Students' and Teachers' Views on School-University Partnership in the Omani EFL Context

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Abstract

Educational partnership between schools and higher education institutions has become an important tool towards enhancing students' achievement levels in both contexts and increasing students' college readiness level. It has also been identified as one key element of educational reform. The present paper reviews a number of models of school-university partnership from different parts of the world. It also presents the results of a study that investigated- among other things- the views of 749 school students and 68 school teachers on the topic of school-university partnership. The paper provides a summary of participants' suggestions on how best to create better progression between EFL syllabuses in both contexts: post-basic schools and foundation programs in Omani universities, with particular reference to the teaching/learning of EFL reading and writing. Students' suggestions have mainly focused on three themes, which were collaboration at the administrative level, the need for orientation programs and exchange visits. Teachers' suggestions were more centered on the need for curriculum change as well as alignment in curriculum issues between the Ministry of Education and the higher education sector. The paper concludes with a number of recommendations for future practice and research.

Keywords: EFL, foundation programs, Oman, post-basic schools, reading, school-university partnership, transition, writing

1. Introduction

Worldwide, schools and universities together play a very important role in building the human being. Schools have the premise of helping students gain the skills and competencies that would be handful for whatever college and/or career path they get to choose. Similarly, universities have the premise of preparing their graduates to become professionally and socially responsible citizens who are capable of being engaged in both contemporary and future concerns of their societies. In both types of institutions –schools and universities- we often hear or read about different attempts–in the form of projects, innovations…etc., that aim at the improvement of different aspects of their offerings, yet each knows very little about what happens at the other end. In fact, studies from various parts of the world have pointed to the existence of a "great divide" (Kirst & Venezia, 2001; Seong, 2011) between secondary schools and higher education. In the USA, Kirst and Venezia (2001) describe how the lack of coordination between k-12 on one hand and the post-secondary sector on the other impedes successful transitions between the two systems. This "disconnect", according to the authors, manifests itself in several areas such as grade inflation and a reliance on grades as predictors, conflicting conceptions of student assessment, and the need for remedial level coursework in college.

A review of the literature has identified a number of issues that might affect students' learning experience at college, especially during their first year of study. In their review of the literature on students' transitional problems from high school to university, Cherif and Wideen (1992) categorize problems as roughly falling into three areas: a) inabilities of students to cope with university work either because of their poor academic preparation at school or their lack of critical thinking skills, b) the cultural gap between the high school and the university caused by lack of communication between faculty from both sides, and c) inadequate teaching and course materials and the way a subject is taught (p.10).

To help address this gap, educational partnership between schools and higher education institutions has become a necessity towards enhancing students' achievement levels at both contexts and increasing students' college readiness level (Torenbeek, Jansen, & Hofman, 2011). It has also been identified as one key element of

educational reform (Linn, 2000; Halasz, 2016; Walsh & Backe, 2013).

2. Review of the Literature

Concerns over gaps between secondary and higher/tertiary education have been raised in different educational contexts, both L1 and L2 ones. Questions over why so many students are entering college unprepared for college level work are found in contexts where English is used as a first language. O'Sullivan and Dallas (2010) report that several recent studies have indicated that first year college students often find it difficult to handle the rigor of college courses. Fanetti, Bushrow, and DeWeese (2010) explain how high school writing instruction can be different from college writing expectations. While school writing tends to be more standardized and quantified, college writing is expected to be more expressive and contextual. This puts college faculty members in the very awkward position of having "to help their students to unlearn (the) rules and skills that might have served them well in high school"(p.80). Similarly, a study conducted by Sanoff (2006) in the USA -where 1,100 college faculty members and 800 school teachers participated-, reported that only one quarter of high school students and one tenth of college faculty teachers believed that first year college students were "very well prepared" for the college reading demands. In the Omani EFL context, Al Seyabi and Al Amri (2016) have also found that school students believed school did not prepare them well for the reading requirements of the university because reading in the two contexts was different.

