: Ministry of Manpower unpublished data.

**Table 7.** Labor force in the private sector by nationality and gender.

Nationality	Male	Female	Total
Omanis	175,524	58,345	233,869
Bengalis	650,280	29,416	679,696
Indians	633,179	36,800	669,979
Pakistanis	225,658	1,155	226,813
Filipinos	12,903	24,980	37,783
Sri Lankans	6,875	10,910	17,785
Ethiopians	638	16,642	17,280
Indonesians	14,798	164	14,962
Nepalese	9,612	4,898	14,510
Egyptians	19,628	5,272	24,900
Other Nationalities	44,942	39,329	84,271
Total	1,779,303	242,545	2,021, 848

Source: Ministry of Manpower unpublished data.

**Table 8.** Oman population.

Year	Total population	Omanis	Expatriates
November 2018	4,656,009	2,610,503 (56.10%)	2,045,506 (43.90%)

Source: Ministry of Manpower unpublished data.

Indians, therefore, make up most of the expatriate labor force in the Sultanate. The economic power of the Indians in Oman has been associated with technological skills and the use of English. Knowledge of English has allowed the Indians to produce and exercise technical and business power, authority, and superiority. We should not underestimate the influence of other non-Indian expatriates in relation to the spread of English in present-day Oman. A considerable number of the non-Arab and non-Indian nationalities occupy jobs in various private sector organizations, which require some form of English, examples being banks, insurance and investment companies, medicine, engineering, and telecommunications.

At the same time, Indians in Oman have constituted a class of specific intellectuals. The slow and gradual spread of technology and modernization in Oman, in which they have played a large role, has influenced the attitudes of the Omani government as well as the Omani public about the role and importance of English for technological acquisition.

Other languages spoken in Oman due to the import of technical, skilled, and sometimes inexpensive foreign labor are Malayalam, Panjabi, and Gujarati from India, Urdu from

Pakistan, Bengali from Bangladesh, Sinhala and Tamil from Sri Lanka, and Nepali from Nepal. All these are classified as Indic languages.

This overwhelming majority of immigrant workers from South and South-East Asia contributed to the emergence of Omani Pidgin Arabic (OPA), 'generally known in the literature as Gulf Pidgin Arabic' (GPA) (Avram, 2014, p. 8). Such workers, who mostly work and live in the Muscat area, have shaped the Omani language situation and sociolinguistic landscape. Avram explains that the generally low level of educational attainment of the foreign workers, their low level in English in general and domestic workers in particular, and the need of the local market for such workers necessitated the emergence of Omani Pidgin. Avram suggests that the pidgin used in the GCCC in general is for interethnic contact. Avram found that such pidgin has its own phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary. Næss (2008) also found that GPA is different from the GCCC Arabic in terms of phonology, expressing possession, negation, and using the copula and verb. Avram comments on the GPA in general by saying that 'GPA is a radically restructured variety of Arabic' and that it is 'the outcome of processes of reduction and of simplification' (p. 33) and that it is gaining more and more grounds with potential to serve as a *lingua franca* in the future.

In addition to the aforementioned languages, there are also Filipino, Indonesian, and Amharic from Ethiopia. Other languages spoken in Oman but in limited numbers are Thai, Chinese, Turkish, Italian, German, French, Spanish, and Dutch. Most of the Dutch are employed by the Petroleum Development Oman Company (Al-Busaidi, 1995). Speakers of these languages make up almost 40% of the overall population in Oman and more than 80% of the overall expatriate labor force hired in the Sultanate. However, these languages are restricted, marginal, and limited to their community members.

Furthermore, education has been playing a significant role in the preservation and maintenance of these languages in Oman for decades. Community schools cater for the large number of the native speakers of those languages. These are Bangladesh School, Indian School, Pakistan School, and Philippine School. While Bangladesh School is sponsored by the Bangladeshi government, the rest are privately sponsored. While all these schools teach the official language of their respective countries, they all use English as a medium of instruction for all science-based subjects.

Indigenous and non-indigenous languages in Oman have historical, cultural, and social roots, yet no official status. The domains of discourse of the majority of these languages are confined to home and limited social and interpersonal relationships and contacts. This linguistic marginalization is in part attributable to and reinforced by the status planning of the Omani government. These languages are not considered to be relevant for socio-economic purposes, education, literature growth, acquisition of technology, or exercise of power, control, and authority. They are rendered subordinate, because they do not have market, capital, value, power, status, prestige, and position in Omani society. In short, they are not languages of the 'intellectuals' (Bourdieu, 1991).

Support from the elites who occupy strategic economic and political positions in public and private social organizations such as the government is a prerequisite for language spread, which affects and influences social change (Beaugrande, 1999). There are many ways in which such support can be achieved. Hassanpour (1993) explains in his article about literacy in Kurdistan that

A king could serve the language by (a) giving it official status ... and (b) by providing for the 'perfection of religion and state,' access to 'science and philosophy,' and encouragement of science, the arts, poetry, and books. (p. 42)

Political, economic, and legislative support are crucial for language spread. Such power has a solid bearing upon public language ideologies. Support from the intellectuals who are described as 'professionally engaged in the creation, elaboration and dissemination of theoretical knowledge, ideas and symbols' (Dua, 1994, p. 31) is equally important, with none of these conditions in place. The indigenous and non-indigenous languages have failed to receive this necessary support from the elites and intellectuals in Oman.

### **Major media languages in Oman**

#### **Arabic**

There are five daily local Arabic-language newspapers, with variable daily circulations, in Oman: *Oman*, *Al Watan*, *Al Shabiba*, *Al Roya*, and *Al Zaman*. There are also three weekly magazines: *Futoon*, *Al Nahdha* and *OsratAlyoum*; a biannual magazine, *Nizwa*; and five monthly magazines *Al Najm*, *Al Waha*, *Al Mara*, *Al Roya*, *Al Tijari*, and *A'alam Almal Wa Ala'amal*. All these are published in MSA.

In addition, there are many free periodicals, which are published in MSA monthly, annually, or biannually by different agencies such as the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Civil Services, Ministry of Culture & Heritage, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources, Ministry of Legal Affairs, The Central Bank, Chamber of Commerce, Oman Aviation, Muscat Municipality, Petroleum Development Oman, Institute of Public Administration, Oman Liquid Natural Gas, Royal Oman Police, Oman Armed Forces, Muscat Securities Market, Sultan Qaboos Higher Center for Culture and Science – Diwan of Royal Court, Oman Aviation, and SQU.

Oman TV is the national television channel broadcaster in the Sultanate of Oman. The channel began broadcasting from the city of Muscat on 17 November 1974 and from Salalah on 25 November 1975. Since 1997, Oman TV has broadcast its programs through its website in MSA. The channel features news broadcasts, government announcements, children's shows, and nature programs. Sports programs, news, and matches can be watched on the Oman Sports channel. The Oman TV network has three other channels in Oman: Mubasher, Oman HD, and the recently launched Oman Cultural channel. There is also a private TV station called Majan TV, which was established in 2009. All these channels broadcast their programs internationally via satellite.

Radio broadcasting in Oman began in 1970 with the stations Radio Sultanate of Oman and Radio Salalah. Listeners have access to a variety of programs broadcast in MSA, ranging from news, information, contemporary musical hits, and readings of the Holy Quran. Two private radio stations were established after 2004. Those are Al-Wisal and Hala FM.

The introduction of the internet almost two decades ago and the different web-based social media platforms or social network sites have recently played a significant role in spreading MSA and CA. The exchanges and posts of messages using wikis, e-mails, or blogs have contributed to upgrading MSA and CA and helped different members of society to gain more exposure to and contact with both language varieties. This situation

has important implications for further protecting both varieties from extinction and promoting MSA language proficiency (Chelghoum, 2017).

Additionally, the expansion of social media and digital communication in the Arab World in the era of globalization has led to the emergence and extensive use of a new language, 'e-Arabic' or 'Arabish,' which is a 'funky' language used by young Arabs. Such youth are consuming new, transnational, multilingual forms of communicating and social media, and creating new, hybrid languages (Daoudi, 2011). E-Arabic or Arabish mixes, borrows, and adapts, uses numbers, Roman letters, Arabic and Latin script characters, symbols, emotions, feelings, metaphors, and words from global languages like English and French to engage with the globalized discourse (Daoudi, 2011).

In one of its issues in 2017, *Muscat Daily* published an article in which it discussed how Arabic affected people in different ways, the main reasons for its decline, and solutions to saving the Arabic language. The article holds television, mobile telephones, and the internet responsible for leading to the weakening, disappearance, or degradation of the Arabic language, which is also the language of the Holy Quran and the Prophet Mohammed and which defines the identity of Omanis and links the Arab nations (*Muscat Daily.com*, 2017, <https://archive.muscatdaily.com/Archive/Oman/Preserving-the-tradition-of-Arabic-language-4yuf>).

