8 Developments in the understandings and practices of first-year Omani teachers of English

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aims

This study investigates how first year teaching experiences impacted the understandings and practices of four Omani teachers of English; recent graduates of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). I explore changes in their thoughts and behaviour in relation to teaching, learning, relationships with students, use of language and lesson/exam preparation.

1.2 Background

SQU graduates enter the English teaching profession in Oman after a four-year pre-service course covering the following content areas: linguistics, culture and pedagogy, curriculum and methodology. Related courses stem from these. For instance, the pedagogy and methodology components include courses on psychology, curriculum and theories, approaches and methods of language teaching and learning. Objectives of the above relate to developing prospective teachers' awareness and knowledge of basic psychological characteristics of learners at schooling age, the scope of the national curriculum and the nature and implications of the process of foreign language teaching and learning (Al-Belushi, 2006).

As for teaching practice, this is carried out in the last year of the programme. During the first semester of year four, prospective teachers are usually allocated one Grade 7-9 class once a week, while, in the second semester, they take one Grade 10/11 class twice a week. They are observed and supervised by the school's cooperating teacher and the university teacher trainer, who provide post-lesson feedback. Upon graduating, they can be assigned to a range of schools, including those following the new (more learner-centred) Basic Education curriculum, for Grades 1-4 and, at present, 5-7, as well as schools employing the General English curriculum being phased out (but still active for Grades 8-12 at the time of writing).

1.3 Rationale

Research (mostly involving teachers in general in Western contexts) suggests the first year of teaching provides crucial learning experiences, as professional knowledge and skills at this stage go through rapid growth and development (Burden, 1990). Yet, the year is characterized by great personal stress, anxieties and frustrations which can greatly influence the novice's future attitudes towards the profession and their ability to carry out their work (Ryan et al., 1980). Fuller & Brown (1975) describes this year as the 'survival stage'. It is a time when ideals and expectations constructed during the teacher training period are replaced by the reality shock of school life (Hebert & Worthy, 2001). In this light, I wish to discover how specifically EFL teachers working in an Omani context, and supported by a pre-service SQU programme, cope with the complexities of real classrooms in their first year.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been argued that first-year teachers come to teaching with idealized and unrealistic concerns and expectations (Almarza, 1996; Richards & Pennington, 1998), many formed during the 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975). As Calderhead (1991) argues, beginning teachers, drawing on memories of their own teachers, often have specific ideas of what constitutes an ideal teacher. They have a tendency to over-generalize and assume that all learners will benefit from the methods they believe benefited them.

Teacher preparation programmes can also create idealized expectations by 'dumbing down' the work of teaching (Carter & Doyle, 1987), conveying the notion that learning is non-problematic if teachers apply certain methods, and avoiding discussion of failure (Chubbuck et al, 2001). Student teachers are often encouraged to find their "own personal teaching style and discover the instructional and managerial strategies that feel right to them" (Roehrig et al, 2002, p. 5). However, these programmes have been criticised for failing to inform prospective teachers of the day-to-day duties of teaching and the social and political context of schools (Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Olson & Osborne, 1991). Rather, they prepare student teachers for the 'front stage behaviours' of teaching (Day, 1999). These are, he adds, the observable teaching behaviours which have been witnessed and internalized by the student teachers over a lifetime of classroom observation.

The student teaching experience has also been blamed for contributing to unrealistic expectations, by shielding student teachers, entering as visitors, from the school's politics (Hebert & Worthy, 2001). They enter their first year feeling more or less competent to teach subject matter, unaware of the organizational and interpersonal forces that are likely to influence their lives in schools (Olson & Osborne, 1991). They are then unable to cope with the 'backstage behaviours' of teaching (Rust, 1994), such as the hours of planning and thinking about teaching, controlling and managing the class and the interpersonal and professional relationships with colleagues. "Unless pre-service teachers are provided opportunities to experience fully the responsibilities of teaching", Houston et al.

