

How Omani teachers perceive the process of integrating 21st century
competencies and skills into the EFL curriculum:

A step forward

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Abstract

The international demands towards incorporating 21st century competencies and skills in any educational system are growing rapidly and the Omani educational system is no exception. This is due to the challenges imposed by the explosion in knowledge and technology and the rapid changes in the economy and the labour market. Therefore, the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman is undertaking a number of reforms towards the inclusion of 21st century competencies and skills in the educational system, both implicitly and explicitly. These competencies and skills include creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, communication skills, and information, media and technology skills. As a result, significant reforms to education were introduced in order to cope with the future economic vision of the country (Ministry of Education, 2012). Therefore, innovations in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum, course content, teaching methods and assessment in Oman were geared towards the integration of 21st century competencies and skills. As teachers are considered “Agents of Change” (Fullan, 1999, Drew, Priestley & Michael, 2016), the current study examines Omani EFL teachers’ experiences of the integration process.

The investigation was informed by the interpretive paradigm. It deployed an explanatory sequential mixed-method design. An EFL teachers' questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were used for gathering quantitative and qualitative data.

The findings revealed that some teachers perceive positively the integration of the skills into the EFL curriculum; however, they are dissatisfied with their exclusion from the process as a whole. Furthermore, teachers emphasised the mismatch between curriculum and assessment, and this is considered one of the challenges they faced during implementation. Other challenges teachers face, that impede a successful implementation of the relevant skills, were highlighted; such as time, the textbooks and the students' levels of competence in English. Consequently, the respondents provided some suggestions to reinforce practice and policy of the appropriate inclusion and implementation of the competencies. Finally, some implications and recommendations were outlined towards the end of the study.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ELT	English Language Teaching
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
ESL	English as a Second Language
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
MoE	Ministry of Education
NCSI	National Centre for Statistics and Information
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
OWTE	Our World Through English
EFM	English For Me
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
BA	Bachelor of Arts
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
PIRLS	Progress in Reading Literacy Study
L2	English as a Second or Foreign language
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Cycle One	Basic schools Grades 1 to 4
Cycle two	Basic schools Grades 5 to 10
Post-Basic	Grades 11 and 12
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
ICT	Information and communications technology
MoNE	Ministry of National Economic
CoP	Community of Practice

LRC

Learning Recourse Centre

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Educational systems around the world are showing a growing interest in the competencies that prepare learners for life and work in the 21st century. This interest is driven by a series of rapid changes that have taken place during the past few decades. Clarke, Gill, Sim, Patry, & Ginsler (2014) identified a number of forces that shifted educational objectives and practices, including:

changing needs for economic and social development; mounting research evidence from the learning sciences about instruction that promotes deeper learning in connection with whole system change; and new and emerging opportunities for both technology-enabled learning at school and informal media-based learning environments outside the school. (p. 3)

Globalisation, and the rapid revolution in technology, have both played key roles in the continuous renewals and reviews of educational programmes and policies worldwide. The focus on “what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is assessed” (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 13) is being transformed in the 21st century. Thus, the challenge is to equip learners with the skills, attitudes, and competencies necessary to succeed in a complex, dynamic, knowledge- and technology-intensive world (Clarke, Gill, Sim, Patry, & Ginsler, 2014). The term “21st century competencies” is controversial; as with most educational terms, it depends on the context and the objectives. Additionally, the terms “competence” and “skill” are used interchangeably in certain contexts. For instance, Ananiadou & Claro (2009) defined 21st century competencies as “those skills and competencies young people will be required to have in order to be effective workers and citizens in the knowledge society of the 21st century” (p. 8). Even though their definition is broad and loose, it served the purpose and

aims of their study. Examples of these competencies are critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and innovation, decision making, communication, and collaboration.

Although globalisation is not a new phenomenon, the direct link with the English language is unavoidable. Indeed, the impact on the English language has been evident, as it is progressing increasingly toward being the *lingua franca* (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2013). Globalisation, through international tourism, business, media, and scientific exchanges, has placed a premium on the ability to communicate in a *lingua franca*, i.e. English (Warschauer, 2000; Block & Cameron, 2002). The debate in the literature regarding the effect of globalisation, between “winners and losers”, has swung like a pendulum (O'Brien & Leichenko, 2003). The fact that globalisation is homogenizing societies through the spread of English is the main concern of the opponents. They argue that homogenization will lead to a loss of identity, culture, and knowledge of mother tongues (Pennycook, 2014; Block & Cameron, 2002). On the other hand, it spreads western norms, values, and knowledge of foreign languages, i.e. English. Some scholars, such as Skutnabb-Kangas (2009), go further and claim that the domination of one language and culture violates human rights despite the calls for local and world Englishes (Pennycook, 2014; Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011; Canagarajah, 2014).

Conversely, proponents believe that the spread of English as a technological and communication language has helped countries to enter the modern era and preserve their positions in the global economy. In addition, some scholars (Gray, 2013; Baker, 2011) have argued that globalisation is having a positive

impact on cultural knowledge, for example with respect to designing and developing a curriculum that is appropriate for such contexts; thus raising awareness among English language teaching (ELT) professionals, teachers, and students, of global issues and their local impacts. From this perspective, learners will develop an appreciation of their native and cultural identity through engaging with global concerns.

As the aforementioned debate will probably continue, its influence on education – and ELT in particular – undoubtedly will continue too. Facione, Facione & Sanchez (1994) argued that 21st century global, social, economic, and environmental challenges required a transformation in all aspects of education, including the teaching of English, in order to prepare generations for competitive international markets, achieve community harmony, and promote cultural diversity and citizenship values.

Therefore, ELT is directly influenced by globalisation and the transformation of educational systems towards the 21st century competencies and skills. Warschauer (2000) argued that globalisation will influence ELT in three main ways: firstly, the spread of English worldwide; secondly, the dramatic shift in the use of English; and thirdly, the transformation and new definition of literacy. Similarly, for Block & Cameron (2002), the transformation of the use of English will promote specific interactional genres, types of speech, and norms for the purpose of international, technological, and political communication. Thus, a shift towards integrating skills and competencies into educational curricula and programmes is articulated explicitly and specifically in new ways of teaching English (Canagarajah, 2014).

Nevertheless, teachers play a key role in educational reforms and trends. For example, Farrell (2015) described 21st century teachers as:

able to respond to every issue, dilemma and problem they face, thus moving beyond their initial craft skills and knowledge and [...] able to evaluate possible roads of action that take into account the needs of their students, their institution and their community. (p. 83)

Therefore, investigating how teachers perceive the recent trends of skill-based or competence-led curricula in education is critical. From this stance, as curricula are advancing towards the incorporation of 21st century competencies globally (Pellegrino, 2017; Pei-Ling Tan, Choo, Kang & Liem, 2017; Boyer & Crippen, 2014) and the use of English as a *lingua franca* is increasing, teachers' perceptions of such trends and the way they relate them to their practice is crucial in any educational transformation (Farrell, 2015; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Banegas & Velázquez, 2014; Banegas, 2011).

Inadvertently, ELT teachers have found themselves in a dilemma that will make them respond differently regarding how they cope with the challenges of globalisation. In turn, these practices will have a direct impact on the learning outcomes.

Therefore, paying attention to ELT teachers' views on their understanding of 21st century competencies and the implications for content, pedagogy, and assessment, is essential to gain an insightful understanding of these competencies and their implications. As Voogt & Roblin (2012) discussed, the reform cannot be accomplished without research into and the unlearning of the values, beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions that practitioners, policymakers, and researchers hold about the topic.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Oman faces the challenge of preparing its youth for life and work in the new conditions created by the modern global economy and politics, especially after the “Arab Spring”. Political and economic educational improvements in the country are a priority in the near future (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012; Katzman, 2016). In addition, it is intended to steer the educational system to focus on quality rather than quantity through enforcing the development of productive skills and less dependence on grades (Salehi-Isfahani, 2016).

These circumstances require a high level of adaptability and a strong background in mathematics, science, technology, and English language so that students can cope with rapidly-changing technologies and emerging international business prospects. Consequently, the government has focused on enhancing the teaching and learning of English. However, despite the progress and the reforms implemented in the educational system in Oman, the outcomes have not been satisfactory. The results of an analysis jointly prepared by the Ministry of Education and the World Bank (2013) confirmed that improving the quality of students' learning outcomes is one of the major challenges facing the educational system in Oman.

In this respect, Al-Mahrooqi & Asante (2010) argued that Omani public-school students lack the essential linguistic and communicative skills that are required for their professional or academic attainment. As a result, in most public and private universities, students require a foundation year (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). Reviewing the English curriculum and teaching methods may be necessary at this stage to help Omani students gain the skills and abilities they require to compete internationally (World Bank, 2013). Furthermore, the development of

“soft skills”, such as public speaking, problem solving, teamwork, a strong work ethic, and critical thinking, were evidently lacking among Omani students (World Bank, 2013).

Therefore, the Ministry of Education is carrying out another educational reform, represented by the Directorate General of Curriculum Development, which is initiating a new curriculum project for all core subjects, including the English language curriculum, and for all grades i.e. 1–12. This initiative was officially announced by Al Shaibani, the Minister for Education:

We are introducing new curriculum standards based on knowledge, skills and attitude of students. The clear objective is to move away from memorising and to encourage our students to be critical thinkers. We are equipping our curriculum with additional resources so that students have learning opportunities that go beyond activities in the classroom. (Times of Oman, 2014)

This initiative is still in progress; however, investigating the ELT professionals in the Sultanate at this stage about the implementation of 21st century competencies will inform the national policy. As part of the new curriculum development process is in its early stages, from a research perspective, conducting such an investigation will hopefully be of significance for the decision-makers of the new curriculum development regarding the integration and assessment of 21st century competencies. Similarly, the expected findings will be of great value during the implementation stage, as they can inform the policymakers about the anticipated amendments required and pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of the innovation.

1.3 Significance of the study

While the issues raised by increasing calls for integrating 21st century competencies, and the impacts these have on ELT professionals, can be seen around the globe, the investigation of the current thesis focuses on the views of ELT professionals in the Sultanate of Oman (teachers, supervisors, curriculum developers, and assessment officers). As a supervisor working with teachers, curriculum developers, and assessment officers, I am interested in exploring their views on this critical issue. I have come across teachers who expressed concerns about the integration process, although they were eager to implement these competencies in their classes. This was especially true of novice teachers. Curriculum developers and designers were overwhelmed by the 21st century competencies to be incorporated within the current EFL syllabus, while the teacher trainers have already started training teachers on the appropriate procedures and methods of teaching these skills. Therefore, as I was in touch with the teachers, I was very much interested in exploring their concerns, fears, interests and recommendations because in my opinion teachers play a major role in the whole process.

In addition, the current thesis reflects the interest of the whole educational system within Oman, as there has been a lot of discourse around integrating 21st century competencies into the national curriculum, particularly after the recommendation of the World Bank (2013) study to develop and reinforce such skills in the current Omani generation.

To some extent, it aligns with the aims of the Omani educational policy to improve the educational system, which will provide Omani youth with the competencies and skills required in a competitive globalised world and so they

will be open to and interact positively with global concerns. One of the aims of the education system in the Sultanate states this explicitly: “Develop life-long learners who are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values to succeed and be creative in the world of the 21st Century” (Ministry of Education, 2016).

In addition, the issue of 21st century competencies gained a lot of attention and recognition during the “Arab Spring” towards the end of 2011. Faour & Muasher (2011) argued that educational systems in the Arab world suffered from suppression and domination. Therefore, people demonstrated for their rights to question, produce knowledge, and think creatively and critically. Consequently, educational systems have since undergone major changes and reforms, especially in the Gulf States, including Oman, to cater for the demands of globalisation and the requirements of the 21st century (Al-Issa, 2015; Al-Jardani, 2015; Al-Senaidi & Wyatt, 2014; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012). These reforms range from the introduction of basic education to diploma certificate at the end of schooling.

These global and local debates will definitely have an influence on the views and decision-making of those who develop and those who implement materials, as well as supervisors and assessors. The perceptions of ELT teachers are significant and accordingly will influence the extent to which initiatives will be enacted. The issues of suitability and readiness of ELT teachers for integrating 21st century competencies into their practice is critical in this respect. The result of my previous experience investigating teachers’ attitudes toward service learning – which included some experience of competencies like problem solving and creativity – while I was conducting my MA thesis in 2011, indicated that teachers are aware of the importance of integrating such skills into their

EFL classes. However, there were a number of challenges, including textbooks' flexibility, technical support, and assessment issues. Therefore, these findings prompted me to investigate the issue in greater depth. Additionally, this experience developed my awareness of the importance of consistency in any reform, and showed that providing a platform for the ELT teachers' voices is crucial for the success of the reform; there is hardly any involvement of these categories of agents in the decisions taken within the educational system.

Hence, the proposed study will shed light on how ELT teachers in the Sultanate of Oman position themselves with regard to regional and global discourse, and will explore their opinions on integrating 21st century competencies into EFL classrooms. The study will provide insights into these issues for policymakers when developing, implementing, and evaluating curriculum reforms in the Sultanate.

1.4 Research aims and objectives

The current study used an interpretive mixed-method approach to examine the socially-constructed views of Omani ELT professionals, i.e. EFL teachers, and their decision-making about integrating 21st century competencies into the curriculum. The research aims to achieve the following objectives:

- investigate the views of Omani ELT teachers about the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum;
- explore the assessment procedures applied in alignment with the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum;
- identify the challenges of the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum;

- investigate how Omani ELT teachers can overcome and cope with the challenges;
- shed light on the strengths and benefits that integrating 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum may give the teachers, the students, the schools, and the educational context in general;
- contribute to the existing literature and conduct a new study in the Omani context that investigates the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum.

1.5 Research questions

This proposed study focuses on addressing the following questions:

1. How do Omani EFL teachers perceive the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum in Omani public basic and post-basic schools?
2. What are their views with regard to the assessment procedures that measure 21st century competencies?
3. What are the anticipated challenges with regard to the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL classrooms?
4. How can the projected challenges be overcome from their points of view?

To answer these questions a mixed-method approach was deployed. The ontological and epistemological stance of the investigation is thoroughly discussed in chapter four (see pages 121-123). Three tools were conducted to answer the questions : the Omani EFL teachers' questionnaire; 10 classroom

observations, of different teachers teaching different levels and at different schools; and 15 teachers' semi-structured interviews.

1.6 Organisation of the study

The present study is organised into seven chapters in which the materials comprising the thesis are developed and the research questions are addressed. The current chapter introduces the preliminary aspects of the study in hand, namely, the statement of the problem under study, the rationale and the significance of it, the research aims, and the research questions. In Chapter Two, the contextual background on which the research study is based and where the data are gathered, i.e. the Omani context, is broadly discussed. The relevant literature is reviewed in Chapter Three, where key concepts are articulated and the conceptual framework is laid out. Chapter Four presents the methodology and the data collection procedures of the research study. Next, in Chapter Five, the data analysis and findings are discussed with regard to the research questions. Subsequently, in Chapter Six, the findings are discussed systematically. The study then concludes with the discussion of implications, knowledge contributions, and recommendations, and with suggestions for future studies.

CHAPTER TWO

Background and Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the background information needed to understand the contextual aspects related to the topic under study. The first part provides an overview of the Sultanate and of globalisation in Oman. Then, the chapter explores ELT in general. It highlights specifically issues related to ELT, such as the use of the English language in the Omani educational system, the English language curriculum, and English language evaluation and assessment. Finally, it discusses the status of 21st century competencies in the Ministry of Education in Oman.

2.2 An overview of the Sultanate of Oman

The modern Sultanate of Oman was established after the Sultan Qaboos bin Said took power in 1970. It is located in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. It is the second-biggest country in the Arabian Peninsula, covering an area of 309,500 square kilometres, and has a population of 4,278,931 according to the statistics of October 2015 (MoNE, 2016) with a growth rate of 0.4 per annum. The population of Omani citizens is around 2,300,000, while expatriates number 1,800,000 (Ncsi, 2017). Oman is a Muslim country, with 86% of the population following Islam, and the rest are of different religions represented by foreign settlers and expatriate workers such as Hindus, Christians and Catholics (MoNE, 2016).

Due to the strategic location of Oman, it dominated the oldest and most important sea trade route in the world between the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. This vital strategic location has always been a major factor in determining the

country's politics and options, and its approach to a wide range of issues and developments both nationally and internationally.

The country has been governed by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said for 48 years and has been accelerating its advancement throughout his reign. The elimination of poverty and illiteracy, and the promotion of health services were prioritized by the government. The country is developing steadily, and Omanis enjoy the latest advancements in technology, transport, economics, health, and education.

The most distinctive feature of modern Oman is its administrative structure. It comprises eleven governorates (districts), namely, Muscat, Dhofar, Musandam, Buraimi, Dakhiliyah, North Batinah, South Batinah, South Sharqiyah, North Sharqiyah, Dhahirah and Wusta. The capital city is Muscat, and the majority of the population resides there, as do most non-natives and expatriates; it is considered a multicultural city compared with the other regions in the country.

Regardless of the country's efforts to diversify the economy, it still depends heavily on petroleum production. According to Oman's 2016 budget, over 50% of government revenues are from oil exports. The empowerment of the national workforce has been constantly emphasised over the last decade. The policy of Omanisation (replacing the skilled and qualified foreign labour with the national workforce) was one effect of such a vision. Therefore, the plan of training and educating national human resources was established as an important factor in developing the country, and Omanis can take the role of development to their fullest potential.

Arabic is the official language of the country; however, English is used increasingly. Indeed, English is used as the medium of instruction in many

educational institutions (public and private). In addition, the technology revolution and the advancement of the internet have extended the need to acquire English in Oman. Thus, Al-Issa (2014) argued that English is considered as a lingua franca; which is questionable to some extent in the Omani context depending on the results of the current study (see the discussion of teachers' frustration in section 5.6.1):

English language in the Sultanate of Oman is a lingua franca and the only official foreign language in the country. It has been receiving legislative support and has institutionalized domains like business, education and the media. (p. 26)

Although English has received legislative support from the government and it is used as a medium of instruction in many higher education institutes in the sultanate, it is still considered as a foreign language according to the conception of lingua franca provided by Firth (1996, p. 240) cited in Seidlhofer (2013). “Lingua franca is ‘a contact language’ between persons who share neither a common native language nor a common national culture and, for whom English is the chosen foreign language for communication.” Drawing on the previous characterization, English is theoretically and practically a foreign language in Oman, as the national native language is Arabic and the dominance of Islamic and Arabic cultures is high in Oman.

2.3 Globalisation in Oman

The phenomenon of globalisation is having an impact almost everywhere in the world, and Oman – where it provokes both optimistic and is pessimistic views – is no exception. The political and economic impact is seen as the leading industrial countries attempting to impose their hidden agendas for their own welfare and interests. This was evident by the domination of the English

language in much of the Arab world, as the English language was the medium of exporting globalisation to the entire world. From this perspective, globalisation was considered to homogenise and hegemonies societies all over the world, causing citizens to have less allegiance to their countries due to them gradually losing their identities, norms, heritage, and language (Al-Issa, 2015).

In contrast to this view, globalisation is seen as leading many societies to modernize through the sharing of knowledge, technology, science, and other resources. Education is one of the areas that have been affected directly by globalisation, particularly in the Middle East, hence the major changes and reforms of educational systems, especially in the Gulf states (Al-Issa, 2015; Al-Jardani, 2015; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012).

In addition, due to Oman's political stance in building political and economic relationships with almost every country in the world, foreign languages such as English in particular were in focus, as it is considered an official foreign language. As the country understands the significant role of English in advancing the country locally and globally, so the English language gains political, economic and legislative support from the higher authorities in the government (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012). The Omani government believes that through interaction, openness, and acceptance of other cultures and civilizations, Oman will gain a position internationally. Oman is a member of many different international organisations, such as the UN, UNESCO, the World Trade Organisation and others.

2.4 Education in Oman

Previously in Oman, the educational system was a non-formal one; modern education started after 1970 under the regime of H. M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said.

Since then, the enrichment of human capital has been a priority for the government in all domains. As a result, the educational system has been revolutionized significantly due to the emphasis the government has attached to the educational sector in order to achieve the set educational goals as a gateway to the country's development. Since then, reform of the Omani educational system has undergone three main phases. These phases are focal points that have transformed education in the country. The aim of the first phase was to accelerate quantitative development of education. Improving the quality of education was the main goal for the next phase, which took place in the 1980s. With the help of international experts, different aspects of improvement were involved, such as curricula, teaching materials and methods, and teacher preparation programmes. In 1986 the development of education reached a turning point, with the establishment of Sultan Qaboos University as the first university in the Sultanate to provide a bachelor's degree, in various disciplines including education. The Omani BA graduates have been gradually replacing the non-Omani teachers in the public schools. Furthermore, the Sultanate of Oman's Vision 2020 strategy had its direct impacts on the Omani educational system. It is a strategy that guides Oman towards a sustainable and diversified economy. The main aim of the vision is to ensure that the per capita income remains at its 1995 level as a minimum, while attempting to double it in real terms by 2020. In addition, the vision aims to create constructive conditions for economic progress. The government aims to use oil and gas revenues to achieve economic diversification while focusing on the provision of health and education services, training citizens and developing their skills, and pursuing policies aimed at promoting a decent standard of living.

The basic themes of the vision, according to Royal Decree 1/96 ratifying the Fifth Five-Year Development Plan, are as follows.

1- Development of human resources and Omanis' capabilities to keep up with technical development, manage the changes therein with high efficiency and face the ever-changing domestic and global conditions.

2- Creation of a stable holistic economic climate with a view to developing a private sector able to optimize the use of the human and natural resources of the Sultanate through efficient methods ,and to maintain environment integrity.

3- Encouragement of the existence of a private sector that is effective and competitive, and the strengthening of the mechanisms and institutions that promote the vision and common policies between it and the government.

4- Creation of favourable conditions for economic diversification and work towards the optimal exploitation of the natural resources of the Sultanate.

5- Enhancement of the standard of living of citizens, and reduction of disparities among regions and different income groups, to ensure that all citizens benefit from the development process.

6- Maintenance of gains achieved during the 25 years since the beginning of the Renaissance in 1970 (Oman Supreme council of Planning, 2019).

As a result, significant reforms to education were introduced in order to cope with the future economic vision of the country (Ministry of Education, 2012). They were designed primarily to equip young Omanis with the knowledge, intellectual skills, and attitudes that they will need in order to learn and face the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

2.5 Omani educational system

Schooling in Oman is a free option, and all Omani children taking up this option go through ten years of basic education; however, education is not compulsory.

The school system in Oman is divided into two general stages – basic

education and post-basic. The basic education model was introduced in 1998/99 (Ministry of Education, 2012); it is organised into cycle one (grades 1–4), which is co-educational, and cycle two (grades 5–10), which is mono-educational.

The basic education system is replacing the general education system (elementary, preparatory, and the first grade of secondary education). It is designed to provide a unified grade 1–10 programme for all school-age children to improve learning outcomes through the development of new curricula and textbooks. The post-basic education system, which includes grades 11 and 12, was implemented in 2007/08. The two-year post-basic education system has gradually replaced the two years of secondary education under the general education system (Ministry of Education, 2012). The post-basic education curriculum is organised on a “core plus electives” model, and students are given an element of choice. During these two years, students’ school experience is expected to prepare them for life after school, either for higher education or for entry into the labour market (Issan & Gomaa, 2010).

Students’ performance and achievement are assessed through systematic formative and summative assessment. The General Diploma certificate is awarded to students upon the completion of grade 12 in post-basic education (Ministry of Education, 2012). The Ministry of Education carries out several central roles, such as planning educational policy, specifying educational objectives, and drawing up strategies, plans and projects through which the objectives are achieved. Within the Ministry of Education, the Directorate General of Curriculum Development has the responsibility for developing the national curriculum that is taught in all public schools. In addition, it has the

responsibility of monitoring the quality of education in public, private, and international schools (UNESCO, 2010/11).

2.6 The status of English in Oman

As mentioned previously, the English language serves as dominating in Oman, especially since the discovery of oil and gas. Government and private sectors utilise English as a second form of communication with citizens and with international organisations. Consequently, improving English language instruction receives massive political and economic support from the government, which defines its place on the social “hierarchy” (Al-Issa, 2002).

Therefore, the English language holds an international significance for Omani society (Al-Jardani, 2013), where there is considerable awareness of its importance. Most parents seek the best English-language teaching for their children, by enrolling them in short language courses or sending them to private schools to improve their chances of obtaining a bright future in the competitive world. It has been the norm in the Omani community to view competence in the English language as a prerequisite for obtaining a white-collar job (Al-Busaidi, 1995; Al-Issa, 2002; Al-Jardani, 2013).

The economy, media and education have accelerated the development of English in Omani society (Al-Busaidi, 1995), and to cope with the demands, English is taught from grade 1 in public schools and in kindergarten in private schools. Additionally, English is used as the major medium of instruction and training in tertiary education throughout the country (Al-Issa, 2009).

Such efforts indicate that English plays a key role in any educational innovation; indeed, Wiley (1996) considered it a resource for national development. At the

national level, English is considered an essential tool that eases Omanisation (Al-Issa, 2002).

Thus, the Omani authorities and policymakers are aware that competence in English is essential for Oman to play an active role in the new global economy. In addition, English is considered the first language of global business and commerce, and is an exclusively important language in different sectors, such as aviation and banking (Al-Issa, 2005). Moreover, globally, English is used as a language for science and technology, and the rapid growth of international computerised databases and telecommunications networks, which are all maintained in English, is progressively becoming a significant feature of academic and business life (Ministry of Education, 2012). The increased national and international demands for competence in English require creative reforms in the Omani education system, so the significance of incorporating 21st century competencies into the educational system and its impacts on practice and decision-making will be the focus of the current study.

2.7 English language in the Omani public schools

The philosophy of education in the Sultanate of Oman prioritises the teaching and learning of English language in order to satisfy the needs of the country's developmental strategies. Thus, English is introduced in grade 1 as a core subject beside the mother tongue language, i.e. Arabic.

Currently English is taught using a course book, *English for Me* (EFM), which has replaced the *Our World through English* (OWTE) series that had been used under the General Education system for children from grade 4. The *English for Me* textbooks are used in basic education schools, with Cycle 1 for grades 1–4 and Cycle 2 for Grades 5–10, and a different textbook is taught for grades 11–

12, called *Engage with English*. Students learn English for five to seven sessions per week, and each session lasts about 40 minutes, giving a total of approximately four hours per week.

There are both Omani and non-Omani English teachers. Almost all the female English teachers are Omanis; however, male English teachers come from a variety of nationalities, such as Egyptian, Tunisian, Jordanian, Indian, and Sudanese. Teachers' qualifications and teaching experiences in Oman vary. Most of the Omani teachers have a BA, especially after the successful upgrading of Omanis high teaching Diploma holders through the University of Leeds BA Educational Studies in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) between 1999 and 2008 (Wyatt & Atkins, 2009). In addition, from the 1990s, Omani graduates of Sultan Qaboos University could study English language teaching, to teach in the post-basic schools. Since then, there have also been recruits from private universities to fill continuing vacancies at all levels. The demand for teachers has increased to fill the vacancies due to the rapid population growth and due to the policy of Omanisation (Al-Balooshi, 2009).

Before joining the Omani public schools, Omani and non-Omani teachers undertake an in-service orientation course in order to support their teaching and help them familiarise themselves with the Omani educational system, textbooks and strategies so they can better work with Omani students (Al-Jardani, 2013).

As Oman is a vast country with a variety of landscapes, such as mountainous, coastal and desert areas, students come from many different environments and backgrounds. A few of them have had the chance to be exposed to the English language at home, mainly in and around the capital; however, the majority of

students are rarely exposed to it. Therefore, English language classrooms provide them with their only exposure to the language. Luckily, thanks to technology, Omani students have the opportunity nowadays to hear the language through satellite television and the internet almost everywhere in the Sultanate. Students are enrolled in the school system when they are six years old and spend around 12 years in formal schooling.

2.8 English language curriculum

The Directorate General of Curriculum Development takes the full responsibility for developing curricula, producing and evaluating teaching materials, and conducting other curriculum- and training-related matters. Many ministerial bodies, working in co-ordination on planning and policy, take the decisions about curriculum development. Curriculum subject committees develop the materials and evaluate them, while they are implemented in schools in accordance with directives and objectives stated by the ministry. Specialists in different subject areas, as well as teachers and school supervisors, are included in these committees. Each committee reviews, writes, and amends curriculum objectives and the teaching and learning materials for their subject area. Completed tasks, i.e. specifications of objectives and units of instructional materials, are submitted to the various curriculum departments. Each department studies what has been completed by the committee and discusses the amendments with the curriculum, assessment, and training committees. Ultimately, a final version is submitted to the supreme committee, which then takes the decision. The subject of English goes through these same procedures.

The content of the English teaching materials pays attention to the international trends of the 21st century, the needs of Omani society, and the understanding and co-existence of others, maintaining the values and positive traditions of Omani society, and linking educational outcomes with the demands of the labour market (Ministry of Education, 2012). The changes made to the current curriculum included the following:

- educational philosophy;
- the role of English in society;
- students' and parents' expectations;
- an increased level of students' awareness in terms of knowledge of the world;
- educational technology.

Apart from the changes included, the current curriculum of English is aimed at reflecting:

- expectations for higher levels of achievement from the school programme;
- less dependence on transmission-oriented modes of teaching;
- acknowledgment of learner-centred methodology;
- less dependence on textbooks;
- less emphasis on linguistic “product” as the outcome of every lesson;
- greater emphasis on the role of English in continuing technological and economic development, and promoting world knowledge.

(MoE, 2011, p.8)

Accordingly, the aims for the 12 years of the English curriculum were formulated. Two kinds of objectives were formulated: those which address language learning; and those which address the socio-cultural and attitudinal

domains of learning. The areas of linguistics are vocabulary, grammar, and the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The non-linguistic objectives are related to culture, learning strategies, attitudes, and motivation. Additionally, an integrated topic- and skills-based approach to the curriculum has been implemented, as well as a communicative teaching methodology aligned to the needs of the Omani classrooms (Ministry of Education, 2011).

2.9 English language evaluation and assessment

In alignment with the curriculum, content and teaching methods development in Oman, a need for changing the assessment of students' techniques was acknowledged. The assessment methods should reflect the changes, as the new curriculum de-emphasises rote memorisation. According to Al-Belushi, Al-Adawi & Al-Ketani (1999), Oman is implementing performance assessment to match its reform. Two key decisions were taken regarding student assessment in the Omani educational system:

- to avoid complete dependence on examinations as the basic measurement tool to evaluate students' school achievements;
- to abolish promotion examinations in cycle one of basic education and instead adopt a continuous formative assessment system. (Rassekh, 2004, p.22)

The implementation of a modern assessment methodology was one of the features of the basic education reform in the Sultanate; for example, replacing summative assessment, which depends totally on examination, with formative assessment, which employs a variety of methods to assess a wide range of aspects of learning, e.g. knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Examples of such techniques to measure students' progress are classroom observations, and

students' portfolios and projects (Ministry of Education, 2011). This sort of assessment tries to help students to succeed and improve their learning skills.

2.10 21st century competencies in the educational system

In a speech to the Oman Council, His Majesty commented as follows:

Giving attention to human resources, including the provision of the various tools required to enhance their performance and incentives to develop their capabilities, diversify their creative talents and improve their scientific and practical qualifications, is the basis of real development and the cornerstone in its structure, which is based on solid foundations. We will provide educational opportunities for them in order that they may acquire useful knowledge, the required experience and the necessary technical skills that will be needed in the labour market and as are required by the sustainable development programmes in the various fields. (From a speech of His Majesty the Sultan in 2008)

This description of the broad vision of how to develop the national human resources guided the Ministry of Education to accelerate its efforts to equip young Omanis with the qualities and competencies required to enhance and sustain the country's development. Additionally, the increasing role of the technological revolution and the challenges created by globalisation are important variables that necessitate a continuous review and renewal of educational policies and programmes. Moreover, the education system in the country has to cope with the rapid changes in the international market and the necessity for divergent education programmes that can provide consistency. However, the Ministry of Education faced the challenge of preparing young Omanis for a competitive labour market and the need to achieve community harmony and to promote cultural diversity and the values of citizenship in the community. Therefore, the educational system in the Sultanate of Oman gave

special attention to learners' competencies in the 21st century, in light of the directives of His Majesty the Sultan during the annual session of the Council of Oman in 2011/2012, stressing the importance of the quality of educational outcomes, and the linkage between those outcomes and the requirements of society and the labour market, through reviewing educational policies, plans and development programmes.