### English

There are four daily local English language newspapers in Oman: the *Oman Daily Observer*, the *Times of Oman*, the *Oman Tribune* and the *Muscat Daily*, all with variable daily circulations; and a free weekly newspaper, *The Week*. There are four free weekly magazines: *Y*, *Pulse of Oman*, *Oman magazine*, *Dossier Oman*, and *The Faces Magazine*; and monthly magazines: *Business Today*, *Oman Economic*, *Auto Oman*, and *City Business*. In addition, there is a daily English news bulletin and other regularly televised English programs on Oman TV such as American and British films, documentaries, and comedy programs. One can also listen to a local English FM radio channel, which broadcasts various programs and English pop songs. Furthermore, there are 18 cinemas across the Sultanate featuring Hollywood movies.

Oman FM radio was also launched during the 1970s. It used to broadcast the news and English songs. The next decade, with globalization gaining momentum, witnessed Omani national television and radio developing further and expanding their lists of English-medium programs. Free-to-air satellite TV was also introduced in Oman towards the end of the 1980s. Several channels broadcast English-medium programs such as films, songs, comedies, dramas, documentaries, and sports. A private live online radio station, Hi FM was opened in 2017 and broadcasts news and music.

The Sultanate witnessed two particularly important developments that supported and consolidated the uses and values, spread, and maintenance of English as the first international language and a Language of Wider Communication (LWC) in the 1990s. The first was the introduction of encrypted TV. Research shows the role satellite TV plays in maintaining the position of English in Oman and affecting students' attitudes towards language learning and acquisition (Al-Issa, 2005).

Moreover, in response to the recommendations made by Nunan et al. (1987), Oman National TV started to broadcast remedial English lessons in English in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Omani television also telecasted programs prepared in-house by the

MoE. These programs were usually lessons taken from national textbook material. They focused on reinforcing structural aspects of the target language.

The second development was the launch of the internet. This is particularly important in the age of 'informationalism' (Warschauer, 2000) and globalization (Chelghoum, 2017). The internet has revolutionized the way the world conducts business locally and globally, communicates nationally and internationally, exchanges and shares information and data of different forms, promotes social development, facilitates and enhances cultural analysis and understanding, and facilitates the development of language skills, employability skills, and critical literacy skills. These are all important benefits that impact on LEP and nation building in the Sultanate.

Furthermore, with the twenty-first century going digital, social media groups, as represented by WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, and many more, revolutionized telecommunications, and took the uses and values of the English language to a completely new level (Chelghoum, 2017). English is being used widely in these means of communication by different individuals in the country. Monolingual (Arabic or English or any other language found in the Sultanate) and bilingual (Arabic and English or English and any other language used in Oman) texts are being composed and posted and shared everyday by different local and expatriate members of the society using smart phones and computers. These are leading to change in attitudes towards the importance of English as an international language and a LWC. It is noteworthy that smart phones in Oman are more of a necessity than a luxury today. Research has shown that social media has a powerful place and role to play in Omani higher education ELT (Al-Qaysi & Al-Emran, 2017; Jose & Abidin, 2015) and it has powerful implications for influencing ELT policy implementation (Al-Qaysi & Al-Emran, 2017).

### **Part III: language policy and planning**

#### ***Arabic language policy and planning***

In building the modern nation of Oman, Sultan Qaboos took nationalism and nationalism into consideration. The latter is one of the most powerful drivers of political change. He has had to pay very close attention to the wider Arab World context, whereby adopting a 'standard language' (Spolsky, 1978) accepted within the political sphere and permitting expression of a wide range of cultural, scientific, technological, and economic theories was very important for the country. This was in order to help determine and shape Oman's position on the Arab World map, define its relationships with its sister countries, facilitate its integration within the large Arab community, and help it project its self-image through maintaining its longstanding Arab and Muslim identity.

The Arabic language in the Arab World is heavily imbued with ideology. It is a 'central' language (De Swaan, 2001). It is the official and national language of the Sultanate and unquestionably the most important language in classic diglossic Oman 'against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 45). Arabic is 'a unique language that has occupied a universal and remarkable status in the world due to its close association with Islam' (Chelghoum, 2017, p. 37). It is the language of the Holy Quran, Islam's sacred scripture, and the tongue of Prophet Mohamed (Bani-Khalid, 2014; Chelghoum, 2017). It has been the language of the Arab ancestors in the

Arabian Peninsula for over 15 centuries. It is the holy tongue and the language of the intellectuals, power holders and dominant groups in the Sultanate. It is affiliated with religious practices and ceremonies. According to Al-Busaidi (1995) Arabic 'represents the official identity, nationhood, ethnicity, culture and traditions of the Omanis; it has no indigenous rivals; it is understood and spoken by almost the entire population, though at varying degrees of proficiency' (p. 134). Arabic has a longstanding literacy tradition as it is associated with culture, religion, and history. It is spoken by over one hundred million people. Arabic is one of the six official languages of the UN. In Oman, Arabic is not the language of postsecondary education, especially for those who major in science and commerce and economics, where English is considered 'the key to education and training in relation to technology acquisition, industrialization, commerce and business and above all the exploration, running and maintenance of its natural resources' (Al-Busaidi, 1995, p. 133). Yet Arabic remains the language of the ruling royal family, the mother tongue of the majority of Omanis, and the first language of almost all Omanis. For the linguistic minorities in Oman, Arabic is acquired as the most important second language. Arabic has 'institutionalized domains among the non-Arabic mother tongue speakers: public, education, religion and mass media' (Al-Busaidi, 1995, p. 135).

Scholz (1980) states that Arab Omanis, who are a mixture of Shia'at, Sunni, and Abadhi Muslims, constitute the majority of the general population of the Sultanate Arab Omanis. They are 'most important in terms of numbers' and 'they probably make up about 70% of the general population' (Scholz, p. 58). Some of these Arabs descend from pre-Islamic tribes. The tribal system is still strong in the Gulf countries. Scholz writes that 'along with the tribes that are to be regarded as the remaining descendants of the pre-Islamic population, they make up the traditional population of Oman' (p. 58). The Arab Omanis are distributed all over the Sultanate.

One can argue that Scholz's book was written almost four decades ago, when the population in Oman did not exceed 1.2 million then, as compared with 4.7 million at the present time. However, the law does not permit anyone to discuss ethnicity in Oman. This has been the practice since Sultan Qaboos ascended the throne. People in Oman prefer to avoid such discussion in public, because it does not always have good consequences. Data about each citizen's ethnic origin and background is classified and kept with the intelligence department only. All Omanis, in the eyes of the law, and regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, have the same rights and responsibilities and are regarded as equal citizens who can contribute equally to the Sultanate's wellbeing, prosperity, and stability. The exercise of linguistic hegemony is believed to rule out any possibility of political and social divisions in Oman. The application of this law has been coercive, but not violent, at least initially. Those who try to create political or social divisions through challenging the dominance of the political leadership are warned verbally by the intelligence department to deter them from doing it again. However, if their politically offensive and opposing behavior persists, more serious measures are taken by the security department. Such measures take the form of formal interrogation and can lead to trial and imprisonment.

The dominance of Arabic within multilingual Oman has brought all Omanis under one umbrella. It has eradicated internal arguments over language rights and has additionally assimilated individuals and groups into the mainstream of society and reconciled different politically or socially separate communities. However, it may be important to



consider another side of this argument. Arabic is a ‘supercentral’ language since it has functions and significance beyond its national boundaries (De Swaan, 2001). It is considered to be a cohesive force and uniting power for the Arab World (Eisele, 2003) and the multilingual population of Oman. This view was prevalent three decades ago. It is believed to unify a multilingual society, to assimilate individuals or groups into the mainstream of society, and to reconcile different political or socially separate communities (e.g. Ashworth, 1985). The choice of Arabic as the language of the state is strongly tied to elements of nationalism (Bitar, 2011; Suleiman, 2003). Arabic has been a ‘coalitive’ language throughout history (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992), despite the fact that it is a ‘pluricentric’ language (Kloss, 1978), which unites people through ‘the use of the language’ (Clyne, 1992, p. 1) and divides them through ‘the development of national norms and indices and linguistic variables with which the speakers identify’ (Clyne, 1992, p. 1). Arabic is a ‘language with several interacting centers, each providing a national variety with at least some of its own (codified) norms’ (Clyne, 1992, p. 1). Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2015) maintain that the ideology that a single unified nation-state requires a single language is based on ‘pragmatic’ and ‘symbolic’ perspectives. The former promotes ‘effective communication and access to state institutions and political functions’ (p. 4). The latter, on the other hand, creates and reinforces ‘a single, unified identity’ (p. 4). Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2015) hold that ‘this ideological conception of linguistic diversity as problematic for national unity influences the language planning of many of the nation-states that gained independence from former colonial powers following World War Two’ (pp. 4–5). Thus, despite the political divisions between the Arab nations, Arabic remains the ‘symbol of Arabness’ (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992) and Arabs remain emotionally attached to their language (Koplewitz, 1992).

However, Arabic within the Arab states generally and the Omani context specifically is pursued for goals outside language *per se* and has ‘primarily instrumental or associational value in the attainment of other, more primary goals’ (Fishman, 1987, p. 110). In a country like Oman, Arabic has contributed greatly to melting down the sociolinguistic and socio-cultural differences and divisions (Phillipson, 1992). A language like Arabic was therefore considered almost five decades ago ‘a uniquely powerful instrument in unifying a diverse population and in involving individuals and subgroups in the national system’ (Kelman, 1971, p. 21). The adoption of a standard language like Arabic, for example, is believed to generate linguistic unification, strengthen political unity in a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural society like Oman and strengthen national consciousness, integration, and unity and strengthen a collective sentiment of belonging together and oneness and uproot internal arguments over language rights (Ashworth, 1985). Arabic is believed to unify Oman’s diverse society, to assimilate individuals or groups into the mainstream of society, and to reconcile different political or socially separate communities leading to the smooth functioning of the government. In his Royal Decree #99/2011 regarding making amendments to some provisions of the Basic Statute of the State, the Sultan decreed that ‘The official language of the State is the Arabic language.’

