

English Communication Skills and Employability in the Arabian Gulf: The Case of Oman

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ABSTRACT

Globalization, the information explosion, and technological advancement have gone hand in hand with the spread of English and its use as a lingua franca worldwide, a phenomenon that necessitated the teaching of English as a foreign language in many countries around the world, with the Arab nations no exception. In Oman, English has been recognized as a necessary tool for advancement and the acquisition of knowledge and technology (Al-Issa, 2007; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2010). In addition, given the multilingual nature of the workforce, which includes around 500,000 foreign workers, English has become a necessary medium of communication in Omani workplaces, especially in the private sector.

Therefore, English has been taught in public schools since 1970 and in higher education since 1986. Unfortunately, higher education students continue to graduate with very weak oral and written communication skills, thus making them unfit for employment in many types of jobs. The aim of this paper is to address the issue of communicative competence among higher education students. It focuses specifically on how adequately linguistic, pragmatic and communicative skills are taught in higher education institutions' language programs. The sample of the study includes 451 students from a number of Omani higher education institutions who answered a 71-item questionnaire on the issue. Forty of the 451 students were also interviewed to investigate the issue further. The results indicate that students are only moderately prepared in terms of all the skills listed in the questionnaire. This

calls for a re-examination and revamping of language programs with the intention of integrating more communication skills into their courses. The researchers recommend that these skills be integrated into content-based courses throughout the different majors' study plans.

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INTRODUCTION

English is the modern world's international language. As is well known, it is the language of science, technology, information, communication, medicine, tourism and many other fields (Altbach, 2010; Graddol, 2006; Crystal, 1992; Phillipson, 1992; Bisong, 1995). Supported by globalization and the power of countries where it is spoken as a native language, English is likely to remain influential for the foreseeable future (Crystal, 2002, Graddol, 2006). Recognizing its importance for their economic and social welfare advancement, countries everywhere have integrated instruction in English into their educational systems, teaching it from early school grades through to higher education. In the Arab Gulf, for example, the tendency now is to teach the language from first grade in government schools. Private schools teach it from kindergarten. And due to the presence of a multi-national workforce (because Gulf country economies depend on foreigners for skilled and unskilled labor), English has become a necessary lingua franca for it. This is certainly true of Oman. English here is urgently required by the job market. As Al-Issa (2007) states, "Oman needs English – the only official foreign language in the country – as a fundamental tool for 'modernization', 'nationalization' and the acquisition of science and technology" (pp. 199-200). Hence, since the inception

of modern formal education in 1970, the government has poured human and financial resources into supporting English instruction throughout the country. State schools initially taught English from grade four, but during the academic year 1998-1999 a new program called Basic Education was introduced in 17 schools which began teaching the language from grade one (Ministry of Education, 2006). In 1986, the first and only national university opened its doors and began teaching all science-based specializations and many other subjects in English, a pattern also followed in more recently-founded private colleges and universities and indeed throughout the Arab Gulf.

However, the huge investment has nowhere yielded the expected gains (Moody, 2009, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; Al-Issa, 2011; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). Higher education graduates emerge weak in English and thus with communication skills inadequate for the job market. Preliminary research findings suggest that communication skills receive insufficient focus in either school or higher education English programs, which, insists Moody (2012), fail to consider the sociolinguistic context of the Gulf countries and between whom English communication is expected to occur. And low English proficiency manifests itself not only in poor oral skills but also in all other skills. In Oman, this too characterizes the products of school English instruction, who suffer from very weak language skills, and especially writing (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi &

Tuzlukova, 2012 a & b). They have reading difficulties too, due to a lack of a national reading culture, public libraries, bookshops, and books in general.

However, findings hitherto have been based on data gathered through one research instrument only and with few subjects, who were teachers and/or students of English as a foreign language. The present study, nation-wide in scope, employed several instruments, including questionnaires for language teachers and students, employers and employees, teacher and student focus groups, and in addition semi-structured interviews with both language teachers and students. Due to the extensive data collected, however, this article reports on findings from the student questionnaires and interviews only. The study was funded by Oman's Research Council.

Because context has a significant impact on education (Show, 1997; Syed, 2003), the following sections provide an overview of Oman's educational system at both the secondary and tertiary levels, examining the place of English in both. Then, comment is offered on English communication skills as a requirement for the local job market.

