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# Constructing Grammar Instruction in the Omani ELT System: A Critical Literacy Perspective

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### Abstract

Debate in the literature has been ongoing about whether to teach English language grammar explicitly, implicitly or integrate both approaches to achieve optimal learning. This research paper, hence, discusses this issue from an ideological perspective with a particular reference to the Omani English language teaching (ELT) education system. The paper triangulates data from various semi-structured interviews made with different agents involved in the Omani ELT education system, the pertinent literature, The Philosophy and Guidelines for the Omani English Language School Curriculum, which I will herewith refer to as the National English Language Policy/Plan (NELP), other policy texts and the English language national syllabus – Our World Through English (OWTE) Teacher’s Guide. The critical discussion revealed various contesting ideologies about teaching grammar in the Omani ELT system and the crucial role of teachers in the effective policy implementation or otherwise. The study has important implications for other similar contexts around the world.

### Keywords

Grammar, ELT, OWTE, NELP, Ideologies, Discourse, Qualitative, Collective/Multiple Case Study

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## **Constructing Grammar Instruction in the Omani ELT System: A Critical Literacy Perspective**

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*Debate in the literature has been ongoing about whether to teach English language grammar explicitly, implicitly or integrate both approaches to achieve optimal learning. This research paper, hence, discusses this issue from an ideological perspective with a particular reference to the Omani English language teaching (ELT) education system. The paper triangulates data from various semi-structured interviews made with different agents involved in the Omani ELT education system, the pertinent literature, The Philosophy and Guidelines for the Omani English Language School Curriculum, which I will herewith refer to as the National English Language Policy/Plan (NELP), other policy texts and the English language national syllabus – Our World Through English (OWTE) Teacher’s Guide. The critical discussion revealed various contesting ideologies about teaching grammar in the Omani ELT system and the crucial role of teachers in the effective policy implementation or otherwise. The study has important implications for other similar contexts around the world. Keywords: Grammar, ELT, OWTE, NELP, Ideologies, Discourse, Qualitative, Collective/Multiple Case Study*

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### **English and English Language Teaching Today**

English in the post colonial era has become the world’s favourite *lingua franca*, a language of wider communication (LWC), and the language of globalization. Different authors have discussed the powerful and ideological role played by the USA and UK in advancing English and the political, economic, and cultural benefits these two countries have been gaining from the direct and indirect promotion of English and its teaching (Dua, 1994; Pennycook, 1989, 1994; Phillipson, 1992). English today is a valuable commodity and has a “linguistic capital,” “symbolic power,” and a “market” (Bourdieu, 1991) with millions of consumers around the world and uses and values that have superseded all other languages. Put differently, capital, information technology, and knowledge have given English power over its rivals, helped it to become the first international language in the world and made it within easy reach of many users. Exposure of the people worldwide to English influenced their ideologies with respect to its importance.

The world today, which is shrinking and seen and described as a global village in the era of communication technology, prefers English to any other language for international communication purposes. The printed word plays a major role in constructing discourses about culture, nationhood, and nationality. This can have significant implication to ideologies about language and literacy as constructed by different governments and education planners.

One powerfully ideological aspect of the spread of English today is English language teaching (ELT). In terms of actual approaches to teaching, Pennycook (1989) argues that “second language education. . . is involved in a complex nexus of social, cultural, economic, and political relationships that involve students, teachers, and theorists in differential positions of power” (p. 590). Different authors have discussed the role of ELT as a profit-making activity and how English has become a multi-million business and industry after the post-war and post-imperial era (Bourne, 1996; Dua, 1994; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1990). As a result, the

past 50-60 years have witnessed the rise of different methods and approaches and the fall of others. Central to this evolution has been the theory of teaching and learning and the role of teachers. The fall of methods and approaches like the Grammar-Translation Method, the Audio-Lingual Method, and the Direct Method, the Cognitive Approach, and Situational Language Teaching, otherwise known as the Oral Approach (Daisy, 2012), was fundamentally due to viewing language as a mechanical activity and marginalizing students' needs and interests. These methods and approaches further marginalized communicative interaction, innovative, dynamic, active, independent meaning creation and manipulation, and critical thinking. By contrast, knowledge about and mastery of language production and the structure of the language and its explicit teaching and learning took centre stage.

These methods and approaches also failed to take into account the language learning process from a strategic perspective (Stern, 1983). Teachers were deskilled and mechanically socialized (Shor & Friere, 1987). They became the sole and ultimate knowledge holders, owners, controllers, and providers, and their power went unchallenged. "Knowledge" here is first and foremost associated with knowledge about the code and formal aspect of the language, which provided security and protection for the novice and the ill-prepared teacher.

In addition, Ur (1996) argued that grammar learning and teaching in a number of different contexts is usually what the students ask for. Therefore, the teacher finds it inevitable to respond to the demands of the students. Students here bring fixed views, philosophies, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes about second language learning. Students have their own ideologies, which impact the teacher's teaching and disturb the implementation of the policy.

Dua (1994) argued that all the methods and approaches are "analytical" in nature and have limits in the development of appropriate linguistic and pedagogical models of ELT and in making the Third World Countries self-reliant in theory and practice. Analytical here refers to the learner remembering something by separating it into parts.

Different writers argued that the Grammar-Translation Method, the Audio-Lingual Method, and the Direct Method, the Cognitive Approach, and Situational Language Teaching originally derived from practical experience and inventiveness in order to meet social, political, and educational aims and needs and therefore were not based on sound theoretical grounds (Phillipson, 1990; Stern, 1983). What is needed is methods and approaches that meet the lived realities and practical theories of the various classroom contexts.

On the other hand, language learning and teaching have been problematized in an approach like the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that I am developing. CLT has redefined language and syllabus goals, teachers' and students' roles, theories of language and language learning. In sum, it has revolutionized ELT altogether for the better (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell, 1998; Thompson, 1996; Xiaoju, 1984) by looking at language as a vehicle for communication that is governed by social, cultural, psychological, linguistic, and cognitive factors. CLT actively involves the learner in the dynamic and active creation, manipulation, and production of the target language to achieve language fluency that is grammatically and functionally appropriate. This is best achieved through completing challenging, demanding, and varied communicative tasks and activities with minimum interference from the teacher (Thompson, 1996). It further places the students at the heart of the process and encourages them to look at language as one complex and creative system. Furthermore, CLT makes them look at linguistic competence as one of a range of competencies that contribute to language production and manipulation in assumed functional and social contexts. Therefore, the scope of language use widens, and the learner is required to move a step beyond rote learning and parroting.

By this account, linguistic competence represented in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, is equally important and significant as social and cultural rules. These rules are viewed to govern language use as much as the linguistic components do (Berns, 1990). In short,

CLT pays equal attention to the functional and the structural aspects of the language (Chen, 1995; Li, 1998). However, language forms are considered to serve the language functions in order to help generate competent use of the language (Littlewood, 1981; Thompson, 1996; Widdowson, 1988). Fotos and Ellis (1991), Fotos (1994), Chitrapu (1996), Willis (1996) and Willis and Willis (1996) argue that learners are encouraged to be engaged in meaningful and challenging tasks that should be designed for grammar-awareness purposes, and which facilitate the acquisition of the target language grammar.

