

## **Involving female Omani English language teachers in evaluating curriculum materials**

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### **Abstract**

English language teachers have an important role in evaluating curriculum materials used with their learners. Accordingly, feedback elicited from teachers should be collected, collated and referred to by curriculum planners initiating educational reform. There are very few accounts, though, of such processes and it is sometimes feared that teachers' voices (including those of non-native speaker females in Middle Eastern societies) are unheard. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, this article focuses on female primary school English teachers' perceptions of their own involvement in evaluating materials in the Sultanate of Oman. It reveals that, although the teachers demonstrate awareness of materials evaluation processes, their experience of being involved in them is limited. It considers how this involvement could be increased.

*Keywords:* curriculum materials evaluation; English language teaching; female primary school teachers; Middle East.

### **Resumen**

Los profesores de inglés tienen un papel importante en la evaluación de los materiales curriculares que utilizan con sus alumnos. En consecuencia, el feedback obtenido de los profesores debería ser recopilado, cotejado y consultado por los encargados de la planificación del currículo que se dispongan a iniciar una reforma educativa. Sin embargo, hay muy pocos casos en los que se realice este proceso y a veces se teme que las voces de los profesores (incluyendo las de las hablantes no nativas en sociedades de Oriente Medio) no se oigan. A través del análisis de datos cuantitativos y cualitativos, este artículo se centra en las percepciones de profesoras de inglés de educación primaria sobre su propia participación en la evaluación de materiales en la Sultanía de Omán. El artículo revela que, a pesar de que las profesoras demuestran tener conocimiento sobre los procesos de evaluación de materiales, su participación en los mismos es limitada. El artículo considera cómo podría aumentarse dicha participación.

*Palabras clave:* evaluación de materiales curriculares; enseñanza de inglés; profesoras de educación primaria; Medio Oriente.

IN AN ENGLISH language teaching (ELT) context, curriculum materials can be defined as anything that facilitates the learning of the English language, whether “linguistic, visual, auditory or kinaesthetic” (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 2). Examples include textbooks, flashcards and multimedia software. Choosing and designing appropriate materials is not necessarily straightforward, though. It is a reflective process that needs to be based on a clear understanding of learners’ needs, awareness of which materials are culturally appropriate and knowledge of how they can be realized pedagogically in the classroom (Jolly & Bolitho, 1998). Materials produced then need evaluating: How successfully do they cater to learners’ “changing and complex needs” in a world being rapidly transformed (Masuhara & Tomlinson, 2010, p. 394)?

Evaluating materials systematically is a cyclical process drawing upon learners’ reactions, teachers’ reflections and opinions, and evidence of the achievement of learning objectives (McGrath, 2002). Therefore, together with their learners, teachers would seem to have an important role. However, while there is increasing evidence of individual teachers in various local contexts becoming personally engaged (Masuhara and Tomlinson, 2010), much less is known about teachers’ institutionally-sanctioned involvement in materials evaluation processes in diverse national contexts, particularly in the Middle East. Focusing on a sample of female primary school English language teachers in Oman, this article considers their awareness of materials evaluation processes and their experiences of being involved in those initiated by their curriculum department.

## **Literature Review**

### **Teacher involvement in materials evaluation**

Twenty years ago, in contexts where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is taught, insiders such as local teachers were often ignored in materials evaluation processes, as their judgements were considered “too subjective” (Rea-Dickens & Germaine, 1992, p. 67). Instead, materials evaluation was often left to foreign *experts*, bringing a fresh perspective but lacking detailed knowledge of the specific learning/teaching context (Alderson & Beretta, 1992). However, attitudes have gradually changed and there is increasing acceptance of McDonough and Shaw’s (1993) long-held view, that evaluating materials is “a very important professional activity for all EFL teachers” (p. 63). For example, Stillwell, McMillan, Gillies and Waller (2010, p. 257) argue that engaging teachers in materials evaluation encourages reflection, promotes professional development and establishes “a sort of institutional memory that prevents participants from constantly having to reinvent the wheel when addressing common problems”. This implies that if an understanding of what tends to work in the specific educational context in which materials are being designed is shared, then this will be highly beneficial to

the participating teachers who are gaining localized expertise in the development of materials.

