'WELCOME TO THE CLUB' MEANS FOR DEVELOPING LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE FOR ELT SPECIALISTS AT THE MITTC – OMAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an innovation program that was implemented at the Muscat Intermediate Teacher Training College (MITTC) – Sultanate of Oman and included 35 student teachers of English. The program combined two modes of language improvement, which I have labelled here as 'General English' and 'Professional English' to help my student teachers develop their English language repertoire. This was achieved via the design and implementation of various language activities, which simultaneously consolidated various fundamental aspects of second language education.

Student teachers of ELT at the Muscat Intermediate Teacher Training College (MITTC) in Oman often ask one crucial question that is of central importance to them: How can we improve our English? Literature on second language teacher education has stressed and justified the importance and centrality of language proficiency to the non-native English teacher (Cullen, 1994; Edge, 1988; Edwards, 1997; Lafayette, 1993; Liu, 1998; Murdoch, 1994; Wilkins, 1974) and suggested ways of improvement (Cullen, 1994; Edge, 1988; Johnson, 1990; Lafayette, 1993; Murdoch, 1994; Woodward, 1991).

The question above is highly demanding and challenging to answer and requires more than theoretical explanations. Channels of help are varied and so are ways of implementing them. However, it is important to pinpoint the category of language these anxious student teachers have in mind. Teachers of English need more than knowledge of English for everyday general communication, although this kind of language knowledge is of great importance to this category of teachers for psychological, social, cultural and academic reasons. English in Oman is the only official foreign language and has highly important

and institutionalized domains like education, business and the mass media (Al-Issa, 2002). The likelihood of these teachers coming into contact with English in their everyday use is very high. Thus, I would like to label this category as 'General English' (GE).

Furthermore, these prospective teachers have ELT classes to teach during training and after graduation. Like any other field, ELT has its own discourse (Fradd & Lee, 1998) and technical terminology outside and inside the classroom. In other words, it has its own domain of content knowledge (Day, 1993), which the target language teacher has to be competent at. This technical language is active during lesson planning, teaching, giving instructions, discussing ELT topics, reading ELT texts, writing ELT papers, attending meetings, seminars, workshops and conferences, and pursuing further studies in ELT. I will thus label this category as 'Professional English' (PE).

Therefore, these student teachers need to improve their GE and PE to ensure competence in English. Thus, my contention is that both types of language are equally necessary and important characteristics of the non-native speaker ELT teacher's overall curricular knowledge (Schulman, 1986) as they legitimate his/her epistemic authority inside the classroom in addition to his/her social authority (Buchman, 1984).

In this paper I will explain an innovation program that I implemented at the MITTC to help my student teachers improve their level of GE and PE. The program combined both modes of language.

However, it is noteworthy that the program went a step beyond and helped consolidate important and fundamental educational concepts and practices like reflective and critical thinking about various ELT practices via exposure to various

teaching styles as in means five and seven. The program further helped consolidate cooperative development as in means two and four, technical and professional knowledge enrichment as in means three and six and creative teaching as in development means two and seven. The activities in the program were carried out in an 'extracurricular' manner. Extracurricular here refers to the fact that the activities were carried out outside college hours and within what was called the 'English Language Club.' The site was a large activity room within the MITTC premises itself that was allocated for the Club. The activities were meant to emphasize GE and PE language improvement without disturbing the daily college timetable. The College administration demonstrated a great sense of cooperation by providing the necessary resources, equipment and materials that the various Club activities required. Examples are board games, a video machine, a TV monitor, video films, reading materials, a photocopier, three personal computer machines connected to the Internet and a printer. Some other necessary materials like stationary and OHP, for example were already available at the College. A very important factor that contributed to the success of the program was that the majority of the ELT tutors and the student teachers lived within walking distance of the College. This facilitated attendance. The Club opened twice a week from five to nine o'clock in the evening and combined first and second year students, who were 35 in number. It is noteworthy that the training program at the MITTC is two years in length. Prospective teachers then graduate as teachers of Elementary Classes and are posted in public schools throughout the country. Two student teachers were made responsible for the

safety of the materials and equipment. On some days the whole session would encompass one activity, while on other days it would encompass two to three activities. There was considerable flexibility in carrying out the activities, which were based initially on the interests of the student teachers in the first place. In addition, visits were arranged to certain private English language institutes.

Nevertheless, prior to explaining the program activities, I would like to start by considering some points that form the basis for the initiation of the program.