The implication at this stage is that the teachers are invited to think and reflect critically and liberally on their theories and practices. CLT has encouraged and presumably developed a sense of critical thinking in the teachers. Critical thinking applies to the practices and materials implemented by the teachers. CLT has helped teachers become more aware of their students' needs and interests. Critical thinking about and subsequent critique of the prescribed material can lead to a critique of ideologies (Gilbert, 1989).

This study documents the different contesting ideologies and discourses that construct grammar instruction in the Omani ELT education system and examines the effect of this on the national ELT policy implementation. The aim of this article is not to provide statistical generalizations or enumerate frequencies. It is rather to expand and generalize a theory and to suggest complexities for further future research. This research aims to make some contributions to the target context via employing multiple sources of evidence—interviews, “critical” content analysis, written texts and documents, and the pertinent literature. All these sources of data entail ideologies and discourses—two key concepts in this study. Ideologies, within the context of this study mainly refer to systems of thoughts and conceptions of the world, and are general, abstract, collective, and socially and historically positioned, developed, produced and reproduced through communication and discourse (van Dijk, 1998). Ideologies are represented in texts and discourses and are considered to construct the human behaviour and the social world in which we live (Gee, 1990). Gramsci (1971) writes that ideologies, which are the cement upon which hegemony is built, are articulated and produced by different social classes and are the result and the product of history and different social practices resulting from exposure to and contact with everyday events. The articulation and production of ideologies, according to Gramsci (1971), occurs via discourses. van Dijk (1998) thus writes that “discourses allow direct and explicit expression of ideologies” (p. 193). Texts and discourses do not un-problematically reflect truth and reality. Texts and discourses reveal knowledge, ideas, and beliefs about a particular notion held, or a situation experienced by a particular person or a group of people (Gee, 1990). A survey of the field has revealed that the study is unique and the first of its kind in its content and approach and can have significant implications for other similar contexts around the world.

### **English in Oman**

English language use in the Sultanate of Oman receives political, economic, and legislative support from the government and the powerful elite in the society and has institutionalized domains like education, business, and the media (Al-Busaidi, 1995). It is a powerful tool for modernization, economic progress, and transition purposes, which ultimately serve the national development of a Third World developing country like the Sultanate. Put differently, English is a tool for “Omanization”—the gradual and systematic replacement of qualified and skilled expatriate manpower by locals. The former category of manpower has approximately reached 1.68 million according to the last national census in 2013, bearing in mind that Oman's overall population is just under 6 million (Muscatdaily, 2014), inclusive of the expatriates, who represent to a very large degree Indian, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, and to a relatively lesser degree the Arab World and Europe.

Al-Balushi (2001) stressed that English has been crucial for development and growth of the national economy ever since it was introduced in Oman and that English in the Sultanate today is “a tool through which almost every Omani can earn a living” (p. 5). Al-Balushi further added that “English came to be perceived by many Omani officials and authorities as the second language through which all economic, technological, vocational, educational, and communicative functions could be conducted” (p. 5).

English language in Oman serves multiple purposes: inter-lingual communication inland, travelling to a non-Arabic speaking country, conducting business, cultural analysis and understanding, acquisition of science and technology, pursuing higher education domestically and abroad, and finding a white-collar job in the private and public sectors.

### **English Language Teaching in Oman**

The Omani ELT system is rigidly centralized and controlled and characterized largely by transmitting “selective traditions” (Williams, 1989) and “interested knowledge” (Pennycook, 1989). Put differently, ELT in Oman has suffered from a wide range of policy and practice problems, which has negatively reflected on the students’ language proficiency and the national economy for the past 4 decades or so.

Al-Alawi (1994) and Al-Hammami (1999) criticise the education system in Oman and describe it as authoritative and highly centralized. The teaching methods employed by the teachers have been governed and controlled by the Ministry of Education and that restrictions imposed upon the teachers to use the teacher’s guide have had an influence on the teaching methods they have employed (Al-Alawi, 1994, Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). Within this vein, Al-Balushi (1999) and Al-Mahrooqi (2012) are highly critical of the teaching methodology in the Omani schools and described it as “formal” and one which “emphasizes a largely passive role for students with an emphasis on rote learning” (Al-Balushi, 1999, p. 4). Moreover, the curriculum is implemented in a top-down mode, which makes it very difficult for teachers to engage in any kind of change or innovation (Al-Toubi, 1998).

Spolsky (1978) thus acknowledged the pivotal role of teachers, syllabus, and resources for improving students’ language competence. Baldauf (1990) emphasized the central role of teachers and their professionalism in policy implementation, which has direct implications for national development.

Al-Mahrooqi (2012) found that teachers are the major cause of the students’ low level of English in Oman and lists 18 reasons for this. Pertinent reasons are teachers’ poor training, linguistic inadequacy, textbook-based teaching, focus on finishing the assigned syllabus, use of traditional teaching methods, teaching English through Arabic, and lack of knowledge of students’ backgrounds by the expatriate teachers.

Al-Mahrooqi (2012) further found that textbook design was problematic. Al-Toubi (1998) and Al-Mahrooqi (2012) criticized the national syllabus for the controlled activities and lack of communicative activities, which has affected some students’ views, perceptions, and conceptions about the uses and values of English in Oman and the place of ELT on the national curriculum (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). Apple (1993) argued that one of the ideological dimensions standardized textbooks have is to help teachers overcome problems pertinent to large classes, which is precisely the case in Oman.

In addition, adherence to one fixed and mandated syllabus, as it is the case in Oman, prevents the students from thinking analytically and critically and largely limits their exposure to “official knowledge” (Apple, 1993) transmitted by the mandated syllabus. This guarantees that all students receive common and fundamental knowledge through exposure to certain authorized and prescribed texts (Luke, de Castell, & Luke, 1989).

Al-Toubi (1998) conducted a research study, which included 82 teachers of English representing different nationalities. He found that the Omani curriculum fails to prepare learners for communication in English as it lacks communicative language practice activities and that the activities are of a controlled nature.

Furthermore, the Omani ELT education system has been criticized for the emphasis it lays on language product and memorization at the expense of language processing and thinking and for the transmission-based strategy it rigidly adopts (Al-Issa, 2010), which is typical of general and higher education in the Arab World in general. Shor and Freire (1987) argue that education conducted in this manner is much more controllable and facilitates quantitative measurement learning. This has consequently lead teachers to engage in “banking” or “depositing” large chunks of knowledge in their students’ minds (Freire, 1974) representing the cultural, political, and economic ideologies of the elite (Havelock, 1989) and leading to the production of domesticated citizens. This has had negative implications for acquiring and developing important higher-order thinking skills (Al-Issa 2010).

### **Defining Neocolonial/Communicative, Professional and Colonialist/Culturalist Ideologies**

According to Giddens (1997), ideology refers to the “shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interests of dominant groups” (p. 583). However, other social groups also articulate and produce ideologies. Singh (2013) wrote that while some ideologies are “helpful,” others are “hurtful,” which makes some acceptable and others otherwise in all walks of life, including education. This, to Singh, is best achieved by “using critical thinking skills” (p. 73).