(1990, p. 19) argue; "teacher training institutions may never be able to prepare beginning teachers adequately".

Zeichner et al. (1987) investigated the impact of pre-service teaching experiences on thirteen student teachers' perspectives and found these perspectives solidified but did not change fundamentally over the course of a 15-week semester. Then, following the teachers' development in their first year, the researchers found that crucial to this development was whether there was a match or mismatch between school culture and teachers' expectations, and how they responded to a mismatch. While a match tended to reinforce teachers' expectations, a mismatch could lead to various outcomes. Zeichner et al. found that teachers may rethink in line with the school culture (internalized adjustment), keep their values covertly (strategic compliance) or assert their values by retaining their teaching style in spite of the school culture (strategic redefinition), which requires determination and self-confidence to persist in the face of resistance.

They also found the nature of the school culture affects the success or failure of any attempt to impact it (Zeichner et al., 1987). In a 'diverse' school culture, various subcultures tend to influence new teachers in contradictory ways, which enable them to redefine various aspects of their school situations successfully. On the contrary, when the school culture is 'homogeneous', strategic redefinition is unsuccessful. Such cultures block teachers' efforts to succeed in a manner consistent with their initial predisposition.

Being a member of a new and different culture, the first-year teacher goes through a process of learning the goals, values and standards of conduct that are considered to be desirable in the school (Calderhead, 1992). Zeichner & Gore (1990, p. 329) call this process 'teacher socialization', defining it as "the process by which an individual teacher becomes a participating member of the society of teachers".

The developmental process of a first-year teacher has been analysed in various ways. According to Fuller & Brown (1975), there are two general stages of development, the first characterised by survival and mastery, when the focus is on class control and the content of instruction. Next, new teachers' focus shifts to teaching performance. Students' learning and the impact of their teaching on this learning only becomes a focus much later. This pattern of development has been affirmed by Kagan (1992) in her review of forty 'learning to teach' studies.

More recently, Maynard & Furlong (1995) have suggested a more complex picture of first-year teachers' development, identifying five stages. These are early idealism, survival, recognizing difficulties, reaching a plateau and moving on. The first stage, early idealism, involves the beginning teacher in identifying strongly with the students, before the survival stage, when, confronted by the reality shock of the classroom, the new teacher adopts quick fix methods. Next, the new teacher experiences self-doubt, recognizing that teachers are limited in what they can achieve. New teachers then reach a plateau, coping successfully with the routines of teaching, though avoiding experimentation while focusing on classroom control. They then move on, focusing more on the quality of student learning.

However, not all educational researchers agree that new teachers go through clear stages as they develop. For instance, Bullough & Baughman (1993, p. 94) stress

that when new teachers "learn to teach, they encounter problems in clusters not rows". Yet, there is widespread agreement that a concern with student learning comes later rather than earlier in the first year of teaching (e.g., Bullough, 1989; Johnson, 2004).

Case studies can illuminate the complexities of the developmental process. In their study of five first-year teachers of English in Hong Kong, Richards & Pennington (1998) found these teachers initially developed 'a simplified working model of teaching', in which concerns with classroom control were paramount. As the first year progressed, a teacher studied by Bullough (1989) became less concerned with classroom discipline and more concerned with learners' needs, learned to plan her lessons more realistically and became better at handling unexpected occurrences in the classroom.

Crucial to first-year teachers' development are socializing agents and mechanisms that influence this socialization process (Zeichner et al, 1987). Jordell (1987) grouped these agents and mechanisms into two categories; personal influences (other people) and structural influences, such as the classroom, school and society. For the purpose of the present study, the socializing role of learners and colleagues will be examined here.

Regarding learners, the position that they are important agents in the development of first-year teachers is widespread. For example, after studying fifty first-year teachers, Johnson (2004) emphasized that students caused them uncertainty. Successful teaching ultimately relies on students' engagement and transformation. Yet the prospect of building productive relationships with their students seems to the new teacher, Johnson maintains, far from assured. As Rust (1994) argues, students play a vital role in the new teacher's experience of success and failure, and indeed validate the teacher's efforts. According to Doyle (1979), students can even influence the teacher's choice of methodology, classroom language and patterns of questioning.

