

Cross Cultural Education: A Key to Omani Student Learning Success

Reem Abuiyada^{1*}, Raed Abdelkarim²

¹Social Sciences Department, Dhofar University, Salalah, Sultanate of Oman

²Correspondence: Reem Abuiyada, Department of Social Sciences, Dhofar University, Salalaha, Sultanate of Oman

Email:¹ reem@du.edu.om

ABSTRACT

This paper surveys the execution of English Language to Omani Students at the Dhofar University (DU) in Oman. The paper canters about the experimental investigation into the successful feat of cross cultural education at a chiefly Arabic speaking Institution for Higher Education. The paper's findings are based on qualitative research methodology that explores Omani students' insight of obtaining education in English in courses presented by an English speaking lecturer from a culture and attitude dissimilar to their own. It also abridges the personal opinions of the researcher who instructed Omani students for many years in order to accomplish practical methods and learning frameworks for cross cultural education success based on the suggestions received through the student perceptions and personal observations

Keywords

Omani, Cross Culture, Education Development, Dhofar University, Cultural methodology

Article Received: 10 August 2020, Revised: 25 October 2020, Accepted: 18 November 2020

Introduction

Oman is a multicultural society in terms of both traditions and religion. Communities differ in terms of cultural heritage, language, dress and religious or sectarian affiliation. The majority of people are Arab (Newcombe, 2008). Arabic is the principal language spoken by Omanis; whereas English is their second language.

The road to educational development in Oman with all its complexities has been laid out. Provoking the socio-cultural challenges by continuously improving and adapting the education system in line with the welfare of the local population is the main way forward (Valeri, 2014). Formal education in Oman was based on their own ethnic language that included their career, business and progression extended to people generally from the similar culture and language as one-self. But now, the swift globalization has headed to covering an extensive range of socio-economic and political changes influencing employment, profession choices which sequentially have advanced to substantial changes and amendments in the professional growth of young Omani Nationals (Valeri, 2014).

The National Education Strategy 2040 that is being developed presently the Educational Council in Oman is trying to aim at equipping young Omanis with the skills required to succeed in a knowledge-based economy (The National Strategy for Education of Oman, 2018). The widespread reform of education schemes in which Omanis are presently involved helps to warrant that the government sectors and the private sectors have an ample pool of merited prospective recruits graduating from full time studies (Mohammad, 2004).

In accordance with Dhofar University (DU) Strategic Plan (2014 – 2019), the motto of the University is not only constrained to teaching, research, and community services but also the University standpoints powerful in the development of all areas: Social, economic, scientific and technological. This strategic vision focuses the DU at the

lead of backing to the development of the Sultanate of Oman within the Expanse (DU, 2018).

Alleviating the above decree, Dhofar University has a weighty role in supporting the far-reaching range of reforms through the groundwork/training of highly competent Omani students. This would aid them to enter the stimulating job arcade of future inherent within the certainties of the demands of international development and standards.

The widely held students presently studying at DU are Omani students that have come from an educational background of highly teacher-dependent locale, limited exposure to English language inside and outside the classroom, low proficiency in English, unsupportive parents and teachers (Al-Mahroqi, 2018)

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this research study, in principle, is to generate strategies on cross cultural teaching for the purpose of scheming a structure or a set of ethics that will intensify teaching / learning success in an ethnically varied locale.

By ingeniously perceiving the way Omani students make use of their ambiances through rituals, symbols, social structures and roles both inside and outside the classroom atmosphere, the researcher created strategies on the cross cultural education success.

The significance of the study

No research has taken place in this field in the Dhofar University specially English is the main language in teaching in DU. This study therefore has been the first attempt discussing university students' perspectives on having their education in English and to show the whole picture of student opinions. This study might be a tool to convince policy makers of the country for formulating concerned policies in future.