Ideologies, according to Gramsci (1971), are the cement upon which hegemony is built and are the product of different social practices and history. This indicates that ideology is related to power, as held by a particular group or groups in the society. Ideology to Burke (1997), “legitimizes the differential power that groups hold and as such distorts the real situation that people find themselves in” (p. 24).

Singh (2013) explained that ideology in language studies refers to “a shared body of commonsense notions about the nature of language, the nature and purpose of communication, and appropriate communicative behavior; these commonsense notions and assumptions are seen as expressions of a collective order” (p. 74). Thus, when seeking a definition of the neo-colonial/communicative ideology for the purpose of this study, one can argue that this kind of ideology is more associated with the role and place of English language at present as the world’s first international language and one which serves multiple functions (Fishman, 1996).

There is also the explicit imperial role being played by the USA at present and the implicit role played by the UK in the past to protect and promote capital interests (Dua, 1994). The developing countries need English to establish channels of communication with the world in general and the USA—the world’s symbol of capitalism and only super power today—in particular, as these countries share economic interests with USA. English is associated with modern technology (Spolsky, 1998) and the developing countries need technology and science for modernization, economic progress, and transition purposes. Therefore, teaching and learning English communicatively facilitates the acquisition of such technology and science.

Furthermore, and within the context of this study, the professional/technocratic ideology is first and foremost concerned with the teachers of English. Teachers, as sole policy interpreters, are expected to be professionals with epistemic power and capacity to make informed decisions and introduce innovation and influence positive change.

One can hence argue that the neo-colonialist/communicative and professional/technocratic ideologies strongly complement each other. A competent English teacher can help prepare competent language users, who can help contribute to the country’s

national development via efficient use of English in the different social, political, and economic domains.

One can further argue that those ideologies are counter to the colonialist/culturalist ideologies, which are primarily associated with transmitting the dominant group's cultural beliefs, values, concepts, and ideas to the powerless and dominated groups through mandatory and manipulative schools texts and discourses, which entail certain biased knowledge and traditions through certain modes of knowledge delivery. Language in particular and education in general, hence, is controlled and exploited to serve the historical, social, economic and political interests of the powerful group(s), which gives implicit and illegitimate rise to that group's practices, and at the same time, oppresses the dominated group's thinking, actions, and rights to find solutions to their social problems in innovative and creative ways.

### **Research Questions**

The discussion above has revealed that while there is a consensus about the uses and values of English today as an international language, multiple ideologies about its implementation within education are embedded in the different discourses produced by different agents and agencies. This has led to an ideological and discursive contest and conflict, which has shaped the theorization and practice of ELT in Oman and subsequently affected Omanization. Within this context, the following research questions are asked:

1. What are the key discourses in the *Philosophy and Guidelines for the Omani English Language School Curriculum* (Nunan, Tyacke, & Walton 1987), which I will herewith refer to as the National English Language Policy/Plan (NELP) about teaching and learning grammar?
2. What discourses and ideologies inform the views of the agents involved in the Omani ELT system about teaching and learning grammar and their role in implementing it?
3. What are the key discourses in *Our World Through English* (OWTE) about teaching and learning grammar and the teacher's role in implementing it?

Examination of these questions will allow for portraying a picture about the complex construction of grammar within the Omani ELT system and the multiple contesting ideologies and pertinent discourses. This, in turn should allow for looking at the Omani ELT context from a unique perspective leading to deeper understanding of previously unexplored and deeply embedded cultural issues and stimulate thinking for further research.

### **Methodology**

This research is driven by a combination of a constructivist and critical theory paradigms and conducted through an "inductive," "interpretive," "intrinsic," "instrumental," collective/multiple case study (Yin, 2003). It investigates the different ideologies as embodied in the different spoken and written discourses about grammar construction within the Oman ELT system. The most ideal way to elicit, collect, and understand ideologies, meanings, and reality constructions about the social world within a combination of constructivist and critical theory paradigms is through engaging in an interaction and a dialectical interchange (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Personal interactions and dialectical interchange are processes through which meanings are created, negotiated, and modified (Schwandt, 1994).



## Data Sources and Analysis

The major source of data collection in this paper came from the agents involved in the Omani EFL system—a Grade 12 student, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) faculty members, a Ministry of Education teacher, and an inspector (see Table 1). The agents, who are all inhabitants of Muscat, the Omani capital, were selected on the basis of opportunity sampling, as they were conveniently available during the researcher’s visit to the interview sites. Factors such as their linguistic, academic, educational, professional, cultural, and social backgrounds were also taken into consideration to guarantee ideological and discursive diversity and to examine how ELT is shaped and determined. All the agents in this research are involved in ELT education in Oman. Their various discourses about learning to teach English reflect their diverse but direct and explicit systems of thought and conceptions of the world.

**Table 1.** *Background Information about Research Participants*

No.	Status	Gender	Age	Nationality	Highest Qualification	Years in Oman	Responsibilities
1	Student	Male	18	Omani	Grade 11 Certificate		Student
2	ELT teacher	Female	32	Omani	B.Ed.		Teach English to and assess public school students
3	ELT Inspector	Male	50	Sudanese	M.A.	22	Inspect ELT teaching quality and participate in designing and implementing in-service courses for teachers
4	University College of Arts faculty member	Male	48	Omani	Ph.D.		Teach linguistics and communication skills to SQU English and ELT teaching majors
5	University College of Arts faculty member	Female	52	U.S.A.	Ph.D.	11	Teach linguistics and communication skills to SQU English and ELT teaching majors

Other equally important and substantial sources of data leading to triangulation are the pertinent literature and the official texts and documents, which represent the ELT policy/plan as inscribed by the Ministry of Education. The aim here is to make some theoretical contributions to grammar construction in Oman. This is considered to be best achieved through employing multiple sources of evidence (content analysis of interviews, written texts and documents, and literature review) that should be used to demonstrate convergence and divergence of data from all sources and which should enhance the construct validity of the study (Burns, 1994; Yin, 2003). It is important to stress that the literature about grammar theory and practice underlying the place of grammar in communication, language, and education, its uses, and instruction and the role of the teacher in all this are important sources of data and discourse that supplements the argument and discussion.

These texts are “multidiscursive” (Luke, 1995) and entail different kinds of information about the uses and values of English in Oman, the construction of ELT, the place of grammar within the Omani ELT, and what roles teachers are expected to play in the Omani ELT. This study adopts a “directed content analysis” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) approach, in which

description and ideologies and discourses about grammar construction and instruction are transferrable and generalizable from the pertinent literature to the Omani context.

This study further adopts a semantic and syntactic content analysis (Spradley, 1979) approach. Semantic and syntactic content analysis in the present research is conducted through the identification and evaluation of the theoretically important “domains” (Spradley, 1979) or units, items, terms, and corpus of “cultural knowledge” (Spradley, 1979) like science and technology, education, business, economy, and development as examples, that communicate “cultural meaning” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007) and “attributes associated with cultural symbols” (Spradley, 1979, p. 174) such as neo-colonialist/communicative, professional/technocratic, and colonialist/culturalist ideologies and the complex relationship between them in order to relate them to the questions of the research about the different ideologies and discourses, which powerfully drive grammar instruction in the Omani ELT context. Here, semantic and syntactic analysis of the units, items, or terms, contributes to the researcher’s general thinking and interpretation and to the development of relevant hypotheses (Hatch, 2002). The present study is designed in which different written documents about grammar instruction in Oman from the Ministry of Education are collected and categories of analysis are defined and determined (Anderson, 1997), interpreted, and analyzed qualitatively.

