

Conference Paper

Winds of Change and Clouds of Ideas: What is the Future of ELT?

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Abstract

Teaching is challenging at a time when changes are rapidly taking place in education along with the interface of technology. Positions of language teaching institutions and teachers are changing and so are perceptions of what constitutes learning. There is a need to take these changes into consideration while designing teaching for the future. This paper is premised on two contexts – FP courses at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, Sultan Qaboos University and FP courses at the Sohar University, Oman. This paper examines teaching and learning in the digital era. Then, a discussion of the 21st century students, society and the global demands, which are also influenced by technology will be investigated. Finally, the expected challenges of teachers' preparedness in using technology, along with adopting potential approaches for teaching will be discussed.

Keywords: changing perceptions, 21st century needs, General Foundation Programs, future of English language teaching.

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1. Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed rapid changes in the field of language teaching and learning resulting in new challenges and demands being constantly placed on the education system. Winds of change create an awareness of the necessity to change and improve in preparing students for productive functioning in an incessantly changing and a highly demanding environment (Miriam Bar-Yam. et.al, 2002). In facing this challenge, it is necessary to consider the complexity of the education system itself and the multitude of problems that must be addressed. We are teaching at a time when changes are rapidly taking place along with the interface of technology. Positions of language teaching institutions and teachers are constantly shifting and so are **perceptions** of what constitutes learning. These shifts and changes need to be considered while designing teaching for the future.

This paper first outlines the role of the teachers and students and then discusses the changing perceptions in teaching and learning. Next it discusses the two case studies -

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the Foundation Program of the Sultan Qaboos University and Sohar University, followed by analyzing the challenges and the gaps and addressing them for future teaching.

2. Roles of Teacher and Student

In the 21st century, a teacher must put on different hats. Today, the teacher is a guide, facilitator, mentor and a partner in learning. In this digital era, he/she also must cope with the demands of technology in teaching. More importantly, the teacher is responsible for training students for acquiring employability skills, critical thinking, creativity and sustainable learning.

Similarly, the roles of students are also changing. The 21st century learner is a:

- lifelong learner, drawn to both formal and informal opportunities to learn
- critical thinker and an innovator
- collaborator and a communicator
- information and media literate
- a judge, a team player
- a responsible person, socially engaged having civic sense

3. Changing Perceptions on Teaching and Learning

As compared to the past years, the **perceptions** on teaching and learning are also **changing**. With increasing changes in the society and market demands, **teaching** has become a complex activity. As said earlier, the role of a language teacher has been changing to align with the demands of the present time. Teaching focus has shifted from 'learner-centered' to 'learning centered' with an increased focus on how students learn better. Teaching should prepare students as producers, not as receivers (Scrivener, J. 2005); it should be blended-face-to-face and online. In other words, teachers should be prepared for flipped classroom teaching, using appropriate digital tools to meet the demands of the digital era. It should include facilitating, counselling, mentoring, supervising, collaborating, communicating and so on. In short, teaching should be synonymous with up-to-date practices.

Learning means progressing on what one already knows and has learnt. A learner connects new knowledge to the knowledge he/she already has and tries to use and apply it practically; it is acquiring of skills and using these skills appropriately inside

and outside the classroom. It is linked to motivation - internal or external, provoking thinking resulting in creativity (Miriam Bar-Yam. et.al,2002). In short, learning is not time-bound; it is a life-long process. These perceptions on learning clearly tell us that today's learner needs motivation to be autonomous and a life-long learner. Given these perceptions, teaching should change to match the learner needs and expectations. (Skinnari, K. & Nikula, T.2017).

4. General Foundation Programs in Oman

The **General Foundation programs** in Oman started in 2010, following the decision of the Higher Education Council No.13/2008. HE, the Minister for Higher Education issued a Ministerial Decision No.72/2008 stating that the General Foundation Programs should be adopted by all public and private higher education institutions operating in the Sultanate of Oman (MoHE,2010).

Keeping in the forefront the changing demands and challenges placed on education system and taking into consideration the changing perceptions on language teaching and learning, a comparative study was carried out on the General Foundation Programs in two different universities in the Sultanate of Oman- the Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat and Sohar University at Sohar.