Research Questions

To gather information from the students about their views and sentiments of learning their subjects in English, conspicuous fluid questions asked during focus group sessions are as follows:

1. How do you like receiving your education in English language?
2. What is your perception of being educated by lecturers dissimilar to your culture?
3. What qualities make some foreign lecturers successful?
4. What makes some foreign lecturers less effective?
5. What do you think should be the current role of foreign lecturers in class?

During conducting of each session, the researcher with the help of the assistant explained the objective of the research and the phenomenal process of focus group discussions in addition to other important issues such as confidentiality and anonymity of the research participant.

Research Sample

In this research, 60 female and male Arab students were asked to be involved in this research study (Krueger and Casey, 2014). Five focus group sessions were conducted over a period of five weeks, three female groups with 12 students in each and 2 male groups with 12 students in each. Other important issues such as confidentiality and anonymity of the research participant were mentioned.

Literature Review

Various studies on cross cultural education effectiveness / success have been piloted by many researchers. The aim of the study was to accomplish practical methods and learning frameworks for cross cultural education success. Mindful of the fact that the students' success on any assignment is swayed by the preparation, support and training they receive (Fontaine, 1997) it is apparent that cross cultural training is essential to minimize failures in education.

Black and Mendenhall (1990) and Shim and Paprock (2002) emphasized that cross-cultural education is prodigious in mounting significant cross cultural skills. It facilitates cross culture tuning, which may lead and result in advanced engrossment and contribution. This augments the students motivation to learn and then transfer his learning to others ultimately enriches the performance of both the foreign lecturers and the students.

Caligiuri, Lazarova, and Tarique (2001) pointed out that cross-cultural training aims at assisting students feel gratified in living and studying in a host country, thus enhancing their cross-cultural adjustment and firming up their ability to recognize and escalate manifold cultural perceptions.

According to Croker (2002) the instructor plays a vital role in a learning process. Croker (2002) suggested a method to clinch a 'whole brain learning design', wherein the instructor should consider being with a perceptible training course by generating an experience of connection between

the concept and its connection to the students' lives and by yielding evidences allied to the notion of culture.

To accentuate, it is strongly evidenced that the effectiveness of cross cultural education includes satisfaction, commitment and involvement of students (Deresky, 2002)

Research Methodology

The researcher collected data through allocating roles to focus group discussion in order to monitor the Omani students as to how they frame their opinions of receiving subject matter in English within the subtleties of a group background sited in a primarily standardized culture.

The main aim of focus group research is to extract information from Omani students upon capturing their attitudes, principles, dogmas and reactions to the absolute in a smart, approachable, sociable and practicable way. This method of focus group interviews that involves systematized discussions with a chosen group of individuals is highly favorable to obtain various perspectives of Omani students, which is of immense prudence. The researcher chose to use focus discussion group because this method is specifically suited for obtaining several perceptions about the same topic (Krueger, 1997)

The researcher appointed both homogenous and heterogeneous focus groups comprising a total of 60 Omani students from DU to derive the finest outcomes on the topic. The students will be for academic year 2019-2020 from College of Arts and Applied Sciences, College of Commerce and Business Administration and College of Engineering of Dhofar University. Proponents of both grouping styles confirm the benefits of the assignment.

Plus, the researcher demonstrated the respondents about the aim and progress methods of the process and also the privacy feat of the discussions to the core. Each group discussion will be controlled by a team of an experienced facilitator and an assistant (Burrows & Kendall, 1997). The chief of the discussion will be the facilitator and the assistant's role includes authenticating the content of the discussion and consequently supplementing the data. The assistant will also observe non-verbal interaction and the dynamic of the group (Fonteyn, Vettese, Lancaster, & Bauer-WU, 2008). Audio and tape recording, note-taking and participant observation will be the main methods of data collection during focus group discussion (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007)

Data analysis

Qualitative and observational data are yielded usually by focus group discussions where the analyses are considered demanding. The qualitative analysis techniques such as the following are helpful in analyzing focus group discussions

1. Grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006)
 2. Content analysis (Krueger, 1997)
 3. Discourse analysis (Steward, Shamadasani & Rook 2007)
- It's evident that qualitative results are the results of two significant analysis particularly includes content analysis and ethnographic analysis. Content analysis empowers a methodical coding of data by organizing the evidence into

sets to ascertain patterns whereas Ethnographic analysis is strictly qualitative; yet it permits a detailed informative account of the everyday social processes of communication and action taking place within the focus group.