Triangulation of analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007) is used to analyze the data and identify key lexical items (Fielding & Lee, 1998) structuring the discourses of the agents, the pertinent literature, and the various policy texts such as communicative competence, teacher, student, textbook, language, grammar, form, meaning, inductive, deductive, instruction, knowledge, thinking, manipulation, control, and power, as examples. This should help identify any inter-textual similarities and differences, agreements and disagreements, contradictions and harmony, presences and absences, and collocations, leading to triangulation of results (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The aim of this is to improve analysis rigor and trustworthiness and integrity of the inferences drawn from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1995) and enhance representation (extraction of adequate meaning from data) and legitimation (trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and/or transferability of the inferences made) (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

There is a substantial amount of relevant information about the political, social, and cultural forces influencing, driving, and shaping teaching and learning grammar in the unique Omani context that call for a deep critical investigation of discourse and meaning construction to understand relevant and pertinent issues beyond the case itself and within an interpretive case study framework. This is bound to allow for the exploration of differences and similarities and contrasting results across the case.

## **Research Instrument**

The three main questions, used in the semi-structured interviews and aimed at stimulating the agents’ thinking, experiences, perceptions, and attitudes, and eliciting their statements about teaching and learning grammar, are

1. How did you learn/are you learning English?
2. What does language teaching/learning mean to you?
3. Describe your ELT syllabus

These questions help reveal ideologies about the learning and teaching of grammar. Answers to these questions are expected to entail experiences and theoretical and practical knowledge about grammar instruction, which should help explain how policies and texts are interpreted and how the syllabus is interpreted.

## Procedures

Prior to commencing the interview process, the researcher applied for an ethical clearance through the Ministry of Education. He had to produce a list of people he would like to interview and for what purpose, and requested access and permission from the Ministry to interview an English inspector, teacher, and a third secondary student in Muscat Area.

The application briefly described the research topic and clearly stated that the informants' participation is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time they wish. The application also clarified that the interaction during the interview session will be recorded on tape and that its content will be transcribed and analyzed by the researcher himself. Moreover, an assurance that the tapes will be handled and treated with maximum care and confidentiality was provided. The application additionally stressed that the informants' identity will not be revealed to anyone.

As far as informants #4 and #5 are concerned, the researcher approached the Deanship of the College of Arts at SQU, where the researcher also works, and requested the Deanship to nominate two faculty members for the research interview purpose. The Deanship showed considerable understanding and cooperation and appreciated what the researcher was doing. Participants #4 and #5 were recommended and the researcher contacted and took through the same procedures described above.

Upon acceptance to be interviewed, each of the informants was given a copy of the interview protocol letter, which explained the aim of the research and their role in it and assured them about the confidentiality of the information they provided. They were also asked to fill out a descriptive information sheet, which requested different personal details pertinent to the study. The descriptive form required the participants to provide basic and background information about themselves, that could be of great relevance for the data analysis stage. Such information is related to their age, gender, academic attainment, current position filled, experience in learning English and current use of English.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher himself, who used a tape-recorder to record them. None of the informants complained about the use of the tape recorder or felt that it was intrusive in any way. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher. Each interview was conducted on a separate day after fixing an appointment with the informants. All informants welcomed being interviewed and showed ample flexibility and cooperation.

All interviews were conducted in English, including the one with the Grade 11 student, who chose to be interviewed in English and not in Arabic and who had good functional knowledge of English. All informants answered all questions. The interviews varied in length. While the shortest interview lasted 12 minutes with informant #1, the longest took 24 minutes with informant #4. This was due to the different experiences and ideologies of the different informants.

To improve questionnaire quality, reliability, and validity, the interview questions were piloted on three volunteers from SQU and the Ministry of Education, but who are outside the circle of the study informants. They represented different backgrounds and held different experiences, notions, values, perceptions, views, beliefs, and thoughts pertinent to teaching and learning grammar. As a result, it was found that the first question could not be asked to the fifth informant, as she was a native speaker of English. However, it was replaced by "How did you learn/are you learning a foreign language?"

## Limitations

This study could have come to somewhat more different results than it did, if it were not confronted with the following limitations. The small number of participants in this study

does not allow for any conclusions to be drawn about grammar construction ideologies across the Omani context. Moreover, all informants involved in this study are inhabitants of Muscat Area (the capital of Oman), which could have influenced their ideologies about the uses and values of English and the place and role of grammar in this international language since the domains of the English language use in Muscat Area differ from those in the other areas of the Sultanate.

### **Ideological Dimension in NELP and Other Policy Texts**

The *Reform and Development of General Education* (Ministry of Education, 1995) states that:

The government recognises that facility in English is important in the new global economy. English is the most common language for international business and commerce and is the exclusive language in important sectors such as banking and aviation. The global language of Science and Technology is also English as are the rapidly expanding international computerised databases and telecommunications networks which are becoming an increasingly important part of the academic and business life. (p. A5-1)

Moreover, the Omani Ministry of Information (1999) states that “the teaching of English has assumed increasing importance in recent years, particularly with the opening of Sultan Qaboos University, where science-based courses are conducted in that language” (p. 154).

The discourse in these two excerpts is of science and technology acquisition, which require competence in English beyond explicit learning of English grammar. The language of wider communication today has also become the language of science and technology. Furthermore, the authors of NELP write that:

The English language skills of Omani nationals must be seen as an important resource for the country’s continued development. It is this recognition of the importance of *English as a resource for national development and as the means for wider communication within the international community* that provides the rationale for the inclusion of English in the curriculum. (p. 2) [emphasis in original]

The writers of NELP value knowledge of grammar and acknowledge its importance for the overall communicative competence a foreign language user is required to demonstrate. However, they do not see that language structures should form a starting point for selecting and grading language input and a departure point for syllabus design as this can lead to courses, which have a narrow focus. This in turn is considered to lead to limited exposure to natural and contextualized language. The three writers also believe that focus on “linguistic rather than sociolinguistic discourse or strategic competence” (p. 9) leads students to preoccupation in memorizing rules, which they consider a distinct weakness of the Omani education system in general and the ELT education system in particular.

Thus, Nunan et al. (1987) look at communicative competence as encompassing “declarative knowledge,” which in turn includes grammatical, pragmatic, functional, and sociolinguistic knowledge. They also see communicative competence as entailing “procedural knowledge,” which is believed to occur through providing communicative resources to the learner to help him/her use the language for problem-solving activities confidently.

Nunan et al. (1987) suggest that special process tasks and activities should be designed when students are occupied with focusing on the form and the meaning simultaneously. They see that these activities should help the students comprehend, produce, and interact, rather than entirely engage in analyzing and memorizing grammatical items.