Besides learners, colleagues are also regarded as highly influential agents in the process of learning to teach (Zeichner, 1987), though Farrell (2003) argues their role in the socialization of new teachers is complex, as they may become guides, guardians or peers. Much depends on the culture. If colleagues pursue a culture of individualism, as opposed to collaboration, the result is "at worst, potentially damaging to the new teacher's development and, at best, damaging to the longer term interests of the school" (Williams et al., 2001, p. 256). When first-year teachers have good relations with their colleagues, they are more likely to know what is expected of them, as Johnson (2004) explains, and know how to meet those expectations in the context of their schools.

Clearly, much has been learned about first-year teachers' developmental processes, primarily with regard to teachers in general in Western contexts. Research into first-year language teachers in the Middle East is lacking. This is my focus.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

I set out to explore how the understandings and practices of Omani teachers of English were impacted by their first-year teaching experiences, focusing on four teachers as a case study. I developed the following research questions:

1. What pre-teaching expectations and concerns did four Omani teachers of English have about their first year of teaching?
2. In what areas did the understandings and practices of these teachers develop during their first year?
3. Who influenced their development?

3.2 Participants

The participants were four first-year Omani teachers of English; graduates of the English language teacher education programme at SQU, willing to taking part in the research, allocated to different types of school and teaching different levels. They were all females - Mariyam, Asma, Tahani and Alya (pseudonyms used). See Table 1 (below) for a summary of these characteristics.

Table 1 Summary of the research participants' characteristics

No.	Name	Sex	Students'sex	Grade/Level taught	Type of school
1.	Mariyam	F	M/F	2/3	Basic Cycle One School
2.	Asma	F	F	5/7	Basic Cycle Two School
3.	Tahani	F	F	8/9	General School (Preparatory)
4.	Alya	F	F	10/11	General School (Secondary)

3.3 Research Method

My research method was the qualitative semi-structured interview, which has been described as "a uniquely powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subjects'… world" (Kvale, 1996, p. 70). Due to the nature of the study and the interest in researching the first year teaching experience from the teachers' points of view, this method seemed appropriate.

The semi-structured interview is centred on a sequence of themes (Kvale, 1996) and the main questions to be asked (Wellington, 2000). However, at the same time, there should be "openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects" (Kvale, 1996, p. 124). Therefore, in order to conduct the interviews, I designed a guide consisting of three broad topics: pre-teaching expectations and concerns, initial understandings and practices, and understandings and practices during the year to give the participants. In addition, a number of suggested open questions were set according to their relevance to the themes.

I piloted the interview guide to eliminate "ambiguous, confusing or insensitive questions" (Wellington, 2000, p. 78) with a first-year Omani teacher of English and SQU graduate called Amal. Before the piloting interview, she was given a briefing of the purpose and the topic of the study and she was emailed the interview guide.

After the interview, Amal was asked about the extent to which the interview guide was useful. She was also asked to email her suggestions regarding the structure, sequence and clarity of the interview questions as well as her opinions on the skills of the interviewer in terms of sensitivity to and general control of the conversation. Her suggestions were extremely useful, and I used these, together with my own notes made while listening to the recorded data, to restructure the interview questions afterwards.

3.4 Data collection

As with the piloting interview, data were collected by making use of the feature 'voice recorder' on a mobile phone. Interviews, each lasting from 30 to 40 minutes, were recorded with the previous agreement of the participants. Then, they were transferred to a computer in the form of audio files. The decision to use a mobile phone to record the interviews was due to the interviewer being in the UK while the participants were in Oman, which made the use of a mobile phone the most convenient way of collecting the data. Another factor supporting the decision to collect data in such a way was the poor quality of internet network coverage in Oman, which can make the use of other means such as 'messenger' inconvenient. The interviews were conducted in English with each individual participant, the language they preferred to use.