5. Case Study 1: GFP - Sultan Qaboos University

The Foundation Program (FP) was implemented at SQU in fall 2010. The curriculum consists of four main components: the English Language, Mathematics, Computer skills, and Study skills. The comprehensive curriculum document (CCD), developed by the curriculum unit, provides information about the English Language and Study skills curriculum. The FP curriculum is based on learning goals, or outcomes, which state the skills and strategies that learners are expected to achieve and use upon completing the program. The FP consists of six proficiency levels. Each level has its own set of learning outcomes and materials with a gradual increase in difficulty from one level to the next (CCD, 2018).

In order to examine the scope in the curriculum to meet the demands of 21st century students, a small-scale study, using archival method, was undertaken. The comprehensive curriculum document was used as the tool and as a reference point at the CPS in SQU.

6. Archival Research Method

Archival research can be challenging, but it can also be rewarding because the method includes examining documents and hard data achieved or currently in use. Archival methods are usually employed by researchers engaged in investigations of documents and texts produced by and about contemporary organizations.

Archival methods can also be applied to the analysis of digital texts including electronic databases, emails, and web pages. In our study, curriculum related document and extracurricular documents were used as tools (Archival Research methods,2019).

7. Methodology

First the relevant documents, both curricular and extra-curricular documents, were accessed and carefully read by the authors, The learning outcomes of the FP courses, the proficiency level descriptors were the takeoff points, Then, using different colored pens, activities under each skill, in each course, were highlighted to assess the potential of student involvement in the process of learning. This was followed by mapping the expected outcomes in each task and then checked against the 21st century skills. The next step was to examine the methodologies used in the various areas discussed in the documents. The final step was to circle the possibilities of developing the 21st century skills under different categories. The categorization paved the way to assess the overall strengths of the FP courses, identify the areas that need improvements and predict the future of language teaching.

8. Findings

The analysis clearly showed **that the**English Language curriculum **had**the potential to equip the students fully with skills to enable them to navigate the 21st century. The components from the curriculum are discussed below:

Scope for using technology effectively

Several areas of the English curriculum have the potential to involve students in using technology. For instance, **Mreader** requires students to read level specific stories and take quizzes online. The quizzes are time bound and require the students to manage their time.

The center uses **Moodle platform** for various activities like, weekly compulsory tasks under reading, listening or writing areas. Students and teachers can communicate with

one another using the discussion boards. Students have to check the announcements online and meet the deadlines for submissions, dates and times for tests and exams. The unseen benefit of Moodle tasks allows students to take responsibility for their learning.

Many quizzes, e-portfolio, e-writing and project tasks are all online, providing wider opportunity for students to use technology. Most of the courses follow blended teaching and the learning-centered approach.

9. Promoting Autonomy

21st century demands students to be autonomous and one of the aims of the FP courses is to prepare students to own responsibility for their learning. At the lower levels, project work includes students to interview someone on campus or outside campus to gather information about the nature of work and the experiences of the interviewee and present the information in the class. The students at the exit levels must successfully explore the library and collect suitable sources for their project. The relevancy of the sources is a big challenge to most of the students. The task, 'Speaker of the day', which is used as a starter, challenges students to think and speak about the topic given on the spot. This task has gained very positive feedback from students. The CPS has a well-established writing center and a tutorial center. It aims to support students' language and academic development with professional learning assistance and an individualized service (PT Hand Book, 2019). As a result, students will use resources effectively, develop successful language-learning strategies, and assume greater responsibility for their academic performance. It is the student's responsibility to book appointments and benefit from one-to-one consultations and feedback from tutors. It is not mandatory for all students, however, those who have used the facility have scored better grades. The extracurricular activities provided at the CPS has very high potential to make students become better users of language. Some of these activities include inter-college debates, speaking club, photography club and cultural days of various nationalities. The rate of participation is seen to be increasing, though it is not compulsory.

10. Exposure to Society

The FP courses contribute to prepare students as socially responsible citizens of the nation. At the CPS the curriculum has designed some tasks which requires students to carefully examine the society and find out the real problems prevailing in their

society. As a first step in this direction, visits to hospitals, companies, botanical garden, museums and forts have been included in the curriculum. Students are also encouraged to participate in blood donation campaigns, marathon walks, and sports conducted by different organizations in Muscat.

11. Developing Critical Thinking, Collaboration and Communication

Critical thinking, collaboration and communication are the buzz words of the 21st century. The FP curriculum provides opportunities to promote these essential skills among the students. Problem-based projects and team-based projects do enhance critically thinking capabilities of the students. The content of the exit courses is based on the CLIL approach to teaching and learning. Team-based approach to learning requires students to collaborate and communicate with the team-members. Most part of the instruction at the CPS focuses on skills-centered approach which ensures maximum student involvement in learning.