ENGLISH IN OMANI HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Almost all higher education institutions in Oman, led by Sultan Qaboos University, use English as a medium of instruction, recognizing the language's international status and its vital role in modernizing the country. However, while policy makers believe in the importance of English, not

all school graduates seem to appreciate this. Many, in fact, view English as an obstacle, because most of those entering tertiary education must successfully complete a foundation English program before beginning their specializations.

Fully funded by the government, Sultan Qaboos University is the country's only state-run university. It has a student body of around 16,000 enrolled in nine colleges: Medicine and Health Sciences, Nursing, Agricultural and Marine Sciences, Engineering, Science, Economics and Political Sciences, Arts and Social Sciences, Education, and Law. All science-based colleges teach their specializations in English. English is also the medium of instruction in the College of Economics and Political Sciences and of a host of other specializations in the humanities. While English is naturally obligatory for all English-medium specializations, it is taught as a university requirement in all Arabic-medium specializations too.

State-run tertiary education also includes seven Higher Colleges of Technology, five Colleges of Applied Sciences, 16 institutions of Health Sciences, and a College of Banking and Financial Studies. All employ English as a medium of instruction. Meanwhile there are seven private universities and 19 private colleges across Oman, all affiliated to British, Australian or American universities – a Ministry of Higher Education requirement as a measure for controlling course quality. Almost all teach their programs in English.

Using English as a medium of instruction arises from a belief by policy makers that it

is required for Oman's acquisition of new technology and integration into the modern world (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2010). However, as already mentioned, students do not seem to appreciate this importance. Hence, a majority invest minimal effort in improving their English language skills and communicative ability. Then too the tertiary curriculum they face uses commercial and in-house textbooks which do not necessarily teach the skills most needed by the job market (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2012a; 2012b). Hence, higher education graduates have been found to lack adequate preparation in English communication skills (Al-Shaqsi, 2012). The gap between policy makers' aims and student perceptions of English thus presents a major challenge that must be examined with some care. The following section will shed light on the challenges Omani higher education faces in terms of English and its future in the country.

ENGLISH-RELATED CHALLENGES FOR OMANI HIGHER EDUCATION

In a world rapidly globalizing, the challenges for higher education everywhere are many and major. This is particularly true for the Arab world, given the uprisings that have taken place since 2010. In the words of Mazawi (2010), "Debates and controversies continue to rage over the role of higher education institutions in effecting social, political, and economic transformation that would successfully leverage reform efforts undertaken in various parts of the Arab region" (p. 41). The role of Gulf

universities is being questioned in the light of growing student under-achievement and graduate unemployment. From their side, employers are claiming that, while they would like to nationalize their workforce, Gulf graduates do not possess adequate or appropriate skills. Most higher education institutions in the region are providing free quality education, but large numbers of their students graduate with either meager skills or those counter-productive to effective adjustment and integration into the job-market. Also the majority of teachers and professors are foreigners, which provides an unstable network of professionals for building a knowledge-base and expertise in the different majors on offer. In 2009, for example, there were more than 30 nationalities represented among English instructors in SQU's Language Center. While this brought much academic strength to the institution, a major challenge arose because the professionals involved had cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from the students' own, causing misunderstanding between them. Syed (2003) made this point when he said, "The linguistic and cultural distance between learners and teachers is a serious factor in the Gulf EFL classrooms" (p. 339).

Gulf higher education also faces another significant challenge - internationalization, which is "a feature of the general trend towards globalization in trade, commerce and communication" (Wilkins, 2001, p. 157). According to Ghasempoor, Liaghatdar, and Jafari (2011), "Universities today are key drivers of internationalization and

global communication.” As a major trend in the global market, the internationalization of education “has a profound effect on today’s political, economic and cultural life. This wide-ranging process also has a major impact on colleges and universities, which are highly sensitive to international developments. Their increasingly international character means they must cooperate to help shape the worldwide “knowledge-based society” (EUA, 2003, p.1) and promote scientific exchange.” (p.35). While curricula at the most prestigious universities are thus becoming internationalized, students can avail themselves of knowledge over the Internet without the problem of travel. For Ghasempoor *et al.* (2011), “This virtual form of internationalization has made foreign language skills an essential part of the domestic research and learning process. Without a certain proficiency in English it is nearly impossible to search for information on the Internet, which has become the main driving force behind this virtual internationalization” (p. 36).

