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Beyond Textbook Instruction: Stories from ELT Teachers in Oman

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ABSTRACT

The government of the Sultanate of Oman actively promotes the value of English as a global *lingua franca* to support modernization and national economic growth. This policy, however, creates difficulties for many teachers, who find themselves implementing certain practices that conflict with a vision of English language teaching (ELT) that accords with humanist values. They find themselves adopting forms of instruction that reduce English to a matter of drills and skills. This essay draws on an inquiry that I facilitated with the help of four Student Teachers during their practicum. The inquiry involved asking them to keep reflective journals in an effort to place their teaching in a critical perspective exposing the contradictory nature of their professional situation. The journals show their struggle with the ELT *status quo* at their cooperating schools, while revealing their commitment to opening up educational opportunities for their students beyond what the curriculum prescribes.

KEYWORDS

English language teaching (ELT); student teachers; reflective journals; textbook instruction; humanistic ideology; culturalist ideology

> Thought and language, which reflect reality in a way different from that of perception, are the key to the nature of human consciousness. Words play a central part not only in the development of thought but in the historical growth of consciousness as a whole. A word is a microcosm of human consciousness. (Lev Vygotsky 1986, 256)

English in Oman

The Sultanate of Oman has recognised English as a global *lingua franca* and international language for several decades. According to official policy, it is the only official foreign language that will help the country to develop national pride and bring about modernisation in the era of globalisation. This attitude reflects the neo-colonial situation of the country, a situation that determines the country's sense of itself and its future directions, even though (as I will point out below) the country was never actually colonised. The acceptance of English as a *lingua franca* has filtered down to the public since Sultan Qaboos Bin Said ascended the throne in 1970 and took initiatives that have shaped the state's thinking and behaviour.

English in multilingual and multi-ethnic Oman is the medium of communication in public domains such as business, education and the media, and this fact is used to

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justify its choice as the only official foreign language in the Sultanate. English is considered 'the key to education and training in relation to technology acquisition, industrialisation, commerce and business and above all the exploration, running and maintenance of its natural resources' (Al-Busaidi 1995, 133). The English language is important for acquiring science and technology, conducting business, pursuing higher education, finding a white-collar job, cultural analysis and understanding, and inter-lingual communication (Al-Issa 2015). Interestingly, the uses and values associated with the English language are not seen to interfere or conflict with those associated with Arabic, the official language of the country, which remains the language of the ruling royal family, the mother tongue of the majority of Omanis.

Such a situation has contributed to Arabic and English existing side by side in a harmonious relationship. Arabic has no indigenous rivals and has a longstanding literacy, as the first national language of the Sultanate and the language of the Holy Koran, Islam's sacred scripture, and the tongue of the Prophet Mohamed (Bani-Khaled 2014). Arabic is the language of intellectuals and the power holders and dominant groups in the Sultanate, representing 'the official identity, nationhood, ethnicity, culture and traditions of the Omanis' (Al-Busaidi 1995, 134). Perhaps it is because of this sense that Arabic embodies rich linguistic and cultural traditions that Omanis feel confident about embracing the uses and values of English and the roles assigned to it as a powerful tool for advancing economy. For Omanis English does not pose a threat to their traditions. They see it as opening up new dimensions of thought and experience, in addition to the worlds of thought and experience embodied in Arabic, most notably economic development and communication with the world. This attitude is reinforced by the fact that Oman was never colonised by a European power, despite the military invasions from Portugal and Britain. Curiously, Oman, with its history of human habitation stretching back over 100,000 years, has a colonial history, having once possessed the island of Zanzibar on the east coast of Africa as a colony.

English language teaching (ELT) in Oman

Despite all the recognition English has been receiving, its teaching and learning have been problematic and criticised by different researchers (Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi 2012; Al-Mahrooqi 2012). This is because ELT education in Oman has largely failed to deliver the required results, which has reflected negatively on the country's development. Teachers bear a huge responsibility for the implementation of the government's English language policy (Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi 2012; Al-Mahrooqi 2012), and this policy failure partly derives from the perpetuation of certain practices, including transmission-based teaching, total adherence to the textbook in an effort to finish the syllabus in time, as well as the use of teaching methods that only stimulate lower-order thinking and cognitive skills such as rote learning, teaching for the exam, encouraging memorisation of certain language chunks, failure to attend to individual differences, and failure to encourage and motivate students to help them overcome their negative attitudes towards language learning. Teachers, in short, are trapped in habitual practices that prevent them and their students realising the humanistic potential of English teaching, not only to help their students to find their place in the economy but to

enjoy the worlds of thought and feeling that might be opened up by the English language.

As an experienced teacher educator with high awareness of the Omani ELT status quo, I have been attempting to maintain my commitment to providing my student teachers with the intellectual and professional resources to help them open up the world of English language to their own students within a socially just and democratic framework. The situation in Oman has inspired me to commence an inquiry that has combined critical theory, critical literacy, critical pedagogy and critical applied linguistics (Freire 1968; Giroux 1981, 1988; Giroux and McLaren 1989) in an attempt to understand the professional learning my student teachers experienced during their teaching placements. The aim of the inquiry has also been to encourage them to reflect critically on their teaching, and thus to open up a sense of alternatives that challenge the way ELT is currently enacted. This essay draws on that inquiry, focusing on the uses that my student teachers made of their reflective journals in the course of their teaching placements to negotiate their own pathway through the policy environment that we share.