Arabic in Oman, therefore, can be best described as a means through which sociolinguistic gaps are bridged, in addition to being a powerful force in promoting citizens’ loyalty to the state. The choice of Arabic as the language of the state is strongly tied to elements of nationalism (Bitar, 2011; Suleiman, 2003). In a multilingual context like Oman, Arabic as a common language helps to ‘integrate the system and to tie increasing

numbers of individuals into it' (Kelman, 1971, p. 32). Arabic as a national language in Oman bridges the gap between the numerous language communities and the government. Nation building is perceived by the members of the Omani society as being about the development of one common land shared by all members and communities. This in turn is considered to have a positive impact on the state's economic development and political and social prosperity, stability, and progress.

The Omani government has been making systematic and organized efforts to reinforce the status of the Arabic language through spreading its teaching to foreigners. It has done this through a wide range of institutions. On its website, the Diwan of Royal Court, Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science (<https://sqhccs.gov.om/affiliates/page/16/135?lang=english>) outlines two programs that teach Arabic to non-native speakers. First, there is the Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers Program at the College of Applied Science, Rustaq. This annual program aims at establishing communication and an exchange of knowledge, experiences and cultures. It began by hosting a Malaysian student delegation to the Sultanate in 2009 at the invitation of the MoHE. An integrated program was prepared for the visit, and included two aspects: Arabic courses of 84 h' duration carried out in the languages lab at the College of Applied Science, Rustaq; and courses intended to enhance the language skills and create opportunities for the practice of Arabic language through contact, visits and trips.

The second program is Arabic Summer Classes for Non-Arabic Speakers. The Sultan Qaboos Center for Culture in Washington organizes, in collaboration with some specialized American institutions, a summer school to teach Arabic language to foreigners. This summer school is held in one of the educational institutions in the Sultanate, targeting students from various foreign countries, religions and cultures who are interested and willing to study Arabic. The first summer school was organized in 2009 in Dhofar University in the south of the Sultanate and the second in Nizwa University in Central Oman in 2010.

There is also the Sultan Qaboos College for Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers. On its website, the College states that Arabic is the official language of Oman, the language of education and communication between the Sultanate and all the Arab countries, and above all, it is the language of the Holy Quran. It further states that the College has the support of the Sultan, who promoted the spread of Arabic globally by establishing chairs in Arabic language studies in a number of universities across the world.

The College offers programs that depend on the latest technologies in teaching foreign languages and contributes to building communication and cultural bridges with non-Arabic speaking nations. The College also aims to produce graduates with high linguistic and cultural competency in MSA to enable them to communicate and interact effectively in any Arab society and to allow them to continue further studies in educational institutions where Arabic is the medium of instruction.

The Language Center at Sohar University started teaching Arabic to non-Arabic speakers from round the world in 2012, to cope with the increasing demand for studying Arabic worldwide. The Center receives students with wide range of nationalities and from a variety of age groups. It offers regular courses and tailored courses. Arabic is not only taught in classes, but also using literature, culture, history, media and common daily materials. Similarly, A'Sharqiyah University teaches Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL). It offers an eight-week program in which students have 240 instructional hours

of MSA and Omani CA. The program uses imported materials to teach MSA and locally developed materials to teach Omani CA.

The Noor Majan Institute for Learning Arabic has a campus in Muscat and another one in Ibri in Al Dhahirah Governorate. The Institute is equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and resources and uses imported syllabi. It offers a wide range of intensive regular and tailored Arabic language education courses, which vary in length and content. Examples are Arabic Literature in Translation, Management Across Cultures, and Overview of MENA (Middle East and North Africa). Noor Majan Institute for Learning Arabic is a member of the Forum on Education Abroad and has developed collaborative partnerships with the Arab American Language Institute in Morocco (AALIM) and the Al Amana Centre in Muscat. In addition to these partnerships, Noor Majan has been a host institution for the US Department of State's Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) Program since 2014. CLS is a fully funded summer overseas language and cultural immersion program for American undergraduate and graduate students. The Institute also offers two types of scholarships.

More local efforts are being made to support the planning of the Arabic language. Recently, the State Council discussed the status of the Arabic language in the Sultanate and recommended developing a policy document to enhance its status in the country. It then reviewed two proposals as part of the language policy. The first proposal was pertinent to establishing an Arabic Language Center to help maintain the purity of the Arabic language, promote its uses for science and arts, and find ways to promote its uses amongst the new generation.

The second proposal was associated with finding ways and suggesting mechanisms to activate the role of Oman in reinforcing Arabic content on the internet. The State Council suggested encouraging Omani youth to contribute to doing this, which should contribute to their employability.

### ***English language policy and planning***

Within the complex linguistic picture in Oman, English is highly valued. Omani-British relationships can be traced back as far as 1646 and have been developed strongly ever since for political and commercial reasons and benefits (Al-Busaidi, 1995; Bhacker, 1992). English has been spoken in Oman for centuries and has a long and distinguished history in the Sultanate despite the fact that it was accepted by and restricted to the elite in Muscat, the capital. Despite the fact that Oman 'had no foundations for English ... there were no English-medium schools in Oman ... there was no British-inspired education' (Al-Busaidi, 1995, p. 90) and Oman has not been ruled as a British colony, Oman readily accepted English as an officially taught foreign language in its institutions in 1970.

Today, there is little debate about the role and importance of English in Oman. However, the complex language situation means that English is strictly a lingua franca and a foreign language, and its domains of use restrict and largely influence its full acquisition by many Omanis. Singh et al. (2012) thus comment that 'the increasing use of English as a second or third language is making changes in language education in the countries with linguistic minorities and indigenous communities' (p. 350). This is obviously the case in Oman with multiple peripheral languages lacking status and corpus planning.

Easing into modernity, planning national development and building the nation state required Oman to choose a ‘world language’ (Spolsky, 1978) or supercentral language or a LWC or a global language to start communicating and integrating with the world and making itself known and recognized. In fact, De Swaan (2001) accords English the special status of ‘hypercentral’ language, as the ‘global lingua franca’ linking the entire system together. An internationally prestigious and globally recognized means of communication like English for achieving such aims was integral to transforming Oman into an active and dynamic member of the growing international community.

In one of the extremely rare government documents found in the Sultanate, one can see a policy statement produced by the Ministry of Education in 1995 which explicitly stresses the choice of the English language in Oman and the importance of planning it. This is found in the *Reform and Development of General Education* document. The text reads:

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

Furthermore, on its website, the Diwan of Royal Court, Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science, states that:

English is taught as a basic subject for students in the Sultanate since the pre-school grades. It is also used as an intermediate language for education in many Higher Education institutions in Oman, especially in the scientific and practical specializations. In the light of the International and local importance of the English language since it is widely used in daily communications and transactions, there are many institutes in the Sultanate that teach English including but not limited to the following: The British Council and American Amideast organization which organize several cultural activities and events in cooperation with the relevant local bodies and institutions. There is also a big number of other specialized institutes which offer English classes around the year.

English today is a global lingua franca and the only official foreign language in Oman. It has institutionalized domains such as business, education, and the mass media, and is central to Oman’s continued national development (Al-Busaidi, 1995). Education is ‘the strongest weapon for enforcing language policy’ (Spolsky, 1978) and a powerful agency, which emphasizes, spreads, and consolidates the role of English and shapes people’s ideologies about the uses and values of the English language. Education gives a language prestige, value, meaning, market, power, and privilege. People in Oman learn English for multiple purposes. These are engaging in interlingual communication, traveling to non-Arabic speaking countries, pursuing higher education, acquiring science and technology, finding a white-collar job, pursuing cultural analysis, and understanding, and conducting business (Al-Issa, 2015). English in Oman receives political, economic, and legislative support from the elite as represented by the government, which determines its place in the social hierarchy.

The British Council and Polyglot Institute Oman were opened during the 1970s to meet the needs of thousands of individuals who wanted to improve their English language skills. This further maintained the spread of English in the Sultanate and benefited these institutes financially. The British Council, which has been playing a dynamic role in spreading

ELT worldwide for economic gains (Dua, 1994; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992), runs courses for children, adults, adults-beginners, university students, workplaces, and companies. It also administers the IELTS, IELTS for UK visas and immigration, Cambridge English, International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), and professional and university exams.

Hawthorn Muscat English Centre was opened in Oman in 2002 to strengthen and perpetuate the presence of English and ELT. Hawthorn English Language Centres are owned by the University of Melbourne in Australia. Hawthorn Muscat offers English language training for individuals, businesses, and government. It provides a full range of general, academic, and specialist programs for students to develop their English skills for academic, professional, or personal goals. As a fully accredited IELTS examination center, Hawthorn Muscat also offers IELTS preparation courses and tests.