According to Renard (2010), for SQU to function “effectively in a globalized world as a research university” (p. 3), it must “continue to make significant investment in English to enable full involvement in global academic networks that function in English” (p.3). He adds that “English is not only the preeminent language of science and scholarship in the 21st century, but it is the language of engagement with the international academic community. Thus, SQU staff and students must be fluent in English. In most scientific fields, English

is the primary language of knowledge dissemination, and the journals are in English. Even in the Middle East, where Arabic is widely spoken, English tends to be the key tool of academic discourse” (p. 7). Hence, SQU staff and students must be fluent in English.

However, Renard (2010) poses important questions which are now part of growing debate and research in the Arab region. Should English continue to be used as a medium of instruction in Omani higher education? Would students not benefit more and comprehend their majors more if their courses were taught in Arabic, their native language? While the answers might seem to be straightforward, they have profound implications for educational policy and planning. Equally important, they also have far-reaching implications for the Sultanate’s economy, international relations and integration into the globalized world. This English-or-Arabic debate is now ongoing in many Arab countries (Rugh, 2002).

Speaking about SQU, Renard (2010) holds that it “has made and must continue to make a significant investment in English if only because it must be fully involved in global academic networks that function in English. How much more should be done to build an English-speaking environment is a complex issue” (p. 7).

Thus, considering the status of English in the world, and the possibility of its remaining influential in the coming decades at least (Graddol, 2006; Crystal, 2002), and, further, faced with the demands of

globalization, free trade and an open world market, Oman needs to continue investing in English language instruction at both the school and tertiary levels. However, for this investment not to be wasted, and to direct reform efforts productively, research must pave the way for progress. Hence, this study seeks to investigate the status of communication skills teaching in 11 tertiary education institutions. But first the connection between English communication skills and the Omani job-market should be addressed.

ENGLISH COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE OMANI JOB MARKET

Due to Oman's strong ties with Britain, English had a presence in its urban areas before 1970, though it was not taught in any of the three all-boy schools which were the only institutions for formal education at that time (Al-Busaidi, 1995). Following His Majesty Sultan Qaboos' ascent to the throne, English experienced a wider presence in the country. Not only is it now a school subject in state-funded schools, and the language of instruction in most higher education specializations, it is also the lingua franca of the country's multi-national workforce. The private sector uses English extensively in its operations (Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; Al-Mahrooqi, Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2012), and many government jobs nowadays also require English. Seeking to diversify its income sources, the Sultanate is currently turning towards tourism, a sector that uses English predominantly in its business

(Tuzlukova & Al-Mahrooqi, 2011). The oil and gas industry also requires English and only those proficient in the language secure employment with such large firms as PDO (Petroleum Development Oman). A command of English can thus give a school or college graduate a competitive advantage over others (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). However, adequate English must manifest itself not only in linguistic terms (possession of a large vocabulary and a command of grammar), but also during use in real life situations, taking into account contexts, interlocutors and their status, topics, times, and a host of other factors, all of them culture related (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2012 a & b). Scholars such as Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), Widdowson (1978), Hall (1999), Thomas (1983), Kasper and Schmidt (1996), Bachman (1990), and Rose and Kasper (2001) have addressed communicative competence's different components, all emphasizing the importance of socio-cultural and pragmatic elements for effective performance.

THE STUDY

Part of a larger strategic research study that aims to find out if Omani higher education institutions equip their students with communicative ability and skills required by the job market, this study focuses on student perceptions on whether or not their English courses provided such instruction. To examine this, two instruments were used: a detailed questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire, containing a five-5 point Likert scale qualitative section

and a quantitative section, was developed by the researchers. It contained 71 items and concentrated on seven areas related to communicative competence. These were: linguistic skills, strategic competencies, professional communication skills, general interpersonal skills, team work, psychological aspects of communication, and pragmatic skills. Under each area there were a number of relevant statements. Students chose a response from five available: equipped me extremely well, equipped me well, somewhat equipped me, did not equip me well, did not equip me at all.

