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The Implications of the Teacher Educator's Ideological Role for the English Language Teaching System in Oman

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Teacher trainers/educators (the two terms will be used interchangeably) at the pre-service level are important agents and influential raw models for their trainee teachers. They can contribute positively to the student teacher's socialization process via the progressive training modes they adopt, the informed decisions they make, the critical reflection and analytical thinking abilities they demonstrate, and the epistemic power and experience they possess and exhibit. In rigidly centralized and hegemonic educational systems, like Oman for instance, educators should be in a position to equip their prospective teachers with theoretical and practical tools to help them become efficient agents of change.

Introduction

The quality of training and education student teachers receive from their trainers in turn largely determines the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of English as a second language (ESL) policy implementation. The central role of teachers as effective agents of change has been emphasized by the document *Philosophy and guidelines for the Omani English language school curriculum* (Nunan, Walton, & Tyacke, 1987), which I will herewith refer to as the National English Language Policy/Plan (NELP).

This research paper, hence, triangulates data from semi-structured interviews made by different agents involved in the Omani English language teaching (ELT) system, the NELP, and pertinent literature. It critically discusses such statements and the various powerful ideologies embodied in these statements and examines

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their implications for initial second language teacher education and second language policy implementation in the Sultanate of Oman.

Narrative

In 1989–1990 the first cohort of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) final year ELT student teachers were at my school for their teaching practice. SQU is the only state-owned university in the Sultanate that produces over 100 male and female Omani ELT teachers annually. I was then Head of the ELT Department staff at the oldest and largest secondary school in the Muscat Region, the capital. As a Head of Department I was asked to arrange the timetable for the student teachers and to ask my colleagues in the Department to cooperate with the SQU practicum supervisor. This involved attending classes taught by these student teachers and providing them with necessary support and feedback. The Omani education system did not at that time have an official mentoring system.

I observed these student teachers and gave the required help and guidance when and where necessary. My colleagues and I were worried about the technical abilities of these student teachers. After spending 4 years at university, how could these student teachers perform so poorly? They had several classroom management difficulties and problems, for most of the time followed the teacher's guide religiously, seldom if ever took any initiatives or made informed decisions about their learning/teaching contexts, and in some cases taught "traditionally," teaching grammar explicitly, sometimes teaching English through Arabic, and teaching through memorization and copying. Such traditional features are still in vogue in many Omani ELT classrooms (Al-Issa, 2002). I also found out that these student teachers had not been equipped with any tools to help them critically reflect on their classroom practices. For instance, no attempts were made to keep journals or diaries or even complete any kind of feedback forms.

I spoke to them about their disappointing performance. Amongst the relevant varied answers I heard, one group said they were teaching the way they had been taught, while another group said that they had been trained to teach this way.

Four years later and after I returned from England, having successfully completed my Master of Arts degree programme in education at the University of London, I was appointed as a seconded ELT inspector for the Muscat Region for 4 months. This was until my papers were ready and I was transferred to the Intermediate Teacher Training College to become an initial teacher trainer. During that period I visited a good number of schools to inspect different Omani and expatriate English teachers. In many of those schools SQU student teachers were appointed as novice teachers and others were affiliated for their practicum. My curiosity was once again aroused. The old memories about the first ELT SQU cohort were revived. What concerned me most was the need to find out how different the subsequent university batches were from the first one. There appeared to be hardly any differences or change.

English and ELT in Oman

English in Oman is the only official foreign language and a tool for "Omanization," the gradual and systematic replacement of skilled expatriate manpower by locals. English in Oman has institutionalized domains like business, education, and the mass media (Al-Busaidi, 1995) and has been receiving considerable attention and legislative power from the government. This is evident in the following excerpt extracted from the NELP (p. 2).

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

Moreover, *The reform and development of general education* (Ministry of Education, 1995) stated that

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

It has been found that Omanis learn English for functional purposes like traveling abroad, pursuing their undergraduate or postgraduate education, finding a white collar job, acquiring science and technology, and establishing contact with the target language culture (Al-Issa, 2002).

The authors of NELP described language as a "complex entity" and, hence, would like to see students taught English communicatively and managed as dynamic thinkers, language and knowledge manipulators, and active participants who can contribute to nation building, as Oman needs English for "transition" and "modernization" purposes.

However, students are fed with "selective traditions" (Williams, 1989) and "interested knowledge" (Pennycook, 1989), which represent the interest of certain dominant individuals and groups. According to Luke, de Castell, and Luke (1989) this guarantees that all students receive common and fundamental knowledge through exposure to certain authorized and prescribed texts and via predefined delivery modes.