Data coding process, in general, produce quantifiable results to push appraisals through focus groups, group subtleties, individual participants or the participants' statements (Andrew & Jonathan, 2006). The data from focus group sessions will be analyzed in two stages, the first stage will exemplify the initial coding that comprises the generation of several category codes; whereas the second stage will represent the focused coding that signifies the elimination, combination and subdivision of the coding categories identified in the first stage.

Results

The following are the outcome of focus group research.

Omani student's feelings / opinion on being educated in English

The portrayal of mixed feelings of "good being educated in English and the tradition of Arabic being their mother tongue making their identity".

The significance of examining the Omani student's frame of mind and views on getting educated in English language is to be honored by both administrative structures and foreign lecturers of Universities.

English is essential for the job market and that utmost jobs in the Sultanate of Oman necessitate English as a condition of employment. Besides, that awareness and knowledge in the world today are manageable typically only in English. The above statements were boldly told by Omani students.

Nonetheless, one Omani student made an association between Arabic language and religion by declaring that Arabic language is part of Islam and is the language of Islam too. The student also emphasizes that it is much easier to learn and study in Arabic than in English, as Arabic is their mother language.

In keeping with modern-day thinking on the teaching-learning process, good education entails taking fundamental attitudes into justification, of both the students and the lecturers.

Omani government places heavy prominence on teaching English in Universities for the feat of Omanization and economic progress. As we are aware, English plays a noticeable role across Arab Gulf Societies and that it's a language of business and finance. As English is in great demand in job market in both private and public sectors, it's seen as a gatekeeper to academic and social success by helping regulate access to education and employment opportunities in Oman. The acquaintances between English and the achievement of knowledge and technology, the extensive use of English as a lingua franca across many parts of Omani society, Oman's sturdiest ties with Britain and government policies ascertaining English as a strategic resource are all the great varied reasons.

As per the researcher, the Omani students bestride two worlds; where the cultural character and national character blend their self and tradition respectively.

The importance of basics of English language education and that they are missing in the system.

The Researcher seized and reported about the lack of basic English Education to provide students with adequate English language communication and proficiency skills.

Communication barrier is one of the big challenges being faced by the Omani students. Major misapprehensions occur normally through verbal/non-verbal communication where simple mispronunciation can be a big factor and pronunciation of words can be very infuriating. Poor English is a major stress and can create significant problems and barricades when trying to function and prosper in their career. Those who have poor English proficiency may need more time to read their books. Moreover, they may not be able to articulate their knowledge on essay exams or research papers due to their limited vocabulary.

Students pointed out that although they were taught English grammar, vocabulary and spelling at school they were not taught to think in English, which in turn becomes problem for their real understanding of concepts and comprehending feat. Students did not focus on understanding and grammar but merely memorized vocabulary. And that they did not receive basic and adequate English tuition at childhood, they do struggle with lectures presented in English in the college level.

Hence the focus group explains that there is a strong need for Omani students' foundation English lessons in primary or secondary level of education.

Omani student's point of views on being taught by lecturers from a diverse culture

Their eagerness to learn about new culture.

The point that most Omani students are open, warm, friendly and approachable to people from different diverse countries and cultures, came into highlight. Their desire to learn by someone from a culture different than their own is welcomed and enjoyable in most instances. Besides, they have a feeling about their culture not being understood by foreign lecturers

Any good teacher knows how important it is to connect with students and understand our culture. "Adora Svitak, An American Writer"

The researcher highlighted that the foreign lecturers need to develop their students' fundamental enthusiasm, and encourage them to learn with drive and passion, having respecting their culture. This feature will ensure that the students become life long learners.