As a result, the Ministry of Education reviewed its educational policies and programmes to bring them into alignment with the demands of the international labour market. For instance, in 2008, the ministry organised the Fourth Ministerial Meeting of Ministers of Education in the Broader Middle East and North Africa and the countries of the Group of Eight (good education for relevant learning), and one of the themes discussed was the quality of education for effective learning and the role of partnership with the labour market. A collaborative study between the World Bank and the Ministry of Education in 2012, "Education in the Sultanate of Oman: the move forward in achieving quality", aimed to shed light on the relevance of educational outcomes to the requirements of the labour market. In 2012, the ministry conducted a panel discussion with other government institutions and the private sector under the theme "integrating entrepreneurship in education", which aimed to identify the prerequisite values, knowledge, and entrepreneurial skills for the labour market and to emphasise the educational programmes that meet them. It recommended a range of important up-to-date knowledge, qualities, and skills that are required to enter the labour market in the future.

Then, in 2013, the ministry organised an international symposium titled "Education and 21st century Competencies", which provided a unique

opportunity to exchange knowledge and experiences with a wide range of experts and specialists on procedures to improve the efficiency of the education system in the 21st century in the Sultanate. Among the recommendations was the formulation of a national framework for educational competencies aligned with the country's actual needs and the upcoming growth of the labour market, and for work to be done to form a comprehensive strategy and to manifest its interconnectivity with corporations in the market to improve support and implementation in different phases and to shrink the gap between schools' outputs and the dynamic markets.

In accordance with the recommendations mentioned earlier, the ministry started working on an educational reform that would integrate 21st century competencies into the system. All components of the school, including the curriculum, assessment methods, teacher preparation and training programmes, and extra-curricular activities, will be planned in an integrated format to create a learning environment that promotes the required learner competencies. English language teaching and learning was also included in this reform. An EFL professionals committee was formed through ministerial decree which included three curriculum officers, an EFL supervisor, and assessment officers. However, teachers were not included in this stage of formulating the EFL curriculum framework. Therefore, the procedure followed was an entirely top-down process.

In my experience, some Omani EFL teachers have risen to the challenge of integrating these competencies into their classroom practice independently, and in most cases these practices are carried out implicitly. This is partly due to the

marginalisation and exclusion of teachers from participating in the whole process of integration.

Therefore, providing them with chances to participate actively in decision-making, besides providing them with suitable support from supervisors, curriculum developers, assessment officers, or the school administration, will help the teachers to work confidently and competently.

In conclusion, although the Ministry of Education acknowledges the importance of integrating 21st century competencies into classroom practices, to date, little research has been conducted in this field to seek out ELT teachers' views and discover how they will affect the success of reforms.

It is hoped that knowing their views will reduce the gap between classroom practice and the policymakers, by highlighting the areas where teachers may need support to enable them to integrate the required competencies properly. It will also provide an opportunity to hear their voices both regarding how they understand these competencies and whether they feel these competencies are appropriate for the progression of English teaching in the Sultanate.

2.11 Summary of the chapter

This chapter has emphasised key aspects related to the background and context in which the current study was conducted. The chapter discussed economic, religious, and social backgrounds. Additionally, it tackled the educational system and the status of English in the Sultanate, while the English language curriculum, English language assessment and evaluation and English language teaching were also discussed. The focus was on the impact of globalisation and the 2020 national vision on education in general, and on the

English language teaching and learning in particular. Finally, the chapter presented the status of the 21st century competencies within the educational system in the Sultanate. The next chapter will focus on the conceptual framework of the study along with the related research literature.

CHAPTER THREE

Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews different aspects related to curriculum development and reform. In the following sections, these aspects are discussed from a critical perspective. The chapter begins by reviewing the concept of curriculum. It then discusses the ideologies and philosophical assumptions of curriculum development. Next, there is a discussion about bottom-up and top-down approaches in curriculum development. Then, the chapter explores the different models of curriculum evaluation, focusing on some specific models; namely, Tyler's model, Taba's model, the Skilbeck situational model, the Nation & Macalister model, and the Christison & Murray model. Next, the concept of 21st century competencies is tackled, followed by a detailed description of these skills and competencies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some studies that have been conducted on curriculum reforms in Oman, and finally, a brief summary of the chapter is given.

3.2. The concept of curriculum and curriculum development

The concept of curriculum is not new, and yet the way we comprehend it changes constantly. Originally, the word "curriculum" was derived from the Latin word *currere*, which means a course to be run, and it is defined as the course of study in an educational organisation (Smith, 2000). This leads us to define curriculum in a philosophical and technical sense; for example, Grundy (1987, p. 5) described it as "a cultural construction". The concept of curriculum has received much attention in the literature, and a wide range of definitions has been offered in order to help scholars and researchers grasp this significant concept. However, it remains a controversial concept that suggests a multitude

of meanings. Personally, I agree with Jung & Pinar (2015) when they argue that curriculum is a complex concept conceived differently at different times by different scholars working in different countries and regions, working in different institutions and settings with different demands.

Stenhouse (1975) argued that curriculum definitions provide professionals with the perspectives on which they focus. On the other hand, scholars such as Ornstein & Hunkins (2013) and Marsh & Willis (2007) described curriculum as a fragmented area of study, confusing, difficult to define and “no easy matter” to conceptualise. As a result, professionals, practitioners, theorists, and philosophers view curriculum from different perspectives. For instance, the teacher’s view of curriculum is different from that of curriculum designers and assessors and from the view of researchers, learners, or other stakeholders. According to the literature, there are a number of aspects of curriculum as identified by theorists, such as knowledge or documents, experience, plan, and process. Some definitions combine two or three aspects according to the purpose of the curriculum. For example, Connelly & Clandinin (1988) defined curriculum as “experienced in situations”. These situations may be articulated through the interaction with the materials that convey the learning outcomes and knowledge. According to Wiles & Bondi (2007, p. 2), "The curriculum represents a set of desired goals or values that are activated through a development process and culminate in successful learning experiences for students."

Popkewitz (1997) argued that curriculum “involves forms of knowledge” (p. 140). Similarly, Howell & Evans (1995) interpreted curriculum as a document or a manual that includes a series of structured descriptions of learning outcomes

for a particular subject area and contains detailed specifications of what is to be learned, how it should be learned and taught, how it should be implemented, and how learning should be assessed. On the other hand, both Tomlinson (2003) and McGrath (2002) viewed curriculum narrowly as materials and documents, mainly in language education such as EFL. They suggested that a curriculum consists of all the materials used in a teaching setting, such as the students' books, the teacher's book, the students' work, the teacher's work, and the teaching aids and materials that teachers and learners bring to the classroom to facilitate teaching and learning.

These stances for considering curriculum, in my opinion, are narrow and basic, as they disregard vital facets of a curriculum, such as the process of planning and the engagement of the stakeholders in the process.

Viewing curriculum as a process rather than as a product has attracted much attention in the recent literature. From this perspective, curriculum is considered as a framework of process which includes: decisions taken for setting goals and aims; the selection of content; the methods of teaching; and assessment and evaluation of the whole process. McKernan (2008) adopted this view of curriculum as a process instead of as set results and goals. He suggested that curriculum is "a proposal setting out an educational plan, offering students socially valued knowledge, attitudes, values, skills and abilities, which are made available to students through a variety of experiences, at all levels of the education system" (p. 12). This definition, which is originally derived from Stenhouse (1975), arguably does not separate theory from practice, nor from assessment and evaluation. Additionally, describing curriculum as a proposal

provides room for experimentation, research, flexibility, reflectivity and critical scrutiny.

Curriculum is basically considered as the end product of a technical process known as curriculum development. Richards (2001, p. 2), identified the concept of language curriculum development as the

processes that are used to determine the needs of a group of learners, to develop aims or objectives for a programme to address those needs, to determine an appropriate syllabus, course structure, teaching methods, and materials, and to carry out an evaluation of the language programme that results from these processes.

Similarly, Clark (1987) defined curriculum development as an ongoing process, that aims for all the components of the curriculum and the documents to be reviewed and revised by a group of curriculum experts according to the needs and conditions of all parties concerned, and that ends with the production of documents and packages of teaching materials.

The previously-mentioned definitions of curriculum development consider curriculum development as involving systematic processes, and they represent an inclusive description of the different needs and purposes of these processes. Yet they still conceptualise curriculum as having predetermined aims, and neglect the element of hypothesising, i.e. research. Therefore, McKernan (2008) views curriculum development as the process involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating study courses or patterns of educational activities that have been carried out as improvement proposals. This definition implies that curriculum development processes are not only systematic, but are critical proposals for action. Indeed, this definition informs the current study, for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is comprehensive in the sense that it considers a

variety of purposes, such as informing decisions, improving effectiveness, making judgments, and accepting that the current curriculum is not complete or perfect. Secondly, McKernan (2008) considers the contribution of different parties in an educational system, in the development processes. Thirdly, as the study examines the challenges ELT professionals face and how they overcome them, it proves that ongoing change and curriculum development is an imperative. Therefore, these features are applicable to the Omani EFL curriculum in different ways. First, the current curriculum requires practical improvements and adjustments for the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. Additionally, the current curriculum ought to be evaluated in terms of content, pedagogy and assessment approaches. Thus, involving all stakeholders in the process of integration is one of the key requirements for effective development. Active participation – of teachers, students, trainers, supervisors, decision-makers and the community – is essential for proper implementation of the competencies. Moreover, including them and considering their suggestions, demands, complaints and challenges might enhance the quality of the Omani EFL curriculum and eventually improve schooling outcomes.

3.3 The confusion between “curriculum” and “syllabus”

The literature also differentiates between the terms “curriculum” and “syllabus”, which are often used interchangeably, especially among teachers. According to Al Zadjali (2017) and Alwan (2006), this confusion is due to lack of knowledge of the differences between the two concepts. Luke, Woods & Weir (2013), however, attribute the confusion to the continuation of the trend toward control

and regulation of teachers and teachers' work. They argue that the syllabus should be considered as a “defensible” map of core skills, knowledges, competences and capacities, with explicit alignment with systematic school- and classroom-level assessment approaches. Richards (2003, p. 2) defined syllabus as “a specification of the content of a course of instruction and lists of what will be taught and tested”.

Breen (1987, p.82) also defines syllabus as

a plan of what is to be achieved through teaching and learning. Such a plan, most typically, maps out that body of knowledge and those capabilities which are regarded as worthwhile outcomes from the work of teachers and learners in a particular situation for which the syllabus was designed.

This view of syllabus as a map is similar to Woods, Luke & Weir (2010) cited in Luke, Woods & Weir (2013). They define the syllabus as an authorised map of the school subject to be covered over a course or school semester, such as Science, Maths, Arabic Language or English Language. This official document provides teachers with a rationale and outline of the relevant knowledge, skills, performance and competences.

For the sake of the context of this study, I shall adopt the views of Breen (1987) and Luke, Woods & Weir (2013), who consider syllabus as a part of the curriculum and as a map comprising a list of content, skills, performances, competencies and assessment practices. Their definition is inclusive and matches the aim of the current study, i.e. investigating the integration process of 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context. In addition, it explores the assessment approaches teachers deploy during the integration.

3.4. Theoretical framework for the study

Tying our general understanding to concrete theoretical practices enables us to consider more adequately the complexities of our social conditions and our role within society (Berman, 2013). As Flick (2018) argued, each discipline has a dominant approach with intended questions, procedures, and conceptual perspectives. In addition, in each field, there is a group of highly productive and influential scholars who communicate formally and informally about the relevant concepts, perspectives, and philosophies. The variations in theoretical stances in the social sciences often represent deep-seated differences in root assumptions about the nature of the world to be investigated. Popkewitz (2011) argued that the underlying assumptions about method and theory in the social sciences are linked to the major transformations of social relations, politics, and economics that occur in society as a whole. Therefore, recognising the conceptual or theoretical framework is essential in any social sciences research. The conceptual framework is useful in defining the research problem, establishing theoretical coherence, organising research design and implementation, and framing conceptual conclusions (Berman, 2013). Similarly, Miles & Huberman (1994, p. 18) defined a conceptual framework as “a visual written product, one that explains either graphically or in narrative form the main subject to be studied and key factors, concepts and presumed relationship among them.”

Troudi (2010) explained that the purpose of a theoretical framework in educational research is to reflect where the research stands intellectually vis-à-vis the research questions, and to convey how the researcher views the data. Additionally, the constructs and concepts under investigation need to be defined

and positioned in context of the related literature in order to establish, explain, and justify the researcher's understanding of the concepts under study. Because theoretical frameworks and research paradigms are intellectually and philosophically intertwined, researchers, especially novice ones, face the challenge of drawing a distinction between them (Troudi, 2011). Unfortunately, that was precisely my experience as a novice researcher before realising the differences.

There are two main elements of any theoretical framework, according to Maja (2015). First, it provides an argument for the study's significance, in order to convince the reader that the study is worth conducting, and second, it entails building an argument that links the research to important theoretical perspectives, policy issues, concerns of practice, or social issues that affect people's everyday life.

In this study, 21st century competencies are a current issue that influences teaching and learning in Omani EFL classrooms; therefore, it is of great value to investigate ELT teachers' views on integrating 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum to reinforce teaching and learning strategies in Omani public schools.

Secondly, the theoretical framework reflects the important intellectual traditions that guide the study (Maja, 2015). Hence, this study is informed by a combination of constructivist and social constructionist theoretical frameworks. The nature of individuals' stances is viewed through the constructivist theory, as individuals construct meaning through experience (Pring, 2004). Therefore, constructivism views people as constructive agents and views the phenomenon

as constructed instead of passively received. In other words, “facts” are not discovered but are created (Pring, 2004, p. 46), leading to the active construction of one’s own representation of the world and the accommodation of it to one’s personal conceptual framework (Richards, 2001, p. 117). Social constructivism, on the other hand, views meaning-making and realities as socially constructed. As a result, culture plays a key role in forming social realities and learning experiences. Additionally, the impact of globalisation and labour market policies, as discussed in Chapter One, will be tackled in the conceptualisation of the study.

3.5. Philosophical assumptions (ideologies) underlying curriculum development

According to Clark (1987), there are three main philosophical assumptions, or ideologies, underlying curriculum development, and each ideology has an impact on, and shapes the nature of, curriculum development and reform. These three ideologies are classical humanism, reconstructionism, and progressivism. On the other hand, Richards (2001) classified five such ideologies, namely: academic rationalism; social and economic efficiency; learner-centredness; social reconstructionism; and cultural pluralism. Slattery (2013) discussed the influences of the following ideologies in curriculum development: poststructuralism; deconstructionism; and postmodernism. While in yet another analysis, McKernan (2008) identified six main curriculum ideologies, namely: intellectual-rationalist; theo-religious; social-romantic; technical-behavioural; personal-caring; and critical-political. Thus, these ideologies have directed curriculum development throughout the history of

education. Indeed, McKernan (2008, p. 27) described them as "the base of values from which decisions are made about what and how to teach." However, going deep into the aforementioned ideologies, the intersection between their underpinning assumptions is evident.

To begin with, classical humanism is described as a content-oriented approach, and sequencing the content from simple to complex is one of the key features. The selection and organisation of content is the role of the educational experts, and teachers are only implementers. It is also known as the examination-oriented model, where students are set in homogeneous groups and are assessed by being compared in a rank order, whereupon high academic achievers move on to the next stage. Classical humanism emphasises intellectual abilities like memorisation, analysis, synthesis, and judgment. Teachers, who are viewed as instructors and transmitters of knowledge, apply the instructions of the predesigned materials without any amendments. These assumptions are similar to the intellectual-rationalist view presented by McKernan (2008). The concept of education as cultivating the intellect and further intellectual growth, through arranging the curriculum into rational forms of subject organisation which are passed on consistently, justifies teaching literature or American/British culture in language courses in order to maintain the elite status of the English language. This ideology is knowledge-driven and assumes that knowledge (truth) never changes. The perennial nature of knowledge is a feature of the intellectual-rationalist view of curriculum. Therefore, the content of the curriculum should be selected carefully to represent true knowledge. Teachers are viewed as transmitters of fact and as correctors of errors. McKernan (2008) justified the lack of any form of social

need or extra-curricular activities in such schools, as it takes away from the time allocated for the acquisition of intellectual knowledge. Meanwhile, Clark (1987) described the classical humanism approach as a "top-down" approach.

Similarly, the theo-religious ideology is also considered a top-down ideology. It is as old as the "Tablet Schools" (McKernan, 2008). The main purpose of such schools was teaching religion to children and young people. The "Cathedral Schools" are another form of religious schools. Therefore, schools advocating this ideology apply a similar approach to that of the intellectual-rationalist schools; they teach the learner about religion as an absolute truth, teachers are considered as transmitters of knowledge, and the content of the curriculum is designed according to religious practices and holy books. This ideology in particular is common in the Arab world. Families send their children to such schools during the early years of childhood to learn the Islamic practices and recite the "Holy Quran". Indeed, as a child, I attended such schools.

In addition to theo-religious ideology, the social-romantic ideology is also one of the top-down ideologies. It is also known as child-centred ideology. The child/learner's interests and needs are the main concern of the ideology. It prioritises the learners' interests and needs rather than the content of the curriculum. Therefore, the main purpose of the schools that adopt this ideology is to prepare students socially and democratically for being with others. John Dewey, A. S. Neill, William Kilpatrick, and Maria Montessori are examples of philosophers who supported this ideology. Accordingly, the teacher's role shifts from master to facilitator and from judge to advisor. However, the teacher plays no significant role in the predesigning stages of the curriculum development process.

The underpinning assumptions of the technical-behaviour ideology are reflected directly in the teaching/learning of 21st century skills and competencies. Yet, it is one of the top-down ideologies. This ideology holds the view that students are consumers. It emphasises the capitalist stance through the processes of producing, consuming, measuring, and vocationalism (McKernan, 2008). The impact of globalisation and technology is evident within the ideology. The curriculum is designed for career work, which includes modern technology courses. Teachers and students are viewed as consumers and are held accountable for the results of their performance. As a result, schools supporting this ideology prepare learners for the job market.

In contrast, the personal-caring ideology, which is also known as the humanistic ideology, was developed as a reaction to, and to compensate for the limitations of, the technical-behaviour ideology. It shares certain features and values with the social-romantic ideology. However, it focuses strongly on the development of the student as a person. The curriculum within this ideology emphasises the features of the humanism, such as inner harmony, self-actualisation, dignity and self-respect, and the worthiness of persons. As values and morals are central to this ideology, the teacher's role is to provide learners with choices in order that they learn how to make moral decisions. Students are required to go beyond mere realisation and to embrace limitless exploration.

Furthermore, reconstructionism is aim-driven, with a linear perspective of curriculum development. It starts with a needs analysis and ends with an evaluation plan. Promoting social unity through teaching and empowering students to change their lives within a society is the main feature of reconstructionism. Communicative language teaching was a result of this

approach “going communicative”, as Richards (2001) described that period of time. Nonetheless, as with the previously-mentioned ideologies, in this approach teachers are considered as implementers, or in ELT as facilitators, and their role starts when everything is ready. It is the responsibility of the expert committees to select, organise, renew, and produce the materials; schools merely implement the ready-made packages. Thus, teachers are not allowed to carry out any modification of the packages the schools receive; they are provided with in-service training to train them on how to implement the materials. Therefore, this ideology is technically a top-down approach.

Progressivism is a methodology-oriented approach, and learning through experience is a key feature (Richards, 2001). As a result, teachers are viewed as creators in that they create suitable learning experiences so students learn how to learn. Instead of teachers being provided with predesigned teaching packages, they are provided with teaching principles and specifications to help them create their own curricula that suit their context (Stenhouse, 1975). This assumption, according to McKernan (2008), views both teachers and students as investigators or researchers who are looking for improvement in the curriculum. Consequently, curriculum reforms are either class-based or school-based. Individual teachers or groups of teachers are involved in curriculum development according to the requirements of a particular school. Such developments can be described as small-scale reforms that instantly solve problems in the teaching context (Clark, 1987). This is considered a type of "bottom-up" approach, as it directly involves the teacher in the process of curriculum development. Nonetheless, this approach faces the challenge of resistance from novice, inexperienced, and unqualified teachers, who prefer to

be adopters of the curriculum rather than creators (Manea, 2016; Al-Senaidi & Wyatt, 2014; Al-Jardani, 2013). In such cases, support from experts is essential for a successful “bottom-up” approach (Manea, 2016).

One contemporary movement that has a direct influence on curriculum development is postmodernism – as opposed to modernism, structuralism, totalising theory, and absolutism (Slattery, 2013). Kelly (2009) and Slattery (2013) argued that defining postmodernism is a challenging task because of its complexity and because it has been advocated in different intellectual contexts, such as politics, art, science, economics, psychology, culture, and education. Thus, the control over knowledge and ultimate truths by the previous ideologies has been questioned; as Kelly (2009, p. 34) commented, “Postmodernism adds great strength to the case for viewing what appears to count as knowledge, at any given time or in any given socio-political context, with continuing scepticism and without dogmatic confidence.” As a result, the view of a curriculum as “God-given” is undermined (Kelly, 2009). In the postmodern era, the curriculum development process involves empowering teachers and researchers through collaboration, negotiation, and reciprocity. In addition, it aims to emancipate teachers and students from the traditional view of teachers controlling the teaching/learning processes, and move towards offering relatively equal power relations between them.

The underpinning assumptions of postmodernism and critical theory informed the critical-political ideology (McKernan, 2008). Promoting the idea of schools as agents of cultural and political change is one of the key assumptions of the critical-political ideology. Therefore, curriculum tackles issues like poverty, racism, the environment, gender issues, and intergroup conflicts, while teaching

about equality and conflict resolution is promoted within this ideology (Eisner, 2002). It empowers teachers, administrators, and students, and considers them as active participants in the curriculum development process in order to transform the society and the culture (McKernan, 2008).

Informed by these different ideologies/philosophies, other classifications approach curriculum theory and curriculum practice as product, process, and praxis. Basically, curriculum as a product is one of the traditional approaches of curriculum that was promoted by Franklin Bobbitt in 1918-1924 and Ralph Tyler in 1949 (McKernan, 2008; Grundy, 1987). This approach received much attention, as the developed curriculum is systematic, and can be found in a very controlled and centralized institutions. It starts with the formulation of behavioural objectives or clear outcomes, which can be assessed and evaluated (Kelly, 2009). Although this approach could be considered attractive, in terms of effectiveness through its systematic planning and organisation, it has received some criticisms. One of the major criticisms is that it considers curriculum as a technical exercise that is imposed on teachers and students. As a result, this approach limits the voices of both teachers and students, and, in some contexts, they have no voices at all (Slattery, 2013). In addition, measuring and evaluating the objectives or the outcome is unrealistic, as to do so would be to imply that behaviour can be measured mechanically. Furthermore, it neglects the processes of interaction and the experiences gained within the learning/teaching situation (Howard, 2007). Therefore, as an alternative, the “curriculum as a process” approach was established. One of the famous scholars who explored the process model of curriculum is Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) (Breen, 2001; Grundy, 1998).

According to McKernan (2008), this approach rejects the predetermined behavioural objectives and considers curriculum as an active interaction between teachers, students, and knowledge. The assumption that teachers and students are active participants in formulating the curriculum through their interactions, negotiation, and collaborative decision-making is entrenched in this approach. Therefore, the ultimate goal of the process approach is developing situations or tasks that encourage interaction, negotiation, and decision-making (Slattery, 2013). Apple (2004) argued that the process-oriented curriculum is better than the other models in that it depoliticises the curriculum to some extent.

Although the process approach is promising, especially in empowering teachers and treating students as subjects rather than objects, it lacks the uniformity of the content taught in the classroom. In addition, the quality of the teacher plays an important role in the success or failure of the approach. Smith (2000) argued that the absence of reflection and critical focus in the process approach, and the introduction of the praxis approach as an alternative, originated from the ideas of Aristotle, Habermas, and Freire. At the heart of the praxis model is the emancipation of the human spirit and the orientation to the collective human well-being – “Thus the emancipatory interest is in the empowerment for learners to engage in autonomous action” (Grundy, 1987, p. 114). Emancipatory interest engages the students, along with the teacher, as active creators of knowledge; in the process, their consciousness is transformed to perceive and act accordingly towards the curriculum. Subsequently, educational experiences are a matter of negotiation between teacher and students. Critical pedagogy originated from the emancipatory interest, and knowledge of critical pedagogy is

constructed in a particular cultural, social, and historical nexus of relationships (Pennycook, 1990).

It is a process which takes the experience of both “teachers and students and through dialogue and negotiation recognises them both as problematic” (Grundy, 1998, p. 103). It also discriminates between natural and cultural. Thus, praxis is a combination, and empowers both teachers and learners to engage in autonomous action and reflection. One feature of praxis is that it deals with authentic world issues and operates in the world of interaction socially and culturally (Pennycook, 1990; Grundy, 1998). Hence, the world of praxis is constructed and is not natural. Critique of all knowledge is implicit in the praxis curriculum (Ford & McGrath 1994). In fact, the curriculum process is inescapably political. Those who have the power to control the curriculum are those who have the power to make sure that their meanings are accepted as worthy of transmission. However, in the curriculum-as-praxis ideology, the learning community is responsible for judging and criticising the validity and authenticity of the learning experiences.

3.6. Top-down vs bottom-up models

The previous models of curriculum development are mainly described as top-down approaches. As a result, many educational systems around the world prefer the centralised, administrative, or hierarchical models, especially in the Arab world (Mawed, 2016; Al-Senaidi & Wyatt, 2012; Al-Jardani, 2013; Al-Issa, 2010). The curriculum in these systems is decided upon and developed by the authorities. Committees, which include high-level personnel and experts, are formed to plan, design, and state the educational philosophy/policy of the new

curriculum. Besides the steering committee, different committees are formed to perform different tasks, such as constructing and formulating specific learning goals that are in line with the set policy, developing the “scope and sequence” of different subject areas, producing the teaching materials and textbooks, and revising the produced materials before implementation (Westbrook et al., 2013). Usually, teachers are excluded from most of these committees, as in these models, the teacher’s main role is as an implementer of the predesigned packages (Khan & Law, 2015). In an ideal context, the new curriculum will go through a trial stage before it is rolled out in all schools.

However, one of the major drawbacks of the top-down strategy is that it widens the gap between theory and practice (Clark, 1987; Richards, 2001; Fullan, 1994; Alsagoff, McKay, Hu & Renandya, 2012; Nation & Macalister, 2010; Khan & Law, 2015). This results in teachers having a lack of commitment or ownership, and in their subsequent resistance to the imposed curriculum.

In contrast, bottom-up strategies aim to eliminate the gap between designers and practitioners. These models are process-oriented and view teachers as active agents in the process, not as having a role that starts only when the predesigned packages are imposed in schools (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Within these systems, teachers are considered as creators of the learning experiences. Regardless of the strengths of such models, inexperienced and, in some cases, traditional teachers show resistance to this approach, as they prefer a directive approach (Al-Senaidi & Wyatt, 2014; Marulcu & Akbiyik, 2014; Mednick, 2006). Additionally, this approach is more suitable in small-scale or classroom-based reforms. According to Richards (2001), in order to bring success and change to the curriculum development process, both teachers and

curriculum planners need to be engaged in the process. Therefore, a blend of the two strategies – both top-down and bottom-up – is required (Fullan, 1994; Kelly, 2009; Al-Senaidi & Wyatt, 2014).

In the Omani context, the main approach implemented in the curriculum development and reform processes is the top-down approach. However, in the late 1990s, teacher education initiatives helped Omani teachers (including teachers of English) to work with the new curriculum and to contribute to curriculum renewal. In addition, teachers are now enrolled in courses to develop their research skills in order to reinforce their involvement in the curriculum development processes (Al Zadjali, 2017; Al-Issa, 2010; Al-Busaidi, 2013; Al-Hosni, 2006; Al-Jardani, 2013). El-Okda (2005, p. 34) commented that this represented

a subsequent bottom-up stage in which Omani EFL teachers may be gradually and systematically more involved in a number of school-based activities including curriculum analysis, curriculum critique and collaborative task-based action research endeavours whose outcomes can feed into subsequent top-down attempts at curriculum renewal.

3.7. Curriculum development models

As mentioned previously, the literature provides a wide range of curriculum development models. This section presents some of the classical models and discusses some of their strengths and weaknesses. Reviewing the models, and especially the language development models, is of great importance in the current study. It is beneficial to discuss the recent and prominent language curriculum development in order to gain a better understanding of the process itself, as well as to make appropriate connections to the Omani EFL context.

This section then presents some modern EFL curriculum development models, such as Nation & Macalister's model and Christison & Murray's model.

Tyler's model involves a linear approach, as described by Richards (2001). The model is simple and straightforward. It starts with identifying the objectives of the curriculum. Then, the content is designed, followed by the organisation of the designed content or materials. The final stage is evaluation and assessment. Although this model has given rise to many criticisms and objections, a significant number of variations of the model have been developed, including for different areas of curriculum (Richards, 2001).

Taba's model emphasises formulating clear and comprehensive objectives; however, focusing on the process is also a priority (White, 1998). As it was constantly argued that a pre-designed curriculum tends to be interpreted by teachers, Taba's model was intended to eliminate the gap between theory and practice. Taba generated a five-step process for curriculum development. The first step is teachers piloting the prepared materials in sample schools. The next step is testing the experimental materials in different classes to gather data for modifications and alternative content. This is followed by the revision and consolidation of the curriculum units to be generalised to all schools. The fourth step is producing a framework that includes the materials developed in the previous stages. Finally, the framework is examined by experts for overall coherence and implementation. Although this model is considered a "bottom-up" one, Zais (1976) argued that some stages could be integrated, such as integrating the installation stage with the implementation stage. I believe this is a valid claim, as both stages have very similar aims.

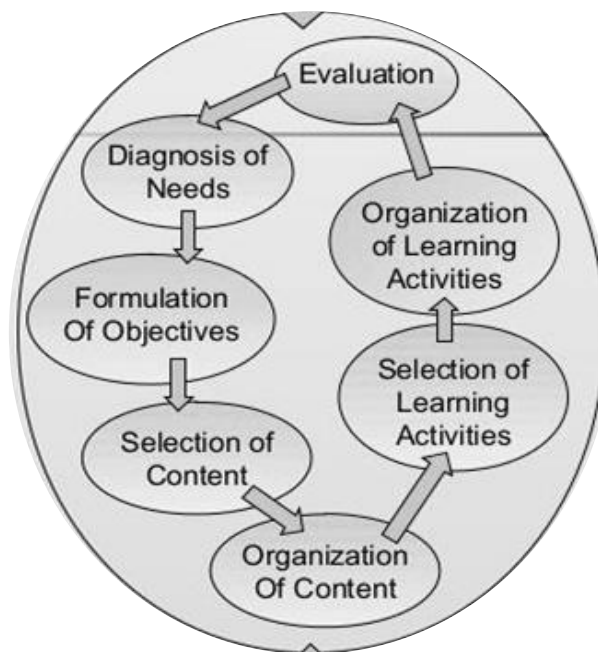


Figure 1: Taba's curriculum development model (1962)

According to McKernan (2008), the Skilbeck situational model considers both objectives and process. It begins with an analysis of the context for which the curriculum is being developed. Then, the objectives and aims are specified, and the programme is designed accordingly. The programme is then implemented and finally assessed and evaluated. Although this model takes into consideration the context in which the programme will be implemented, it lacks any link between the last stage and the other stages of the model, in particular, the designing of the programme. As a result, some cyclical models have been proposed to overcome the criticism of the discontinuity between the different stages of the development process. One of these is the Nicholls & Nicholls model (Richards, 2001).