It is unclear, though, to what extent EFL teachers are involved in materials evaluation processes, particularly in the case of non-native speaker females providing primary school education in the Middle East, a group whose input might be restricted for various reasons. There are political and socio-cultural issues. For example, non-native speakers have long suffered inequality within ELT (Holliday, 2006). Furthermore, primary school teachers can suffer prejudice in many contexts worldwide in relation to secondary school teachers, who tend to be better qualified (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). Additionally, it may be harder for females in Middle Eastern societies to physically get to curriculum meetings as many do not drive and are reliant on transport provided by male relatives (Richardson, 2004).

Whilst the position of women has improved dramatically in recent decades in Omani society and, in the education sector, local women have become much more active (Rassekh, 2004; Wyatt & Arnold, 2012), opportunities to gain influence over curriculum management processes have been limited. This is partly because historically various middle management posts in the Omani Ministry of Education that include responsibility for the English language primary school curriculum, e.g. textbook editors, authors and advisors, have been held by British foreigners (Al-Issa, 2006), including men as well as women. Furthermore, here, as in much of the Middle East, education authorities have tended to prefer top-down models of curriculum development that would seem to confine the teacher's role to implementing pre-designed packages of materials (Al-Issa, 2007; El-Okda, 2005). In such contexts, materials evaluation processes are rarely publicised and the results of curriculum evaluation exercises tend to be in the form of confidential reports to the commissioning education authorities (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2010).

Nevertheless, despite the common tendency of education authorities in different worldwide contexts to discourage a bottom-up approach to materials development, powerful arguments for involving teachers can overcome the various objections raised. After managing to persuade Argentinian authorities to accept a bottom-up approach, Banegas (2011) initiated reforms which demonstrated that, through giving teachers space to participate, a more appropriately context-sensitive curriculum can be developed, with teachers growing as reflective practitioners through the process.

Of course, the first step towards achieving such reform in different national contexts is to get teachers involved in systematically evaluating curriculum materials themselves, perhaps as elected teacher representatives serving on curriculum committees (McGrath, 2013). Such initiatives are necessary. Where teachers are not engaged actively in the materials evaluation process, as Banegas (2011) reports had been the case in Argentina prior to his intervention, the outcomes can be deeply disappointing, with

materials provided to teachers and students after a top-down design process perhaps misunderstood, rejected and/or largely ignored by the intended users.

Teachers might be consulted at different stages of the materials evaluation process, at points identified by McGrath (2002) as pre-use, in-use and post-use. The pre-use stage incorporates what McGrath terms *armchair evaluation*, when the teacher, yet to use the materials in the classroom, comments on potential suitability. Then, once the materials are in use, perhaps being trialled on a small-scale basis, teachers might engage in “conscientious record-keeping and evidence-based reflection” (McGrath, 2002, p. 181), considering issues such as how much of the materials they are able to use unchanged and how well they appear to work. Teachers’ records might be supplemented with observations of them teaching, learner diaries and plenary discussions. These might consider the interest generated by the materials, their appropriacy in terms of linguistic and cognitive challenge and whether they offer sufficient practice (McGrath, 2002). Such concerns also inform post-use evaluation, when overall suitability is also considered and learning outcomes of various kinds are assessed.

For teachers to engage fully in materials evaluation, they need appropriate infrastructure and support. If data they provide are to be collated and fed systematically into the evaluation process, this requires coordination and commitment at various levels (McGrath, 2002). In-service training focused on how to evaluate may also be highly beneficial, particularly where teachers’ basic training is limited (Banegas, 2011). Studies of expertise (e.g. Johnson et al., 2006) suggest that experienced teachers may be able to contribute more to the materials evaluation process than novices, although, given the benefits of being involved, it can be argued that all teachers should be involved (Banegas, 2011).

Accounts of involving teachers in evaluating curriculum materials are rare, but two such studies were conducted over 15 years ago in our research context, Oman. We report on them below.

