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The Implications of Implementing a 'Flexible' Syllabus for ESL Policy in the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract ■ The education system in general and ELT in particular are rigidly controlled in the Sultanate of Oman, which gives teachers little room to supplement the mandated textbook. This article, hence, discusses ideologies about the 'flexible' ELT syllabus and the role of the teacher's professionalism in the syllabus implementation process.

One of the powerful 'ideologies' that govern ELT in the Sultanate of Oman is thus the 'neocolonial/communicative'. Another powerful ideology is the 'professional', which is exclusively concerned with the teacher's professionalism. These two ideologies complement each other and are present in the various statements made by different agents involved in the Omani ELT system, the pertinent literature and the *Philosophy and Guidelines for the Omani English Language School Curriculum* (Nunan *et al.* 1987), herewith referred to as the National English Language Policy/Plan (NELP). However, these seem to conflict with the 'colonialist/culturalist' ideologies incorporated in the content of the materials produced locally by the Ministry of Education—*Our World through English* (OWTE) and its suggested means of implementation. This is considered to negatively impact 'Omanization'.

This research paper, therefore, critically examines and discusses this state of ideological conflict via triangulating data from semi-structured interviews conducted with different agents involved in the implementation of ELT in Oman, pertinent literature and policy texts and NELP. Such examination and discussion have their implications for second language policy implementation.

Keywords ■ ELT, flexible, ideologies, NELP, OWTE, syllabus.

English in Oman

Oman needs English – the only official foreign language in the country, as a fundamental tool for 'modernization', 'nationalization' and the acqui-



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sition of science and technology (Nunan *et al.* 1987; Al-Alawi 1994; Al-Busaidi 1995; Al-Balushi 1999; Al-Issa 2002). Al-Alawi (1994) and Al-Issa (2002) found that people in Oman learn English for communicative purposes and that functional knowledge of English is important for travelling, pursuing higher education, finding a white-collar job, science and technology acquisition and cultural analysis and understanding. English has been receiving legislative power from the state and has institutionalized domains like the mass media, business and education (Al-Busaidi 1995).

Hence, 'functional competence' (Nunan *et al.* 1987) in English is a prerequisite for finding a white-collar job in the private as well as the public sector in the Sultanate at present. Al-Busaidi (1995: 268) argues that 'it is virtually impossible for non-English-using personnel to be employed in technical jobs or in the country's private sector, except in low-skilled or manual jobs'. Within the same vein, Al-Balushi (2001: 5) writes that 'English came to be perceived by many Omani officials and authorities as the second language through which all economic, technological, vocational, educational, and communicative functions could be conducted'.

Moreover, Al-Busaidi (1998) writes that English is very important for socializing and integrating with the non-Arab tourists and foreign labour force in Oman, which represents countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Philippines and others.

English is further the medium of instruction in the science-based majors at SQU. English is also the medium of instruction in other public higher education institutions like the Higher Colleges of Technology, the College of Banking and Financial Studies and the Ministry of Health Institute. English is further the medium of instruction in all private colleges and universities. Moreover, English is taught in public schools from Grade Four, while it is taught from Kindergarten One in all private schools. There are four bilingual private schools, which teach all subjects in English, except Arabic and Religious Studies.

ELT in Oman

Al-Toubi (1998) conducted a research study, which included 82 multinational teachers of English. He found that the Omani curriculum fails to prepare learners for communication in English as it lacks authentic materials and communicative language practice activities. He further found that the activities are of a controlled nature and that skills are not integrated.

Adherence to one fixed and mandated syllabus, as it is the case in Oman, prevents the students from thinking analytically and critically and largely confines their exposure to the 'selective traditions' (Williams 1989) and 'interested knowledge' (Pennycook 1989) transmitted by the national textbook. This guarantees all students receive common and fundamental knowledge through exposure to certain authorized and prescribed texts (Luke, de Castell and Luke 1989).