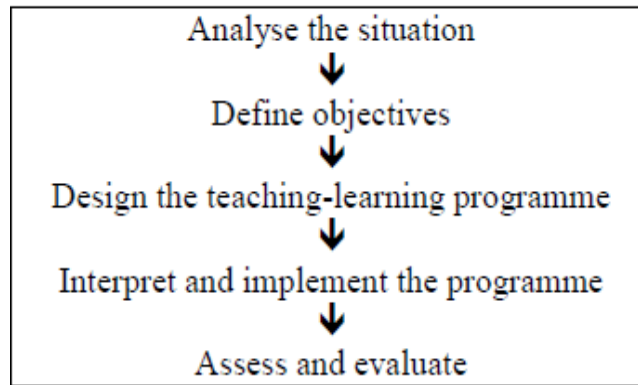


Figure 2: Skilbeck situational model

3.7.1 Language curriculum development models

The previous section discussed some general curriculum development models. These and the following models are informed by the philosophical ideologies and theories mentioned earlier. In fact, McKernan (2008) has argued that curriculum development models are visual representations of the philosophical conceptions and theories. Therefore, the following section will review some of the modern EFL curriculum developments which are similar to the previous ones in terms of components and stages. However, they are more focused on the language acquisition process, and in turn they reflect the underpinning assumptions of the language learning theories. Consequently, the in-hand investigation is informed by these models as it explores Omani EFL teachers' perceptions of the process of integrating 21st century competencies and skills into the current EFL curriculum. This curriculum has been recently developed and implemented in the Omani public schools, including the content, materials, resources, teaching methods and assessment approaches. Additionally, the current investigation is concerned with developing the current curriculum

through exploring the challenges, related to the implementation of the competencies, which hinder a successful implementation.

3.7.2. The Richards curriculum development model

Richards (2001) argued that since the middle of the 20th century, the status of English has changed dramatically. The role of English became greater as it is considered the international language as supported by trade, commerce and technology. As a result, new teaching methods and new curriculum development frameworks were in great demand. The focus shifted from learning general English to learning English for more specific and precise purposes. For instance: the structural-situational approach; TESL/TEFL approaches; the audio-lingualism approach; and the audio-visual method. Although these methods worked in different situations and conditions, consideration of learners' and societies' needs was absent. Therefore, the communicative language teaching approach, and English for a specific purpose (ESP) were developed, in which "the whole context of teaching and learning and the societal and learners' needs are identified" (Richards, 2001, p. 27). Thereafter, Richards (2001) suggested a framework which is more comprehensive and inclusive than the previous models. In addition, his framework is applicable to the development of a completely new curriculum, or to renewing an existing one. Therefore, his concept of curriculum development matches the context of the current investigation, as it explores teachers' perceptions of the existing EFL curriculum and their points of view with regard to the curriculum-related issues that impede the implementation of reforms. In addition to his broad view of curriculum development, Richards (2001) conceptualised the elements or components of the model as an interactive system. In other words, each element has an effect

on the others; a change in one component has an impact on the others and on the system as a whole. Another difference in this framework is that it places teachers and ELT professionals at the heart of the processes of development and decision-making. This feature of the framework is also reflected in the current study. The study in hand investigates Omani EFL teachers' perceptions and their roles in the process of integration of 21st century competencies and skills into the Omani EFL context. Thus, the Richards (2001) framework includes the processes that focus on: needs analysis; situational analysis; planning learning outcomes; course organisation; selecting and preparing teaching materials; providing for effective teaching; and evaluation.

This framework, as mentioned earlier, includes other substantial components that are missing in the other models, such as situational analysis, as well as the other components as in Taba's model and the situational model.

3.7.3. Nation & Macalister model

In contrast to the other models, the curriculum development model designed by Nation & Macalister (2010) is not linear, but cyclical and complex. It consists of three outer circles and a segmented inner circle. Principles, environment, and needs are represented in the outer circles; for example, learners' prior and present lack of knowledge, the availability of resources, and teaching/learning principles. Thus, such considerations are investigated within the processes of environment analysis, needs analysis, and the implementation of principles. One of the key features of this model is that it integrates curriculum, syllabus, and evaluation. In this sense, the inner circle represents the syllabus, with the goals in the centre. Nation & Macalister (2010) argued that content and sequencing are an integral part of the model, as the learners will get the best

return from the learning process. The techniques and activities used to facilitate learning are considered in the inner circle as format and presentation, and the last part of the inner circle, signifying monitoring and assessment, represents the process of observing learning, assessing and testing learning, and finally, providing feedback to the learners. Therefore, this stage might be considered as formative evaluation, as it can lead to changes to the other parts of the process. A large circle, which represents evaluation, surrounds the whole model. The process of evaluation involves examining each aspect of the programme to judge its adequacy and effectiveness and to identify the required improvements. The developers of the model believe that this step is usually ignored in the curriculum design process, which in turn adds further merit to the current model (Zamanian, Kashkouli, & Seddighi, 2015).

Another value that can be added to the model is the consideration of the connections between theory and practice represented in the lines that connect the inner circle with the outer ones.

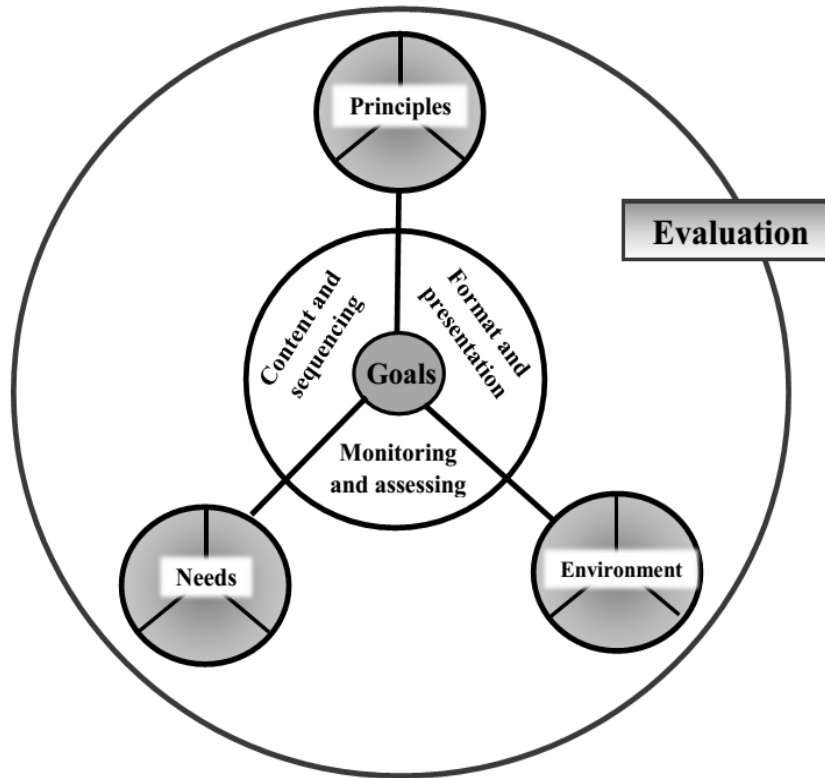


Figure 3: Nation & Macalister curriculum design model (2010)

3.7.4. Christison & Murray model

According to Christison & Murray (2014), curriculum development is a complex, iterative, and dynamic process. The developed model of curriculum design is basically a linear one; however, it moves cyclically through the different stages and components (Figure 4). The model includes the main stages and the sub-stages within each stage. Stage one is understanding the context. Determining the theoretical framework and conducting stakeholder analysis and students' needs analysis are the processes required for this first stage. The second stage is the development of the curriculum, which is relevant to the content. It includes defining the outcomes or goals, selecting approaches to curriculum development, selecting content and sequencing it, selecting learning materials/activities, and then assessing the learning. The final stage is

evaluation, and this consists of the processes of tying the instructions to the context and tying the learning to the context. This model considers student learning and performance as the centre of the whole process. It also provides comprehensive examples of the various components included within the model. In addition, and most importantly, it provides opportunities for the teachers to select their preferred methodologies based on their assumptions about language, the roles of teacher and learners, second language learning, and the appropriateness of the learning activities and instruction materials.

Stage 1: Understanding the Context

- Determining theoretical framework
- Conducting stakeholder analysis
- Conducting needs analysis

Stage 2: Developing curriculum relevant to the context

- Determining outcomes/goals
- Selecting approach to curriculum design
- Selecting content (scope)
- Sequencing content
- Selecting learning materials and activities
- Assessing learning

Stage 3: Evaluating the curriculum

- Tying instruction to context
- Tying learning to context

Figure 4: Christison & Murray model (2014)

Christison & Murray's model overlaps that of Nation & Macalister. The outer circles represent the first stage of Christison & Murray's model, and the inner circles represent its second stage. The last stage of evaluation is represented

by the big circle that surrounds the whole model. Additionally, both models are considered bottom-up approaches in curriculum development.

However, while the Nation & Macalister model is cyclical and interactive, the Christison & Murray model is more detailed and provides examples of the components in the different stages. It also considers teachers as agents of change, because ultimately it is they who implement the developed curriculum (Christison & Murray, 2014).

To sum up, the previous section critically analysed some of the curriculum development models in general and EFL models in particular. Taba's, Tyler's and Skilbeck's frameworks are general while , those of Richard , Nation & Macalister and Christison & Murray framework are marked as EFL development models.

Planning in curriculum development is vital, and although many curriculum models exist, most can be classified into different approaches which hold similar features, as Ornstein & Hunkins (2013) highlighted. In addition, they upheld that these approaches should not be seen as dualistic or as being either positive or negative. In agreement with Ornstein & Hunkins (2013), O'Neill (2010) suggested that “no one model is ideal and no one model may suit a full programme. However, identifying and being consistent with these models will help support cohesion and clarity of approaches in any educational reform (p. 9).” The Christison & Murray model has informed the current investigation in a variety of aspects. First of all, this model is heavily context-oriented and this orientation matches the aims of the study as it explores EFL teaching and learning in the Omani context. The Omani EFL context is unique, as it is a

society very much linked to Islamic and Arabic traditions and principles. Thus, one of the main objectives of the educational system in Oman is to “reinforce young Omanis' strong and proud belief in Islamic principles and behaviour as well as pride in their country, their Gulf heritage, and the Arab world” (Ministry of Education, 2011). Secondly, the model places teachers and EFL professionals at the centre of the different stages of curriculum development. This is relevant to the current study because the model values teachers' opinions and their suggestions on how to overcome the challenges they face during implementation. Teachers' perceptions are the key factor in the study with respect to the integration process of 21st century competencies into the Omani EFL curriculum. Thirdly, teachers play multiple roles in curriculum development processes. Accordingly, teachers are considered as decision-makers, analysers, developers, organisers, assessors and evaluators. Consequently, teachers' inclusion in the process of curriculum development is a demand that needs to be addressed (Al-Balushi, 2017; Al-Zadjali, 2017; Al-Senaidi & Wyatt, 2014; Al-Hosni, 2006). The following section will discuss the assessment approaches and their roles in the curriculum development process.

3.8. Assessment and curriculum development

Assessment is an integral part of any curriculum development procedure. When the curriculum is designed, it has to be measured to determine how successful it is. Thus, it is necessary to adapt different assessment approaches to identify clearly what learners know and can do (Mcleod & Steinert, 2015; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Westbrook et al. (2013) argued that a clear alignment

between the curriculum and the assessment will contribute positively to the improvement of student learning outcomes in “Schools for Life”.

Different scholars and organisations have attempted to provide an inclusive definition of assessment. Indeed, one of the main recommendations made at the World Education Forum in April 2000 – when more than 164 countries, including Oman, gathered in Dakar, Senegal, and adopted the Dakar Framework for Action, “Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments” – was to obtain a comprehensive and accurate definition of assessment, that is, the process that teachers use to obtain information about learners' attainment in particular tasks through the use of different tools to measure the achievement of the objectives and learning outcomes (Gronlund, 2006). It has also been defined as “a process of inquiry” that involves different sources of evidence, such as a test or other tools, to interpret, decide, or take an action from the stakeholders involved in the process (Moss, Girard, & Haniford, 2006, p. 152). In their definition of assessment, Moss, Girard, & Haniford (2006) added elements of action and the involvement of the stakeholders depending on the results gained from the assessment process. Similarly, Cheng, Rogers & Hu (2004) and Troudi, Coombe & Al-Hamly (2009) viewed assessment as a process of collecting data or information about ESL/EFL learners to be used in making decisions about their achievement and language development. Clearly, these definitions of assessment identify the integration of assessment, curriculum development, and teachers' involvement and practices. In general, there is an increased dependence on implementing assessments or tests of cognitive achievement as an alternative to learning outcomes, and therefore as a measurement of the quality of the educational system in developing countries.

Hence, international survey bodies, such as PISA, PIRLS and PASEC, are extensively used as measures of academic achievement in addition to local and national examinations. Such dependence on “international indicators will have a far greater reach and influence within developing countries” (Westbrook et al., 2013, p. 8). Consequently, teachers tend to teach in merely test-oriented approaches.

In their study, Cheng, Rogers & Hu (2004) attributed the variations in the assessment practices of 461 university instructors in three countries, namely, Canada, Hong Kong, and Beijing, to the nature of the courses taught, the instructors' teaching experiences, the teachers' knowledge of assessment, the needs and levels of the students, the teaching and learning environment, and the role and impact of the standardised tests. Alkharusi, Aldhafri, Alnabhani, & Alkalbani (2012) conducted a congruent study based on a descriptive survey exploring the attitudes, competence, knowledge, and practices regarding the educational assessment of 165 in-service teachers in Oman, who were teaching different subjects in grades 5-10. The teachers showed a positive attitude towards assessment, but the findings revealed that grade level, gender, subject taught, and teachers' experience and workload affected the variation in the implementation of assessment. Similarly, Troudi, Coombe & Al-Hamly (2009) claimed that EFL teaching/learning knowledge, and the socio-political aspects of the context, influence teachers' assessment practices, and that there is a gap between teachers' beliefs and their practices of assessment. They argued that teachers made no contributions, in the UAE and Kuwait, to the curriculum development process, especially in assessment-related decisions, thus implying the use of top-down strategies in such contexts. Therefore, the recommendation

to involve teachers, and take advantage of their knowledge and experience of the context, in the curriculum development process, is vital in order to create a conducive teaching and learning environment (Troudi, Coombe & Al-Hamly, 2009; Alkharusi, Aldhafri, Alnabhani & Alkalbani, 2012).

3.9 Complexity of teachers' perceptions of curriculum development and reform

The current study explores teachers' perceptions of the integration of 21st century competencies and skills into the Omani EFL context. Teachers' perceptions, in the study, are identified through the constructions of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 2012) in the areas related to the integration process. The term "perception" is considered a broad term, and used synonymously with other terms such as belief, experience, feeling, value, attitude and conception (Hall, 2017; Santagata & Yeh, 2016; Borg, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001; Khansa, 2015; Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015). It is common in educational research that is informed by constructivism and social constructivism to use the term perception to refer to constructions of reality that are formed by educational professionals and that might change according to context. Nonetheless, teachers' perceptions and beliefs inform practice and teaching techniques. In addition, they influence decisions teachers make while teaching (Borg, 2006; Fullan, 1993). Consequently, teachers select what and how to teach according to their perceptions and beliefs. Perceptions are closely and significantly affected by the context. In other words, teachers' perceptions, and the identifications teachers hold about themselves, influence their behaviour in the classroom (Al Zadjali, 2017; Lukacs, Horak & Galluzzo, 2011). One of the

ways to investigate perceptions or beliefs is ask teachers to reflect upon their practice. In fact, this was deployed in the current study, as discussed in this chapter. One of the main instruments used to gather data for this study was the semi-structured interview, in which teachers articulated, reflected, justified and interpreted their actions in the classroom in order to understand their perceptions of the integration process. Furthermore, there have been two different views of the impact of training on teachers' perceptions and beliefs. One side argued that teacher training programmes fail to change or influence teachers' beliefs (Pajares, 1992; Borg, 2003; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson, (2009). On the other hand, some scholars contended that new perceptions and beliefs can be established or altered (Fullan, 1993) if teachers are challenged and confronted with the previous ones. Therefore, enhancing the new perceptions through consistent training is a prerequisite; as is the elimination of any contextual conditions that impede the implementation of the new actions which match the recently acquired perceptions. As Fullan (1993) emphasised, the culture of the school ought to facilitate the acquisition of the new perceptions, and accordingly teachers' practices will be aligned with their perceptions.

In summary, although “perception” is a broad and debatable concept, I have attempted to explain it from the perspective which suits my study. Based on the arguments above, I shall be considering perceptions, which are constructions of reality, as constructs of beliefs.

3.9.1 EFL teachers' role in curriculum development and curriculum change

The calls for teachers' participation and involvement in the process of educational reform have increased dramatically in recent years (Al Zadjali, 2017; Al-Jardani, 2013; Eakle, 2012; Carl, 2009; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015; OECD, 2005; Fullan, 1993; Hattie, 2012; Troudi & Alwan, 2010). However, in practice, teachers are excluded from such processes. Eakle (2012) claimed that grants were secured by the state government under the condition of focusing their curriculum and instruction on specific topics and on whether they specifically target the benchmark achievement requirement. Therefore, the local voices of educators, especially teachers, were excluded and diminished in the light of larger and global issues, such as the need to equip students with the skills that could meet the competitive challenges of the world. As a result, scripted direct curriculum approaches are popular in such a context. In the same vein, direct instruction curricula involve polices and clear scripts of what the teacher says, when, and to whom. The argument is that the goals of education can be achieved only through the teacher/student community relationship and by empowering teachers as curriculum and instruction designers (Orafi & Borg, 2009). Consequently, educational reforms can be real and sustainable through the abandonment of the top-down models of curriculum design in order to empower teachers and educators locally. Jones (2012, cited in Eakle, 2012, p. 4) argued that "teachers should have active seats at the state-wide curriculum decision-making, their voices should no longer be silenced by bureaucrats who are politically driven and hold little knowledge about learning, curriculum design and instructions." Teachers are rarely

involved in the curriculum designing process, and if they are invited to participate in such committees, their participation serves merely as token involvement. Teachers' active participation in the curriculum design process creates greater teacher accountability and ownership (Carl, 2009; Biesta & Priestley, 2013; OECD, 2005): Eakle argued that "Change cannot come from outside the education system; it must evolve from within from those who know the classroom and its students the best – our teachers" (2012, p. 27).

On the other hand, although Burns & Botzakis (2012) agreed that teachers should have some decision-making power regarding curriculum, as they are the primary interface with students and parents, and they experience daily de facto encounters with curricula, they argued that teachers have some limitations. Teachers' positions sometimes hinder them from making connections to global issues that may arise across the country regarding the educational needs of all learners. Personally, I agree with Burns & Botzakis' (2012) point of view to some extent, especially when connecting it to the Omani educational context. In my experience, teachers are concerned with their school and classroom responsibilities, as they are overburdened. Additionally, although most Omani teachers are degree holders, they lack experience and training when it comes to curriculum design and instruction. However, some teachers are competent in this field and are able to participate actively in curriculum design committees.

According to Biesta & Priestley (2013), the fashion of curriculum design has been changing worldwide. Teachers have been involved in the process of curriculum development, as they are considered "agents of change". This shift has given teachers greater confidence and autonomy in curriculum design, apart from the debate about how successful such an approach can be. The

main purpose of the trend is to eliminate the gap between theory and practice, i.e. between curriculum aims and classroom practice, bearing in mind that teachers play an important role in mediating or modifying curriculum intentions to match their students' needs and school settings. Unfortunately, the situation of curriculum design in the Omani context has not changed, and teachers' roles are basic and traditional. Al Hosani's 2006 study explored the perceptions and practices of Omani EFL teachers' involvement in curriculum development within the school level. The researcher used a quantitative questionnaire as the main tool for gathering data. The sample consisted of 163 male and 259 female teachers. The study revealed that teachers perceive themselves as curriculum developers and evaluators of high importance; however, their participation in such a process is very limited, especially in top-down approaches. Again, the study implemented a quantitative orientation to investigate teachers' perceptions and practices in curriculum development. Within the same vein, a study was conducted by Al Mushaifri in 2006 to investigate the Omani experience in evaluating the current educational curriculum, i.e. basic education. It analysed the techniques employed for the evaluation process and provided some recommendations for future improvements. The study found that the Omani evaluation system used updated techniques in curriculum evaluation, such as questionnaires, school visits, and content analysis. Nonetheless, the evaluation process in the Sultanate has some shortcomings, as the researcher indicated. Firstly, there is no clear strategy for the evaluation process. Secondly, the active participation of teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders is very limited, and in some cases is totally lacking. Therefore, the researcher suggested an evaluation framework that includes the main aims of the

evaluation strategy and some issues to be focused on within the process. However, this recommended framework is very limited and brief. Both studies used pre-specified statements expressing potential teacher attitudes in their questionnaires. However, a drawback of such an approach is that the respondents might have had other perceptions that the data collection instruments failed to record. Although Al-Senaidi and Wyatt's (2014) study used multiple methods in collecting data, their findings echoed those of Al-Hosani (2006) and Al Mushaifri (2006). The researchers surveyed 172 female primary teachers and interviewed seven teachers from the sample to investigate the involvement of teachers in evaluating the EFL curriculum in Oman. The findings revealed that teachers demonstrated a positive awareness of the material evaluation process; however, their involvement in such a process was very limited, and in some cases non-existent. The researchers suggested a number of principles that increase the engagement of teachers in curriculum development processes. In-service training in curriculum evaluation, involving teachers in the "armchair evaluation" stage, and encouraging teachers to keep reflective dairies are examples of the principles proposed. Although the period between these studies is more than eight years, the agreement of the results revealed that the issues of voice and power are still dominant in the Omani context, and the tendency of policymakers to impose change on teachers rather than involving them is ongoing. Similar findings were revealed at the tertiary level, as Al Issaei (2017) concluded that teachers' role in the curriculum development process has been limited to the performance of their teaching duties, and that they weren't allowed to contribute actively to other curriculum elements in the Colleges of Applied Sciences in Oman.

As a result of the previous studies, another study was conducted, by Al-Jardani (2013), to develop a curriculum evaluation framework in order to provide Omani EFL professionals with opportunities to participate in curriculum development and evaluation. He developed such a framework and piloted it in the Omani context. The study was in three phases: the needs-analysis phase; the development phase; and the evaluation phase. The sample included curriculum evaluation officers and English language supervisors, and data were collected through in-depth interviews and questionnaires in the different phases. He concluded that the Omani educational system and curriculum development needs to develop a systematic evaluation framework. As a result of this study, a framework has been developed that includes different elements. The proposed framework includes suggested elements, such as rationale and policy, vision and mission of the curriculum evaluation, stakeholders' needs and expectations, aims and learning outcomes, methods and approaches, textbooks and materials, resources, instruction time, assessment, teacher training, and finally, management and evaluation elements. The proposed framework is an encouraging attempt at providing guidelines for curriculum evaluation specialists; however, as it is intended to be an evaluation manual, it gives a general view of the education system in Oman rather than providing a comprehensive overview of the curriculum evaluation process in particular. Moreover, the study did not involve teachers in the process of curriculum development or evaluation, in which the gap between designers and practitioners has expanded.

This transformation of curriculum design recognises that there is a need to specify ways of shaping teachers' role in the curriculum design process. As a

result, transitional discourse, such as lifelong professional learning, teacher autonomy, teachers as agents of change, and “teachers matter” (OECD, 2005) are common concepts in the transformational professional role of teachers. In contrast, Priestley et al. (2015) argued that this concept of “teachers matter” has tended to lead to an overemphasis on teachers’ individual capacity, neglecting the structural, relational, cultural, and global conditions that shape the teaching and learning process and make it as effective as possible. Adding to the transition of discourse, scholars around the world have investigated the characteristics of teachers who are labelled as “agents of change” (Heijden, Geldens, Beijaard & Popeijus, 2015). Teachers play a pivotal role in the success of any educational reform as long as they are actively engaged in the process within their school context (Heijden et al., 2015; Fullan, 2007). Bandura (2001, p. 2) defined the role of the agent as “to intentionally make things happen by one’s action”. In the same vein, for teachers to be change agents (Fullan, 1993; Hattie, 2012) or agents of change (Priestley et al., 2015; Biesta & Priestley, 2013; Biesta, Priestley & Robinson 2015), they must be open to change and act accordingly, realising the challenges and complexities of the process in their context (Heijden et al., 2015).

Although Heijden et al. (2015) made clear the distinction between the two terms, I believe that both phrases, i.e. “change agents” and “agents of change”, serve the same purpose as long as teachers are actively engaged in the change process.

Reviewing the literature in this area, Fullan (1993), Lukacs & Galluzzo (2014), Hattie (2012), and Heijden et al. (2015) identified four general features of teachers who are considered as agents of change. Firstly, they are life-long

learners and reflect consistently on their practice. Secondly, they are described as masters in their area, with comprehensive teaching knowledge and skills. Thirdly, they have an entrepreneurship skill that encourages them to take responsible risks, that motivates them, and that helps them make decisions in the process of change. Fourthly, being a collaborative teacher is a key feature.

In their study, Orafi & Borg (2009) concluded that educational reform or change needs to concentrate on both pedagogical practices and teachers' beliefs. However, this claim does not suggest that new reforms should match teachers' beliefs and practices perfectly; instead, it suggests that curriculum designers try to make an effort to assess the gap between teachers' practices and beliefs – on the one hand – and the intended goals of the reform, on the other. This assessment will inform the support needed to facilitate implementation, which in turn will promote change in teachers' practices and beliefs.

A comparative study conducted in three European countries (Estonia, Germany, and Finland) investigated teachers' experience and perceptions of their autonomy and the control exercised over them in the global era of neoliberal educational reforms. Educational reforms worldwide have followed the global "theory of neoliberalism", which reflects global market concepts, such as accountability, privatisation, and standardisation (Erss, Kalmus & Autio, 2016). As a result, teachers are viewed as technicians who follow systems and who are paid according to the outcomes. Curriculum discourses in turn have also changed. Professionalism, autonomy, accountability, and teacher responsibilities were dominant within the neoliberalism ideology. The results revealed that teachers' dissatisfaction with top-down educational reforms has influenced their autonomy and control of their own work. In addition, they found

that there is a mismatch between curriculum's general intentions and teachers' practices in the classroom. Although teachers in the three countries agreed that they had pedagogical autonomy, for example in selecting methods, materials, and instructions, they claimed they had less control over content autonomy, especially in core subjects, which are centrally assessed. It was also noted from the data analysis that school settings and leadership systems influenced the enactment of autonomy. The Omani EFL context, with respect to teachers' autonomy, does not exist, as teachers have no control; this is due to the centralised and top-down system (Al Zadjali, 2017; Al-Jardani, 2013; Al-Issa, 2010). Therefore, researching teachers' perceptions of their participation in the process of integration of 21st century competencies and skills is crucial in order to draw conclusions that might help policymakers to create channels for involving teachers in the process.

3.9.2 EFL teachers' reaction towards curriculum change

EFL teachers' views have been the focus of a considerable amount of research recently. Borg (2006) suggested that teachers' views are closely linked to the decisions taken within the classroom environment. During classroom practice, teachers are concerned not only with the implementation of the content, but also (consciously or unconsciously) with the implementation of their personal philosophies, which reflect their personal beliefs and understandings about good teaching (Pennington & Richards, 2016). As a result, investigating EFL professional views is critical in educational change. Such views help in the development and the sustainability of educational reform through providing suitable support (Holmes, Clement & Albright, 2013; Fullan, 2006; Lamie, 2005).

Throughout the history of curriculum development and change, research has usually identified the key principles and purposes of reforms, and has neglected the human element (O'Neill, 2010). Some scholars have suggested systematic models of change that help designers to map out the rationale for the use of specific teaching, learning, and assessment approaches. However, these frameworks have neglected the human aspect, i.e. the attitudes, values, and views which have a direct impact on the sustainability and continuity of any reform (O'Neill, 2010).

Lamie's (2005) description of educational change/reform recaps the whole process of change. "To have a sustainable change, one has to create a positive environment for change, communicate, treat change as a process and not as an event, set realistic goals and priorities, provide resources and ongoing support, monitor and evaluate progress, be flexible and open-minded, be accountable, develop awareness of the process of change, and expect the unexpected (p. 211)."

Finally, as stated by Bailey (2001) and Lamie (2005), living systems cannot grow, develop and adapt to their changing environment unless they themselves change. This is exactly what is stated in the Holy Quran, Chapter 13 (Thunder), Verse 11 (God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves). Therefore, unless EFL teachers change their beliefs and reveal their perceptions of the inclusion of 21st century competencies, the success of the implementation of these competencies in their classrooms is under threat.

3.10 21st century skills and competencies

Competencies or skills suitable for the 21st century form one of the controversial terms in education (Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoe & Terry, 2013), just like many other terms that scholars, researchers, and academics attempt to define. Hence, in the area of 21st century competencies, the struggle has been the overlapping of the terms “skills” and “competencies”, as they are used interchangeably in some contexts.

To start with, the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably to describe 21st century competencies and skills. However, OECD’s DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies) (2005) project drew a distinction between the two terms, while Ananiadou & Claro (2009, p. 4) distinguished between competence and skill:

A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands by drawing on and activating psychological resources (including skills and attitudes).

On the other hand, a skill is defined by the European Commission’s Cedefop glossary (Cedefop, 2008) as “the ability to perform tasks and solve problems.” However, the commission defines competence as the ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context like education, work, or personal development. Therefore, a competence is not limited to cognitive elements, but encompasses functional aspects, interpersonal attributes, and ethical values. These distinctions demonstrate that a competence is a more comprehensive concept than a skill. For the purposes of their study, Ananiadou & Claro (2009, p. 8) defined 21st century competencies as “those skills and competencies young people will be required to have in order to be effective workers and

citizens in the knowledge society of the 21st century”. In a similar vein, Fandiño (2013) argued that 21st century learning stresses the explicit integration of learning – core knowledge – and innovation skills, information, media and digital literacy skills, as well as career and life skills.

Similarly, Trilling & Fadel (2009) use a definition that speaks of the skills that young people need in order to be successful as individuals, citizens, and workers in the 21st century. They argued that to succeed in the 21st century, an educated person is required to acquire core skills in both literacy and numeracy and in the skills (competencies) that empower him/her to think reasonably and solve problems autonomously and effectively.

3.10.1 Components of 21st century skills and competencies

The 21st century skills gap (Trilling & Fadel, 2009) is being discussed around the world as students graduate lacking some basic skills, such as oral/written communication, critical thinking, problem solving, professionalism and work ethics, teamwork and collaboration, working in diverse teams, applying technology, and leadership and project management skills. These skills actually are not new; Ravitch (2009) called the 21st century skills “an old familiar song”. She claimed that there is nothing new in the proposals of 21st century skills, as almost the same concepts were iterated and reiterated by pedagogues throughout the 20th century. However, they have been highly reinforced by the contemporary world market and business firms. There are strong calls for these skills to be included in the educational systems around the world, as education is considered the key to economic survival in the 21st century (Greenstein, 2012). Education plays four major universal roles:

- empowers people to work in society;
- develops talents and skills;
- fulfils civic responsibilities;
- maintains traditions and values.

Trilling & Fadel (2009) argued that four forces are transforming and leading us toward new ways of learning for life in the 21st century, as depicted in Figure 5.