### **The research context**

Oman has modernised rapidly since 1970 when there were just three schools in the whole country (Harrison, 1996) and illiteracy rates were high, particularly amongst girls and women, a situation that has now radically changed (Atkins & Griffiths, 2009; Rassekh, 2004). Initially, as the number of schools expanded, qualified Omanis were in short supply and most teachers were expatriates. However, Omani English language teachers were recruited from the late 1980s (and assigned to teach lower grades). These were Diploma-holders from teacher training colleges; the majority (over 900) subsequently upgraded their qualifications through a University of Leeds BA Educational Studies in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) (Wyatt, 2011). Additionally,

Omani graduates from Sultan Qaboos University entered English language teaching from the 1990s to teach in secondary schools. Since then there have also been recruits from private universities (Al-Balooshi, 2009) to fill continuing vacancies at all levels. These vacancies are due partly to rapid population growth, which has increased the demand for teachers, and also to the policy of Omanisation, which encourages the recruitment of Omanis and the phasing out of expatriate posts wherever possible.

There have been waves of curriculum renewal. The first specially designed curriculum was 'English for Oman' (EfO). Introduced in 1979, it was replaced in 1988 by 'Our World Through English' (OWTE), which in turn gave way to 'English for Me' (EfM) in 1999. While EfO was produced by an international publisher with the author resident for four months each year in Oman (Barnard & Randall, 1995), OWTE and EfM were both products of the curriculum department in Muscat, which, as noted above, employed a team of British expatriate authors and advisors.

These three curricula were all trialled, and although these were top-down processes they nevertheless involved teachers (Barnard & Randall, 1995; Harrison, 1996; Wyatt, 2010). In the following paragraphs, we explore the different strategies and methods (e.g. observations, interviews, reflective diaries and questionnaires) used in the trialling of EfO, OWTE and EfM.

For the trialling of EfO (which was a continuous process over a number of years, starting with lower grades as course materials were gradually introduced), teachers were selected from different types of school: boys and girls, urban and rural, mountain, coast and plain. The curriculum author visited teachers' schools twice each year, observed lessons in which they used the materials, elicited their perceptions of them orally and analysed the diaries they were asked to complete. Their lessons were also observed by school inspectors, whose observation notes the curriculum author saw (Barnard & Randall, 1995).

Observing lessons in which the new materials were being trialled was also a feature of the evaluations of OWTE and EfM. Regarding the former, which initially focused on Grade 4, since this was the starting point for formal English learning at the time, Harrison (1996) reports that school inspectors from nine (of eleven) different regions of the country (see Table 1, below, for a full list) were involved. Each region was asked to subject particular sections of the new course book to scrutiny. Inspectors, who Barnard and Randall (1995) report were asked to be impartial in focusing on the extent to which recommended procedures were followed, observed the same two teachers teach the same classes everyday for two to three weeks (Harrison 1996).

Observation was also employed in 1999, when EfM was being trialled in a limited number of new primary schools (for Grades 1-4) around the country. These primary schools were part of widespread educational reforms. Now both genders would study

together for the first time (until Grade 5 when they went to single-sex schools). English would be introduced in Grade 1 rather than Grade 4. Senior teacher posts would be created to encourage mentoring. The new primary schools, though, would employ only female teachers, which is why female teachers are the focus of our research. During the trialling of EfM, visitors from the curriculum department were often present, observing and discussing appropriate methodology for use with the new materials, according to a teacher in Wyatt's (2010) study.

Besides observation, OWTE evaluations made use of questionnaires. However, these were lengthy, difficult to analyse, did not provide the kind of information that could be of use to curriculum evaluators and may have been resented by the teachers asked to complete them (Barnard & Randall, 1995). Regional meetings with teachers were of limited value too. Such meetings require clear aims, a positive atmosphere and inclusive management that encourage participation (Harrison, 1996). The smaller-scale EfO evaluations may have done more to build positive relationships and trust (Barnard & Randall, 1995).

Were they more effective, though? Large-scale materials evaluation is highly complex, requiring various forms of triangulation (Harrison, 1996). Furthermore, even if a highly effective process is employed, so that improvements are continually being made on the basis of feedback, the curriculum may nevertheless be replaced wholesale if economic or political concerns dictate (Barnard & Randall, 1995). The same outcome may also be the result of insufficient improvements. Although it had been revised, Harrison (1996) identifies issues with EfO that may have led to its replacement.

