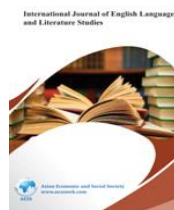




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THE NEED FOR A STUDY INTO STAKEHOLDERS' NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF SCHOOLS GRADUATES' ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEVEL AND SKILLS FOR ENTRY INTO THE TERTIARY EDUCATION LEVEL IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

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ABSTRACT

During the last forty years, the Sultanate of Oman has undergone rapid economic growth and development. As a result, the country is facing the challenge of preparing its youth for life and work in the modern global economy. It is essential that young people are provided with a high level of knowledge and skills in Maths, Science, Technology and Languages to deal with the changes in society, life style, technology and international business (Ministry of Education, 2010). High levels of knowledge and skills are also vital in meeting job market demands to ensure continuing and stable economic growth and development, particularly in the areas of tourism, business and commerce. Therefore, English language has become a vital aspect of preparing young people for their future as well as helping Oman integrate with the rest of the world, and allowing Omanis to take their place in the world with strong confidence in religion, culture and their own beliefs. The resulting changes in educational philosophy; the role of English in society (tourism, business, etc.); students' and parents' expectations; educational technology and the expectations of the workplace, all require a clear reflection of plans across the social and educational context. This paper highlights the need for a study to be conducted in Oman into stakeholders' needs and expectations concerning school graduates' English level and skills when entering tertiary education. It starts with discussing ELT at primary level then tertiary level. The paper also stresses the need for this research to identify language areas which primary level can focus more on. The paper also provides an insight for reducing the need for a foundation year at tertiary level.

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Keywords: Stakeholders' needs and expectations, Schools graduates, English level, English skills, primary education, Tertiary education, Sultanate of Oman.

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Contribution/ Originality

This study adds to the Omani context by highlighting the need for a study to be conducted into stakeholders' needs and expectations concerning school graduates' English level and skills when entering tertiary education towards reducing the need for a foundation year at tertiary level

1. INTRODUCTION

English in Oman is seen as an important foreign language by all sections of society, from the government and business sectors to parents and students. It is utilized in both governmental and private organizations (Al-Jardani, 2012;2013). However, it is used more in private associations, as they are linked more closely to international organizations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF and other areas such as oil and gas companies. The government recognises that competence in English is important if Oman is to become an active participant 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. It is also the global language for Science, Medicine and Technology, and rapidly expanding international computerised databases and telecommunications networks that are maintained in English are increasingly becoming an important aspect of academic and business life (Ministry of Education, 1995).

In 2004, the Ministry of Tourism was created in Oman as a result of the increase in the number of tourists coming to Oman every year and the perceived need to diversify in the economy. The effects of tourism and business would definitely seem to require a better understanding of people from other cultures and an open mind to learning about them. Thus, teachers need to work with their students to teach English in ways which enable their students to use the language in public.

In addition to the economy and tourism, the role of English in Oman has also been affected by technology. The use of different communication and information devices is very evident within the context of Oman and Omani youth. It is uncommon nowadays to meet a teenager without a smart phone with modern features. They use phone applications such as WhatsApp which are mostly in English, while chatting and surfing the Internet for school purposes and their own interest. The availability for these devices and their use adds to the use of English.

People in Omani society see the need to focus more on how English is taught in classrooms. They also see the importance of teaching English as a means for communication and of developing children's abilities to use it authentically - for example, filling in English forms and writing e-mails. These expectations lead them to focus on the use of the target language. They mainly focus, as the researcher sees it, on language production skills, as parents are keen to see their children write and speak well. Parents see the importance of this target language for their children as it operates as a tool or as a gateway to the future. They spend time, effort and money to help their children learn English quickly and effectively. They sometimes send their children to private institutes during holidays for English and computing courses.

The Ministry of Education takes responsibility for providing suitable education for the youth of Oman. With regard to this concern for English Language teaching, different departments within

the Ministry are working on ELT to ensure a better teaching practice in Oman. The Department of Human Sciences in the Directorate of Curriculum Development has the key role as it develops and reforms the curriculum whenever needed. Other departments are the Assessment Department which has the responsibility of developing exams, and the Department of Supervision whose role is to observe teachers and offer them continuous support. There is also the Department of Curriculum Evaluation, which helps in developing studies into the effectiveness of the curriculum, and the Department of Training which provides in-service training for teachers systematically and whenever required.

The educational system in Oman has developed continuously. In 1998, a reform system was implemented based on the new education philosophy which took into account the different stakeholders' needs and expectations as well as how to cope with the changing world in the sense of the information and skills needed and the technology utilized (Al-Jardani, 2013). The term 'stakeholder' refers to all parties involved in the need for English language teaching and involved in the developing and evaluating process, such as employers and higher institutions and colleges.

2. ELT IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

The Oman education system consists of three 'cycles'. Basic Education comprises Cycle 1, which covers Grades 1-4, and Cycle 2 which comprises Grades 5-10. The third level is called 'Post-Basic Schools' and includes Grades 11 and 12. Cycle 1, 2 and Post Basic schools are often organised as separate schools, however, in some areas of the country, one school might cover two or even three levels. For example, in my hometown, there are only two schools, a boys' school and a girls' school both of which cover all three levels from Grades 1-12.