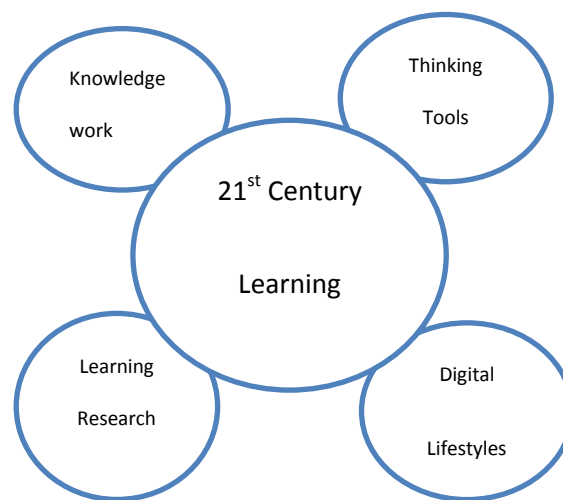


Figure 5: 21st Century learning convergence

Arguably, these forces have affected education and school systems in a variety of ways. Many educational systems around the world have been looking for new forms and tools of learning, searching for suitable environments and guiding principles to support learning practices in the 21st century. As a result, a number of initiatives around the world have stood out to advocate learning and teaching of 21st century skills and competencies. Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATCS), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Technological

Literacy Framework for the 2012 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are major organisations that support the infusion of 21st century skills and competencies into school systems. Additionally, many frameworks have been developed to guide policymakers, educators, teachers, and students in the main concepts of integrating these skills into their systems. In their analysis of frameworks for 21st century skills, Voogt & Roblin (2012) found that there is a definite alignment between these frameworks in terms of the definitions and significance of 21st century skills and competencies.

The knowledge-and-skills rainbow developed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) (2009) is one of the most common frameworks, as shown in Figure 6.

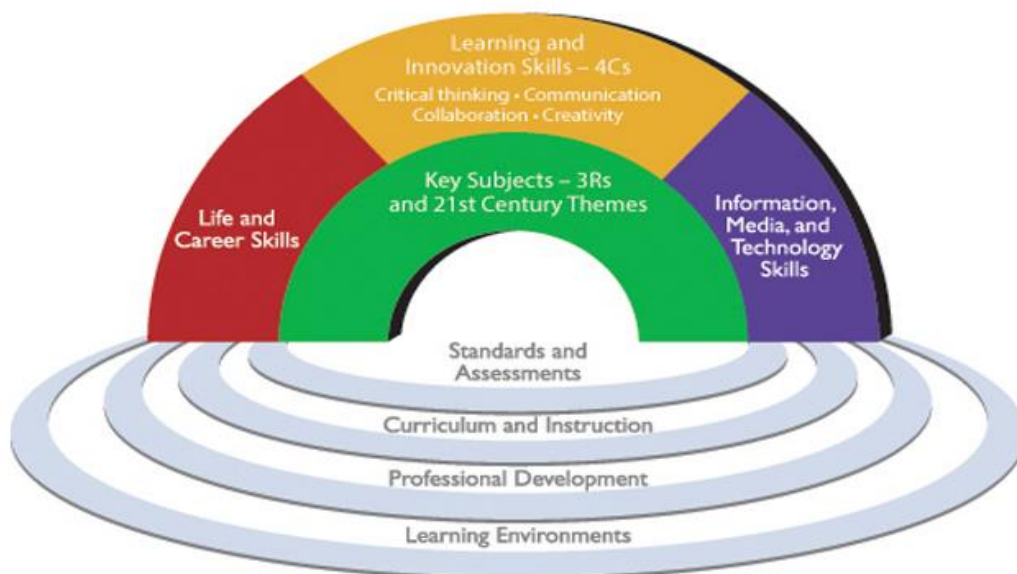


Figure 6: The 21st century knowledge and-skills rainbow (P21, 2009)

The knowledge–and-skills rainbow illustrates the desired student outcomes that are most needed for the 21st century. The following sections will review these skills as they appear in the rainbow framework and their implications for the Omani EFL context.

3.10.2 Learning and innovation skills

The learning and innovation set of skills is considered the first set of 21st century skills, which addresses critical learning skills and innovations, such as the following:

- critical thinking and problem solving;
- communication and collaboration;
- creativity and innovation.

As the new century demands high levels of expert thinking and complex communication, the skills of critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration are envisioned as key learning and knowledge work skills that satisfy these demands.

Similarly, creativity and innovation are significant job demands of the global market, as it is crucial to invent new and better products and services (Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010; Dede, 2010; Voogt & Roblin, 2012); hence, these skills focus on discoveries and inventions. Creativity is defined and described differently by different scholars. For example Glaser(1941) defined it in a general sense, however, Elder's(2007) definition is more related to the current study, as it describes critical thinking as a mode of thinking about any subject or content area (in this case English language) in which the student improves his or her thinking through taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking

skilfully and imposing intellectual criteria upon them. Traditionally, critical thinking is combined into the broad categories of Bloom's taxonomy of higher order thinking skills - applying - evaluating – analysing - and synthesizing. However, Greenstein (2012, p.65) and Trilling & Fadel (2009) relate critical thinking with interpreting information, analysing parts of a whole, evaluating evidence, comparing multiple perspectives, discerning patterns, and grasping abstract ideas. For example, some of the aims of critical thinking in EFM are to:

- use various types of reasoning (inductive, deductive, etc.) as appropriate to the situation e.g. inductively learn a grammar rule.
- analyse the purpose of information presented in diverse formats and evaluate the motives behind its presentation.
- respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline.

Problem solving is another 21st century skill which basically refers to the process of identifying problems, considering options, and making informed choices. This skill involves a range of knowledge and abilities according to Greenstein (2012, p.70) :describing the problem clearly and in-depth; recognising its complexity; looking at the problem with an open mind; evaluating alternatives; considering multiple perspectives; gathering information to make an informed choice and develop a plan; implementing the solution and monitoring with integrity; and finally, evaluating the outcomes with a willingness to revisit the problem. Therefore, there are five steps in problem solving;

- Understand the problem;
- Brainstorm all possible solutions;
- Devise a plan;

- Carry out the plan;
- Evaluate the results.

The EFM books enhance the problem solving skills among students at different levels. For example the following tasks and activities are identified in the books;

- State the problem in the text using your own words;
- Discuss the problem and its possible solutions in your groups;
- Analyse your ideas and make a table, a diagram or a chart
- Justify your solutions in relation to the problem

Given that these skills are direct demands of the 21st century, they have also attracted attention recently as self-reliant lifelong learning skills that develop autonomy and control of the learning process among learners (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Thus, learning to ask and answer important and appropriate questions, to critically review any subject, to pose and solve problems, to communicate and work with others, and to create new knowledge in order to make a better world are crucial skills for both the learning process and innovation.

Cognitive research has shown that applying skills like critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity to the content knowledge increases motivation and improves learning outcomes (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Greenstein, 2012). Therefore, the partnership for 21st century skills included various aims; for example, learners should be able to reason effectively, use systems thinking, make judgments and decisions, and solve problems both conventionally and innovatively. Hence, teachers should teach and learners learn these skills through various inquiries and problem-solving activities and approaches, such

as learning projects (Griffin & Care, 2014). These skills are emphasised in the Omani EFL curriculum; however, they are rarely implemented in the EFL lessons.

Teaching critical thinking, problem solving and creativity are not preferred in strictly centralised, top-down, transmission-oriented, rote learning, and textbook-based contexts. Factors like lack of proper training of teachers, the top-down ELT system and the syllabus impede the teaching and learning of these skills (Al Issa, 2010).

Therefore, the current study investigates the teaching and learning of these skills. In addition, it focuses on the challenges teachers face in this regard during implementation.

3.10.3 Communication and collaboration

The new century demands, for a deeper personal portfolio of communication and collaboration skills, outdated the traditional communication skills such as correct speech, clear writing, and fluent reading. In this regard, Voogt, Dede, and Mishra (2013) argued that articulating thoughts and ideas via oral, written, and nonverbal communication, in a variety of forms and contexts, utilising multiple media and technologies, and communicating efficiently in diverse environments, are premium skills to promote learning in the 21st century. One effective way to acquire these skills, as argued by Trilling & Fadel (2009), is through direct communication and collaboration opportunities, either physically or virtually, using the technology. Luckily, the Omani EFL curriculum is based on communicative and experiential approaches to the teaching and learning of English (Ministry of Education, 2009); accordingly, many activities and project-

based tasks are focusing on building learners' communication skills. Through my experience of observing EFL teachers in the classroom, most of them apply group discussions and group work activities. However, these activities are conducted in many cases without communication aims. Teachers apply them to accomplish the tasks, rather than in order to foster communication skills such as expressing ideas and thoughts, or utilising technology to communicate efficiently in diverse contexts. Although the learner-centred approach is promoted in EFL classrooms, where learners can communicate naturally and through different choices of learning strategies and activities, in practice the teacher-centred approach is dominant in the Omani EFL context. This might be attributed to a lack of sufficient training, time constraints, and students' low proficiency levels (Al Mahrouqi, 2013). Therefore, the current investigation explores EFL teachers' perceptions of the integration of 21st century skills and competencies, in which communication and collaboration skills are essential. Furthermore, it investigates the challenges teachers face during the implementation of the reforms, and how they overcome constraints such as time, lack of training and insufficient support.

3.10.4 Creativity and innovation

In the competitive world of innovative services, processes, and production, there is a requirement for all countries to book their places as advanced states and to take part in making the world a better place for humanity. Finegold & Notabartolo (2010) declared that advocates of and believers in 21st century competencies support the urge for reforms in education and schools. They are motivated by the economic and social needs of learners and humanity as a

whole in the 21st century. As a result, creativity and innovation are at the top of the list of the 21st century competencies. Kenneth Robinson (cited in Trilling & Fadel 2009) believed that “we do not grow into creativity, we grow out of it or rather, we are educated out of it” (p. 57).

Originality, uniqueness, imagination, flexibility, fluency, making connections, forming new patterns, and personal expression are common aspects of creativity. Carl Rogers(1967, p.350) defined creativity as "the emergence of a novel relational product , growing out of uniqueness of the individual." Hence, skills like brainstorming, problem-solving and critical thinking are pivotal for a creative product or creative thinking. Thus, many EFL curricula such as that described in EFM, include tasks and activities that enhance creativity as in the following examples,

- Curiosity : probing, asking questions, seeking deeper meaning.
- Fluency: production of a number of ideas.
- Originality: ideas that are novel, fresh, unique or unusual.
- Elaboration: ideas that display intensive detail or add to existing detail.
- Imagination: dream up, invent new and genuine ideas or products.
- Flexibility: ideas that show a variety of possibilities.

Thus, the traditional approaches of education, which focused on content memorisation, primary skills, and test taking, are not competent in developing creativity and innovation among learners (Griffin & Care,2014). According to Trilling & Fadel (2009), many misconceptions around the world hinder the teaching and learning of creativity; such as the myth that not all students are creative but that only geniuses are, and the mistaken belief that creativity

cannot be learned or assessed. However, creativity is based on imagination, something with which all mankind is born; and history is full of examples of creative people from diverse backgrounds and educational contexts who have contributed positively in all aspects of life.

Learning environments that foster questioning, tolerance, trust, openness, and learning from trial and error are considered the best environments in which to nurture creativity and innovation (Prasad, 2013). So, designing real-world problem projects, in which learners must come up with creative solutions, is an example of an approach to reinforce creativity (Hakala, Uusikylä & Järvinen, 2015; Kivunja, 2015; Maisuria, 2005). The Omani EFL curriculum enhances this creativity and innovation through projects. Students are required to submit a project, either individually or in groups, each semester. However, these projects are mainly traditional, where students submit models or charts. Teachers need to focus on the skills of creativity and innovation when asking students to do their projects, as well as focusing on the accuracy and fluency. So this study aims to illuminate teachers' beliefs and practices while they are implementing these skills. In addition, it explores some of the challenges that hinder the implementation of such skills, from the teachers' point of view.

These skills of critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, creativity and innovation are at the top of the list of knowledge, work, and life in the 21st century; however, they are not sufficient on their own. The next sets of skills are of similar significance.

3.10.5 Digital literacy skills

In most education systems, the main purpose of developing information and technology skills is to appropriately access, use, manage, evaluate, and add to the knowledge of information and media. Therefore, the development of such skills is enhanced by the increasing demands for accessing information efficiently and effectively, evaluating it critically and competently, and using the information accurately and creatively (Griffin & Care, 2014). Hence, developing learners' ability to understand the different types of media used for communication, and to choose the appropriate media from the massive choices available, and teaching them how to create effective messages in a variety of media, are essential media-oriented skills of the 21st century. In addition, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy is one of the quintessential and prerequisite skills of modern times. Thus, it is important to obtain the skills, strategies and dispositions required for effective reading comprehension on the internet, as defined by Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu (2014). Students are required to learn some modern and contemporary skills such as :

- selecting core information and identifying the central problem from a large amount of data;
- effectively using key words and search strategies;
- managing the flow of information from multiple sources;
- critically evaluating and verifying online resources for accuracy and reliability;
- evaluating, comparing, and synthesizing information from various sources;

- appreciating the purpose and persuasiveness of media messages; and
- considering the effect of messages on beliefs , behaviours, and values.

Consequently, most of the educational systems around the world are working consciously and rapidly to integrate these skills into their curriculum, bearing in mind that these digital skills are constantly evolving and changing, which requires them to update their ICT knowledge frequently. Most of the public schools have a Learning Resource Centre (LRC). These centres contain a number of PCs, a TV set, a smartboard and a library. EFL teachers conduct some of their lessons in these centres, especially when they are conducting research or working on a project. Students are encouraged to search for international issues, such as shortage of water, or global warming. In addition, they use the technology to reflect on global issues and relate the content and its implications on their own Omani experience. Therefore, the curriculum supports using ICT knowledge quite often. However, teachers always complain that their learners' level of proficiency in English hinders them from achieving these aims. Additionally, they criticise the lack of resources available in the schools; for example, poor internet performance and the shortage of technological facilities. Consequently, the study in hand investigates the challenges teachers face while implementing these skills in their lessons. Furthermore, it explores deeply on teachers' suggestions to overcome them.

3.10.6 Career and life skills

The third set of skills in the famous P21 framework's rainbow is career and life skills. Although these skills are not new, as they are age-old personal skills, there are increasing demands to include them in education systems, as the technology revolution affects learning, work, and life in the 21st century. These

skills include flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural interaction, productivity and accountability, and leadership and responsibility (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013).

In order to integrate 21st century skills and competencies into any school system, various interlinked support systems must work together; namely, standards, assessment, curriculum and instructions, professional development, and learning environment. This is illustrated in Figure 6 (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Although the Omani EFL curriculum, and especially the themes in the textbooks, are used to link either directly or indirectly to the various career and vocational fields that many students enter, it is still focusing on language functions and not on the skills themselves i.e. flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural interaction, productivity and accountability, and leadership and responsibility. A study conducted by Al Maashani (2016) investigated EFL teachers' beliefs and practices about learner autonomy as a separate 21st century skill in Omani post-basic education, and revealed that teachers have positive attitudes towards learner autonomy in language learning and the key role of the teacher in promoting it. They also believe that social interaction, mental attributes, students' motivation, and students' engagement in decision-making are examples of practices that enhance learner autonomy. Therefore, teachers need to train their students to take decisions related to their learning, and to take control of their own learning regarding what and how to learn. The researcher recommended that teachers encourage learners to keep diaries and online blogs, while teachers ought to give constructive feedback about them. Additionally, teachers need constant support through training programmes to build their knowledge, experience, and

techniques in order to enhance learner autonomy. Despite the results of the study, the quantitative approach which was deployed was not suitable for investigating teachers' perceptions or curriculum change. Therefore, an element of qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one is required.

Therefore, a thorough exploration of the application of these skills in the classrooms is required, along with an investigation of the obstacles that impede the application of these skills; and these are among the aims of the study in hand. For the sake of the current study, the focus will be on assessment and curriculum, and the instructions that enhance the successful implementation of 21st century skills in the Omani EFL context.

3.10.7 Assessment of 21st century skills and competencies

Assessing students' knowledge and skills is crucial in any school system. It provides guidance and feedback, for both teachers and students, on their achievement of the desired goals. Traditionally, the trend of "teach for the test" is popular when applying narrow, high-stakes tests of content in core subjects like maths, languages, social studies and so on. The focus of these measurements is on the memorisation of the content, and the quality of the school will be judged accordingly. A heavy reliance on summative assessment as a quality assurance approach has downplayed the value of formative and authentic assessment (Griffin & Care, 2014; Greenstein, 2012; Pepper, 2011). Arguably, formative assessment is beneficial for both teachers and learners; it provides feedback and offers opportunities for instant adjustments in instructions and materials to suit the students' needs. Furthermore, the dependence on summative assessment approaches has neglected the value of other authentic assessment methods, like essays, projects, and peer- and self-

assessment (Silva, 2009; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). In addition, it has neglected the primary 21st century skills and abilities. In this regard, Griffin & Care (2014) and Greenstein (2012) argued that there is a need for a shift in assessment methods and approaches in order to overcome the shortcomings of summative assessment, in providing reliable measurement and feedback on students' progress, in understanding learning topics and gaining 21st century skills, and in measuring a wider range of abilities that reflect the fully rounded learner. There is an urgent need for balanced summative and formative assessment procedures that assess a combination of knowledge, basic skills, higher-order thinking skills, deeper comprehension and understanding, applied knowledge, and 21st century skills and performance. Thus, these types of ongoing evaluations, which are integrated into the daily classroom activities, might provide instant feedback and suggest extra learning opportunities that can enhance understanding and performance, which would be beneficial (Silva, 2009; Pepper, 2011).

As assessment is crucial in any educational system, and drives all the rest of the educational support systems, many initiatives are designed to combine a core set of balanced 21st century assessments that realistically align with deeper understanding and skills performance; provide a whole picture of the full capabilities of the fully rounded learner, including emotional, cognitive, physical, and social skills; and positively challenge students. Accordingly, the literature provides many examples of effective methods of ongoing learning assessment, such as essays, observation rubrics, online quizzes, design problems, blogs and wikis, solving online simulation challenges, and ongoing internship and civic work in the community (Griffin & Care, 2014; Greenstein, 2012).

In agreement with Trilling & Fadel (2009), one of the main advantages of the technology era regarding assessment is that technology-based assessment can automate some of the labour-intensive work of assessing students' achievements and can offer new ways to evaluate skills performance.

Fortunately, our assessment system in Oman supports both formative and summative assessment procedures. Teachers have the choice to select the appropriate method of assessment according to their students' needs and requirements from a variety of assessment tools, like observation rubrics, project work, short quizzes, and portfolio assessment (Ministry of Education, 2011). However, my observation and experience indicate that some teachers depend heavily on summative assessment and national standardised tests. This attitude is due to a number of reasons, such as the prevalent norm in our society that the best method to measure students' learning is through tests. In addition, there are problems of class size, lack of training on the application of formative assessment procedures, and a shortage of support and resources (Al-Issa, 2010). Therefore, promoting awareness of the importance of balanced assessment procedures amongst ELT professionals in public schools, and providing suitable support and training, will help develop and enhance the integration of 21st century skills into the system. Indeed, Greenstein (2012) argued that a balance of formative, summative, and authentic assessment would be effective when incorporating 21st century skills.

3.10.8 Curriculum and instruction

The other main challenge after assessment lies in designing and redesigning curricula; and, when the decision is made to incorporate 21st century competencies, developing instructional strategies to deliver them (Trilling &

Fadel, 2009; Greenstein, 2012). Thus, the ultimate goal of most educational systems around the world is developing and designing a balanced curriculum which includes both traditional and direct learning approaches of instruction and inquiry, and design and collaboration projects. Achieving this aim of a balanced curriculum will transform classroom instructions, which, in turn, will enhance creativity, imagination, problem solving, and critical thinking. Additionally, the lessons will be meaningful and will gain greater relevance to the outside world (Richards, 2013; Kärkkäinen, 2012; Kivunja, 2015).

Although there have been no studies conducted in the field of 21st century competencies in the Omani EFL context, some studies have been carried out to investigate Omani EFL professionals' views, attitudes, and perceptions of changes or strategies implemented in EFL classrooms. However, these studies concluded that imposing change in content, teaching approaches or assessment procedures has not been successful in the Omani context. For instance, a study was conducted by Al Mahrouqi (2013) regarding Omani EFL perceptions and practices, and the difficulties of implementing a learner-centred approach in the Omani context. The data were gathered through a questionnaire (170 participants), classroom observations (14 lessons), and semi-structured interviews (14 teachers). The results showed that Omani EFL teachers have positive perceptions about the learner-centred approach; however, in practice, the teacher-centred approach is dominant. This might be attributed to a lack of sufficient training, time constraints, students' low proficiency levels and mainly because of the top-down system .

The aforementioned studies have collectively provided evidence that teachers were obliged to implement, use, and integrate the new curriculum or a new

strategy in their instruction without having the power of choice. Thus, the issue of powerlessness is evident within the top-down approaches to curriculum change; many teachers perceived themselves as knowledge transmitters and saw their main role as helping their students master the content without any involvement in the process of change. This hinders the success of any reform. However, McGrail (2005) claimed that to facilitate reform, teachers should have an understanding of the rationale for change and should be involved in the process, as teachers seem to be co-operative when they are aware of the reasons underpinning change .

Moreover, it is clear that there are limitations regarding how the phenomenon of curriculum development has been tackled from different perspectives. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been utilised in investigating the issue in Oman. However, aspects such as how teachers perceive the newly developed curriculum, and the extent to which assessment procedures are compatible with that curriculum, have not been sufficiently covered. Additionally, exploring the challenges teachers face, and how they manage to overcome them when implementing the curriculum, is essential at this stage in order to fill some of the gaps in the knowledge about curriculum development strategies in the Sultanate.

Despite the fact that developing such a curriculum is a challenge (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Greenstein, 2012), there is a global movement (Silva, 2009; Griffin et al. 2012; Greiff & Kyllonen, 2016) which calls for the introduction of different suggestions and frameworks for the integration of 21st century competencies and skills (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The rising number of online libraries and repositories containing massive resources of effective learning projects will

contribute positively in developing the desired curriculum. Besides, the online and distance learning courses based on project design help to inform the implementation of a curriculum that supports 21st century skills.

In conclusion, as Khan & Law (2015) stated, creating and recreating an education system is not a simple task; there are massive challenges that must be overcome in order to achieve the optimum aim of creating a better world. Fortunately, the work is continuing and advancing through the growing number of school networks and through committed and enthusiastic educational leaders, teachers, and researchers, who have achieved a great deal of progress in the field of transforming education to fit into the 21st century era.

3.11 The conceptual framework

A conceptual framework is considered as “a road map”, which provides a guide for the researcher throughout the whole process of an investigation. It starts with an overview of the key concepts, the theoretical framework underpinning the professional context of the study, the research themes and questions, the methodological implementations of the study, the results and analysis, and finally, the conceptual and practical findings of the research (Berman, 2013).

As mentioned earlier, this study attempts to explore Omani EFL teachers' perceptions of the integration of 21st century competencies and skills into the Omani EFL curriculum. In this section, I shall explain the main concepts referred to in this thesis by drawing on the literature. The main concepts are: “teachers' perceptions”, “curriculum”, “knowledge of the 21st century competencies”, and “assessment approaches”. Figure 7 illustrates these constructs, and the manner in which they interact with each other and enhance the implementation of the

essential 21st century competencies in the Omani EFL context. This framework also stresses the process of integration of the competencies; the focus needs to be on these principles appearing explicitly in EFL aims, content, pedagogies and assessment.

The aforementioned curriculum development models have informed the devising of the framework . To begin with, the curriculum development models have collectively stressed the importance of conducting needs analysis, for the context, for the stakeholders and for the environment. This element of analysis was utilised in the form of teachers' perceptions in order to extensively understand the needs of teachers in the whole process of integration of the 21st century competencies and skills. Teachers basically have been overtaken in this process as is thoroughly discussed in sections(3.9.1 & 3.9.2).

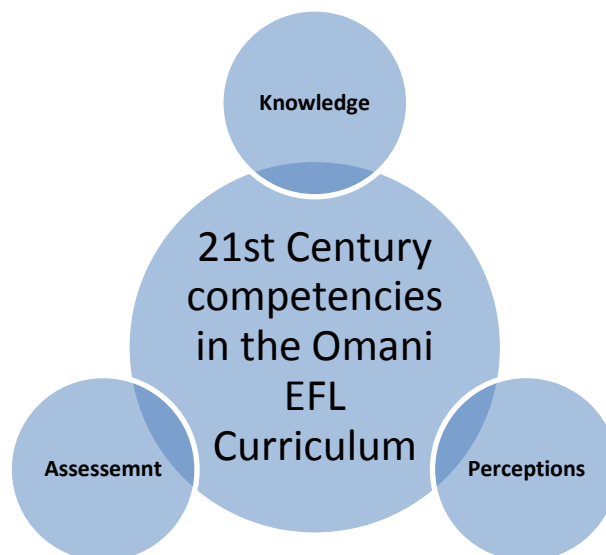


Figure 7: The constructs of the study

Borg (2003) defines L2 teacher cognition as what teachers think, believe and know and as the relationship between this set of things and what teachers do inside the L2 classroom. Teacher beliefs tend to be tacit, and may restrict their understanding and adoption of new knowledge they meet throughout their careers (Pajares, 1992; Borg, 2003; Borg, 2015). Therefore, during pre-service teacher education programmes, the hidden beliefs of student teachers need to be brought up to the surface and comprehended so that these hidden beliefs do not obscure teacher learning and development (Borg, 2015; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). This can be achieved through the implementation of reflective activities and mentoring. Katzenmeyer & Moller (2009) explain that new teachers' beliefs and values need to be confronted through special kinds of mentoring programmes where teachers' professional roles can be enhanced. Therefore, an implementation of the actions arising from the teacher's semi-structured interviews will tend to unveil some of the beliefs about, and the knowledge and perceptions of the integration process.

The next construct is assessment as detailed in sections (3.8 & 3.10.7). The current study investigates the assessment approaches teachers deploy while teaching and learning the 21st century competencies and skills. Curriculum development models especially the language curriculum development frameworks have confirmed that assessing the learning process is an integral part of the development (see sections 3.7.3 & 3.7.4). Hence, classroom observations and the teachers' questionnaire were the tools applied to collect the data in order to answer the second question of the study. In addition, these tools helped to deeply understand the teachers' practices and experiences of assessing the 21st century competencies and skills.

3.12 Summary of the chapter

This chapter analytically reviewed the literature on curriculum development studies. The conceptualization of curriculum in light of the prominent current debates in the curriculum literature was followed by a critical discussion on philosophical orientations and ideologies. The subsequent section explored the different curriculum development models and identified their strengths and weaknesses. The discussion on the philosophical educational dogmas underlying the study and the curriculum development models aimed to reveal the researcher's conceptual framework, which is implied throughout the chapter and ultimately depict a visual representation of the constructs .

Next, it critically drew a comparison between the top-down and bottom-up approaches in curriculum evaluation and renewal. Some issues were presented concerning assessment, and the incorporation of 21st century competencies was discussed extensively with reference to some international studies. The chapter concluded by focusing on previous studies of curriculum development in the Omani context for the purpose of discussing the limitations of this study and regarding how it will fill the gap in the literature.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This study focuses on Omani EFL teachers and their perceptions of the integration of 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL classroom context. The research identifies assessment approaches used to measure these skills, and discovers the possible challenges teachers may face while integrating these skills in their EFL classes. Further, the research investigates how teachers can overcome these challenges. With these points in mind, the research addresses the following questions:

1. How do Omani EFL teachers perceive the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum in Omani public schools?
2. What are their views with regard to the assessment approaches that measure 21st century competencies?
3. What are the anticipated challenges with regard to the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL classrooms?
4. How, from the teachers' points of view, can the projected challenges be overcome?

In this chapter, I outline the research methodology and discuss the methods and processes deployed during the course of the project. I then justify the methodological choices that have been made – a mixed-method approach as a research methodology. This is an approach that employs both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection in order to obtain a comprehensive and accurate demonstration of the issue under study. The qualitative methods used in the study included interviews and observations, while the quantitative

component included a questionnaire. By using three distinct instruments, this study produced multiple forms of data that could be triangulated in order to increase the scope, depth, and consistency (Flick, 2014) of findings that in turn reinforced the study's conclusions.

This methodology chapter is divided into several sections, reflecting the multiple data collection processes that comprised the study: the questionnaire; in-depth, semi-structured interviews; classroom observation; and the pilot study.

4.1.1 Philosophical assumptions

The interpretive paradigm informs the current investigation. Interpretivists investigate social phenomena as they happen in their settings and then interpret them according to how the participants experience them and add meaning to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Schwandt, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Flick, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Flick, 2018). Investigating human beings and their experiences is distinct from viewing them as objects: "Man is not a subject of science" (Pring, 2004, p. 32). Therefore, interpretivism is concerned with exploring the richness and the complexity of social and human life in order to understand the problem through "identification, empathy or sense of entry into the lived reality of it" (Ernest, 1994, p. 27). One of the major goals of the study was to explore Omani EFL teachers' perceptions during the integration of 21st century competencies and skills in public schools, and interpreting the collected data with the goal of locating the hidden meanings they attached to their experience. Thus, the philosophical stance of the interpretive approach matches the aims of the study.

Additionally, the subjectivity of the participants and how they create their own meanings and voices for the phenomena is one of the key assumptions of

interpretive research (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2018). Garrick (1999) argued that complete objectivity does not exist when studying or observing humans or social events. The participants' subjective stories, the discourse they use, their descriptions, and the metaphors that humans give to the event are fundamental. Hence, the interpretation by the individuals and the subjective meaning that EFL teachers attached to 21st century competencies and skills in Omani public schools is a priority of the current study. Subsequently, the interpretive paradigm closely matches the philosophical assumptions of the study.

4.1. 2 Ontological and epistemological stance

Ernest (1994, p. 20) defined ontology as “the theory of existence” and the study of being. Interpretivists believe that individuals perceive reality in multiple and relative ways (Pring, 2004). The ontological perspective of interpretivism centres on the nature of reality and meaning in the minds of the participants, and the role of the researcher is to uncover this knowledge inductively. In this research, the participants had their own views about the issue under investigation – 21st century competencies and skills. Teachers' perspectives have been developed from a variety of relative understandings; as Crotty (1998, p. 42) stated, “Reality and knowledge are created, developed and transmitted through mutual interaction between individuals and their social context.” Despite the fact that the participants in this Omani study appeared to share the same experience and conditions of implementing 21st century competencies and skills, the study assumed that they would not actually have the same experience; but rather that they developed relative truths and multiple truths, as all might interact differently in their social context. As a result, the researcher's

role was to uncover these hidden realities while interpreting teachers' perceptions.

Crotty (1998, p. 8) defined epistemology as understanding what can be involved in knowing and "how we know what we know", while Ernest (1994, p. 20) defined it as the "theory of knowledge and learning". Therefore, the interpretivist epistemological view of reality is that it is multiple and is continually constructed through social interaction. This view contrasts with positivism which views reality as predictable and as an absolute truth. One of the main world views mentioned by Creswell (2014) is the social constructivist view. Similarly, Flick (2014, 2018) believed that interpretive research enlightens researchers regarding how the realities and understanding gained are socially constructed through participants' cultural backgrounds, daily interactions, and institutions. This view of social constructivism relates directly to interpretivism. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) shared the same view of interpretive research, as investigating issues happening in their settings and interpreting them in respect of how the participants experience them and add meaning to them. As Flick (2011, p. 30) suggested, "Interpretative research is concerned with analysing 'concrete cases' in other words, participants in their local environment exploring in particular peoples' activities and discourse in their natural context."

These ontological and epistemological views of the interpretive paradigm align directly with the aims of this study, the purpose of which is to illuminate and gain an in-depth understanding of Omani EFL teachers' perceptions of integrating 21st century competencies and skills, and to uncover their personal interpretations and experiences of that integration. The current study assumes that the teachers are involved in the experience, and believe in a certain truth of

the experience, and that they eventually interpret it differently. In fact, there will be no absolute truth or “true or valid interpretation” (Crotty, 1998, p. 47); hence all diverse interpretations are applicable and accepted. Therefore, the interpretive paradigm informed the study appropriately and provided the authority for the researcher to interact effectively and positively with the participants in order to understand their interpretations of the phenomenon under investigation. The philosophical stance of this study having been clarified; the following section will consider the research design.

4.3 Design and methodology

The main aim of the study is to uncover the experiences, beliefs, concerns, understandings and perceptions of Omani EFL teachers through an in-depth investigation of their own individual stories. Therefore, the study employed a mixed-method approach to explore the phenomenon of integrating 21st century competencies and skills into the Omani classroom environment.