Curriculum replacement is expensive, though, and can be resented by teachers attached to aspects of the discarded curriculum they feel work (Barnard & Randall, 1995). Continuing curriculum renewal might be a better option, particularly if teachers feel able to contribute to this. Since the 1990s, teaching has gradually become a graduate profession in Oman (in primary as well as secondary schools), with Omani teachers, including women, both assuming more responsible roles (Wyatt, 2010; Wyatt & Arnold, 2012) and gaining the experience that facilitates a fuller contribution to materials evaluation processes (Johnson et al., 2006). Furthermore, for certain graduates of the University of Leeds BA TESOL, some training in evaluating materials has been provided (Wyatt, 2011). The educational landscape has thus changed considerably since the studies of Barnard and Randall (1995) and Harrison (1996).

In this paper, we explore female primary school English teachers' awareness of and perceived involvement in materials evaluation processes in a Middle-Eastern context being reshaped since the Arab Spring by calls for greater participation in various spheres of public life (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). Our perspective is not that of former curriculum department insiders, as was the case in the Barnard and Randall (1995) and Harrison

(1996) studies, but is closer to the periphery in terms of influence. The first-named author, senior teacher of a primary school in the fairly remote Sharqiya South region, nearly 300 kilometres from the capital, Muscat (see Table 1, below), with extensive teaching experience and University of Leeds BA and MA qualifications, has developed interest over time in involving teachers in materials evaluation. This inspired original research on which this article is based (Al-Senaidi, 2010). The second-named author, a teacher trainer/advisor in the same region between 2000 and 2002, shares a concern for listening to teachers' voices in curriculum renewal.

### **Research Methodology**

Our research questions are as follows:

1. What awareness of materials evaluation processes do female primary school English teachers in Oman demonstrate?
2. What are their experiences of being involved in materials evaluation processes initiated by the curriculum department?

To address these questions, we have adopted a mixed methods study, using both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data will provide a broad picture of teachers' awareness of materials evaluation processes and their experiences of being involved, while qualitative data will provide in-depth insights.

Quantitative data were collected through "stratified sampling" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 111), which involves dividing the population into "homogenous groups, each group containing subjects with similar characteristics", and then including a proportion of each group in the sample. In this case, we targeted 10% of the female Omani primary school English teachers in each of the eleven regions of the country. In the year 2009-10, there were 1732 such teachers working in government schools (see Table 1, below).

Stratified sampling was chosen as this would provide equal access to the voices of teachers from remote regions (e.g. Al-Wusta, the capital of which is over 500 kilometres from the national capital). This principle also influenced the collection of qualitative data; volunteers from different regions would be sampled. This seemed important, as it was hypothesised that teachers from remote parts of the country could possibly be neglected in materials evaluation processes, notwithstanding the studies of Barnard and Randall (1995) and Harrison (1996), which provide no evidence of this. In the event, our study was forced to exclude the 16 teachers from one small, very isolated region (Mussandam), due to lack of accessibility.

Region of Oman	Teacher population	10% (the final sample)
Muscat	272	27
Batinah South	221	22
Batinah North	330	33
Dakhiliya	263	26
Sharqiya South	158	16
Sharqiya North	120	12
Dhahira	119	12
Buraimi	45	5
Al-Wusta	46	5
Dhofar	142	14
Mussandam	16	0
Total	1732	172

Table 1. The sample of female primary school teachers surveyed (by region).

A questionnaire was designed that, besides asking teachers to record region and number of years teaching experience, included closed and open questions, Likert scale and ranking items. One item sought to elicit teachers' awareness of materials evaluation processes by presenting five statements and asking for their degree of (dis)agreement with each (answers in Table 2, below). Others asked teachers if they had been involved in materials evaluation and in what ways. Teachers were also asked to rate criteria for materials selection for importance and highlight their most significant three from a list of 15, including: learners' ability to use the materials, sequencing, language level, cultural appropriacy, clarity of instructions, practicality and motivational potential for learners and teachers. Open questions elicited the types of changes teachers would like to see in curriculum materials provided (Al-Senaidi, 2010).