Westerners and Arabs live in two different worlds, each structured in each own style. Arabs tend to be more focusing on family but Westerners direction emphasizes individualism although families are important to them. Arabs center on togetherness whereas Westerners focus on individualism.

Honor is important to Arabs. Some behaviors in the West that are taken lightly can be very offending to Arabs - such

as sitting with the sole of your shoe facing someone. Also, much reverence is given to older people - the older the more respected. It's actually rude to call someone significantly older than you by his first name, regardless of the socio-economic class. In the West, it doesn't make much of a difference.

Arabs are generally more comfortable showing their emotions. They are also very passionate when they discuss matters. Even if some topic concerns seem quarrelsome, after the subject changes, the smiles and laughter turns back as if they never disagreed on an issue.

The researcher acknowledges the discomfort and apprehension experienced by Omani students at first on being educated by foreign lecturers, from the discussions of the focus groups.

Also, added that the foreign lecturers will be able to bond more simply with their Omani students by adapting the above-said simple suggestions and regulating communication patterns and non-verbal behavior to ensemble the culture.

Mutual respect befits the root of teaching and learning success

The above realization and need were felt and expressed by Omani students during focus group discussions. Their consistent demonstration for the need of respect towards Omani culture, customs and traditions by foreign lecturers was captured.

They expressed that few lecturers do not have a good understanding or perception about Omani culture as they fail to value their emotions at times.

From the focus group discussions, it became evident that the Omani students' temperaments to receive education from others have got a clear link towards foreign lecturers' respect for cultural understanding, sensitivity and diversity.

What qualities make some foreign lecturers successful?

The quality facts obtained through focus group research on teacher efficiency and success are as follows:

According to the Omani students, the successful teachers create a positive atmosphere in which the conditions are both academically challenging whilst also helpful.

Teachers must buoy up, support, motivate, and empower those whom they teach. They need to have a passionate approach if students are to engage in the classroom. Passionate teaching is a social process that happens in the framework of relationships with students. Passion is the zeal which teachers should possess and that may possibly infect their students with gusto and keenness for learning.

The following are the characteristic features of an effective lecturer listed down by Omani students during the research group discussions:

1. An effective lecturer esteems students in all aspects including their culture.
2. He creates a sense of belongingness in the classroom.
3. He is reliable, enthusiastic and caring.
4. He sets high prospects for all students for their profits.
5. A great lecturer assesses his teaching throughout the lessons and finds new approaches to present material to assure that every student learns the prime concepts beyond doubts.

6. A great lecturer maintains competence in all areas from individual appearance, supportive approach to administrative skills and attentiveness for each day.

"Happiness is inner harmony and relational connections of mutual reciprocity" - stands as an expression and strategy for cross-cultural education success.

The need for relationships between student and foreign lecturer based on mutual reciprocity is clearly and consistently portrayed by both male and female students in Dhofar University.

It's really true that if you approach being friendly with the students, they will find you more approachable. They will more readily come to you with propositions that they would not consider broaching with a more wizened faculty member. The focus group results indicate that they would need the foreign lecturers to adopt a "fair go" attitude at the outset. Also, they would want lecturers to be knowledgeable, approachable, friendly and enthusiastic.

The supremacy and importance of relationships with others infiltrates every facet and interface of the Omani student's daily life.

The significance of connections and relationship with others was confirmed during the focus group debate, where the students interpreted the need for deep valued meaningful relationship based teaching by the foreign lecturers. They felt the need of caring lecturers for the supporting tasks such as advising, guiding, supporting and gently correcting their mistakes like the elder brother do for the younger siblings.

The researcher also observed that Omani students from DU always want to know their teachers on a personal level, viz. their family life, whereabouts, well-being and the possible reciprocity with them. The students also want to ensure that there is no ambiguity between the personal beliefs and professed role as teachers.

The wise perception of the researcher, in concise, included the following:

A learning milieu where the Omani students are willing to experiment with new conceptions, theories, models, notion, ideas would pave a wonderful path for relational teaching style that is entrenched with mutual reciprocity and deep-relational connections.