3.5 Data analysis

I listened to each interview several times to help me code and categorize the data, then analysed these categories for relevance to research questions. Data were then further condensed and reduced, as Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) recommend. I then summarized each interview with a view to presentation and transcribed sections to incorporate in the findings presented below. I present each case in turn, aiming in each to provide the reader with a clear picture of the first-year experience. Findings about sources of support are reported in connection with areas of development, as they seem intertwined and inseparable.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Case One: Mariyam

As a result of her schooling experience, Mariyam expected to face classroom discipline problems. When she was a student, English lessons were not taken seriously. They were seen as opportunities to misbehave and do the homework of other subjects, due to the poor management techniques and dull teaching styles of teachers who were mainly expatriates. This expectation was strengthened when she knew she was going to teach young learners of Grades 1-4, who she had no

experience of, in a basic education cycle one school. Her SQU teacher education programme did not address such a system either in its methodology courses or in its teaching practice.

Therefore, she decided she had to be very strict and firm with the students from the first day and set rules for good behaviour and manners in class from the first lesson. This decision was also based on her belief that the first impression is very important and she did not want learners to think she was a lenient teacher with whom they could mess around. Therefore, from the moment she stepped into the school, she put a strict look on her face. In addition, she initially believed that quietness in a classroom is a prerequisite for learning. Consequently, from the first lesson, she intended to show the class she was strict and would not tolerate any noise or disruptive behaviour. She did this by making a contract with the learners, explaining their roles and hers. For example, she told them: "while I'm explaining you should listen and be quiet, when you want to answer put your hands up".

After a short while, Mariyam discovered that her initially held belief that a quiet classroom signified learning was not compatible with the beliefs on which the coursebook activities were based (e.g., children like to play with language, learn by doing and learn best in a stress-free environment). However, her concern about not being able to control the class was stronger than her tendency to try to implement instructional risks. Given the chance to observe her more experienced colleagues' classes as part of a professional development plan set by the senior teacher, Mariyam noticed that most of the activities, such as songs, games and groupwork activities, could not be satisfactorily carried out without a reasonable amount of noise and movement. She also observed that, though there was some noise in her colleagues' classes, children were learning and were being controlled. Therefore, she cancelled some rules, modified others and added new ones in order to gain a smooth flow in the lessons' activities. Noticing the joy and the engagement of the children during subsequent lessons as the year progressed, Mariyam arrived at a conviction that was contrary to the one initially held; that a certain amount of noise is necessary for children's learning.

In addition, Mariyam came into teaching with the idea that a teacher should adapt, change and sometimes add to coursebook activities. She got this idea from her teaching practice experience (with older learners and a curriculum being phased out), when student teachers were encouraged to adapt. However, she found it very difficult to do the same with the basic education curriculum activities, and the senior teacher did not approve. After a while, Mariyam came to a realisation that the curriculum was designed in a way that adequately responds to the needs and interests of the children and that her attempts to adapt it were a waste of time.

4.2 Case Two: Asma

Asma came into teaching concerned that teaching English was a very tough job, after teaching practice experiences with able but undisciplined students, who were disrespectful because she was a student teacher. She also heard complaints from experienced English teachers about the administrative workload, and an aunt, who was teaching mathematics, "made the situation of teaching in a school [sound] even worse".

Nevertheless, based on her own school-learning experiences, Asma expected her hometown students to be respectful and disciplined, though not very motivated and of average ability. She was mostly concerned about motivating such students and teaching them effectively.

As a result, she initially tried to create a friendly classroom environment, which she thought would motivate the children of grades 5 and 6. However, she encountered classroom control problems, which resulted in difficulties in keeping the students on task. There were moments of genuine despair, and Asma struggled with a desire to maintain her self-identity as a teacher and a feeling that it was necessary to achieve classroom control to get things done. Later, she came to a decision to adopt a personality that was counter to her self-image as a teacher.

