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Mechanisms for Establishing a Research Culture at Language Institutions

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ABSTRACT

The Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University is the academic unit that is responsible for teaching English. However, teaching English is only one of the three functions that it has. The other two functions are carrying out different types of language assessments and conducting research in the field of language instruction and acquisition. Underpinning the third function, which is conducting research, is the rationale that it is through research that educational institutions can come to an understanding of the various phenomena or situations that could emerge in language teaching contexts, and the factors that shape them. Based on this understanding, it is believed that it "will have a beneficial effect on language teaching and learning" (Borg, 2009, p. 1). The purpose of this paper is to report on the main findings and implications of a study that aimed at exploring the perceptions of the Language Centre teachers on research, its advantages and constraints, as well as their ideas regarding the ways in which ELT research and research culture can be promoted at their institution.

Keywords: ELT research, language institution, language teaching context, research awareness, research culture

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The Language Centre (LC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman is an academic unit whose main objective is to prepare SQU students to meet the demands of higher education once they join their college credit courses.

The Language Centre offers intensive English language instruction for new students and credit English language instruction to support college courses. The centre also provides teaching of English at the postgraduate level, English for the university administrative and technical staff, English for the community and IELTS preparation courses. The centre teaches more than 5000 undergraduate students per semester, around 120 staff members, and 100 people from the community.

The centre has over 200 very well-qualified teachers who come from 29 different countries, hence deservingly earning the Language Centre the reputation of being the mini-UN in SQU. This colourful tapestry of people is one of the main assets of the Language Centre, as each and every individual brings to the centre the wealth of their cultural heritage and identities which are rooted in the norms of their parent societies. These teachers, despite their different backgrounds, are united by one profession, the teaching of English to non-native speakers of the language. This unity brings harmony to the institution and cultivates an atmosphere in which ideas are shared and communicated.

In addition to this tremendous asset in human resources, the LC has a Curriculum Development Unit that is responsible for

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developing print and electronic teaching materials as well as designing, reviewing, implementing, and revising curricula in the intensive program. The centre also has a Testing and Assessment Unit that is responsible for preparing and administering all SQU placement and exit testing. It is also responsible for carrying out all end-level exams in the intensive programme. The two units base much of their work on research, the product of which is sometimes published.

The Language Centre administration believes that continuous professional development is essential for the skill development of is staff. Therefore, there is a Professional Development Committee at the centre which organizes frequent seminars and workshops on different areas such as teaching, testing, materials design, development and writing. These professional development sessions are conducted by local and international experts. The most prominent teacher development event held at the centre is the annual Oman International English Language Teaching (ELT) Conference. This is a magnificent event that attracts around 1000 individuals from around the world. The LC publishes conference proceedings that contain papers based on the best presentation featured at the conference. Since its inception in 2000, the International Oman ELT Conference has been a great forum for the exchange of ideas about English language instruction among colleagues from the region and from the international arena.

The administration of the Language Centre believes that research encourages teachers to be observant, analytical and reflective. It affords them additional insights into the process of teaching and learning a language. This heightened awareness is believed to positively influence their classroom practices and methods of teaching. Recognizing the crucial importance of research, the Language Centre has made it its objective to establish a research culture within its boundaries and to foster it even beyond. In order to achieve this, it has established a Research Committee that has a clear vision, a clear mission, and clear objectives. The primary functions of the committee include facilitating research within the centre and fostering an atmosphere conducive to research. The committee meets frequently to discuss reseacrh matters within the centre and to determine how to advance the cause of research among its staff. Recently, the committee organized a symposium that aimed at promoting research in ELT. The symposium was attended by around 400 ELT professionals from Oman.

Therefore, the academic faculty members at the Language Centre are encouraged to carry out research projects in various aspects of the English language teaching and learning, testing, curriculum and methodology, and participate in a range of national and international conferences, symposia and professional journals. Hence, a great number of the members of the Language Centre are keen to do research in the different fields of ELT. They are aware of the advantages to be reaped from doing research and many of them read ELT journals or journals of related fields. Teachers with similar research interests have started forming teams that meet regularly to discuss their research studies, divide up roles, and review their progress. Their active research helps to enhance the academic reputation of the Language Centre and SQU and inform the teaching and testing practices. The vision of the Language Centre administration regarding research, the support of the research committee, and the involvement of the teachers in research have resulted in the gradual but noticeable growth in research conducted at the Language Centre, and this promises a brighter future for research and publication within it.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted with the aim of exploring the perceptions of ELT teachers about research in the field of English language teaching. It also sought to find out what these teachers perceived as the advantages and constraints of such research. In addition, the study also attempted to elicit these teachers' ideas regarding how to promote ELT research in their institution.