Requisite for Experience based training that analyses students' experience that can be feasible only with student interaction, participation and plausible opportunities to learn.

Male and female students specified that the foreign lecturers who supported the student participation are called as "effective teachers" but not the rest who just gave lectures without any classroom discussion, debates or group talks. They also insisted about the animosity of few foreign lecturers' memorizing information and reading monotonously from the text books during their lectures.

It's a matter of fact that we all learn through experience regardless of culture. The three important mechanisms that pave way for the successful learning are as follows

- 1) Reliability of experience
- 2) Emotional awakening
- 3) Behavioral Assessment

Research shows that students who are promised with experiential learning benefit greatly from the experience seized.

- a) Experiential learning increases student persistence and plans to sign on.
- b) It increases students' content understanding and skills.
- c) It grants greater outcomes in solicitation of course work.
- d) It enhances greater intricacies of understanding and advanced order thinking skills.
- e) Also, it paves way to increase students' critical thinking abilities.
- f) It upsurges students' self-esteem, self-efficacy and empowerment.
- g) It Increases students' prospect to engross in pro-social behavior.
- h) It provides an affirmative effect on students' enthusiasm for learning.

It is highly probable that in conditions where the above mentioned potent components are applied by Faculty, the learning experience will be exclusively encouraging and memorable for the Omani students.

What makes some foreign lecturers less effective?

- 1) No usage of audio-visual aids and other teaching technology to enhance or enliven classroom instruction
- 2) Culturally insensitive or ignorant
- 3) Lack of a relational component to teaching

The feedback from the male and female Omani students in the focus group grants positivity in some areas; yet, there was an upsetting narrative rejoinder when students scarcely applauded few lecturers' efforts and pointed out that there was lack of humanity on some of them.

The lack of kindness, integrity and understanding of the academic staffs during their interaction with them was emphasized. Apparently, kindness, understanding, integrity are the attributes that the students truly want more of and deserve these in their lives.

The highlight of importance of acknowledging difference like backgrounds, experiences, personal commitments and learning, during the discussion about "Understanding" aspect is portrayed. They want a "United-feel good-understanding" treatment rather than being separated like groups.

Kindness seems to be the most demanding attribute expectation from foreign lecturers by the students. During the orientation, they pointed out that they would need the foreign lecturers to have compassion, empathy and to smile and encourage while lecturing so as to inspire, educate and team up with. Perhaps, the need for self-awareness to take a moment to think about the damaging effect of the behavior, re-prioritizing things and decency at the best is also quoted. The researcher finally insists from the absolute responses that treating the students with humanity is vital in general.

What should foreign lecturers do more of in class?

- 1) Usage of more technology and teaching aids during lectures would be of help
- 2) Provision of more practicable and experiential activities during lectures would pave the way

The focus should not be only in teaching, but also in students learning. This means that teachers should adapt themselves with the purpose of achieving both the teaching goals and the learning goals. Then, one of the main issues that teachers must deal with is the evaluation system in

order to check whether the students have met the learning objectives. This has been brought up into notice by the focus group research.

Cross Cultural Teaching and Learning Framework

The following Cross Cultural Teaching and Learning were derived from the above qualitative research findings of this study.

- a) Relationship-based Education
- b) Technology-based Education
- c) Application / Practice-based Education
- d) Culture-based Education

The super-hit point of students itemized from discussions demonstrate that "relational teaching embedded with mutual respect and sense of community, experimental and activity based learning methodologies would prove more effective than the typical lecturing style"

The proficient statement made by the students in regards with culture based education are as follows: "Becoming aware of cultural differences and diversity, common ground and similarities, embracing, honoring and esteeming the host culture" could be highly possible by adapting cultural methodologies such as awareness, understanding, sensitivity and immersion into the teaching techniques"