Mixed-method research, which is also known as the integrating, multimethod, quantitative and qualitative method (Creswell & Poth, 2017) of research, is a combination or integration of elements of qualitative and quantitative research and data in a study. Mixed-method research provides an opportunity to develop novel theoretical perspectives by combining the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods. Thus, it provides rich insights by overcoming limitations associated with either method alone, and results in “meta-inferences” – an integrative view of findings from qualitative and quantitative strands of mixed-method research (Creswell, 2014; Venkatesh, Brown & Sullivan, 2016; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The emergence of the mixed-method approach,

according to Tashakkori & Teddlie, (2010), was prior to the “Paradigm War” (Dörnyei, 2007) between positivists and constructivists. During this philosophical conflict the positivists complied with quantitative methods while social constructivists deployed qualitative methods.

Arguably, the mixed-method approach integrates the two in order to reduce the tension between the two paradigms. Thus the call to combine the two paradigms was repeatedly articulated between the late 1980s and the early 1990s (Venkatesh et al., 2016; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Eventually, the merging of the two paradigms became accepted by researchers as a legitimate strategy. Tashakkori & Teddlie (1998) claimed that the similarities of the fundamental values of the quantitative and qualitative approaches made it possible to integrate the approaches flawlessly. For instance, Tashakkori & Teddlie (1998), as cited in Creswell & Plano Clark (2011), mentioned the value-laden nature of inquiry, the belief in the theory-laden nature of facts, the belief that reality is multiple and constructed, and the belief of the fallibility of knowledge. Therefore, by the early 1990s, researchers using the mixed-method approach sought a systematic convergence of quantitative and qualitative databases.

Although there is no fixed definition of the mixed-method approach, the generic term, mixed-method, is recommended to be used (Mertens, Bazeley, Bowleg, Fielding, Maxwell & Molina-Azorin, Niglas, 2016). Practically, mixed-method research was defined as the collection or analysis of qualitative and quantitative data in a research study in which the data is collected sequentially or simultaneously. The method involves incorporating data collected at one time, or in phases, within the process of the research, as well as the weighting of the

datasets (Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2018). Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner (2007, p. 123) defined mixed-method research as “the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g. use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration.” Brown (2014, pp. 8-9) claimed that in order for a study to be called “mixed-method”, it ought to have most of seven characteristics that he identified. These are: (1) the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods; (2) simultaneously or sequentially integrated qualitative and quantitative points of view; (3) data collection methods; (4) forms of analysis; (5) interpretations strategies; and (6) modes of drawing conclusions. In addition, the procedures for both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, such as sampling, source of information and data analysis stages need to be conducted rigorously. The two forms of data are integrated in the design analysis through merging the data, connecting the data, or embedding the data.

Consistent with Brown's view of mixed-method research, Creswell (2014), and Tashakkori & Teddlie (2010) interpreted the advantages of applying mixed-method design as enabling researchers to provide stronger inferences than a single method or worldview, and providing an opportunity for researchers to produce a greater assortment of divergent and/or complementary worldviews. Thus, as the two approaches compromise strengths and weaknesses, embracing qualitative and quantitative approaches resolves the shortcomings of both. Even though the combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches resolves some limitations and allows for robust analysis, the mixed-

method design does not replace any of the other designs (Venkatesh et al., 2016). Instead, research design is determined by “fitness for purpose” as claimed by Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2011, p. 115).

4.3.1 Mixed-method models

The early strategies of mixed-method designs were typological (e.g. Creswell, 2014; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Creswell (2014) identified three basic types of mixed-method designs: concurrent, sequential, and advanced. Although a typological approach of mixed-method research could help researchers select a particular design for their study, Tashakkori & Teddlie (2010), Guest, MacQueen & Namey (2012) and Maxwell & Loomis (2003) argued that mixed-method research has a far greater diversity than any single model. This is because of the diverse nature of qualitative and quantitative approaches that one can employ, the wide range of purposes of the approach, and finally the differences with respect to time orientation. All of these aspects reveal the complex design of a mixed-method study. The following sections will elaborate on the features of these models.

4.3.1.1 The convergent parallel mixed-method design

Convergent parallel mixed-method is one of the common or familiar approaches for novice researchers. In this approach, the researcher collects both datasets (qualitative and quantitative) concurrently, then analyses the data separately, and finally compares the results as a method of triangulation (confirming or disconfirming the findings). This approach is based on the assumptions that both datasets yield two different types of information, and a comparison yields similar findings. Within this approach, the qualitative tools used might be

interviews, observation, document analysis, or records analysis. On the other hand, surveys are a commonly used quantitative tool. The key feature of this design is that the same constructs, variables, or concepts are collected from both data forms (qualitatively and quantitatively). Additionally, the sample size in the qualitative and quantitative data collection process is different depending on the intention. Hence, the intention behind using the qualitative method is to obtain data from a small number of participants but in an extensive way. In contrast, quantitative method studies have a large sample of participants with which the researcher may carry out the statistical tests for the purposes of generalisation. Another issue within the design is whether the participants in the qualitative sample should be included in the quantitative sample. Basically, the intention of this design is to draw a comparison between the datasets, therefore, the more similar the participants are, the better the comparison.

Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) claimed that the challenge of this design is the merging of datasets during the analysis stage. Thus, the researcher has a number of options. One option is to apply a side-by-side technique for the comparison, in which the researcher might draw the comparison within the discussion, presenting the first set of findings and then the other. Alternatively, the researcher can apply the data-transformative technique. This technique involves the changing of qualitative codes or themes into quantitative variables. The third technique is the joint display of data, which can take the form of table or graph. The interpretation of data in this design is typically reported in the discussion chapter. It includes the comparison of the findings from the two datasets, and records whether there is a convergence or not between the two

sets. Establishing validity in this design can be carried out for both the quantitative construct validity and qualitative triangulation process.

4.3.1.2 Exploratory sequential mixed-method design

This research design works in reverse to the explanatory design in that it starts with the qualitative phase and is followed by the quantitative phase. Therefore, the researcher explores the phenomena with qualitative tools and applies the results, the analysed data, to the quantitative phase. Similar to the previous design, this approach builds on the findings of the first phase in order to conduct the second. The main intention of the design is to construct better measurements and data collected from a specific small sample of the population in the qualitative stage in order to generalise the findings through a larger sample during the quantitative stage.

In this design, the researcher has a couple of options when it comes to data collection. For example, qualitative data analysis could be used to develop better psychometric tools that might be applied to the sample and population under study. In addition, the qualitative data can be used to establish new variables or to identify suitable scales. The datasets in this design will be analysed separately, then the findings from the first phase inform the quantitative instruments. During the interpretation stage, the researcher interprets the qualitative results, and uses them first; then moves on to the analysis of quantitative data. The researcher who uses this design has to establish the validity of both phases (qualitative and quantitative).

4.3.1.3 The explanatory sequential mixed-method design

This design deploys a two-stage approach in which the researcher collects quantitative data in the first phase, analyses them and then plans accordingly for the next phase (qualitative stage). Thus, the quantitative findings inform the qualitative stage, especially in the development of the research instruments and the participants involved. Therefore, qualitative data may help explain the primary quantitative data in greater depth. Typically, this design begins with collecting survey data during the first stage, and analysing the findings statistically. After this, qualitative tools are designed and applied in order to explain the survey findings more deeply. According to Creswell (2014), the challenge of this design is to decide upon which quantitative results to follow up on, and the selection of the sample for the qualitative phase, as the qualitative data is built directly on the quantitative findings.

The purpose of this design is to follow up the quantitative findings and explore them in depth; this in-depth investigation of the mechanisms during the qualitative stage is considered an advantage of the design. In this approach, datasets are analysed separately, as the results of the first phase feed into the planning of the second phase. Therefore, the design is attractive for researchers in general because the analysis for each phase proceeds independently. The interpretation starts by reporting the first set of data, i.e. quantitative, followed by the interpretation of the qualitative findings. However, this approach implies a third form of interpretation in a way; an explanation of how the qualitative results justify the quantitative results. The validity in this design is established following the same procedures implemented in the parallel mixed-method design.

Creswell (2014) and Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) identified a couple of advanced mixed-method designs. These methods generally integrate the elements of the main designs, i.e. convergent, explanatory sequential, and exploratory sequential. They are the embedded mixed-method design, the transformative mixed-method design, and the multiphase mixed-method design.

According to Creswell & Plano Clark (2011), the decision to use a certain approach in the mixed-method design depends upon the following:

- How the data will be integrated (mixed-method integration that is merged, connected, or embedded);
- Timing in mixed-method data collection (concurrent or sequential);
- Suitability of the design for a field;
- Choice of a researcher or a team of researchers to carry out manageable tasks (phases).

Hence, the following section describes in depth the approach used in the current study and the rationale behind this selection in particular.

4.4 The approach implemented for this study

I chose the explanatory sequential mixed-method approach for this study. This design best matches the intentions and aims of the current investigation, to investigate the perception and experiences of Omani EFL professionals towards the integration of 21st century competencies and skills in their classes. I am drawing from the philosophical stance of prominent figures in mixed-method research, such as Brown (2014), Tashakkori & Teddlie (2010), and Creswell & Plano Clark (2011), who contend that “pragmatism” is the best philosophical assumption for mixed-method research. This approach allowed me to combine

a survey with in-depth interviews and classroom observations, thereby providing profound insights into the views of Omani ELT professionals on the subject.

The two phases of data collection were considered in the study, as each phase feeds into the other. Accordingly, the second phase of data collection explained in depth the findings of the first phase, i.e. the questionnaire, while the first phase informed the second one as shown in Figure 8. To be more specific, the construction of the interview and the classroom observation depended heavily upon the results of the survey phase. On the one hand, the survey was administered to gain a global understanding of the phenomenon, in which the perceptions and experiences of a large number of EFL teachers was measured statistically. On the other hand, the interviews and classroom observations were conducted with a smaller number of teachers, in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the subject and to explain the statistical findings. The reciprocal benefit of implementing the two phases in the current study was considered as an attraction. Practically, the collection of the interview and observation data started after the completion of the survey analysis and data collection. In this sense, the qualitative tools were developed and established while the participants were identified according to the quantitative results. This shift is supported by Creswell (2014) and Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) who justified the change in the overall philosophical assumptions of the design. As it starts with a post-positivist to a constructivist stance, this shift between multiple philosophical assumptions is acceptable, as the researcher conducted each phase using different strategies in order to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

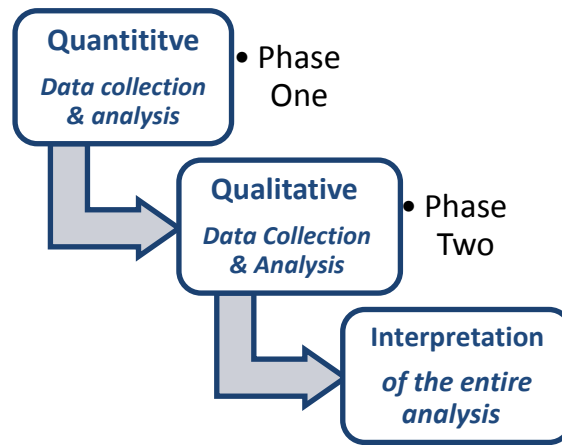


Figure 8: Phases of the study

Another motive for selecting the mixed-method design was the specific field and context demands. According to Creswell (2014) , Brown (2014) and Creswell & Plano Clark (2011), the field of the study contributes greatly to the decision taken by the researcher regarding the research design. Therefore, reflecting on my experience as an MA student, and the Omani educational and research context, the sequential explanatory mixed-method approach was selected. In general, the Omani educational and research context depends heavily on numerical data and can be described as more quantitatively-oriented. As a result, providing policymakers with statistical data is always effective and supportive. However, the idea of having in-depth data from other forms (interviews or observations) is also growing nowadays. Furthermore, this approach is relatively appropriate for answering the research questions. Thus the questionnaire is suitable to answer questions 1 and 3 of the investigation in addition to having some answers for the rest of the questions, while classroom observations and the semi-structured interviews are conducted to answer questions 2 and 4.

One of the key decisions in selecting the appropriate mixed-method approach is prioritising the quantitative and qualitative strands. This gives the appropriate weighting, of the quantitative and the qualitative methods, to answer the research questions. Accordingly, there are three possible options for the researcher to choose from taking into consideration the research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). These options are: equal weighting (QUAL = QUAN), quantitative priority (QUAN–qual), and qualitative priority (QUAL-quan). Brown (2014, p. 9) classified the priorities as “Pure Mixed”, “Quantitative Mixed”, and “Qualitative Mixed” respectively. Therefore, apart from the classifications, what leads to the decision taken to prioritise the methods depends upon the research questions and the underlying theoretical and philosophical underpinnings. The primary aim of the current investigation is to explore Omani EFL professionals’ perceptions and to make their voices heard as much as possible. As a result, such an investigation can barely achieve its aims through the quantitative method alone, i.e. the questionnaire. Conversely, I was entirely convinced that the implementation of the other qualitative tools, i.e. semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, would provide me with the opportunity to become an insider in order to explore and gain deep understanding of the participants' perceptions. In addition, building on my EFL teaching experience and conducting the classroom observations and interviews all by myself, this close attachment expanded my comprehension of the issue and added to my understanding.

Furthermore, another critical decision in the design of the research strategy was the integration point of the two strands. Thus, the process by which the researcher implements the independent or interactive relationship of a mixed-

method study depends heavily on the points of interface and mixing strategies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 66). This is because the mixing can occur at different stages within the research process, i.e. during data collection, data analysis, interpretation, and design. Consequently, the current research deployed the explanatory sequential design to investigate ELT teachers' perceptions and experiences, and for this purpose semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were emphasised. Generally, as Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) concluded, most researchers put the integration process into action at the stage of data analysis, and at the stage of interpretation. Hence, the current study follows the same method of integrating the two data sets at the stages of data analysis and interpretation as it appeared to be the most suitable strategy for addressing the research questions. The following, Figure 9, depicts the entire design as adapted from Creswell & Plano Clark (2011, p. 121).

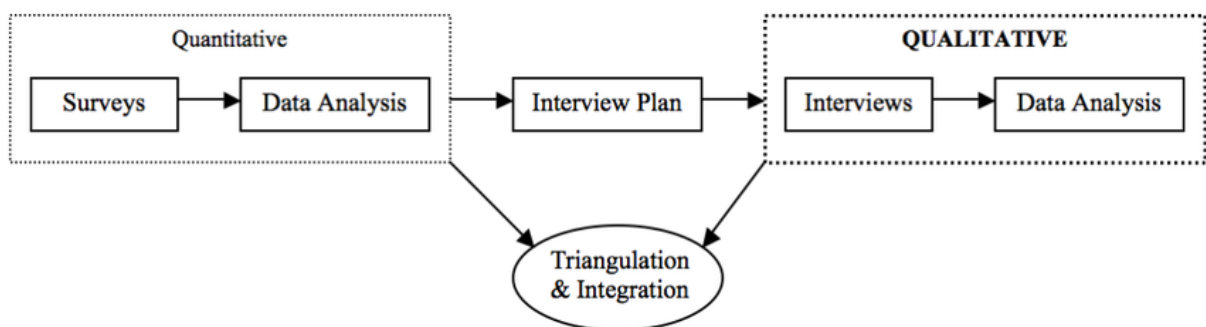


Figure 9: Explanatory design

4.5 Participants

Both qualitative and quantitative designs approach the concept of sample and sampling differently. For example, in quantitative research the participants are referred to as research subjects, while in qualitative design they are known as participants. In the end, both terms refer to the people who take part in a

research project. In addition, both designs have different techniques and assumptions behind the selection of the sample from the wider population. According to Cohen et al. (2011), there are two different types of sampling, namely, probability and non-probability sampling. Quantitative design most frequently uses probability sampling because it seeks representativeness and hence generalisability of the findings. On the other hand, qualitative design selects participants based on certain criteria appertaining to the purpose of the study. This is commonly known as purposive or purposeful sampling (Brown, 2014).

The current study employs a mixed-method design with both qualitative and quantitative components. Therefore, the two techniques of sampling were implemented. Precisely, the quantitative phase employed probability stratified sampling while the qualitative phase employed purposive sampling.

Sampling for the first phase of the research followed the random stratified approach, one that involves dividing the population into homogenous groups with similar features (Cohen et al., 2011). Consequently, the sample in the first phase was classified into groups according to the educational governorates and then included a proportion of each group in the sample. In this case, I targeted 20% of Omani EFL teachers, in each of the eleven governorates in the country, in the 2016-2017 school year. The population includes 7164 Omani EFL teachers (MoE,2016) in the whole Sultanate, and so the sample size was calculated using the probability table (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 147). Table 1 provides details of the sample.

Educational Governorate	Population	Stratified random sample (one in every 20)
Muscat	1,045	53
North Al-Batinah	1,251	62
South Al-Batinah	866	43
Al-Dakhlya	1,009	50
North Al-Sharqiya	575	30
South Al-Sharqiya	630	29
Al-Buraimi	177	9
Al-Dhahira	486	23
Dhofar	810	39
Al-Wusta	156	7
Musandam	112	5
Total	7164	350

Table 1. Sample of English teachers to complete the questionnaire

As for the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was implemented. The cases or participants included in the sample are selectively chosen on the basis of the researcher's judgment in order to satisfy the research aims and purposes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In fact as Cohen et al. (2011, p. 157) claimed, purposive sampling is used to reach "knowledgeable people", that is, those who have in-depth knowledge of certain issues. Accordingly, the current study approached as a sample those who received special training in the process of the integration of 21st century competencies and skills in their EFL classrooms. These were taken from different regions i.e. Muscat, Albatinah North, Albatinah South and Al Dakiyliah. Teachers who volunteered to continue to the next phase of the study were approached through their personal contacts. This allowed qualitative semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to be

conducted with those who had the experience to implement 21st century competencies in the EFL classrooms.

Interview questions focused on the teachers' awareness of 21st century competencies and skills, the nature of their experiences and the challenges that they faced during the implementation period. Fifteen Omani EFL teachers were approached to inaugurate the qualitative phase methods, i.e. 15 interviews and 10 classroom observations. The main criterion for selecting these teachers was that they had undergone training in the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills in the specialized teacher training centre. So those who had started teaching the skills in their classrooms were identified and approached personally and they agreed to take part in the investigation.

These teachers provided informed consent and participated in semi-structured interviews, conducted by me, 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) as shown in Table 2.

No	Region	Pseudonym	School	Grades	Years of Experience
1	Muscat	Haifa	Cycle one	2 & 3	3
2	Muscat	Naeema	Post-basic	11 & 11 elct.	7
3	Muscat	Khadijah	Cycle one	3 & 4	16
4	Muscat	Hafidah	Cycle two	6 & 8	9
5	Muscat	Saeed	Cycle two	8 & 9	4
6	Muscat	Sumayha	Cycle one	3 & 4	11
7	Aldakiliyah	Zahra	Cycle one	SET	14
8	Aldakiliyah	Abeer	Cycle one	1 & 4	10
9	Aldakiliyah	Kareema	Post-basic	11 & 12	12
10	Aldakiliyah	Fatima	Cycle one	SET	2
11	Aldakiliyah	Mona	Cycle one	2 & 4	2
12	Batinah S	Maryam	Post-basic	SET	9
13	Batinah S	Houda	Cycle two	SET	10
14	Batinah N	Sara	Cycle one	1 & 3	4
15	Batinah N	Souad	Cycle one	SET	8

Table 2. Teachers interviewed

Despite the fact that the current study deployed two types of sampling to comprise the quantitative and qualitative phases, it was mainly a qualitative investigation. The intention was not to have a representative sample, and hence generalisability of the findings. Instead, the intention of the investigation was to gain deeper insight into the phenomena inherent in the research questions. Thus purposive sampling was more appropriate for the purpose of investigating EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences of the integration of the 21st century competencies and skills in the EFL classrooms. It provided me as a researcher with opportunities to critically select participants that had been enrolled in the training previously and who had experienced the integration of these competencies in their contexts.

4.6. Data collection methods

Three methods were deployed for this study. These were an online teacher's questionnaire, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. These methods will be discussed extensively below. The data collection process comprised a number of stages, beginning with a pilot study to test and refine the research instruments, followed by three stages of primary data collection. Initially, the study aimed to explore the perceptions of Omani EFL teachers of the implementation and teaching of 21st century competencies, through a quantitative questionnaire, a series of observations and semi-structured interviews. These were conducted between February 2017 and June 2017. Figure 10 presents the data collection phases, and the participants involved at each stage.

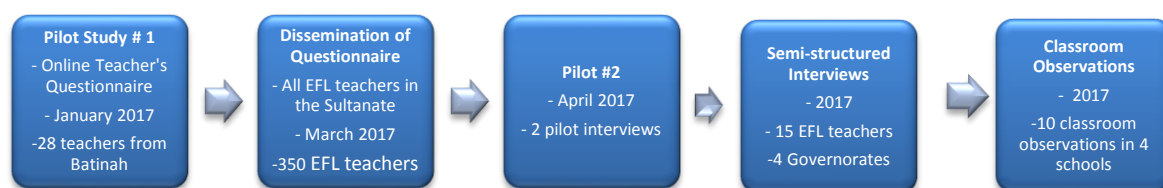


Figure 10: Data collection stages

4.6.1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire is defined as a set of closed questions on a topic designed to be completed by the participants themselves as “a self-completion questionnaire” (Bryman, 2012, p. 232). Generally, questionnaires provide the researcher with the opportunity to collect data in the field settings with a large number of participants. They provide structured, and usually numerical, data which can be analysed statistically (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Flick, 2018). Hence, it is claimed that using a questionnaire as a data collection method to explore the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of respondents in

any field or context provides the researcher with the ability to unlock their tacit views and beliefs. Bryman (2012) and Dörnyei & Taguchi (2009) listed a number of advantages of applying questionnaires as a research method. This method is known for its impartiality, in that when the researcher is detached from the research questions, this minimises biases through the elimination of the researcher effect. The anonymity and convenience of questionnaires are great features. They allow respondents to complete the questionnaire freely and at their convenience. In addition, the process allows them to reflect upon their answers without restrictions. The cost advantage of online questionnaires is also important. It is a convenient tool with regard to administration and distribution, especially if the sample is spread over a large geographical area.

For the purpose of the current study, the questionnaire was constructed to measure the perceptions and attitude of Omani EFL teachers in integrating 21st century competencies/skills in the EFL curriculum. Taking into consideration the sample of the study, a large number of EFL teachers teaching in remote geographical areas and regions of the country, a self-completion questionnaire was an appropriate choice. It was quicker and more practical to distribute and collect, especially when applying new technological facilities. In addition, the objectivity of the method produces rigour and authentic outcomes (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017). However, in spite of the practicality and authenticity of the questionnaires, there are some pitfalls that researchers have to consider when applying them, as summarised by Cohen et al. (2007). Specific research aims and clear questions must be assured in order that the questionnaire can be easily completed. In addition, there is little control over the respondents, which can lead to bias. Furthermore, a questionnaire does not

provide any further information from the respondents, especially with closed questions. One of the major challenges with questionnaires is the risk of low response rates or missing data. In studies where the questionnaire is the main and only method of gathering data, these issues are of great concern.

Questionnaires can take different forms; structured, unstructured, semi-structured, open-response and/or closed-response (Brown, 2014). Structured questionnaires use closed questions, whereas unstructured questionnaires tend to include open-ended questions. On the other hand, semi-structured questionnaires contain both closed and open-ended questions. For the purpose of the study a semi-structured questionnaire was developed to collect data in the first phase. Using a combination of closed and open response items provided the respondents with opportunities to elaborate or add to their answers. Pallant (2016) argued that combining closed- and open-ended questions in a questionnaire is beneficial in the early stages of a research as it provides an indication of whether the closed responses sufficiently cover all the response categories that respondents wish to offer. This argument matches the aims and the philosophical stance and the design of the current study as mentioned earlier. Ultimately, as Cohen et al. (2011) argued, the semi-structured questionnaire sets an agenda but does not anticipate the nature of the answers.

4.6.1.1 Designing the questionnaire

Brown (2014) claimed that the questionnaires are adaptable tools. They can be used purely quantitatively or qualitatively. However, the construction of a reliable and valid survey is a challenging task. Many scholars provided some input to this process. As Brown (2014) and Pallant (2016) noted, there are some

problems that researchers face when developing and disseminating questionnaires. For instance, overly-long items, and ambiguous or unrelated items. There are of course strategies available to overcome these problems in order to produce accurate data. Indeed, these guidelines were considered throughout the process of developing, refining, and piloting the questionnaire. The developed online questionnaire was informed by the conceptual and theoretical framework adopted in the study, and with reference to the related studies in the area of integrating 21st century competencies/skills in the EFL classrooms; furthermore, by how teachers perceive and experience the issue with respect to their social realities, previous experiences and local and global aspects that influenced their views, perceptions and understanding. A detailed description of the online questionnaire will be provided below.

4.6.1.2 Designing stage

During the design stage of the questionnaire, the “item pool” (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) concept was used. This fundamentally refers to the different resources used in the development of questionnaire items, such as established questionnaires from the literature, the researcher’s ideas and the informants’ input. Hence, the two main sources for section B of the questionnaire in the current study were the questionnaires established and implemented by Li Li (2016) and Esterik (2013). The sections on the conceptualization of the skills, teachers' perceptions and the assessment of the skills were adapted from their questionnaires. Sections A and C, on the other hand, were designed through reading the literature in the area of curriculum development and the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies. In addition, my supervisors' comments were taken into

consideration while designing the questionnaire especially for the demographic section and the first section. Finally, the open-ended questions were suggested by my supervisor to gain extra information from the participants.

Thereafter, the initial version of the online questionnaire was constructed. It had three main sections: a precise demographic section; a closed-ended section; and an open-ended section. The closed-ended items covered a wide range of questions and issues related to the integration of the 21st century competencies/skills in the EFL classrooms, whereas the open-ended questions provided the participants with chances to express their thoughts deeply. In that sense, the combination of closed-ended and open-ended sections supported the breadth and depth of the questionnaire. As the targeted participants are Omani EFL teachers and around 92% of them are degree holders (Ministry of Education, 2016), the questionnaire was administered in English.

The first version of the questionnaire comprised 90 items. Then, the items were reduced to 53. Following the recommendations of my supervisors, five more items were added to the initial version of the questionnaire, which resulted in the 56 items described below. The questionnaire was arranged as follows:

- Section A explored demographical data. This section included five items and was constructed in order to obtain background information about the participants involved. It contained items about gender, region, level taught, qualifications, and years of teaching experience.
- Section B included 51 items divided into five parts that measured different aspects of the issue of integration of 21st century competencies/skills. The items in this section were based on a five-point

Likert scale (from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). The first part included eight items investigating EFL teachers' conceptualisation of 21st century competencies/skills. The second part focused on teachers' perceptions of the corroboration of 21st century competencies/skills; sixteen questions were posed to test their perceptions of the 21st century skills implementation. The third part contained 10 items investigating practices and performance regarding the integration of the 21st century competencies/skills in the EFL classrooms. The fourth section investigated the assessment of 21st century competencies/skills; nine items were developed to explore their assessment practices. The last section included eight questions focusing on the challenges teachers' face while implementing 21st century competencies/skills in English language classrooms.

- Section C of the questionnaire included two open-ended questions. The first question asked for an elaboration on the challenges faced by teachers while integrating 21st century competencies/skills. The last question encouraged a reflection on any of the questions provided in the questionnaire as a whole. Unexpectedly, these two questions were helpful, as the respondents provided and suggested elements which had not previously been considered. For example, many teachers mentioned the number of students per class as one of the major challenges. A copy of the final version of the online questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1.

4.6.1.3 Piloting the questionnaire

Once the construction of the online questionnaire was finished, I moved to the pilot stage. The purpose behind this stage of development was to determine, before the actual implementation in the study, whether the research instrument operated properly (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Flick, 2018). In addition, the survey trial provided indications to the researcher of the time required for completion of the survey, and of the clarity of instructions and questions, as well as aiding decisions on adding or omitting items. Therefore, in the current study the piloting phase was conducted under similar conditions, and using similar respondents, as the actual implementation.

The pilot of the questionnaire was beneficial in many ways because it refined the instructions and items. Moreover, the piloting of the questionnaire took place in the natural environment, i.e. public schools, in order to ensure that the sample was suitable for the current study. Additionally, the piloting provided a clear purpose for triangulation, as Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) suggested; triangulation seeks convergence, corroboration, and correspondence of findings from the variety of data collection methods. Therefore, the process of piloting the instrument gave me the chance to obtain initial insight into the key points which emerged from implementing the tools and the experiences I went through with regard to the aims and questions of the current research. Additionally, the main purpose of piloting is to fine-tune the research instrument and the overall approach. Cohen et al. (2011) argued that in principle, piloting a questionnaire increases the reliability, validity, and practicality of the survey; this will be discussed in detail in the next section.

The process of piloting was undertaken in January 2017. The first stage of piloting started when I sent electronic copies of the questionnaire to colleagues, school supervisors and teachers, to obtain their comments on the different aspects of the survey such as clarity, relevance, layout, and structure. Then the revised version was sent to my supervisors. Their feedback was given particular consideration, especially as regards the formulation of the items, the appropriateness of the questions to the respondents and the integrity of the questionnaire. The second stage was a piloting of the final version of the questionnaire followed by item analysis. Although the whole process of the piloting was long, it was extremely important in terms of proofing and fine-tuning the questionnaire. My respondents' and colleagues' input to the questionnaire was an inspiration as some participants were giving me critical feedback. This helped me to identify verbose, ambiguous, and double-barrelled items. In addition, the technical aspects of the online survey and its implications were worth trying out, as I used the Qualtrics platform for my questionnaire. It was beneficial to try to resolve any technical issues before the actual dissemination of the online questionnaire.

As shown in Figure 10, 28 participants took part in the pilot stage. All participants were fully informed of the aims of the study and of their rights during participation, including anonymity. As expected, some of the participants left the open-ended questions unanswered. Then, an item analysis was conducted, considering issues of missing values, recoding the negative items, and the internal consistency of the questionnaire. Tests of Normality, Skewness, and Kurtosis were established. However, the main tests conducted

at this stage were the tests of the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. The section below describes these in detail.

4.6.1.4 Questionnaire reliability

Reliability is defined by Brown as:

The degree to which the results of observations or measures are consistent, and/or the degree to which the results of the study as a whole are consistent. It can be enhanced by designing effective measures and can be verified by calculating test-retest, parallel forms or internal consistency (2014, p. 119).

Thus the reliability of the quantitative tool, i.e. the teacher's questionnaire, was established through calculating the Cronbach Alpha test. According to De Vellis (2012), cited in Pallant (2016), the ideal internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha coefficient scale should be above 0.7. Therefore, the test was run directly after the piloting phase with 28 Omani EFL teachers after maintaining permission from the Directorate of Education. The obtained Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.709 which is assumed to be a good score (Pallant, 2016).

The table below illustrates the numbers and the degrees of reliability coefficient.

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardised Items	N of Items
.709	.726	56

Table 3. Alpha Cronbach reliability test

4.6.1.5 Questionnaire validity

Validity in quantitative research is determined by whether the research instruments truly measure what they intended to measure (Pallant, 2016). Thus, to validate the questionnaire of the current study I sent electronic copies to my

supervisors. Thankfully, they checked the questionnaire against face, content and construct validity. For instance, there were suggestions to add items that measure the knowledge of 21st century competencies, to change the wording of some items, and to avoid double answer items. Thereafter, an improved version of the survey was sent to a panel of eight experts who were also requested to comment on the clarity and relevance of the items. The panel consisted of one faculty member of the College of Education at Sultan Qaboos University, two EFL trainers at the specialised centre of training, one EFL curriculum developer, one assessment officer, one regional supervisor, one lecturer at the college of higher technology, and a lecturer at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University. Following this procedure, their suggestions and comments were taken into account and I used them to fine-tune the questionnaire. For instance, three of the participants commented on the order of statements in section B. One of them suggested reducing the wording of the questions as much as possible, as the respondents might get bored with reading long questions.