Two more important foreign ELT agencies were opened in Oman, further cementing the status of English and ELT and shaping ideologies about them. The American English Language Education Services Center administers the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) International Benchmark Test iBT exam, an internationally administered program of assessments to compare student performance globally, between grades and over time. The Center prepares candidates for taking the TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), and other non-ELT related tests. It also runs courses in General English, Business English, English for Specific Purposes, conversation, and also runs courses for children.

Polyglot Institute Oman, which is an authorized Cambridge University center, is affiliated with many national and international powerhouses such as Petroleum Development Oman, Microsoft, Pearson, and many more. The Institute runs courses in language and teacher training such as the IELTS and CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) and DELTA (Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults), soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, creativity, interpersonal skills, leadership, and more. It also runs courses in professional qualifications, information technology, engineering, higher education, professional accountancy, and training for employment and career development.

The internationally recognized and accredited Cambridge CELTA and DELTA programs were introduced and managed by Muscat English Teacher Training Centre. In 2019, in an unprecedented move, the MoHE decided to collaborate with Polyglot Institute Oman whereby the latter trains university graduates who meet certain criteria. It awards them a CELTA, helps them to achieve Band 6.5 on the IELTS, and facilitates their appointment as English teachers in the FPEL run by the many private academic institutions, bearing in mind that expatriate teachers of English in these institutions far outnumber their Omani counterparts.

CELTA came under scrutiny by several authors and was criticized for reflecting an incorrect image about ELT as a complex, demanding, and challenging profession, as it adopted an inappropriate performance-based philosophy (Barnawi, 2016; Sulaimani & Elyas, 2015; Stanley & Murray, 2013). These authors called for questioning the teaching competence of those who hold CELTA. They criticized CELTA courses for providing candidates with minimal theoretical and practical knowledge and a few key survival techniques in a short time, which contradicted the ethics of the profession.

On the other hand, the SCPTT works closely with and receives technical support from the Center for British Teachers (CfBT) to facilitate its development. It is noteworthy that the CfBT was established in Oman in 1985. More and more schools were being built during that decade and the demand for Omani English teachers was high then to help speed up Omanization. More consultancy services and solutions to problems pertinent to pre-service and in-service teacher education, teacher recruitment, curriculum design, textbook and material development, establishing vocational and higher education, and many more were urgently required during that time. However, there were no locally qualified agents and agencies to offer consultancies and services on such matters. The CfBT provides a range of services, which include educational consultancy to governments and private schools to help them find practical and sustainable solutions. Their consultancy portfolio includes national education reform, teacher development, leadership and training, developing strategy, leadership and management, capacity building, curriculum design, literacy and numeracy, textbook and multimedia development, institutional strengthening, school improvement and management, inspections, vocational education, and adult basic skill and special educational needs. Other services include quality assurance and accreditation support for private schools through implementing a four-step process, training in English language, information technology, corporate training, teacher training, after school classes, the IELTS, and recruitment and deployment of English language instructors. Nonetheless, authors such as Boussebaa and Faulconbridge (2016) and Phillipson (2016) see such ELT activities as business, which fits clearly into this pattern of unequal relationships between the Core countries and the Periphery countries and serves the interests of the latter type.

### ***French language policy and planning***

The Sultanate's French connection can be traced back to the 1660s when maritime trade relations between the two countries strengthened and merchant ships from the Indies Company called at Muscat. In the eighteenth century Omani-French trade grew after Muscat became an increasingly important port for trade in the Indian Ocean region. Oman granted France official rights to establish a trade center in Muscat in 1775 and the right to appoint a diplomatic representative in 1786. These links formed the background to Napoleon's historic written message to the Sultan of Oman dated January 1799, inviting Oman to trade freely and safely with Suez (*Oman Daily Observer*, 2019, <https://www.omanoobserver.com/oman-french-relations-rooted-in-history/>). In the 1840s, Oman ruled over a vast marine empire that stretched from the coasts of Persia and Beluchistan to Zanzibar and Cape Delgado on the African coast. The then Sultan signed a Trade and Friendship Treaty with France in 1844 expanding bilateral trade, which was followed by the historic expedition of the Omani merchant ship *La Caroline*, marking a milestone in the marine trade between them. French-Omani relations received a fillip after the opening of French consular representation in Muscat in 1894. Sultan Sayyid Faisal bin Turki showed great affection for France. In 1896, he donated a palace in Muscat, now known as the 'Maison de la France' (Bait Faransa), to the French Consul. In 1992, Sultan Qaboos and the late French President François Mitterrand established a museum in Bait Faransa. The museum has a large collection that highlights the shared history of the two countries.

Today, bilateral trade between the two countries exceeds US\$580 million. In 2015 French exports to Oman stood at approximately US\$520 million, while Omani exports to France reached approximately US\$62 million. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development's official website describes the French economy as the fifth largest in the world and states that 'the French-speaking world accounts for 15% of global wealth and 12% of international trade.'

Therefore, with a view to boosting French investments in Oman, the Public Authority for Investment Promotion and Export Development (Ithraa) held a three-day 'Invest in Oman' exhibition in Paris last year, focusing on sectors such as tourism, logistics, food and beverages, and fisheries. In an interview with Muscatdaily.com newspaper in 2015 (<https://archive.muscatdaily.com/Archive/Oman/80-households-in-Oman-have>), the director of the CFO, Christian Adam de Villiers, addressed the growing French and German tourist presence in Oman. French tourists increasingly find Oman an attractive destination, thanks to the tourism workshops and exhibitions in France organized by Oman's Ministry of Tourism. In 2018, as many as 46,520 French tourists visited Oman, and the numbers are expected to rise in the future. Oman Tourism France, which celebrated a decade of successful operation in 2012, has been instrumental in marketing Oman in France.

The official website of the France Diplomatie states that in order to promote French and the French-speaking world, furthering France's influence abroad, the actors of French diplomacy have established a bilateral policy aimed at developing cooperation activities with local authorities to develop French in their education system and direct teaching activities led by the French cultural and education system. They further established a multilateral policy which aimed at bringing Francophone countries together in a political community. France supported the creation of the International Agency of La Francophonie (OIF) in 1970. In 2018, it had 88 Member and Observer States with French as a reference language. This institution representing the Francophone world aims to contribute to peace, democracy, human rights, the promotion of French and cultural diversity, and the development of shared and sustainable prosperity.

The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development states on its official website that France annually assigns over US\$780 million of its state budget to promote French. The website also states that the French Government runs a range of programs that are tailored to demand, particularly in emerging countries. This strategy, according to the website, strengthens the position of French in all education systems. The strategy includes improving initial and in-service teacher training of French teachers, supporting bilingual education involving French, promoting innovation in teaching French, supporting networking of French teachers, boosting the development of French language university courses and international branches of French higher education establishments, and encouraging foreign students to travel to France.

In an interview with *Muscat Daily* newspaper in 2015, the director of the CFO addressed the planning of French within education in the Arabian Peninsula. He stressed the role of schools and universities in providing students with the opportunity to learn more than one foreign language, and how countries such as Bahrain, KSA, Oman, and Qatar had started teaching French in their public schools (Al Hashmi, 2015).

French as a supercentral language has been receiving growing and noticeable attention in Oman. It was officially introduced to Oman in 1979 through the establishment of the

CFO, which was established under a bilateral co-operation agreement between France and Oman. The CFO, dedicated to promoting the French language and culture in Oman, functions under the supervision of Oman's Ministry of Education and the French Embassy. It has become a meeting place for the younger generation of Francophones to acquaint themselves with all that is French. In the same interview, the director of CFO described the Francophonie Day as an occasion to showcase aspects of contemporary French literary and cultural life to the public. He stated 'we hope to involve as many people as possible in the Omani-French cultural dialogue. The entire week from 19 to 23 March is observed as the Francophonie Week in Oman, complete with art exhibitions, movie screenings, concerts and conferences.'

Annually, well over a thousand students of different ages learn the French language at the CFO centers in Muscat and Sohar. CFO runs sessions of up to 500 students of all ages. It offers language courses and workshops, private lessons, official exams DELF (Diplôme d'Etudes en Langue Française)/DALF (Diplôme Approfondi de Langue Française) and TEF (Test d'Evaluation de Français)/TCF (Test de connaissance du Français), and cultural activities. CFO is also equipped with a media library and culture library and Information Office for Higher Education in France.

The director of CFO saw an opportunity for French to become an influential language and the third language of choice in Oman. He attributed this to the French-Omani intrinsic ties, which could allow French to fill a growing need for a foreign language other than English. He further attributed it to the Omani presence in Africa, where up to 10,000 Omanis who migrated to Burundi spoke French. The director of the CFO also spoke about the difference a young Omani with French competence can bring to the job market.

The Diwan of Royal Court, Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science website mentions teaching French to non-French speakers. It describes this as one of the most important projects and initiatives carried out and implemented by various education-related institutions in the Sultanate of Oman, which support and promote the goals of the 'Alliance of Civilizations' initiative.