Textbooks are targeted at the entire student population nationwide since they are an economic means of education. In other words, they fail to take individual needs and interests into account (Al-Toubi 1998), but rather expose all the learners to the same textbook, which conveys the ideologies (beliefs and ideas) of the dominant group(s).

Al-Alawi (1994) and Al-Hammami (1999) criticize the education system in Oman and describe it as authoritative and highly centralized. The teaching methods employed by the teachers have been governed by and controlled by the Ministry of Education and those restrictions imposed upon the teachers to use the teacher's guide have influenced their teaching methods (Al-Alawi 1994).

Al-Balushi (1999: 4) writes that 'teaching methodology still tends to be very formal and emphasizes a largely passive role for students with an emphasis on rote learning'. Moreover, the curriculum is implemented in a top-down mode, which makes it very difficult for teachers to engage in any kind of change or innovation (Al-Toubi 1998).

A teacher-proof material like OWTE does not allow teachers sufficient space to contribute to their students' knowledge and experience. Such materials relegate the teachers' epistemic power to a secondary place.

Research Questions

Within this context, the following research questions are asked:

1. What are the key discourses in NELP about the ELT syllabus and the teacher's role in implementing it?
2. What discourses and ideologies inform the views of the agents involved in the Omani ELT system about the ELT syllabus and the teacher's role in implementing it?
3. What are the key discourses in OWTE about the ELT syllabus and the teacher's role in implementing it?

Data Collection and Analysis

The major sources of data collection in this article are the agents involved in either implementing or supervizing the implementation of OWTE in the Omani second language education system—GSC students, teachers, inspectors, school heads, student teachers and SQU tutors. These agents represent various social, cultural, academic and educational backgrounds. Their various discourses about implementing a flexible syllabus reflect their diverse but direct and explicit systems of thought and conceptions of the world. Such diversity in backgrounds and ideologies directly and indirectly influences syllabus implementation and teacher professionalism.

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 and the Omani ELT syllabus produced by the same Ministry. These texts entail all sorts of information that form a rich and a fertile basis or source of data for this article. All these texts and discourses—sources of data—which reveal knowledge, ideas, beliefs and experiences, will be used to contribute to the construction of a theory about implementing a flexible syllabus in the Oman ELT system and the role of the teacher in this implementation. *Our World through English Teacher's Guide Elementary Level* (1997–1998) and *Preparatory Level* (1997–1998), which are produced locally by the Ministry of Education, are two official support documents that were written by the authors of the national English textbook—OWTE. The guide written for the Preparatory level is also used by the teachers at the Secondary level. These two books, which discuss the 'philosophy' of the OWTE materials, are written for the multinational teachers and ELT inspectors in the Sultanate. They define various techniques and methods for teaching OWTE.

The data extracted from the aforementioned sources was analyzed to identify key lexical items structuring the discourses of the agents, the pertinent literature and the various policy texts, and help identify any inter-textual similarities, agreements and harmony. Here, semantic and syntactic content analysis contributes to the author's general thinking and interpretation and the development of relevant hypothesis. There is a substantial amount of relevant information about the political, social and cultural forces influencing, driving and shaping the implementation of a flexible ELT syllabus and the role of the teacher in this implementation.

*Defining Neocolonial/Communicative, Professional
and Colonialist/Culturalist Ideologies*

The term 'ideology' refers to the 'shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interests of dominant groups' (Giddens 1997: 583). However, this should not mean that the articulation and production of ideologies is confined to the dominant group(s).

Gramsci (1971) argues that ideologies are the cement upon which 'hegemony' is built and are the product of different social practices and history. This indicates that ideology is related to power, as held by a particular group or groups in the society. The relationship of ideology to power is that '...it legitimates the differential power that groups hold and as such distorts the real situation that people find themselves in' (Burke 1999).

As far as the 'neocolonial/communicative' ideology is concerned, and within the context of this paper, it can be argued that this kind of ideology is more associated with the international role and place of English language at present as the world's first international language and one which has multiple functional uses and brings the international community closer (Fishman 1996).