> I was behind in the syllabus…I used to go to my colleagues nearly crying, I was telling them that I'm the worst teacher ever… but then I said to myself that this shouldn't last long, yeah I want them to have fun but also my duty is to help them learn…so I decided there would be no fun anymore, I should be strict and firm with them, I shouldn't even smile.

However, with the help of the senior teacher's advice during post-lesson discussions, Asma gradually arrived at a middle ground. She was advised to identify a set of classroom rules and establish routines for her students. In addition, taking part in an in-service training course for lower secondary teachers on a day release basis, Asma realised that besides setting rules and routines, maintaining good classroom control requires being consistent in implementing and reinforcing rules. Consequently, as the year progressed, she became better able at handling classroom control problems, allowing her to inject joy and fun into her teaching.

One of Asma's main challenges was with lesson planning. The new curriculum surprised her by providing a lot of detail relating to each step within the lesson but without presenting objectives relating to each. At the start of the year, she found the process of writing a lesson plan very time-consuming, involving a complex four-step process. However, as Asma became more familiar with the syllabus, time spent on lesson planning decreased and she developed the skill of writing brief and accessible lesson plans which could be made use of while teaching.

4.3 Case Three: Tahani

During teaching practice, Tahani enjoyed working with students, who were well-behaved, well-motivated and had a good level of English. These experiences gave her high expectations for the hometown students she was going to teach, who she expected to be like her.

When she started, Tahani tried to build warm and friendly relationships. Based on her teaching practice experiences, she thought that such relationships would make the students interested in learning English, responsive to teaching through fun and love, so that there would be no room for misbehaviour. However, she reported, this led to difficulties.

> At first I was too kind with them, I laughed with them…I played with them…I was too kind because I didn't want them to feel afraid, I wanted them to feel safe and free to talk and to take risks with the language as I did in the teaching practice and it was fine…but with these students it didn't work…they started to misbehave and I lost control…they were very noisy

> and they thought that I was an easy teacher, not like the other teachers , so they didn't care about the lesson and the homework.

Consequently, the need to maintain control became central to Tahani's teaching decisions. For the sake of increasing control, she jettisoned interesting activities that she thought could be used to improve the course book. Among the first to go were group work-activities such as games because Tahani found that keeping five small groups busy and on-task was much more difficult than keeping one large group working. Therefore, due to students' misbehaviour, she gave up on activities that were fun but risky and conformed instead to the teacher role the students were most familiar with.

Furthermore, to achieve and maintain desirable student behaviour, Tahani tried to identify and use a set of management strategies which included incentives and punishments. The main source of these management strategies were her own experiences at school. However, Tahani reported, the peer observation schedule set by the senior teacher was very useful, too.

> I got the idea of using marks from my colleagues, I mean when I visited their classes and when we taught together, team teaching… I used them as encouragement and punishment at the same time…my colleagues also gave me techniques when they visited me, you know they are experienced and they know how to deal with students.

A further problem Tahani faced was to do with writing exams appropriate to the level of her students. Though the senior teacher and colleagues assisted in this area, she was not satisfied with the quality of the first two she prepared. They were too difficult, and Tahani reports that when she saw her students' results, she was "very upset".

However, towards the end of the first semester, Tahani was better able to write exams that suited the actual level of her students, and the senior teacher described her December exam as "reasonably good". Then, Tahani reports: "I got better and better…when I compare between the first exam I wrote and the one in April, I see a big gap, lots of differences, for good of course."

4.4 Case Four: Alya

Alya was going to teach at the hometown secondary school where she had studied. In contrast to the city students she met during teaching practice, who, with plenty of exposure to the language, were high level, Alya did not expect her hometown students to be more than average in ability or highly motivated. She did expect them to be well-behaved and they were.