A large body of research has been conducted on school-university transition and the topic was investigated from several perspectives. Some research looked at teaching approaches at secondary schools and how they related to first year university achievement (Torenbeek et al., 2011); others looked at factors that would improve success rates of first year students (Steenkamp, Baard, & Frick, 2009; Horn & Jansen, 2008; Smith, 2004). There is also other research that presented different models of partnerships between schools and universities. The following section presents a few partnership models from different parts of the world.

2.1 School-University Partnership: An International Perspective

One of the most successful collaboration projects took place in the Netherlands in the mid 1990s. A secondary education reform was introduced with the main purpose of improving the fit between secondary education and higher education, not only in terms of content covered at both contexts, but also in the teaching and learning approaches (Jansen and Suhre, 2010). A major part of the project focused on developing school students' study skills; the number of weekly lectures were reduced and replaced with an organized program of monthly or weekly assigned tasks that promoted autonomy and independent work. The premise is that students would be equipped with the learning skills that would help them succeed in meeting the requirements of university education (Torenbeek et. al., 2011).

In the UK, one pioneering collaborative initiative is the Bridging the Gap project, funded by Newcastle University in the northeast of England (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). According to this project, it is vital to offer school students a clear and coherent preparation program for their higher education. A good preparation program can include three types of activities:

- Generic activities that could aim at raising young people's aspirations towards university and that it is a possible option for them,

- Focused activities which focus more on giving guidance to students in their final years of school and helping them with decisions about colleges and/or majors, and

- Pedagogical activities that are subject-specific and offer potential students a real task of university life (p. 8).

Another model adopted in some Korean universities is what is called the UP, a university level program that is offered to high school students. According to Seong (2011), UP is a rigorous academic pre-university program that is required to provide descriptions of typical introductory college courses and to assess equivalent achievement in them. It is mainly offered for Korean students with high English proficiency (and are hence expected to enter higher education). The program provides English curriculum that connects high school curriculum and those of English introductory courses offered at college.

In Japan, a successful model of partnership has manifested itself in the form of school-university collaborative research projects that are often funded by Educational Boards, universities, research councils…etc. Matoba, Shibata, Reza, and Arami (2007) write about a three-year (2002-2005) collaborative research project between Nagoya University and the Tokai City Board of Education. The authors describe how Japanese school structure and policy has both flexibility and authority to invite experts from universities to do collaborative research that helps connect theory with practice and gives school teachers opportunities to develop their practical knowledge.

While this form of research collaboration is often dependent upon the individual connections between researchers and teachers, the authors describe how the process is becoming more organized as the Japanese Ministry of Education has begun to support universities in the formation of these partnerships.

In the United States, the importance of establishing partnerships between public schools and colleges was recognized as early as the 1980s. An example of such partnership projects was "Adopt a Classroom" project, implemented jointly between the Texas Tech University and Lubbock Independent School District, which made faculty members of the university available for school teachers (Ishler & Leslie, 1987). According to this model, university faculty members can play four different but interrelated roles: 1) they can be a general classroom resource, exchange teacher and role model, 2) they can help high school students make the transition to college by acting as mentors for them, 3) they can recruit students to the college, and 4) they can develop other suitable activities. In many other parts of the United States, and elsewhere, special "college readiness" programs are designed and introduced in most advanced universities. These programs can take different forms and can last from a few weeks in a summer school to a whole academic year. They generally aim at developing the necessary academic skills needed for university education and to facilitate the move to undergraduate studies by engaging students in advanced coursework on a variety of curriculum areas (O' Sullivan & Dallas, 2010; Labas & Rowe, 2010). In their study of post-secondary success, Hein, Smerdon, and Sambolt (2013) report that participation in college preparatory activities such as summer transition and orientation programs as well as high school-to-college bridge programs have been identified as variables that contribute positively towards success at college courses. In our Omani EFL context, this concept is embodied within the foundation programs that most higher education institutions have.