These student teachers join the ITTC after they leave secondary school; i.e. at the age of 18 years. Their level of English ranges between lower intermediate and intermediate. However, the majority fall in the former category. They spend nine years receiving instruction in English language prior to joining the college. This instruction is characterized as top-down product-oriented, textbook, memory and examination-based. The locally written syllabi are poorly designed and produced. Omani English teachers are poorly trained while the teachers recruited from outside the Sultanate, who come from Arab and Asian origins, vary in their sociocultural and training backgrounds and academic qualification, but are also mainly poorly trained. Wilkins (1974) argues that one of the major reasons for non-native speaker of English teachers low level of English lies in the quality of instruction they receive at school. Furthermore, time allocated to ELT is limited and English is treated like any other fact-based school subject and is therefore taught artificially. Language is a tool for the delivery of "selective traditions" (Williams, 1989) and selected knowledge. Classes are mixed ability and crowded with a

minimum of 35 students in each class. Time allocated to ELT is insufficient – 600 instruction hours spread over nine years of language learning. Research has proved that second language students need a minimum of 4000 contact hours in order to pursue their post secondary studies, as has been the case in Canada (Nunan, Walton & Tyacke, 1987). Despite the fact that the resources allocated for language-in-education planning are very good, implementation remains unsatisfactory and below expectations. By the time the students leave school they fail to communicate in English at the productive skills level due to lack of procedural skills and proceduralized knowledge of the target language.

The English language curriculum for the ITTC (1986) stresses that

> The curriculum aims to provide as intensive an English medium environment as possible in the circumstances and time allowed. The principle of language improvement adopted, in line with the contemporary language learning theory and practice, is that language improvement appears to occur most efficiently in situations of communicative need (p. 3).

There is stress on the importance of learning English for communicative purposes for both classroom use and everyday use. There is also stress on the nature of language learning and acquisition as being complex. My role and obligation as a college tutor, however, was to overcome the problem of time and try to create an appropriate environment and contexts that would facilitate language acquisition and learning. This came through establishing an English Language Club to help maximize the chance for language contact and genuine and

meaningful interaction. The two years the student teachers attend the College do not provide sufficient language exposure and interaction.

As far as college education is concerned, ELT student teachers spend two academic years, or four semesters at the college during which they study English alongside other subjects like Arabic, religious studies, maths, science, child development, social studies and physical education. All these subjects are taught in Arabic. They receive a total of 12 contact hours in Semester Four and a total of 22 contact hours in Semester Three for methodology and language improvement in addition to practical training in ELT and social studies, which occurs in the form of college-based teaching and school-based teaching. The length and quality of practical training varies from one semester to another. The following table explains the development of the English curriculum in the two-year system.

Term	Coursework	Practical Training
1	Introductory English course for all students (non-specialists)	None
2	13 hours per week available for English specialist courses in methodology and language improvement	College-based training: Demonstration classes, observation, peer teaching, team teaching and limited individual teaching
3	22 hours per week available for English specialist courses in methodology and language improvement	College-based and school-based training
4	12 hours per week available for English specialist courses in methodology, language improvement and literature	College-based and school-based training (twice a week)

It has to be admitted that the two-year system decision made by the Ministry of Education has not worked in favor of the teacher, particularly at the language improvement level. Courses in teaching at the initial training level have been expanded in some countries from four to five years to allow more time for knowledge input and field-based training, while in Oman we expect to produce competent teachers after two years and with limited exposure to the target language. The aim behind the two-year system college education lies in the fact that the Omani government aims to expedite 'Omanizing' – nationalizing the skilled and white-collar jobs now occupied by expatriates. Oman is a developing country with a population of just over 1.5 million. According to the data obtained from the database of the Ministry of Education in 2001, there are 709 non-Omani English teachers teaching in the public schools throughout the Sultanate as opposed to 211 native teachers. This phenomenon is not confined to the teaching of English, but also

applies to teaching all other subjects and teaching English in private schools.

The English Curriculum for the ITTC (1986) states that one of the guiding aims of the two-year system is "to raise the students' (trainees') individual performance in English to a minimum level needed to teach the English syllabus in Elementary and Preparatory Schools in Oman" (p. 1-2). This means that these student teachers are trained to teach false beginners and beginners.

However, language classes are unpredictable (Wilkins, 1974) and the linguistic competence exhibited by the various students is never identical. This unpredictable nature of the language classroom can cause embarrassment to the linguistically poor (Wilkins, 1974) and unconfident teacher. Lafayette (1993) stresses that linguistically strong teachers are confident and are good language examples to their students. Edwards (1997) goes even further than this and stresses that a good command of the target language makes a successful teacher. It is important to bear in mind that teachers in Oman, like many other parts of the world, are considered as infallible sources of knowledge. This lays an extra burden on the teacher's shoulders with regard to performance and professional competence.