When she first taught Grade 10, Alya started adapting course book exercises in a way that would give them the opportunity to use English communicatively. However, she realized quickly that the adapted activities were beyond her students' level, which was low, and that continuing with such activities would not benefit the students. Therefore, she decided to abandon communicative activities and start with very basic vocabulary and grammar exercises.

In addition, the teaching context influenced Alya to use the mother tongue. When she started teaching, she adhered to a strict, all-English policy for her own

and her students' language use, which was informed by her experiences of university tutors and classes. Confronted with the reality of her students' low level and assisted by the advice of the senior teacher, she realized that such a policy would not result in desirable learning outcomes. Therefore, she initially relaxed her English-only rule in teacher-student classroom interaction. Later, and as the students' level started to get better, she maintained an English-only rule for her own classroom language and left it flexible for the students' language based on the demands of the classroom situation.

The need to raise the students' level in English influenced Alya's initial decision to focus on accuracy when marking students' pieces of writing. She thought that, by doing so, students would put more effort into learning and improving their repertoire of vocabulary items and grammatical structures. However, when she saw the paragraphs of her colleagues' students, during peer observations, she was shocked. "Their paragraphs were nice and long", she reported, "there were grammatical mistakes but the teachers didn't focus on them as I did with my students". She felt the pressure she put on accuracy led to students avoiding the use of relatively complex structures and unfamiliar vocabulary items.

Consequently, her strategy in dealing with students' pieces of writing changed, which was also made clear to the students. This led to improvements, she reported:

> I found that my students had very good ideas when they write in Arabic, why didn't they do that in English? because they were afraid of making mistakes and getting lots of red marks on their notebooks, so I told them when you write don't worry about each and every word, just write your ideas and I also gave them free writing topics, not from the course books…they wrote very amazing and beautiful paragraphs, of course they still have mistakes but I'm happy now with their writing.

4.5 Summary

Clearly, the teachers developed in different ways from the pre-teaching period through the first year. I will discuss common themes that emerged relating to pre-teaching expectations, areas of development and sources of support in the next section, organizing the discussion around research questions.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Research question 1: What pre-teaching expectations and concerns did the four Omani teachers of English have about their first year of teaching?

From the findings, it is clear that the four Omani teachers of English came into teaching with a set of varied expectations about their first year. These expectations centred mainly on students' English language level, motivation and behaviour. In contrast to city students with whom they had their teaching practice, the four teachers expected their hometown students to have average levels of English due to more limited opportunities to use English outside the class, which they felt might have a negative impact on their motivation. Regarding students' behaviour, three out of the four teachers expected their hometown students to be well-behaved and therefore

classroom control problems were of a minor concern to them. The issue was teaching English successfully. Mariyam, however, located in a cycle one school, with young children she had no experience of, was mainly concerned with classroom control.

These expectations and concerns were derived from different sources; such as schooling, teaching practice, contact with relatives, knowledge of the hometown context and the type of school they were being allocated to. However, the experience of being a student at school was the most prominent source, as other researchers have found (e.g. Freeman, 1992; Calderhead, 1991). Other sources seemed to contribute when experiences they offered matched those from schooling. As Farrell (2003, p. 10) has argued: "novice teachers' expectations and views are related to their autobiography", with personal experiences of being in a learning relationship with teachers dominant. Indeed, Wild (2003) has suggested that school experiences operate as filters through which information and experiences from other sources are interpreted and understood. This might explain why classroom control problems were of a minor concern to Asma and Alya, though two of them faced such problems during their teaching practice. In forming their expectations about hometown students, both teachers saw themselves as prototypes "of their students and generalised one example to suit all" (Calderhead, 1991, p. 13).

While first-year teachers' pre-teaching expectations are often characterised in the literature as idealistic or unrealistic (e.g.; Almarza, 1996), findings suggest the expectations of the four Omani teachers can be better described as 'matched' or 'mismatched' to their schools' contexts and realities. This is because two different teachers might hold the same expectation, but find different school contexts. To illustrate, both Asma and Alya expected their hometown students to be well-behaved, based on their school experiences. In the case of Asma, this was a mismatched expectation because it did not tally with her school context; she faced a number of classroom discipline problems. However, in the case of Alya, such an expectation matched her school context.