Reflection as an ideological enterprise

Student teaching invariably prompts student teachers to reflect critically on the status quo at their co-operating schools. They see themselves as challenging old and persistent theories and practices, testing new ones and facilitating change. Reflection not only helps practitioners to develop their cognitive and affective skills (Minott 2011), but has 'political/moral' and 'social' dimensions (Zeichner 1981, 1987). As a teacher educator, I subscribe to Zeichner's view that through encouraging reflection, teacher education can help student teachers:

> …to understand the reasons and rationales associated with different practices and with developing teachers' capacities to make intelligent decisions about how to act based on their carefully developed educational goals, on the contexts in which they [are] working, and on the learning needs of their students. (Zeichner 2008, 535)

Zeichner (2008) maintains that teacher education can foster genuine teacher development that is oriented towards human emancipation. This involves four aspects. First, student teachers should be encouraged to exercise their judgement with respect to the practices they encounter in research and in others' practice. Second, they should reflect critically on whether what they are doing is directed towards the empowerment of their pupils. Third, reflection should involve thinking critically about the social and institutional context in which teaching takes place – schools are powerful agencies for socialisation and enculturation, and they have their own agendas through which they shape student teachers' beliefs and perceptions for better or worse. Last but not least, a disposition towards reflection can prompt student teachers to engage in conversations with their peers and to think and act in a collaborative spirit.

The study out of which this essay arises took the reflective journals of four female student teachers from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Muscat during their Spring 2018 semester practicum. My goal was to understand how they positioned themselves ideologically as ELT professionals *vis-à-vis* the prevailing culture of ELT. I was especially interested in their capacity to draw on the intellectual and cultural resources

available to them (Aznacheeva and Mamonova 2015) to question, resist and challenge the practices adopted by some teachers and to explore alternatives solutions.

The student teachers in this study were themselves a product of ELT practices that positioned teachers as 'technicians' (Zeichner 2008) or mere 'dispensers' (Arnold 1999) of the knowledge and skills their students required, which gave them a strong sense of relationship between their co-operating school and the ELT education they experienced for 12 years (Kemmis 2009). I was aware that when these (ELT) student teachers began their practicum they were likely to be torn between two competing 'professional' ideologies – 'humanistic' ideology and the political 'culturalist' ideology. In the former case, and within the framework of this study, the student teachers are 'Education for Sustainability' (Kemmis 2009) advocates and initiative takers with a practical and philosophical way of looking at the Omani school ELT. They 'think differently', 'act differently' and 'relate differently' to reconstruct the 'practice architectures' by which taken-for-granted ELT practices are currently thought about and constructed in the local ELT system by curious and enduring 'participatory' and 'democratic' means (Kemmis 2009). They see their task as involving 'critical action' to change ELT practices through involving students in 'self-transformation' to create a student-centred ELT environment. They work towards transforming the persistent politically and socially oriented and driven ELT status quo and day-to-day textbook-based school ELT. They try to resist and change incomprehensible, irrational, unproductive, false, misleading and harmful ideas and discourses as embedded in textbook-based approaches and which serve the interest of the Ministry of Education at the expense of students' interests and lead to demotivation and textbook- and teacher-centred learning. Such teachers try to reconstruct and transform the Omani school ELT by finding creative and innovative solutions to facilitate the implementation of a communicative language teaching (CLT)-based philosophy, which emphasises the central role of teachers as 'public intellectuals' (Ball 1995) in making informed decisions and introducing student-centred ELT education.

On the other hand, the student teachers are confronted with the politically dominant and competing culturalist ideology as promoted by the Ministry of Education since the inception of ELT in the Sultanate of Oman in 1970, which has controlled, marginalised, oppressed and subordinated the epistemic power of teachers as public intellectuals and professionals, and confined them to being servants to the prescribed textbook and deliverers of certain modes of knowledge. The essence of the culturalist ideology within this study is that all teachers should relinquish their competence and teach the mandated textbook in the same way and following the same routines, regardless of the way they were educated and trained as humanistic professionals, who can influence and facilitate student-centred ELT implementation, which makes such teachers mentally colonised and a socially underprivileged class that continues to struggle for its right to implement humanistic ELT. Such behaviour has for decades impeded policy implementation and created a disparity between theory and practice.

Reflective journals as an ideological enterprise

All student teachers at SQU are required to keep reflective journals as a means of reflection-on-action (Boud 2001) to help them critically examine and reflect on their

practices in order to identify their weaknesses, and to make informed decisions about what to do in a particular circumstance. This gives rise to the possibility of re-theorising their existing knowledge and to explore, discover and construct new knowledge to improve as creative and innovative practitioners and empower their students to solve their actual learning problems (Zeichner and Liston 1987).