Hence, the writers of the NELP see creative and innovative teaching as helping bring about positive change and as positively impacting on policy implementation. They like to see teachers taking initiatives, making informed decisions, and showing the will, power, and skill to go beyond textbook teaching and to meet their students' variable needs and wants. This is particularly important in a rigidly centralized, top-down, teacher-centered, textbook, transmission, memory, and exam-based system like the Omani one, where motivation is almost entirely driven by examinations and where English is treated like any other fact-based subject (Al-Issa, 2002).

Accordingly, the writers of the NELP supported the notion of teachers supplementing the mandated textbook and providing activities, opportunities, and space for their students to help arouse their integrative and intrinsic motivation, which the Omani education system seems to have overlooked, stimulate their interaction, and ultimately use the target language functionally and communicatively.

Dove (1986) argued that teachers are most free from interference inside the classroom, which makes them the sole interpreters of the curriculum for the learners and which makes it very difficult for the authorities to control their determination to resist policy implementation.

The authors of the NELP further wanted to see teachers demonstrating a degree of professionalism via critically reflecting on their experiences and practices and critically exploiting the dynamics of the classroom to help attend to their students' needs and wants and give ELT life. This is considered to come through variation and adaptation of techniques and materials, to which the SQU ELT teacher trainer should make a significant contribution.

The Role of the ELT Teacher Trainer

Teacher trainers can help student teachers see the relevance of the various interests and needs and reasons for learning English students bring with them to the classroom through careful selection and tuning of the programme and its content. They can help prospective teachers understand that language cannot be taught from one textbook and through exposure to the teacher only. They can help their student teachers see that language has multiple uses and values. Teacher trainers are powerful individuals and intellectuals who have a major role to play in the socialization of student teachers. They can, therefore, bring about change and influence policy implementation via their training mode(s).

Thus, problems of second language teacher education appear when teachers are not well prepared (Nadkarni, 1983; Rubin, 1983). This is bound to affect interpretation of the second language policy. Much of the success of educational programmes, as Sibayan (1983) argued, depends upon the teacher's competence. Dove (1986) wrote that

> If teachers have low levels of general education and are untrained or *inadequately trained*, they are likely to lack confidence and ability in undertaking any activities other than those which involve familiar and "safe" teaching routines. (p. 59; emphasis added)

This paper, therefore, examines the ELT teacher educator's role in influencing second language policy implementation from an ideological perspective, as this examination has implications for initial second language teacher education and second language policy implementation in the Sultanate of Oman. The literature on second language teacher education defines the roles and responsibilities of the ELT teacher educator (Edwards, 1996; Wallace, 1991), but falls short of offering any (ideological) discussion of the educator's central and powerful role in preparing student teachers as efficient agents of second language policy implementation.

Data Collection and Analysis

A major source of data for this paper is the different agents involved in the Omani ELT system. Their various discourses about the role of the ELT teacher educator in influencing second language policy implementation or otherwise reflect their diverse ideologies. However, other equally important and substantial sources of data are the literature and the official texts and documents which represent the ELT policy/plan as inscribed by the Ministry of Education. These texts entail all sorts of information that form a rich and fertile basis or source of data for this paper. All these discourses and sources of data will be used to contribute to the construction of a theory about the role of ELT teacher trainers in influencing second language policy implementation. Here, semantic and syntactic content analysis contributes to my general thinking and interpretation and the development of relevant hypotheses. There is a substantial amount of relevant information about the political, social, and cultural forces influencing, driving, and shaping the role of ELT teacher trainers in influencing second language policy implementation or otherwise.

Findings and Discussion

A British English language teacher trainer in the English Language Curriculum Department, Ministry of Education, described her trainer as somebody who had impacted on her training considerably through getting her to try out and test theories.

> I had a superb trainer. … It was very down to earth and it was theory and practice. It was varied. We had to present things. We had to do things. So, it wasn't just coming from the trainer in telling us how to do things. It was an open question in getting us to tell her what we already knew. I think it was a very positive experience.