After several revision stages, the questionnaire was given to a panel of six professors of English and Applied Linguistics to validate. Each questionnaire statement was assessed for relevance to the topic, clarity and accuracy of structure. Also the professors examined the items in terms of repetition and their classifications into categories. This process led to the exclusion of many items and to the rephrasing of a few to improve their clarity. The questionnaire was then piloted on 40 students before being placed online and distributed as hard copy among students at several higher education institutions, including Sultan Qaboos University, Majan University College, Middle East College, Khaleej College, the Higher College of Technology, Ibri College of Technology, Ibra College of Technology, Shinas College of Technology, Ibri College of Applied Sciences, Sur University College, Musanna College of Applied Sciences, the Open Arab University, the Modern College

of Business and Science, and Sharqiya University. Both male and female English foundation and credit program students were involved in the study. For data analysis, the software "Statistical Package for the Social Sciences" (SPSS) computer program was used to obtain descriptive statistics (means and standard deviation), data documentation and management.

The interview was conducted with just 40 students from the whole sample due to its demanding nature and to its being time-consuming. The interview offered in-depth information about student opinions on the importance of English in the local and international job-market. It also elicited their opinions on how communication skills are taught in their institutions. The interviews were all taped and later transcribed, after which the transcriptions were read carefully by the researchers and answers tabulated and categorized to depict trends, similarities or differences in student opinions. Examples given by students of activities that helped them gain communicative competence were also noted to illustrate their opinions.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that none of the seven areas received a mean above 4. With very limited standard deviation, the means ranged between 3.31 and 3.06, indicating at best a moderate preparation in terms of the skills in question. Hence English programs in the 14 institutions only somewhat equipped students with communication, linguistic and pragmatic skills. This agrees with previous findings from Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova's

study on English teachers at Sultan Qaboos University's Language Center (2012), but it is not completely in line with them. While students in this study indicated that they were somewhat adequately equipped with the seven skill areas, the teachers felt that the curriculum does not equip students well in professional communication skills and does not train them well in the areas related to the psychological aspects of communication. However, in this study, as Table 1 shows, the means for these two skill categories are the lowest among all the seven categories, obtaining 3.06 for Professional Communication skills and 3.19 for the Psychological aspects of communication.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Seven Main Skill Categories

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Linguistic skills	451	3.29	.827257
2. Strategic competencies	451	3.26	.897948
3. Professional communication skills	451	3.06	.808804
4. General interpersonal skills	451	3.21	.867100
5. Team work	451	3.36	.879039
6. Psychological aspect of communication	451	3.19	1.021269
7. Pragmatic skills	451	3.31	.839813

For a close look at the results, Table 2 shows the means and standard deviation of the different sub-skills under each of the

seven categories. The means show some very interesting results. The following sub-skills had means below 3: possessing language related conflict resolution strategies (M=2.8); interpreting accurately clients' needs and wants (M=2.97); communicating alternatives to clients (M=2.94); being skillful in using English in competitive situations (M=2.92); persuasive skills (M=2.93); responding to complaints (M=2.91); interacting effectively in a job interview (M=2.95); writing an effective CV (M=2.8); giving invitations (M=2.96); expressing sympathy (M=2.88); objecting and making counter arguments (M=2.96); and issuing complaints (M=2.84). These twelve sub-skills, with the exception of giving invitations and expressing sympathy, which are more socially oriented, are very important for effective performance in the job market. If language programs fail to equip students with them, then their success in the job market when they first enter it might be jeopardized.

It is worth noting that there were four items (language functions/speech acts) that achieved a mean above 3.5. These were:

1. Using polite language with others (M = 3.74)
2. Greeting and saying goodbye (M = 3.66)
3. Knowing how to make polite requests (M = 3.55)
4. Introducing oneself to others and introducing people to one another (M = 3.53)

The above four speech acts are basic and are expected to be mastered by elementary school students, not higher education students with 9-12 years of English instruction at school in addition to English instruction at the college level. This highlights the dire need for reform in English language teaching at both school and college levels in Oman.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Students unanimously agreed that English is very important for employment in Oman, especially in the private sector. They equated proficiency in English with “getting a good job” and “getting employed faster.” The majority thought that English will remain influential in Oman for the coming 20 years. However, there were a few who thought that other languages, such as Chinese and French, would emerge as being important and would be taught in Oman alongside English. Those languages, in the opinion of three students, might become even more important than English in the coming 20 years.

Again, there was unanimous agreement that students learnt English to be able to communicate. However, student definitions of communication skills varied. Some equated them with possessing a rich vocabulary and good grammar, while others defined them as the four language skills. Still others described them as “being accurate when speaking and writing.” Around 40% of the participants also mentioned body language and culture as important elements of communication skills, signaling

their awareness of the role of culture in determining the meaning of a given linguistic message.

