English Education Policy in Oman

Khalid Salim Al-Jardani

Abstract  The Oman chapter highlights varies aspects of Education in the Sultanate of Oman. It starts by describing how English language is seen in Oman from governmental, the society views. It discusses English in both the primary level and the tertiary level. The chapter also highlights some of challenges facing the Sultanate of Oman to prepare its youth for a better life and work. The aspect of using only one Textbook for Government Schools is also discussed.

Aspects related to Teacher Training is also highlighted. This covers types of programmes provided for teachers as an in-service training addressing the needs of teachers at each stage of schooling: Cycle 1, Cycle 2 and Post-Basic Education.

The chapter ends by addressing aspects leading to improvements showing a number of recent researches developed which can help policy makers to make better choices for a better development for English language Education in Oman.

Keywords  English • Oman • Education • Primary level • Tertiary level • Textbook • Teachers • Schools

The Sultanate of Oman is facing the challenge of preparing its youth in life and work for the modern global economy. There is a need to prepare them with a high level of awareness and skills in Maths, Science, Technology and Languages to deal with the changes in social and life style, technology and international business (Ministry of Education 2010). This also helps to develop a smooth interaction with the rest of the world and show a high degree of adaptation to take their place in the world with strong confidence in religion, culture and their own beliefs. The need to observe the changes in educational philosophy; the role of English in society (tourism, business, etc.), students’ and parents’ expectations; the educational technology and the workplace expectations, all require a clear reflection of plans across the social and educational context.

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1 ELT in Primary Education

English in Oman is seen as an important foreign language. It is utilized in both governmental and private organizations (Al-Jardani 2012, 2013). However, it is used more in private associations, as they are linked more closely to international organizations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF and other areas such as oil and gas companies. From this international perspective, people in the 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 of developing children’s abilities to use it authentically – for example, filling in English forms and writing e-mails. Parents see the importance of this target language for their children as it operates as a tool or as a gateway to the future. They spend their time, effort and money to help their children learn English quickly and effectively. They sometimes send their children to private institutes during holidays for English and computing 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 language production skills, as parents are keen to see their children write and speak well in English.

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 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).

It is clear that 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 et al. 1987, p. 2) and is “a resource for national development as the means for wider communication within the international community” (2). This stresses the need for English language and also a need to specify the objectives of learning it in Oman and other related elements and of course the need to make these elements easy to be known by different organisations in a form of a framework.

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).

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 and Al-Shibli 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 English Language Teaching

The educational system in Oman has developed continuously. In 1998, a new system was created based on the new education philosophy which takes into account the different stakeholders’ needs and expectations as well as how to cope with the changing world in the sense of the information and skills needed and the technology utilized. The stakeholder covers all parties involved in the need for English language teaching and involved in the developing and evaluating process, such as employers and higher institutions and colleges. Further research into this area is needed (Al-Jardani 2013).

English is taught as a second/foreign language subject in government schools in Oman; there is an argument whether English is seen as a foreign or a second language. Students start studying it from Grade 1 along with Arabic which is naturally their mother tongue (Al-Jardani 2013). They have 5-7 periods per week and each period lasts for 40 min, which makes about 3-4 h of learning English per week. For educators who see it as a second language, teaching it from Grade 1 and even in KG level along with Arabic, the mother tongue is strong evidence. On the other hand, English is mainly spoken in international institutions and big companies and for students a 40 minute lesson per day for 12 years of primary education. It is very rarely spoken at home which seems to be a strong evidence for the educationalist who feels that it is a foreign language in Oman. Moreover, starting in 2012 two more foreign languages were introduced as an elective courses in Post education Schools – French and German.

Schools are provided with some materials from the Omani Ministry of Education. Each school has a Learning Resource Centre which contains computers, CDs, DVDs, 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. However, there is a plan to add more sources both fiction and non-fiction books in the nearly future. There are 3 levels of schools running at the same time. The “Basic Cycle 1 Education”, which covers Grades 1-4, Cycle 2 for Grades 5-10 and third level is called “Post-Basic Schools” which includes Grades 11 and 12. In addition, in some areas of the country, a school might cover two or even three levels. In a place where the researcher comes from, there are only two schools, one for boys covering Grades 1-12 and the other for girls covering all three levels; including Grades 1-12.

