

Language Problems Facing Omani Learners of English

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English is important in the Sultanate of Oman for acquiring science and technology, conducting business, traveling to English-speaking and non-Arabic speaking countries, analyzing and understanding culture (reading, watching films and other programs, listening to pop music, and surfing the Internet), and finding white-collar jobs. Over 250 Omani students are yearly awarded fully- or partially-sponsored scholarships by the Omani government to study for their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in English-speaking countries (Al-Issa, 2006). These students will subsequently contribute to the nation-building of Oman.

Prior to embarking on their program of specialization, many of these students enroll in an intensive English as Second Language (ESL) improvement course in an English speaking country for six to twelve months, which may cost between \$10,000 and \$15,000. These courses are taught by native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), who often have little or no knowledge about the cultural, academic, and linguistic backgrounds of the Omani students.

This paper discusses the problem of Omani students' lack of communicative competence after nine years of EFL school-based learning. It investigates the causes leading to this problem and suggests ways that ESL instructors in English-speaking countries can cope. The aim is to enlighten NESTs about the cultural background and educational needs of these students, which in turn should have a positive effect on both the teachers' performance and the students' achievement.

The Problems

When students in Oman exit high school, they generally encounter problems with using English

communicatively (Al-Issa, 2005a). They lack grammatical competence (how to use the structure and form of the language), discourse competence (how to provide cohesion and coherence across sentences and utterances), sociolinguistic competence (how to interact), and strategic competence (how to make the most of the language you have, especially when it is deficient) (Hymes, 1972). Omani students are exposed to substantial teaching of grammar rules, so grammatical competence is their least problematic area.

The four primary causes of students' lack of communicative ability are the national textbook; the transmission-based education system; the lack of educational aids, especially technology, in the EFL classrooms; and the paucity of time given to English in the national curriculum.

It is worth mentioning that these problems are not exclusive to Omani learners. Other Arab learners in contexts where English is another school subject, a foreign language, in the national curriculum encounter the same problems (Rabab'ah, 2005). This is particularly the case in the neighboring Arab countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

The National Textbook: Communication in *OWTE*

Al-Battashy (1989) and Al-Toubi (1998) state that English is not taught as a language for communication in Oman. They note that the classroom materials, especially the prescribed text *Our World Through English (OWTE, 1999-2000)*, and classroom activities are controlled and do not resemble real language use. Saur and Saur (2001) point out

that the kind of English taught and evaluated in secondary school is different from the kind of English the students need for entry to an English-medium college or university, and Al-Alawi (1997) also notes that it has little connection with the real world.

The ESL teacher needs to be aware that Omani students do not get much practice in integrating skills and communicating naturally. Al-Toubi (1998) found that the skills in *OWTE* are not integrated, and learners in the Omani English classroom are not given opportunities to express themselves. He further found that *OWTE* does not provide sufficient room for spoken language practice. *OWTE* fails to deal with language as a “social process, taking place in a social environment” (Pande, 2004, p. 4). Al-Toubi concludes that the Omani English language teaching curriculum fails to prepare the students for accurate, effective, and appropriate oral communication in English due to a lack of a variety in real speaking activities.

When it comes to written expression, the ESL instructor should also be aware that Omani students lack opportunities to communicate freely in writing. Students dwell on a single topic from the textbook, listening to a text about it, reading about it, speaking about it, and eventually writing about it. In general, students think about and produce language in a linear and controlled manner. The topics in *OWTE* are seldom based on the outward-bound students’ needs and interests. Therefore, students may have little interest in expressing themselves in the Omani classroom.

Culture in *OWTE*

Al-Toubi (1998) and Al-Issa (2005b) found that the current national syllabus lacks a variety of authentic practice activities and materials and focuses heavily on the local culture and environment. This is despite the fact that the literature emphasizes the vital role of the culture of the L2 in positively impacting second language acquisition and developing communicative competence (Byram & Risager, 1999; Tang, 1999) and critical thinking (Ghosen, 2002).

OWTE contains simplified listening tasks, a few songs, and rhymes on the accompanying tapes.

These attempt to stress certain lexical and structural aspects of the lesson or topic introduced. The listening segments, spoken by native speakers, are primarily for the students to use in modeling their pronunciation (Al-Issa, 2002). In this way, *OWTE* narrows the focus of listening activities and does not expose students to a range of authentic materials, spoken by native speakers, to be listened to for a variety of purposes. Moreover, the students listen to the textbook’s language more through the carefully controlled presentation of the non-native English speaking teacher, while lacking exposure to authentic materials that provide “naturalistic samples” (Nunan, Tyacke & Walton, 1987) of contextualized language and facilitate second language acquisition.

