

Alignment of the oral English curriculum and the communication skills required in the 21st century labor market and higher education: The stakeholders' perspective



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ABSTRACT

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skills.

Graduates from Omani schools are currently struggling at higher education institutions (HEIs) and in the labor market, mainly due to their lack of oral English communication skills, a 21st century skill that is in high demand. It is common knowledge that the rate of unemployment has increased and that the number of college students enrolling in English general foundation programs (GFP) is high. This study aimed at examining the perspectives of different stakeholders, such as secondary students, secondary English language teachers, curriculum officers, GFP academics and selected representatives from the business sector. The current study adopted a mixed-method research design to collect and analyze the data. Firstly, questionnaires were distributed to secondary students, teachers and curriculum officers and, then interviews with academics and business/ industry officials were conducted. The results revealed that the students and teachers were satisfied with the curriculum, while the curriculum officers, academics and business officials were not. These results suggest that the Ministry of Education (MoE) needs to consider some adaptations to the oral English communication skills taught in the current curriculum to meet the needs of Higher Education (HE) and the labor market.

Contribution/ Originality: It has been established that school graduates lack oral English communication skills and struggle later in Higher Education and the labor market. The issue was not studied from the point of view of all stakeholders. Hence, this paper provides an overview of the issue from the point of view of five different stakeholders namely, secondary school students, teachers, curriculum officers from the Ministry of Education, academics and representatives from the business sector.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is the fundamental reason for learning any language. The worldwide need for a lingua franca has increased due to globalisation, and English has become the official language of communication globally. It is no longer owned by its native speakers. This paradigm shift has, in turn, made English the official language of work and Higher Education (HE) (Al-Issa, 2006; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018; Hashemi, 2011).

Many European and Asian countries have realised the importance of equipping their youth with proper English communication skills for them to thrive in HE and in the labour market. It has become apparent that high school

education is not a luxury, but is a necessity if a country is to keep pace with the world, which has placed a tremendous amount of pressure on the quality of school education; hence, educational systems have undergone various reforms to meet the international standards and to provide a more market-relevant learning experience (Al-Barwani, 2002; Maclean, Jagannathan, & Sarvi, 2013).

Nations across the world, particularly developing ones, have acknowledged the status of English as a professional language of communication. However, English communication skills pose a challenge for most graduates, particularly in Asian countries, and are thus a hindrance to their further education and employment. It has been argued that these countries are still prisoners of their conventional approaches towards language learning and that the attempts to implement changes have not been successful due to many underlying issues (Farooqui, 2007; Martinez-Fernandez & Choi, 2013).

In Oman, English is the official lingua franca of communication amongst different nationalities, which makes it a major requirement for HE and employment. Oman has spent tremendous amounts of money on reforming secondary education, but the results have not been successful. Despite twelve years of English language learning, there are still many unskilled and unemployed people in Oman. One of the main reasons is the lack of oral English communication skills (Al-Issa, 2006; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016b; Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014). In his analysis of the English language in Oman, Al Busaidi (1995) warned that, if radical changes were not made, the result would be that which is being experienced at present, namely the bomb of unemployed youth, as Al-Barwani (2002) alerted. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the matter from the perspectives of stakeholders namely grade 12 English teachers, grade 12 students, curriculum officers, General Foundation Program academics, and business people.

The study addresses the following questions:

- What are the perceptions of grade 12 English teachers, grade 12 students, and curriculum officers regarding the oral English communication skills taught in the grade 12 English curriculum?
- What are the perceptions of the General Foundation Program academics and employers regarding the oral English communication skills taught in the grade 12 English curriculum in relation to readiness for employability and Higher Education?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The most fitting definition of oral communication skills would be that it is a combination of language proficiency and 'pragmatic' awareness and it "involves the ability to express oneself clearly and appropriately depending on [the] situation, topic, time, and place" (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a).