English teachers in Oman comprise of both Omanis and non-Omanis. Non-Omani teachers represent many different nationalities, such as Egyptian, Palestinian, Tunisian, Jordanian, Indian, and Sudanese (Al-Jardani 2012, 2013). Teaching experience in Oman varies; while 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 to 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. Initially, a need for an orientation course is important in a country like Oman in order to help new teachers, both Omanis and non-Omanis, as a refresher course to highlight the main issues of the textbooks and better ways to work with Omani students.

Students in Oman are rarely formally exposed to English or to native English speakers. Very few Omani children have the opportunity to listen to English being spoken by their parents at home (Al-Jardani 2012, 2013). However, they are exposed to English through the satellite channels and the Internet, which many can access from 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. It must also influence the kind of English that is being taught because there is often a discrepancy between the English of text books and that of the media, as the language utilized and taught within a classroom is usually simpler and selective when compared to that which learners might hear from the media. Starting from 1998, learners in the government and private schools started to learn English from Grade 1. This might have helped learners to be more exposed to English and get more opportunities to use it, although no research could be observed on this issue so far.

4 English Language Curriculum Development

Throughout the history of curriculum development in Oman, the Ministry of Education has used both commercial publications and an 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 started in 1998, and is called the Basic Education system.

The rationale for the 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 their 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;
5 One Textbook for Government Schools

Using only one textbook in the whole Sultanate is an aspect for argument. However, this issue requires further research in order to find out whether there is a need for different textbooks for different regions and is outside the scope of this study. The variety of geographical differences which affect learners' needs and interests might push towards having different textbooks catering for each place and context. However, other issues related to financial and equal opportunities for all children of Oman should be considered too.

A government needs a curriculum to make sure they provide equal exposure of a language or information to learners in the whole country. For example, in Oman only one course book is used all over the country. The English for Me and English with English series in this case. The rationale of this is mainly that the Ministry of Education wants to ensure that all learners get equal learning input and opportunity and then sit for the same exam. This is a contentious issue as there is a need for different textbooks and a need to set for different exams according to what learners in different contexts are exposed to. However, funding seems to be the key point for the government decision. Developing different textbooks requires funding as well as a greater effort to be made to encourage authors and materials.

The Tests and Examination Department has responsibility for public examination in Oman. This covers all test and examinations at all level. The high-stakes Grade 12 examination has two purposes, one is to provide completion of the Post-Basic School and getting its certificate and then joining jobs or tertiary-level institutions. Using continuous assessment is used to assess students' achievement throughout the school year. However, the percentage of the marks awarded differs according to the level of the students. For example for lower grades; Grades 1–2, the continuous assessment covers all the grade, however, the percentage is decreasing towards Grade 12 which is 30% and 70% for the Semester Tests as well as the short tests (Ministry of Education 2012, p. 91).

6 English Language Curriculum

Officers in different departments such as Supervision, Assessment, Training, Curriculum Development and Curriculum Evaluation need to have a clear curriculum. The curriculum department only has to develop one course book for each grade. It should be noted here that the writing of one course is not an easy task as the course book has to cater for learners' needs and interests for all Oman, taking into account, for example, learners with different backgrounds, knowledge, needs and interests. Another aspect is that along with the course book, there is also a need for supplementary materials including printed and non-printed materials. Extra supplementary tasks which are in separate booklets can help students to practice the
language more; others such as audio and video devices can also play an important role in supporting learners’ learning the target language.

Since the new course book started in 1998 written by textbook writers, (a mixture of native English speakers and national educationalists), which is about 14 years old, the Basic Education course book: The English for Me series (Grades 1–10) and Engage with English series (Grades 11 and 12) is still the purpose of any evaluation which seeks to work towards covering school materials which is not done until date. Therefore, the main purpose of any Curriculum Evaluation at least during the coming five years is mostly to identify positive things about the existing course to maintain (Al-Jardani 2013). Also the focus will be on adapting and developing the weaker areas. The purpose of comparing different courses is not practical at least now as there is only one relevant course book available. A former one was produced during the eighties out this seems to be out of date regarding the methodology and the information included.