Teachers were asked if they were willing to be interviewed, and, if so, to provide contact details. This allowed qualitative semi-structured interviews to be conducted with those who had materials evaluation experience. Interview questions focused on the teachers' awareness of materials evaluation processes and the nature of their experience and training. The research was conducted according to University of Leeds ethical guidelines.

While studying in the UK, the first-named author piloted and revised the questionnaire and gained permission from the Ministry of Education in Oman to distribute it. Questionnaires (with introductory letters) were sent by electronic mail to coordinating

colleagues in different regions. There they were printed, distributed randomly, collected and scanned. For contact with an isolated region lacking Internet coverage (Al-Wusta), fax was used. 102 of 172 questionnaires were returned (60%) and analysed using SPSS 16 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). From three of 10 regions, the response rate was 100%, but from another three (Muscat, Dakhiliya and Dhofar), it was only 27-33%. The sample was therefore less representative than anticipated.

Another limitation was that only seven of the 102 respondents volunteered to be interviewed; they were from three different regions but five of the volunteers came from the same region, Sharqiya South. One of these five was selected (on the basis of her extensive answers in the questionnaire), together with the two from other regions (Dhahira and Batinah South). These teachers provided informed consent and participated in semi-structured telephone interviews with the first-named researcher, which were audio-recorded with the teachers' permission, transcribed and subjected to further analysis. The teachers, whose contributions were anonymised, were given the following pseudonyms (in no particular order): Maha, Nadia and Abeer. They were amongst the most experienced of the questionnaire respondents and were graduates, like the first-named author, of the University of Leeds BA TESOL. We now present the findings, organised around the research questions.

## Findings

### What awareness of materials evaluation processes do female primary school English teachers in Oman demonstrate?

To address this question, five statements, based on our understanding of materials evaluation processes and teachers' involvement in these (McGrath, 2002), were developed. Likert scale responses from the 102 teachers were as follows:

Statement	Mean score
1. Materials evaluation can involve teachers' views of their teaching aids.	4.39
2. Materials evaluation involves measuring the achievement of learning aims.	4.00
3. Materials evaluation can involve learners' reactions while using the materials.	3.96
4. Every day reflection is another way of evaluating materials.	3.83
5. Teachers don't need to evaluate the materials because they are produced by experts in the Ministry of Education.	2.45

Key: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = not sure, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

Table 2. Teachers' awareness of materials evaluation processes.

As the table indicates, there is strong agreement amongst respondents that materials evaluation processes can involve teachers' views (Statement 1). McDonough and Shaw (1993) and Stillwell et al. (2010) feel it is important that teachers are involved. The respondents also agree that materials evaluation is concerned with the achievement of learning objectives (Statement 2); this relates to evaluation carried out post-use (McGrath, 2002). Indeed, elsewhere in the questionnaire, the biggest concerns teachers expressed about materials were whether or not learners were able to do activities and how well the materials motivated learners to participate. Learners' reactions thus seemed to feature prominently in their thoughts. There seems, however, to be slightly less awareness of *in-use* evaluation, as McGrath terms this, though Statement 3 does gain broad agreement.

There is greater uncertainty, however, concerning the relationship between materials evaluation and teachers' everyday reflection (Statement 4), even though reflective practice is encouraged in Oman (Wyatt, 2010; Wyatt & Arnold, 2012). This may be a cause for concern, as curriculum development and teacher development can be considered inseparable (El-Okda, 2005).

Regarding teachers' views as to the nature of materials evaluation processes (Statement 5), responses were mixed, as the mean score (2.45) suggests. We looked again at the raw data on which the mean was based. This showed that some respondents did indicate willingness to accept a top-down process in which they had limited involvement. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given their familiarity with such an approach, societal expectations that they will accept authority (El-Okda, 2005), and evidence that suggests inexperienced Omani female teachers (and our survey included these: Figure 1, below) can lack confidence (e.g. Wyatt, 2010; Wyatt & Arnold, 2012). However, nearly two-thirds of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with top-down processes. This supports an argument therefore, e.g. as articulated by El-Okda (2005), for at least an interactive rather than a merely top-down process of materials evaluation.