Spadling and Wilson outlined several benefits of journal writing:

> (1) journals serve as a permanent record of thoughts and experiences; (2) journals provide a means of establishing and maintaining relationship with instructors; (3) journals serve as a safe outlet for personal concerns and frustrations; and (4) journals are an aid to internal dialogue. Furthermore, as instructors we benefit because (1) journals serve as windows into our students' thinking and learning; (2) journals provide a means of establishing and maintaining relationship with students; and (3) journals serve as dialogical teaching tools. (Spadling and Wilson 2002, 1396)

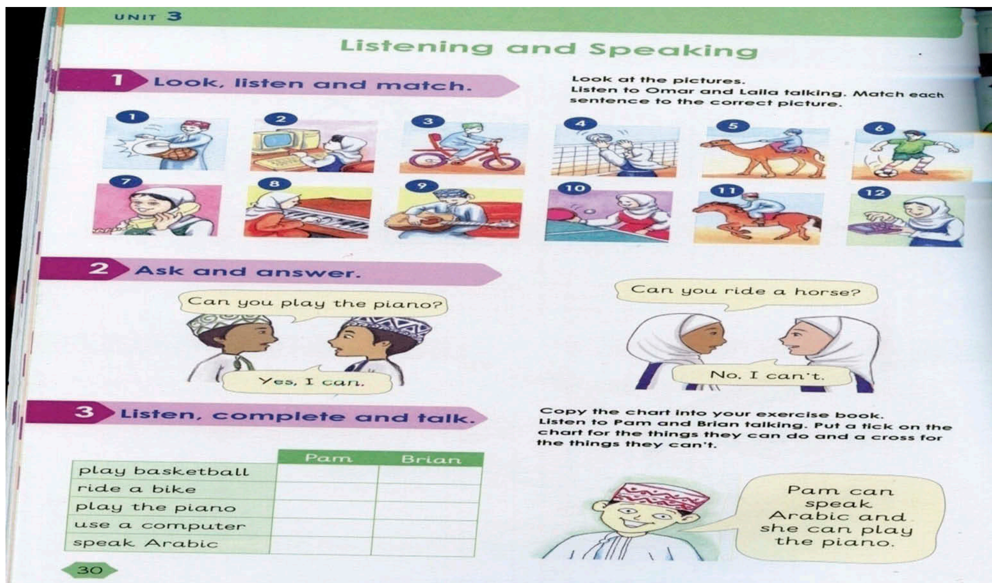
Drawing on Vygotsky's view of language as the most important cultural tool and a meditational means for cognitive development and thought formation and his socio-cultural approach to mind and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) notion (1986), I also considered the reflective journals as providing opportunities for my student teachers to collaborate with themselves to organise their thoughts and think and plan consciously and independently to aid their performance and self-regulate their action against the dominant textbook-based school ELT. In other words, I asked them to write their journals in English as I provided them with questions and prompts about the status quo of ELT in the Omani schools, and their role as informed decisions makers who can use English as a psychological tool to solve the Omani ELT textbook-based pedagogy problems, and introduce and facilitate change. I wanted them to use the target language to form and convey their thoughts. Guided by Chitpin (2006, 80), I 'encouraged them to go beyond description of incidents and issues and to explore different perspectives, alternative ways of understanding and responding'. I also encouraged them to consider ELT research and theory and 'to draw conclusions based on their experiences'. I further asked them to test any theories they generated to tentatively solve the problems they encounter (Chitpin 2006).

Furthermore, as an applied linguist, I always viewed second-language acquisition as a complex and integrated phenomenon. Hence, I used the journal writing activity within the ZPD as an occasion for language use and language learning to co-occur (Swain 2000). SQU ELT graduates have been criticised for the past three decades or so for their lack of English language competence, which has reduced their opportunities in enrolling as full-time ELT practitioners (Al-Issa, Al-Bulushi, and Al-Zadjali 2017).

Moreover, guided by the ZPD notion, the use of journals was an occasion for my student teachers to construct professional knowledge and negotiate meaning to try to find solutions to the different problems found in the Omani textbook-based ELT (Swain 2000). Such graduates have been criticised for lacking the necessary teaching competence and hence failing to influence policy implementation.

I decided to empower my student teachers by placing them at the forefront of their own development to evaluate their practices, modify them and monitor the effect of this change (Wallace 1991). Kumaravadivelu (2001, 545) puts it this way: 'theorize what they practice and practice what they theorize'.

My ideology as a teacher educator contrasts with dominant assumptions about ELT in Oman, not least because of my strong advocacy of Omani ELT education as a vehicle for achieving social justice and democracy. This can be seen in the way I attempt to position my student teachers as co-equals in a joint enterprise to implement rich forms of curriculum and pedagogy in the field of ELT. I treat them as adults, I try to facilitate a dialogue with them characterised by mutual respect, one in which I arguably have as much to learn as they do. My main concern has been to educate and enlighten my student teachers about how a richer vision of English Language, one that is infused with a humanist ideology, can drive and shape ELT reform in the Sultanate. Certain cultural beliefs and perceptions and practices have been dominant and ingrained in the Omani ELT system since the modern state was declared in 1970, and they have contributed to widening the gap between the economic needs and educational objectives and led to an unemployment crisis (Al-Issa 2015). Such a situation has transformed ELT into a meaningless school subject (Al-Issa 2007, 2014), where motivation is driven almost entirely by the desire to pass exams in which students simply produce the textbook and regurgitate information transmitted to them. Figures 1 and 2 show how language production is artificial, inauthentic, simple, predictable, temporary, context-reduced, inflexible, rigidly controlled, and strictly confined to a certain selection of isolated lexical and structural items, which promotes dull drilling and parroting, and memorisation of fixed chunks of language, while meantime depriving students of completing communicative tasks and using language for realistic communicative purposes. Put differently, more emphasis is laid in these activities on achieving linguistic proficiency than on building students' communicative competence, which leads to the false assumption that acquiring the former, which has been discarded as dysfunctional, leads to improving the latter.