However, looking back at the existing course book and the long time taken to put it into the field will not be an encouraging experience unless by enriching the curriculum department with more qualified manpower or finding good commercial books which need to be adapted anyway. This area is also in need of clear and planned research. Developing a clear planned evaluation process is a key issue in order to develop a good evaluation (Al-Jardani 2012, 2013). This should be based on needs analysis, the evaluation’s purpose and the co-operation of others with the evaluator.

7 Teacher Training

Apart from the initial teacher education, there are a number of programmes offered to in-service teachers. First of all, teachers are provided with methodology courses to address the needs of teachers at each stage of schooling: Cycle 1, Cycle 2 and Post-Basic Education. These programmes aim to develop the ability of teachers of English to teach at different levels effectively. They focus on developing their understanding of theoretical principles underpinning foreign language learning and teaching as well as best practice with regard to approaches and techniques of teaching English successfully. Teachers are also offered a programme to help them improve their language proficiency and knowledge of the English language system. In addition, a programme which focuses on research for professional development and which aims to equip teachers with the skills needed to undertake action research to continue to understand and develop their practice is offered to experienced teachers. Finally, a programme is offered to prepare Senior English teachers, to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to effectively support and mentor teachers.

As well as these programmes, teachers are offered a number of one day workshops. These include workshops to familiarise them with curricula innovations, to address literacy skills, the teaching of grammar, and making teaching more creative. The list of workshops is constantly updated to ensure these remain fresh and are responsive to teacher’s needs.

8 English Language Curriculum Evaluation

In order to reform initiatives in English language education in Oman, one must 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 for the end users (i.e., 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, p. 164). Therefore, there is a need for a systematic Curriculum Evaluation to support practitioners in the field.

In 2003 a new “small” department (Ministry of Education 2012, p. 94), the Department of Curriculum Evaluation, was founded as part of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education 2012). The main aim of having this department was to participate in developing the curriculum based on the learning objectives in Oman, the type of learners and society and the workplace needs (Directorate General of Curriculum Development 2011). 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 an unstructured way.

Every year, the Department of Curriculum Evaluation of each subject suggests the grade which they expect the Department of Curriculum Evaluation to work on (Al-Jardani 2013). There can be more than one grade suggested, however it seems that one grade is acceptable considering the shortage of members of the Curriculum Evaluation Department. The department uses different curriculum officers including all subjects. They also use the supervision departments and teachers in schools to evaluate the books. For example, if a Grade 1 Arabic language course book was selected, the members of Arabic language in the Curriculum Evaluation have to plan the whole evaluation process, but can use members of the Arabic curriculum section, supervisors of Arabic language, Arabic teachers in schools, as well as learners if necessary. The process takes about a whole year. It covers documentation, field notes analysis and using other instruments including observation, interviews and questionnaires. It also covers different schools in different regions, and also teachers, students of the grade evaluated and sometimes parents. This coverage might help to provide a good picture of the course book being evaluated.
The department uses mainly document analysis sheets for educational researchers within the Department of Curriculum Evaluation, Curriculum Officers, supervisors and teachers of the same subject. These intend to be used by researchers to enable course participants and teachers to analyse the tasks and activities they engaged in during a course (Bell 1999; Wallace 1991, pp. 141–164; Krippendorff 1980, p. 21).

The Curriculum Evaluation sheets produced by the evaluation engage teachers in pre-observation and post-observation discussion. They also use classroom observations by outsiders in the form of a checklist, during the Focus Group meetings with teachers as well as in the teacher’s questionnaire. These sheets mainly focus on teachers’ perceptions of the curriculum and the learners’ reactions towards it (Al-Jardani 2013). This is mainly because they are the main users of the curriculum and the ones who we tested to see whether they have done it well as if their learners were able to succeed. However there is a clear need to have these skills even to help themselves to analyse their students’ reaction and development towards learning the language and how to support them more.