2.1. The Significance of Oral English Communication Skills at Work

"A degree may once have been a passport into graduate employment: it was indicative of a level of knowledge and intellectual ability;" (Harvey, 2000) however, nowadays, employability skills are a key performance indicator (KPI) for performance measurement (Weligamage, 2009). The skills in demand differ from one country to another and from one workplace to another, yet it could be agreed that oral English communication skills are highly demanded almost in every job (El-Sakran & Awad, 2012; Maclean et al., 2013; Pavlova & Maclean, 2013). When employers' demands were studied, communication skills were rated the highest and they were also the most frequent skills required in job advertisements (Lenard & Pintaric, 2018). In her study, Singh (2019) synthesized from employers interviewed that communication skills were not just language related, but also comprised people skills and attitude. Indeed, since English is spreading out globally, a communicative mastery of it is a prerequisite for acquiring almost any job (Butarbutar & Leba, 2023; Hashemi, 2011; Singh, 2012; Thao, Yen, Khang, Khoi, & Quyen, 2022).

Around the world, nations are in paradigm shift mode to keep pace with the global industry. In Europe, the concern with the lack of English proficiency has led to a massive amount of research getting funded to provide better 2nd language education. In Asia, due to the move from blue-collared jobs to white-collared jobs, high proficiency of English speaking is in demand (Bolton, 2008). India's 2020 vision has made it necessary to emphasize on employability skills after clearly noticing the lack of communication skills within graduates. In fact, "there is . . . an increasing expectation in what it is that an employee can 'do' rather than what he 'knows'" (Singh, 2019).

In the Middle East, English communication is as important, or even more than knowledge of content (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a; Thomas, Piquette, & McMaster, 2016). Thomas et al. (2016) provided some evidence based on their employer focus group discussion in Bahrain when they singled out English communication "as a unique selling point" to getting a job (p. 37). Similarly, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), employers of engineering companies ranked all communication-relevant skills high, indicating that they 'direly' needed these skills in their new recruits (El-Sakran & Awad, 2012). Thus, today's employers find communication skills much more essential than technical knowledge (Lenard & Pintaric, 2018).

In Oman, English is the only official effective lingua franca of communication between Omanis and non-Omanis (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016b; Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2014) hence "a powerful tool for . . . national development and Omanization" (Al-Issa, 2006). Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2016b) conducted a qualitative study on employees to find the importance of communicative skills at work and all participants thought highly of having a good oral language competency and related it with better opportunities within the organization. In fact, it has become common today that a mastery of English communication is an asset to step in the Omani labor market (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a).

English communication has opened the door for expatriates to be part of the Omani job market, yet it has made it harder for Omani school graduates or dropouts (Al Busaidi, 1995). Initially, "the Omanization policy is based on a principle that ensures that Omanis are properly trained and qualified before being appointed to positions currently held by expatriates", according to Al Busaidi (1995). However, the researcher also points out that it is not enough to equip graduates with an academic or vocational degree but also to acknowledge the importance of 'quality replacement' and the attainment of expatriates' replacement depends mainly on the English language proficiency. Al Busaidi (1995) stated that, "unless and until Omanis are competent in English, it is indeed inconceivable how they can possibly acquire the specialized knowledge or succeed in training, both of which are available through English (p. 127)". The majority of those who now graduate with a general school diploma in Oman can only work in repetitive and easy to learn jobs like factories, cashier, retail and some administrative jobs. These jobs do not require high oral English communication skills (Al Hooti, 2020).

2.2. The Significance of Oral English Communication Skills in Higher Education

Any higher education institution, that is seeking to deliver students who are internationally competitive and can take part in developing their societies, has to emphasize on English language acquisition. Unfortunately, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries were unsuccessful in equipping students with adequate English language skills for academic purposes (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a).

Presently, in Oman, English has become crucial for the nation's higher education, as it is 'the key tool of academic discourse' (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a). The reform in the educational system was supposed to inflict changes that will let education help in market and human resources' development (Al-Barwani, 2002).