Another powerful model of school-university partnership is the Professional Development School (PDS), which also started in the USA (Linn, 2000) but then spread widely in different parts of the world. Professional Development Schools (PDSs) were created as innovative institutions to form mutual partnerships between schools (k-12) and professional education programs such as colleges of education and other forms of teacher preparation institutions where the main goal is to improve the quality of teacher education. The mission of a PDS partnership is: (a) the preparation of new teachers; (b) faculty development; (c) inquiry directed at the improvement of practice; and (d) enhanced student achievement (NCATE, 2007). Teitel (1999) describes how PDS can not only provide informative views of teaching in terms of syllabus and teaching approaches but can also be considered as a creative way to bridge the gap between theory and research presented by college teachers on one hand and the day to day practices of school teaching. PDS can also provide opportunity to resolve the tensions that have historically existed between schools and universities (Labas & Rowe, 2010).

In Morocco, O'Brien (1986) reported the need to bridge the gap that exists between secondary and higher education by reviewing the expectations and objectives that teachers and learners have, and by continually promoting activities which focus on training or sharing ideas. He suggested different topics on which secondary and tertiary teachers could usefully share ideas such as how best school teachers can prepare their students for tertiary education, the standard of English expected for a student entering higher education, what students have developed by the end of school, which they could take with them to the university and how higher education teachers can draw on all of this in designing their courses.

Besides Morocco, perhaps one of the structured attempts to bridge the gap between the two contexts in the Arab world was the latest merging of the two ministries: the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. The merging took place in early 2015 in an attempt to overcome the many obstacles in the way of educational reforms in the Kingdom. According to Naif Al Roomi, Governor of Public Education Evaluation Committee (newspaper interview), "the merger will bridge the gap between the two ministries and improve educational outputs…the combined efforts of the ministries in one operational system will regulate this vital sector and ensure effective coordination in the implementation of its policies and programs" (Arab News, Feb 2, 2015). The United Arab Emirates has also recently followed suit (http://www.emirates247.com/news/mohammed-announces-biggest-structural-changes-to-uae-government-2016-02-08-1.620129). While perhaps it is too early to evaluate the experiences of both countries, the merging does reflect a realization of the existence of a gap that needs to be bridged.

3. The Omani Context

Since its renaissance in 1970, Oman has made giant strides in the field of education. From three schools built in 1970 to accommodate 909 students (all males), the number of schools scattered in all educational governorates in Oman has now reached 1077 and is in the increase.

The Omani government believes that diversification of the economy depends on human resource development

through higher education. With almost 45% of the population below the age of 25 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Oman), there is both an increasing student demand and an increasing national commitment for access to higher education. Since the establishment of the first, and so far the only, national university –Sultan Qaboos University- in 1986, higher education in Oman has come a long way. There are now not less than 54 higher education institutions covering different fields and specializations (http://mohe.gov.om/?&culture=en). There is a rapid provision of access to universities and other forms of higher education institutions such as the Colleges of Applied Sciences, the Colleges of Technology and the Institutes of Health Sciences. The private sector of higher education has also undergone steady growth in the last few decades. Compared with one private college, Majan, in 1995, there are now 28 private higher education institutions in Oman (Ismail & Al Shanfari, 2014).

Parallel developments were also taking place in the general education school system. A new educational reform was planned in 1995, which resulted in the introduction of basic-education in 1998, a system that gradually replaced the general education system in public Omani schools. The new reform covered several aspects including changes in the structure of the school system; changes in curriculum content and textbook development; changes in student assessment; and improved teacher training (Issan & Gomma, 2010). Among the several aims of the basic education system in general and in grades 11 and 12 (post-basic schools) in particular is to ensure that students are adequately prepared for the requirements of further and higher education (Ministry of Education, 2008). In fact, according to The Drive for Quality report (Ministry of Education and the World Bank, 2008), the first choice of most post-basic education graduates is to pursue a university education. However, according to the same report, in 2008, only 32 percent of the applicants were offered a place in higher education institutions including universities and colleges.

Despite this big turnout, a number of studies conducted in the Omani context –similar to other contexts-have reported that the students accepted into higher education institutions are not "college ready" and that their high scores from schools do not truly indicate a high level of abilities and skills (Al Seyabi & Al Amri, 2016; Al kharusi et al., 2015; Ministry of Education and the World Bank, 2008). Students seem to be having problems with their transition from school to higher education institutions. Studies that examine this issue and explore how bridges can be built between the two educational systems are highly needed in the Omani educational context. Furthermore, the present study is partially inspired by a speech given by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos at the inaugural ceremony of the Sultan Qaboos University Cultural Centre on December 18, 2010, where he highlighted the special significance attached to each level in the march of education from the early stages till the postgraduate studies stage. It is hoped that the outcomes of this study will provide insights on what channels of communication need to be established and how partnerships between schools and higher education institutions can be set up.