There is also the explicit imperial role being played by the USA at present and the implicit role played by the UK in the past to protect and promote capital interests (Dua 1994). The Third World developing countries need English to establish channels of communication with the world in general and the USA—the world's symbol of capitalism and only super power today—in particular as these countries share economic interests with the USA. English is associated with modern technology (Spolsky 1998) and the developing countries need technology and science for modernization, economic progress and transition purposes. Teaching and learning English communicatively, hence, facilitates the acquisition of such technology and science for the reasons pointed out above.

So far as the 'professional' ideology is concerned, and within the context of this article, such ideology is concerned with the teachers of English. Teachers are expected to be skilled and professionally developed and dynamic and independent thinkers to effectively manage their classrooms. Behind the closed doors of the classrooms, teachers are required to possess a vision to innovate and create and make informed and enlightened decisions. This is since they are the sole interpreters of the philosophy and guidelines of teaching English and intellectually powerful and competent

professionals, who are in a strong position to draw on their deep and varied knowledge in order to enrich their learners' learning and education.

Therefore, it can be argued that the professional and neocolonialist/communicative ideologies are not just counter to the 'colonialist/culturalist' (described below), but also complement each other. A professionally developed and competent English teacher can help produce a competent language user, who can help contribute to the country's national development via efficient use of English in various walks of life.

The colonialist/culturalist ideologies are more associated with confining the transmission of the dominant group's cultural values, concepts, beliefs and ideas to the ruled groups via mandatory schools texts, which entail certain predefined official knowledge. This occurs via certain modes of knowledge delivery. Language in particular and education in general, hence, become subservient to the historical, social, economic and political interests of the dominant group(s). This, in turn, contributes to oppressing and suppressing thinking beyond the prescribed text and delegitimizes and marginalizes the English teachers' epistemic power and restrains them from playing the roles described and discussed above effectively inside the classroom.

Ideological Dimension in NELP and Other Pertinent Policy Texts

The writers of NELP support teaching English communicatively to help Omanis reach a level of English competence that can allow them to contribute effectively to the overall national development of the Sultanate.

Moreover, the *Reform and Development of General Education* (Ministry of Education 1995) states that

The government recognises that facility in English is important in the new global economy. English is the most common language for international business and commerce and is the exclusive language in important sectors such as banking and aviation. The global language of Science and Technology is also English as are the rapidly expanding international computerised databases and telecommunications networks which are becoming an increasingly important part of the academic and business life (1995: 5A-1).

The discourse here is one of technology and science acquisition and economy progress. Both (computer) technology and world economy are largely dominated and controlled by the world's only super power at present—the USA—which necessitates the acquisition of English for a developing country like Oman.

The authors of NELP state that language learning is a 'complex, multi-faceted, multifunctional entity...learned by different learners in different ways' (Nunan *et al.* 1987: 2) and that '...different learners will exhibit different degrees of skill in different aspects of language use' (1987: 2). In other words, learners have variable degrees of aptitude and interest.

The writers of NELP, hence, encourage developing tasks that cater for various levels and can be undertaken by mixed proficiency groups. They further consider integrating skills and attending to and analyzing students' needs as necessary practices that teachers should be capable of carrying out in order to enrich the language learning process.

The authors of NELP agree that it is important that students are given interesting, meaningful, interactive and challenging activities that encourage problem solving and analytical thinking. In other words, the space given can help the teacher analyze some of his/her students' needs and interests, maximize and vary their exposure to and practice of English, pick the right material and design appropriate activities that foster and encourage meaningful language use.

Moreover, Nunan *et al.* believe that materials like stories and videos contain a high degree of cultural element and natural language, which can contribute to the learners' overall language improvement. The writers of NELP, hence, draw attention to resources and state that provision of better resources and investing more in the ELT materials should contribute to better quality of education.

