

The Need for Bridging the Gap between General and Tertiary Education in Oman

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Abstract

This paper is based on a plenary session in the professional development Day entitled “The Need for bridging the gap between general and tertiary education in Oman on 19 March 2015 in Sultan Qaboos University. The presentation provides an overview of the English coursebooks and expected changes within the general education in Oman. It also discusses the teacher's challenges in tertiary education especially during the foundation year. The session also highlighted the student's challenges in their first year of university and discussed ways to overcome them. It also questions whether students are facing huge difficulties in their first year of tertiary education and whether this can be called a Tertiary Life ‘Culture Shock’. The paper ends by highlighting a number of suggested ideas which can be useful for supporting students at general and tertiary education.

Keywords: General education, Tertiary education, Bridging the gap, Oman

1. ELT in general education

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 a 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 (Al-Jardani, 2012).

2. 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 (SQU), 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 & Al-Shihi, 2014). This highlights the need to look back at what students are provided within their general education and how they were taught during their 12 years of primary level and this clear difference between male and females.

3. An exploratory research design study

This study consists of 100 students (32 male and 68 female) from Sultan Qaboos University identifying the factors causing low English proficiency among school graduates (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). The study used a qualitative questionnaire and follow-up focus groups to examine students’ school experience. It concluded 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%).

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 courses of tertiary study.

The study highlighted the important of having a foundation year where English level needs to be increased as one of the key aspects colleges and universities are targeting before allowing students to start their main course/degree. However, the study is mainly based on student's perceptions and cannot be generalised, but it shows some of the students ideas of what are the challenges they faced during their foundation year and try to think of reasons behind it.

4. Stakeholders' needs and expectations

A need to identify different stakeholders' needs and expectations is also important. Another study (Al-Jardani, 2013) highlighted the need for separate research into stakeholders' needs and expectations. 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. By having these needs and expectation clear identified, this helps all other stakeholders including the Ministry of Education and higher education to meet them.

5. The School System in Oman

There are 3 levels of schools running at the same time. The 'Basic Cycle 1 Education, which covers grades 1-4, the Basic Schools, Cycle 2 for grades 5-10 and third level is called 'Post-Basic' schools which includes grades 11 and 12. In addition, in some remote areas of the country, a school might cover two or even the three levels (Al-Jardani, 2012).

Basic Education Cycle 1	Grades 1-4
Basic Education Cycle 2	Grades 5-10
Post-Basic Education	Grades 11-12

6. Working on a new educational reform

Government schools in Oman use only one English national course book, an in-house curriculum, called English for Me (EfM) for grades 1-10 and 'Engage with English' (EWE) for grades 11-12, which is based on a reform project. This project started in 1998 which restricted the English Language teaching in Oman (Al-Jardani, 2013). A new reform started last year 2014, covering developing the educational standards, restructuring the educational system, developing new textbooks. The plan is to start writing new textbooks in the coming few years based on the new educational standards which the Ministry is working on.

7. Teachers' and students' challenges

In the foundation year, teachers are mainly facing a number of issues including students' lack of

- English,
- reading comprehension,
- writing proficiency,
- mathematical competence
- and critical thinking skills.

On the other hand, students are facing a number of challenges their foundation year, including

- placement test,
- lack of awareness,

- not enough explanation of roles and tasks,
- Campus life!,
- Peers affects,
- Time management
- and gender effectiveness.

Focusing on the foundation year, students may have difficulties with placement test. This covers

- aspects covered,
- time allocated
- and task types.

They also facing different context and teachers vary accents. They also have a challenge with the course and the assessment followed:

- form and details,
- layout of the textbooks,
- types of tasks,
- inadequate information about courses
- form and frequency of assessment
- types of assessment utilized- formative/summative
- and role of the teacher; how its different compared to the role of the teacher in the general education.

Having all of these challenges and not enough support they are provided with, this can lead to identify that students attending their first year of tertiary education might have the chance to get a culture shock.

8. Tertiary Life ‘Culture Shock’-ways to support

How possible can we call this a Tertiary Life ‘Culture Shock’. If the answer is yes or maybe, so how can support students to overcome this shock? However, the main thing is to look for ways to support them and here are some suggestions:

There are two main things which we can base our support on. This covers the need to keep productive communication between different stakeholders and the second is to identify the lack of information within the context by working on national research and studies which we need to work on immediately.

Others can be examined and developed such as:

- A need for remedial level coursebooks,
- Review the placement test,
- Develop a summer school,
- A need to examine the link in content between grade 12 and placement tests in the tertiary,
- Use the grade 12 assessment as an additional and feed into it,
- Allow students to take the placement tests in school level,
- and develop a theme/unit in grade 12 highlighting some of these issues,

The Ministry of Education already started developing a whole theme on what a tertiary education is about covering expected challenges and needed skills and strategies. However, this can be revised from time to time and see if it helps students of grade 12 to get an idea of what's might be happening in their future life.

9. Discussion

To end this paper, a need to question some of the aspects related. Is there a need to have a foundation year as its effort, time and fund consuming? A need for a study to identify the expectations and needs for workplace and tertiary education in order to look back at what students are provided with in order to identify gap and support students with to be ready to get to the main course/degree.

How clear the procedures in different universities are when it comes to the new comes of students. Are they provided

with enough Input and the feedback provided and whether they are given guidance with both locations of the campus and also the learning and achievement process?

My last question is whether we need to teach our students the English Language for more than 12 years in the general education and followed by some few years in the tertiary level which they rarely find a chance to use it with our context at least for most of us, excluding people who are linked directly to the English language.

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