5.2 Research question 2: In what areas did the understandings and practices of these teachers develop during their first year?

From the data analysed, it seems there were overlapping areas in which the understandings and practices of the four Omani teachers of English developed during their first-year of teaching. Their understandings seemed to respond adequately to the context-specific needs of their schools; in particular to the level of the students, control problems and syllabus requirements. The development of such understandings were reflected in their changed practices in relation to types of teaching activities, use of language, and approaches to the teaching of writing.

Being mainly concerned with students' motivation towards learning English, three of the teachers (Asma, Tahani and Alya) started using student-centred and communicative activities, such as songs and groupwork activities, which added to the curriculum. However, due to the unexpected low level of the students and the classroom control problems that emerged, the three teachers started using activities that suited low language levels and ensured discipline and order; mainly grammar and teacher-centred activities. These findings are similar to those of Johnson (1996),

in his study of an ESL teacher. Johnson stated that new teachers generally "lack the practical knowledge they need to deal with the classroom complexities and therefore, they tend to teach in ways that simply maintain the flow of instruction and classroom order" (p. 45). However, he also added that as new teachers get better in understanding what their students are capable of doing, they become better able to tailor their instructional activities to match their students' abilities. Unlike the other three teachers, Mariyam, whose primary concern was initially maintaining order and control, adjusted her activities from teacher-fronted to relatively student-centred activities due to a development in her understanding of the syllabus requirements.

Other aspects of teaching which the first-year teachers developed understandings and practices in relation to are use of language and approaches to the teaching of writing. Alya, for instance, gradually moved from a strict all-English policy, relaxing it in teacher-student interaction and vice versa and finally maintained an English-only rule for her own language and a flexible one for the students'. Unlike ESL teachers studied by Richards & Pennington (1998) who abandoned the use of an-English only rule to facilitate rapid coverage of the lessons' materials, Alya's various techniques in this respect were in response to the students' level of English. As for approaches to the teaching of writing, her practices shifted from a focus on accuracy to a focus on meaning. As the year progressed, she perceived writing required more than competence in grammar.

As for learning, one area in which the four teachers grew from divergent initial understandings was in how to balance a relaxed, caring classroom environment with classroom rules and routines. To illustrate, Mariyam's initial idea that if students were quiet they were learning developed into an understanding that a reasonable amount of movement and noise are necessary in a young learners' class. Accordingly, she changed her practices from strictly teacher-centred to moderately student-centred, adjusting her classroom rules. In contrast, Asma and Tahani started teaching with an understanding that students' learning is greatly enhanced in a fun and loving classroom environment, which is able in itself to eliminate control problems. However, as the year progressed, they gradually developed an understanding that, besides fun and caring, students' learning requires the identification and use of a consistent set of classroom rules and routines. All four teachers became aware of the importance of establishing a friendly but professional teacher-student relationship.

As for writing, there were also developments. Time Asma spent on lesson planning decreased as her understanding of the syllabus grew. Furthermore, as she developed an array of summarizing skills, her lesson plans became more accessible while she was teaching. Tahani improved in writing exams as she gained a deeper understanding of the students and the syllabus, and techniques useful to examination writing.

5.3 Research question 3: Who influenced their development?

The teachers' development throughout the first year can be largely attributed to the support of senior teachers and English teaching colleagues in schools. These

teachers worked in 'collaborative' rather than 'individualistic' school cultures, as Williams et al. (2001) describe these environments, in which there were informal 'collegial working relationships', of the type described by Farrell (2003), and where a form of 'buddy system' (Flores, 2005) seemed to operate. Colleagues were critical friends, who coached and guided the first-year teachers in a non-judgemental manner and were consulted in the event of problematic situations.