When asked to evaluate their ability to communicate, all students agreed that they needed more training in how to use language in various activities, including apologizing, requesting, expressing sympathy, negotiating, interrupting, complaining, and congratulating, among many others. Students at a private college in Muscat unanimously agreed that their English classes definitely improved their communicative ability. Although all of them started learning English in the foundation program when they first enrolled, they felt that their communication skills had improved tremendously. They gave three main reasons for this: the college encourages speaking in English outside the classroom; students communicate in English with classmates, instructors and professors; and English instructors use interactive methodologies in their teaching, such as group work, debates and class discussions. They said that students also use English in extra-curricular activities, in the college’s “American Corner”, and when they receive their field training. But while these students felt that their confidence in using English had improved, they still expressed a need for more training in communication skills so as to function effectively in the market place. A large number from the other institutions thought that, although English classes at the tertiary level were an improvement over their school English lessons, their college English classes were ineffective in equipping

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations of sub-skills

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Linguistic skills	451	3.29	.827
1 Proficiency in English	451	3.45	0.993
10 Possessing language related conflict resolution strategies	451	2.8	1.057
19 Comparing and contrasting ideas	451	3.27	1.111
25 Ability to write letters	451	3.28	1.131
26 Ability to write emails	451	3.36	1.17
27 Expressing opinions and ideas in writing	451	3.45	1.117
28 Writing brief notes	451	3.51	1.12
29 Summarizing other people's ideas	451	3.41	1.165
30 Paraphrasing and restating other people's opinions	451	3.27	1.141
31 Writing reports, proposals, minutes and meeting agendas	451	3.11	1.176
32 Asking questions	451	3.48	1.124
35 Understanding and accurately using idiomatic expressions	451	3.06	1.141
46 Giving negative feedback in a positive way	451	3.16	1.111
48 Being easily understood by people from different backgrounds when speaking in English	451	3.25	1.129
52 Beginning and ending a conversation	451	3.33	1.114
60 Describing people, places, objects and processes	451	3.38	1.103
69 Reading and understanding English texts independently	451	3.29	1.163
Strategic competencies	451	3.25	.898
33 Listening and note taking	451	3.53	1.134
34 Finding other ways to communicate intention, ideas or emotions when lacking words	451	3.17	1.133
42 Asking questions for clarification	451	3.33	1.105
43 Knowing how to change the topic to redirect discussion or conversation towards a new issue	451	3.01	1.123
Professional communication skills	451	3.06	.809
2 Effective oral communication in English, speaking clearly and directly	451	3.06	1.086
3 Effective written communication, writing legibly, logically and concisely	451	3.25	1.049
4 Interpreting clients' needs and wants accurately	451	2.97	1.024
5 Communicating alternatives to clients	451	2.94	1.059
6 Verbal negotiation skills	451	3.01	1.081
9 Being skillful in using English in competitive situations	451	2.92	1.091
11 Persuasive skills	451	2.93	1.087
24 Resolving a conflict or disagreement	451	3.08	1.092

TABLE 2 (*continue*)

37	Contributing effectively to discussion of important topics	451	3.16	1.113
39	Being able to use appropriate gestures and body language when communicating with others	451	3.29	1.151
40	Having effective presentation skills	451	3.28	1.087
44	Ability to communicate using different media e.g. speaking on the phone, texting, voice messaging etc	451	3.18	1.202
47	Expressing new ideas logically and clearly	451	3.28	1.082
53	Responding to complaints	451	2.91	1.153
64	Making arrangements for trips, meetings etc	451	3.03	1.242
68	Being well prepared for the job market in terms of communication skills	451	3.06	1.211
70	Interacting effectively in a job interview	451	2.95	1.215
71	Writing an effective CV	451	2.8	1.287
General interpersonal skills		451	3.21	.867
12	Introducing oneself to others and introducing people to one another	451	3.53	1.09
36	Engaging in everyday communication	451	3.24	1.112
56	Giving invitations	451	2.96	1.141
58	Expressing regret	451	3.08	1.124
59	Expressing sympathy	451	2.88	1.158
61	Refusing a request or an offer	451	3.12	1.111
63	Greeting and saying goodbye	451	3.66	1.16
Team work		451	3.36	.879
7	Communicating collaboratively in a team	451	3.35	1.082
8	Participating appropriately in group conversations	451	3.22	1.11
38	Communicating and having good working relationships with colleagues	451	3.41	1.089
41	Empathizing with others' positions	451	3.24	1.128
49	Respecting other people's opinions even if they are different from your own	451	3.58	1.143
Psychological aspect of communication		451	3.19	1.021
65	Feeling completely at ease when engaging in communication with others	451	3.15	1.145
66	Feeling at ease when asking for necessary clarification	451	3.23	1.132
67	Feeling confident in one's ability to communicate with others	451	3.19	1.141
Pragmatic skills		451	3.31	.839
13	Using polite language with others	451	3.74	1.081
14	Understanding people with different backgrounds, values, skills and abilities	451	3.52	1.11
15	Being sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences	451	3.32	1.136