Development Means

1. One of the means, which proved helpful for GE improvement was language games. The club contained English board games like Scrabble, Monopoly, Bingo and many more. These games provide a good language exposure and help the language learner use the target language meaningfully, interactively and in a relaxed manner. The student teachers used to play these games in groups of four or sometimes more. Sometimes they would to seek my help or that of my three colleagues or consult a dictionary. At certain times, language games, which required chalk and board, were also played in a competitive manner. These games integrated more than one language skill or subskill and focused on language items that the student teachers had come across during their language improvement course at the college for consolidation purposes. Chalk and board games gave the student teachers an insight into the significance of language games and ways of organizing them in the language classroom. Larcabal (1992) writes that language games help develop the inner self, train in creative freedom, promote self-confidence, bring learners and facilitators closer and above all develop communication skills where they become stimulating and interesting to help learners acquire the target language without even realizing it.

2. The second means that the Club implemented for GE and PE development purposes was the design and production of wall journals and teaching materials for ELT. The student teachers were asked to collect different materials and texts related to the level of the classes they taught during the teaching practice phase, which is the same level that they would be assigned after graduating from the college. They produced flashcards, reading cards, writing and reading exercises and so on. They also produced wall journals that included various texts extracted from various sources like newspapers, books and magazines. Ho (1992) writes that "journal writing has been used not as an

activity to help students improve their writing, but increasingly, by educators in different fields to help students learn" (p. 40). While producing flashcards and reading cards facilitated PE development, producing journals influenced GE improvement, particularly at the reading and writing level. The student teachers not only were actively involved in searching and researching, but they also took a creative route and started to think beyond the existing syllabus and materials and produced materials that supplemented the existing/mandated syllabus. It is important that teachers see language teaching and learning within a complex perspective and appreciate what it takes to become a second language learner or teacher. These activities enhanced their linguistic and technical skills and raised their awareness about the concept and significance of varying channels of exposure to the target language. The journals the student teachers produced, which exceeded 12 in total, were hung on the wall of the Club activity room and were judged at the end of the year by a panel and the best journal received an award. The student teachers were informed about this competition beforehand.

3. The third means, which contributed to GE and PE improvement was the provision of newspapers, ELT journals and graded readers. The college subscribed to various local English newspapers and ELT journals. Examples of newspapers were the *Oman Observer* and the *Times of Oman*, which are both daily local newspapers, while examples of journals were the *English language Forum, TESOL Journal, The Language Teacher, TESOL Reporter and The English Teacher*. These readings enriched the student teachers' linguistic and technical knowledge. The student teachers found them interesting, motivating and inspiring. While the daily newspapers gave the student teachers rich exposure to GE, the journals broadened their horizons about ELT in general and PE in specific.

As far as graded readers were concerned, the student teachers were free to borrow one or more reader at a time. The readers varied in size and level. They exposed the student teachers to language, style and culture. The student teachers were asked to produce a summary about each reader. The summary included writing the names of the main characters of the story and writing a short summary about the story. Some of the student teachers went as far as providing a commentary about the story. These summaries were collected and marked by me and I used the International Marking System to help the students identify their errors. Producing a written summary is always a challenge to Arab learners of English. However, they received some training in this beforehand (Al-Issa, 1998). Moreover, each student teacher was asked to write five to eight questions about the story he had read for the next reader to tackle. The idea underlying this activity was to train them to produce as many questions in English as possible and encourage them to read for comprehension purposes. In fact, asking questions in English is another very hard task for Arab learners due to the great difference between the

structural dispositions of the two languages.

4. A fixed characteristic of the Omani public and private schools is the daily morning assembly school radio/ broadcast presented by certain students selected by their class teachers on the basis of their distinguished ability to read clearly. This always precedes classes and a number of different items are presented. For example, the recitation of some verses from the Holy Koran, news flash, quizes, proverbs, jokes and so forth. This is delivered in Arabic, but one day is usually allocated to English in every school. The student teachers were invited to prepare materials for their future/after graduation school radio. They were divided into groups and asked to extract different texts that they believed were useful and suitable for their future learners. They came up with a wealth of ideas. Some of these materials were valid, while others were edited or required translation. The materials which were produced were mostly taken from various Internet English websites, English books, newspappers and magazines and were photocopied and filed according to respective themes. On the whole, the experience was worthwhile and the student teachers felt that it contributed to their GE improvement through providing exposure to various lexical and structural items and authentic English.

5. The fifth means was video films and combined GE and PE language development. Reference is made to two types of films here: feature films without subtitles, for entertainment purposes like these produced by Hollywood, which enriched and indirectly contributed to the student teachers' GE; and films for technical and professional purposes, which enriched the student teachers' PE repertoire. Khan (2002) states that feature films can be motivating, challenging and encouraging. She also states that such films provide exposure to the culture of the target language and exposure to language beyond the classroom. Thus such films were hired from video shops. The student teachers were asked to write a summary about each film they had watched as a means of thinking critically about what they had seen. They were asked to describe the main theme of the film and jot down the names of the main characters. Once again some of them wrote a commentary about the film. They were also asked to write three to five questions about the film and ask them to the whole class. This task ensured that they had understood what they had seen and trained them in ask questions. A glossary of new, useful and key vocabulary was provided to the student teachers after the film to try and work out the meaning either through guessing or dictionary work. Another glossary of new vocabulary and relevant phrases explained in English was distributed prior to playing the film to facilitate understanding.