However, the three authors argue that the teacher presents the most powerful element in influencing learning outcomes. They argue that if teachers do not have the will and lack the necessary training, it is unlikely for any change to occur. ELT teachers in Oman come from diverse cultural, social, educational, and training backgrounds, and most of them still teach through the traditional methods and approaches. This is particularly the case in the male sector, where over 55% of the teachers are expatriates. Many of these teachers are appointed in remote areas, where signs of civilization are rare. This is in addition to being overworked and underpaid. In other words, the teaching load of ELT teachers in Oman can reach up to 24 periods a week, while they earn less than most of their five Gulf Cooperation Council Countries counterparts in a rich oil producing country like Oman. This consequently triggered teacher strikes across the Sultanate in 2011 and 2013 as part of the Arab Awakening or Arab Spring that witnessed the Arab people revolting against their governments and political regimes to voice their different social, political, and economic concerns, demands, and rights. The three authors, therefore, suggest conducting in-service workshops and sessions in certain areas and expanding them in others for teachers. This is bound to help equip them with tools to develop as critical reflectors and dynamic and informed agents of change.

### **Ideological Dimension in the Agents' Statements**

Agent #1 demands more grammar teaching in his ELT syllabus and sees it as useful and helpful for creating meaning and communication. He says that he would like to see

More grammar. . .grammar is very important. Grammar fits the words in places.  
 . .I used to have some problems in grammar. I mean some students 'till now don't know the present perfect. That depends on the teacher who doesn't give them the idea about the present perfect. They gave us this year. Why this year? They should have given us before, because we can do it this year in communication. . .that's why I think grammar is very important.

One can read three different messages in this informant's statement. The first conveys powerful colonialist/culturalist ideologies represented in the mention of the "present perfect" specifically and its deductive teaching. There is a specific choice of a grammatical tense here at the expense of others, which stresses the importance of certain tenses over others. Knowledge about language use here is fragmented, which represents this agent's learning experience and can be based upon "sociolinguistic hegemony" (Fairclough, 1995). A tense like the present perfect does not exist in Arabic, which makes acquiring and using it a challenge for Arab learners of English. Teachers of Arabic in the Arab World usually explain the grammatical rules to their students first and then engage them in activities to help them practice using the target rule. However, this only applies to Classical Arabic, which is one of three varieties of the Arabic language. The other two are the Quranic Arabic and Colloquial Arabic. The various colloquial or national versions in the Arab World emerged as a result of Islam spreading during its first two centuries when Arabic became an international language and was used in extending areas and started to compete with other international languages such as Latin, Greek and Persian (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992).

Classical Arabic is strictly used in formal domains like the media, ceremonies, and production of official written documents, for example. While there is only one version of

Classical Arabic, there are many versions of colloquial Arabic; as many as the number of the Arab countries. While the latter variety is popular, socially accepted as a norm for wider communication, and publically recognized, it is not codified, elaborated, standardized, or even officially endorsed (Abd-el-Jawad, 1992). Nonetheless, both the classical and colloquial varieties are rooted in history, although the former has a hegemonic culture and is associated with capital and power, which is exactly the case with English.

The second message embedded in this student's statement is associated with neo-colonial/communicative ideologies about the role of language as a tool for communication and interaction and the role of grammar as a "mediator" and "a resource for the adaptation of lexis" and how "lexis and grammar act upon each other in the determination of meaning" (Widdowson, 1990, p. 87). As an adult with experience, this agent is reflecting critically on the mandated syllabus and is struggling to challenge its authority and dominance and change the reality to better meet his learning style and abilities. He is also aware of the individual differences in the Omani mixed-ability classrooms and considers this a disadvantage that hinders his and others' language development and puts him on equal terms with many other students, who are less capable than him.

The third message is associated with the powerful professional/technocratic ideologies embedded in this agent's statement about the role of the teacher as an ultimate authority over knowledge and a professional with epistemic power and control over lesson proceedings whose hegemony over knowledge and official school texts is most welcomed. This student would like to see his teacher resisting the constraints imposed upon his authority by the curriculum, acting liberally, reflecting critically on the context and materials at his disposal, and taking an adequate act that reflects his awareness of the situation and eventually meets his students' needs and interests and enriches their language repertoire and advances their language development. Teachers, within a strictly and rigidly controlled context like the Omani one, are looked upon as technocrats and professionals with innovative and creative solutions to educational problems deeply-rooted in history and culture.

One can thus argue that students and teachers are powerful agents, who are in a position to influence policy implementation through turning their ideologies into practices (Shohamy, 2006). Dove (1986) argues that teachers are most free from interference inside the classrooms, which makes them the sole interpreters of the curriculum for the learners and which makes it very difficult for the authority to control their determination to resist policy implementation. Doyle (1979) and Zeichner and Tabachnick (1982) argue that students are a highly influential and determining element and significant and powerful socialization agents in the teacher socialization process. In other words, students can influence the teacher's teaching plan, methods, and techniques via demanding more overt teaching of the formal system of English than what is already available in the textbook. This in turn legitimizes the teacher's power to move beyond the prescribed mandated school texts, despite the fact that teachers in Oman are required to complete the syllabus in the predefined time, as exams are largely based upon the content of the textbook.

Al-Kalbani (2004) thus examined 1073 students' and 222 teachers' perceptions of the role of explicit and implicit grammar instruction in Omani ELT classrooms in three different regions and found that teachers and students favour explicit grammar instruction. He further found that teachers of English in Omani public schools teach grammar explicitly. Al-Kalbani attributes this to the beliefs held by these teachers about the importance and direct contribution of explicit grammar teaching to the improvement of English language learning.

Moreover, Al-Nadabi (2003) examined the beliefs of 345 teachers from four different regions in Oman about language learning in Oman. He found that while the participants perceived that English should be taught to be used for communicative purposes, it is necessary

that students are taught grammatical rules explicitly and that repetition of structural items serves learning and mastery of the target language.

Ellis (2010) thus criticizes this approach to grammar teaching on the basis that it promotes the students' linguistic abilities at the expense of their proficiency abilities. This, to Ellis, does not serve the educational policy for teaching English as an LWC in many parts of the world today and undermines communicative competence. Alternatively, Ellis (1993) argues for the "weak interface position," whereby learners are viewed as individuals with cognitive abilities and power over the processing and internalization of grammatical input. Ellis (1995) suggests teaching grammar through designing activities that help learners focus on the targeted structural item in the input that enables them to identify and comprehend the meaning(s) of this structural item. Ellis (1995) perceives this approach as emphasizing "input processing for comprehension rather than output processing for production" (pp. 87-88). Teachers, within this context, are critical needs analysts and skilled theorists and practitioners. Moreover, students are critical thinkers and reflectors and decision makers about linguistic knowledge. Both teachers and students are liberal and informed contributors to teaching and learning respectively and are in a powerful position to challenge the authority of the prescribed textbook and enrich language education.

By contrast, Agent #2, who is a product of the grammar-based teaching school and who has been teaching English for over a decade, lays emphasis on teaching grammar *per se*. "If I want to change the syllabus I will make it full of English grammar, something they have to learn, grammar in general. I will teach them everything about grammar." There are powerful colonialist/culturalist ideologies here about the importance of "intensive" grammar teaching and its impact on learning as opposed to the "extensive" type. Such ideologies put the teacher in the driver's seat in terms of knowledge possession, control, and distribution, while marginalizes the role of the student as the centre of the process and dynamic and active thinker. It further puts the teacher in a position of ultimate power to make decisions on behalf of the learners and take rein of their cognitive power and social and academic present and future, which is counter to the contemporary humanist/progressive approach to education and NELP.