UNIT 3

Listening and Speaking

1 Look, listen and match.

Look at the pictures.
Listen to Omar and Laila talking. Match each sentence to the correct picture.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

2 Ask and answer.

Can you play the piano?

Yes, I can.

Can you ride a horse?

No, I can't.

3 Listen, complete and talk.

Copy the chart into your exercise book.
Listen to Pam and Brian talking. Put a tick on the chart for the things they can do and a cross for the things they can't.

	Pam	Brian
play basketball		
ride a bike		
play the piano		
use a computer		
speak Arabic		

Pam can speak Arabic and she can play the piano.

30

Figure 1. Lesson from an Omani ELT textbook.

Figure 2. Lesson from an Omani ELT textbook.

Therefore, language loses its value as a discursive practice and functional communication tool and becomes a prey for memorisation and the production of interested and selected language chunks and items, which serves exam purposes.

Sakeena

Sakeena decided to challenge the dominant and oppressive teacher-fronted and textbook-based teaching approaches to facilitate her students' learning. She created a warm, empathetic and supportive classroom culture that encouraged and supported students in their efforts to learn English and to use the language in meaningful ways. Here is what she wrote in her journal:

> I was given substitution lessons in which I discovered the essence of being a teacher. Once, I discussed the story of 'I have a dream!' and I asked the students to work in groups and write speeches about a dream they wish to achieve. I was surprised by the students' ability to raise issues that reflected how aware and open-minded they were. That day I decided never to underestimate their abilities and that my teaching should trigger their creative thinking. In another substitution period, I prepared Backboard game and went to the class hoping that it will work for the students. The excitement that I saw on their faces when they knew that they would play a game using their textbook topics worked as magic for me. I found their lively and active spirits during their interaction. The group work was very effective, enjoyable, and competitive. They asked me – 'When will you teach us again, miss? We are longing to see you teaching us again!' What can be more rewarding than hearing that the students liked my lesson?

Sakeena highlighted the recognition teachers should give to the human-ness of their students and the concerted effort they should make to attend to that human-ness. This is a matter of 'viewing and treating pupils as student-subjects as opposed to student-objects, facilitating the development of student-self, positive school relationships, student autonomy, mutually respectful and trusting relationships, consciousness, and a perceived sense of community' (Leach 2012, 21). Students should, in other words, find themselves in a classroom situation where they can bond and develop socially and communicate confidently to achieve mutually academic goals.

As a reflective practitioner, who continued to facilitate her students' learning, Sakeena was critical of the dominant culture of 'spoon-feeding' and how it oppressed and marginalised the cognitive and affective domains of her students' sense of self:

> I noticed that students are used to spoon-feeding. There is no use of challenging activities and tasks that arouse and provoke students' curiosity. My supervisor drew my attention to the importance of raising students' curiosity and inquiring ability. Since then, I regularly asked challenging questions, which sometimes were controversial and hard, which resulted in having 'researcher students' in my class. I was surprised that they came up with the answers! It was thrilling for both of us! In fact, this task made me keener on learning and reading about the language.

Khatibi, Sarem, and Hamidi (2013) argued against confining ELT to the textbook and saw it as resulting in failure. Hence, Sakeena acted as a resource and guide for her students. She enthusiastically took responsibility for the knowledge she wanted them to develop and was explicit about the goals she wanted to achieve (Stevick 1976). Furthermore, she showed sensitivity to their feelings and involved them in real and desired communication to help them retain what they had learnt (Stevick 1976). Moreover, she challenged their identities by developing their 'reflective and dialogic competencies' in which they combined 'social-psychological' and 'socio-political' elements (Seidei et al. 2013, 45).

Sakeena's openness to new ideas meant that she became increasingly conscious of other dimensions of traditional ELT pedagogy that belittled, marginalised and oppressed students' feelings and thinking. This time she was critical of the rigidly controlled and assessment-driven focus of the teaching of writing.

> Students don't have the freedom to write freely. Their writing is controlled by the structure and the ideas that they have discussed previously with the whole class. Their writing is assessed three times in order to improve their grades. I disagree with this approach because teachers don't have time to teach. They are more concerned with assessing their students.

Moskowitz (1978, 11) viewed humanistic ELT as aiming at 'combining the subject matter to be learned with the feelings, emotions, experiences, and lives of the learners', where feelings and information always need to go together in order to make successful learning possible. Sakeena was aware of how the Omani ELT system transformed teachers into textbook slaves and test slaves, and to what extent this has negatively impacted students' motivation, attitudes and behaviour, and disturbed the CLT philosophy implementation (Al-Issa 2016). Al-Issa (2006) highlighted the authoritative Omani ELT system and how the curriculum is implemented in a top-down manner and the teaching methods in general and teaching writing in particular are 'horribly

controlled' by the Ministry of Education, leaving students helpless to produce a single free genuine sentence. Using standardised and teacher-proof textbooks makes it very difficult for teachers to engage in any kind of change or innovation and guarantees all students receive common and fundamental knowledge through exposure to certain authorised and prescribed texts.