Qualitative data provide triangulation here. All three interviewees identified a role for teachers in the materials evaluation process. They conceptualised this slightly differently, though. Maha emphasised micro-contextual features: "the designer should know the age and grade of the students, their culture or environment... assess if the material is [both] suitable for these learners and relates to the activities that you want to give them as a teacher". Nadia, in contrast, emphasised the big picture, reporting the process involves "gathering information about the materials from teachers, then discussing this with senior teachers from different parts of the country in conferences or meetings, then changing activities when necessary and keeping the valuable activities". According to Abeer, this "organised process" would support decision-making, so that materials could be used or adapted to fit aims appropriate to pupils' levels. In these teachers' words,

therefore, awareness of the need for in-use and post-use materials evaluation (McGrath, 2002), as a principled, systematic and carefully managed process (Tomlinson, 2003), involving teachers working collaboratively with their learners' context-sensitive needs in mind (Stillwell et al., 2010), is evident. We now turn to our second question.

### **What are their experiences of being involved in materials evaluation processes initiated by the curriculum department?**

To address this question, we turn first to a closed questionnaire item, requiring a yes or no answer: 'Have you ever been involved in evaluating teaching materials for Grades 1-4?'

Responses were as follows: overall, only 30% said "yes". In eight of 10 regions surveyed, at least some teachers reported having such experience, although they were in the minority in every region apart from one (Dhahira, where 7 of 12 said "yes"). We did not detect any particular relationship between remoteness (i.e. distance from the capital) and involvement in materials evaluation (Dhahira, for example, is one of the more remote regions, about 300 kilometres from Muscat). However, we also looked for a relationship between involvement and years of teaching experience (Figure 1, below).

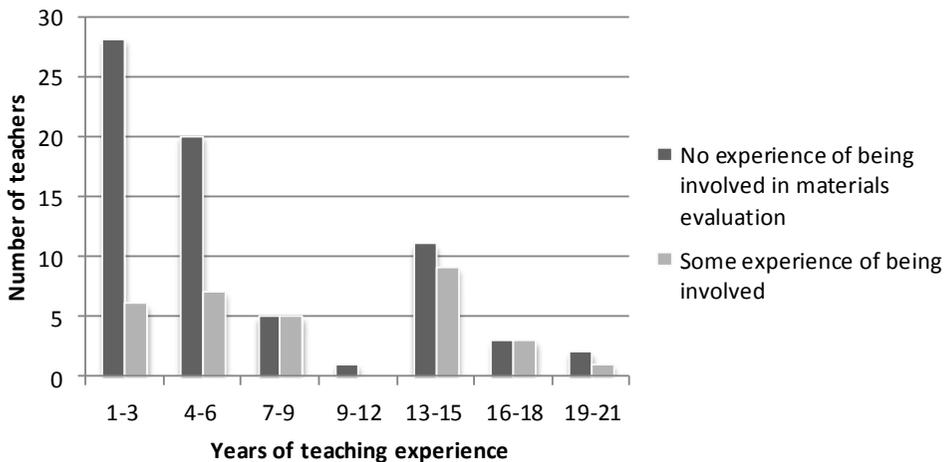


Figure 1. The relationship between teachers' involvement in materials evaluation and their teaching experience.

As Figure 1 indicates, teachers with more than six years teaching experience were more likely to report having been involved in materials evaluation than those newer to the teaching profession. This is unsurprising. Johnson et al. (2006) suggest that experienced teachers might have more to contribute to the process and it is possible

that such teachers have been targeted in materials evaluation exercises. However, even amongst teachers with more than 12 years experience (of OWTE, therefore, as well as EfM), fewer than half reported involvement in materials evaluation. When one considers arguments that all teachers should be involved (McDonough & Shaw, 1993) as well as data presented above regarding respondents' awareness of a role for teachers in such processes, this is disappointing.

