
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN OMAN

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ABSTRACT: *The safety measures of COVID-19 pandemic have pushed teachers and students to shift the teaching and learning process online overnight. This article describes the encountered difficulties of coping to teaching English online in Omani public schools during 2020-2021 academic year from my experience as an English teacher. The swift transition into online learning and blended learning modes has created pedagogical challenges in relation to teacher education, teaching strategies and the taught curriculum. Turning the English syllabus into a virtual lesson format has been one of these challenges. Teaching a virtual ELT syllabus requires syllabus designers to redefine the six areas of the subject matter, design of the curriculum, the role and the needs of the teacher, the role and the needs of the student, the used assessment methods, and the roles of the context. Given the rush to implement virtual learning platform, these six areas were not given equal significance nor weight. The second difficulty, which goes in line with the first syllabus challenge, is the inadequate teacher education which was given to English teachers. Undoubtedly, offering teachers professional training courses on online instruction and blended learning instruction can yield positive consequences. Unfortunately, according to my own experience, the offered online course was short and incomprehensive. The third difficulty of moving into virtual instruction is using motivating teaching strategies. As a matter of fact, the normal everyday teacher-student interaction is missed in virtual classroom settings. Instead, teachers need to rely on using diverse technological strategies to trigger students' motivation. The motivational issue is more vivid in online instruction as students tend to lose interest more rapidly in comparison to the situation in real face to face instruction. In conclusion, ELT has undergone through a rapid move towards adopting online instruction in the Omani context. Yet, much in-depth investigation needs to be carried out.*

KEYWORDS: COVID-19 and ELT in Oman, online instruction, teacher education in Oman, challenges of virtual education, the move to virtual education, Omani public schools.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has swept through the world and brought about abrupt changes in every sector of life, including the area of ELT (English language teaching). This paper explores briefly from my humble point of view, as an in-service English teacher, the impact of the current pandemic on ELT curriculum, teaching methods, and educational growth of teachers.

Background scene

In order to contaminate the spread of corona novel virus, the MOE in Oman ceased in-person instruction in all educational institutions in March 2020 as WHO announced COVID-19 a global

pandemic (Cleland Mckim, Fuller, Tayler, Janczukowicz, and Gibbs, 2020). Within a one day notice all educational facilities were closed. More than 843 school students (Times of Oman, 2020) stayed at home for almost 7 months. Up until now, 3 main phases have depicted the scene of education in Omani public schools. The following table outlines the three phases.

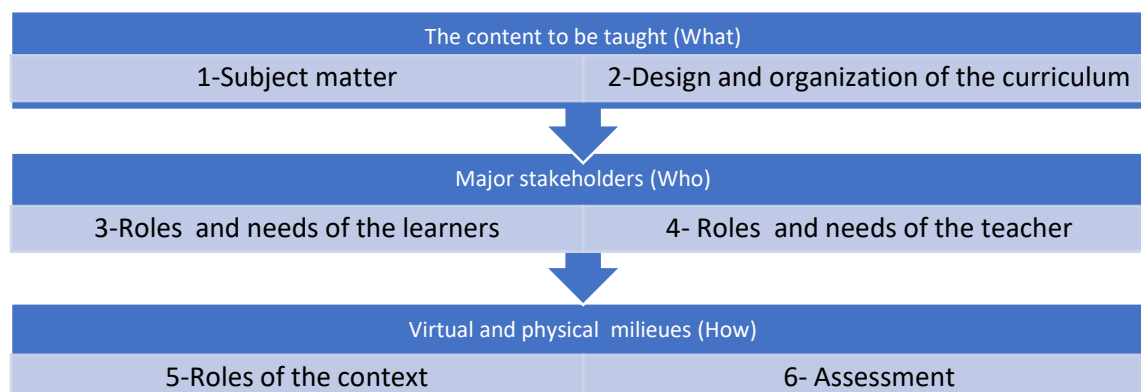
Table 1: Phases of Education in Omani Public Schools during the pandemic

Phase	Timeline
1-Disruption of traditional teaching	March 2020 – October 2020
2- Adopting blended learning and on-line learning modes	November 2020- March 2020
3- Adopting on-line learning mode for all public schools except for those schools located in mountainous areas	March 2020 – June 2021

English Language Teaching (ELT)

ELT in Omani's public schools has been deeply affected due to the spread of the pandemic. The teachers and students alike were given an extended summer holiday during phase 1. That is to say that learners were deprived of any sort of English tuition or input for seven months. According to Quinn and Polikoff (2017) the attainment degree of learners declines during the summer vacation by one month of the academic school year. In the Omani context, the summer learning loss could be even worse because of the unprecedented long vacation. All public-school students in the 2019-2020 academic year passed to the next grade level without formal assessment. On the other hand, the English curriculum of the second semester was condensed into two teaching weeks to be taught at the beginning of phase two. Drawing from my own experience teaching the second semester content within a fortnight proved to be stressful as well as challenging. The mentality for planning an on-line lesson differs from traditional teaching. I literally had to brainstorm, research and connect ideas from various resources for hours and hours to come up with an on-line lesson design. My teaching mindset was going through a phase of mounting concerns trying to visualize the student response on the other end.

Many factors contributed to such a tough situation, including not having a clear guidance to clarify how to teach learners on-line nor how to design a proper on-line lesson, not to mention the rush to cover the content and have students pass the exams. Obviously, ELT in public schools has been going through several technical and pedagogical challenges. The lack of experience, guidance, and technical support have ultimately redefined and increased the role of English teachers. As revealed by Graves and Garton (2017), there are six elements that make up curriculum framework. I adapted the same elements into three groups as shown in the below chart.