They suggest building some flexibility into the materials to allow the teachers the opportunity to bring some of their own knowledge and experience to the classroom. They suggest improving efficiency of delivery as a means of implementing a challenging syllabus.

Nunan *et al.* look at the characteristics of the good English teacher as fundamental for demonstrating the ability to create and supplement the syllabus and for bringing about positive change. The authors of NELP thus mention developing '...a confidence which allows teachers the freedom of adding their own activities and materials so that they do not rely on the set books' (Nunan *et al.* 1987: 8). This encourages teachers to become informed decision makers, dynamic thinkers and reflective practitioners.

Ideological Dimension in Agents' Statements

The following GSC student believes that English at school is '...not that hard. I want something more hard than it is. It's a bit poor...the book is a

bit poor. It's not very difficult.' He goes on to provide an example about the simple things students receive at school by saying: 'just a story and just a paragraph, or answer, or give us reference, or what does it mean, or where do you go for your holidays, or a bit listening, that's all'. He says that he would like to have 'something a bit difficult'. He adds: 'I went to the British Council and I saw the difference between the British Council and our books'.

The language the textbook presents appears to lack challenge. 'Challenge' here could be seen within the perspective of using language functionally and for accomplishing things. Students have a variable level of aptitude and bring individual differences to the second language learning classroom, which requires a varying degree of attention. However, second language education in Oman seems to have overlooked this vital point.

Furthermore, reference is being made to the 'British Council' by the second student. The syllabi used at the British Council are normally imported syllabi from Longman, Oxford or Cambridge, which are written for an international audience and which entail a high degree of cultural component. One of the reasons behind learning English in Oman is for cultural analysis and understanding. What is more, these syllabi are accompanied with support material packages like compact disks, audio tapes, video tapes and workbooks. This varies, facilitates and enriches exposure to the second language. Moreover, teachers at the British Council have the freedom to supplement the syllabus in any way they like and bring to the classroom whatever material they see appropriate.

Students are, thus, powerful agents of socialization (Doyle 1979). Doyle stresses that pupils are significant and influential socializing agents, who can positively influence policy implementation via influencing the teacher's practices and decisions s/he makes inside the classroom.

The following SQU Third Year ELT student teacher believes that '...the curriculum at school is very, very, very easy. I think it isn't helpful really. I've been taught at school something which is different from the university. It was too easy, really not helpful.'

There is use of the word 'helpful' here, which can mean, in this student teacher's case, English for job, education and other communicative purposes, such as travelling, for instance. There is reference being made to the gap between the English presented at school and at university. In other words, OWTE, with its current status, does not seem to prepare general education students to embark on their university studies with sufficient efficiency and capacity. Thus, students at SQU do reports, assignments

and projects, which sometimes include a genuine research component. They also review literature, engage in critical thinking, inquiry and examination, collect data from various sources and argue, discuss, criticize and analyze what they read and find in forms of presentations.

Saur and Saur (2001) argue that the kind of English presented in secondary school is different from the kind of English the students need for entry to an English-medium college or university.

While the GSC student and the Third Year ELT SQU student teacher looked at the flexible syllabus from the point of view of challenge, the following SQU Fourth Year English language student teacher, who has started his practicum, believes that expert teachers should be given some kind of freedom. He believes that OWTE should include one unit that allows the teacher freedom to bring his own experience into the syllabus and the classroom.

I think the flexible syllabus is the most beneficial one. I mean we are not supposed to stick ourselves upon the activity book or the teacher's guide we are given from the Ministry of Education. It should be a little flexible. I mean there should be freedom for the teacher, especially the expert one.

The same student teacher then elaborates on his statement and defines the concept of 'flexibility'.

For example, if we give them [the teachers] a unit, in this unit we tell them that you are free to do anything you want to do in this unit. If the book has four units, three free units from the Ministry and one unit for the teacher to do whatever he [the teacher] wants...he can, for example, bring videotapes and bring stories for the students.