Although Oman has invested massively to reform English education, school graduates are not equipped with the skills needed for higher education; therefore, most of these graduates have to enroll in intensive General Foundation Programs (GFP), initially founded to fill the gap between school and HE. This required a budget on its own, especially since GFP for some students might take as long as two years (Al-Barwani, 2002; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a; Tuzlukova, Inguva, & Sancheti, 2019). According to World Bank Report (2000), if secondary education is of

more quality, the need for GFP would be less in HEIs, which will make higher education more focused and meaningful (as cited in Al-Barwani (2002)).

2.3. Oral English Communication Skills in Theory in Oman

“The secondary level of education in particular plays a very critical role in shaping the human capital of a nation,” stated Ghailani and Khan (2004). From this perspective, the Omani government realized the need for a better system to reach international standards to increase the potential of economic growth (Al-Barwani, 2002; Al Hosni, 2016). Thus, the Post Basic Education Curriculum (PBEC) (grades 11-12) was implemented in 2007 to enhance the quality of English education. Al Hosni (2016) argued that the curriculum is made to equip the pupils with real life and authentic skills to prepare them for their careers. Its design is claimed to ensure that students are ready for a variety of career choices whether they want to finish their higher studies or enter the job market immediately (Al-Najar, 2016; Issan & Gomaa, 2010).

The Ministry of Education (2010) English Language Curriculum Framework listed all the general and specific objectives of the curriculum. One of these objectives clearly state that “by the end of Grade 12, students should be able to use English as in preparation for work or for further studies, and as a means of communication with the outside world” (p. 6). In her analysis of the English curriculum, Al Hosni (2016) believed that the national English textbooks provide a wide range of experiences as they are rich, relevant, authentic and motivating. Notwithstanding, Al-Najar (2016) questioned the notion of PBEC providing real life experiences, as she pointed out that it lacks a practical side.

2.4. The National Strategy for Education 2040

Although the crux of Vision 2020 was about deviating from dependency on oil and foreign labor, oil remains the main source of revenue in the country and the issue of expatriate labor is still afoot (The Educational Council, 2018). The main achievement Oman has made during this time is the enrollment rate for education in all stages. However, these graduates are facing issues regarding employment.

Therefore, The Educational Council (2018) tasked Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and other key institutions of the country to establish a strategy to raise the standards of education in Oman. They expressed the urgency of strategic planning in education, using scientific methods. This should be accomplished by identifying roles, responsibilities and interrelationships between concerned stakeholders. However, the recommendations to how this should be done were obviously still top-down, as various stakeholders were not involved in decision making. Another point raised in the Council was the quality assurance of education. This means that students need to be equipped with the 21st century skills and that teacher training should be an ongoing process. In addition, it has been recommended that the school system should develop different paths: technical, vocational and academic. Indeed, the statistics in 2021 show that there are 630516 Omanis between the ages of 15 to 24 (Indexmundi, 2021) therefore, Oman needs to invest in its youth who comprise a large proportion of its population.

2.5. Oman Vision 2040

To establish the significance of the topic, it is key to refer to some highlights from Oman Vision 2040 that are relevant to the current study:

- Vision 2040 clearly refuses the notion that reaching the goals is solely the government’s job. All stakeholders must be involved: citizens, public and private sectors. Only through such cooperation, communication and a comprehensive governance framework, the transformation to a better future can happen.

- Vision 2040 emphasized on lifelong learning and skills development. This should be accomplished by building national capabilities that are 'empowered' to take part in the society, leading to Omanis' development as people of the nation.
- Education, learning and national capabilities are a priority in Vision 2040. Improving the educational system at all levels in Oman will boost Omanis' confidence in their identity. This could be done by escalating the quality of all levels of education and embedding employability skills throughout the curricula. Furthermore, stakeholders ought to 'join the forces' to develop skill-based educational programs that will help enhance the skills of the human resources which in turn will strengthen the country's economy (Ministry of Economy, 2020).