9 More Issues Related to English Language Curriculum Evaluation

The evaluation observed within the Curriculum Evaluation department in Oman seems to be on a very short term basis. Basically every year, officers of each subject intend to do one complete evaluation for a grade. A report will be distributed at the end of each academic year (Al-Jardani 2013). This is intended to be short term, however a plan is needed to do a long term evaluation where data of formative and summative input are collected systematically over a long time.

Looking through the sheets used by the Curriculum Evaluation department requires both types of measurement. There is a need to analyse numbers and also oral and written feedback. This requires knowledge of analysing qualitative and quantitative data. The training department established a course every year for teachers supporting them to do action research, conducting and then writing about them. The Ministry has already published a number of publications based on this practical research (Al-Jardani 2013). This will help other teachers with similar issues and also the Curriculum Evaluation process in which these can be used and their results can be examined. The idea of developing and encouraging a systematic approach of “Action Research” is very important. This could be developed within conducting a micro-evaluation which can be part of the professional development of teachers. Action research as a method of gathering data will be discussed in the section on gathering information. The training centre in Oman develops kinds of courses for teachers of different levels. Teachers attend a course of two parts, theoretical input for some sessions followed by action research. Teachers intend to do research within their classroom to solve some of their English teaching problems or any behaviour issues.

The key use of learners noted in the Curriculum Evaluation department sheets is by observing teachers to see how learners are managing the curriculum. Further, more teachers might be able to get some chances to discuss with the learners directly. There are also some general self-assessment tasks (Al-Jardani 2002) within the English course books at the end of each unit which can be seen as distractors – i.e., those which stop learners from smooth learning by some experts and others can see them as a way to assess the learners themselves of what they managed to do with that unit. These tasks can be used whether by their teachers and visitors to understand how learners think about their course book and each unit.

Officials from different departments in the Ministry of Education can also be part of the evaluation process as coordinators. They can help in the observation work and also in the discussion periods and meetings (Al-Jardani 2013). However, there is a need for cooperation between the officers themselves as they might be from different departments including: Curriculum Development, Curriculum Evaluation, Supervision, Evaluation, and Training departments. Their role in the evaluation process needs to be specified. Based on their needs seen as “institutional needs” (Masuhara 1998, p. 241), they are expected to consider different aspects related to the development of a curriculum. This covers developing the educational policy and the key aims and objectives of the system, considering social and political needs, market and workplace requirements and other organisational issues such as the number of periods allocated for the subject, the resources and the budget available.

Within the Omani context, the key role players in this matter are the officers of the Curriculum Evaluation. They need to establish the whole process within the Ministry itself by contacting different departments related to the evaluated course book, so they would be happy to participate and then make the changes needed afterwards, and also within the school levels and the directorates within each governorate. Involving all these parties in the process especially officers of the different departments would help to look at the curriculum from different sides (Al-Jardani 2013). This is basically as it is not only a good course book which makes the curriculum any better as they are different aspects need to be considered. By having officials of the supervision department, issues related to senior teachers, supervisors can be better checked and evaluated. The same things related to training involvement; their participation will give the trainee teachers’ side more focus and can help to develop a better report at the end of the process. This happens to other parties such as the curriculum writers and students assessment departments.

A study on the Curriculum in Oman by Al-Mahrooqi et al. (2015), as part of a nation-wide investigation funded by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos’ Trust Fund for Strategic Research, awarded on May 2, 2012, into stakeholders’ perspectives on the reasons for public school graduates’ weaknesses in English in Oman. This study concluded that there are a number of areas which requires more attention in order to make the Omani course books more effective is by providing learners with higher level thinking skills and check out the learning process considering the scaffolding of it, as well as providing students with authentic texts. These and some other issues needs to be looked at seriously by different stakeholders.
10 The Way Forward

A study was carried out by Al-Mahrooqi (2012) comprising a hundred students (32 male and 68 female) from Sultan Qaboos University into the factors causing a low English proficiency among school graduates. 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 course of tertiary study. The study concludes 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%). This shows that 85% of students in the study thought that teachers are the major cause of their low level of English, indicating that ineffective teachers, inadequate curricula and uninterested students seem to be the key issues as perceived by students as contributing to them leaving school with inadequate English skills.