Conclusion

This paper, based on the qualitative focus group results, concludes that "Teaching based on relational acquaintances of mutual reciprocity, and mutual respect between foreign lecturers and Omani students is prime important and that stands as a great stratagem for cross cultural education success". Focus group results suggest the necessity for more teacher-student participation, teacher-student interaction, and opportunities for students to learn through experiential experience. The necessity for teaching with awareness, understanding, sensitivity, immersion on Omani culture is also accentuated. The research findings and researcher found that Omani students felt the need of foreign lecturers with caring approach, friendly attitude and emotional openness. Based on the qualitative research findings of the study, various cross cultural teaching methods like Relationship based teaching, Technology based teaching, Application/Practice based teaching, Culture-based teaching methods and learning frame works were formed, which is praiseworthy. This paper accomplishes that these methods would prove more effective than the typical lecturing style and will turn as a prime strategy to Omani students' academic success promisingly.

References

- [1] Al-Mahrooqi, R. & Denman, C., (2018) English Education in Oman. Springer Nature. Singapore Pte Ltd.
- [2] Andrew, P., & Jonathan, T. (2006). Focus Group Methods and Methodology: Current Practice and

- Recent Debate. *International Journal of Research& Methods in Education*, (29), 23-37.
- [3] Black, S & Mendenhall, M., (1990). Cross-Cultural Training Effectiveness: A Review and a Theoretical Framework for Future Research. *The Academy Management Review* 15(1): 113-136. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234021357>
- [4] Burrows, D., & Kendall, S. (1997) Focus Groups: What are They and How Can They be used in Nursing and Health Care Research? *Social sciences in Health*, (3) 244-253.
- [5] Caligiuri, P., Phillips, J., Lazarova, M., Tarique, I., & Bürgi, P. (2001). The Theory of Met Expectations Applied to Expatriate Adjustment: The Role of Cross-Cultural Training. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 12 (3): 357-372.
- [6] Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Ground Theory: A practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Sage Publications Inc. Retrieved from http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Charmaz_2006.pdf
- [7] Croker, E., (2002). *Developing Whole-brain Instruction: A Learning Styles Model*, Pocatello, ID: Idaho State University.
- [8] Defranzo, S. (2011, September 16). What is the difference between qualitative and quantitative research? Retrieved from <https://www.snapsurveys.com/blog/qualitative-vs-quantitative-research/>
- [9] Deresky, H., (2002). *International Management: Managing Across Borders and Cultures*. 4th Ed. Upper saddle River: Prentice Hall. DU Strategic Plan www.du.edu.om
- [10] Fontaine, G., (1997). Skills for Successful International Assignment to, from and within Asia and the Pacific: Implication for Preparation, Support and Training. *Management Decision* 35(8): 631-642. Retrieve from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267388054>
- [11] Fonteyn, M. E., Vettese, M., Lancaster, D., & Bauer-WU, S. (2008). Developing a Codebook to Guide Content Analysis of Expressive Writing Transcripts. *Applied Nursing Research*, (21), 165-168.
- [12] Krueger, R. (1997). *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results*. Sage Publications Inc.
- [13] Krueger, R. & Casey, M (2014). *Focus Groups: A practical Guide for Applied Research*, 5th ed. Sage Publications Inc.
- [14] Mohammed, A. (2004). The Gap Between the Requirements of Higher Education of High School Graduates and the Process of Preparation, Analytical Study, Educational and social studies, 10(4), 89-118.
- [15] Newcombe, O., (2008). *The Heritage of Oman: A celebration in Photographs*. Ithaca Press
- [16] Shim, S. & Paprock, E., (2002) A study Focusing on American Expatriates' Learning in Host Cultures. *International Journal of Training and Development* 6(1): 13-24. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227730103>
- [17] Stewart, D., Shamdasani, N., & Rook, W. (2007). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. Sage Publications Inc.
- [18] The national Strategy for Education 2040 <https://www.educouncil.gov.om/downloads/Ts775SPNmXDQ.pdf>
- [19] Valeri, M., (2014). *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*. Oxford University Press.