2.6. Oral English Communication Skills in Practice in Oman

Even after the reform, the results were not satisfying, so researchers in Oman started questioning the gap between theory and practice. Al-Mahrooqi (2012b) looked at Omani higher education students' perspectives of the reasons of their low level of English and 85% of the participants blamed teachers. Not all teachers spend a good amount of time on speaking skills (Al Hooti, 2020). On the one hand, it could be generalized that students' struggle with English communication as a result of the 'entrenched' teaching methods (Al-Ani, 2017; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016b). On the other hand, Al-Issa (2005) explained that teachers do not have full power over the teaching methodologies and whatever power they have is very restricted within certain 'parameters' in a very top-down manner by the 'decision makers'. From this perspective, it could be said that the school environment does not match the guidelines designed for the system and that the educators are not well-trained to implement them (Al-Najar, 2016).

It is ironic that the same challenges that are facing PBEC were facing the previous curricula. Al-Barwani (2002) mentioned some of these challenges that are still applicable to date:

- Graduates are not getting employment;
- Graduates are not ready for higher education;
- Conventional teaching methods;
- Meager practical learning;
- Lack of teacher training;
- Schools fail to increase students' intrinsic motivation in learning.

On the whole, research on both Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) and PBEC (From grades 1 to 12) show that the expectations, not only for English but also for Arabic skills, were not met and that the change is insignificant; thus, the massive amount of money and effort the Omani government has spent to reform the educational system did not meet expectations (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a; Al-Najar, 2016; Al-Saadi, Tonawanik, & Al Harthy, 2013).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The current study adopted a mixed-method approach. Questionnaires were distributed to grade 12 students, teachers and curriculum officers and interviews with GFP academics and business officials were conducted to explore their perceptions.

3.2. Population

This study targeted various stakeholders as shown in the following tables.

Table 1. Population and sample for the stakeholders that were given questionnaires.

Stakeholder	Population	Sample	Returns
Grade 12 English teachers	1005	100	54
Grade 11-12 students	16933	200 (Only grade 12)	189
Curriculum officers	7	5	3

Table 1 presents the details of the population and sample of stakeholders that were provided with questionnaires. Whereas Table 2 exhibits the information of the population and sample of stakeholders that have gone through interviews.

Table 2. Population and sample for the stakeholders that were interviewed.

Stakeholder	Sample	Returns
GFP academics	10	9
Business sector	10	7

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Questionnaires

The questionnaire was adapted from Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova (2014) work; the researchers collected more than 50 communication subskills according to five different categories of communication skills. This comprehensive list covers almost all of the oral English communication requirements for HE and the labour market. A five-point Likert scale was used for the questionnaire; it is important to note that the student questionnaire was presented in English and in Arabic to ensure comprehension.

3.3.2. Validity

The tool was subjected to face and content validation processes prior to being administered to ensure that it was comprehensible for all the stakeholders, since it contained a significant amount of jargon. Validation was requested from selected people who had experience either in the field or in similar research, resulting in five validation responses. The responses confirmed the validity of the tool with minor changes in vocabulary.

3.3.3. Interviews

The questions that were asked mainly explored the perspectives of the interviewees with regard to the oral English communication skills that were taught as part of the grade 12 English curriculum. However, as the interviews were unstructured, the interviewees were asked other questions to allow them to elaborate or provide more details based on their knowledge, experience or willingness.

3.4. Procedures

Google Form was used to design the questionnaires that were later sent to the teachers, students and curriculum officers. Consent was taken from MoE to distribute the questionnaire to the stakeholders.

Table 3. Independent-sample t-test for students and teachers' responses.

Skill	Students		Teachers		T	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
General interpersonal skills	3.41	1.32	3.36	1.3	0.44	0.66
Linguistic skills	3.45	1.25	3.33	1.25	0.79	0.43
Pragmatic skills	3.61	1.3	3.53	1.24	0.59	0.56
Strategic skills	3.65	1.32	3.2	1.3	2.52	0.01
Professional skills	3.36	1.31	3.41	1.2	-0.31	0.76
Team work	3.76	1.3	3.56	1.22	1.16	0.25

Interviews were arranged with representatives from the business sector from various sectors that hired school leavers and with GFP academics from different colleges and universities in Oman. This was done by approaching certain institutes and requesting interviews.