The Omani-French Center, established in 1979 under the supervision and funding of the French Embassy in Muscat and the Ministry of Education at the Sultanate of Oman, offers French classes around the year for those willing to learn this language. The center receives in its main branch in Muscat and in its two other branches in the Wilayats of Sohar and Salalah, more than 500 students in each course. In return, it teaches Arabic for foreigners residing in the Sultanate, which achieves a sort of cultural exchange. French is also taught in some Higher Education institutions in the Sultanate such as the Sultan Qaboos University and some private universities and colleges.

The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development website describes French-language films and literature as the most widely distributed after those in English. Moreover, the website maintains the importance of promoting French as a language of international communication through expanding its presence in the international media and in the digital sphere. To this end, the Gulf College in Oman and CFO signed a memorandum of understanding in 2017. A press release stated that activities to promote French would include screening of French films with Arabic and English subtitles. Such activities would ensure a greater degree of acculturation with the presence and active involvement of Francophiles and Francophones in the college. Photo exhibitions,



concerts, plays, conferences, workshops, and research are also activities being planned to maximize the full potential of the partnership.

### **German language policy and planning**

Since consular relations were established in 1967 and upgraded to diplomatic relations in 1972, Oman and Germany have developed a mutually beneficial relationship, which encompasses cooperation in almost every field. It is worth mentioning that the number of German tourists in Oman exceeded 37;000 in 2017. The Diwan of Royal Court, Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science states on its website:

There is a growing demand to learn the German language from the part of Omanis, especially those willing to pursue their studies in German universities. In the Sultanate, there are many educational institutions which offer German classes and courses including the German University of Technology and Goethe Institute. German is also taught in a number of Higher Education institutions in the Sultanate such as Oman Tourism College and Sultan Qaboos University. The Ministry of Education intends to introduce French and German languages as elective courses for the 11th and 12th grades.

The German University of Technology (GUtech) was established in 2007 in the Sultanate of Oman and has one campus in Barka in Al Batinah Governorate. It is a private university recognized by the Omani MoHE and affiliated with Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule (RWTH) Aachen University in Germany. It offers six undergraduate programs of study. These are Sustainable Tourism and Regional Development, Urban Planning and Architectural Design, Applied Geosciences, Applied Information Technology, Mechanical Engineering, and Process Engineering. GUtech also offers postgraduate programs in a number of science and engineering specializations. The medium of instruction at GUtech is English, with the academic version of the International IELTS or the TOEFL accepted for admission. However, German language classes are offered as an elective to Foundation Year students. All undergraduate students are required to undertake German language classes as part of their degree program once they have reached an IELTS level of 6.

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Embassy encourage students from other universities in Oman to apply for similar courses. The DAAD, Goethe-Institut, and the German Embassy promote and support the teaching of German as a foreign language in the Sultanate. *The Times of Oman* quoted the First Counselor for Political, Cultural, and Academic Affairs at the German Embassy in Muscat in July 2018 saying that more than 1,000 people enrolled in German language classes in the Sultanate. The figures were revealed at an event announcing an upcoming study trip for 15 students of the GUtech. Out of more than 100 submitted applications for the course, 15 of them successfully passed the two-stage selection procedure. This annual study trip, funded by DAAD, has been conducted since 2009. Its main aim is to introduce the students to life in Germany and to student life at the RWTH Aachen University. The DAAD grants provide GUtech students with an opportunity to enhance their German language competence. The trip came as recognition of those students' outstanding performance in German language classes, despite being students of engineering, geosciences, computer science, and business management. The August 2018 group, comprising 12 female and 3 male students, traveled to GUtech's partner university in Germany, RWTH Aachen University, to attend a three-week German Language and Culture Course. The students came from the departments of

engineering, international business management, logistics, applied geosciences, and computer science at GUTech. The 15 students were accompanied in Germany by two GUTech staff members. They practiced their German language skills in an authentic environment. They also visited academic institutes on the RWTH campus, did cultural training, and attended an international evening. They met other students and tutors at the university and went on educational trips to Maastricht, Cologne, and Bonn.

The DAAD was established in 1925 and is the largest German support organization in the field of international academic co-operation with an approximate budget of half a billion Euros. It is a private, federally funded and state-funded, self-governing national agency of the institutions of higher education in Germany, representing 314 German higher education institutions (100 universities and technical universities, 162 general universities of applied sciences, and 52 colleges of music and art). The DAAD supports over 100,000 German and international students and researchers around the globe each year, making it the world's largest funding organization of its kind. It also promotes internationalization efforts at German universities, helps developing countries build their own systems of higher education, and supports German Studies and German language programs abroad. The most important responsibilities of the DAAD include granting scholarships, promoting the internationalization activities of German universities and research organizations, strengthening German cultural and language studies abroad, and helping developing countries establish productive higher education institutions. The DAAD is also the National Agency for European Union Higher Education Cooperation.

The Goethe-Institut is considered the world's most important cultural organization for German speakers and learners. It was founded in 1951 and now has more than 150 branches all over the world, not just in German speaking countries. The Goethe-Institut promotes German culture and language and has a varied educational program. The institute has three branches in the United Arab Emirates and one branch in Muscat. The Muscat branch offers courses in general language or standard German for adults and courses aimed at young learners aged between 9 and 12 years old. The institute also offers courses with specialized content for specific target groups to develop specific skills and administers German exams which are recognized all over the world for students and professionals. In addition, the Goethe-Institut's web site lists reasons for learning German. Amongst the many reasons listed is the large number of German tourists and tourists from German-speaking countries and the spending power they enjoy.

The Goethe-Institut website states that in an increasingly integrated global business community, and with diversity in local and global workplaces, functional knowledge of German can improve one's business relations and increase job opportunities and chances of success with German and foreign companies in one's own country and abroad. Today, Germany is the economic powerhouse of the European Union (EU) and the German economy is the largest national economy in Europe, and one of the most stable in the EU. Germany has the world's fourth largest economy, behind the United States, China, and Japan. Germany is Europe's most industrialized and populous country. The German language is one of the major languages of the world. It is a native language to almost 100 million people worldwide and the most widely spoken native language in the EU, where it is an official language in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, and Switzerland. German is the third most commonly spoken foreign language in the world after English and French, making it the second biggest

language in the EU in terms of overall speakers. German is also the second most widely taught foreign language at primary school level in the EU after English.

According to the Goethe-Institut website (Lingoda, <https://www.lingoda.com/en/german-speaking-countries>), German is the second most spoken language used by scientists all over the world. Germany is the third largest contributor to research and development and offers research fellowships to scientists from abroad. German is one of the top three most used languages on the internet, as approximately 6% of all live websites are in German. There is also a large percentage of books written in or translated into German. Germany is ranked fifth in terms of annual publications of books. It is estimated that 10% of all printed books are in German.

More local endeavors to highlight the beneficial Omani-German social, political, historical, economic, cultural, and academic relationships were made by the Omani National Records and Archive Authority (NRAA) in collaboration with Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Humboldt University of Berlin, Free University of Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, and Oman Studies Centre in Germany. NRAA has announced it is organizing its eighth international conference, on the topic of 'Omani-German Relations during the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries' in Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany, in June 2020. The conference aims to study different aspects of Omani-German relations since the arrival of Germans in East Africa and the Gulf; the German role in historical, economic, social and cultural studies of Oman; German-Omani political and economic rivalry in East Africa; as well as German involvement in the issues of the royal family in Zanzibar. The conference aims to deepen understanding of the history of nineteenth–twentieth century Omani-German relations, and further research in this field, bringing together scholars from the Sultanate of Oman, Germany, and other countries.

## **Part IV: language maintenance and prospects**

### ***Teachers as agents of language maintenance***

The discussion so far has shown that education and the media have played a powerful role in maintaining the status of Arabic and English in Oman since 1970. This is not likely to change in the foreseeable future due to the political support both languages are receiving from the government and the historical roots they have in Oman. Within this context, teachers have been found to be key players in the spread and maintenance of both languages. Baldauf (1990) emphasized that it is teachers who are at the center of the whole language planning process, since they are the sole interpreters of the syllabus that usually enfold the political philosophies and ideologies set by the government. He argues that these philosophies and ideologies are a blend and a reflection of the close relationship between 'the use of language and power, socioeconomic development, national and local identity, and cultural values' (p. 18), which affect policy implementation for better or worse. Taking these ideas further, Throop (2007) advocates the powerful and complementary relationship between teaching and classroom language planning. Johnson (2013) labels teachers as arbiters and stresses their power to shape and influence the interpretation and implementation of language policies. With the ideas, values, and beliefs teachers hold and bring to their respective contexts, they become significant agents of LPP in general and language maintenance in particular.

It has become obvious that the Sultanate of Oman is counting heavily on education in general and teachers to help it achieve modernization. More specifically, an agency like teacher training and education is central to achieving nationalization. However, the discussion has revealed that the training and education of teachers has been suffering from two major problems.