For this purpose, a qualitative survey was designed by the authors. The survey contained

eight open-ended questions (Appendix 1). The authors' immediate concern was to obtain the views of the teachers about research in general and ELT research in particular, its characteristics, benefits, advantages, and constraints. The questions of the survey also elicited the teachers' vision about how to further promote research in the Language Centre.

Given the current proliferation of online research instruments and potential values of web-based research strategies and approaches (Zhang, Davies, Yokoyama and Miyadera, 2009), the online version of the survey was created and posted to all the members of the LC faculty.

Twenty teachers of the Language Centre voluntarily responded to the call and answered the survey questions. One main limitation of the study was that only 10% of the teachers participated in it. Since participation was voluntary, only those who were truly committed to research responded to the call and answered the survey questions.

The small number reflects a problem that actually faced by the Language Centre administration as it is often the case that the staff does not respond when input is sought from them regarding the issues that are critical for the development of the LC. Quite often, teachers pronounce their concerns verbally but when they are requested to volunteer in the context of research, they shy away from doing so. However, the LC administration is keen to involve all the teachers and will continue to raise these teachers' awareness regarding the importance of voicing out their opinions and views for the well-being and development of the Language Centre.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, teachers were given a list of open-ended questions concerning ELT research with eight items in it. The teachers described research as a methodical, scientific, systematic, directed, and deliberate investigation to gather data about a certain phenomenon, to solve a certain problem or to learn more about a certain phenomenon. According to them, research should fill a gap in knowledge for the benefit of humanity. It is a process of enquiry into a specific question, or into one's concerns. The teachers' definitions reflect an awareness of what research really means and involves. These definitions are similar in nature as to how Research is defined in the TESOL Position Statement on Research and Policy (2005). The statement states that research "refers to a spirited inquiry and systematic investigation that contributes to the knowledge base of a field."

To the teachers who responded to the questions of the survey, ELT research stems from the very basis of human nature which has at its core the need to communicate and to improve this communication with the purpose of creating and sharing meaning among different individuals who possess different languages and cultural backgrounds. In the opinion of these teachers, language acquisition is a very complex process and so is a fertile field for on-going research. However, this research falls under the umbrella of social sciences or humanities and thus, it is quite different from the research in the fields of the natural sciences, where findings are based on facts and are conclusive if the methodology followed is flawless. In ELT research, we can observe, survey, and interview. We can do our best to arrive at the right conclusions, but different people might glean different things from the gathered information.

It is evident, that there are many factors involved in language learning and teaching; factors that are related to the learner, to the teacher, as well as the factors are related to the context and learning situation, and factors that are related to textbooks and resources. Within each of these factors are numerous other elements that influence the instructional process, and thus have a bearing on research findings and conclusions.

In the words of one Language Centre teacher, "ELT often deals with issues that can be dynamic and sometimes are difficult to grasp, with the context (social, historical, political, etc) of the study assuming more importance than in many other fields."

In the opinion of another teacher, "ELT research is interdisciplinary and insights from

various fields such as psychology, management, business, education, anthropology make ELT research richer and more insightful unlike research in other fields."

A third LC teacher addressed the difference between ELT research and research in other fields, quite emphatically, as follows:

> "One of the main distinctions is that ELT has no overarching theory of communication. We can point to Chomsky's theory of deep structure and universal grammar; Skinner's verbal behaviour theory; Piaget's language acquisition theory; Candlin and Widdowson's communicative language theory; Krashen's language acquisition theory; cognitive theory; speech act theory; etc. There are many separate theories about different aspects of communication. Compare this situation with that of other fields: Physics has quantum mechanics, Biology has evolution; Geography has plate tectonics. In most cases, there are comprehensive, unifying theories which overarch whole disciplines. This is not the case with EFL. Until EFL has a unifying principle, or even competing unifying principles, there will always be wildly different opinions about all aspects of EFL".

All the twenty teachers who participated in the study agreed that ELT research is absolutely necessary in arriving at a better understanding of the nature of language learning and teaching. This understanding is, in turn, deemed essential in examining old theories, approaches, perceptions, and beliefs concerning language instruction. One Language Centre teacher noted:

> "The advantage of ELT research is that it opens "the rules" of teaching to new ideas. As brain science claims, novelty helps us learn. So, just by experimenting with new techniques or applying the ideas of new research we are waking up the minds of students".