Teachers are required to finish teaching *OWTE* in a prescribed amount of time as the end-of-semester exams are to a large extent based upon it: “It is

important ... that you complete the syllabus as this is what you test” (*Teacher’s Guide: Elementary Level*, 1997-98). *OWTE* is not accompanied by any

material appearing either in a hard copy form or as software to facilitate independent learning and varied exposure to the target language and to its culture in context. Teachers are invited to supplement *OWTE* in case they finish teaching it ahead of time. It is noteworthy that *OWTE* is structured so that the teacher will finish the content by the end of the academic year.

Transmission-Based System

Omani students generally show a high level of awareness about the importance of English for their future (Al-Issa, 2005b). However, knowledge-based tests, mastery of content, and achievement grades dominate the scene and powerfully affect student motivation, contributing directly to their poor level of competent performance in English (Al-Toubi, 1998, Al-Issa, 2005a).

Learning through rote memorization is seen as generally one of the weaknesses of the educational system in Oman (Nunan et al., 1987; Al-Toubi, 1998; Al-Issa, 2005a). In Oman, exams are based on memorization and include a component that tests the four skills, grammar, and vocabulary independently.

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Babrakzai (2001) believes that this fragmented approach fails to “reflect the nature and functions of language in acquiring knowledge” (p. 21) as language is “not learned in small components” (p. 21). Al-Toubi, (1998) and Al-Issa (2005a) found that exams in Oman encourage and demand a considerable amount of memorization and production of information in huge amounts, while at the same time ignoring fluency.

Babrakzai (2001) writes that Omani students who enter English medium universities possess very limited ability to use English functionally for two main reasons. First, students forget what they have memorized at school. Secondly, knowledge in the textbook is transmitted to the students in a linear style, making retention more difficult.

Al-Alawi (1994) criticizes the education system in the Arab world, of which Oman is a part, and describes it as “authoritative.” 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). Al-Balushi (1999, p. 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.” Omani students encounter problems with thinking critically and analytically due to the structure of the system and its underlying philosophy and practices (Al-Issa, 2005a).

Educational Technology

Al-Balushi (1999) writes that there is inadequate use of educational technology in the Omani schools in general. A typical Omani classroom includes a blackboard, chalk, tables, and chairs. Teachers are given a tape-recorder to play the listening texts recorded on the accompanying tapes. Schools rarely have computer or language labs. School libraries include very few English books and readers. Schools are not equipped with technological items such as overhead projectors, monitors, DVD players, or videos. In the principal’s office there is usually one (small) photocopying machine, which is used exclusively by the school administration.

Al-Barwani et al. (1997) found that at Sultan Qaboos University, the only state-owned university in the Sultanate, 79.33% of the 243 graduate teachers complained about the inadequate and insufficient resources and facilities allocated to teaching.

ELT Time

Lightbown (2000) writes that “the most important reason for incomplete acquisition in foreign language classroom settings is probably the lack of time available for contact with the language” (p. 449). Nunan et al. (1987) point out that students need a minimum of 4,000 hours of instruction to reach proficiency in a second language. Students in Omani public schools, however, receive under 700 hours of formal English language instruction throughout the nine years they spend at school.

Suggested Solutions

This section suggests solutions to the problems associated with the four language competencies.

Grammatical Competence

Omani and GCCC students spend a considerable amount of their time studying grammar out of context and in isolated sentences in teacher-fronted instruction situations. The teachers themselves were taught through the grammar translation or audio-lingual method. Students in Oman and other Arab countries are hardly, if ever, given opportunities to explore grammatical structures in context “to see how and why alternative forms exist to express different communicative meanings” (Nunan, 1998, p. 102-3).

Savignon (2002) writes that “for the development of communicative ability, research findings overwhelmingly support the integration of form-focused exercises with meaning-focused experience” (p. 7). Savignon also believes that “grammar is important; and learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences” (p. 7). Moreover, Celce-Murcia (1992) and Nunan (1998) assert that grammar instruction is more effective if it is discourse-based and content-based than if it is sentence-based and context-free.