### ***National professional standards***

There is an evident lack of coordination and communication between the MoE, SQU, OAAA, and the MoHE, which supervises Rustaq College of Education, Dhofar University, Nizwa University, Sohar University, and A'Sharqiyah University. Each agency has its own views about training, educating, and benchmarking teachers. This has caused a conflict in the interests and training and education strategies and approaches and put a drain on the financial resources of the country. While the MoE, Rustaq College of Education, and the private universities work from a local perspective, SQU and the MoHE decided to resort to imported, short-term, and ready-made solutions. The former opted for the academic accreditation, while the latter sought the help of foreign agencies such as the CfBT and foreign selective traditions such as CELTA to select and benchmark teachers' language proficiency and teaching competence. In a more or less similar manner, OAAA opted for the imported Quality Audit for benchmarking purposes. Even within the PHEIs themselves, there is a lack of academic, educational, technical, and financial cooperation and collaboration, which has created a state of turmoil and dissatisfaction and impeded national development (Ismail & Al-Shanfari, 2014). This has affected the quality of teachers prepared at these institutions (Al-Malki, 2017). To elaborate, there is an urgent need to establish national professional standards for teachers in schools and higher education and explicit assessment criteria that align with those standards. With oil prices falling sharply and by almost 50%, there is a need to find locally suited and long-term solutions to fix the problem and avoid overburdening the national budget by spending on certain imported and costly traditions such as the IELTS and academic accreditation, for example. Hence, there is an urgent need to bridge the growing ideological gap between the different agencies involved in LEP to help the system grow qualitatively and increase its efficiency, credibility, and accountability. For example, during the 'Omani Spring' in 2011, where teachers were one of the leading groups behind the protests, ELT student teachers at Rustaq College of Education called for either a total removal of the IELTS or at least a lowering of Band 6 as a requirement to enroll in ELT. In fact, some student teachers went as far as presenting a counterfeit IELTS certificate to the MoE to get a job.

Interestingly, Freeman et al. (2015) proposed a construct, which they called 'English-for-Teaching,' through which teachers could develop a sense of authority and expertise as a result of their knowledge of the 'local' tasks and responsibilities of their teaching situations and the social and interactional contexts of their classrooms while using English as a global language. The construct could provide information about how local performance could be aligned with a global set of benchmarks and facilitate stronger program validity as it would create assessments linked to teachers' classroom proficiency, thus allowing for stronger validity.

Additionally, during the Omani Spring teachers of English and Arabic and other subjects demanded more frequent promotions, higher housing allowances, and improved

working conditions including a reduced teaching load. These are issues for English teachers which Nunan et al. (1987) had pointed out long time earlier. The protests, which were spread through text messaging and the internet, led to the closure of large numbers of schools around the country. While the government partly responded to the financial demands at once, demands related to the professional side are yet to be seen.

Therefore, it will be interesting to investigate how the incorporation of the academic accreditation at SQU will affect the training and education of Arabic and English teachers in a few years' time. It will also be interesting to research the role of the IELTS and CELTA for benchmarking purposes. It will also be interesting to research what outcomes the teaching of French and German will yield in the near future. This is especially so since teaching these two language bears a strong resemblance to ALT and ELT in the sense that the Omani government is seeking consultancy from and collaborating with worldwide prominent cultural and political French and German agencies known for their experience and history in promoting the teaching of their native languages. Moreover, teachers represent different nationalities, academic qualifications, and training and educational backgrounds, and are being trained to use different resources for teaching. Besides, all materials and most tests used are imported, with the latter used for benchmarking purposes.

### ***Accountable and credible teacher training and education***

A great responsibility rests on the shoulders of teacher educators and their 'professionalism' (Al-Issa, 2019; Al-Issa et al., 2017a) to help achieve an accountable and credible language education system that could prepare 'professional' agents of change (Al-Issa, 2019; Al-Issa et al., 2017a; Al Shabibi & Silvennoinen, 2017), who can influence better policy implementation. Some researchers have specifically questioned the teaching experience of the ELT teacher educators at SQU in school settings and are critical of the teacher educators' selection criteria at SQU and their teaching approaches and methods (Al Shabibi & Silvennoinen, 2017). Others have criticized SQU ELT teacher educators for lacking knowledge about critical reflective practice, which affected their efforts to place their teaching in a critical perspective and expose the contradictory nature of the professional situation in Oman, and discouraged them from opening up educational opportunities for their students beyond what the curriculum prescribes (Al-Issa, 2019; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2010). Teachers who are well prepared linguistically and methodologically can be strategic partners who can work with the MoE and contribute to the economic expansion and growth of the country. They can potentially solve many problems and meet different needs and interests. First, they can save the government the huge amounts paid annually for students' pre-session courses prior to embarking on their academic programs abroad. Similarly, they can save the large amounts spent on the FPEL at the different public and private higher education academic institutions since such teachers will help prepare students able to use the target language communicatively to fulfill the aims of the BES and EMI.

Secondly, drawing on the skills and competence they acquire from their teacher training and education programs, teachers can save the government the large amounts invested in importing foreign benchmarking and quality assurance instruments such as the

culturally insensitive and biased IELTS, CEFR, and in academic accreditation. This will potentially help align students' performance with the job market needs allowing for stronger school ELT education validity. Such validity can also save parents who enroll their children in private schools and private language institutes the high tuition fees.

Thirdly, teachers can save the government the large budgets allocated for in-service training, as they take care of their own continuous professional development and critically reflect on their theoretical and practical knowledge, which allows them to successfully introduce change to the system to help their students become better foreign language learners.

Last but not least, Ball describes teachers as 'intellectuals – public intellectuals – and should be treated as such' (p. 90). He advocates their involvement in different education policy and planning matters. Therefore, involving teachers in curriculum policies and implementation, as a means of empowerment, where their beliefs, values, feelings, and acts are aligned can help promote their sense of ownership and agency of the environment. This will allow them to play their role as effective leaders and decision makers in the implementation of educational reform and innovation (Ketelaar et al., 2014). Sergon (2011) found that teachers felt 'ignored' and their diverse comments, opinions, and views about the creation of the curriculum were never considered in a rigidly and densely bureaucratic and strictly hierarchical system. He also found that the Ministry of Education did not provide enough resources or time for teachers to 'be able to adequately and efficiently do their job' (pp. 28–29), which has resulted in 'substantial frustration and discontent' (p. 30).

Therefore, it will be interesting to investigate how the establishment of the SCPTT will affect the training and education of Arabic and English teachers in a few years' time, and the impact of LEP on LPP implementation for better or worse since apparently much hinges on teachers' 'professionalism' to introduce change (Al-Issa, 2019).

### ***Parents as agents of language maintenance***

The previous sections have shown that all indigenous languages in Oman are endangered to varying extents, due to their lack of social, economic, and educational attraction, and lack of political support. Parents also play a role in the lack of maintenance of these languages and their endangerment. Conversely, attempts to maintain languages like Arabic and English continue to increase. According to Epstein (1986), there are six types of parental involvement programs: (a) involvement in basic obligations at home; (b) school to home and home to school communications; (c) assistance at the school; (d) assistance in learning activities at home; (e) involvement in school decision-making, governance, and advocacy; and (f) collaboration and exchange with community organizations. Avvisati et al. (2010) suggest that parental involvement is complex and typically includes more than one type of involvement. Al-Harrasi and Al-Mahrooqi (2014) divided parental responsibilities into 'at-home' activity and 'at-school' involvement.

#### ***At-home activity***

The role of urban bilingual and multilingual parents and families as socialization and enculturation agents and stakeholders is powerful. They implicitly and explicitly affect

and determine language policies through the different, complex, and rich language ideologies they hold and the practices they expose their children to at home. The role of parents as unique contributors to LPP, bilingualism, and multilingualism is increasingly being recognized. King et al. (2008) hold that family language policy not only 'lays the foundation for language maintenance' (p. 917), but also controls and allocates its use in the home, which has important implications for their children's 'cognitive development and educational achievement' (p. 916).

As King et al. (2008) put it, 'parents often have clear ideas about which languages should be used for which purposes with their children' (p. 912), which makes them a powerful source of beliefs, and beliefs impact and determine the notion of good or bad parenting. Parents in Oman play an important role in language planning and integrating their children into a bilingual and multilingual environment. Different parents code-mix and code-switch between their L variety of Arabic and English, while others are triglossic and code-switch and code-mix between English, their L variety of Arabic, and their ethnic language, providing a complex language environment. Many parents are holders of at least a first degree obtained either from a local or foreign (English-speaking country) higher education academic institution. Many middle-class parents also use English at work and use MSA in either the private or public sector. Such parents' influence on their children's language acquisition extends to the choice of the medium of communication at home and the provision of different English- and MSA-medium books for their children to read and expand their knowledge through English and MSA. This is one way to provide rich language experiences and to influence their motivation, beliefs and attitudes about the uses and values of learning both languages. To illustrate, an interesting recent trend adopted by various middle-class parents in Oman has been the recruitment of nannies and au pairs from countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia to communicate with their children in English, which is believed to help their children grow up with a good command of spoken English.

In the age of globalization, social media has become a necessity rather than a luxury in Oman. Muscat Daily newspaper conducted a survey in 2014 which covered 11,000 randomly selected households across the Sultanate. It was found that more than 90% of the households possessed at least one mobile phone or smart phone, more than 80% owned at least one computer, and about 80% of households had access to the Internet. Another necessity today in Oman is free-to-air TV. Around 48% of the households receive television on terrestrials, 48% on satellite, and only 7% of households have access to pay television (Television in Oman, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Television\\_in\\_Oman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Television_in_Oman)).