3.4.1. Data Analysis

Two different data analysis approaches were used for the questionnaires. First, a T-test of the teachers' and students' responses was performed to determine the significance of the differences. Following this, it was decided that the responses of the curriculum officers could not be compared statistically to those of the teachers and students due to the small number of responses; therefore, they were assessed qualitatively and discussed separately.

Table 3 summarizes the results obtained from teachers and students using an independent-sample T-test.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Questionnaires

It could be said that the teachers and students mainly believe that the curriculum sufficiently covers all these oral English communication aspects as the means in all skills are skewed to agreement. As the standard deviations show, there is not much variation and all the responses are grouped around the mean. However, the comparison is not significant for all skills, except for Strategic skills ($t = 2.52$, $sig. = 0.01$). It seems that there is a small difference between students and teachers when it comes to the extent in which the curriculum covers strategic skills. At this point, even though teachers may think that the curriculum is not addressing strategic skills as much as students do, their mean is still quite high; hence, it cannot be assumed that teachers think there is a lack of strategic skills in the grade 12 English curriculum.

On the other hand, the curriculum officers' responses were different, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of the results of questionnaires for curriculum officers.

Skill	Curriculum officers	
	Mean	SD
General interpersonal skills	2.95	0.97
Linguistic skills	2.44	0.91
Pragmatic skills	2.18	0.89
Strategic skills	2.33	0.87
Professional skills	1.98	1.00
Team work	2.47	1.25

The results from the curriculum officers were discussed qualitatively due to the small number of the sample. The means for the majority of the skills were leaning towards neutrality and disagreement, except for 'general interpersonal skills'. It is worth mentioning here that general interpersonal skills cover the basics of communication skills like greeting, describing people, saying goodbye etc. There is no variation in the responses. It was assumed here that the curriculum officers did not believe that the curriculum is addressing all the oral English communication skills mentioned in the questionnaire.

It is truly perplexing that the end users think highly of their curriculum while the experts who were involved in creating it think it is not sufficiently teaching oral English communication skills. Despite this, a few students commented in the open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire that they do not fully rely on textbooks. They practice other activities to strengthen their communicative language. Some critical questions may arise from the questionnaire results: why would the curriculum department run a curriculum that they believe is not good enough? Does the curriculum department in MoE make changes based on informed scientific approaches? Could it be that the curriculum is fairly adequate, yet it is not being practiced in the right manner? This last concern can be related to the notion of teacher training.

Previous research indicates that traditional English language teaching is still taking place in Omani government schools and one of the main reasons is lack of proper teacher training (Al Hosni, 2016; Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014). The policy makers may develop a curriculum, but without teacher training, the teachers will address it their own way (Widodo, 2016). Many teachers do not spend enough time teaching communication skills and students in Al-Mahrooqi (2012b) criticized the teaching methods and held teachers accountable for their low proficiency in English. Notwithstanding these claims, Al-Issa (2005) argued that language teaching is top-down and restricted, and teachers are mere followers of these restrictions.

With regard to students, Al-Mahrooqi (2012a) found out in her study, which was an initiative to find the students' perspectives on communication skills, that students who graduate from schools, themselves, do not have a coherent idea of what communication skills are. Another study by Lenard and Pintaric (2018) that was done to compare the perspectives of students and recruiters regarding communication skills revealed that both parties have totally different directions. Since students are the receivers of the curriculum, hence, an essential stakeholder, they need to be well-informed about it Harvey (2000).

4.2. Interviews

Since the interviews were conducted with two stakeholders: General Foundation Program (GFP) English teachers and employers, it is more logical to look at these two categories separately, especially since they are two different entry points for school graduates. To differentiate between interviewees and maintain their anonymity, their initials were used to identify them.

4.3. General Foundation Program (GFP) Academics

4.3.1. Perspectives on School Graduates' Levels of Oral English Communication Skills

Seven out of nine teachers believed that school graduates do not have the necessary oral English communication skills for higher education. SS even said that "if their language skills are enough then we won't be needing GFP". In fact, one interviewee added that in Sultan Qaboos University's (the elitist university in Oman) entry exams, an insignificant number of students passes the foundation program "and this is an expensive year in HEIs".