4.6.1.6 Dissemination stage of the online questionnaire

After ensuring the reliability and validity of the questionnaire through the piloting process, the final version of the online questionnaire was administered. It consisted of a closed-ended questionnaire consisting of 56 items, with two open-ended questions, and a demographic information section. In addition, an introductory paragraph described the aims of the research and instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire a paragraph was attached that expressed appreciation of the participants' input and invited them to be included in the next phase of the study – the interview and classroom observation. Once I obtained ethical approval from the University of

Exeter and the Ministry of Education to conduct my study (Appendix 3), and after assuring that all governorates had received the access letter, I started the dissemination process of the online questionnaire. It was distributed to the research participants as a link whereby they accessed it, completed it, and submitted it using either their computers or their smartphones as “a self-completion” questionnaire (Bryman, 2012).

The link to the online questionnaire was then distributed to a random sample of English teachers and Senior English Teachers (SETs) in the 11 educational Omani Governorates. The number of participants in each Governorate is based on the total population of English teachers and SETs in each governorate. For example, the total number of English teachers in Muscat governorate is 1,045 teachers. I chose a random sample of one in every 20, meaning that the sample from Muscat governorate should be around 53, as shown in Table 1. In terms of reaching a sample for each educational governorate in Oman, I contacted my colleague supervisors, who acted as gate-keepers. A total of 11 gate-keepers in the 11 educational governorates were assigned. I sent the link of the questionnaire to each gate-keeper via smartphones, and he/she sent the link to all SETs in each school in the targeted governorates. The SET then sent the link to his/her staff of all English teachers and asked them to complete the questionnaire, if they wanted to participate. Once I received responses from the total number of targeted teachers in each governorate I closed the access to the questionnaire for that governorate.

4.6.2 The Semi-structured interview

Atkinson & Silverman (1997, cited in Kvale, 2007) referred to the present era as an “interview society” (p. 14). Interviews are used widely as a technique to gain

knowledge. Indeed, recently, interviews have attracted much focus because of the technological revolution, philosophical trends, and cultural transformation. Technology has made it easy for researchers to record interviews using audio tape and videotape and to use computer programs that facilitate data analysis. In addition, viewing knowledge as socially constructed through conversations and discourse justifies the growing interest in interviews in many research designs (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). As a novice researcher, I agree with Kvale that these changes and reforms in the world, in terms of ideas or technology, have facilitated access to knowledge. However, they have also made it quite difficult to analyse and comprehend the massive amount of information gained. According to interpretivism, which this study is based on, the view of knowledge as socially constructed and as obtained through active interaction between participants and the world has prevailed. The researcher tries to understand and make meaningful interpretations from the participants' perspectives by allowing participants during interviews to express and share their emotions, beliefs, values, and experiences using their own words, and to approach multiple versions of reality.

The researcher is viewed as "a key instrument" (Creswell, 2007). A relativist epistemology in interpretive research undoubtedly shapes the role of the researcher. The researcher is actively engaged in knowledge production and cannot be detached from the phenomena being investigated (Wellington, 2000). His or her subjectivity as a researcher appears throughout the research process. Formulating the questions, selecting the appropriate methodology and methods, choosing the sample, analysing and interpreting the data, and finally presenting the findings are phases where the researcher's subjectivity is

evident. Depending on the researcher's philosophical stance and the aims of the study, the researcher is required to position his/her knowledge, ideas, values, and experience in a balanced manner. The assumption in interpretive research, of multiple realities, has a direct impact on identifying the roles of the researcher. The researcher's own reality, understanding, and beliefs interact with the participants' realities, understandings and beliefs. In other words, the researcher is a "co-production" of meaning, as suggested by King & Horrocks (2010, p. 22). Unless the researcher is aware of the different roles he or she plays in the research process, the findings might be questioned. The researcher in interpretive research is considered as rapport constructor, ethics protector, transparency spectator, decision-maker, and interpreter. Therefore, as I was aware of the different roles I was taking throughout the process of conducting this research, I tried to position myself sensibly.

For the purpose of this study, I used semi-structured interviews as a tool for collecting data from the participants. Unlike positivist research, qualitative research involves selecting the participants who are relatively connected to the social world and phenomena that the study is investigating in order to shed light on "meaningful differences in experience" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 20).

4.6.2.1 Defining semi-structured interviews

The interview is a method used in many research designs. Qualitative interviewing is a kind of conversation, one in which an interviewer (or more than one) asks questions of a participant (or more than one), on a particular topic, and carefully listens to and preserves the answers either by recording the interview or by taking notes (Warren, 2004).

Kvale's (2007) definition of interviews as "a construction site of knowledge" (p. 2) reveals the use of interviews in qualitative research as an interactive medium of exchanging understanding. It implies that both the interviewer and the interviewee have active and reflexive roles in the process of constructing knowledge. In light of this, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee is significant, as are the answers to the questions (Mason, 2004). The interaction can be in different forms; for instance, face-to-face interviews, phone interviews, and online interviews. As well as the different types of interviewing techniques, there are three main types of qualitative interviews: structured; semi-structured; and unstructured.

The current study deployed the semi-structured interview as a data collection method in the second phase, sequentially implemented after the completion of the first phase of data collection, i.e. quantitative questionnaire. This was carried out purposefully as the semi-structured interview was designed based on the findings of the quantitative data. Semi-structured interviews are considered as a professional interaction "whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale 2007, p. 11). Using structures or categories in semi-structured interviews is common. Bradley (1993) suggested that they keep the interviewee and the interviewer focused on the aims and objectives of the research. The interviewer uses an interview schedule that helps him/her to remain within the scope of the study, while still having the freedom to tailor the questions and to prompt for more data that might be relevant. King & Horrocks (2010) defined the "interview guide" as an outline of topics to be covered during the interview. The structure of the semi-structured

interview is flexible in terms of the order and the wording of the questions. The interviewer relates to an interviewee in a gentle manner and is often allowed to ask questions outside the predetermined ones if there is a sense that such questions will give important information. In addition, in semi-structured interviews, unlike structured interviews, interviewees have the chance to interact and express their perspectives and perceptions freely. The use of an interview schedule will reduce and minimise variations between interviews (Patton, 2002).

One of the key advantages of semi-structured interviews is that they offer the researcher a chance to prepare beforehand. Thus, the researcher will be more confident and competent when interviewing. These benefits were evident in my research. Although preparing the interview guide was time-consuming, it was beneficial, as I felt competent and confident during the interviews.

As mentioned earlier, one of the drawbacks of semi-structured interviews is that they are time-consuming (Silverman, 2013; Flick 2011); a considerable amount of time is spent in preparation and implementation, and in analysing the data. Additionally, employing semi-structured interviews in interpretive research involves particular skills and abilities in conducting the interviews. The availability of resources in qualitative interviewing can be an issue, especially in conducting large-scale projects. It requires massive effort, training, time, skills, resources, facilities, and staff. Fortunately, I consider myself well trained in terms of conducting interviews, due to my work as a supervisor. I have conducted many interviews with teachers, from different regions and teaching at different levels. However, the experience revealed that qualitative interviewing is “a complex subject” (Bradley 1993, p. 442).

4.6.2.2 Designing the interview schedule

Designing the interview schedule began after the first phase of data collection was completed. The findings of the quantitative phase informed the second phase, i.e. qualitative, in a number of ways. Firstly, it informed the sampling and the participants involved in the second phase. Since the current study implemented an explanatory design wherein the aim was to explain in detail the initial results, the same participants were included in the second phase of data collection. Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) suggested that the individuals who participated in the first stage should be included in the second stage. In fact this is justifiable as the main intention of the approach employed in the study (explanatory) is to provide further information and to articulate, in depth, the quantitative findings.

In addition to the sampling, the first phase informed the construction of the interview and observation schedule. The results of the quantitative stage showed that the section describing the actual classroom practices of the integration of 21st century competencies required extra investigation. The results of the questionnaire analysis on teachers' classroom practices and assessment were high in terms of percentages especially questions one (90%), five (80%) and seven (85%) in the practice section and questions one (85%), four (80%) and nine (77%) in the assessment section. Thus, observing and discussing these aspects of the integration process with teachers was helpful in order to gain a clear understanding of the process and compare their answers with their practices.

Moreover, approximately 87% of the teachers were facing many challenges while integrating 21st century skills and competencies in their classrooms, and

therefore asking teachers about these practices and how they cope with these challenges was a requirement.

This requirement guided me in my design of the interview schedule, so that I was able competently to obtain further details of the issue (Appendix 4).

4.6.2.3 Piloting the interview protocol

The trialling of the questionnaire was the first stage within the procedures of data collection as discussed earlier in this chapter. So the second stage was the piloting of the interview protocol. The process of piloting was beneficial. It helped me practise my interviewing skills, estimate the duration of the interview, test the quality of the recording, and evaluate my questions regarding how clear, relevant and suitable they were. Two Omani colleagues were interviewed in the piloting stage; both have the profiles of the study sample, and both were EFL teachers. One of my test subjects was an MSc programme student at the University of Exeter and the second was a second-year student at the TESOL programme at the same university. Both volunteers were of great help because they represented the sample and were able to provide me with constructive feedback as well as to highlight issues to be tackled in the actual interview. Hence, some improvements were carried out to the original interview.

For instance, during the piloting process, I realised that questions seven and fourteen overlapped. Therefore, I decided to omit question seven and focused on question fourteen by adding more prompts. In addition, I found out that some questions were double-barrelled questions, such as question four. So I separated the question into two which made it easier to comprehend and to be answered properly. By doing so I reduced the duration of the interview, as the pilot took more than an hour per interview. So these amendments limited the

interview to 40 minutes that is the time of one school period in the Omani public schools. After this the final version of the schedule was produced (see Appendix 2). It consisted of fourteen questions divided into four sections. Section one was about knowledge, the next section was about practice , the third section was about assessment and the final one was about the challenges teachers face during the implementation of 21st century competencies.

4.6.3 Observation

Observation is widely used as a tool for data collection, particularly in educational research; as Perry (2011. p. 116) claimed, “the use of human observers as data collectors is as old as research itself”. Classroom observation is defined as non-judgmental depiction of what is happening in the classroom that can be examined and interpreted (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2010). However, in many cases classroom observations can be judgmental, and provide ratings of the teaching practices (Mikeska, Holtzman, McCaffrey, Liu & Shattuck, 2019). Therefore, the implementation of classroom observations depends on the purposes and the criteria applied. The advantage of using observation is that it provides researchers with a chance “to gather live data in natural settings (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 456).” Similarly, Marshall & Rossman (2011) believed that observation is an aspect of logically describing, noting, and recording the events, behaviours, and objects within the area of the study. Observation helps the researcher discover specific details and issues within the complicated scenes of life and culture in a society. Thus, observation requires the observer, the researcher, to deploy all of his or her senses and to be attentive to specific details around the issue under study. The main reason for employing observation might be to find out whether participants behave in the same way

they claim to behave. Through my experience, classroom observation is a daily activity in almost every school. EFL teachers use it a lot as an essential activity for their professional development.

Cohen et al. (2011, p. 457) argued that “the kind of observations available to the researcher lie on a continuum from un-structured to structured, responsive to pre-ordinate”. Perry (2011) noted that observation formats depend upon who is observing, the degree of involvement of the observer during observation, the nature and the use of the data collected, and whether or not the collected data is recorded on audio or video equipment. However, the most common types of observation may be said to be structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

The current study deployed an unstructured observation approach. The rationale behind this decision is that it harmonises with the paradigm adopted within the study, i.e. the interpretive paradigm. In addition, the intention of using open observation was to witness the integration of 21st century competencies and skills enacted in a naturalistic setting through the eyes of the researcher (Flick, 2014).

Although the presence of the researcher as an observer reinforces the richness of the data collected, as claimed by Ritchie & Lewis (2013), the subjectivity of the researcher will always be present. The researcher brings forward his/her own experiences, perceptions, and background to the observation setting. Therefore the researcher has to consider the extent of their involvement and participation within the observation setting (Cohen et al., 2011). According to Ritchie & Lewis (2013), the researcher in an observation setting can take four roles: complete participation; participant as an observer; observer as a

participant; and complete observer. In this study, and in concert with Cohen et al. (2011), I positioned myself as researcher in a completely passive observer role. This role was considered appropriate since the research sought to capture the dynamic nature of teaching events happening in the classroom and to note the patterns of behaviours that teachers and students generate while teaching or learning 21st century competencies and skills in Omani EFL classrooms.

As a result, the observations were conducted in the EFL classes of all volunteer participants. I observed 10 teachers who were trained to implement the 21st century skills in their classrooms. They chose their preferred skills to teach, according to the plan they had prepared and following the textbook instructions. I observed teachers implementing creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking and collaboration in different classes and at different levels see table 4 for detailed distribution of the classroom observations.

Teachers had been made aware of and agreed to the classroom visit from the outset of the study and had been asked to act naturally during the visit, and to treat the day as a normal day. The teachers were free to choose the level and the lesson that they would be observed in. The observations focused on the patterns and incidents related to the integration of 21st century competencies and skills, as I jotted down in my notebook some prompts and questions in this regard. Hence, the observations were based on the teachers' practices and the assessment procedures implemented while teaching these competencies. Special care was taken to observe the type of skills taught, assessment opportunities and tools applied, methods, materials and technology, and challenges faced. A copy of the observation schedule is provided (see appendix 5).

There were variations in terms of level, ages of students, skills taught, and schools in the classes under observation – a total of 10 classroom observations. Table 4 provides details on these classroom observations. The time of classroom observation was consistently 40 minutes per lesson. Most of the time I sat at the back of the classroom, and occasionally I joined some the groups while they were working, without disturbing the classroom arrangements. The number of students in the classes ranged from 32-35 students, and most of the time they were arranged in groups of five or six depending upon the size of the class.

While observing, I kept recording the natural events that were happening related to the focus of the observation. Fortunately, through classroom observations I managed to observe lessons showcasing a cross-section of teaching and assessment activities. These, together with the semi-structured interview data, gave valuable insights into the challenges teachers faced, and assisted in creating a more substantive picture of the teachers, the students and the actual curriculum.

No	School	Grade	Teacher	Region	Theme	Core skill	21 st century skill	Assessment
1	Post-basic**	11	Marwa	Muscat	Communication	Reading Writing	Critical thinking Problem-solving	Presentation -debate
2	Cycle 2***	9	Safiya	Al Musinah	Tourism	Reading		-Grades
3	Cycle 1****	3	Nasra	Al Musinah	Life-cycle	Speaking Reading	Creativity	-project -self-assessment
4	Cycle 1	1	Asma	Nizwa	Body parts	Speaking	creativity	-presentation - observation
5	Cycle 2	7	Hajar	Muscat	Health and illness	Reading speaking	Communication Technology	-presentation
6	Cycle 1	2	Nawal	Samail	Places		Creativity collaboration	Observation
7	Cycle 2	10	Nada	Muscat	Climate change	Reading Listening		-pair-assessment
8	Post-basic	12	Asia	Muscat	Health and Safety	Writing Speaking	Critical thinking collaboration	-self-evaluation
9	Cycle 2	6	Ruqiya	Barka	The world of food	Reading Speaking	Collaboration creativity	Peer-evaluation project
10	Cycle 2	8	Raya	Nizwa	Transport and travel	Reading and writing	Teamwork Technology creativity	-project -peer-assessment

*Period: A lesson lasts for 40 minutes in the Public schools

**Post-Basic: Grades 11 and 12

***Cycle 2: Grades five to 10

****Cycle 1: Grades one to four

Table 4. Classroom observations

4.7. Data analysis

The research deployed three different data collection methods in order to achieve the aims and answer the research questions. Due to the implementation of the teachers' survey, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations, quantitative and qualitative data were generated. The next section will focus on the procedures followed in analysing the quantitative

data generated from the questionnaire, and qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and classroom observations.

4.7.1. Analysis of quantitative data

A total of 350 male and female Omani EFL respondents participated in the questionnaire. The statistical software SPSS was used to analyse the quantitative data. Its features made the analysis comprehensive and precise. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were calculated; as Cohen et al. (2011) suggested, these measures describe the data, whereas the researcher's role is to interpret what the data means. Thus, the analysis of the quantitative data was taken into consideration while analysing the qualitative data. I was looking for possible resemblances, differences and conflicting answers from the two data sets, and to try to explain the situation appropriately. For example, in section (5.3.4) the two data sets were in agreement with regard to the importance of the 21st century competencies for Omani students as well as teachers. On the other hand, on the question of the best assessment procedures for assessing the skills, the two data sets were divergent, as explained further in the next chapter section (5.4.3). Hence, this variation in the two data sets deeply informed the analysis and the findings of the study, and created a wider spectrum within the discussion.

4.7.2 Qualitative data analysis

Both instruments, the semi-structured interview and classroom observation, were analysed qualitatively and separately. The analysis began with the data from the semi-structured interviews. A total of 15 interviews were conducted with both one male and 14 female EFL teachers. The interviews were

transcribed into a document, with a sample of the interview transcription provided in Appendix 6. Then a copy of the transcript was sent back to the participants who requested a copy by email, so that they could ensure the validity of the transcription. The interviews took place mainly in schools, during the teachers' free time. Usually they were conducted in the school library or wherever there was a quiet place available.

The interviews were recorded using a digital device, besides taking notes on the interview schedule. After transcribing the interviews, coding them was the next step. It is the process of breaking down the data into smaller segments, and then naming and identifying the segments (Brown, 2014). The process of coding requires the involvement of the researcher to skim, scan, and screen throughout the data, repeatedly searching for any emerging patterns, categories or themes. Then, the researcher is required to review the data and alter the categories as appropriate, by recoding, combining, breaking, or deleting. So technically it is the process of going back and forth through the data for several times until the researcher is satisfied by the coding and recoding of the themes. An example of generated codes and categories can be found in Appendix 7.

Brown's data analysis framework (2014) was implemented for the analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The framework is inclusive and chronological as well as dynamic and reflective. In other words, the analysis process is not linear but cyclical. In this, the researcher keeps reflecting on the data and the steps of analysis until he or she is satisfied with the analysis. The framework includes seven steps.

The first step is to get data into a usable form as discussed in the previous section.

The second step is looking for patterns. The strategies provided within this step were implemented spontaneously as they helped me look for appropriate patterns and categories. These strategies look for general patterns, search for different patterns and explore similar patterns. There is then a check for prominent outcomes and a final scan for overlapping or iterative ideas.

The third step is to map out patterns. This can be done following certain rules for forming matrices that can be developed manually or digitally. For the purposes of the current study a couple of electronic matrices were initiated as the example in Appendix 7 shows.

In the fourth step, the matrices developed in the previous step facilitated the organisation and reorganisation of the categories. During this step, I started moving data from a certain category to another, or sometimes using the same piece of data in two different categories.

The fifth step involved looking back at the data, searching for any relationships, connections, associations, correlations and so forth. This step is comprehensive in a way because it gave me the chance to look through the full sets of data, i.e. quantitative and qualitative, in order to find relationships between or among categories. Some relationships were shining clearly while others were hiding within the categories and data sources. Similarly, some connections were contradicting or diverting from the main category. Therefore, this step was critical and involved certain levels of criticality and analysis.

The sixth step was to consider multiple perspectives. Practically, viewing data categories, themes and subthemes from different stances is advisable when

analysing qualitative data. In fact, it is the nature of human beings – looking at things and issues from different angles. Therefore, going through this process is quite normal. Yet, the researcher has to provide a clear explanation of the perspectives involved during data collection, thematisation and analysis. Therefore, it was obvious that I should have to change my perspectives within the process of the study. For example, when the analysis was completed, I asked some of my colleagues and participants for their feedback, which helped me to have a holistic view of the issue.

The seventh and final step is to be sceptical. During this step, the researcher is in a situation of challenging his or her assumptions and perspectives, through searching for weaknesses in the study that might contradict the categories and interpretations. This process gives the research findings increased solidity and rigour.

4.7.3. Interpretation of data

Within the process of data analysis as described earlier, meaning was attributed to the data sets. Then the interpretation of what was observed and what was said was carried out systematically. Hence, after further refining themes and sub-themes, looking for patterns, rescanning transcripts, some ideas emerged from the respondents' perspectives on their social context. In some instances it was explicit and in others it was implicit. Therefore, the underlying logic or reason was constructed inferentially, by arranging the evidence obtained from the teachers' survey, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. In addition, cross-referencing analysis from other studies and literature was also implemented for further validation of the interpretations.

4.8 Ensuring research quality

Ensuring the quality and worthiness in social research is one of main concerns that a researcher faces. Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) claimed that applying a mixed-method design intensifies the issues of quality and validation in a way that exceeds the concerns in a single-method, qualitative or quantitative design. In agreement with Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) as a researcher, I went through a number of processes to ensure the quality and validity of the data that had been collected.

Brown (2014) classified research standards into four types: consistency; fidelity; verifiability; and meaningfulness. Each of these standards is categorised differently for quantitative and qualitative research. Thus, consistency in qualitative research is assessed through the dependability of the data, the analysis, and the interpretation, whereas quantitative research refers to reliability. Fidelity, on the other hand, is determined by the credibility of data, data collection procedures, and interpretation in qualitative research, but by validity in quantitative research. Quantitative verifiability is referred to as the degree of replication of the results, but qualitative verifiability is established through the confirmability of data. Meaningfulness of the findings, quantitatively, is concerned with generalisability; and qualitatively, concerned with transferability.

While Onwuegbuzie & Johnson (2007), and Teddlie & Tashakkori (2012) related validity in mixed-method design to the different stages of the research, data collection, data analysis and interpretation are the main stages concerned with validity in this research approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Therefore the following section will describe the measures taken to ensure the quality of the instruments deployed in the study.

4.8.1 Qualitative validation

The research methodology literature provides a variety of terminologies that describe the procedures or strategies of ensuring the quality and rigour of qualitative research. Unfortunately, variations may lead to confusion and misunderstanding, particularly for novice researchers. Although Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) preferred to use the term “validity” as an accepted term qualitatively and quantitatively, Brown (2014), Cohen et al. (2011) and Lincoln, Lynham & Guba (2011) used terms such as credibility, dependability, consistency, applicability, transferability, and trustworthiness.

Therefore, the next four sections will tackle the four main principles followed to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the qualitative strand of the current study. Trustworthiness or quality in qualitative research is defined as a set of strategies employed by the researcher to assess the quality of the research through addressing potential issues in data collection, data analysis and interpretation, when merging or corroborating the quantitative and qualitative strands using the mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Brown, 2014; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). The techniques I implemented were dependability, credibility, transferability and confirmability.

4.8.1.1 Dependability

Dependability is defined as the implementation of multiple data collection methods in a study in order to explain the complexity and richness of the phenomena by making use of both qualitative and quantitative data (Flick,

2014). Hence, dependability in a mixed-method research design requires the researcher to be aware of issues related to the consistency of the research, in terms of the effect on the participants of changing the conditions, in order to gain a better understanding of the context under investigation. Furthermore, ensuring dependability is closely tied with credibility, as Lincoln, Lynham & Guba (2011) state. Hence, dependability can be enhanced through triangulation. Accordingly, the current study deployed three data collection methods; the teachers' survey, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. This tactic of using multiple methods reinforces trustworthiness and the rigour of the data collected, as claimed by Brown (2014). Similarly, Cohen et al. (2011) argued that the use of multiple data-collection methods will increase the level of confidence in the findings. Apart from the multiple methods applied in the study, the research design and the procedures followed were described in detail for further in-depth investigations. Moreover, every step of data collection is described thoroughly, remarking all decisions taken and challenges faced, along with their resolutions, to enhance trustworthiness and transparency. Thereafter, these descriptions might support other researchers investigating similar contexts and similar populations.

4.8.1.2. Credibility

One of the main criteria quantitative researchers apply to ensure trustworthiness is internal validity. This fundamentally refers to the degree to which the methods deployed in a study measure what they intend to measure. Conversely, the corresponding criterion applied in qualitative research is credibility. According to Brown (2014), credibility is the fidelity of identifying and describing the participants, through the judgments made by different parties

involved in the investigation, in order to match the findings against real-life settings. Credibility can be reinforced through a number of strategies such as triangulation, detailed descriptions of the phenomena under investigation, participants' involvement in the research process, the researcher's reflexivity, and scrutiny by peers, colleagues and academics. Consequently, the current study addressed some of these principles in an attempt to ensure credibility.

To begin, I took the responsibility as a researcher to provide detailed descriptions of the research design, data collection methods, and procedures followed for gathering data, analysis, and the interpretation framework. In addition, I explained the steps taken to fulfil the research aims, the challenges faced and the possible solutions to overcome them.

Another tactic applied to assure credibility is the familiarisation of participants with the project's aims and procedures, and with the methods used for gathering data. For instance, prior to the interviews and classroom observations, I provided the participants with full descriptions of the investigation and assured them of their rights to discontinue their involvement at any point of the process. In addition, some of the participants had the opportunity freely to provide their opinions and reflections on the methods and procedures implemented.

The third principle applied was multiple-method triangulation. The current study provided complete details of the three methods used for collecting data. It also described the purposes and justified the selection of these methods. For instance, classroom observations were conducted with the participants after the semi-structured interviews. This process helped me observe the teachers in their natural setting and verified particular details they provided during the

interviews. As a result, using the two methods congruently overcame the limitations of the methods and exploited the benefits of both.

The reflections of, and feedback from, supervisors, peers, colleagues and academics were, together, another criterion applied to ensure the credibility of this investigation. Peer and colleague feedback and comments were welcomed throughout the different stages of the research, particularly on the methods and the process of implementation. This approach helped me as a researcher to refine the tools and develop comprehensive justifications of the chosen design; and it enlightened me as to the strengths and weaknesses of the study, and challenged the study assumptions.

4.8.1.3 Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is concerned with the meaningfulness of a study's findings and how they are applicable to other settings (Brown, 2014); the corresponding criterion in quantitative research is generalisability. It can be reinforced by providing comprehensive descriptions of the investigation. Providing detailed descriptions will allow other researchers to compare and contrast the instances of the investigation against their own contexts. This chapter thoroughly described the context, the sample, data collection methods, procedures followed, and the process of analysis and interpretation. For example, the chapter clearly stated the number of the participants involved in the study and their characteristics, the methods that were employed, and the number and length of the data gathering sessions.

4.8.1.4 Confirmability

According to Brown (2014, p. 122), confirmability in qualitative research is concerned with "the verifiability of the data upon which all interpretations in the

study are based.” In other words, interpretations and results have to be consistent with the data collected. Cohen et al. (2011) claimed that confirmability deals with objectivity. To address that concern, it is important to present the findings clearly and as the true experiences and ideas of respondents rather than the preferences of the researcher. Moreover, Lincoln, Lynham & Guba (2011) stressed the role of triangulation as a means of ensuring confirmability and reducing researcher bias.

Consequently, this study explained in detail the methods deployed, the reasons behind the selection of the approach, and the strengths and weaknesses of the techniques. Additionally, the current study followed the process of an independent reviewer, or what is called an “audit trail” (Brown, 2014), by which the reader is encouraged to assess the research process step-by-step through detailed descriptions of the procedures implemented and decisions made throughout the study. Thus, a couple of diagrams were included to enhance an “audit trail”, such as the diagram that depicts the data collection process and the theoretical framework.

4.9. Research ethics

The ethical concerns of any research study are a priority, especially when human beings are involved as subjects. The concerns begin from the early stages and continue throughout the later stages of the investigation. Informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, openness, and avoidance of harm are the main principles of ethics. Cohen et al. (2011) argued that if participants feel insecure, they will refuse to collaborate; for example when confidentiality and anonymity are questionable. Therefore, guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity might result in active and eager participant participation.

Ethical issues were emphasised throughout the study. For instance, a detailed cover page of the questionnaire was sent to the respondents. It contained the aims of the study, the purpose, the estimated time for survey completion, and confirmation that there were no right or wrong answers. In addition, the participants' permission was needed for the dissemination of the results and publication. Moreover, respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, as a consent form was obtained from each respondent. In addition, a clear statement was provided to the participants addressing their complete right to withdraw from the investigation at any stage, following the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2011) guidelines: "Researchers must recognise the right of any participant to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and at any time, and they must inform them of this right."

In light of these critical guidelines, the participants in this study were informed clearly of their right to discontinue their participation at any stage and time without needing to justify their decision. An ethical approval form was issued and approved by the Graduate School of Education at the University of Exeter (Appendix 3).

Additionally, during the different stages of the research, participants' anonymity and confidentiality was ensured and protected by using pseudonyms, as shown earlier in Table 2; during the process of data analysis, I applied these pseudonyms when referring to the participants in an attempt to protect and conceal their identities.

4.10 Challenges of conducting the study

The phases of designing and implementing the research instruments are two of the most challenging phases. During these stages the researcher's personality, perspectives and criticality are revealed. As I perused my study, my perceptions and beliefs were challenged.

One of the main challenges I faced as a researcher was the status of educational research in the Omani context. This was obvious during the arrangements of the interviews and classroom observations. Therefore, the status of educational research requires collective efforts from different parties to be situated properly in the Omani context. Teachers cannot be blamed, as they are overloaded with lessons and other activities. Although teachers' participation in the research was voluntary, many teachers excused themselves, at the last minute, from being interviewed or observed, due to their heavy schedules. So, one of the biggest challenges was to have "Plan B" and arrange alternative observations or interviews with nearby schools.

I intended to collect the data from their natural settings, i.e. schools and classrooms; however, some schools were too crowded, especially in Muscat. Frequent interruptions were experienced during some interviews and classroom observations. Therefore, it was a challenge to find a quiet venue in such schools. To overcome such conditions, I suggested to teachers that we should conduct the interviews after school; thankfully, teachers agreed. Although the resultant interviews were slightly shorter, they were correspondingly concentrated, relaxed and informative.

4.11 Summary of the chapter

This chapter outlined the key aspects of the current study and the methodological procedures I chose to use to obtain the data needed to complete the work. The chapter started with an overview of the research questions in an attempt to establish the research problem and the main aims of the study. The chapter also presented the conceptual basis of the research, that is, the ontological and epistemological stance, together with a discussion of the mixed-method approach for data collection. I described in detail the instruments the research deployed, as well as the procedures and measures, together with the process of research and the pilot stages.

Finally, I discussed the ethical issues taken into consideration during the course of the research and presented the prospective framework applied for data analysis and interpretation. As the current study deployed a mixed-method approach, quantitative and qualitative data was collected through the implementation of a teachers' questionnaire, classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Therefore, different approaches of analysis were used. A statistical approach was implemented using the SPSS program to analyse the results of the descriptive statistics of the quantitative data. The qualitative data that was gathered from the classroom observations and semi-structured interviews were processed thematically implementing the Brown (2014) framework of analysis. Then, the decision to integrate the two data sets was taken and described thoroughly in the following chapter as it presents the results and the findings of both data sets where appropriate.

CHAPTER FIVE

Data Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the main stages of the analysis approach applied to the data in the current study. The data analysis was geared towards the research questions. The analytical approach implemented is described as all-inclusive. In other words, in order to answer the questions, amalgamated data from multiple research methods were used, rather than analysing the data from each method separately. Thus, combining the data together was a decision taken to present the whole picture of the issue under investigation. Therefore, the variety of perspectives on the integration of 21st century competencies in the ELT curriculum in Oman appeared to be clear and dominant throughout the data-collection process, and created a concise picture of the results. In addition, the three data sources converged in some cases and diverged in others, which is common in mixed-method approaches (Brown, 2014).

The different levels of the analysis revealed four thematic findings related to the research questions: teachers' experience; assessment; challenges; and implications. Thereafter, completing the categorisation of themes and sub-themes, the literature was used occasionally to support the categories. Additionally, examples of the developed themes/codes are mentioned in the quotations from participants. The quotations show how codes accumulated to form a category. Extracts from participants are used to explain some of the categories in detail and highlight the voice of the participants as much as possible.

5.2 An overview of the participants involved in the teachers' survey

The online questionnaire examined Omani EFL teachers' perceptions of the process of integrating 21st century competencies and skills in the EFL curriculum. The first section of the questionnaire gathered information about the participants, for example qualifications, governorate, level taught, gender and teaching experience. 350 English teachers distributed throughout the 11 educational governorates took part in the questionnaire as shown in Table 1 section 4.7.1. The response rate was quite high, although usually one of the major drawbacks of an online questionnaire is the low response rate. In fact, the response rate of the current study exceeded 82%, which is generally a good response rate.