Students can be engaged in meaningful activities like grammar games, for instance, which are fun and require manipulation and creativity. Such activities deter the students from using grammar mechanically and from considering grammar “as a static system of arbitrary rules” (Larsen-Freeman, 1997). Grammar should be primarily viewed as a component of listening, reading, speaking, and writing tasks,

rather than as a separate skill (Ramirez, 1995). Chen (1999) thus writes that grammar “must be taught in a manner that is consistent with grammar’s new role [and] not be taught as if it were the language per se” (p. 5).

Therefore, teachers should be concerned with designing meaningful tasks with a true interactional component to promote successful language learning (LeLoup & Ponterio, 2003). Such tasks can involve, for instance, solving a problem, making a video, preparing a presentation, or drawing up a plan (National Capital Language Resource Center, 2004b).

Furthermore, “students should be given opportunities to figure out everything by themselves, receiving help only when necessary” as they “tend to prefer assignments that allow them to explore the language.” This is because “the knowledge they obtain becomes theirs and it is often much easier to remember” (Sysoyev, 1999). Such “language exploration” can be best achieved through using authentic texts, which expose learners to various items and forms operating in the real world (Nunan, 1998), since “the grammatical items being taught are encountered in a range of different linguistic and experiential contexts” (Nunan, 1998, p. 108).

Educational technology not only contributes to varying channels of language contact, but also allows more time outside the class for students to come into contact with the target language through working independently while relying less on the teacher (Al-Issa, 2002).

Discourse competence

Like any language, English has its own unique language patterns, which the Omani and GCCC learners need to be able to understand and apply efficiently. Otherwise, they will face difficulties making themselves understood. Demo (2001) says that learners should be trained to become discourse analysts. He suggests a four-step technique to maximize second language learners’ exposure to discourse in English. In step one, the teacher videos

or audiotapes a pair of native speakers engaging in a conversation in a social event, for instance. In step two the teacher plays the tape for the students and has them identify patterns of recorded linguistic behavior. Step three is associated with transcribing the conversation so that students can count the particular target tokens and examine their placement within the discourse. In step four the teacher gets the students to analyze specific discourse features individually in pairs or in small groups.

Demo (2001) suggests that the same data, which can be collected by the students themselves, can be “repeatedly examined for other conversational features” and “compared to discourse features found in other speech events” (p. 6). Demo believes that “this discourse approach to language learning removes language from the confines of textbooks and makes it tangible, so that students can explore language as interaction rather than as grammatical units” (p. 6). Also, these activities can be used by the teacher to “raise students’ awareness of language variation, dialect differences, and cultural diversity” (Demo, p. 6).

The teachers’ role is important in raising students’ awareness about taking individual responsibility for this part of the language learning process

Sociolinguistic competence

Exposing students to authentic texts also contributes to the students’ listening comprehension development (Richards, 1983), which is an integral part of the overall development of the students’ sociolinguistic competence. Yet, teachers in English-speaking countries should not rely on the fact that their students are immersed in an English-speaking culture to assume that their Omani and GCCC students will develop sociolinguistic competence. Students need to be made aware of how to find and use authentic texts and understand that, as adults, they should be responsible for developing this important aspect of their overall communicative competence (Broersma, 2004).

The teachers’ role is important in raising students’ awareness about taking individual responsibility for this part of the language learning process and developing meaningful relationships with members of the target culture. Second language acquisition goes beyond oral and written language produc-

tion and involves gestures and body movements, too, such as handshaking, patting on the shoulder, and so forth. By observing such things, second language learners can discover a great deal about the interactive process in the target language (Broersma, 2004).

Broersma (2004) suggests that keeping journals to record questions, problems, and discoveries helps students develop sociolinguistic competence. Students can make note of any language features that cause trouble or frustration to them during communication and ask their teacher or any significant native speakers in their lives to help clarify such points.

In this vein, teachers need to expose their students to as many speech acts as possible, as speech acts are genuine examples of authentic language in context. Such speech acts complement the everyday English that students come across outside the institution

boundaries, and hence promote the practice of the language skills they are learning (Broersma, 2004).

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Moreover, Kasper (1997) and Olshtain and Cohen (1991) point out that activities such as roleplays, simulations, and drama engage students in different social roles and speech events. These activities provide opportunities to practice the wide range of pragmatic and sociolinguistic abilities that students need in interpersonal encounters outside the classroom.