It seems that the levels of communication in general are weak, according to the teachers. Most of the students are not able to speak about themselves or ask simple questions like "who is my teacher?" They choose to speak in Arabic with Arabic speaking teachers. SS and HS said that students actually prefer having Arab teachers for this specific purpose. Teachers feel like they have to "start from scratch" with their students. Not to mention that they are not used to speaking in front of the opposite gender, so a lot of times they refuse to practice whatever language they have.

Some of the reasons for the lack of oral English communication skills that the interviewees mentioned are lack of confidence, lack of motivation and limited vocabulary. SZ asserted that it is not only about vocabulary but also about critical thinking skills and having enough general knowledge. She said that you cannot communicate well if you do not have content knowledge. FA stated that their lack of command of the language hinders their learning process as well as "it makes it difficult for the teachers to carry out their lesson plans". FS proclaimed that how are we supposed to teach them critical thinking if they cannot respond to a question like, "tell us about yourself". One interviewee added that this gap leads students to find "survival methods like cheating and outsourcing", hence they again "lose tremendously whatever help teachers can offer at this stage".

The other two teachers were not direct about their responses, but their points could be deduced. One of them stated that the levels are average admitting that she is "playing it safe". The other expressed that she cannot generalize the outcome of schools based on the "poor batches" in the college she is teaching at. The reason was because she was a grade 12 teacher before coming to teach in college and she had "excellent" students in her classes.

Similarly, another GFP teacher who previously was a school teacher declared the exact same thing, that she taught some really good students in government schools. The question of region comes back again here, as AM wonders why the students from Muscat have better English fluency than students from other regions. “What happens in government schools in the interior?” She questioned.

It is often said that the Omani education system perceives all students as a ‘homogeneous’ group that will eventually get a Higher Education (HE) degree. However, the majority of the students who enroll in colleges go through at least 1 year of GFP. This was a result of lack of quality in secondary education despite the high budgets allocated for educational reforms. Indeed, HE would be more significant if school education’s quality improved (Al-Barwani, 2002).

4.3.2. How Much Oral English Communication Skills do Students Need Prior to Entering College?

All teachers agreed that English is the medium of instruction in the majority of universities and colleges in Oman and that students need some oral English communication skills to cope with their academic life. CC believes that we can still teach students reading and writing in college, but with listening and speaking, they need to have it way earlier. FS and AM expressed that they need “at least the basics”, which they lack now; for instance, asking simple questions, having a short conversation, and presenting about a topic for at least 5 minutes.

Al-Mahrooqi (2012a) pointed out that English is the main medium of communication in the Omani HE system. It could be argued that although communication is being taught in the school curriculum, it lacks the intensiveness needed for HE (Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014).

4.3.3. Is School Curriculum Equipping Students with Enough Oral English Communication Skills?

Teachers’ views about the curriculum itself varied. To state a few:

- “It’s not enough for their academic life in college.”
- “School curriculum is not equipping students with oral English communication skills that we need at college. [Students] don’t even have the basic rules and regulations of spoken language.”
- “I am not sure if it’s a shortcoming of the curriculum itself or the students’ motivation to learn the language as well as exposure to language”, but we go back to teach content that were supposed to be covered at schools instead of teaching higher level materials.
- “It is a wonderful curriculum. MoE is trying its best to train teachers;” yet, “I don’t know, there’s a gap,” admitted FS, “we are still receiving students who cannot answer simple questions. It may be because they have big classes, teachers are overloaded,” as well as there is a lack of family cooperation.
- “MoE keeps introducing new curricula and regulations without proper teacher training,” stated SZ. Maybe this curriculum is good, but many teachers do not know how to work with it. For example, the Omani curriculum is built on scope and sequence, which means every objective leads to the other; however, “no one from the ministry bothered to familiarize the teachers with this concept”. On top of that, there is no curriculum evaluation even if signs of its failure are evident.
- “I don’t know, is it the curriculum, the students, or our teaching?”, questioned SS.
- “The curriculum is really good. The problem is in the early ages. Students lack the basics,” and as they grow without these, the curriculum cannot do much for them.