5.2.1 Respondents' profiles

The total number of respondents who took part in the online survey was 350. From the total number, only 56 (13.8%) were male compared to 356 (86.17%) female participants. The difference between the two genders of participants is due to the fact that all the participant teachers who are teaching in cycle one schools, i.e. from grade one to grade four, are females. The highest number of respondents, 169 (41.4%), have six to 10 years of experience. This is due to the phases of development of the educational system in the past; between 1970 and early 1990, expatriate English teachers were teaching in Omani public schools. Gradually, as they left the country, Omanis took over teaching English, especially after the opening of Sultan Qaboos University in 1986 as the main teacher training institute.

5.3 Experience

The following section addresses teachers' perceptions and views of the process of integration of 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context. Three data sources were utilised to investigate teachers' perceptions i.e. teachers' questionnaire, teachers' semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The data revealed in this section were directed to answer the following question:

- How do Omani EFL teachers perceive the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum in Omani public schools?

The participants answers and practices revealed held different views about the process of integration. Their opinions were the direct result of their real experience of the process in the Omani public schools, as there is a strong relationship between beliefs and practice (Borg, 2003).

5.3.1 Positive views: “We cannot deceive students”

The teachers' reactions towards the recent changes in the EFL curriculum in the Omani context differed greatly; 18% of teachers around were satisfied with the changes while 47% were not. The teachers provided their reasons and justifications of their stance. These perceptions were revealed from the semi-structured interviews.

The interviews revealed that teachers, specifically those who are teaching higher and lower grades, were satisfied with the changes to some extent. For instance Teacher (Kareema teaches grades 11 and 12) thought the changes were constructive and suitable for her students: **“for example, adding new themes like for example updating our lives, what’s going around us like**

media or technology for example included there. of course it is helpful for our students as now they have an idea about what is happening around them.

Teacher (Abeer), who teaches grades one to four, had a positive attitude toward the changes, in particular those in grade one, as she reported: ***“Yes changes I think some of them like using the Jolly phonics is very successful and this the right way of teaching the pupils how to read and write.”***

Nonetheless, she thought it not enough and discussed more changes to be carried out with her supervisor: ***“but still the class book and other part of EFM it still needs lots of change and we discussed this two weeks ago with supervisors and I asked her to come here because I got an idea but I wanted to share it with her and what she thinks about it.”***

Likewise, Teacher (Zahra a SET in cycle one school) is satisfied with the changes for grades three and four compared to the old syllabus: ***“somehow yes especially with grades three and four. They have lots of activities and new things because I taught the old one and the current course book.”***

However, she claimed that teachers need to transform their teaching methods to match the changes: ***“but the teacher has to change his/her teaching methods to suit these changes.”***

Teacher (Fatima also a SET in cycle one school) praised the work of the Ministry of Education in developing and updating the syllabus and said: ***“in my opinion the English department at the MoE is working continuously to develop the English curriculum. I see that there are always adaptations and new versions of the curriculum.”***

Teacher (Sumayha teaches grades 3 and 4) had a matching viewpoint with Teacher (Zahra) as she compared the old syllabus with the new one: ***“the updates done in grade four are different from what it is used to be.”*** In the same vein, Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) praised the improvements as they give the students the chance to think critically and evaluate what they receive in the classroom: ***“We also have to tell them that when there is something in the curriculum we have to evaluate it and not accept it as a fact we have to search and judge. So in my opinion it is good for students to give them the chance to think and critically judge what they receive. We cannot deceive students.”***

Although Teacher (Houda teaches grades 7 and 9 and a SET of cycle two school) thought that the EFL syllabus has improved a lot, she suggests that the gap between the syllabus and the students' needs is still there: ***“The curriculum somehow has improved, but, there is now a big gap between the students' needs and our curriculum, so, our curriculum should focus on the 21st century needs and demands, skills we are missing these skills.”***

Therefore, focusing on the strengths of the curriculum and work on the weaknesses is a priority in the forthcoming curriculum development processes in the Sultanate. In addition, teachers have shown their competence and criticality in evaluating the Omani curriculum; their involvement and participation in curriculum development reforms is not only one of their rights but it is a premium criterion to ensure successful implementation of any educational reform in the Omani context.

5.3.2 Negative views: “The only change was the edition dates.”

Through investigating other standpoints regarding the recent improvement of the EFL curriculum changes, it emerged that 46% of teachers claimed the changes are insignificant, while 10% claimed there are none. Teacher (Mona teaches grades 2 and 4) did not value the changes, except the addition of the phonic component: **“Unfortunately there are no much changes in the curriculum except adding the phonics component for grades one and two but no changes for grades three and four.”** Similarly, Teacher (Souad a SET teaches grades 1 and 2) shared the same point of view: **“Very minor changes only for grade one and two adding the jolly phonics but no changes for grades three and four.”**

Furthermore, cycle two teachers also did not recognise the recent changes as valuable or remarkable, for example Teacher (Saeed teaches grades 8 and 9): **“Unfortunately there are no considerable changes in the curriculum I mean in cycle two.”** Teacher (Hafidah), who teaches the same level, i.e. cycle 2, had the same opinion, except for the assessment framework: **“until now not even a single letter in the course book, the only change was the edition dates, seriously, but there were some changes in the assessment but for the past four years it is the same, none of these classes from five to ten.”**

On the other hand, Mona grades two and four teacher suggested that the changes are not suitable and do not match the needs of the new generation: **“I don’t think that the changes are matching the needs of this generation because you know our generation’s interests are different from today’s generations.”**

This negative view was also reflected in the analysis of teachers' responses to item five with regard to the degree of satisfaction with the improvement of the Omani EFL curriculum, as shown in Table 6. 47% of the total participants were dissatisfied with the EFL curriculum improvements whereas only 18% of them were somehow pleased with development. In my opinion and through my experience in the EFL context in Oman, these opposing views are due to the fact that the cycles and grades that looked the most likely candidates for quality improvement were cycle one (grades one to four) and post-basic (grades 11 & 12). The community and authorities were more concerned by the early stages of schooling, as they form the foundation for the upper grades. As well as the early grades, post-basic was also in focus, as these are the final years of schooling and students go through a diploma exam. This is justifiable in exam-oriented contexts like Oman (Mawed, 2016; Al Zadjali, 2017). Therefore, there were constant reforms and evaluations for these levels to serve the demands and the needs of the community. On the other hand, cycle two (grades five to ten) was the lowest level which underwent any sort of evaluation and reforms. There was only routine revision of the textbooks either to add or omit some tasks or activities.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5	I am satisfied with the improvements of the EFL curriculum	2.87%	15.29%	34.3%	40.76%	6.69%

Table 5. Teachers' views of the EFL curriculum improvements

5.3.3 Teacher preparation

The participants of the study reported that they have gained some knowledge about 21st century competencies and skills, either from their first-degree studies or from in-service courses they have attended during their career. Thus, 70 % of the total numbers of participants were familiar with 21st century skills. Table 7 below shows the participants' responses about their knowledge of 21st century competencies.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	I know what the 21 st century competencies/skills are.	18.61%	51.42%	27.13%	2.52%	0.32%

Table 6. Teachers' knowledge

However, the data from teachers' interviews and classroom observations showed that there are two different views regarding pre-service and in-service training qualities and the effectiveness of these two types of training in enhancing the acquisition of these skills. These views will be discussed in the forthcoming sections.

5.3.3.1 Pre-service training: "Theory only without any practice!"

Novice teachers, that is those with one to four years of experience, expressed that they were taught the skills during their first-degree studies at the university; for example, Teacher (Saeed teaches boys in grades 8 and 9), who has been teaching for three years:

"All these skills we came across them during our studies in the university I mean pre-service and not only during the specialised centre course. We

had a lot of training on these skills during our studies at the university and it helped us a lot in our teaching and in life in general.”

However, 46% of teachers claimed that the training they received during their first-degree preparation was inadequate. Teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle one school) said: ***“Yes I have come across the 21st century competencies and skills during my studies but not all of them.”*** In contrast, others claimed that their studies were mainly theoretical and lacking in practice; another SET in cycle one school Teacher (Souad) commented:

“I came across some of them during my preparation course at the university however it was theory only without any practice! And then I had a much clearer idea about them during the course at the specialised centre. I also read articles about them and sometimes through online search.”

On the other hand, teachers who have many years of experience stated that they have never studied anything about 21st century skills; for example Teacher (Zahra a SET in cycle one school): ***“Actually, I didn’t know about them in the university, it was just when I was searching about them I had just glimpses of them but as a complete and comprehensive idea was mainly from the course at the specialised centre.”***

In line with the issue of training, researchers such as Darling-Hammond (2000) and Ngang & Chan (2015), confirmed that effective and strong teacher preparation programmes are fundamental in equipping teachers with knowledge, updated techniques and methods, and in supporting teachers to cope with the challenges they face in their career. As a result, teacher

preparation in Oman needs to be reassessed in order to develop more effective and efficient programmes.

5.3.3.2 In-service training: **“So it was only during the in-service training.”**

Despite the fact that pre-service training was crucial in learning and teaching 21st century skills and competencies, it was evident from the teachers' interviews and classroom observations that in-service professional development played a key role in improving students' performance in general (Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer & Kyndt, 2017), and enhancing teaching and learning of these skills in particular. Teachers in the current study valued the courses they attended in the specialised centre. These courses, namely the new teachers' programme, and the expert programme for senior teachers, had a major impact on the teachers' understanding of the skills and in the development of their teaching skills with regard to teaching/learning 21st century skills and competencies. According to the Ministry of Education (2016), the Ministry conducted 716 training programmes in the academic year 2015/2016 and around 66% of all subject teachers were enrolled in these specialised programmes. These courses ranged from two weeks to one or two years of training; they covered a wide range of topics and areas, such as senior teachers' courses, management, pedagogy, assessment, ICT and curriculum studies.

Teacher (Houda cycle two SET) reported that she gained knowledge and training in these skills when she joined the course in the specialised centre: ***“I knew about them through attending the course at the specialised centre , my understanding about these competencies in order to develop students' skills and abilities through communication, co-operation, critical***

thinking etc.” Cycle one SETs Teacher (Zahra) and Teacher (Souad) not only confirmed their acquisition of these skills, but also that they were expected to cascade the knowledge to the other teachers in the school: ***“Actually I got to know about these skills in the specialised centre during our third module in the course, and then I have to train the teachers and apply them. So it was only during the in-service training.”*** Part of raising awareness about these skills was to discuss them with teachers at the same school. Teacher Kareema teaches grades 11 and 12 explained ***“I learned about these skills after I joined the specialised centre I knew many things about them and we went into deep discussions about them, applying them in our classes with our students and teachers, and yes we gave lots of workshops for the teachers.”***

These in-service training courses did not only equip teachers with certain skills and teaching strategies, but they created a positive attitude towards 21st century skills, and as a result the teachers felt encouraged to apply the skills in the classroom. Moreover, it motivated teachers to conduct workshops, and focused observations on teaching and learning these skills for the EFL teachers in the school, as Teacher (Souad cycle one SET) describes:

“I searched the internet and YouTube in order to familiarise myself with the skills then I conducted the workshop introducing the idea of 21st century competencies to my teachers. Now if you ask my teachers what are the 21st century competencies? they will be able to mention some skills and subskills.”

In some cases, senior teachers conducted similar workshops for teachers of other subjects, such as the Arabic language teachers in Manar Al Elm girls’

school (grades 10 to 12), as Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school) explained:

“I think I am skilful because even other teachers for other subjects they come and ask me about how can we modify this task or that to match the 21st century skills. For example I once prepared a model lesson for the Arabic subject yes maybe they think that I have the ability to give them ideas through cross curricula not only for English subject.”

5.3.3.3 Impact of Training

Despite the contradictory views on pre-service and in-service training, almost all the teachers interviewed stressed the significance of the in-service training in developing their skills and abilities, in addition to filling the gaps between theory and practice, as Teacher (Zahra cycle one teacher) expressed: ***“We don’t consider ourselves professionals in applying them we need more training on them. So the support was limited as I explained and not enough at all, we need more, you know, especially in the practical side of it, not the theory of it so we need support from that part. We even wrote it as a recommendation as part of the evaluation form of the course.”***

It was interesting to see that teachers were confident that these training courses had a direct impact on their performance and practice in the classroom. Indeed, the majority of them claimed that these courses helped them to be “better teachers” by developing their skills in planning lessons, stimulating their creativity and enriching their strategies and techniques in teaching 21st century skills and competencies. This finding matches those of some studies, such as Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon (2001), in that there is a positive link

between a teacher's professional development and improvement in their teaching skills.

It was evident through classroom observations that teachers who had been enrolled in 21st century skills and competencies programmes were more confident, creative and critical. For example, during classroom observation of a lesson about transportation for grade 8 (appendix 8), with Teacher Raya, the students experienced and practised a number of skills, such as creativity, critical thinking, co-operation and teamwork. Working in groups of six, they designed a model of selected transportation vehicles and evaluated each other's work according to set criteria. The teacher supported the groups through scaffolding, cueing, guidance and instant feedback. On the other hand, teachers who missed the training were teaching traditionally. A classroom observation of a reading lesson with grade 9 (appendix 9), conducted by Teacher Safiya, was very typical. This out-dated lesson started when she wrote the date and the title and then gave the instructions for the task from the skills book. The girls opened the book, started reading the text, and began answering the questions that followed. Although the girls were seated in groups, the interaction was mainly one way, that is teacher to student or student to teacher.

Another observed lesson, with Teacher Nada in grade 10 (appendix 10), was carried out in the same manner. She asked the girls to complete the grammar sheets individually, then she elicited the answers and corrected the errors all by herself. The girls copied the answers from the board and then she collected the sheets to be kept in their portfolios. In these lessons the teachers did not apply any 21st century competencies and moved automatically from one task to the other without any creativity or criticality. Therefore, these teachers showed

serious shortcomings regarding teaching and learning 21st century competencies due to lack of knowledge and training.

In general, the data revealed that there is a positive relationship between training and teaching skills, which proves that joining training courses, or any other professional development event, can enrich teachers' knowledge, skills and abilities.

5.3.4 The integration of 21st century competencies in the current EFL curriculum

To integrate 21st century competencies and skills into the EFL curriculum was a decision taken by the Ministry of Education in 2017. The process of integration embraced different major phases starting with curriculum development, assessment and training.

Unlike other changes in the EFL curriculum, the decision to integrate these skills within the EFL curriculum was applauded by most interviewed teachers. They felt that it was both beneficial and enjoyable for both teachers and students. This positive attitude toward the integration was revealed by, and recognised within, all three data collection methods.

During the semi-structured interviews, teachers voiced their satisfaction and support. Teacher (Abeer teaches grade 1 and 4) explained: ***“Because it helps them to acquire different skills that will last with them for life. In addition using these skills will help them to remember the knowledge and it will stay in their minds and never forget them they will remember it for years because they searched for it by themselves. They are now enjoying English classes, alright, because of use of the competencies and they***

said teacher we are happy not sleepy during classroom which make me also happy and active.”

Similarly, Teacher (Fatima SET in cycle one school) claimed that her students like learning these skills because it meets their needs, although she faced challenges at the beginning of the implementation as she described: ***“when I applied these skills in my lessons, I had to face some challenges at the beginning, but now I think my students are trained and ready to apply these skills.”***

Teacher (Maryam), who teaches in a post-basic school, also commented on how these skills are relevant to the students' lives, and so they enjoy learning them: ***“they like learning these skills because they are more related to them.”***

Interestingly, it is not only students in higher grades that enjoy learning these skills, but young learners also like the integration of these skills in their English lessons. Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) commented on the benefits of the integration for young learners in particular: ***“Well because our students are young learners they move a lot, so games and problem-solving, brainstorming with a partner or drawing mind maps and active learning is very good to control the students' movement and gear it to something useful. In such lessons, the students are active learners and not passive learners. So they have to move around, ask and seek for information and listen to each other attentively. They compare, evaluate and discuss.”*** She continued describing the benefits through drawing a comparison between the past and present approaches: ***“In the past when the teacher says something that's it, no argument. But nowadays you find students argue and give***

evidence of what they are arguing about and it gives them more space to express their ideas, and more confidence. Besides, it improves their communication skills. They are much better than we used to be.”

Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) argued that Omani students deserve a chance to acquire 21st century competencies and skills, as they are very beneficial, not only for the learners but for the whole Omani society: ***“The Omani students have to have the chance to be trained in these new skills. They have to reach for the ideas by themselves, to develop as independent learners. So by this they will be able in the future to compete internationally because if we use the traditional ways of teaching they will be behind other learners in the wider world. And also in a way to protect them against any interfering ideas or ideologies, because they will be able to critically analyse these ideas and reject them if they were trained to do so.”***

In line with this perspective, 56.5% of teachers agreed on the benefits of including 21st century skills and competencies in the EFL curriculum, when they were asked about their opinions on inclusion in the survey in item 2. However, only 47% of them thought the changes in the EFL curriculum were appropriate, while 53% of the participants were not so sure about the suitability of changes, as they were opting for better inclusion. Table 8 depicts the percentages of the teachers' responses.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2	The integration of 21 st century competencies/skills in the current EFL curriculum is suitable.	10.16%	46.35%	25.40%	16.83%	1.27%
5	I think the changes with regard to the integration of 21 st century competencies/skills are appropriate.	6.69%	40.76%	34.39%	15.29%	2.87%

Table 7. Teachers' views of the integration

It was evident during classroom observations that the integration of 21st century skills not only develops students' skills and abilities, but also motivates teachers to be more creative in their teaching methods. The transition, from the traditional ways of teaching to more student-centred techniques, was remarkable in the majority of the lessons observed. For instance, there was an observed EFL lesson with grade 6, taught by Teacher Ruqiya about food (appendix 11). The purpose of the lesson was to introduce new vocabulary about food and recipes. The lesson was conducted in the Life Skills room. The girls were asked to create a dish using basic ingredients, and they worked co-operatively within their groups, while the teacher was mainly supporting and encouraging them. Throughout the lesson, I noticed that the girls were engaged and enjoyed the lesson, while the teacher felt confident and satisfied.

Additionally, teachers interviewed believed that the inclusion helped the students to be more independent and autonomous learners. As Teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle one school) stated: ***“Of course, you know these competencies enable students to be ready for the future, for future learners to be independent learners even in their personal life and working life they need them. I think they are important skills for everyone***

to acquire and to be competent in them not only students. Yes so it is important and essential actually in this era, it is essential to include them.”

Similarly, Teacher (Khadijah teaches grades 3 and 4) argued that this approach works well in boys' schools and not only in girls' schools: ***“I think if our students learn that from grade 1, from their first step in school, it will not only change their view of life but it will change how they see everything in their lives and they will be more responsible and independent. The boys in our school really enjoy such lessons.”***

5.3.4.1 Practice: “I apply these skills but....”

In spite of the fact that most teachers (88%) were satisfied with the inclusion, the majority of them (81%) admitted that the textbook was not supportive at all and it had a lot of content. EFL textbooks are packed with knowledge, and teachers were spending enough time teaching that content without focusing on 21st century skills. Therefore, they were in conflict. So when they were asked about how often they taught these skills, 56% of them said “rarely”, due to the intensive content of the textbook. Teacher (Houda cycle two SET) explained her point of view: ***“I apply these skills but not quite often, because there are many challenges I face when applying them. First , we have a syllabus to finish we have a plan and if I want to apply them every day I will not finish the course book, because the ministry has no idea that I am teaching these skills and I am obliged to finish the course book no matter what!”***

Likewise, Teacher (Naeema teaches grade 11 core and elective) claimed: ***“Not much because you know we have to finish the course book, we don't have time to be creative in our teaching.”***

Apart from the intensive content, teachers were also constrained by time. 63% of teachers participated in the investigation criticised the integration of 21st century competencies for being time-consuming and requiring longer preparation and application. As Teacher (Haifa teaches grades 2 and 3) explained: ***“they require a lot of effort when we are planning them, like prepare the materials and everything, the class, so the time we have a burden.”*** Teacher (Hafidah teaches grades 6 and 8) claimed that different competencies require different amounts of time and preparation: ***“I use also the other competencies but I think I don’t have enough time for some of them, they require more time than the others like creativity.”*** Teacher (Sumayha teaches grade 3 and 4) agreed about the issue of time, although she liked to apply the competencies in her classes: ***“we don’t have enough time to teach these skills although I like to use these competencies in my lessons because I have very good students, genius, and I think I have to change the atmosphere I don’t want my students to be audiences all the time so sometimes I want them to take the role of the teacher or to be a competitor.”***

This claim about time was notable during the classroom observations. In three out of 10 observed classes, teachers managed to finish the prepared tasks on time, that is in 40 minutes, while the rest were struggling and could not finish on time.

5.3.4.2 Using technology in the classrooms

Trilling and Fadel (2009) listed a number of elements that work together to enhance the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. These elements include appropriate classroom environment and the presence

of education technology infrastructure (p. 139). In the same perspective, the findings from the three research instruments revealed that a good quality classroom environment has a direct impact on the performance of both teachers and students. Hence, the percentage of teachers who agreed on the vital role the technology plays in promoting 21st century competencies exceeds 80%, as Table 9 reveals.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
14	Incorporating technology in EFL classrooms promotes the development of 21 st century competencies/skills.	44.08%	37.55%	13.06%	3.67%	1.63%

Table 8. Teachers' views on incorporating technology in EFL classrooms

During teachers' interviews, all the 15 teachers agreed that having appropriate classrooms equipped with suitable electronic aids improves teaching and learning in general.

From their own experiences, teachers have noticed that their students enjoy, and make more progress in, their learning when lessons have an embedded element of technology, such as the internet, or using electronic devices like laptops, projectors, mobile phones or a basic CD player. In relation to this view, Teacher (Sara teaches grade one and three) described her lesson with grade three students as "**a great lesson**", as she prepared a lesson using a video clip about planets.

5.3.4.2.1 The effect of using technology in the classroom

Interviewed teachers expressed a positive reaction to using technology in the EFL classroom. 13 interviewed teachers used the term "technology generation"

when referring to their students. Therefore, they prepared their lessons using a suitable technology device that served the purpose of the lesson and supported the acquisition of 21st century skills. Teacher (Saeed a male teacher teaches boys in grades 8 and 9) stated that he stopped using traditional teaching aids and turned completely to technology, so most of his lessons are conducted solely through iPads: ***“This year I am not using any markers I am using iPads as daily drive. Am teaching using iPads and trying to do a lot of games to give them clips from YouTube, teaching them what are the good sources of gaining information for their learning and I am really focusing on them at the end of the year I will be really happy if I see my students knowing how to find the information and how to really see the good and the bad and be critical about it.”*** He claimed that his students are more focused, and enthusiastic to learn more about the topics discussed in the classroom.

It was also noticed from the classroom observations that lessons with embedded technology were interactive and enjoyable, while lessons conducted traditionally were lifeless and boring.

Consistent with this positive attitude towards using technology in the EFL classrooms, item 15 of the teachers' survey investigated the application of technology in the English lessons. The results supported the qualitative analysis, as Table 10 below shows. 58% of the participants strongly agreed, and another 30% of them agreed, with regard to using technology to promote the teaching and learning of 21st century skills. Only 3% of them disagreed.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
15	I encourage activities using technology to promote 21 st century competencies/skills	58.23%	30.38%	7.59%	3.38%	0.42%

Table 9. Teachers' views of using technology

5.3.5 Professional support

Literature on curriculum change has stressed that in order to facilitate implementation by teachers and avoid misinterpretation of the changes, extensive and continuous support and follow-up are required (Troudi & Alwan, 2010; Grundy, 1987; McKernan, 2008). Yet, the findings of the current study revealed a lack of support as expressed by almost 80% of teachers . In addition, teachers complained about the type and level of support – financial, technical and pedagogical – they receive, and about the sources from which they receive it, i.e. from senior teachers, trainers, supervisors or administrators. This has a direct impact on their performance and the implementation of 21st century competencies and skills.

5.3.5.1 “In reality no, none of them did anything for us.”

The majority of interviewed teachers have to self-fund the materials used in their teaching, such as photocopying worksheets, so they are using their personal resources when adapting and modifying the tasks. This issue was mentioned by almost every participant. Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) said: ***“Even when we complained to the trainers at the specialised centre about these things, they told us that you have to ask the admin in your schools to provide you with suitable support! But in reality no, none of them did anything for us.”***

Similarly, Teacher (Kareema teaches grads 11 and 12) complained: ***“not enough because teachers always search and learn and I can teach myself from other sources for example the internet, books and learning centres in the school. Besides we prepare our own materials and worksheets and photocopy them from our own pocket.”***

One of the schools visited had its own EFL hall, equipped with a smartboard, a TV set, a number of PCs and a small library. English teachers in the school have managed to set up the hall from their own personal fundraising. However, all the other schools shared one Learning Resource Centre (LRC) hall.

5.3.5.2 “Good knowledge but the practical side is not enough at all.”

In the same vein, 80% of teachers participated in the questionnaire expressed their dissatisfaction of the support they receive from their supervisors, trainers and head teachers. Hence, they have nobody to depend on except themselves when they face problems during the implementation of 21st century competencies and skills. Their supervisors are neither available, nor aware of the issues related to the integration of such skills. In addition, there is always a confusion and a conflict between the roles of such supervisory staff, as supporters on the one hand, and on the other hand as evaluators of teachers' performance. Teacher (Naeema teaches grade 11 core and elective) explained: ***“Most of the supervisor come to assess and evaluate us. They want to see us in the classroom only, they want to see us as teachers only in the classrooms explaining, and demonstrating but not to see us using technology, which is the opposite of the requirement of teaching these skills.”***

Teachers also mentioned that the trainers are detached from the field and are unable to provide them with the practical and technical support they require when implementing these skills in an actual classroom environment. Teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle one school) described this: ***"So the support from the trainers I can say is not suitable. I mean they give us good knowledge but the practical side is not enough at all. They have to come and see the situation in schools, the materials and facilities we have."***

In addition, interviewed teachers also faced a lack of support from the schools themselves. They complained that school administrators do not focus on the skills the teachers teach, but are more concerned about finishing the textbook and accomplishing the duties assigned. Teacher (Kareema teaches grade 11 and 12) said: ***"We are always reminded by the school administration to follow the instructions in the course book or in the teacher's book strictly but we need to do things in our ways to be creative, ok, and even if we would like to initiate something say for example we plan for a field trip for our students we have to go through a very long process till we accomplish it, everything is made difficult in our school I don't know why!"***

5.3.5.3 SETs and colleagues' support: "Our senior teacher is supporting."

On the other hand, 10 out of 15 interviewed teachers praised the role of the senior teachers in their schools. They claimed that the SETs are helpful and supportive in every way; technically and emotionally. Teacher (Mona teaches grades 2 and 4) talked devotedly about the support they receive from the senior teacher: ***"Our SET is open and gives us the support we need. For me as a teacher coming from teaching high grades to teach young learners at the***

beginning I had too much pressure because I had a problem with classroom management. I was ZERO in classroom management. I used to go with a stick so the students get afraid, now when I attended some lessons with the SET and saw her techniques of organising groups, her voice and intonation, the games she used to manage the class in grade 1, helped me to develop my skills in classroom management. I applied some of her strategies for my grade four students and they were effective. Now I am progressing in terms of management.”

Likewise, Teacher (Haifa teaches grades 2 and 3) added: ***“Our senior teacher is supporting us and encourages us to include these skills in our teaching, for example technology she encourages us to use IT in our classrooms especially technology and that’s why we have some TV sets in some of the classrooms especially for grades 11 and 12 we have the materials I mean the appliances like projectors, TV sets and so forth.”***

Inadequate support from their superiors forced teachers to search for other channels of support. Thus, teachers were more dependent on each other to make up for the lack of support from above. It was clear that the collaboration among teachers was increasing. They shared ideas and materials, and observed each other's lessons, and reflected back on them. McCaleb (2013) described the benefits of peer co-operation on teachers' development. Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) commented by saying: ***“Support! not much only when exchange visits with other subjects like Arabic lessons or math or science we can learn and gain experience from them. We sometimes exchange visits not frequently but we do so and it is beneficial***

especially for teachers who teach the same class to exchange ideas across curricula."

Teacher (Mona teaches 2 and 4) supported this view by explaining how her colleagues helped her to develop her skills: ***"So when we are provided with the chances of observing other teachers it helped me to improve my teaching skills especially when teaching the competencies not only observing English teachers but from other subjects I gain experience and learn from them."***

More interestingly, some teachers are working on initiating networks not only within the same school but with other schools in the area. As Teacher (Saeed) expressed it: ***"I have started to develop myself and share experiences by visiting other schools and attend and conduct workshops for teachers on how to apply these new techniques and how to make them effective for them and for their learners."***

Another benefit for teachers resulting from a lack of support from their management is that they have become creative in dealing with the issues associated with integrating 21st century competencies and skills. Through classroom observations, I have noticed that teachers were creative in terms of designing tasks, selecting teaching methods, using technology, producing teaching aids and assessing. One example is the lesson taught by Teacher Hajar in a lesson on healthy lifestyles for grade 7 (appendix 12); she used video clips, role play and a competition, and took notes for assessment purposes while students were working on the tasks.

5.3.6 Adaptation and transformation

5.3.6.1 Modification of materials

The textbook has a very limited set of tasks that enhance the teaching/learning of 21st century competencies and skills. The interviews revealed that adapting and modifying teaching materials was one of the sources of stress for teachers when implementing these skills. This result was supported by the teachers' survey. Table 11 shows that at least 88% of teachers would like to have extra activities, in the course book, which develop 21st century competencies and skills.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
6	There should be more 21 st century competencies/skills activities in the EFL textbook.	56.00%	32.00%	8.40%	2.00%	1.60%

Table 10. Teachers' views of including more 21st century competencies/skills activities in the EFL textbook

Therefore, 74% of teachers shared the same perception of the importance of modifying and adapting the course book activities to align them with the students' needs and the requirement of incorporating 21st century competencies. It is worth stating that most teachers refer to the EFL textbooks and course books as "curriculum", and do not use the macro sense of it which is common in our context, as confirmed by Alwan (2006), Al Khars (2013) and Al Zadjali (2017). For instance, Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) described the issue by saying: ***"Our curriculum should focus on the 21st century needs and demands, skills we are missing these skills. So for***

example, when I need to apply 21st century skills in my lessons, I have to get away from the curriculum, to search for the information or appropriate technique and modify them in a way so I have to create my own tasks and use different teaching strategies almost I have to change everything which is not related to the book at all, just for example the theme is from the course book, the idea or the grammar rule, then all the tasks from me, so the curriculum doesn't help at all."

The same view was pronounced by Teacher (Khadijah teaches grades 3 and 4): *"the course book is not supporting with many activities but there are some tasks that support high thinking level, and it depends on the teacher's criticality to take the available chances in the course book and foster these skills as much as possible. So the ordinary teacher will go through the pages I finished this and move to the other page without thinking of how to adapt this curriculum."*

Together with their agreement on the necessity for task modification, teachers also expressed their frustration with the inflexibility of the textbook in most of the grades. The textbook centralisation was obvious from the classroom observation and the interview responses. Teachers believed that the textbook restricted them from being creative and innovative in their teaching, as Teacher (Kareema teaches grades 11 and 12) explained: *"I don't think the current syllabus will be of any use because we don't have flexibility to include them. So our current course book doesn't give the chances of including these skills and if there are they are very rare. The course book is very long and full of content."*

Therefore, terms like limitation, restrictions, lack of freedom and inflexibility were common during the interviews, all of which reflect the idea of the domination of textbooks as the only source of teaching and learning. The same terms were frequently used in the open-ended questions in the teachers' survey when they were asked about their opinion on the restrictions that force them to neglect the implementation of 21st century competencies and skills in their classrooms.