Nonetheless, Sakeena was supportive and aware of teachers being agents of change, who can facilitate policy implementation via bringing their own experience, knowledge and skills to the classroom, and supplementing the syllabus to enrich their students' linguistic repertoire, rather than give the textbook and grades the upper hand (D'andrea 2010). Sakeena thus would like to see students using writing to enhance their communicative competence in English, which includes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. D'andrea maintains that 'writing is a powerful tool for reflecting on language structure and thus promoting reflective learning' (143). Sakeena referred to writing for learning as opposed to writing for display. While the former promotes process writing, the latter emphasises product, which has always been the target of the Omani ELT system. Besides, the former is complex and bottom-up, and roles of teachers and students are redefined. While teachers are more dynamically involved as they read and respond to what their students have written, students work collaboratively and use the language communicatively and purposefully to brainstorm and generate ideas, plan their work and make decisions about the content of the text. This is counter to what the activity in Figure 3 promotes, where language and knowledge are simple, fixed, predetermined and rigidly controlled to pave the way for memorisation of certain language chunks for the exam. Grossman

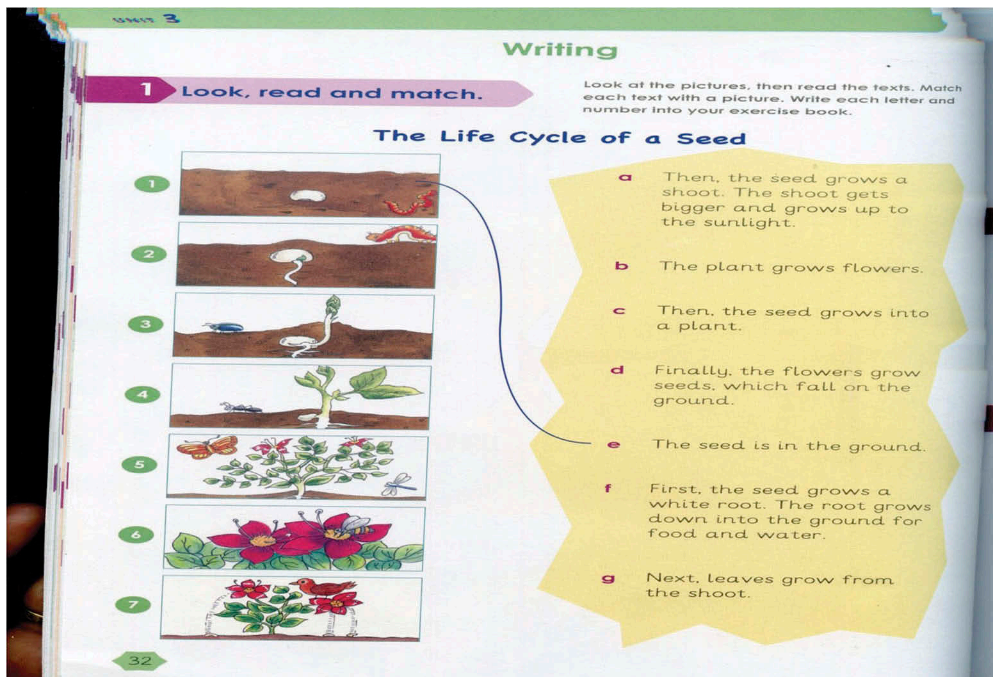


Figure 3. Lesson from an Omani ELT textbook.

(2009, 16) thus found that the more training students received in process writing the better they performed in tests, since process 'determines the content of a piece of writing and the meaning conveyed' and that 'the process approach by its very nature allows writing to evolve and develop slowly and exam writing by its very nature is the opposite, expecting the writing process to be "squashed" into 10 minutes of planning'.

Rabab

Rabab had already developed a humanistic approach to ELT teaching that was reflected in a holistic attitude towards students' growth and a view of their language development as being embedded in their lives and interests.

> I believe that triggering students' passion to learn is achieved through making a lesson seem to be a sort of a show or entertainment! I am sure that no matter what, I will try my best to test my philosophy of education and strive for the best of my students.

As a joyful and self-actualised teacher herself, who believed that 'affective education is effective education' (Moskowitz 1978, 14), Rabab attempted to enable her students to experience moments of affirmation and accomplishment that enhanced their identities as users of English. She stressed the affective aspect of language learning and the development of her students' emotional self, seeing their emotions as being bound up with their cognitive development. She expected that 'the answers to her students' language learning problems are more likely to come from psychology than from linguistics' (Khatibi, Sarem, and Hamidi 2013, 49). Rabab was driven by the belief that students' happiness can enhance their performance while a feeling of sadness can cause them distress and frustration and affect their work.

Rabab discovered, however, that she had disruptive behaviour in her classroom and she decided to tackle it affectively.

> I am working on my relationship with my students. I have come across times where I just felt fed up with some students' misbehavior, but I continue reminding myself that I am dealing with young human beings and that one day I was just like them! I really feel that they are my younger sisters! I care about their future as well as their needs and interests! I started to move closer to them and understand them better, especially those who don't feel eager to learn English and who cause the disruptive behavior. I am happy to admit that some of them have actually started to change!

Rabab showed empathy and accepted her students as 'worthy individuals' (Arifi 2017) and imperfect beings with a lot of potential. She also accepted that they had different personalities and that they were experiencing barriers that undermined their learning and any effective engagement in the classroom. In response to their behaviour, she encouraged an 'autonomy-supportive' culture and a culture of 'trusting freedom' (Leach 2012). She moved beyond a preoccupation with controlling students in an effort to stamp out misbehaviour to a more trusting attitude that involved an expectation that they would be able to engage in self-discipline.