Parents make decisions regarding which satellite dish to install, since not all channels are culturally appropriate. There are also the encrypted channels, which different parents subscribe to in order to enjoy a wide array of channels presenting the latest Hollywood movies, comedy and drama serials, cooking programs, sports, quiz shows, cartoons, children's programs, and documentaries. These channels and programs provide exposure to authentic and contextualized English language and its multiple varieties and cultures in diverse contexts, which can affect viewers' motivation to learn English, influence their language repertoire, and affect their ideologies about the uses and values of English (Al-Issa, 2005). Such exposure can additionally complement teachers' work at schools and higher education institutions, as it allows them to select relevant materials to help meet

their students' diverse needs and interests as well as provide adequate exposure to and contact with contextualized English. All this can have a positive impact on students' development of communicative competence.

Moreover, Avvisati et al. (2010) maintain that parents' caring about involvement is 'instrumental to achievement' (p. 761) and that children whose parents are involved in their education are more likely 'to develop a strong, positive sense of efficacy for successfully achieving in school-related tasks' (p. 767). Avvisati et al. (2010) additionally suggest that parental involvement can potentially help children emulate their parents' behavior and devote interest and time to school activities and thus do well at school. Parental involvement can also reinforce children's interest, which leads to school success. Parents' direct instruction can additionally influence their children's educational outcomes. Hence, with parents supporting the role of education as a fundamental tool for the spread and maintenance of foreign languages, especially English, they can, for example, help change their children's attitudes towards the adoption of EMI at higher education academic institutions. Parents can also play a key role in affecting their children's choices about what foreign language(s) to learn, which can positively impact on the spread of French and German.

Al-Harrasi and Al-Mahrooqi (2014) found that Omani parents understand their involvement in 'at-home' activity and believe in the importance of helping their children with their homework and discussing school issues. They further found that the majority of parents consider parental involvement as a positive factor that produces higher student academic performance. Therefore, it will be interesting to try to further understand how parents affect their children's MSA and English language education at home. By the same token, one can research parents' contribution to language death, choice, shift, contact, spread, preservation, and maintenance, especially now that minority languages such as French and German have recently emerged on the LEP arena.

### ***At-school involvement***

Many parents, especially middle-class parents with white-collar jobs, prefer to send their children to private bilingual schools where they receive English language education right from preschool. Parents expect such schools to contribute to increasing their children's exposure to and contact with English and to equip them with the right language skills and competence to prepare them for their subsequent education.

Some parents additionally send their children to the various privately run English language institutes such as the British Council, for example. Others, who are financially more able, send their children to English speaking countries during the summer holiday. Avvisati et al. (2010) maintain that the parents' socio-economic status determines their involvement consistency. In other words, parents with higher education and higher salaries allocate more time to direct childcare. Avvisati et al. also hold that parents' social class can increase their children's probability of success.

A third category of parents hire private Arabic and English teachers for their children when they reach Grade 12 to train them for the Grade 12 high-stakes tests that determine their entry to college. A two-hour private tuition session costs around USD \$40 and students normally require 12–15 sessions to develop the skills to handle the final exam prepared by the MoE. Such tuition is found across the Arab World and has been in vogue in



Oman since the early 1970s. This phenomenon is a result of the performance-based assessment system and is academically and financially unhealthy, as it creates and perpetuates social and economic inequalities. It favors financially privileged students and increases their opportunities to pursue their post-secondary education.

In their review of the literature on parental involvement in school, Avvisati et al. (2010) found that parental involvement has an economic motive. They define the economic motive as 'direct effort, provided by the parent, in order to increase educational outcomes of their children' (p. 760). Avvisati et al. suggest that parents' involvement in school depends on their understanding of their role in their child's life, parents' belief that their involvement can exert a positive influence on their children's outcomes, and the parents' perceptions about the need of the children and the school to be involved. Scarino and Liddicoat (2014) see parents' influence on school program and practices as a powerful shaping factor and as a response to the generated policy in a particular context. Parents, hence, can be involved in developing the school's vision and mission and in exchanging questions with staff that help promote self-reflection about children's learning (Avvisati et al., 2010). In addition, since many parents directly supervise their children's learning, they can be involved as consultants, co-designers, co-writers, and co-evaluators of the materials centrally produced by the MoE, which were found irrelevant, unrealistic, boring, failing to cover all skills adequately, and failing to support the development of higher-order thinking skills and independent learning (Sergon, 2011). One can describe forging a partnership with parents as being strategic since it can potentially increase accountability, credibility, and quality of education at low economic cost.

Avvisati et al. (2010) hold that 'plans to foster parental involvement have been already scaled up to the national level' (p. 760), where dialogues have been enhanced with parents. This is particularly the case in Australia, the UK, and the US. By welcoming parents and listening to them about alternative ways of assessing their children, it can lead to finding solutions to the problem of private tuition in the Sultanate, which has caused financial concerns to families for almost five decades.

Al-Harrasi and Al-Mahrooqi (2014) found that parents in Oman believe in the importance of their involvement in their children's education and schools and view this as a solution to students' academic and educational problems. Al-Harrasi and Al-Mahrooqi found that parents had high self-confidence in their ability and knowledge to make a difference and introduce change to the school system and their children's education. They concluded that Omani parents regarded their involvement as 'a key factor for promoting improved student academic performance and motivation' (p. 282). They additionally found that teachers and school administrations complained about the lack of parental involvement and expressed a desire to have their help at school to enhance 'at-school' involvement. They attributed this situation to poor communication between teachers and parents and the lack of initiatives by teachers to invite parents to schools. More specifically, Al-Mahrooqi et al. (2016) found that Omani parents were generally aware of the importance of their involvement in their children's development and that there is a need for creating 'higher levels of dialogue between schools, parents, and the wider community' (p. 11) to overcome parents' limited involvement. This kind of systematic, integrated, and sustainable involvement is bound to overcome the often-reported limitations of MSA and English language learning within Oman. Al-Harrasi and Al-Mahrooqi recommended that the colleges of education should train teachers in how to deal

with parents. They additionally recommended the Omani government should establish and finance parental involvement programs. Hence, it will be interesting to investigate why parents have not yet been involved in any at-school activities, and whether there are any plans to involve them as strategic partners in the LEP process.

### ***The media as an agency for language maintenance***

The above discussion shows that efforts are being made to facilitate the spread of and increase contact with French and German and that education is the tool used to serve this purpose. However, this does not seem to be bearing fruit so far due to a lack of spread and contact. Grin (2000) puts language on an equal footing with air and water, which constitute our natural environment. He, therefore, views it as a ‘public good’ that should not be left in the hands of privately run institutions to promote its learning and teaching and preserve it since this sector is first and foremost interested in business and generating profit. Therefore, agencies such as the media need to be involved more strategically in increasing the practical domains of these two languages to help advance modernization. The media today have freed languages from any borders or territories (Kelly-Holmes, 2015). The media use language to transmit culture. An integration of the two can subsequently help learners increase their contact with contextualized language and develop their communicative competence. This approach can potentially impact on policy implementation (Al-Issa, 2005).

### ***Traditional media***

Salawu (2006) asserts that in most developing countries, history and politics largely determine what languages are used for communication. He maintains that the world is governed by communication diversity and that even though certain contexts are dominated by certain languages, the smaller languages continue to exist and are used to varying degrees in the media. He highlights the powerful ideological role the mass media, as a social and reinforcing agency, can play in raising the public’s awareness and changing its attitudes about the importance of using languages and hence maintaining and preserving them from extinction.

Salawu established a link between how the reading of a newspaper published in a minority language by educated elites can impact on the preservation of that language. He holds that ‘print media themselves are by nature vehicles for literacy as they are required to be read for information and knowledge’ (p. 89). Luan and Beng (2018) discuss how a leading Chinese newspaper in Malaysia, *Sin Chew Daily*, emphasizes and preserves Chinese cultural and nationalist discourses by reporting news about Chinese education and Chinese culture. On the other hand, it continues to play a significant role in supporting government policies such as nation-building efforts within multiethnic Malaysia.

Salawu (2006) argues for the indispensability of the media in inspiring people and changing their attitudes towards teaching and learning languages. More specifically, he argues for the relevance of newspapers for language acquisition and teaching reading to students with limited proficiency. He additionally argues for the use of radio and TV to create specific programs to teach certain aspects and skills of the language. Grin (2000)

views the media in general and TV in particular as central for minority language preservation. They heard and contributed to the promotion of several Nigerian languages.

Oman TV played two strategic and complementary roles that contributed to the spread and maintenance of MSA and English. Those were: (1) the wide array of Arabic- and English-medium programs; and (2) the ALT and ELT lessons broadcast during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both strategies generated important results and affected the attitudes of the public about the status of these languages (Al-Issa, 2005). More specifically, newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV have an important place in the Omani ELT system, as they maximize the chances of contact with the target language and help produce skilled and competent language users, who can influence Omanization. Hence, an identical strategy can be adopted to promote the spread and maintenance of French and German at the present time. Such a strategy could be applied to Oman radio as well, where an official station that broadcasts programs in French and German could be established. Radio broadcast productions are usually less expensive than TV productions, and require fewer resources and personnel (Nwaneri et al., 2014; Salawu, 2006). There is more than one radio station in Oman at the present time which could be assigned this responsibility.