4. Purpose of the Study

The present study mainly presents school students' and school teachers' responses to the following question:

What do you suggest post-basic schools (and/or the Ministry of Education) at one end and the foundation programs at higher education institutions at another end should do for a better connection and progression in the reading and writing components of English curriculum?

5. Method

5.1 Instrument

Data presented in the study was mainly gathered through the use of an open-ended question in a questionnaire. This was part of a larger-scale research that aimed at investigating different issues pertinent to the teaching of EFL reading and writing as perceived by school students and teachers on one hand and university students and teachers on another hand.

5.2 Sample

The questionnaire was distributed to 1114 students from three different Directorates of Education in Oman: Muscat, Batinah South and Dhakeleya. Students responding to the open-ended question that addresses the topic of the present study were 749. Hence, the analysis conducted is based on the responses of the 749 students. As for teachers, 68 grade 11 and 12 teachers from the same directorates of education participated in the study, distributed as follows: 28 from Batinah South, 22 from Dhakeleya and 18 from Muscat.

5.3 Data Analysis

Students' and teachers' responses to the open-ended question were read carefully in order to identify major

patterns and themes. Main coding categories and sub-categories were then generated based on the analysis. The frequencies of mention as well as the percentage of responses falling into the main categories were then tabulated and examples of students and teachers' suggestions were noted.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 School Students' Views

Upon examining school students' suggestions on forms of collaboration between their schools and universities/colleges, it was clear that their responses fell into three broad areas/themes: a) collaboration at the administrative level in issues relevant to curriculum in general and EFL reading and writing in particular, b) orientation programs, and c) exchange visits/programs. Table 1 below shows the percentage of the three main themes that emerged from data analysis of students' responses.

Table 1. Percentage of responses under the three main themes emerging from students' responses

Emerging theme	Percentage
Collaboration on EFL curriculum-related issues in general and EFL reading and writing in particular	42%
Orientation programs	23%
Exchange visits	11%
Others	24%

A) Collaboration on EFL curriculum-related issues in general and EFL reading and writing in particular

The majority of students' responses fell under this theme (42%). As the title of the theme indicates, some of these suggestions were concerned with general curriculum issues in terms of syllabus, testing and extra-curricular activities. Students were generally keen into seeing changes that would increase their opportunities of going to college. To them, improving their English language was one main path towards achieving this end. For example, some students suggested having extra/remedial English classes to address their weaknesses in the language. They also wished that English Open Days, a school activity that often took place once during a semester were held once a month or even once a week. Other suggestions along the same line included "Organizing more extra-curricular activities and having more students participate in them", "Giving more time for English teaching" and "Having one day a week to teach only English". One student also suggested, "Teaching some school subjects in English". The above suggestions indicate that students are aware of their need of more exposure to the English language. The more they are exposed to the language, the better opportunities they have to increase their language level and hence their chances of joining colleges.

Another sub-theme under collaboration on curriculum issues included a number of suggestions concerned with English teaching. For example, students suggested "Creating new methods to teach the English language", and "Teaching topics that are more relevant to students' lives". Similarly, a group of students seemed to believe that testing could be a contributing factor. They suggested: "Having electronic tests at the end of each week to make students revise regularly" and "Making the English curriculum and tests easier so that more students can go into colleges and universities".

A large number of students seemed to be aware that the English problems students have in post-basic education could have been addressed at an earlier stage of their education, as early as cycle 1. This was reflected in the following thoughts: "Changing the English curriculum of cycle 1 so that there is more alignment with cycle 2 and grades 11 and 12", and "Preparing well qualified English teachers for cycle 1 who can teach English in a fun way to children and make them like the English subject".