Initial second language teacher education conducted in this manner can facilitate positive change. It is important that student teachers are exposed to a variety of theories and are given considerable time to practice and try out and test theories in order to be able to make decisions based upon professional experience and knowledge. Teacher training in this way creates teachers with epistemic power to defy the syllabus knowledge and language. This appears evident in this teacher trainer's statement when she says "it wasn't all coming from the trainer in telling us how to do things." Student teachers are not supposed to be spoon-fed. In other words, they should be respected for their knowledge and initiatives and encouraged to create space and contribute as well as acquire new knowledge and ideas. Gebhard (1997) argued that student teachers bring beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge to the formal training programmes, which makes each trainee unique. Gebhard stressed that educators should respect these attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge. Gebhard further argued that teacher development means provision of chances for teachers "to gain awareness of what they already know, believe, and feel about teaching and themselves as teachers, as well as provide opportunities for them to gain new knowledge, and develop their beliefs and attitudes" (p. 2).

By virtue of her responsibilities, this teacher trainer is in a position of power to influence positive change through encouraging her teachers to think critically about the materials at their disposal and bring some of their own skills, competence, and knowledge to the system. This is bound to contribute to attending to and developing the skills and abilities of the students, who need English for purposes beyond the language classroom.

Similarly, a British English language inspector described her pre-service programme tutor by saying that she "had an excellent supervisor." She provided a further description of her supervisor, saying

> Had the most wonderful man conducting that course. … He was very dynamic, very interactive and would make us all get up and do things. He used texts from around the world. This was the kind of things he encouraged.

"Get up and do things" once again refers to practicing and trying out various ELT theories. Moreover, using "texts from around the world" and encouraging such an exercise demonstrates the vital role initial second language teacher education can play in instilling power and confidence in the student teacher to move beyond the mandated textbook and positively influence policy implementation. In his case study of ELT in the Sultanate of Oman Al-Issa (2002) found that students bring to the language classroom various levels of aptitude, interests, and needs and that attending to all these requires a competent teacher as much as facilitates language skills acquisition on the part of the student. Language and knowledge acquisition are not solely confined to the mandated textbook, despite the fact that "education is much more controllable, if the teacher follows the standard curriculum" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 11). Shor and Freire further argued that adherence to the mandated textbook facilitates quantitative measurement of learning and, in other words, gives product an edge over process.

This inspector can use her positive "images" and "beliefs" to bring about positive change through encouraging her teachers to supplement the textbook and defy the textbook-oriented system.

Furthermore, Woods (1996) stated that beliefs about learning and teaching a second language lead teachers to interpret teaching situations and make decisions about classroom practices. Al-Issa (2002) found that Omani student teachers of English hold various beliefs about and images of different aspects of ELT, such as the content of the syllabus, how a foreign language is learnt and taught, and the place and role of grammar and vocabulary in ELT. Al-Issa stressed the power and influence trainers can have as key agents of socialization on their prospective teachers.

The inspector and teacher trainer discussed above have constructed such images about teaching and training, which can effect their inspection and training modes, respectively. In other words, they are in a position to transmit these images and beliefs about teaching English to their teachers.

Similarly, an American English teacher had positive recollections about her course tutors, who she believed were knowledgeable and experienced.

> I suppose I was lucky enough to be taught by people who had lots and lots and lots of TEFL experience and who had spent a long time traveling. They had spent a long time in various countries. So, we were taught by people who had hands on experience and we had a lot of great discussions and all sorts of workshops and we really appreciated because I knew what they were talking about. They weren't just talking things out of books and passing it around to us. They were talking from genuine experience.

"Workshops" usually include "discussions," which provide space for the teacher and the student teacher to develop professionally through critically inquiring and reflecting on his/her practices and the theories at his/her disposal. Such workshops open horizons of change and knowledge for the prospective teachers and inspire them to initiate change. Various disciplinary fields witness change constantly and the role of ESL teacher education is to equip the prospective teachers to understand this and appreciate it and remain in touch with their field. The three authors of the NELP would like to see teachers taking initiatives and making decisions about their students' learning and about their teaching.

Furthermore, "workshops" and "discussions" are distinctive characteristics of the progressive/humanist model the authors of the NELP support. The progressive/humanist model encourages putting the learner at the heart of the learning and educational process as an important human resource and help produce skilled and competent language users. Initial teacher education can bear a great resemblance to second language education, and the two processes can synchronize when student teachers are considered to be at the centre of the process. Student teachers can develop positive images about second language teaching through their training, which can consequently reflect on their practices.

A Sudanese SQU Faculty of Arts English language lecturer has been through a similar experience to that lived by the last two informants. He was trained to reflect and make decisions about his classroom realities.