As far as the latter category of films was concerned, the college had to borrow these from the British Council and the English Language Curriculum Department at the Ministry of Education. These films were made locally or in Britain and they represented classes taught by various

teachers or documentaries about language learning. Gebhard (1992) states that "teachers can see their own teaching in the teaching of others, and when teachers observe others to gain self-knowledge, they have the chance to construct and reconstruct their own knowledge" (p. 2-3). He then goes on to say that "much can be learned simply from viewing a videotape of another teacher's class, especially if the observer took notes while doing so" (p. 3). Such videos are educational as well as promote and enhance critical reflection and thinking. They also impact teachers' image and beliefs. It is important that student teachers are trained to analyze critically and judge thoughtfully (Villar, 1995). The use of videos also improves motivation and provokes classroom discussion (Ellsworth, 1992). Prior to playing this type of video, I would give the student teachers a task to complete while watching the video. I would give them a form that included some classroom management, interpersonal skills and methodology points that they would need to look for during the lesson and comment upon. Example of points were lesson timing, degree of creativity applied by the teacher, degree of answer elicitation, variation of activities and teaching techniques, degree of independent learning applied, application of correction techniques, degree of attention paid to weaker students, teacher's use of blackboard and translation, whether the teacher had any sense of humor, teacher's positioning and movement, teacher's eye contact and gestures, pace of the lesson, student participation and so

forth. Such tasks generated healthy discussions, encouraged observation and promoted the use of PE.

6. The sixth means for language development was concerned with the student teachers' PE and took the shape of inviting experienced people in the field of ELT to give talks. These people represented the Ministry of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, the only state-owned university in the Sultanate, MITTC and people from private language institutes. The talks revolved round ELT themes like teaching the four skills, classroom management issues, lesson planning issues, issues about language learning and acquisition and so forth. Some talks were theoretical in nature, while others provided practical tips for the audience and took the form of a workshop. The talks were followed by a question and answer session. Moreover, the student teachers were asked to take notes during the talk. This was aimed at killing two birds with one stone. The first was to train them in the skill of note taking. They were required to expand these notes and convert them into a written summary about the talk. The second was to ensure they were following the talk and making the most of it.

7. Last but not least were the visits arranged to privately sponsored language institutes, which recruit native speaker teachers; for example, the British Council, the Capital Institute and Polyglot, all of which are situated in the Muscat Area, the capital. I had to approach these institutes on a formal basis and coordinate with them. The aim behind these visits was to allow the student teachers a chance to observe

their teaching experience and help enrich their PE. Teaching in private language institutes in Oman is different from teaching English in state schools. The number of students in each class in these institutes is smaller and the syllabi and teaching methodology used are different. The majority of the teachers in private language institutes are experienced native speakers. This was bound to add to the student teachers' PE and teaching experience and allow them to compare and contrast and see ELT from a different perspective. Research has shown that student teachers often come to training programs with a set of beliefs and images about teaching and learning. Observing these classes along with the videos mentioned above helped the student teachers access and confront their personal beliefs and images. Watching other teachers helps teachers reflect on their own teaching and language learning experience. The student teachers were given forms identical to the ones they were given while watching videos to help put the activity into a meaningful framework and to ensure that they were making the most of the experience.

Conclusion

This innovation program would not have got off the ground had not there been combined effort and a strong will and desire for knowledge acquisition and success. Implementing this project was a challenge in itself that exceeded the challenge of planning it. The program included academic as well as managerial aspects that required considerable preparation and attention. Nevertheless, the continuous evaluation of the various aspects of the project contributed to its success and continuity. The continuous feedback from the student teachers formed a solid basis for the evaluation process.

The program combined pleasure and hard work and helped develop more than language knowledge, although the main aim was language knowledge development. It promoted and consolidated a strong sense of community and cooperation. Furthermore, it provided good grounds for teacher development. Some of the activities integrated and developed teaching knowledge and language knowledge simultaneously, like watching videos and visiting private language institutes. Most importantly, the students found the experience worthwhile and useful. They thought that the amount of linguistic and technical exposure they had during that time was considerable and effective and that it added to their existing knowledge. Those who graduated and became full time teachers offered to come to the Club during their leisure time. This was an important yardstick for the success of the program. Another yardstick was the development of the student teachers, which showed gradual improvement. The improvement was evident in the language they produced inside and outside the teaching commons. Of course, they had a language improvement component to their regular studies (see program description), but we felt that the Club played an effective role as well.

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