Besides making suggestions on general curriculum issues, some students made more direct references to EFL reading and writing such as "having separate lessons for reading and writing", "Connecting the writing assignments with the reading topics", "Organizing school competitions in reading and writing", "Using different teaching methods of reading and writing that are more fun", "Getting students to do more extensive reading to become more fluent readers", "Organizing more workshops and programs (to be funded by the Ministry) on reading and writing to increase students' motivation to read and write", "Distributing reading texts and samples of university students' written work so that the gap becomes smaller" and "Having a library in each school".

Students believed that the university should play a more active role in any developments of the English curriculum for post-basic education. This can be evident through responses such as: "The English syllabus of grades 11 and 12 should have a few lessons/components that are common with the university syllabus".

B) Orientation programs

Another major theme that emerged from the analysis of students' responses was the need for orientation programs (23%). A large number of grade 11 and 12 students suggested conducting workshops and other forms of orientation programs at their schools. Some suggested that these workshops address general topics such as "how to prepare for university" and "how best to learn English", or sessions on "the importance of the English language", while others made more specific references to the teaching of reading and writing. Students' responses included a number of constructive suggestions. For example, one student suggested that English Open Days, which some schools organize on a monthly basis, get devoted to talk about university and its English courses. Other students believed that university students should be invited to attend these orientation programs to share their experiences with school students. Another student suggested allocating part of the career advisory lesson to talk about university and the requirements of the foundation programs.

There were also several responses suggesting summer orientation programs. For example, students suggested that the Ministry of Education "Conducts free summer English programs in all regions in Oman especially for students finishing grades 11 and 12". These, according to students, "could be more geared towards the needs of university education". Students believed that these help to "prepare students for admission to universities and other higher education institutions".

Overall, the 11th and 12th grade students from post-basic schools participating in the present study seem to realize the importance of organizing orientation programs before entering higher education institutions, a step that may help both fill in the gaps in their knowledge about the university courses as well as raise their aspirations to attend higher education colleges and universities. According to Hein et al. (2013), such orientation programs have been identified as success variables in university courses.

C) Exchange visits

This was another common response from students (11%). Interestingly, the exchange visits suggested were both at the student and faculty levels. As for visits at the student level, some student suggestions included "Increasing the number of visits that school students make to the university", and "Having students in grade 12 visit higher education institutions to learn more about the requirements not only to see the buildings". Visits should be reciprocal as indicated by the suggestion: "Students in the university/first year in the university should visit schools to give advice to school students on university life and the English classes".

Students have also suggested exchange visits as part of contests and competitions. For example, they suggested, "Organizing competitions between school and university students on various aspects of the English language". One particular example was "Conducting spelling bees with participants from both school and universities".

Technology can be used to facilitate communication between school and university students. One interesting suggestion that came from students was to "open collaboration programs where university and school students correspond in writing. Students will enjoy writing in English and find it fun because it is more meaningful".

Suggestions pointing to exchange visits at the faculty level included: "Having some university professors teach some school lessons to exchange ideas and experiences", "Having specialists come to school to talk to students about university life and the best way to study English" and "Having PhD holders from the university teach English at school".

6.2 School Teachers' Views

A closer examination of the responses of the 68 English teachers who participated in the study revealed that most of them found this a platform to express their concerns with different aspects pertinent to curriculum, since this is the area that they have to deal with on a daily basis in their English lessons. Teachers' suggestions can be grouped into two main themes: 1) changes in curriculum and 2) alignment in curriculum between the Ministry of Education and higher education.

A) Changes in curriculum

Fifty six percent of the teachers responding to the question were keen to see some changes in areas pertinent to the reading and writing components of English classes. As for writing, one suggestion was concerned with the amount of time that is allocated for the writing skill in the English syllabus. One teacher stated: "The Ministry of Education should introduce writing for students in a separate course so that students can be taught deeply from writing a short sentence and ending with writing an essay. This is the only way to get them ready for writing at the university". Along the same line, another teacher suggested to "have special lessons for writing and not to do it in the last 5 minutes of class only". Other teachers felt that the teaching techniques that teachers were allowed

to use should change and that there should be more focus on "teaching students some writing strategies as part of the English lesson". Another suggestion reflected teachers' desire for more freedom when teaching writing. It stated "Teachers should be free to choose interesting writing topics for students".

