

English Language Curriculum Evaluation in Oman

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Abstract

This paper starts with highlighting some of the key literature regarding curriculum evaluation in general. It highlights the English Language teaching, schools, teachers and pupils in Oman. It also presents the main issues related curriculum development and process of curriculum evaluation.

Keywords: English, English teaching, English curriculum development, English curriculum evaluation, Oman

1. Introduction

Education is developing rapidly over time. There is regular reform going on in different places which can include developing teaching styles and methods, curriculum design and better understanding of the learning process. Educationalists intend to develop different aspects of education including curriculum development.

Continuous development of the curriculum is taking place in all over the world. In some places, governments have their own curriculum officers and basically develop their own curricula. However, there are other countries that depend on different publishers who intend to write, revise and develop the curriculum over a period of time. In both these cases, a need to evaluate the curriculum is significant in order to update the methodology utilized, the content and other curriculum features (Al-Jardani, 2011).

The field of Curriculum Evaluation is still developing and when looking closely at the Curriculum Evaluation books and articles, it shows that the aspects covered in this area if compared to other issues in Education are still not enough (Al-Jardani, 2011). This important aspect of Curriculum Evaluation is vital and needs a lot of work, especially in developing a systematic approach for Curriculum Evaluation in the long-term.

A lack of a framework for Curriculum Evaluation in the Ministry of Education in Oman for the public has been observed (Al-Jardani, 2011). This has resulted in a miscommunication between the curriculum departments and the practitioners in the field. Building and publicizing a framework helps to show the role and responsibility of each in developing and evaluating the curriculum.

2. Literature Review

In this section, the concept of Curriculum Evaluation will be discussed. It will cover the some aspects of curriculum evaluation. This starts with a definition of curriculum evaluation.

Different definitions of Curriculum Evaluation are found in the existing literature about the topic. It can be defined as a systematic process for collecting and analyzing all relevant information for the purpose of judging and assessing the effectiveness of the curriculum to promote improvement (Nichols et al., 2006; Simons, 1987 in Marsh, 2004: 106; Brown, 1989: 223 in Brown, 1995: 218). The definition consists of key words such as *systematic, process, collect and analyse, relevant information, curriculum effectiveness' assessment, and to improve.*

Curriculum Evaluation can be either a small-scale task involving a very limited number of participants if it is classroom based, or a massive large-scale task involving a number of schools, teachers, parents, officers and some community members. An action research exercise conducted by a teacher in his/her class with learners can also be part of Curriculum Evaluation. On the other hand, an internal or external evaluator evaluating a whole curriculum covering several schools, a large number of teachers and learners, and which may additionally cover the schools' surroundings, may also constitute Curriculum Evaluation.

There are some common characteristics of different types of Curriculum Evaluation. It starts with needs analysis which is on-going as it never finishes (Brown, 1995). This shows that there is a need for Curriculum Evaluation within any curriculum system and within any teaching and learning process. It cannot be merely one short task and, although that can be a part of the overall evaluation, it cannot be all of it. Generally, Curriculum Evaluation helps to connect all other elements of curriculum and also to highlight positive and negative issues related to these elements, such as the aims, goals and purpose of different subjects, guidelines for course design, teaching and learning principles and others. Brown (1995: 217) says that the absence of Curriculum Evaluation will result in the other elements lacking cohesion.

A need for both internal (insider) and external (outsider) evaluation is necessary. Moreover, evaluation should cover both the result of the curriculum and the planning of it, too. (Nation & Macalister, 2010: 123; Marsh, 2004). These points and others will be discussed in the coming sections of the Curriculum Evaluation section of this thesis.

3. Method

The paper utilized a document analysis method to highlight some of the key issues to English and English Curriculum development and evaluation in Oman. Document analysis as a method, is used to study the common document within the area of research (Krippendorff, 1980: 21, 112; Bell, 1999). The document which is used for this paper is the English Language Curriculum Framework and some other relevant documents.

The English Language Curriculum Framework published by the English Section is produced by the English section in the Human Sciences department. It included sections related to curriculum development. It covers the aims of the curriculum in general and each levels aims and specific objectives. It also covers the coursebook components.

4. English in Oman

English in Oman is seen as an important foreign language. It is utilized in both government and private organizations. However, it is used more in private associations, as they are linked more closely to international organizations. From this perspective, 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 develop children' abilities to use it authentically—for example, filling in English forms and writing e-mails. Parents see the target language importance for their children as a tool or as a gate to the future. They spend their time, effort and money to help their children to learn English fast and effectively. They sometimes send their children to private institutes during holidays to have English and computers courses.

From this standpoint, English is expected to be taught to reach the expectations of society and parents. These expectations lead to focus on the use of the target language. They mainly focus, as the researcher sees it, on the production skills, as parents are keen to see their children write and talk well.

The use of English in Oman has developed into “institutionalized domains”, such as business, the media and education (Al-Busaidi, 1995). To prepare future participants to function in these domains, English is taught in government schools from Grade One, while it is taught from Kindergarten One in private schools. English has also become the medium of teaching and training in all private and public higher education/post secondary institutions throughout the Sultanate (Al-Issa, 2005).

English is seen as an effective tool for any educational innovation. As such, efforts to improve English Language instruction receive political and economic support from the government, which determines its place on the social “hierarchy” (Al-Issa, 2002). English is considered as a resource for “national development” (Wiley, 1996). “English is also considered as a fundamental tool that facilitates ‘Omanisation’”—a gradual and systematic process through which the expatriate labour force is replaced by a qualified Omani one (Al-Issa, 2002). Mastery of the English language is a prerequisite for finding a white-collar job (Al-Busaidi, 1995; Al-Issa, 2002). English is, hence, central to Oman’s “continued development” (Nunan, Tyacke, & Walton, 1987, p. 2) and is “a resource for national development as the means for wider communication within the international community” (p. 2).