As to the nature of this involvement, the most common means teachers reported of engaging in the process were through oral feedback (to senior teachers and supervisors) and questionnaires (for the curriculum department). Unfortunately, there was much less evidence of methods of contributing that can promote deeper engagement, such as those used in Barnard and Randall's (1995) study, for example diaries that are shared.

Turning to the qualitative data, interviews with Maha, Nadia and Abeer reveal that none had had specific training, apart from through their undergraduate degree, and that their experience of materials evaluation was limited. Regarding experience, Nadia, for example, recalled being asked two years before "to send a report about any mistakes" found in the course books. This was the extent of any earlier involvement she could recollect. However, if a top-down approach to materials development is employed by a curriculum department (El-Okda, 2005), such limited involvement of teachers is perhaps to be expected.

Nevertheless, all three teachers had recently (in the 2009/10 academic year) been asked to contribute to a nationwide, curriculum department-initiated evaluation of the Grade 3 materials. Initiatives to involve teachers in this way are, of course, welcome (McDonough and Shaw, 1993). Indeed, Abeer appreciated it, reporting: "I have been teaching for 15 years and they never asked us before to analyse the curriculum".

However, not all experiences of this involvement were positive. Maha recalled being summoned to a regional meeting with two other teachers from her school and being given a questionnaire to complete: "At the beginning, it was difficult for me because I didn't know what the meeting was for." She had not been provided any information in advance, "then, for half an hour they talked about the topic of evaluating grade 3 materials and books." "We were surprised", she reported; "we were confused."

A similar meeting was held in Abeer's region. Three teachers were invited from each school, Abeer related, "different teachers from different schools, not only teachers with experience. The meeting was from 8.30am until 2pm and the questionnaire was very detailed. They put us in groups to do this."

As she had not taught Grade 3 for three years, Maha felt she did not do well in completing the questionnaire, writing "only some comments" to questions such as "Are the objectives appropriate to the learners' level?" There was also a problem with resources: "They provided us with some books, like teachers' books, course books,

but not for everyone.” So extra resources would have been ideal, but, given that most female teachers do not drive (and indeed tend to be chaperoned by male relatives in public places), it could have been difficult to access these during a mid-morning break, even if there was a school nearby that could provide them.

From Maha’s perspective, it seems that this particular materials evaluation exercise could have been better organised. Aims could have been clarified in advance, teachers most able to contribute invited, sufficient resources provided. It is also unclear how useful to the evaluators the data collected from the questionnaire would be. As Barnard and Randall (1995) indicate, making use of such data can be problematic without careful planning. Furthermore, in the regional meeting Abeer attended, teachers evaluated materials in groups, which can increase participation, but much depends on how the group work is managed, feedback organised and license given to the expression of individual views (McGrath, 2002). Without careful management, such meetings do not necessarily produce useful data (Harrison, 1996). Indeed, trying to interpret the minutes of a curriculum evaluation meeting that had been presented to him, Harrison acknowledges:

the right kind of atmosphere for frank and open discussion may not have been created, or there may have been domination of the meeting by a limited number of voices or perhaps the right kind of questions may not have been asked (1996, p. 290).

However, unlike Abeer and Maha, at least the teachers who attended Harrison’s (1996) meeting had been given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire beforehand. If teachers are to be meaningfully involved, they need to be prepared (McDonough & Shaw, 1993).

All three of our interviewees argued for a greater role for teachers in evaluating materials. “We need to participate more”, Abeer reported; “because teachers know the level of the students and what can work well with them. They know what they need and what they don’t. Some topics are too difficult.” These comments strike a chord with both a key finding from the questionnaire that having *achievable activities* was one of teachers’ biggest concerns and Harrison’s (1996) argument in the same geographical context that teachers’ voices should be heard in curriculum materials evaluation. If their voices are not heard, they may not get what they want, in this particular case more practice activities (which, to consolidate new input, seems a very practical concern) and greater use of technological resources (Al-Senaidi, 2010), the latter a concern too of primary school English teachers in other contexts worldwide, for example Thailand (Graham, 2009).