In addition, as part of a PhD study, Al-Jardani (2013) highlighted the need for a separate research into stakeholders’ needs and expectations. This is clearly observed from the analysis of the study. 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 are they expected to provide and what support they need to give (Al-Jardani 2013).

As these needs and expectations are subject to change over time and as the Ministry of Education is planning to reform education, a clear need for this research is easily seen and should be encouraged. There is no point in reforming the educational system without considering the needs of stakeholders receiving the outcome of the 12 years of learning at the primary level. Therefore, there is a need for such a study to find out the up-to-date needs and expectations in order to incorporate these into the development of education in Oman.

The study aims to investigate the gap between stakeholders’ needs and expectations in relation to English language level and skills at tertiary level education, and the actual skills and level of Grade 12 graduates entering tertiary education in Oman. The Ministry of Education is planning to reform education in Oman through the development of new curriculum standards integrating knowledge and the skills across all subjects. Within this process of educational reform, it is essential to ensure stakeholders’ needs are addressed. While it is generally recognized that Grade 12 Omanis graduate enter tertiary education without the necessary level of English skills, there is a lack of research into the specific skill gaps that exist and the possible causes of these gaps. In order to ensure that the new curriculum standards meet stakeholders’ needs, it is essential to methodically research this issue. Therefore, this study aims to investigate this skills gap and identify areas within basic and post-basic education that could be improved to help ensure that Grade 12 graduate students’ English skills are more closely aligned to stakeholders’ expectations.

The study intends to answer the following questions:

- What is the expected English language level and skills of students entering tertiary education?
- What is the actual level of English Language and skills of students entering tertiary education?
- How can Basic and post-basic education be improved to reduce the gap between expected and actual English level and skills?

The study needs to start by developing a clear background about the topic highlighting issues related to the Ministry of Education, and tertiary education regarding the level of English and other skills needed. This requires an initial study to explore the need and expectations. The study will then analyse the Ministry of Education documents and the input provided for students from Grades 1-12 to highlight the needs covered and compare between the two lists. An additional issue if there is time would be to highlight what has been done to cover this gap from the tertiary education and ways to start with these needs in the primary education (Al-Jardani 2015).

Parents and society can also be enlisted to help address their children’s difficulties and ways to overcome them. On the other hand, society can follow up the aims covered and the needs and interests of the country in general to be addressed in each curriculum. The private sector and workplace need be considered in developing the curriculum and also in the evaluation stage. Considering the aims of the workplace, the employee’s skills and competence may be covered within the curriculum in order to develop good students.

Re-write the new standards from which a new scope and sequence of learning can be developed. As well as defining learning outcomes can be defined, a new curriculum can be written or the existing one developed based on them. There is also a need to consider checking and developing all documents covering all aspects of learning/teaching process of all subjects and students grades. This should cover curriculum development, curriculum evaluation, and supervision and training frameworks. This can be a golden chance to develop one whole document to ensure a unique document which can be a good basis for learning process.

There is a number of research areas suggested by different national research A study or analysis of the Stakeholders needs including society, the higher education institute and the work place too needs to be carried out.

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The English Language Teaching Situation in Palestine

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Abstract The modern-day areas of Palestine corresponding to the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the Gaza strip represent some interesting and dynamic sociolinguistic realities. First, although these are areas in which colloquial Arabic has traditionally been spoken by a majority of the population, several other languages have been in use in educational domains especially Classical Arabic, Turkish, and French among Christians. However, the British Mandate period saw the establishment of English as an important language of political, economic, and cultural power within Palestine. Yet with the establishment of the State of Israel in areas that were once part of British Mandate Palestine, a new language was introduced to the area, Modern Israeli Hebrew. Still, English has endured, partly as a colonial leftover, but also increasingly as a window onto the world for Palestinians. The present chapter explores the enduring yet changing role that English has played and continues to play in the educational system of Palestine. The chapter concludes with evaluations of current English teaching and educational policy in Palestine and provides suggestions for enhancing this policy in order to promote economic development and growth while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Keywords Palestine • English language • EFL • TEFL • ELT • Curriculum • Teacher Training