Rabab then decided to opt for 'self-assessment' as a means of committing herself to empowering and understanding her students better.

> I am planning to implement the 'self-assessment' strategy starting next week. I will ask my students to reflect on the lessons and their learning either through writing or orally. It seems that it is something that they feel eager to do and sounds effective for me as a teacher as well, as it gives me insights about what I should modify or improve. Therefore, I have decided to investigate this issue in my Action Research.

'Self-assessment' is a basic principle of democratic education and its absence from less-democratic societies like the Omani one has negative implications for students' self-esteem and autonomy, and the possibility of experiencing transformative learning (Amini and Amini 2012). Rabab therefore decided to analyse her students' problems to help her transform her practical and professional knowledge in response to their 'sociocultural agendas' (Parra 2010). Put differently, she shared and set up a principled relationship between herself and her students to facilitate their target language learning. This was best achieved via being a theorist and researcher and a professional who would adopt 'critical' action research as a self-reflective process on her practices and the context of the ELT social formation to construct other architectures and self-transform herself to give her life 'meaning, substance and value' (Kemmis 2009, 469) through understanding the consequences of self-assessment.

Nonetheless, Rabab was confronted with the bitter reality of the ultimate authority of the textbook and the role it played in depriving students of any motivation to learn English, as well as undermining the special relationship that she invested time and energy in building with her students.

> Since we were running out of time and we are burdened with a loaded syllabus that has to be covered by the end of the semester, I was asked to stop having games, using pictures or any other scaffolding material due to being 'a waste of time'! I started teaching in the traditional boring way! I am worried about how my students would feel! Will they still be interested as before? I don't think so! I feel bored myself! While I understand that my cooperating teacher is stressed as she is also under pressure by those above her, I don't feel that it is fair for the students. We need to care about the quality of what they learn rather than the quantity. Covering everything in the textbook never guarantees that learning has really occurred.

Rabab saw her primary role as one of a 'humanizer' (Matos 1996), not simply an instructor who drills her students to imbibe the requisite language skills. Her aim was to provide her students with dignifying and improving learning experiences. The games, pictures and scaffolding material she used complemented the textbook content and added fun and purpose to learning and injected new life into her classroom ELT, as opposed to the formal, restrictive and limited in scope textbook.

Ramla

Ramla decided to take an emancipatory stance and introduce change through challenging certain hegemonic practices. She spoke about the persistent one-size-fits-all approach and uniform education, which has given textbook knowledge supremacy over all other types of knowledge.

> The substitution classes I taught made it clear to me that my supervisor was right – 'classrooms are about realities'. The activity that worked well in one class did not have the same impact on the other. For the coming weeks, I am planning to adapt the textbook

> activities, so that it fits with the students' level and expectation and to avoid planning the same lesson for two different classes. I am about to try different methods to choose the most suitable one for my students.

Ramla showed 'respect' to her students (Leach 2012). She valued their human dignity and uniqueness as individuals, treating them as people who can think differently and make meaningful contributions to the lesson, drawing from their experiences and using materials and texts external to the mandated textbook.

In a series of statements in which Ramla made a list of things that she feels teachers as powerful transformation agents should do, she continued to reflect critically on certain hegemonic practices and the empowerment strategies she was trying to pursue in order to bring about change.

> From the four months I spent at school as a student teacher, I had the chance to see the reality of teaching in Oman from a wider perspective. First, I realize that implementing the theories and philosophies that we studied at SQU is not always the right choice. It's the teacher's responsibility to choose the most suitable method and adapt it to fit the students' level, needs, and interest.

Ramla made use of both her 'experiential' and 'received' knowledge (Wallace 1991) to engage in reflection, which helped her re-examine her decisions, experiences and knowledge, and which fed back into her practices. She referred to the practices of some of her ELT teacher educators at SQU, which involved requiring student teachers to adhere to the mandated textbooks, and telling and demonstrating to the student teachers how to teach rather than engaging them in collaborative talks to stimulate their reflection (Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi 2010).

Ramla then turned her attention to the role given to the mandated textbooks and the teacher's book as dominant and sacred texts, which control teachers' thinking and practices.

> Second, my cooperating teacher introduced me to the textbooks I was going to teach and the teachers' guide. However, I felt I shouldn't become a 'slave' to the teachers' book! I felt it could limit my creativity. So, I decided not to look at it until I finish preparing the whole lesson to see if it can give me any idea to adjust my lesson.

Al-Issa (2008) argued how certain teachers in the Omani ELT system choose to relinquish their skills and competence by adhering to the mandated textbook and teacher's guide, which affects their students' language acquisition and learning. Ramla tried to create an environment that fostered positive and respectful interactions and relationships and promoted dignity. She showed respect for her students through recognising their human-ness and valuing their diverse linguistic and social backgrounds, creative and reasoning abilities, and abilities to make meaningful contributions to the curriculum.

Next, Ramla turned her attention to her self as a teacher with certain beliefs and perceptions about ELT and the way to change them. She said 'Third, taking risk and making my own decisions is a major challenge that I have to face on my own to learn from my mistakes and to have my own style, without being a copy of another teacher'. Despite finding the prospect threatening, Ramla decided to take 'intellectual' risks to

elevate her students' potential for 'higher achievement and strong leadership' and maximise their 'motivation and cognitive development' (Koh, Yeo, and Hung 2015, 95).