Furthermore, these collaborative cultures included the systematic plans set by senior teachers to support professional development. Such plans included senior teachers' informal and formal classroom visits and peer observations, when new teachers had the opportunity to observe colleagues' classes and be observed and provided with insightful feedback on their performances. In addition, team teaching, which allowed new teachers to prepare and teach lessons in cooperation with more experienced colleagues, was part of the plan.

Therefore, it can be argued that senior teachers and colleagues played a vital role in the development of the four first-year teachers in this study. These teachers were thus much more fortunate than a group of Singaporean novices described by Farrell (2003), whose development was impeded by individualistic school cultures.

6 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Implications

A number of implications can be drawn from the previous discussion. These relate to at least three overlapping and mutually informing common concerns in language teacher education in the Omani context; the SQU language teacher education programme, the relationship between this programme and schools, and professional development conducted in schools.

6.1.1 The SQU language teacher education programme

Experiences of learning at school were the prominent source of first-year teachers' expectations and, worryingly, the university teacher education programme did not appear to make much of an impact. This suggests that language teacher educators at SQU need to re-consider their approach.

It seems that a traditional approach which focuses on "what teachers need to know and how they can be trained, rather than on what they actually know or how that knowledge is acquired" (Carter, 1990, p. 291) still guides the orientation and design of the SQU programme. As a result, the programme may not promote the integration of new information (received from the programme) with previously held knowledge and beliefs (from school-learning experiences), which is desirable as Richardson (1997) argues. Therefore, I suggest that if the programme considers student teachers' cognitions in its design, it will be more worthwhile. Opportunities for student teachers to articulate previously held knowledge and beliefs could be built into the programme through classroom observations, case-based activities and early collaborative teaching experiences.

6.1.2 The relationship between the SQU language education programme and schools

It is surprising that the SQU language teacher education programme does not address the basic education system in its courses, particularly since the system was established some years ago, and many SQU graduates are subsequently allocated to basic education schools. Cooperation and coordination between the two responsible ministries could perhaps be improved.

6.1.3 Professional development in schools

Clearly, the four first-year teachers received considerable professional support from their schools, specifically from senior teachers and colleagues. This reflects the serious professional development programmes implemented by the Ministry of Education in Oman. As a previous teacher and senior teacher and a present supervisor in the same context, I find it legitimate to note that in-service training in schools has been noticeably improved. The informal and formal personal and professional support the four teachers received greatly assisted their development and made their year a success.

6.2 Limitations

The limitations of this research can be derived from two main factors. These are the inherent nature of qualitative research and the contingencies of data collection within a constrained period of time. Although generalisations cannot be made and are not the intention of this qualitative study, much of what has been discussed might nevertheless have relevance for other language teachers' practices and contexts.

Regarding data collection, my study would have been improved if I had used more than one research method. However, triangulation by observation was not feasible, as I was in the UK. Furthermore, limitations can be attributed to the period when data were collected, which was towards the end of the first year of teaching. Due to constraints in the time available, prolonged engagement was not feasible. This affects the credibility of the research findings and interpretations, especially the ones related to the first research question: What pre-teaching expectations and concerns did four first-year Omani teachers of English have about their first-year of teaching? Teachers' answers to this question may have been influenced by their subsequent experiences during the first year.

6.3 Conclusion

It is important that induction and mentoring programmes for first-year teachers are informed by an awareness of the criticality of first year teaching and its vital role in shaping teachers' future professional behaviours and attitudes. As Eisenschmidt & Poom-Valickis (2003, p. 12) put it: "no matter how good the basic training is, the new teacher is not 'ready' nor has sufficient experience to cope alone with all the problems arising at school".

Findings reveal that the understandings and practices of the Omani teachers I researched developed during their first year of teaching in collaborative environments. They were helped by senior teachers and colleagues, who played a critical role in providing and contributing to professional development opportunities. Findings suggest that in such circumstances the first year of teaching can be a successful one.

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