The teacher further elaborated on her personal experiences and mentioned that the research gave her more than her own intuition to validate the use of these new practices. Another teacher asserted that "by engaging in research we can: find solutions to problems we face in our teaching; find ways of improving our teaching skills; understand more how our students think and thus find ways to motivate them. Generally we can discover new ways of approaching our teaching."

Thinking more broadly and deeply about the advantages of ELT research, a third teacher noted that:

> "The advantages of engaging in ELT research include being able to gain a greater understanding of what might at first appear a troubling area or topic and learning more about students and your own teaching practice. But I think perhaps the biggest advantage is being able to place these in a much broader field, drawing links between the issues of the immediate classroom to what other researchers-practitioners have also done, and thus being able to take a step back from the immediate classroom concerns and place them in a broader (and hopefully more enlightening) context".

In the opinion of the teachers who participated in the study, conducting research in the ELT field boosts self-confidence about one's classroom practices in the knowledge that these are founded upon solid ground of research findings. ELT research transforms the teacher from a mere imparter of knowledge into a reflective person who thinks critically about his or her practices. This, in the words of another teacher, "can enable him/her to contribute to the task of creating new perspectives and solutions to improve ELT". It can also "help to keep him/her mentally alert as he/she accepts the challenges that may come from other professionals who may have other points of view."

Although all the teachers agreed on the advantages of ELT research, they did also mention some disadvantages. These were related, in the most part, to the time-consuming nature of research (workload, job responsibilities, very little time left for conducting research or documenting it) and the complexity of research (as there are often many grey areas so results are not conclusive unless found true using representative samples of individuals under various conditions or under controlled conditions depending on the objectives of the research).

To illustrate the disadvantages, one teacher explained,

> "I think the main disadvantage is the amount of time genuine and thorough research requires. It is not only the amount of time needed to read widely in an area, analyze the ideas, develop research methodology etc., but also the time needed to gain approval for the research, have everything vetted to ensure it meets the required ethical and practical standards etc. All this has to be balanced against the concerns of preparing for and delivering effective classes, marking, student consultation etc, which may mean engagement in ELT research, actually makes them less effective instructors (at least) in the short term".

The teachers who participated in the study are apparently aware that as ELT teachers, their primary roles are to deliver effective lessons to their students and to be available to help and guide these students at all times. Similar views have been described in the literature. For example, Hatton and Smith (1996) contended that teaching is mainly understood as immediate and pragmatic action. Because they are conscientious teachers, they stress the importance of achieving a balance between teaching and doing research. As one teacher put it very clearly:

> "The primary role of an EFL teacher is to teach. The pendulum should not swing too far so that the person spends too much time researching and not enough on the primary role. A balance needs to be kept. There is also a distinction between academic research and action research. The latter takes place in the classroom and may even be small-scale. Ideally it should be occurring on a regular basis and every teacher should perhaps be involved in some way with action research. For example, a teacher may want to test which method works best with a group of students, or which types of material create the most interest. Academic research, on the other hand, will not have the same immediate benefit to students that action research has. Its benefits may not even be obvious. A good teacher may not make a good academic researcher. Similarly, a good researcher may not make a good teacher. Perhaps some research needs to be done on how frequently these two abilities are found in the same person? Placing too much emphasis (and kudos) on academic research could have a detrimental effect on the LC, which is after all a language teaching operation".

When asked about the role that research has played in their lives as professionals, many participants said that research shaped their beliefs regarding teaching and their practices inside the classroom. One teacher reflected that she found research could support practices she finds intuitively helpful. She later continued on saying:

> "Also, it helps look into non-linguistic ways of improving my teaching and my own learning (as in the case of educational psychology or neuroscience research). I find that sharing some of this information with students helps them to attempt unfamiliar practices. Also, while I was working on some projects here at the LC, research helped to inform certain methodological choices."

In the opinion of these teachers, good quality ELT research - whether qualitative or quantitative - is situated in teaching practice, addressing or targeting an important ELT problem or issue of concern to either the teacher or the students, or to both. It should ask questions guilelessly without knowing the answers in advance, and should be reliable, valid, purposeful, practical, well-designed, and organized.