TABLE 2 (*continue*)

16	Knowing how to politely refuse requests	451	3.18	1.154
17	Knowing how to make polite requests	451	3.55	1.137
18	Distinguishing between formal and informal language and using what is appropriate in a given situation	451	3.25	1.219
20	Communicating with people who have different backgrounds, values, skills and abilities	451	3.33	1.112
21	Knowing how to apologize when making a mistake	451	3.45	1.166
22	Expressing agreement with someone else's ideas	451	3.46	1.087
23	Expressing disagreement politely and assertively	451	3.42	1.113
45	Responding to criticism appropriately	451	3.08	1.116
50	Giving others a chance to express their ideas and then responding when appropriate	451	3.55	1.135
51	Interrupting appropriately	451	3.25	1.107
54	Asking for suggestions	451	3.27	1.12
55	Making suggestions and recommendations	451	3.19	1.132
57	Objecting and making counter arguments	451	2.96	1.123
62	Issuing a complaint	451	2.84	1.16

them with communication skills. Different teachers focused on different things, they said, some on grammar, others on reading and vocabulary, and still others on writing and correcting grammar mistakes. They also felt that most of their English courses were minimally related to their specializations and future employment.

In the opinion of many students, the tertiary level environment did not encourage them to use English because everything is available in Arabic and there is little encouragement to practice English outside the classroom. However, they had to use English when visiting their English instructors, unless these were Arabic speakers and a problem could not be explained in English. However, when communicating with their Arab content area professors, they often used the mother tongue. Moreover, Arab professors did

the same in their class teaching. Content area exams used mainly multiple choice questions, which required little English competence to answer, and many professors distributed lecture notes and summaries of the text they taught, making the course books redundant and also reducing student study time in English.

A significant number of Sultan Qaboos University students reported favorably on joining the English and Translation Society or simply attending its classes and activities. Student-led, it organizes five different workshops every week to improve attendees' English language competence and performance. Some mentioned agreeing with their peers to use English whenever possible outside the classroom and others spoke of participation in social and other cultural activities organized in Muscat in which new people and English usage could

be found. To improve their communicative ability, students suggested the following:

1. The specific teaching of communication skills in a separate course or in conjunction with other courses
2. Encouragement and support of English-medium student-led or college-led extra-curricular activities (e.g. English clubs and drama clubs)
3. Emphasis on adherence by content area professors to the policy of “English only” in the classroom
4. Making language learning more meaningful and contextualized and using communicative approaches in language teaching more widely and by all language teachers (e.g. group work, pair work and debates).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that linguistic, pragmatic and communication skills are not highlighted in higher education English classes and that neither is the environment an encouraging one. Quantitative data indicated that some communication sub-skills essential for effective performance in the job market are actually inadequately present in Omani higher education institutions. These include possessing language related conflict resolution strategies, interpreting accurately clients’ needs and wants, communicating alternatives to clients, being skillful in using English in competitive situations, persuasive skills, responding to complaints,

interacting effectively in a job interview, writing an effective CV, objecting and making counter arguments, and issuing complaints. Qualitative data from the interviews and open-ended questions made clear that language programs do not emphasize speaking and language functions adequately. Hence, students graduate from tertiary education inadequately equipped with the oral communication skills which are vitally needed in a global job market with a multinational workforce.

Among the recommended solutions are the following:

1. Higher education institutions should foster and encourage student use of English on campus
2. Extracurricular activities need to be encouraged and supported
3. Using feedback from the job market, a special course on communication skills should be offered by all the relevant institution. Learning should be made meaningful and contextualized
4. Arab professors should adhere to the “English only” policy in their classrooms

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