From the interviews, it was also deduced that the ministry of education realized the decline of English language proficiency, hence it established a committee to investigate this decline, involving many supervisors and experts from universities. The goal was to establish the national standards of education, according to one of the interviewees. However, the approach was not fruitful as the expectations were high and the duration too short, not to mention that there was a shortage of experts in the ministry. The interviewee added that when the US started

their standard-based education, it took them 10 years before implementation, so policy makers in Oman need to be more patient and think far ahead.

It is true that these views of the curriculum do not necessarily debase the grade 12 curriculum, but they are a further proof of the gap that common sense dictates that it appeals to exist.

4.4. Business Sectors

The interviews were conducted with people from various sectors that recruit or deal with school leavers like oil, factories, restaurant chains, training and construction.

4.4.1. Perspectives on School Graduates' Levels of Oral English Communication Skills

The majority of the interviewees thought that the quality of school outputs' English is unacceptable. "They cannot explain ideas or express themselves", said YB, "and they don't have the confidence in job interviews. Also, sometimes they know how to speak but they don't know how to listen and understand others". "Not only do they have issues with communicating in English, but also in Arabic," remarked HS. He referred that gap to the rote learning that schools implement.

In addition, NB expressed that the recruitment process of school leavers is very tedious and that is not just because of their English language deficiency, but also because of their attitude. "They don't have any experience in dealing with people," stated HS and that is why they go through intensive training programs and "only those motivated to change pass these programs".

On the other hand, MQ believes that this new generation is doing much better than the previous generation. He linked this change with the education of parents. YB supported this when he said that "school gives part of the language" and that he noticed that students who come from families that do activities in English at home tend to do better eventually.

A 'modern' employee needs oral English communication skills to survive in a work environment [Singh \(2019\)](#). Almost all the interviewees believed that the English proficiency of government school graduates is not up to the required level. They simply lack a lot of interpersonal, strategic and professional communication skills that are prerequisites to even blue-collar jobs in the private sector like technicians, receptionist etc. It is true that they don't need a high level of proficiency ([Al Hooti, 2020](#)) but they need at least the basics to thrive in a multi-cultural environment. This is only natural since English is the only lingua franca in Oman between different nationalities, hence a ticket to the Omani job market ([Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a](#)). Employers in this study expressed that recruiting is challenging since these students also have some attitude problems. [Al Busaidi \(1995\)](#) mentioned that a lot of employers in his study noticed that graduates are not motivated to work hard. An impression that is noticed today by their heavy dependence on the government to find them suitable jobs ([Radwan, 2014](#)). It may be true that the employers' hesitance to recruit Omanis is due to the low reputation of its national educational system ([Al-Barwani, 2002](#)). The majority of the interviewees emphasized that they are not necessarily looking for fluency or pronunciation, but they are looking for candidates who are able to take and give verbal messages. Indeed, oral English communication is a KPI for employability ([Weligamage, 2009](#)).

4.4.2. How Much Oral English Communication Skills Do Graduates Need for Work?

In the private sector, SA emphasized that English is a must no matter what your job is. "It is the language with which you can communicate, build relations, influence others, and it will also make it easier to build work relationships with the expatriate staff," she elaborated. SA further added that employees in the private sector are expected "to react and take action quickly", and English communication is the skill to achieve that.

This lack of proficiency in English has always been an obstacle to achieving optimum Omanization. In [Al Busaidi \(1995\)](#) predicted the future of English language in Oman from his analysis of the past and the present and

he was surprisingly accurate. He anticipated that in 2020, the demand on English will increase and if language policies did not change, a vast increase in unemployment will occur with a hint of 'social inequality' where wealthy people can educate their children in better schools and end up having better opportunities than the average population who will be government school graduates. Al Busaidi (1995) called out that a meaningful replacement for foreign labor is not going to happen unless Omanis become competent in English, the language that all professional development resources are in. In the five-year development plan (2016-2020), Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the former Sultan of Oman, stated that educational institutes need to work on upgrading the skills, as the Sultan was a strong believer in the power of human resources. It is unfortunate that a curriculum built to tackle unemployment, "a social and political time bomb" (Al-Ani, 2017; Al-Barwani, 2002) has done fairly little.