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 (Al-Issa, 2005). English is the global language for Science 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. This was as a result of a better understanding of the need to stay on the cutting edge of international development, and also because of the increase in the number of tourists coming to Oman every year. Therefore, if we focus only on the Omani culture by highlighting its main aspects, this would not satisfy the needs created by these recent developments in Omani society. The effects of tourism, business and of accepting others would definitely seem to require a better understanding of others and an open mind in learning about their cultures. These would have far-reaching effects within Oman. Thus, teachers need to be working with their pupils with some space for them to teach the language in the ways which might help their pupils to use the language in public. The increased use of English in Oman necessitates innovation in the education system.

5. English Language Teaching in Oman

English is taught as a second language subject in government schools in Oman. Pupils start studying it from Grade 1 along with Arabic (Mother tongue). They have 5-7 periods per week; each period is 40 minutes; this makes about 3-4 hours of learning English per week.

Schools are provided with some materials from the Omani Ministry of Education. Each school has a Learning Resource Centre which contains computers, videos, cassette players and many books. However, these centres are rarely used by the English teachers as there are very few English books and resources available in each centre.

English teachers in Oman comprise both Omani and non-Omani. Non-Omani teachers represent many different nationalities, such as Egyptian, Palestinian, Jordanian, Indian, and Sudanese. Teaching experience in Oman varies: some teachers have several years of experience; some are fresh graduate teachers with little practical classroom experience. In addition, some non-Omani teachers have been in the country for a few years while some are new to the country and 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.

Pupils in Oman are rarely formally exposed to English. Very few Omani children have the opportunity to listen to English being spoken by their parents at home. However, they are exposed to English through the satellite channels and the Internet, which many have access to in their homes. This creates difficulties for teachers seeking to implement the syllabus, as they need to provide more interactive opportunities to use the language in their classrooms, and to do so in a very interesting and enjoyable way.

6. Curriculum Development in Oman

The Educational system in Oman is called "Basic Education" which includes Cycle 1 (Grades 1-4) and Cycle 2 (Grades 5-10). This is followed by Grades 11 and 12 which are called "Post-Basic Education". In grade 12 which is the last grade in the system, students sit National Exams in different subjects of which English is one. Based on their results—the results are in form of letter grades not marks—they can apply to different fields of study in and outside the country's colleges and universities, both governmental and private.

Throughout the history of curriculum development in Oman, the Ministry of Education has used both commercial publications and in-house curriculum. With two series of commercial books being used first, five curricula of in-house materials have been developed so far. This shows that Oman intended from the beginning to develop its own curriculum for English Language Teaching. The latest curriculum used discussed above, starting in 1998, is called the **Basic Education system**.

The rationale for the new English Language Curriculum has been developed to match the general objectives of the Basic Education system in the Sultanate of Oman.

The **general objectives** of the education system are to:

- reinforce young Omanis' strong and proud belief in Islamic principles and behaviour, as well as pride in their country, their Gulf heritage, and the Arab world;
- value the diversity of the world's peoples,
- understand and actively promote equity, justice, peace, and the protection of the environment in their community, Oman, and the world;
- care about the physical, emotional and spiritual health as well as that of others
- pursue healthy, purposeful lives and develop good work habits and basic life skills;
- acquire knowledge and skills in all areas of the curriculum, including skills in questioning, investigating, critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making;
- apply the skills learned to further studies, work, leisure, daily living and a lifetime of learning;

- use a variety of technologies, demonstrate an understanding of technological applications, apply appropriate technologies for solving problems related to their daily lives, and promote transliteracy;
- raise critical awareness of various forms of arts, and participate in creative activities and expression.
- raise awareness of global issues within the curriculum;
- use English to support, reinforce and consolidate topics in other subject areas;
- present English as an international language and as a means of communication.

(ELCS, 2010)

Government schools in Oman use only one English national coursebook, 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 the new reform project. Every school must use this book and is required to finish all of the lessons on time. Therefore the syllabus is seen as the main source of input.

7. Curriculum Evaluation in Oman

Reform initiatives, in terms of English language education in Oman, start at the Ministry of Education, which seeks to implement changes via a new or revised curriculum. As the principles underlying the approach represented in any new textbook or other educational reform initiative may be novel to the end users (classroom teachers and learners), problems can arise if there is a lack of explanation, orientation or a lack of effective Curriculum Evaluation process. If this area of Curriculum Evaluation is neglected, the textbook may be abandoned outright, or, more likely, a hidden curriculum could develop, with teaching and learning taking place much as it did prior to the introduction of the innovation (Kennedy, 1987, pp: 164-165). Therefore, there is a need for a systematic Curriculum Evaluation to support practitioners in the field.

In 2005 a new department, the Department of Curriculum Evaluation, was founded within the Ministry of Education. The main aim of having this department is to participate in developing the curriculum based on the learning objectives in Oman, the type of learners and society and the need for the workplace (The Ministry official website: www.moe.om). Therefore, there is a need to develop a clear and planned approach for developing and evaluating the curriculum and not to deal with it in a random way.

Every year, the curriculum section of each subject suggests the grade which they expect the Department of Curriculum Evaluation to work on. The department uses different curriculum department including all subjects sections. They also use the supervision departments and teachers in schools to evaluate the books.

The department use mainly document analysis sheets for educational researchers within the Department of Curriculum Evaluation, Curriculum Officers, supervisors and teachers of the same subject. For example, in 2011, the Grade 8 English book was analysed and evaluated. This ends up with a final analysis report of that subject.

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