Ellis (2006) thus argues that intensive grammar teaching typically entail the PPP (presentation-practice-production) model to foreign language teaching. Such instruction rigidly controls the quality and quantity of language used and produced by the learners and encourages its automated and mechanical use and production. Language, within this framework, is detached from its social concept as a dynamic and living entity that can be used for knowledge construction, creation, sharing, dissemination, analysis, and critique. Furthermore, intensive instruction, as Ellis (2006) argues, is time consuming, encourages limited and linear exposure to grammatical structures, and does not require teachers to be skilled practitioners with ability to critically analyze their students' needs and interests and attend to their individual differences, which defeats the purpose of ELT in Oman.

The authors of NELP are critical of the skills, practices, and knowledge of the teachers in the Omani EFL education system. They are further critical of the performance-based tests and mastery of content and achievement grades for powerfully driving and affecting student motivation and teacher performance. The writers of NELP additionally criticize the size of classrooms – 35-45 students in each classroom and the school year, which they found shorter in comparison to many other parts round the world, which has negative implications for students' exposure to English.

Poorly trained teachers, teaching grammar intensively, performance-based tests, and large class size are hence a reflection of the economic and epistemological edge given to the national syllabus and the hegemonic ideologies vested in the planning of English whereby the minds of the powerless people in the society are manipulated and their cognitive abilities are harnessed to allow for the sustainability of the powerful people's dominance and control

through biased knowledge and practices. Literacy here is viewed as a tool for domesticating the powerless and manipulating their cognition. It is also considered a tool for total adherence to the power and supremacy of the knowledge selected and included in the official texts and the hegemonic ideologies infested in them.

Agent #2 is further referring in her statement to the “proactive/deductive” explicit grammar instruction (Ellis, 2010), which is based on a planned or predetermined structural syllabus. The rule of a specific linguistic property in this type of instruction is explained by the teacher in an oral form or by textbook in a written form and supported by examples. Ellis (2010) argues that most teachers have a narrow view of grammar and one which “involves the direct explanation of grammatical features followed by practice activities” (p. 19). Anderson (2005) argues against students automatically applying grammar concepts and rules that have been presented in isolation. Poorly prepared teachers, as it is the case here, become subservient to the mandated textbook and a tool for the transmission of its content, which can lead to suppressing students’ role as dynamic and active thinkers and misrepresenting the communicative power of a language like English and hence defeats the principles laid by Nunan et al. (1987).

Taber (2008) attributes choice of this type of teaching to being easy and not necessarily requiring a high degree of linguistic fluency by the teacher, which can put teachers in a position of power to challenge the unsatisfactory *status quo* through resorting to their critical reflective thinking skills that will allow them to confront their deeply rooted incorrect beliefs about teaching non-communicatively (Al-Shabibi, 2004) and move beyond the mandated syllabus. This type of grammar teaching is additionally controlled and largely encourages spoon-feeding and helps train and produce students as “grammarians” rather than communicative language users (Frodesen, 2001). Spoon-feeding manipulates and marginalizes the cognitive power of the teacher and the students, while puts the textbook in an ultimate position of power and control. Planning language around grammar facilitates controlling the quality and quantity of knowledge presented, and hence, leads to oppression of innovative and creative thinking.

The proactive/deductive type also gives teachers’ and textbooks’ knowledge supremacy over the other multiple sources of knowledge acquisition in an era where dissemination, exchange, and sharing of knowledge and information have become easier and faster than ever in a world characterized as a small village. Teachers are further tools for conveying the powerful people’s hegemonic ideologies. Students’ value here as a vital human resource that can significantly contribute to nationalization is relegated, as their thinking powers are marginalized and restricted. English as a LWC and a tool for achieving multiple significant purposes in Oman is thus misrepresented.

Batstone and Ellis (2008) thus identify and discuss three principles deriving from one general principle that stresses that “effective grammar teaching must complement the process of L2 acquisition” (p. 203). The two authors further argue that “a key aspect of the acquisition of grammar for second language learners involves learning how to make appropriate connections between grammatical forms and the meanings which they typically signal” (p. 194) and emphasize the challenges teachers are faced with to embody the three principles and create the right conditions to help their students to achieve this aim and achieve communicative competence.

This type of grammar teaching empowers teachers and students to generate and manipulate meaning using their critical cognitive abilities. It brings to the fore their epistemological powers as liberal thinkers and reflectors, who can take initiatives and make informed decisions about what to take, why, and how, and what to leave out, how, and why. This kind of teaching grammar undermines the power and dominance of the school textbook, while puts the learner at the heart of the process. The knowledge of the textbook and the selected and interested knowledge embedded in it become peripheral. Exposure to language



and its multiple sources of use facilitate language acquisition, improve language education, and facilitate national development.

What Agent #2 is advocating is, in fact, contrary to what the neo-colonial/communicative ideologies held by the authors of NELP, which suggest laying emphasis on developing students' communicative competence. Competent teachers are those who have the courage to confront their rigid and persistent beliefs and have a critical reflective ability to locate EFL "within wider social, political and cultural contexts. . .which influence teachers, students, and learning outcomes and learning activities" (Al-Issa, 2010, p. 42). This is bound to help teachers bring about change through diagnosing and understanding their students and contexts better and taking "informed specific actions" and making "sound decisions in the classroom" (Al-Issa, 2010, p. 46).

Students in Oman, as it is the case around the world, bring experiences and knowledge to the classroom that need to be critically analyzed and understood by the teacher. The current generation is surrounded by English more than ever, especially with the speedy growth and spread of the Internet and satellite TV. Research has shown (Al-Bulushi & Al-Issa, 2012) that students in Oman use a wide range of out-of-class strategies like reading cultural texts, watching and listening to English-medium programs, using technology for communication, playing video and different online games, reading print materials, participating in extra-curricular activities at school and college, and engaging in face-to-face conversations at home and beyond in order to maximize their exposure to and practice of English. These are all sources of discourse that reflect and enhance the status of English today as a hegemonic language. They also marginalize the power and dominance of the textbook and teacher, while presenting students with opportunities to make and manipulate meaning leading to strong academic and educational preparation with positive implications for modernization and nation building.

Al-Bulushi and Al-Issa (2012) suggest that teachers should help their students to improve their productive or active language capacity through adopting strategies that engage them in using the productive skills of the target language. Within this vein, Ellis (2008) suggests that explicit instruction can take the shape of "proactive/inductive" instruction, whereby discovery learning is encouraged through providing students with consciousness-raising tasks, where grammatical understanding is achieved through communication. This kind of language education emancipates teachers and students' thinking and empowers them to think and reflect on the multiple uses and values of English. It additionally raises their awareness about what English to use, why, where, when, and with whom. "Discovery learning" is a means through which teachers empower their students to search for alternative sources of knowledge to enrich their learning and develop as independent and global citizens with multiple informed perspectives about education and life.