4.4.3. *Is School Curriculum Equipping Students with Enough Oral English Communication Skills?*

The majority of employers voiced their concern that school curriculum is not adequately equipping students with oral English communication skills. They thought that the curriculum should cover more 21st century skills. AJ stated, "although we don't actually require all these skills mentioned in the checklist for clerical jobs, but since the school curriculum is a general curriculum that is teaching a common group of people then they should cover more skills". Furthermore, HS is concerned that there is "a deeply rooted buildup" of this serious problem. He explained, "these students already did not have a strong foundation and that is capped up by a curriculum that does not provide a lot in high school. It may be too late to help them no matter how many trainings and classes they take to improve their English; the change will be slow at this stage". HS made it clear that he is referring to the average students, because "there will always be exceptional students who will do well no matter what educational system they study in and those cannot be taken as a benchmark".

Interestingly, YB added a new insight to this problem. He said, "if you look at the labor market, you need to separate the private and public sectors. For private sector, this curriculum is simply not enough, but for public sector, it is". The interviewee explained that in the government, the mode of communication is mainly in Arabic and the school graduates will survive without a high proficiency of English.

"MoE is one of the most expensive ministries in Oman. However, their focus is not on education per se," argued HS, "there expenditures are not necessarily providing for education directly. The main issue is that they are hostage to a very negative culture and the price is high". He made it clear that this is not the responsibility of MoE by itself; it's an "ecosystem" as the ministry without the "proper human resources" and "the financial skills" has limited power to inflict change. It is true we have vision 2040 and 5 years plans in theory but when it comes to implementation, "that's another story," concluded HS.

In the end, a point to be given is that the Omani government has spent and is still spending immensely on education, but the quality of the outcome is still not up to the standards. It may indicate a lack of financial skills, as was pointed out in the interviews. It is also worth mentioning at this point that the challenges that faced the previous curriculum 'Our World Through English' that were highlighted by Al-Barwani (2002) are still challenges for the 2007 curriculum after the educational reform. Some of these challenges are: traditional teaching methodologies, lack of practical learning, lack of teacher training, a low student motivation to learn English, unpreparedness for HE and employment.

5. CONCLUSION

Oral English communication skills are a major requirement in the labour market and for Higher Education. Thus, there should be good emphasis on these skills in school curricula, particularly in secondary school, as the goal is to create an outcome of human resources who are ready for post-school life. This study aimed to explore the perspectives of stakeholders of the grade 12 English curriculum. The stakeholders who have responded to questionnaires included grade 12 English teachers, grade 12 students and curriculum officers. The analysis of the

questionnaires revealed that the students and teachers believed that the curriculum was providing all the required oral English communication skills appropriately, while the curriculum officers' responses indicated that it was not. This aspect requires further investigation to shed the light on the conflict in the opinions of the developers and those of the end users of the said curriculum.

The interviews with the stakeholders who received these students after graduation (academics and employers) revealed that the interviewees did not consider the students to be well-prepared in terms of oral English communication skills and other behavioural aspects.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study suggests that the following recommendations should be considered:

- Ministry of Education (MoE) needs to revisit the current curriculum and determine the extent to which it meets the requirements of HE and the labour market. If changes need to be made, different stakeholders need to be involved.
- There should be more exposure to authentic language throughout school for students. Authentic language is key to learning communication skills and preparing students for life outside of school.
- The MoE needs to establish close contact with the private sector for various reasons, such as revising the curriculum, arranging internships and work visits, and the like.

The findings of this study could be considered by other nations facing similar concerns in relation to Oral English Communication.

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