Furthermore, Ramla spoke about the role of teachers as effective agents of change, who should make informed decisions to facilitate their students' learning. She wrote 'Fourth, teachers should work to change the incorrect dominant perceptions and beliefs at school by providing evidence of good and effective teaching that speaks louder than words'.

Ramla criticised the Ministry of Education for marginalising her role as an intellectual who can facilitate her students' learning. She wrote 'fifth, as a teacher, I have more knowledge about my students than the Ministry of Education. So, I should not follow the textbook step by step. I can add, omit, or adjust some activities according to my students' needs and interests'.

Ramla used her 'consciousness' or 'critical awareness of power and the exertion of power in the creation of political, sociocultural, economic inequities' as an indication of valuing her students' human-ness (Leach 2012, 61). She also showed social responsibility or the willingness or ability to act with her students' welfare in mind.

Ramla concluded her series of statements by critically reflecting on the marginalisation of teachers as effective agents of change and expressing the hope that teachers can still overcome such a situation.

> Last but not least, I realized that teaching is a long-lasting learning journey in which you will receive as much as you give. Despite the restrictions imposed by the others on us, there is no limit to develop as creative practitioners. Believing in our potentials can make a difference!

Ramla developed as a creative and conscious practitioner with an ability to understand, question and resist the dominant cultural values embedded in the system (Valett 1977). The use of 'our' clearly indicates a plan to continue resisting and bringing about change via the use of critical action to achieve collective self-transformation.

Aamna

Aamna reflected on teachers' practices as knowledgeable and experienced intellectuals who should be in a position to influence change. She first spoke about the teacher-centred practices that were dominant at the school where she was placed, their negative implications for students' affection and cognition, and her plan to introduce change.

> I noticed that the teachers are completely controlled by the textbook. They followed every single instruction in the textbook. They didn't allow themselves enough flexibility to focus on their students' needs. It is completely teacher-centered! There has been an obvious lack of creativity. I went to school with high expectations to see creative teaching to get excellent experience to be able to fulfill the new generation's needs. Unfortunately, what I found was mostly traditional approaches, which I didn't think fulfilled students' needs. Students need to be independent learners! I'm looking forward to emphasizing creativity in learning.

Moskowitz (1978, 109) drew an analogy between the humanistic approach and CLT, and argued that learners in both approaches are not be seen so much as 'full-time linguistic objects at whom language teaching is aimed, but rather as human individuals

whose personal dignity and integrity, and the complexity of whose ideas, thoughts, needs, and sentiments, should be respected'. Moskowitz considered English language teachers responsible for contributing to their students' 'self-actualising' process. In fact, what Aamna noticed and found was contrary to what teachers are expected and encouraged to do, which is to commit to opening up learning possibilities for their students through drawing on their broad repertoire of professional knowledge and making informed decisions to transform and enrich their students' learning and contribute to effective ELT policy implementation (Al-Issa 2005; Al-Issa 2007, 2014).

Aamna then spoke about her knowledge as opposed to the textbook's and how her experience made the difference to her students' learning.

> I was sometimes confused whether to teach the lesson to finish the syllabus on time, or to make sure that students have learnt effectively and whether to use some creative teaching techniques or to cover more than two tasks in one lesson to be able to finish the unit in the shortest possible time. My students are excellent! It took me a long time to understand their needs. I tried many techniques to discover their weaknesses and I managed to find out some. I work hard and always go to class fully prepared. It stimulated me to read more about the different topics we discussed in the lessons and to prepare tasks and activities, which were slightly above their level to challenge them and get the best out of them.

Aamna developed a critical consciousness of the ways in which the institutionalised political, cultural, social and economic inequities prevented students from realising their full potential. The integration of social and political issues into Aamna's education and training raised her consciousness about local issues and inequities that could potentially affect her students' consciousness.

Next, Aamna quoted examples about her knowledge and experience regarding transforming her students' learning.

> I also have a nice relationship with my students! I'm trying to create a friendly relationship with them. I'm paying attention to their interests and sharing my interests with them through some discussions we have during the class. I'm trying to motivate them and help them to eliminate any negative thoughts they have developed about themselves. I could feel the change! Some of them started telling me about the difficult quiz they've just finished or the assignment that they couldn't complete, and that they don't like some of their teachers. I was happy once, when I was talking with Haneen, whom I discovered that she was a good writer, but who never received enough attention from her teacher. I asked her once to bring me some of her writings and we talked a lot about them, which I felt had strengthened our teacher–student relationship. I was so happy when Ruba once came to me and asked me to help her to choose novels she wanted to buy when she visited the book fair. Another interesting story is when Hajer came to the teachers' room and was kind of nervous because of the English quiz. She wanted me to explain some examples to her because I told them the day before that they could come to my office if they needed any help. These situations increased my passion and curiosity to educate myself and search more for the importance of teacher–student relationship.

Leach (2012, 39) concluded that 'the development of personal student–teacher relationships is a humanistic characteristic as it demonstrates the value teachers place on human-ness'). Leach further concluded that 'the development of personal student–teacher relationships reveals teacher valuing of and concern for students as people rather than students as cognitive entities' (39). Aamna tried to be a committed friend, parent and caring person to her students. Such a positive student–teacher relationship,

according to Leach, 'can encourage students to approach teachers with academic issues' (39).