Based on the above, the English language curriculum at the CPS clearly shows the potential to prepare students fully equipped with skills to face the challenges of the 21st century. However, through informal conversations with colleagues and from the personal experiences of the author, it is obvious that there are some obstacles in the implementation of the curriculum. Some of these are rigid curriculum, want of time, lesser levels of motivation to learn and certain administrative policies.

12. Case Study 2: GFP in the Sohar University

In Oman, some colleges are for specific fields of study. For example, there is the College of Design, Technical colleges, Colleges of Nursing, Maritime college etc. Each of these have FPs that are context specific.

The **General Foundation Program** at the Sohar University runs on similar lines as SQU but also is different in certain aspects. We have students sent to us by the Ministry of Higher Education, Oman, as well as Private students who are from both Oman and a small percentage from some other countries.

While SQU GFP comprises of 6 levels, we at Sohar University (SU) run our GFP in 3 levels i.e. Elementary, Pre- Intermediate and Intermediate. SU's FP clearly lays the foundation for students to be able to cope with the faculties where they will be further trained to become the professionals that they aim to be. Today's FP students in general

must be able to meet the ever-increasing market demands. They need to possess the required abilities that comprise of core skills such as working effectively in a team, good communication skills, creativity, time management, a working knowledge of other allied subjects and critical thinking.

In helping to fulfil the needs of this pursuit for students, the FP at SU has the following integral points to showcase: The findings are premised on some of the components of the curriculum.

13. Developing Technical Skills

This is done in many ways within the GFP:

- The ACS Projects that exit level students produce are digital copies and require the student to be able to cope with the technical demands needed.
- SU SULMS is a student learning platform on the website where teachers can help students with extra study materials, give and grade quizzes and make announcements.
- Computer Lab sessions where students work on continued projects like MEL (My English lab) which is part of the North Star course book.

14. Promoting Autonomy

This is an area that our GFP works quite effectively at. We offer our students several ways by which they can become autonomous learners which is a skill they will surely carry with them for life.

- Students' work on Presentations at all levels in graded progression. At our exit level students do presentations both as individuals and in groups (student Handbook,2018-19).
- Students also do a mini research project which is partially autonomous. Although they are guided on how to go about doing this by their teachers it is probably their first individual work on research.
- This research project which is part of the ACS (Academic Communication Skills) studies also develops time management skills for the student. The student at various stages of this study makes submissions of the completed project work to maintain deadlines. This creates a sense of self-discipline and time management.

- Students also have access to the Student Support Majlis, the Writing Studio and the Peer Tutoring Program which functions under the umbrella of Student Support Services. This is an initiative that is a work in progress, where students take the responsibility for their studies and development by making appointments for sessions, meeting up with tutors and teachers in order to improve academic performance. This is the way forward for student autonomy.

15. Exposure to Society

In order to develop the social responsibilities of our students SU, GFP involves them in initiatives that increase their social awareness.

- Blood donation camps is one such awareness program.
- Some other programs envisioned could be increased medical awareness camps and student involvement in road safety, environmental preservation activities and other such initiatives.

16. Future of English Language Teaching

The **challenges** that teachers, learners and administrators face in the 21st century is highly demanding. Teachers should be trained and prepared for teaching in a digital era, effectively using various tools. Teachers will face the overwhelming opportunities and choosing the relevant ones will be a major challenge (Kessler, 2018). They should also be ready to embrace blended teaching approach, mobile learning, concept of paperless teaching. They must also be trained to use social technologies effectively in teaching. Also they should be prepared to adapt new content areas besides constantly updating themselves and participating in professional development opportunities. Curriculum designers need to understand societal and market demands while designing courses. Content should have a good balance of input and application of skills learnt.

Similarly, future learners must meet the competition by becoming multi taskers with varied skill and own maximum responsibility for their learning. They should be effective users of technology. They must be ready to adapt to mobile learning and paperless learning. They will have to acquire new skills such as curiosity, imagination, entrepreneurship, changing classroom dynamics. Another important challenge student face will be to cope with busy parents.

Administrators should be aware of the immense changes in the layout of future classrooms, the required facilities such as interactive projectors, virtual and augmented reality trainings for teachers and learners and so on. In short, teaching in the 21st century is going to be very complex with high expectations and mainly woven around skills-centered and experienced-based methodologies. Teaching will be a race against the rapidly emerging technological advancements.

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