### Conclusions

The capacity of female Omani English language teachers working in primary schools to contribute to curriculum renewal has grown considerably since the mid-1990s, when the great majority were non-graduates with very limited teaching experience (Harrison, 1996). Various initiatives, including the University of Leeds BA TESOL, have helped produce teachers who can engage in reflective practice (Wyatt, 2010; Wyatt & Arnold, 2012) and critical materials evaluation (Wyatt, 2011).

However, this growing capacity to contribute seems under-exploited. From our perspective, materials evaluation processes do not appear more developed than those employed in the 1990s. Indeed, in some respects, the trialling procedures employed in the much smaller-scale EfO materials evaluations appear to have been more motivating for the participating teachers (Barnard & Randall, 1995). This lack of progress is a cause for concern.

Of course, our findings need qualifying. Rather than consult the curriculum department about the complex triangulations they might perform, we have adopted an alternative perspective by focusing on teachers' perceptions. While these are important, as all teachers should be involved (McDonough & Shaw, 1993), we recognise that getting an insider view may have led to a deeper understanding of the various complexities involved. Furthermore, we also recognise the *stratified sampling* (Cohen et al., 2007) employed could have reached more teachers, while ideally more than three teachers could have been interviewed. There were constraints in data collection regarding accessibility. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, our findings do point to the conclusion that there are female primary school English teachers in Oman who feel they have been neglected in materials evaluation processes but who are willing and able to participate more fully.

The curriculum department in Oman is currently evaluating Grade 3 EfM materials first introduced in 1999, which represents an opportunity to involve these teachers to a greater extent. This department, as well as those in other countries considering curriculum renewal, could consider the following principles:

- Provide teachers with in-service training in curriculum materials evaluation that includes awareness-raising of *pre-use*, *in-use* as well as *post-use* processes (McGrath, 2002).
- Elicit teachers' views of materials at the 'armchair evaluation' stage by inviting interested teachers to join scrutinizing committees.
- When trialling materials, observe them being used not just in a regular and systematic way, as in the OWTE evaluation, but also in a supportive, participatory manner that supports change processes, as in

the EfM evaluation (Wyatt, 2010).

- Encourage teachers to complete reflective diaries focused on the materials and learners' reactions to them, as in Barnard and Randall (1995). Issues such as which activities work and/or need modification, how and why can be explored.
- Support coordinators, such as senior teachers, in collecting, collating, summarising and reporting in-use and post-use evaluation; this may require management and research training.
- When designing post-use evaluation questionnaires, consider carefully how data collected support materials evaluation processes to avoid pitfalls reported on here.
- When organising meetings with teachers to discuss materials, share objectives in advance, invite those who have something to contribute and adopt supportive procedures that invite participation.

We believe that if such principles are applied in countries that currently adopt a top-down approach, e.g. in parts of the Middle East, the resulting greater involvement of primary school English teachers (including non-native speaker females) in the curriculum renewal process would better serve the needs of language learners and their families, school communities and teachers, and support continuing professional development. However, while we conceive of this as an important step, we are not suggesting that reforms should stop there. In a changing Omani landscape being reshaped by recent calls for greater participation in all spheres of public life, including education (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012), we believe that not just an interactive but also perhaps a bottom-up approach to materials development could subsequently be adopted, as in Argentina (Banegas, 2011). Though such an innovation might be some way off, dependent on both inspired leadership and shared vision, this would allow teachers to participate more fully still, in localised materials design as well as evaluation to the benefit of their learners, resulting in yet greater empowerment.

This suggests a need for action research involving teachers, again as in the Argentinian example (Banegas, 2011). Capacity building is essential, so that teachers can truly become researchers in contributing to curriculum change. This suggests that expert guidance is required (McGrath, 2013), including both mentoring that encourages reflective interaction with materials (Banegas, 2011; Wyatt, 2011) and support in writing up the research, so that it is published and shared. Access to teachers' perspectives is necessary both in the Omani context (Harrison, 1996) and beyond. Stories of teachers' engagement in materials evaluation and development, told in descriptively-rich, accessible accounts that bring contextual realities to life, in keeping with the traditions

of naturalistic enquiry (Cohen et al., 2007), have the potential to reach out to curriculum reformers everywhere.

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