These two student teachers can positively impact policy implementation via adopting some flexibility in their teaching after graduating from SQU and being appointed as a full-time teachers.

The concept and notion of the flexible syllabus is defined and interpreted differently by this Omani private school head, who is in his mid-forties and who learned English through rote learning. He believes that the teacher should be assigned the responsibility of designing the syllabus for his/her learners, while the Ministry of Education provides the guidelines.

There has to be a syllabus, but this should not mean a textbook. A syllabus is a plan or a general guideline for all the teachers to follow in a certain educational system. However, a large room should be left for the teacher to be able to make use of different references that help and

facilitate the use of different language skills such as speaking. I doubt there is a book that combines all these language learning and teaching particles...however, a number of aims and objectives should be outlined for the teacher to try and achieve such as speaking, writing and grammar. I think if we specify the aims and then allow the teacher to move within this framework, I think he will be able to cover a complete syllabus provided he has the right characteristics.

While the student teacher suggested partial flexibility, this school head believes in teaching without a textbook. There are strong ideologies about the role of the textbook in failing to teach the students all the language and knowledge. This is evident in his statement 'I doubt there is a book that combines all these language learning and teaching particles'. An international language like English is used today to access multiple streams of arts-based and science-based knowledge and confining teaching it from a single textbook appears to defeat such a purpose.

Moreover, this school head elaborates on the teacher's 'right characteristics' by acknowledging that teachers should be highly qualified, well-trained, knowledgeable in their field, skilled, experts at arousing their students' interest and open to accepting new teaching methods and approaches in order to be able to implement a flexible syllabus.

They [the teachers] should use advanced methods and approaches. Teachers are required to adapt to the new and modern methods of teaching so that they enrich the students' academic and practical life... I think teaching English requires advanced skills.

This school head can influence policy implementation through getting his teachers to analyse and respond to their students' needs and make informed decisions about what to teach and what to leave out. Al-Issa (2002) found that school heads are powerful individuals with sanctioning power over the teachers.

The following Irish ELT inspector defines and interprets the flexible syllabus from the point of view of the teacher being in full control of the syllabus design. She thinks that the teachers should be free and should be encouraged to provide, design and create their own material. She wants the teachers to play a more powerful and dynamic role with respect to decision making and initiative taking.

I personally wouldn't have any books for the kids. I would have lots of material available for the teachers. For example, a variety of resources available to the teachers, with children having folders rather than a book.

Private schools in Oman are free to teach an imported textbook beside the locally produced one. Teachers in private schools are also freer than their counterparts in public schools to supplement the syllabus and go beyond it. They are also freer to adopt the teaching methods and techniques they feel appropriate for their learners. Moreover, private schools in Oman are better equipped and have no more than 20-25 students in each classroom. Better equipment here refers to photocopiers, overhead projectors and other resources such as books, stories, magazines, newspapers, labs and computers, for example.

By virtue of her responsibilities and position, this inspector, who has sanctioning power over her teachers, wants teachers to be dynamic and autonomous decision makers with regard to choice of syllabus and materials.

Similarly, the following Omani public school teacher, who is in her mid-thirties and who is a product of a textbook-based system, advocates that needs analysis should be carried out by the teachers themselves. She believes that teachers should be given some space to prepare their own material in light of their students' needs.

I like the teacher who prepares his own material. I mean there should be some freedom like the other countries for the teacher to choose the material by herself and to find out what the students needs and give them, rather than the material ready.

There are strong counter colonialist/culturalist ideologies embedded in this inspector's statement about the role of the textbook-oriented system. The use of the word 'freedom' indicates the confidence and power that should be given to teachers to create and innovate and to contribute to enriching their students' communicative repertoire. In other words, teachers, as informed decision makers, can vary their techniques, activities and materials, test out theories and reflect critically on their practices.