In addition, there are certain "common educational practices" (p. 9), according to Nunan et al. which seem to impact the students' attitudes about EFL in Oman. While the authors see that there is a lack of "problem-solving/analytical thinking, or risk-taking" (p. 9) in the educational practices, they believe that "rote memorization used in other subjects changes language learning techniques" (p. 9). Subjects like Arabic, Religious Studies and Social Studies are taught mainly through memorization. In Arabic, grammar is taught consciously. Classical Arabic in the Arab World is more or less like English in the sense that both are second languages and a school subject. These subjects are deeply embedded in history and culture and are a reflection of identity. Values and traditions about language, religion, history, and geography are sacred in Oman and the Arab World, as they are the foundation upon which the powerful elite build their hegemony and rule the rest of the nation. Knowledge presented in those subjects is confined to the school textbook and highly prescriptive, descriptive, and static and the discourse through which this knowledge is presented is one of power and bias. Students are expected to memorize these types of knowledge and embrace them. Language used in these

subjects is controlled and a tool for transmitting selective traditions and interested knowledge about the elites. This imposes a “closure” over the powerless class’s thinking, while cements the powerful class’s hegemony (Myers-Scotton, 1990, 1993).

Arabic grammar in the Arab World in general is thus taught explicitly in the classroom. There are usually one or two periods allocated for teaching Arabic grammar explicitly every week. Structural items are analyzed, discussed and practiced through making sentences that contain the target structural item. Arab learners, therefore, receive explicit grammar teaching almost right from their first days at school. This is evident in the statement made by Agent #3, who is a product of the grammar-based teaching school and who has been an English language inspector in Oman for over 2 decades.

If you introduce another language without paying attention to its grammar the students might not take it seriously, because language without grammar is not a language. . . knowing that grammar is necessary and especially for Arab speakers, who have grown up with a lot of respect for learning grammar. . . English grammar must be very welcomed.

One can read powerful colonialist/culturalist ideologies in this agent’s statement. This agent is talking from a position of power and his discourse is firmly situated in history and culture, as he indirectly refers to the Arabic language as an example. Arabic and English are both “languages of the intellectuals” (Bourdieu, 1991), have no rivals, have a longstanding and substantive literacy tradition, and share certain domains of discourse in Oman-like business, education, and the media. They are additionally a *lingua franca* to a number of people (Al-Busaidi, 1995). Arabic, nevertheless, remains far more dominant to English in terms of domains of discourse and practice, and that this is bound to influence the ideologies of the people. This is despite the fact that English has more linguistic and functional power and value worldwide. This power necessitates teaching and learning it for communicative and interactive purposes.

Also, use of words like “seriously,” “necessary,” “respect,” and “must” indicates powerful cognitive control over discourse and bias towards explicit grammar teaching and favours one mode of knowledge possession and transmission over another. Students and teachers within this context are deprived from the privilege of exercising any critical thinking and making any learning and teaching decisions that would influence change. By contrast, there is explicit promotion of certain selected aspects of language knowledge and traditions, which perpetuate certain forms of hegemonic ideology that can have negative implications for the local economy.

Explicit teaching of grammar has been thus described as “peripheral and fragile” (Krashen, 1993, p. 725), very impractical (Weaver, McNally, & Moerman, 2001), automated and without credibility (Skehan, 1996), and superficial. Teaching grammar explicitly additionally has been criticized for having a short-lived effect and a strategy which does not promote language comprehension and production (Truscott, 1996, 1998). Babrakzai (2001) argues explicit grammar teaching and describes it as a strategy which decompartmentalizes language and gives the incorrect impression that language can be learned in small components.

Ellis (1995) thus reports that several applied linguists have argued against teaching grammar explicitly and called for its abandonment, while meantime supported engaging learners in communication to allow for natural inter-languages development. Ellis explains that “this position is motivated by research showing that learners progress along a natural sequence of development for grammatical structures, which direct instruction is unable to circumvent” (p. 99).

Savignon believes that “grammar is important; and learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences” (p. 7). Savignon (2002) writes that “for the development of communicative ability, research findings overwhelmingly support the integration of form-focused exercises with meaning-focused experience” (p. 7). Azar (2006) corroborates this by viewing grammar teaching and communicative teaching fitting hand in glove. Nassaji and Fotos (2004) review the argument of different researchers about the importance of integrating grammar and communication to facilitate the development of communicative competence.

In the Omani context, as it is the case in many other parts around the world, inspectors are professionals with formal sanctioning power over the teachers, and have a high degree of influence on the teacher’s socialization process. This Sudanese inspector can disturb effective policy implementation via instructing the teachers he visits and supervises to teach about the formal system of the language.

The importance of overt grammar instruction is further corroborated by Agent #4, who is also a product of the grammar-based school. He believes that conscious exposure to grammar is fundamental for the foreign language learner.

I consciously believe that it is very important for students exposed to English as a second language or foreign language to be exposed to grammar consciously along the lines of EFL. There is a need for a clear focus on grammar.

He further believes that in an EFL environment where English has limited functional domains of practice, like Oman, for example, conscious exposure to the formal system of the language is essential for its acquisition. He goes on to say,

I have seen so many people who speak very good English, but who make terrible and serious grammatical mistakes due to the fact that these students have not been exposed to grammar. I firmly believe that people exposed to language in a foreign environment, or even in a second language environment, not getting enough language exposure, their exposure is not equivalent to the people who are exposed to the first language and there is always a gap to be filled and this gap is simply grammar, and focusing on grammar in an environment where teaching English like here in Oman is really very important indeed.

While this informant holds powerful neo-colonial/communicative ideologies about the role of English as the first international language at present, he does not believe that there are sufficient domains of exposure to and practice of the English language in Oman that facilitate its proper spread and acquisition. There is an implication in his statement that English language education is not being treated fairly by the policy makers and planners. This is particularly the case in a rich oil-producing country with a relatively small population, which can afford to vary the channels of exposure to English through allowing access to the Internet in schools and equipping the different schools with different print materials, for example, to help students maximize their contact with the language outside the classroom hours.

There are further implications in this agent’s statement about the role of the syllabus and teacher in compensating for the lack of conscious grammar teaching. The syllabus and teacher are preferred to complement each other instead of being involved in an ideological contest and struggle over grammar instruction theory and practice. Within such a context, students are expected to be the focus of attention. In other words, the syllabus and teachers need to serve the needs and interests of the students and put them at the centre of the process to help them grow as competent users of the language.

Nonetheless, while this agent looks at the role of grammar as an integral part of the “communicative competence” (Hymes, 1972) and a skill that complements the “discourse,” “sociolinguistic,” and “strategic” competences (Lee & Van Patten, 1995), Krashen (1981) distinguishes instruction and acquisition and argues that formal grammar teaching does not convert into acquisition of grammatical knowledge. This is known as the “noninterface position.” Agent #4 holds colonialist/culturalist ideologies about teaching grammar, which disintegrates, decompartmentalizes, and prioritizes knowledge in a biased manner. His ideologies represent the old school of language pedagogy and have negative implications for Omanization.

Nassaji and Fotos (2004), who reviewed literature about developments in research on grammar instruction, thus discuss the importance of noticing target forms to process input for meaning and attend to specific forms for acquisition purposes. The two authors highlight the importance of grammar feedback for attaining high levels of proficiency in the target language. However, they suggest that grammar acquisition is affected by “internal processing constraints” (p. 137) and that this has implications for the period of time students are required to achieve linguistic mastery. Nassaji and Fotos suggest that mastery can be best achieved through creating chances for students to notice to continually raise their awareness about the target forms. Teachers can also provide repeated meaning-focused exposure to input containing these forms and create opportunities for output and practice.