English is taught as a second/foreign language subject in government schools in Oman. Students start studying it from Grade 1 along with Arabic which is naturally their mother tongue (Al-Jardani, 2013). They have 5-7 periods per week and each period lasts for 40 minutes, which makes about 3-4 hours of learning English per week. In addition, starting in 2012 two more foreign languages- French and German were introduced as elective courses in Post education Schools.

English teachers in Oman include both Omanis and non-Omanis. Non-Omani teachers are represented by many different nationalities, such as Egyptian, Palestinian, Tunisian, Jordanian, Indian, and Sudanese (Al-Jardani, 2012;2013). In addition, some non-Omani teachers have been in the country for a few years while some are new to the country and to Oman's education system. Moreover, most non-Omani teachers stay in Oman for only four years. Thus, there are usually some new teachers arriving in Oman every year.

3. ELT IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

English is the medium of instruction in all the science majors in public institutions (Al-Issa, 2006; Al-Jadidi, 2009). English is taught for both general and specific purposes in different institutes and colleges according to need In some institutions, such as Sultan Qaboos University

and Institutes of Health Sciences where assignments and papers are required to be produced in English, it is taught for academic purposes (Al-Issa, 2006).

In most institutes and universities in Oman, students spend about a year on foundation courses before they start their main courses of study and a few may drop out of their studies because of their low level of English. For example in Sultan Qaboos University, 86% of female and only 44% of male students finished their foundation course in 2010 and 4.2% of male but only 0.66% of female students dropped out of their study in the same year (Al-Busaidi and Al-Shihi, 2014).

4. THE NEED FOR A STUDY

A study was carried out by Al-Mahrooqi (2012) comprising a hundred students (32 male and 68 female) from Sultan Qaboos University into the factors causing a low English proficiency among school graduates. Students continue to graduate from schools with insufficient English language proficiency and the majority (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012) therefore require remedial or intensive English courses in a foundation programme before they start their main course of tertiary study. The study concludes that the reasons behind this failure at the primary level as seen by the students themselves are classified as follows: Teachers (85%), Curriculum (80%), Students themselves (70%), limited exposure to English and lack of practice outside the classroom (24%), Parents and the social context (23%), The system and the school environment (15%) and having careless and unmotivated friends (2%). This shows that 85% of students in the study thought that teachers are the major cause of their low level of English, indicating that ineffective teachers, inadequate curricula and uninterested students seem to be the key issues as perceived by students as contributing to them leaving school with inadequate English skills.

In addition, as part of a PhD study, Al-Jardani (2013) highlighted the need for a separate research into stakeholders' needs and expectations. This is clearly observed from the analysis of the study. It should cover investigating the needs of different stakeholders, and may include some document analysis as well. There is a need to adapt these needs which help the national and foreigners working here in the education party as well as other parties such as stakeholders to get a good idea of not only what is expected from the school graduate students but also what they are expected to provide and what support they need to give (Al-Jardani, 2013).

As these needs and expectations are subject to change over time and as the Ministry of Education is planning to reform education, a clear need for this research is easily seen and should be encouraged. There is no point in reforming the educational system without considering the needs of stakeholders receiving the outcome of the 12 years of learning at the primary level. Therefore, there is a need for such a study to find out the up-to-date needs and expectations in order to incorporate these into the development of education in Oman.

The study aims to investigate the gap between stakeholders' needs and expectations in relation to English language level and skills at tertiary level education, and the actual skills and level of Grade 12 graduates entering tertiary education in Oman. The Ministry of Education is planning to reform education in Oman through the development of new curriculum standards integrating

knowledge and the skills across all subjects. Within this process of educational reform, it is essential to ensure stakeholders' needs are addressed. While it is generally recognized that Grade 12 Omani graduates enter tertiary education without the necessary level of English skills, there is a lack of research into the specific skill gaps that exist and the possible causes of these gaps. In order to ensure that the new curriculum standards meet stakeholders' needs, it is essential to methodically research this issue. Therefore, this study aims to investigate this skills gap and identify areas within basic and post-basic education that could be improved to help ensure that Grade 12 graduate students' English skills are more closely aligned to stakeholders' expectations.

The study intends to answer the following questions:

- What is the expected English language level and skills of students entering tertiary education?
- What is the actual level of English Language and skills of students entering tertiary education?
- How can Basic and post-basic education be improved to reduce the gap between expected and actual English level and skills?

The study needs to start by developing a clear background about the topic highlighting issues related to the Ministry of Education, and tertiary education regarding the level of English and other skills needed. This requires an initial study to explore the need and expectations. The study will then analyse the Ministry of Education documents and the input provided for students from Grades 1-12 to highlight the needs covered and compare between the two lists. An additional issue if there is time would be to highlight what has been done to cover this gap from the tertiary education and ways to start with these needs in the primary education. Details of the data collection and analysis methods are outlined in the table below:

5. ANTICIPATED BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

It is anticipated that the research will provide the Ministry of Education with essential data when developing new curriculum standards and educational reform, and identify areas within the basic and post basic education curricula that could be improved to ensure students gain a better level of English language and skills by the end of Grade 12. The research will also highlight the needs and expectations of students and stakeholders in tertiary education. In the long term, it may also provide insight into the future possibility of reducing the need for foundation English courses at tertiary level in the Sultanate of Oman.

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