This teacher can impact policy implementation positively by supplementing the syllabus and bringing some of her own material to the classroom. Dove (1986) argues that teachers are most free from interference inside the classrooms, which makes them the sole interpreters of the curriculum for the learners, and which makes it very difficult for the authority to control their determination to control policy implementation.

The following Sudanese SQU English language lecturer teaches vocabulary and reading courses to English language and ELT specialists at the Faculty of Arts and supervises ELT student teachers' teaching practice. He provides some examples of activities that can be seen in a flexible syllabus.

He looks at the flexible syllabus through his practices inside the university teaching common. He further defines his role as a teacher who makes the appropriate selection of materials, which suit his learners' needs and interests.

I don't have a syllabus. I make my own selections and decisions. I use my own material. I try to collect passages from social problems mostly from different resources, magazines and newspapers. I try to cover 20 passages in one semester. In addition to that I try to create, to develop various games and I have boxes of these games for vocabulary and pronunciation. Also, I try to use games based on what they listen and read. I make listening and reading a debate session other than traditional kind of read and answer comprehension questions... I try to consult my students because teaching a language is a matter of integrating all skills... So, I say what do you need? What do you want to practice?... Also, we have at the university a very good lab, multimedia lab, they see satellite channels, VCRs, they can come watch films and after they watch they can come and discuss what they see and hear. The lab facility really makes the learning a very enjoyable experience.

This lecturer believes in his epistemic power. He analyzes his learners' requirements and makes his decisions about what to teach accordingly. This lecturer has the characteristics the Omani private school head discussed and outlined above. In other words, he has the knowledge, skills, competence, space and the ability to create, manipulate and adapt.

Contrary to the Omani public schools, SQU is equipped with state-of-the-art support technology and resources. The examples he provides are referred to by the writers of NELP as important for varying and maximizing contact with the language, affecting the students' perceptions about ELT, encouraging students to engage in using natural, meaningful, functional and contextualized language and driving the students' motivation. Many of the materials this lecturer suggests contain a high degree of cultural component and to some extent authentic English.

Singhal (1998: 1) writes that 'current pedagogy stresses that language cannot be taught without culture' and that 'culture teaching is essential to language learning' (1988: 2). Also, Byram (1988) argues that the aim behind teaching the L2 culture in our classes is to achieve communicative competence. This is since communicative competence encompasses a cultural dimension where the language user is capable of mediating between cultures and establish communication, which takes differences into consideration (Byram and Risager 1999).

This Sudanese lecturer further considers exposure to the language to be varied and not solely coming from the textbook. There is an advocacy of integration of all four skills to help facilitate second language acquisition and communicative competence.

Furthermore, this Sudanese lecturer looks at the flexible syllabus from the angle of negotiating the content with his students. The questions 'what do you need?' and 'what do you want to practise?' not only reflect the space this lecturer has, but also reflects his high sensitivity toward the needs and interests of his students.

The use of the word 'consult' puts the teacher's role within a progressive perspective and reflects his respect for the learners' intellectual properties and capacity. The role of a consultant or a negotiator conforms more to the progressive/humanist models, which stress respectively the teacher's professionalism and the placing of the student at the heart of the educational process and consider him/her as a valuable national human resource.

This lecturer also attempts to link ELT with real life. The use of 'debate' signals giving the students opportunities to think, analyze, criticize, reflect and discuss. Analytical and critical thinking, which are fundamental and powerful skills for life, could very well lead to questioning and interrogation about the validity and credibility of the knowledge presented at school and the mode through which this knowledge is delivered. This is not a preferred situation in many (Third World and Arab) countries like Oman since it has multiple political and cultural implications.

Ideological Dimension in OWTE

OWTE is a topic-based syllabus at all levels. The topics are presented and practiced in skill cycles. 'A skill cycle consists of a set of procedures in which pupils first use receptive skills...to understand the topic language and then use productive skills to produce language about the same topic' (Teacher's Guide—Preparatory Level 1997–98: 3). Language production is controlled and confined to the content of the textbook, which represents the selective traditions and interested knowledge of dominant group(s). Knowledge external to and beyond the textbook content is not welcome. Teaching also follows a set of fixed and predefined routines that lack challenge and flexibility.