Nassaji and Fotos (2004) review and discuss five approaches to teaching grammar: processing instruction, interactional feedback, textual enhancement, task-based instruction (focused tasks and collaborative output tasks), and discourse-based instruction. They state that all these approaches focus on the communicative nature of language and emphasize the role of the learner as a dynamic, independent and reflective thinker, initiative taker, knowledge analyst, critic, and constructor with significant cognitive and social developmental powers.

Agent #4 holds firm ideologies about the explicit teaching of grammar and can transmit his beliefs, attitudes, views, and perceptions about teaching grammar explicitly to the student teachers he teaches, which can affect their thinking and beliefs and reflect on their ELT performance. This in turn can contribute to disturbing policy implementation, as teacher trainers/educators are people with sanctioning power over student teachers and are very important and influential socialization agents, who can influence their student teachers’ behaviour and thinking.

Explicit teaching of grammar and achievement of accuracy are further supported by Agent #5. She considers grammar as an integral part of the overall communicative competence. She believes that communicative competence is incomplete without total awareness of the grammatical aspect of the language.

Now, just to have communicative competence at the expense of grammatical accuracy, I think is shocking. I do not like sloppiness in teaching. I don’t like glossing over the points of syntax. I don’t like grammatical accuracy to be relegated to a secondary position.

Like any other language, English is a complex system that cannot be learnt and taught in isolated chunks, if the aim is to achieve communicative competence. This is particularly important when considering that English is important for achieving multiple purposes in Oman that require all aspects of knowledge to be treated equally. Knowledge of grammar is viewed as fundamental for achieving communicative competence. Like agent #4, this agent must have noticed that students suffer from problems in using grammar in their speech and writing.

This agent would like to see teachers taking responsibility for helping students achieve grammatical accuracy. There are powerful technocratic/professional ideologies infested in this

agent's statement about the role of teachers as knowledgeable and skilled practitioners and needs analysts, who are in a strong position to take control of the unsatisfactory situation and bring about positive change.

Nonetheless, the use of "grammatical accuracy" indicates advocacy of using "focus on forms" (Long, 1991) type of grammar instruction, where learners are primarily concerned with achieving accuracy through completing form-focused intensive activities over a series of separate lessons. Such approach to grammar instruction encourages teacher-centred and textbook-oriented approaches to ELT, where teachers are considered the sole bearers and transmitters of knowledge and are its infallible source. Certain types of language knowledge here dominate others, which can negatively affect students' thinking about the uses and values of language and portray an incorrect picture about its complexity as a system and its centrality for constructing knowledge and practising and developing critical and reflective thinking abilities.

Also, the use of "grammatical accuracy" suggests that this agent strongly prefers and uses the "reactive/deductive explicit instruction" type (Ellis, 2008), which stresses the use of explicit correction and meta-linguistic feedback. This type of instruction trains the learners to rely on the teacher as an ultimate and sole source of knowledge for correcting their language and always providing the right answer, rather than providing opportunities for the students to take initiatives through critically thinking about it. Al-Issa (2010), stresses the importance of critical thinking for Omani students for developmental purposes and the central role teachers can play in teaching their students to develop as critical thinkers since critical thinking is difficult and complex.

The Omani ELT education system nevertheless requires students to produce error-free language, which contributes to the development of anxiety and hesitation, suppresses meaning and knowledge construction and negotiation and exposure to any input sources beyond the teacher and prescribed national textbook. It further discourages free and spontaneous language use and production and initiative and risk taking, disregards performance-based assessment, and marginalizes challenge, creativity, and innovation. All this strips off language learning from its meaning as a social, complex, and evolving entity and a fundamental and powerful tool for achieving multiple significant purposes. By contrast, it makes learning English a difficult and unpleasant experience for the students leading to overall failure. It additionally has negative implications for implementing NELP.

Classrooms in schools and SQU are thus identical in the sense that they are both barrack-like, which encourages teacher-fronted teaching. Both institutions also consider the marks scored by students as a yardstick for the teachers' overall success and efficiency. Teachers in both institutions additionally come from a wide range of social, educational, and training backgrounds, and generally lack proper teaching training and education and hence feel insecure and resort to safe teaching routines to avoid embarrassment. Teachers at schools and SQU further share using the teaching-centred and evaluation and certification-based approaches, which according to the progressive/humanist approach to education is unproductive. Teachers in both institutions additionally constantly feel the pressure to finish teaching the syllabus in the defined time, as exams are almost entirely based on the syllabus and encourage memorization to a great extent. In brief, general and higher education institutions equally control access to knowledge, marginalize and manipulate students' cognitive abilities, and give certain selected and interested types of knowledge an edge over others, which guarantee dominance and maintenance of power exercise, but have negative implications for ELT policy implementation.

Agent #5, who shares her ideologies with the rest of the agents discussed in this study, is a significant agent in her ELT student teachers' socialization and enculturation process. She

can influence her student teachers' thinking and beliefs about the effectiveness and importance of teaching grammar explicitly.

### The Ideological Dimension in OWTE

The *Teacher's Guide – Preparatory Level* (1997-98) defines grammar teaching as teaching grammatical terms and rules and use of grammatical structures. Elsewhere, the same *Teacher's Guide* states that “grammar is primarily knowing the rules of a language and how these rules are used to make grammatically correct sentences” (p. 5). The same book further states that in addition to paying limited attention to grammatical terms and words, OWTE focuses on knowing and using the rules. Teachers are, therefore, expected to teach grammar inductively and deductively in the broad sense.

The *Teacher's Guide* is not only highlighting the importance of the knowledge of the formal system of the language, but it is also trying to cement the place of the teacher, as more or less the sole knowledge provider and the individual with control over the implementation of the syllabus. In other words, teachers are used as a tool for promoting the biased knowledge and hegemonic ideologies vested in the mandated syllabus about grammar teaching and getting their students to copy and produce the controlled language of the school textbook, which have negative implications for policy implementation and which are counter to what the authors of NELP are stressing.

Teachers are given two contradictory roles to play—teaching grammar inductively and deductively. Competent teachers, nevertheless, are in a position to reject their epistemic power being relegated to a secondary place through transmitting an incorrect picture about language learning and teaching. They should challenge this unsatisfactory *status quo* in an innovative and creative manner. They can overcome this problem via critically confronting their beliefs and reflecting on their contexts and making the right decisions inside the classroom to help produce competent users of the target language who can contribute positively to modernization.

### Conclusion

The discussion revealed that there are contesting ideologies about teaching grammar in the Omani ELT system. The five agents and OWTE emphasize the colonialist/culturalist ideology, which stresses explicit grammar teaching, and which is bound to disturb policy implementation and subsequently produce incompetent language users. On the other hand, NELP and the pertinent literature are in favour of teaching grammar inductively and implicitly and consider teachers' professionalism central in helping students become competent users of the target language.

The discussion thus revealed that teachers at different levels remain key players in the policy implementation process. Their innovative and creative teaching approaches, methods, and methodologies and critical reflective skills can have positive and direct implications for influencing change in the Oman ELT education system.

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