Aamna believed that she had the potential to acquire and develop her teaching knowledge and experience further to continue empowering her students and transform their learning.

> My next plan is to look for more experience. I don't feel that four months of teaching practice were enough to start teaching as a full-time teacher. I will try my best to find chances to enable me to teach various levels to acquire as much experience as I can. I want to try more teaching methods and techniques, which can only come through intensive practice. I need to be an agent of change in my classroom and empower my students with more values, knowledge, and skills. I want to change the idea that teaching is about textbooks, curriculum, exams, and grades and marks. The reality of teaching is way beyond all this!

Aamna developed a 'critical consciousness', and she was committed to facilitating the development of the same kind of 'critical consciousness' in her students, helping them understand the institutionalised political, cultural, social and economic inequities imbued in the ELT classroom and system, and be aware of how to confront them (Leach 2012).

Conclusion

The interesting, exciting and intriguing critical reflection journey came to an end around mid-May 2018; nevertheless, the learning lessons taken from that journey are yet to be reported. The reflective journals made the five of us see where we stood as humanistic educators in relation to our power to resist incomprehensible, irrational, unproductive, false, misleading and harmful traditions, and find solutions to problems. As far as the student teachers are concerned, evidence showed that they adopted certain practices that reflected the critical stance they took and informed decisions they made to resist the dominant ELT textbook-based culturalist ideology, which controls teachers and students and gives the textbook knowledge the upper hand and disturbs CLT policy implementation. They made great effort to resist the top-down approach imposed by the Ministry of Education where teachers are used as tools for transmitting certain traditions and knowledge via certain modes of delivery to serve certain interests. The four student teachers manipulated, adapted and supplemented the content of the text-book where appropriate and necessary to facilitate student-centred ELT. They tried and tested new theories. They took intellectual and moral control over their practices via becoming practitioners, theorists and researchers who could empower their students, transform the status quo and introduce democratic reform (Kemmis 2009), despite the position of schools as powerful socialisation and enculturation agencies with ideological agendas that conflicted with their own (Al-Issa 2008).

As far as my journey with my student teachers' reflective journals is concerned, I learned that preparing critically reflective teachers could potentially facilitate preparing linguistically adequate students, who could contribute to their country's economic growth and advancement (Al-Issa 2008). However, this is strongly linked with the role ELT teacher educators play as 'professionals' (Al-Issa 2005, 2017), which is a prerequisite for training student teachers to embrace critical reflection. I learned that

powerful ELT teacher educators can counter dominant ELT ideologies as promoted by the Ministry of Education and hence achieve quality and accountable second-language teacher education (SLTE) (Al-Issa 2017). ELT teacher educators have their own ideologies, which may not be necessarily in harmony with the context in which that particular ELT teacher education programme exists, but which might be helpful and useful for showing care and respect for their student teachers' emotions and cognition, and committing to social justice and democratic SLTE as a moral and political undertaking to face an ethical dilemma like textbook-based ELT (Al-Issa 2005, 2017). This is particularly important since ELT teacher educators at SQU have lacked strong disciplinary knowledge and hence failed to empower student teachers' cognition and affection, academic knowledge and professional development, which have reflected negatively on student teachers' abilities to reflect critically on the political/moral and social dimensions of Omani school ELT and hence transform the status quo. In fact, ELT teacher educators at SQU have been themselves found lacking familiarity with reflective practice, which has had negative implications for their student teachers' beliefs, thinking and performance (Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi 2010).

The world today is witnessing rapid changes and transformations that are largely attributed to ideological conflicts and contests, and more and more individuals are engaging in ideological struggles and debates that reflect the substantial injustice and inequality and lack of democracy surrounding and controlling the social arena. Millions of individuals worldwide are engaging in ideological discussions, even without knowing the word ideology, or know it but do not know exactly what it means; at least this is the case with the participants in this study, who had their own humanistic ideology which shaped their thinking and identities, but which they never recognised as an 'ideology', one that could counter another (culturalist) ideology, or that it could powerfully shape and drive group and individual beliefs, thinking and behaviour. The four student teachers is a small case, which resembles the larger case of a developing and third world country in the Gulf like the Sultanate of Oman, where ideological discussions and public criticism of policies and action against them are not a welcomed practice. However, more and more educated individuals are speaking the language of ideology in Oman today, either explicitly or implicitly, especially after the Omani Spring in 2011, which introduced a new and unprecedented political climate in which democracy and social justice could be discussed. In fact, teachers were at the fore of such awakening. They tried to challenge the unsatisfactory social and political status quo governing education by highlighting and questioning its lack of credibility and accountability, arguing against its different weaknesses and drawbacks, and suggesting solutions for combating corruption and providing a better life for teachers and students.

Therefore, as a humanistic teacher educator, I am determined to continue speaking the implicit language of ideology with my student teachers behind the ELT Methods One and ELT Methods Two courses closed doors and during my student teaching supervisory visits to their co-operative schools to emancipate their thinking and behaviour and to empower them to develop as critical reflectors, who can in turn empower their students with the language knowledge and skills via introducing humanistic ELT in Omani schools to help them function in today's competitive and ever- and rapidly changing world.

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