Thus, OWTE follows the presentation-practice-production (PPP) language model, where the teacher presents the new textbook language and the students practice and produce it. Flexibility in relation to choice of methodology, language and knowledge is absent.

The Teacher's Guide—Elementary Level (1997–98) invites teachers with one year's experience in using OWTE to carefully plan their own activities and materials, provided they achieve the aims of the lesson and gets the approval of their inspectors. There is space and freedom given to teachers here, but within certain predefined parameters.

The same book tells teachers '...once you have used the Teacher's Guide from start to finish, you are free to adapt to even use different texts or tasks' (Teacher's Guide—Preparatory Level 1997–98: 33). However, this is subject to very careful planning and most importantly the inspectors' approval. Freedom here is entirely associated with the time available at the teachers' disposal. Moreover, teachers are not free to make any decisions at this point as the situation is rigidly controlled and 'significant others' like inspectors, have power over teachers.

Sometimes the Teacher's Book makes suggestions for extra activities. You must decide how you spend this time... with a difficult lesson and a weak class you will need to find some extra time perhaps by omitting some easy steps or even by using extra lessons... Once you have used a Teacher's Book from start to finish, you are free to adapt it or even use different texts or tasks as long as you achieve the same aims... The easiest way to achieve these aims, however, is to follow the Teacher's Book... You must plan any changes very carefully. Your inspector, for good reasons, may insist that you follow the Teacher's Book exactly (Book One: 33-34).

Teachers are required to finish the syllabus in the predefined time: 'It is important... that you complete the syllabus as this is what you test' (Teacher's Guide—Elementary Level 1997–98: 33). Students are expected to produce the language of the textbook as the tests are largely, if not entirely, based upon the mandated textbook. Tests, hence, have the upper hand and encourage treating English like any other fact-based subject.

Furthermore, the Teacher's Guide—Elementary Level states that English was made deliberately easy for the average child to be aware of their progress. In other words, OWTE fails to take individual differences into account. The element of challenge at this stage for the 'good' or even 'excellent' students is absent.

Conclusion

The discussion has revealed various paradigms about the 'flexible' Omani ELT syllabus and English teachers' professionalism. This is mainly attributed to the variable experience and ideologies held by the various infor-

nants. However, there has been a consensus about the importance of designing materials that facilitate teaching English communicatively and free teachers from total adherence to the mandated school textbook.

There has been also a consensus about the role of English teachers as informed decision makers, active and dynamic practitioners and effective agents of change, who can defy the existing unsatisfactory situation and hegemonic forces and practices that obstruct effective implementation of NELP, and carry out policy implementation with sufficient competence, power and confidence. The powerful professional ideologies discussed demonstrate the fundamental place and role of teachers as competent managers of positive change.

The discussion revealed various 'dents' in the Omani language education system. However, a well-prepared and qualified teacher can tackle these problems with a degree of professionalism (Al-Issa 2002). Students learn English for various purposes in Oman. It is, hence, important that teachers understand all this and work towards achieving it. The Sultanate needs English as much as it needs competent teachers. Both have been found to be tools for achieving national development.

To this end, there is a pressing need for a thorough needs analysis. Times have changed and so have the reasons and purposes for learning English and the way through which it is learnt. The uses and values of English have evolved in accordance with the current speedy economic, political and social changes on the world arena. There is an urgent need to carefully scrutinize, analyse and understand the needs of the Omani learners and the perceptions of the practising educators and design a curriculum that would allow the teachers more power, space and freedom to facilitate positive change. Effective channels of constructive communication between the Ministry of Education, students and teachers is a prerequisite at this stage to ensure that second language education contributes to an efficient and smooth transition leading to a more economically and scientifically dynamic, demanding and challenging world.

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