Among the sources of published research that the twenty teachers reported using are journals of a variety of origins: the ELT Journal, ERIC Digests, Ebraries, the LC Forum, the Language Testing journal, TESOL Quarterly, Teaching English as a Foreign language System, Educational Technology, BBC research site, Journal of Educational Technology The Language Teacher on line, Modern English Teacher, Articles LC ELT Conference Proceedings, Asian Journal of ELT, the International Review of Applied Linguistics, World Englishes, Journal

of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, TESOLIslamia, Language Testing, Assessing Writing, Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, Language Learning, English for Specific Purposes, Journal of Second Language Writing, and the Internet TESL Journal.

The twenty teachers who participated in the study agreed that the Language Centre of SQU is moving forward in terms of its support for research. It is working hard towards achieving its objective of establishing a solid research culture. Another teacher had the opinion that the Language Centre is "buzzing with wonderful ideas and initiatives…the provision of frequent seminars and presentations in all areas of ELT is certainly stimulating interest in research amongst LC instructors."

However, there is still much for the centre to do to establish, develop and foster a research culture among its staff. Some of the survey participants suggested allocating release hours for research. Others suggested more workshops, seminars and talks by prominent researchers in the field, and one advocated the establishment of a "virtual research" environment to encourage more on-line reading and discussions of important research findings and/or articles.

CONCLUSIONS

As stated in the Charter of Sultan Qaboos University, one of the university's objectives is to uphold scientific research as the most effective tool in establishing accurate facts, problem solving and the prediction of social patterns as well as undertaking research in the fields of technology in relation to the Omani Society, in particular, and others, in general, to enhance the intellectual capabilities and quality of life of mankind as a whole and of the Omani society in particular. A similar objective, that which is more precise and worded regarding the field of language teaching and teaching, was proposed by the TESOL Position Statement on Research and Policy (2005). This statement says that research has the potential to help English language teaching professionals improve the processes, outcomes and conditions for language teaching, learning and assessment.

In order to fully address this potential and to further foster a research culture in the Language Centre, a series of initiatives are deemed necessary. Change-bringing mechanisms should be aimed at both highlighting the advantages of research in language institutions and overcoming the personal and institutional constraints. In the same vein, to fulfil its third function of conducting research- as per Sultan Qaboos University Charter, and to take the lead in promoting ELT research within the Language Centre and in Oman, it is important for the Language Centre to take the initiative to:

- raise awareness about the potential for ELT research in Oman,
- promote and sustain good quality research in ELT in Oman,
- show how research in ELT can raise the quality of teaching and learning,
- encourage discussion among professional interested in research in the different fields of ELT,
- foster communication and cooperation between ELT providers in the private and public sectors in the area of ELT research,
- present and share research practices and findings in the local, national and international communities,
- to publicize and make research available to all members of the Language Centre faculty,
- collaborate with international journals to acquaint Language Centre staff with venues that could publish their research,
- invite reputed scholars from the field of ELT research to deliver workshops and lectures on how to conduct research studies and publish their findings,
- hold conferences and symposia focused on research to foster professional and academic

communication between international and local experts and practitioners in the field of ELT research,

- encourage members of the Language Centre faculty to document their practices and get published in ELT local, national and international journals.

Publishing will definitely help other teachers of the Language Centre benefit from the research, motivate those teachers who are reluctant to carry research and indisputably involve the teachers of the Language Centre personally, intellectually and academically lead to enhancing their job satisfaction, fostering their self-esteem and empowering them.

To facilitate successful implementation of the research function, the Language Centre aims to continue with its variety of activities (international conferences, research symposia, workshops, presentations, initiated action research, professional development sessions). It is also about to expand the traditional scope of activities to allow the members of the faculty to have more access to international ELT associations, organizations and journals through the portal of Sultan Qaboos University, web-page of the Language Centre and provided links.

It is envisaged that if the Language Centre succeeds in delivering the above plans, then, it would put in place solid mechanisms for establishing a research culture within the Language Centre and in Oman.

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APPENDIX 1

Survey Questions

1. How do you define research?
2. What distinguishes ELT research from research in other fields?
3. How can engaging in ELT research benefit the ELT professional? What are the advantages?
4. Can you think of any disadvantages concerning research in ELT?
5. What role does research play in your life as a professional ELT specialist?
6. How can research be promoted at the LC?
7. What are the characteristics of good quality research in ELT?
8. How often do you read published research in ELT? When do you do that? What journals do you often read?