Pragmatic competence

Communication is complex and grounded in the culture and entails verbal and nonverbal strategies. It is necessary for the students to acquire such strategies where language is manipulated to meet communicative goals. Anisimova points out that “the acquisition of styles and registers is a very important factor in strategic competence for second language learners” (Anisimova, n.d., n.p.). According to Anisimova:

Successful interactional communication requires knowledge of slang, jargon, jokes, folklore, cultural aspects, politeness and formality, expectations, and other clues to social exchange. The personal function allows a speaker to express feelings, emotions, personality. (n.p.)

Rababa’ah (2005) believes that it is important to raise the students’ consciousness about the importance of strategic competence. Students need to know that the use of the time-gaining devices that native speakers themselves employ, such as “you know,” “you see,” “do you see what I mean?” and “what do you call this?” and other such strategies “is not an indication of communication failure [but] it can be very successful in compensating for the lack of linguistic knowledge, and they can help the English language learners solve their communication problems and achieve their communicative goals” (Rabab’ah, 2005, p. 194).

While native speakers’ strategic competence is tacit or implicit, and cannot be described (Kasper, 1997), English as a second language learners, according to Kasper, acquire such knowledge through out-of-class observation or watching audiovisual media.

Kasper states that out-of-class observation or watching audiovisual media is not for the students to “imitate native speakers’ action

patterns but in order to build their own pragmatic knowledge of the right kind of input” (n.p.). This means that the teacher plays an essential role in selecting appropriate authentic input.

“Appropriate” here also refers to having culturally sensitive input and materials. ESL instructors must be acutely aware that audiovisual media should not include scenes that conflict with the Muslim and Arab culture and traditions which are considered outrageous by Arabs in general and Muslims in particular. Be especially careful to exclude scenes of nudity or of a man and a woman kissing, or the use of socially offensive and unacceptable words. Muslims can be quite upset when they hear or read disparaging references to religion or God. It cannot be overemphasized that Omani and GCCC students are very conservative and can be easily offended.

Conclusion

Omani and GCCC students find themselves communicatively incompetent in the English language when they exit high school in their respective countries and travel to English-speaking countries to pursue their first degree studies. The discussion in the

first part of the paper revealed that this is mainly due to the rigidly controlled, transmission-based, and textbook and exam-oriented system these students experience prior to embarking on their university programs. Language in such a system is taught for its own sake and is hardly, if ever, used as an effective tool for achieving anything other than passing exams. This has subsequently led most of these learners to treat English as another fact-based school subject and a hurdle to overcome (Al-Issa, 2005a).

NESTs teaching Omani and GCCC students in English-speaking countries will need to help these students change their learning and thinking habits and become more responsible for their own language learning and acquisition. NESTs should adopt and implement an approach to ELT that dynamically and constantly varies the channels and levels of exposure to the language and provides and creates opportunities for the students to use the language in an interactive, meaningful, challenging, creative, dynamic, and interesting way.

“Students’ motivation for learning increases when they see connections between what they do in the classroom and what they hope to do with the language in the future” (National Capital Language Resource Center, 2004a). Their attention increases when classroom activities are relevant to their interests and when different resources are carefully applied. Numerous articles have been written about the role of technology in education. Computers and the Internet are especially good in enhancing second language learners’ motivation, sense of achievement, and communicative competence by exposing learners to rich, authentic, and contextualized language beyond what is presented in the classroom (see <http://www.iteslj.org/Articles> and <http://hkjtefl.org/>).

Better teaching in turn can impact these students’ attitudes towards the complexity of second/foreign language learning and acquisition and the uses and values of the world’s first international language. With more motivation, such students will gradually make the necessary mental effort to reflect on their own language learning, explore the language, and use it for analytical and critical purposes.

After all, the aim behind learning English is to help these students use the language for acquiring science and technology to successfully contribute to building their nations. When they return to their

respective countries, they will enter a demanding and competitive job market. Competence in English in this market is a prerequisite for finding a white-collar job. However, science and technology cannot be acquired if language is not acquired and used effectively in the first place.

Learning English for everyday communication and interaction and for cultural analysis and understanding are two very important (personal) purposes for learning English worldwide today. Learning English for these two purposes contributes to these students’ ability to vary their exposure to and practice of English. It also helps them to gain the necessary confidence in understanding and using the language and to see it as serving significant multiple purposes.

Like students worldwide, Omani students bring to the language classroom different social, psychological, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, experiences, philosophies, expectations, perceptions and hidden agendas (Al-Issa, 2002). Hence, it behooves NESTs to explore and understand these differences. NEST should also strive to understand the different aims such students bring to the foreign or second language classroom and to help them achieve these aims in the best possible ways.

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