Of course, in online as well as blended teaching, all these components are ought to be rethought and redefined, taking into consideration the nature of the Omani conservative community, the weak online infrastructure the country possess, and the safety measures of COVID-19.

Professional Growth

COVID-19 has led to an unprecedented biggest disruption of education worldwide (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). However, no one was really prepared for the sudden shift towards on-line instruction. Locally in Oman, policy makers announced a long break for public-school teachers that lasted for half a year. At that same period, private school teachers, especially in prestigious schools, were continuing teaching their students online during the months of March, April, and June. A legitimate question that poses itself here is why the ministry of education did not cooperate with the private schools to train the ministry teachers on distance learning in March 2020. I personally believe that there could have been more learning gain for our public-school students as well as a timely investment for public school teachers as invaluable human resources in case public school teachers were trained earlier.

Undoubtedly, equipping teachers with the basic skills to deal with the new era of distance learning is an urgent necessity. Looking back at my own experience, teachers took the advantage of two types of professional growth sources: formally given by the ministry and informally initiated by teachers' efforts to develop their own practices. As for the formal teacher education, I received a one-week course on how to use google classroom from the ministry of education. Unfortunately, the course trainer was not an English academic and hence the on-line training course was not comprehensive and overlooked many crucial on-line aspects in terms of lesson design, teaching strategies, and assessment techniques. To fulfill the missing gaps, I had to cooperate with my fellow English teachers and share our teaching expereinces. Also, on-line you-tube videos have proved to offer a repertoire of creative online ideas. The interesting pattern that emerged, especially during the first few weeks of applying online teaching, was characterized by the heat and excitement of cross-disciplinary interaction. It was not strange for an English teacher to chat with an Arabic teacher over what worked best in her online lesson nor for a physical education teacher to tell her fellow math teacher about an exciting educational game website. The need to catch-up and renew our teaching skillset was really overwhelming and mind-boggling. I quote here the touching saying of our late Sultan Qaboos "I will teach my children even under the shade of

trees.” An update, that best fit the recent scenario, can read “I will teach my students through the waves of technology, regardless of the noticeable absent students, the endless technological sudden incidents, students’ complaints of having a bad network.” It is not only a technological battle that we are facing, but also the emotional fear of the unknown and the unexpected. I believe that we teachers have gone through a tremendous period of burn-out during the past academic year (2020-2021). I also believe that most teachers have made a big leap in terms of their technological professional development.

Teaching Methods

There is a need to design a comprehensive teacher education program to meet the demands of the recent era of on-line instruction. It is undeniable that the recent health crisis has created multiple obstacles for ELT, yet there are windows to be explored (Flores and Carrilo, 2020). Active participation of learners goes hand in hand with implementing innovative instructional strategies by the teacher (Philips, 2005). Teaching methods refer to the practices that teachers use to achieve the lesson objectives, cultivate student motivation, and cater for individual varied learning styles.

Since maintaining learner motivation on-line, from my experience, proves to be a challenging territory, English teachers need to find interactive platforms to engage student interest and extend their concentration span. A good example of a teaching method that I learned from my tech-savvy colleague, and I immediately tried with my students is “Class 123”. After creating an account and logging in as a teacher, classes and student lists can be easily formulated. What is interesting in this website is that, as a teacher, you get little by little to experience lively aspects of the virtual reality classrooms. Added to that, class 123 engenders a feeling of competitiveness and togetherness among the students. Each student is represented by an avatar that dances joyfully whenever the teacher awards her a point.

Motivating students within synchronized lessons is not an easy task. Engaging in online learning could negatively affect students’ intrinsic motivation (Pietro, Biage, Costa, Karipinsiki and Mazza, 2020). Those students come from different family backgrounds. Not all families can afford supplying their children with laptops or tablets. Some students had to log in the meet by using small-sized cell phones. I remember shedding a tear over a student who hardly could read my power point show, simply because she was using the small phone screen as her browser. So, what drives students to learn? How can we reach students who come from under-privileged households? What can we do to provide a fair chance of education for everyone? How can we consider the socio-economic differences of our students? Those questions, as big as they might seem, do reflect the undeniable huge responsibility left on the shoulder of the teacher. While teaching, teachers also play the other roles of being student counselor, technician, and a mediator for the school’s administration, not to mention an online syllabus designer.

Theoretically speaking, Ryan and Deci (2017) proposed the self-determination theory. According to this theory, self-motivation and self-determination are prerequisite needs for the learner to develop competence, relatedness, and autonomy. In this regard, teachers could use interactive platforms and varied teaching strategies to trigger their students’ motivation and self-worth. However, beside using technology, I believe that the teachers’ voice is the most influential factor

in online-teaching. Reaching students' hearts, reassuring them, and most importantly, keeping them calm at a time of a pandemic can only be transmitted through the human touch of the voice tone.

CONCLUSION

The current trend of online education requires evidence-based framework of what works and what does not work in terms of the interconnected areas of ELT curriculum, teaching methods and teachers' professional growth. We are amid a rapid shift of learning and teaching. At such times, scribbling reflective thoughts of what happened and how it happened and conducting opinion polls can lead to more clarity and quality in our future use of technological teaching practices. All stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, administrators, and policy makers are genuinely concerned with this ongoing open dialogue. In the words of Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Aaron, 2020 as educators we need to "go beyond the urgent online practices and develop quality on-line teaching."

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