> We had very liberal trainers. They trained us to be flexible, practical and realistic. They didn't impose any ideas on us. They said we don't want to produce an ideal teacher. We want to produce a realistic teacher. He said don't be a teacher who searches for what people call, or the so-called best method. There isn't any best method. So, be realistic and just be flexible and know how to adapt your techniques to your situation, your learners, your size of class and things like that. They said be open to ideas and the necessary things like adaptation, not stick to anyone's ideas and don't be imaginary, don't expect that you are going to just put language in the students' heads simply like that. It is a matter of adaptation, a matter of flexibility, practical. You should look at the classroom realities other than taking a beautiful book and going to the classroom.

The use of the word "liberal" indicates being trained to teach freely and enjoy a considerable deal of epistemic power at the knowledge possession and decision-making level. Being "flexible," "practical," and "realistic" reflect substantial characteristics of the skilled and competent teacher. Teaching flexibly means the teacher enjoys a high degree of skill and knowledge and can resort to and manipulate both when and where necessary.

Moreover, teaching through one textbook lacks flexibility. This appears evident in saying "you should look at the classroom realities other than taking a beautiful book

and going to the classroom." Teaching English through memorization, copying, and for examination purposes is neither practical nor realistic.

Furthermore, classrooms in Omani public schools are large, 35–50 students, educational technology is missing, and the time allocated to ELT in the curriculum is insufficient (NELP). These are "unpleasant" realities, which the prospective teachers should be trained to cope with since they are beyond their control. Learning English, as is the case in Oman, has been considered a bridge to national development and teaching liberally, flexibly, and realistically helps this materialize and helps the students systematically increase their exposure to the language and learn it and use it functionally.

Teachers in a context like the Omani one are thus required to teach and create opportunities for their students to help them use the language communicatively, purposefully, and functionally, while their role remains as directors and supervisors. Teachers can create space for their students to exercise critical thinking and inquiry. Professional growth thus comes via critical examination, reflection, and inquiry (Al-Issa, 2002).

It is interesting to see this SQU tutor advocating what is known as "eclecticism" by saying that "there isn't any best method." Eclecticism is best seen as a "healthy skepticism of educational innovation" (Blyth, 1997, p. 50) and as a methodological adaptation tool that best serves the learners' as well as the teacher's needs, provided it is "enlightened" (Blyth, 1997). Teachers, hence, are needs analysts and skilled and competent practitioners, who defy the textbook-based teaching regime. They resent what is imposed upon them, while making careful selections and decisions about what to take and what to leave. Pennycook (1989) argued that methods do not reflect classroom realities since they are more "perspective" than "descriptive."

In contrast, an Omani SQU Fourth Year English language student teacher did not appear to be experiencing positive supervision, which was attributed to conflicting views and beliefs amongst his trainers.

> The views or the ideas of the doctors at the university are very different at many times. For example, the doctor say to you don't start making warming up, start with another step, another doctor say to you no. For example, we have a doctor but at the beginning he said negative points is to walk around the class while explaining because this make students feeling tired by looking and searching for you. He said you have to stand up in front of the class so that everyone can observe you and you are like the TV, because if the TV is moving you can't follow. The other doctor said no, you have to move in the class, because when you stand in front of the class this will make the students feel boring and to make the class dead. I'm not sure where to follow.

This student teacher was complaining about being dictated to as to what to do, rather than encouraged to take initiatives, make decisions, and test out theories. Dictating techniques and methods to prospective teachers fails to give them the chance to experiment and critically examine and analyse what they are doing. It further gives them the impression that there is one "good" or "correct" way of teaching the target language. Teachers in such contexts fail to exercise any power over the mandated syllabus and demonstrate skill, critical ability, and competence. There are

individual differences, or actual "challenges," for the teachers and classroom expectations and experiences that students bring to the classroom, which should be analysed, understood, and exploited by the teachers.

This SQU student teacher had not been trained to be an informed decision-maker who could critically reflect on his classroom realities, critically evaluate methods and materials, and make informed decisions accordingly. The way he is being trained can influence his images of ELT and make him accept that the best way of teaching English is through total reliance on textbook knowledge and the teacher's book advice, which provides him with the ideal "dos" and "don'ts."

Critical reflective teaching thus helps teachers access their beliefs through questioning and assimilation of roles (Collier, 1999). Reflective teaching trains prospective teachers and teachers to critically analyse their own performance (Calderhead, 1989). Since teaching is always evolving (Collier, 1999), critical reflection is an important and essential characteristic of the "good" teacher.