Several studies on students' transition from school to university show that students finish their secondary education without being fully prepared for the rigors of college level writing (Ahmed, 2010; Chin, 2007; Kim, 2005; Thuy, 2009; Al Seyabi & Tuzlokova, 2014). While university instructors expect students to be able to write concise, coherent and well-reasoned writing assignments, many students are still struggling at the sentence level. Improvements in EFL writing curriculum at school should ultimately prepare students better for their college requirements and reduce the gap that exists between the two educational systems (Kirst & Venezia, 2001).

There were also specific suggestions on how certain curriculum issues on EFL reading should be addressed so that students become better at reading and more prepared for the high requirements of their university education. One teacher believed that "The number of themes and units in grades 11 and 12 should be reduced so that there can be more focus on teaching reading strategies to students. These strategies will make them better readers". Another teacher suggested "more time or class periods are allowed for reading analysis in order to be able to do pre reading, while reading and post reading activities". Devoting more time for reading in order to improve students' reading skills and address their weaknesses seemed to be a recurring theme. One teacher suggested that the Ministry of Education "Opens mini language centers in schools to address the specific reading and writing problems that students have and give them remedial work. These could be open in evenings". Another teacher made comments about the importance of the extensive reading program adopted in Omani public schools in improving students' reading skills and suggested "Reading rooms should be provided for both teachers and students and specific time should be allotted for them to do extensive reading".

B) Alignment in curriculum between the Ministry of Education and higher education.

The other theme emerging from teachers' responses was a more direct answer to the study's research question. This was represented by 32% of their responses. Teachers suggested different areas/methods of collaboration in areas relevant to curriculum. Here are some suggestions: "The foundation programs of higher education should communicate with the Ministry of Education and suggest some of the reading and writing that they use in their programs", "Students in grade 11-12 should get the chance to have a similar curriculum that they might have in foundation programs", "Both of them (schools and colleges) should agree on the curriculum that pupils should study in post basic education in both skills" and "There should be special conferences on curriculum attended by both school teachers and university teachers where views are shared and decisions are made and executed".

These suggestions from teachers reflect their awareness of the need for more collaboration between people working on curriculum development at the Omani Ministry of Education and those working in English language programs in Omani higher education institutions. Enhancing curriculum has in fact been cited as one important reason for the need for collaborative initiatives between schools and colleges (Seong, 2011; Ishler & Leslie, 1987). Without this, there is always danger that the void becomes deeper.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study shed light on the importance of establishing partnerships between schools and universities in order to help bridge the gap and build the "divide" that often exists between the two educational contexts. The study presented a number of school-university partnership approaches from different parts of the world and showed how this partnership can address different aspects such as curriculum, collaborative research, study skills and teacher mentoring and professional development.

Students and teachers participating in the present study made various suggestions on how links could be established between schools and universities in their Omani context. Students' suggestions focused on three main themes, which were the need for orientation programs, exchange visits and collaboration at the administrative level in issues relevant to curriculum. Teachers too were more concerned with curriculum; most of their suggestions centered on creating change in the reading and writing curriculum and alignment between the school English curriculum and that of foundation programs in universities. Perhaps one significant finding of the present study is the overwhelming desire that students, in particular, have shown towards connecting with university and university life.

Most of the suggestions that teachers and students made are not part of the current practice. The present paper argues that adopting some or all of these suggestions might have significant implications towards building sustainable channels of communication between the two educational contexts and smoothing the transition of Omani post-basic school students into colleges and universities. Whatever approach institutions choose to adopt,

it is very important that it acknowledges the reality, or indeed the multiple realities (Matoba et. al., 2007) that surround it so that challenges can be identified and addressed to help this partnership succeed. More importantly, an effective and successful partnership is expected to be a sustainable effort, one that does not involve a specific need on the part of the school or the higher education institution but rather one that aims to yield long term or systemic change. This is an area that merits further research and investigation in both the Omani educational context and beyond.

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