### **Digital media**

Kelly-Holmes (2015) sees the world wide web as a major site for 'linguistic practice,' where individuals and institutions are 'free to do what they want in borderless cyberspace, paying little attention to the, generally, territorially anchored regulations of language policy and planning' (pp. 130–131). As a vast, limitless, and 'explicitly global medium,' which provides choices of vast contexts, according to Kelly-Holmes, the web 'provides an ideal domain in which to explore issues of language policy and globalization' (p. 131). She adds that new media have enabled 'the development of online speech communities' (p. 131). Such communities incorporate shared norms and beliefs in relation to their practices. She describes these individuals and institutions as 'non-traditional actors' who use language in 'non-traditional domains,' and who are free from any national borders and regulatory frameworks. Grin (2000) sees the 'new media' as a strategically important venue and platform for the maintenance of minority languages due to the high cost of TV broadcasting.

Each of the French and German institutions and agencies in Oman and beyond is utilizing its culture and cultural resources in different ways to spread and increase contact with its language in order to facilitate students' language acquisition and learning. The Omani government is reinforcing the MSA content on the internet and the State Council suggested encouraging Omani youth to contribute to creating more Arabic content on the internet. Indeed, the use of the internet in the Omani ELT system, which largely emphasizes a passive role for students with emphasis on rote learning. It has impacted on students' 'culturalist' ideologies, stimulated their motivation, and supported learner-centred ELT. It has additionally helped students to develop their grammatical, discursive, sociocultural, and strategic competence by providing opportunities for them to interact with people from around the world, understand their cultures, and use the target language on a variety of topics in authentic settings. All this has positive implications for ELT policy implementation.

Hence, it will be interesting to investigate how Omani graduates of French and German studies and institutions like the University of Nizwa, SQU, and Gulf College, facilitate the spread of these two languages. In other words, one can research how non-traditional actors and non-traditional domains use minority languages to regulate their own language practices online and generate and upload content in diverse locations, and how these activities impact on their language competence.

### ***Language prospects***

The above discussion revealed that with the increase in skilled labor and the growing and rapid spread of the internet and communication technology, GPA will continue to shape the Omani sociolinguistic landscape and gain more ground as a potential candidate to serve as a lingua franca. Another variety that continues to gain more ground is e-Arabic or Arabish, due to the spread of mobile phones. Therefore, it will be interesting to follow the progress of both varieties in a few years' time and see whether this language shift will continue to grow and what effects it will have on LPP in Oman.

Furthermore, French and German were recently introduced into the education system. Linguistically speaking, English is one of the most similar languages to German. In other words, German is similar to English in structure; thus, it is easy to learn. Besides, the German and French communities are becoming increasingly important and gaining more and more economic strength in the Sultanate. However, the attractiveness of French and German remains low due to a lack of political power. In addition, the contribution of education and the media, as two fundamental enterprises with substantial power to affect people's attitudes towards the uses and values of these languages, is extremely limited. However, the recent efforts to teach both languages at school and higher education point to plans to deliberately increase the number of speakers of both languages and maintain their status as important languages that can contribute to the diversification and development of the country's economy. It will thus be interesting to observe whether the explicit attempts made by the Omani government to increase the number of French and German speakers succeed or not and what factors will affect this change, bearing in mind that the present experience with teaching Arabic and English has not yielded positive results as yet, despite the resources allocated for such activity.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the language planning situation in the Sultanate of Oman from historical, social, political, and ideological perspectives. The discussion has revealed that the Omani linguistic landscape is complex and that its complexity will continue to grow. The indigenous languages, despite being historical, are left unplanned and the same applies to certain non-indigenous languages used by immigrants and foreign laborers. Amongst the relatively large number of immigrants, natives of the Indian sub-continent form the vast majority. Their presence has been important for socioeconomic reasons and has contributed to the emergence of OPA for interethnic contact. OPA is gaining ground and is gradually and steadily becoming a lingua franca, which can bridge the communicative gap between the different ethnic communities found in the country and affecting the business transactions of those who are using it, including

Omanis. However, these languages do not facilitate Omanization and neither are they important for the global economy, international business and commerce, science and technology acquisition, telecommunication, and academia; nor are they linked to nationalism and nationalism, religion, and identity, nor do they have a longstanding literacy tradition associated with culture, religion, and history. In short, these languages are not the languages of the intellectuals, and thus are not the focus of any planning by the government.

Conversely, while views about Arabic and English have continued to grow stronger since 1970, new views pertinent to the importance of French and German, although to a much lesser degree, have emerged. Language choice, language spread, language contact, language preservation, and language maintenance have always been biased and have worked, and will continue to work for many more years to come, in favor of Arabic and English to support and serve several historical, economic, and political interests. The planning of Arabic and English has been very different from that of French and German due to the functional domains the former two languages serve. By contrast, the planning of French and German is strictly confined to their contribution to science and technology acquisition and the advancement of business. The role of the government, as represented in the Diwan of Royal Court, in legislating and defining the uses, status, and values of each of these languages has been evident and noteworthy. In addition, its role in theorizing the place of these languages within education has been significant. Education has been viewed as a key realm for the implementation of Omani government policies. However, important questions pertinent to the role of the education sector in implementing the Diwan's policies arise.

The discussion in this study has shown showed that the MoE, as represented in the public and private schools, the MoHE as represented in the public colleges and private and public colleges and universities, and SQU, took charge of promoting the spread, preservation, and maintenance of and contact with these languages. However, problems principally pertinent to teacher training and education led to ALT and ELT policy misinterpretation and problematic implementation. To help solve the problem, the MoE, MoHE, and SQU sought advice from foreign agencies and consequently imported biased and decontextualized teaching, learning, assessment standards and benchmarking criteria and systems to control the quality of Arabic and English graduate teachers. A similar initiative was taken to guarantee validating the language ability of students studying at higher academic institutions. On the other hand, a key area like pre-service teacher training and education, with its questionable quality and problematic practices, has been completely overlooked, which has resulted in failure to achieve quality, accountability, and credibility and bridge the policy-practice gulf.

Thus, in a locally and globally dynamic and constantly changing, challenging, and demanding environment, the MoE, the MoHE, and SQU have continued to depend on expensive canned solutions available off the shelf of the Western market to provide solutions to LEP problems. This overreliance on and submissiveness to Britain and the USA not only has historical, political, and economic reasons and roots, but also has been due to a lack of clear direction. Such cultural dependency and lack of strategic planning has resulted in failure to foresee the future and anticipate problems before they arise and solve them before they become worse.

LEP within the Omani context, has been described as ‘ramshackle,’ ‘a process of bricolage,’ ‘borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere,’ and a ‘hit and miss’ affair so far (Ball, 1998, p. 126). This unsatisfactory situation has proven to be costly and has failed to solve persisting language problems. LEP ends and means have been worlds apart, resulting in failure to meet societal expectations. Put another way, LEP has lacked innovative solutions and failed to introduce radical change, which has undermined language spread, language contact, language shift, language preservation, and language maintenance. Interestingly, it appears that identical mistakes are being made regarding planning French and German within education, which could potentially lead to additional policy–practice disparity in the near future, leading to a loss of quality, accountability, and credibility due to the preparation of graduates unfit to serve the job market.

This struggle, which has continued for five decades, to utilize education in an effective way to serve LEP, is a result of a lack of systematic long-range strategic planning and organized effort. In other words, there is a lack of communication, efficiency, purpose, and mission, leading to a lack of collaboration amongst the different existing agents and agencies that have been driving and shaping LEP and affecting its implementation. LEP within the Omani context can therefore be judged to be part of the problem and not the solution to the language problems.

In closing, times have changed and so have educational development plans and strategies worldwide. It is high time the MoE, the MoHE and SQU collaborated to find more contextualized, customized, sustainable, lifelong, and effective avenues for LEP to advance Oman’s economy. Joining forces and forging a strong alliance with teachers, parents, and the media as strategic local partners and reliable sources of knowledge, information and data can potentially help the government bridge the policy–practice gap and achieve its economic aims.

## Notes

1. This resulted in Oman hosting the secret USA-Iran talks that led to the landmark nuclear agreement in 2013.
2. The Diwan of Royal Court is a council of state which is the political and administrative link between the Sultan of Oman and the central government, the armed forces, the security forces and the people. It is responsible for the Sultan’s royal ceremonies and for law-making. The Diwan also supervises the work of cultural, religious, scientific, and social planning, projects, programs, and institutions. These include Oman 2040 Future Vision, the Public-Private-Partnership Taskforce, the National Youth Program for Skills Development, the National Program for Enhancing Economic Diversification, the National Leadership and Competitiveness Program, Islamic Institutes, Muscat Municipality, Sultan Qaboos Mosques, and environmental conservation.
3. An Islamic endowment of property to be held in trust and used for charitable or religious purposes.
4. The CEFR is a guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe and, increasingly, in other countries. It was put together by the Council of Europe as the main part of the project ‘Language Learning for European Citizenship’ between 1989 and 1996. Its main aim is to provide a method of learning, teaching and assessing which applies to all languages in Europe. Cambridge Assessment English was involved in the early development of CEFR. However, in 2001, a European Union Council Resolution recommended using the CEFR to set up systems of validation of language ability. The six reference levels are becoming widely accepted as the European standard for grading an individual’s language proficiency.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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