Hence, teacher education conducted in the manner described by the SQU ELT student teacher above blocks change and impedes effective policy implementation. Teacher education appears to have failed to internalize the ELT policy due to a lack of internalization of the NELP and due to factors related to the university tutors' experience, skills, knowledge, training, and images and beliefs and the way they were presumably trained themselves. These factors can directly contribute to producing Omani teachers of English who in turn fail to produce skilled Omani language users who could help Oman face the challenges of a changing world and be a part of the new economies.

Within this vein, an Irish private education English language inspector, who has been in Oman for over 15 years and who had taught in public and private schools prior to becoming an inspector, did not think that the SQU tutors were sufficiently competent to conduct the ELT programme.

> I was a little bit concerned about their [the ELT SQU student teachers] advisors as well. Did they actually have the training and the background themselves, because it's all very fine insisting on doctors, but they need to be people who have actually done a lot of teaching themselves. You know it's important of the theory, but you have to have people there on board who are good practitioners themselves.

It is thus important to state that the ELT Curriculum and Methodology Department at SQU recruited four male Arab doctoral teacher trainers (two Jordanians, an Egyptian, and a Yemeni) and two Omanis (a male and a female). While the female lecturer had a Ph.D. from an English speaking country, the male lecturer obtained his first degree from the SQU and a masters degree in the UK and is now reading for a Ph.D. in the UK. This has been SQU policy in relation to recruiting Omani academic staff. The policy rests on the philosophy that graduates of the SQU are most familiar with its systems and requirements and hence can best contribute to its development. Graduates of the SQU who have achieved a distinction in their first degree are awarded a masters and/or a doctoral scholarship to return as university tutors. Prior to this they are appointed as demonstrators for a few months before they are sent to pursue their higher education.

Rivers (1983) argued that teacher trainers in EFL college departments are not always specially trained for the task. Rivers argued that those who join the department are often accepted on the basis of their research publications. She also pointed out that trainers had not had any teaching experience since they left high school. Rivers also claimed that such trainers may lean more towards teaching literature or poetry than training teachers and hence stressed the importance of careful recruitment of teacher trainers. Rivers believed that trainers should be "open-minded," "perceptive," and professionals, and practitioners who "should have some close association with an ongoing teaching program" (p. 199).

In addition, Rivers considered the variable cultural backgrounds of the trainers, as is the case at SQU, and believed that such trainers knew least about the local school contexts in which they existed. This is bound to create ideological conflict, which has negative implications for policy implementation.

Conclusion

I have discussed the role of ELT teacher trainer as it influences second language policy implementation. There have been powerful ideologies in statements made by various agents and the authors of the NELP, which are supportive of the trainers and teachers as skilled, qualified, competent, needs analysts, and critical and reflective practitioners. These characteristics can influence change. They further have their implications for the training of Omani student teachers at SQU and in the Arab World. Education in general and ELT in specific in the Arab World, part of the large Third World, share a considerable number of "traditional" characteristics that have been discussed above. Books and papers have been published which stress teaching English communicatively and functionally and the important roles teachers can play here so as to give ELT life and meaning and equip the learners with marketable skills necessary for tomorrow's competitive and shrinking world.

ELT educators have a significant role to play in making this happen. The degree of professionalism and awareness of the changing educational and language education philosophy they possess and continuously develop can impact on the prospective teachers' ideologies and help produce teachers with power, skills, and competence, who in turn help prepare students for the present and future, local and global, and economic and social challenges and demands.

The findings revealed that educators have their own ideologies, hidden agendas, philosophies, perceptions of, beliefs about, and images of ELT as a concept and practice, which are reflected in their modes of training and which are mainly related to their education and field experience. Such ideologies, beliefs, images, etc. might be helpful and useful, but not necessarily in harmony with the context in which that particular teacher training process is taking place. Each educational context round the world is somehow unique in its philosophies, orientations, structures, and modes of policy implementation. Hence, ESL teacher educators need to analyse and understand this. In other words, they need to be dynamic analysts and thinkers and critical

reflectors themselves, prior to training their trainees to be so. Like teaching, training is ever evolving too, as it is closely associated with political, economic, social, and cultural contexts that powerfully determine ESL policy formulation and implementation. Educators, therefore, should themselves test out training theories and methods and take what works best in favour of their trainees and the particular system in which they exist. This in turn can reflect positively on their trainees' perceptions, beliefs, images, and ideologies, as the discussion revealed. It has been found that educators are powerful socialization agents who can be influential raw models for their prospective teachers.

To end, two of the agents discussed in the paper made claims about the SQU trainers' mode of training and professional background, respectively. Such claims can form the bases for future research, which can focus on the SQU ELT educators' competence, qualifications, and ways of training.

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