Some interviewed teachers justify the need to adapt materials as having to relate the tasks to the students' real life, as Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) explained: ***“I don't follow the book when I prepare my lessons but I am far away, I just take, for example, the grammar rule so I am searching from different means like books, internet, I don't depend on the curriculum. So we have to modify them to meet the students' needs and connect to the students' real lives.”***

Teacher (Haifa teaches grades 2 and 3) also stated the benefits of adapting materials as this motivates her students and makes the lessons interesting for her and for them: ***“We tried to focus on the key concepts and then adapt so we don't deliver the course book as it is, we try to select the tasks that are more suitable and useful for the students. So we use these ways to overcome the challenge of curriculum by not considering it as a challenge but as an opportunity to enjoy our teaching/learning process, enjoy our time with our students. So we don't want to suffer and make our students suffer also. So what we do is adapt and enjoy every step.”***

Although teachers justified adaptation and modification of the textbook, they commented that teaching the content of the book is a priority. The rationale behind this view is the exam-oriented system, not only among students but in

Omani society in general, as Teacher (Naeema teaches grade 11 core and elective) explained with disappointment: ***“Also, in the culture of grading and evaluating students a lot of students will do what they are asked to do if the teacher is going to give those marks and not for their own development and progress. Unfortunately, our society is pretty much exam- and marks-oriented!”***

Another teacher, (Souad a SET in cycle one school), supported this view by saying: ***“I am obliged to finish the course book no matter what!! So I have to take extra lessons to teach these skills because they are not related to the curriculum or the exams.”*** Therefore, teachers are expected to teach every word in the textbook as the final exam is content-based, especially in the higher grades. Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school) stated: ***“It is like teaching for the final exams and tests and students are very conscious about their marks in year 12 therefore we have to teach every word in the course book.”***

During the interviews and classroom observations, teachers showed some difficulties in integrating 21st century competencies and skills into their EFL lessons. Therefore, teachers have developed some learner-centred strategies and techniques to cope with these difficulties, and avoid the traditional teaching/learning approaches.

The participants acknowledged that the massive amount of course content, and the limited time devoted to the integration of these skills, prohibited them from implementing the skills. As a result, some teachers came up with the idea of a “Worksheets Bank”, which includes activities to enhance 21st century skills.

5.3.6.2 Teacher's transformation: "Has modified me as a person and as a teacher!"

The participants in the current study valued the impact of teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills. They shared their experiences on how learning about these skills transformed them personally and pedagogically.

Teacher (Saeed a male teacher teaching grades 8 and 9) described her situation by drawing a comparison between past experiences and present ones:

"If I compare myself in the past and my teaching in the present after the course, I can see huge differences. It has modified me as a person and as a teacher! In the past, I used to criticise everything in the course book, but now I am aware of the chances the activities give to integrate these skills. So I look at the activities critically and try to locate the connections between the activities and the 21st century skills. Honestly, this is a credit for the MoE and for the course I attended in the specialised centre."

Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) noticed that she improved her searching and assessing skills. In addition she became more creative: ***"It developed my searching skills , yes, so directly I have an idea of what to do so, sometimes I look for a program and download it, some educational program, they helped me a lot to search for new ideas of teaching and to be creative. Also my abilities in assessing my students have developed, I use a lot of tools to assess my students during the lessons, yes observing them what do they need how can I change my strategies to meet their needs so."***

Similarly, Teacher (Mona teaches grade 2 and 4) believed that knowing and learning these skills had helped her to meet her students' needs and interests.

She commented: ***“I think knowing these skills helped me to pay attention to how I can connect these skills or competencies to my students’ interests and needs. I think the IT and using technology in the classroom is more suitable for our generation, so when we use technology, my students feel happy and interested and they will be more attentive in the lesson. So I think yes knowing these competencies has helped us to develop many of our skills and teaching strategies and deliver lessons that suit our students.”***

Teacher (Haifa teaches grades 2 and 3) reported that her classroom management skills have improved since she started implementing 21st century skills and competencies: ***“Especially in lesson management for me at the beginning I didn’t know what to do and how I can attract students’ attention. Then I found that students like games and they like to find a solution to a problem. My students like to be ‘Little Teacher’. They like to take the role of the teacher and come in front of the class and present.”***

Another teacher, (Naeema teaches grade 11 core and elective), talked about how she was transformed in terms of teaching methods and students’ involvement. She said: ***“It made a lot of changes in our teaching even the students also changed in their participation level it is different from the past, ok, of just using the whiteboard. In addition, my planning of the lessons has changed and my assessment procedures too.”***

The previous excerpts from the interviews express the positive impact of the implementation of 21st century competencies and skills, experienced not only by students but also by teachers, professionally and personally.

5.4 Assessment

This section focus on the approaches followed by the participants to assess the learning and teaching of the 21st century competencies. The three data collection tools i.e. teachers' questionnaire, teachers' semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were utilised to answer the following research question:

- What are their views with regard to the assessment approaches that measure 21st century competencies?

Frustration among the participants, with regard to assessing 21st century competencies and skills, was unavoidable. Teachers described how hard it was for them to cope with the amount of content that they had to cover, together with the misalignment of the assessment framework and the integration of 21st century skills and competencies. These limitations hinder teachers from conducting lessons that foster these skills. Teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle one school) explained this by stating: ***“It is difficult because we have a course book that we have to finish otherwise it is not difficult, if we have to finish everything it will be difficult.”***

The participants complained about the struggle of teaching these skills in an exam- and grades-driven context.

Teacher (Kareema teaches grades 11 and 12) also talked about the same issue and expressed her concerns thus: ***“Not quite often we teach these skills unfortunately we have a course book that we ought to finish and prepare our students especially in grades 11 and 12 for the final exams.”*** Teachers are stressed by having to strike a balance between the textbook demands and preparing the students for exams. Therefore, teaching 21st century

competencies and skills is not a priority for some teachers, since these skills are not considered in the assessment framework. Teachers usually skip teaching these skills – such as creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking – to save the time to prepare students for exams, as Teacher (Saeed) confessed: **“Frankly speaking we as teachers in this school skip teaching these skills and competencies especially during the exams, because we have to teach the syllabus and prepare our students for the tests.”** This is a common phenomenon; Radnor, Poulson & Turner-Bisset (1995) claimed that it is inevitable in an exam-oriented context, when teachers have to focus on developing skills and strategies which help students to pass their exams. As the Omani educational context is mainly exam- and grade-oriented, teachers tend to teach for exams, especially in post-basic schools i.e. grades 11 and 12.

5.4.1 Formative vs summative assessment

Assessing 21st century competencies and skills was one of the major concerns about the inclusion of these competencies in the Omani EFL context. Teachers were in an almost daily dilemma when it comes to assessing these skills. The participants reflected upon their experiences of assessing 21st century competencies and 60% of them believed that formative assessment is the most appropriate system by which to measure the progress of their students in acquiring these skills. For instance, Teacher (Hafida) stated that: **“for me for example I really like to use the formative assessment. So I divide the class into groups and observe how they work together and then assess them while they work within their groups. We also use presentations, debates, projects so we have a variety of tools.”**

Equally, Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school) said: ***“in my opinion I think the formative will be more suitable for assessing these skills.”*** This tendency towards preferring formative assessments was also evident in the teachers’ survey, as Table 12 shows. 60% of the participants agree that formative assessment approaches are best to measure the skills while only 8% of them think the opposite.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5	21 st century competencies/skills are best measured through a formative assessment approach.	19.55%	40.91%	27.27%	8.64%	3.64%

Table 11. Teachers’ views of using a formative approach

Furthermore, the participants justified their preference for implementing formative assessment approaches to measure their students’ progress in these skills, as teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) explained: ***“In my experience, I believe that applying the formative assessment is more appropriate for assessing these skills. Because we have to focus on the students’ needs, we have to change our strategies in order to meet students’ needs, if we are using the summative we will miss and not notice their progress and what is happening in the classroom. So a teacher should build assessment strategies for learning; we have to focus on learning, how to develop the process of learning and we have to search for better ways for our students for learning.”***

Teacher (Hafidah) also said: ***“In my experience the best approach to assess students in these competencies is the formative assessment. Because I***

can observe the progress in classroom but not the summative or tests they can't give a correct indication of the students' progress in these skills, their achievements and their strengths and weaknesses. For example for speaking skill I use presentation and participation during the lesson. So I mainly use classroom observations and presentations."

Teacher (Mona teaches grades 2 and 4) commented: ***"For me I use more formative such as self-assessment, projects, presentations. I even run competitions for classroom presentations in my classes and then we did it for the whole school."***

So, assessment instruments such as presentations, projects, debates, classroom observations and self/peer assessment were mentioned frequently during the interviews. These tools were also utilised during the lessons observed. For example, in the lesson observed with Teacher (Marwa) in grade 11 (appendix 13), the teacher asked the girls to prepare a short presentation about using mobile phones in school. So each of the six groups started planning for their presentation. The girls discussed the pros and cons of using mobile phones and how to present their ideas; the duration of this stage was around twenty minutes. Then the teacher asked the groups to present their ideas in front of the class. In another lesson with grade two students (appendix 14), Teacher Asma asked them to create monsters using basic materials like paper plates, straws, crayons, ribbons and buttons. Students worked on their creations and at the end of the lesson each group described their monsters in front of the class. The teacher took notes while the students were working and presenting. In a lesson with grade 8 students, Teacher Raya asked the girls to

evaluate each other's posters of transportation and then announced the best poster according to the students' evaluation.

5.4.2 Assessment challenges

In the next question the participants were asked if they found it difficult to assess 21st century competencies and skills in the EFL classroom. The findings of the semi-structured interviews with the teachers revealed that most of them commented on the challenges they face rather than the assessment itself. Basically, teachers complained about time, large numbers of students, the intensive course book and lack of support. Teacher (Haifa teaches grades 2 and 3) talked about big classes: ***“It will be difficult because we have big classes!”*** Another teacher blamed the lack of time: ***“It is difficult because we have only 40 minutes per class so the time will be an issue.”*** A third teacher, (Fatima a SET in cycle one school), reported the mismatch between the assessment framework and the textbook: ***“Well if we base the assessment of these skills on our assessment framework, it will be difficult because there is a mismatch between our assessment criteria and the course book.”***

In fact, Al Zadjali (2017, p.205) confirmed that the misalliance between assessment and the course book is another challenge facing both teachers and learners in the Omani context. This opinion was also articulated by teacher (Saeed), who described it as: ***“a tangled issue!”*** ***“Assessment is not helpful and not clear especially in cycle 1 (1-4); very general objectives let alone the unified summative assessment that's far away from the 21st skills and the curriculum itself. A tangled issue!”***

Referring back to the previous section, teachers were remarkably aware of appropriate ways to assess 21st century skills. However, the challenges they faced held them back from implementing those approaches. From my experience and through my classroom observations, I have noticed that teachers are skilful in the assessment approaches they have mentioned previously. I believe this was due to the training and experience they had, as Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) stated: ***“Also my abilities in assessing my students have developed, I use a lot of tools to assess my students during the lessons, yes observing them what do they need how can I change my strategies to meet their needs so. I gained it through the training I have received in the specialised centre.”***

The assessment system in the Omani context considers that “[b]oth formative and summative assessment are necessary and important; neither should be neglected (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 6).” As a result, in almost every observed lesson one or two of the formative assessment approaches were deployed. For instance, Teacher Ruqiya in class 6 utilised projects as a form of assessment, while Teacher Asia used a collection of students’ written work in their portfolio. In another lesson, Teacher (Marwa) in grade 11 employed peer-assessment when she asked the girls to evaluate their peers’ writing on the pros and cons of using mobile phones in school.

Despite the fact that teachers consider themselves competent in applying the formative assessment approaches, they opt for more training and practice, as Teacher (Fatima) expressed: ***“You know sometimes I feel that I am skilful in teaching these skills to my students and teachers but I am facing***

challenge when it comes to assessment of the skills. I definitely need more training on assessing the skills.”

Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) also mentioned the same point, but from the learners' perspective he suggested that training students from an early stage would result in better assessment practices: ***“I mean from grade one teaching students these skills but nowadays if you try let's try to assess these skills, the teachers will be lost, the students will be lost because there is no foundation for teaching/learning or assessing these skills, I guess so, so we need to build a strong foundation first and then it will be easier and better.”***

5.4.3 "Traditional system! All about grades."

The gap between assessment and the teaching and learning of 21st century skills and competencies is wide, as one teacher, (Maryam a SET in post-basic school), reported: ***“Also, in the culture of grading students as we implement a very traditional grade-oriented system, a lot of students will do what they are asked to do if the teacher is going to give those marks and not for their own development and progress. Traditional system! All about grades.”***

The teachers criticised the exam system and evaluation committees as only measuring the amount of information the students can retain and not how they think or learn, which they considered was ignored in the evaluation system. This view was voiced by Teacher (Saeed): ***“The committees that usually come at the end of each semester to investigate as I can name them are not aware of what teachers do in class. They are very literal to some old documents and exam results. They usually don't like change or creativity, which***

discourages teachers from initiating new ideas, especially in assessment strategies.”

Therefore, when teachers were asked about their best practices of assessment to measure 21st century competencies, interviewed teachers agreed on formative assessment, as Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) described: ***“In my experience formative assessment especially for cycle one students. I use classroom observation and peer assessment sometimes.”***

However, the survey results show (Table 13) that 36% of teachers strongly agreed and a further 49% of them agreed strongly that an integration of both formative and summative assessment was a good description of their actual practice. In my opinion, this is due to the strong impact of the grade-driven context that exists in Omani society.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
4	I integrate both formative and summative assessment in my lessons.	36.70%	49.54%	8.72%	4.13%	0.92%

Table 12. teachers’ views of using both approaches to assess 21st century skills

5.4.4 Testing 21st century competencies

Interviewed teachers in the current study welcomed the idea of including test items to measure students’ actual learning and assess their capabilities in 21st century skills and competencies, rather than just their memorising skills. Teacher (Mona teaches grades 2 and 4) remarked: ***“Maybe it is difficult because they are skills so somehow they can’t be seen in the test it is abstract it is not a matter of memorising information and just write it in the***

test we can for example ask them about a problem and they have to solve it in the exam paper or ask them about their opinion but I prefer to be assessed in the classroom and not through tests.”

In the same way, Teacher (Souad a SET in cycle one school) agreed and said: ***“I am including them in my teaching in grades three and four; I change even the way of giving the test. Previously we gave them questions in the test which are very direct with no differentiation in the levels; I told the teachers we should train them from the beginning how to manage difficult questions. I don’t call them difficult, but the kind of question that asks the pupils to analyse, or high-order thinking questions; especially in reading. The kind of question that asks the pupils to be critical or to judge for example.”***

However, interviewed teachers agreed that it is essential to train students and teachers in this type of test beforehand, as Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school) explained: ***“I believe it is good to include such items; however, the students have to be trained first from the early stages in how to apply these skills. If they are not trained it will be a disaster; just like what is happening in the TIMSS and Pearls tests.”***

While Teacher (Naeema teaches grade 11 core and elective) agreed on this integration of 21st century skills test items, she proposed that it would be more suitable for the higher grades, i.e. 11 and 12: ***“Speaking for myself, as I am teaching grades 11 and 12, I would like to include such skills in tests like problem solving questions or critical thinking or creativity, so I recommend it, but we need adequate support.”***

In addition, teachers praised the benefits of the non-traditional approaches to evaluation, i.e. observation, projects, portfolios, etc. Teacher (Khadijah teaches grades 3 and 4) commented: ***“I mean using assessment tools during the lesson when students are engaged in authentic activities. In such activities students learn a lot of things beside the basic skills and it gives us the chance to assess them authentically.”*** Although Teacher (Saeed) believed in unconventional assessment procedures, he commented that teachers usually choose to do what he called “the easy job”. Another teacher, (Kareema teaches grades 11 and 12), suggested that using these methods of assessment develops students’ creativity: ***“Sometimes I ask them to choose the assessment they prefer, if they want to present it in role play, miming, presenting or designing a poster it is up to them, so they have the right to choose what suits their abilities because some of them are good in drawing so they like to choose a poster and in this way it will stick in their minds directly. Actually my girls are very creative and developed.”***

Greenstein (2012, p. 51) argued that it is possible to assess 21st century competencies and skills through tests. However, there are better and more comprehensive strategies, for example observations, self- and peer-assessment, Logs , and portfolios among others.

5.4.4.1 National tests

The combination of both formative and summative assessment is at the core of teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills (Greenstein, 2012). Consequently, when the participants of the current study were exposed to the idea of including test items which measure these skills in the national end-of-semester tests, interviewed teachers had contradictory views. Some teachers

agreed to include them, but others disagreed. Teacher (Maryam a SET in post basic school), for example, said: ***“we need to think of how the students will react towards such change and also don’t forget the parents.”*** Similarly, Teacher (Sumayah teaches grades 3 and 4) expressed her doubts and literally said: ***“It will be a DISASTER.”*** Echoing the same fear, Teacher (Naeema teaches grade 11 core and elective) talked about how it would affect not only students, but parents and other stakeholders: ***“First of all we have to think of our students; do they want that or not? And other stakeholders are involved in such decisions, not only teachers.”***

However, Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) believed that 21st century skills and competencies cannot be assessed through tests, as she explained: ***“Maybe it is difficult because they are skills so somehow they can’t be seen in the test it is abstract it is not a matter of memorising information and just write it in the test we can for example ask them about a problem and they have to solve it in the exam paper or ask them about their opinion but I prefer to be assessed in the classroom and not through tests.”***

Another group of interviewed teachers were somewhat reflective, and not against the idea completely, but suggested that training students with these types of test items would be of great value, as teacher (Mona teaches grades 2 and 4) explained: ***“Well I think they are somehow difficult because in my opinion if we train our students on these competencies and apply them frequently their assessment will be easy but if we apply them rarely we will face some challenges in assessing them even for, if you compare between the students they have different levels, so I don’t think that all of***

them can be assessed in the same way. For example in the competitions we have different skills like handwriting, reading, speaking, writing, presenting, etc. So the students who are good in different skills can compete and participate.”

Teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle one school) commented that training students is essential, however, and that shrinking the gap between the course book, teaching methods and assessment is a priority: ***“So I said earlier there is a gap between the course book, teaching methods and assessment and unless this gap is eliminated we can’t risk including them in the tests!”***

Teacher (Saeed) welcomed the idea of including the test items, although he claimed it would be appropriate for the higher grades: ***“I think it will be a good idea but it might be appropriate for higher grades like grades 10, 11, 12; not for lower grades because they are still learning these skills.”***

A couple of teachers suggested that if the decision is taken, it should be implemented in other subjects, such as Arabic language, as Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) justifies by saying: ***“I think the language is considered as a barrier for my students to fully acquire these skills. So in Arabic it would be much easier for them than in English and it may be that for older students it would be possible but for young learners I don’t think so.”***

Teacher (Sumayah teaches grades 3 and 4) also asserts that language is a barrier, as students are not competent in English and this type of question requires a high level of competence. ***“It will be difficult in my opinion for my students because they are weak in the language. So, they might know the answer but they don’t know how to express it in English. So I think these***

skills might be assessed in other subjects like Arabic or Math but not English.”

Once again, the exam-oriented perspective is dominant. 49% of teachers disagreed with the exclusion of the test items that assess 21st century skills and competencies either in the term tests or final tests. Only 9% of them strongly agree with the exclusion of the test items that assess the skills. The following table represents these findings.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
7	I am against the inclusion of test items that measure 21 st century competencies/skills in tests.	9.50%	11.76%	29.41%	28.05%	21.27%

Table 13. Teachers’ views of testing 21st century competencies

This section has addressed Omani EFL experiences in assessing and evaluating 21st century competencies and skills. Although the majority of teachers expressed their complete support for the unconventional testing approaches for these skills, the dominance of summative assessment was clear. This perspective is informed by political and societal forces and the centralisation of the educational system in the Omani context. Therefore, the authorities need to draw up a strategic plan to reduce the impact of such orientation.

5.5 Challenges of the implementation of 21st century competencies

The following section will focus on the perceived challenges which teachers face while implementing 21st century competencies and skills in their EFL classrooms. This set of challenges is one of the main themes that emerged from the data, and it is significant when trying to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of integrating 21st century skills. The data collected from the teachers' questionnaire, teachers' semi-structured interviews and classroom observation were analysed and processed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the anticipated challenges with regard to the integration of 21st century competencies into EFL classrooms?
- How can these challenges be overcome from the teachers' points of view?

The challenges were voiced and observed during the interviews and classroom observations. In addition, a teachers' questionnaire documented teachers' level of agreement and disagreement with the anticipated challenges. In addition, they have mentioned some of the challenges they face in the one of the open ended questions.

Teachers reported many challenges during the interviews; however, there are eight main challenges which appeared frequently in the data.

The following table (15) shows the frequencies of these eight main challenges being mentioned.

challenges mentioned	Frequencies
Curriculum/textbook	29
Lack of training	17
Lack of resources	14
Students' level and motivation	14
Time	10
Assessment	7
Number of students in the classroom	5
Extra duties	5

Table 14. Frequencies of the challenges

5.5.1 Teachers' frustration with the curriculum

This section focuses on teachers' feelings about curriculum change and the integration of 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context. Teacher frustration about the issue was a recurrent theme in the data. Findings in this section were revealed from teachers' responses to interview questions and open-ended questions from the online questionnaire. The overall interpretation of data revealed that participants perceived change from various perspectives.

During the interviews, teachers were asked if they were keen to promote 21st century competencies in EFL classrooms. Most of their answers were negative. They offered a number of reasons for their reluctance, which reflected negatively on the process of teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills. They talked about lack of appreciation and incentive, reluctance to change, and lack of engagement with the decision-making due to top-down system. These reasons will be discussed thoroughly in the forthcoming sections.

5.5.1.1 Lack of appreciation and incentive

Lack of appreciation and incentive is one of the factors making teachers feel depressed and unwilling to do more. Although teachers have been employed to teach the competencies along with the language, they believe doing so requires extra effort which in turn requires consideration from the ministry. Teachers believe that their efforts should be recognised and appreciated; one teacher, (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3), described her efforts to prepare and conduct a model lesson in her school and how, sadly, nobody appreciated it: ***“Lack of incentives and appreciation of the teacher’s work and effort. I can see a lot of difference between my previous school and the current one. The admin used to encourage and praise a lot. If, for example, I have a model lesson, the principal will inform all teachers to attend and, in some lessons, I might end up of having 10 teachers observing my lesson... Besides, she would praise me in the class and within the group. So she made me feel proud of myself and with my achievement even if it was a tiny one. But in this school they don’t care about us or about our professional development.”***

Another fellow teacher Hafidah teaches grades 6 and 8 suggested that incentives should be considered for teachers as well as for students: ***“We also need incentives for hard-working students and teachers as well.”***

Another aspect limiting and frustrating teachers was the uncongenial work conditions. Some interviewed teachers claimed that this type of work environment contributed to a feeling of frustration. A senior teacher in cycle one school, (Souad), described her depression because her colleagues did not share the same interest as her in developing the 21st century competencies and

skills: ***“I have faced many challenges to convince teachers to apply these competencies in their classrooms; unfortunately they are not keen. It is normal, from my point of view; when you come to teachers and tell them about a change or new procedures, you will find resistance. They don’t like any change because they have to do something and they don’t want to do it. So I believe, up to this point, that some teachers hate me because of these ideas of integrating 21st century competencies and skills in the classrooms. They made lots of fuss about it – even during our regular meeting they will ask ‘What’s new today?’”***

This is due to the lack of encouragement from the Ministry of Education and from the school itself. Ironically, there is no difference between a teacher who is creative in implementing 21st century skills and a teacher who abides by traditional procedures, in terms of promotion or professional privileges.

5.5.1.2 Reluctance to change

Reluctance to change is one the issues that, the participants argued, influenced the development of 21st century competencies. Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) voiced this opinion bluntly and said: ***“In my opinion some teachers are not open or willing to change. They always say that we have been in the field for years and we are experts; however, most of them are traditional teachers and they don’t welcome new ideas.”***

Meanwhile, teacher (Naeema teaches grade 11 core and elective) talked about it from a psychological perspective: ***“I am not sure, but probably our teachers are afraid of change because it makes them feel unhappy; it is not easy for them to change what they have been used to doing for many years.”*** Similarly, teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) reported that

teachers' lack of motivation limits them in terms of applying these skills in their classes: ***“Unfortunately, I can say to you no, because our teachers are missing the motivation, they are not motivated at all; most of them say that 21st century skills are like a load or a burden on them because they have a lot of things to do in the school and these skills they need to be prepared for; yes, [the skills must be] searched for, find a suitable place, be managed in the timetable, managed in the classroom –everything.”***

Thus, teachers consider the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies to be an extra load rather than an integral part of the curriculum. They are required to plan, organise, search and assess, which for some teachers is exhausting and requires a lot of adaptation from their side. As a result they prefer to stay as they are and avoid changes.

5.5.1.3 Top-down system

A critical finding was discovered from the data; what dramatically increased teachers' frustration was their powerlessness during the process of any educational change. They consider themselves as being at the bottom of the pyramid. As one of the male teachers, (Saeed), exclaimed: ***“I believe that if nothing can be changed from the top of the pyramid we can change it from the bottom; if we start really digging it will change!”*** Another teacher described the situation by saying: ***“We are not machines.”*** These descriptions explain their frustration and sense of powerlessness with regard to the process of curriculum development and change. In fact teachers' limited, or in some cases neglected, involvement in curriculum change negatively affects their self-esteem. They feel that they are alienated and marginalised. Change has been imposed on them by higher authorities like supervisors, senior teachers, school

principals and Ministry of Education officials. Teachers, therefore, devalue themselves and their contributions to the development, as Teacher (Mona teaches grades 2 and 4) articulated: ***“We need to be involved in the decision-making; for example, while designing the curriculum we want to have our share of input because we are the ones who have experience and know every detail of our learners and the context. So we better know the needs of our students and their interests.”***

Dissatisfaction with the changes in the curriculum was also voiced. Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school) claimed that: ***“Not much change has been made recently, but maybe for grade 11 the themes were reduced; instead of five there are four now.”***

Paradoxically, 46% of teachers had a contradictory opinion towards curriculum change. A couple of interviewed participants welcomed the change and the integration of 21st century competencies and skills. Miraculously, they considered this change as an opportunity for learning for themselves and for their students. As Teacher (Hafidah teaches grades 6 and 8) elaborated: ***“Also my skills of designing creative tasks have developed directly and completely during the implementation of the 21st century skills and competencies.”***

Likewise Teacher (Souad a SET in cycle one school) reported her approval of the change as a whole and specifically in terms of the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. This change helped her to become creative and critical: ***“Actually, with my class, I changed my way of teaching. First, to be frank with you, before I started this, I took a course – I don’t remember when it was – and the name for it was SETs only it was***

about thinking critical thinking; it taught me that we are not teaching, in fact, that the good teacher teaches the children how to think not what to do or what is in the subject but how to think. So when I learned about 21st century competencies I thought the idea that I got from the course on critical thinking, it is just part of it. I was starting to apply it and also my teachers and anyone who visits my classes can see the development in myself and in my students.”

This finding resonated with the argument of Ganguly (2001), that teachers are considered to be co-learners during educational reforms.

These mixed feelings of satisfaction, dissatisfaction, frustration, insecurity and contradictions are claimed to be part of the whole package of change (Fullan, 1999). This is absolutely true and I couldn't agree more. However, in my opinion these feelings could be controlled and minimised by a broader involvement of teachers in the process of change and development. In addition, our teachers are critical in their feedback and views of any reform, and their opinions are based on valid experience. So, marginalising them is not an option; it leads to low morale and to frustration, as is revealed by the data.

5.5.2 The textbook

The textbook was at the top of the list of challenges teachers face during the implementation of 21st century competencies and skills. As indicated earlier, the participants in the current study appreciated the inclusion of 21st century competencies and skills and expressed an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards its benefits. Nevertheless, the data revealed that overloaded teachers and unsupportive textbooks are a major challenge our teachers face during the implementation of 21st century competencies and skills.

A sense of conflict and pressure prevailed during the interviews. 69% of teachers encounter this when teaching 21st century skills, particularly when they are embedded in intensive academic content in the textbook. Teacher (Khadijah teaches 3 and 4) elaborated on the issue: ***“Another challenge is the course book and the overloaded timetables. The course book is full of content and stuff; it is very condensed. Yes, it is definitely a challenge. This course book also restricts teachers from applying the skills in their classes because I have a syllabus I have to finish.”***

The intensity of the textbook was the main reason for lack of time when dealing with these skills, as explained by Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school): ***“the book; so, the load of the curriculum is what stops me from applying these competencies every day; so also as you know they require a lot of effort when we are planning them, like preparing the materials and everything.”*** Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school) echoed the same constraint: ***“The first challenge is the syllabus and the course book is loaded with content; we have six units per semester full of things and stuff to teach.”***

Yet, the heavy content load wasn't the only issue associated with the textbook; as one of the participants articulated, there were other challenges such as the difficulty of understanding questions, terminologies and tasks. Teacher (Hafidah teaches in cycle two school) said: ***“In this curriculum, we are suffering from these topics, words and questions that are difficult to our students. The topics that are not related to our students are also a problem. You know that for our pupils this language is their second language, I mean a foreign language, and no one helps them at home; they don't speak it in***

the house; they only have the chance of forty minutes to practise the language in the whole day to speak that language, to be familiar with words in the language". Similarly, Teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle one school) complained about the substantially difficult vocabularies in the textbook and how students take ages to understand the words to achieve the task: ***"The students don't know how to process and manage the information they receive or find in the textbook. They lack very basic skills like finding a word in a dictionary."***

The familiarity of the task is also an issue related to the textbook. For instance, Teacher (Saeed) described a situation where his students did not comprehend the activity of preparing a presentation: ***"For example, last year I tried to define the word 'debate' for the students; it was really hard, even the word 'presentation' was hard for them. I mean, in the boys schools, I remember last year or the year before when I tried to teach grade 8 for the first time I was asking them to do presentations and they were saying what is presentation?! It is our first time to hear the word although there are a lot of presentation tasks in their course book from grade one to grade 12."***

Accordingly, indications from the collected data identified that textbook incompatibility, from the perspectives of participants, created a gap between levels. For example, the gap between year four and year five was explained by Teacher (Souad a SET in cycle one school): ***"I think the problem with the textbook was even when I studied the basic systems so we had a shock when we moved to grade five because the textbook was full of information, difficult words and difficult tasks! So there is a gap and we felt it when we moved from grade four to grade five."*** Therefore, teachers

believed that year four is too simple in comparison to year five, which is at an unrealistic and very demanding level.

In addition, the excessive number of themes and activities, and the excessive vocabulary, is not supported by the activities and tasks that would enhance learning through 21st century competencies and skills. This issue was identified by around 69% of the teachers as a major pressure that prevents teachers from implementing 21st century skills in their classrooms. As Teacher (Maryam) described: ***“As I said, it is full of content and we have to finish the course book no matter what!”***

Practically speaking, the overburdening content shifted teachers' efforts towards covering the content rather than towards the development of the skills. Teacher (Mona teaches grades 2 and four) expressed an opinion that the intensity of the course books is turning pupils into “machines” without any freedom or creativity: ***“So our current course book doesn't have the chance to include these skills and if it does, they are very rare. So we don't have flexibility to include the skills and be creative. The course book is very long and full of content. Beside that the teacher has to finish the course book no matter what.”***

These quotes represent the negative impact, linked to the course book, on teachers and students. The danger of teaching in a mechanical way, without any personalisation of the teaching and learning approaches, is a critical condition that needs to be taken seriously in order to accomplish the aims of the integration of 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context.

The topics, the pictures, the activities are out of date and don't reflect the generation's interests and the needs of the teacher.

In addition, 80% of the surveyed teachers strongly agreed that the textbook and its massive content contributed negatively to the development of 21st century competencies and skills among students. This was clearly evident during classroom observations. Most of the teachers observed were behind the schedule. The lessons finished before the teachers managed to achieve the tasks planned for the lesson. Consequently, teachers allowed less time for skills during the lessons. For example, group discussions in which students develop their communication and collaboration skills last for only one or two minutes. Students' presentations and evaluation activities are also affected. During the year one observation lesson, only four groups out of six managed to present their creations of monsters; in the lesson observed in year 11, only two groups managed to present their ideas on the topic of using mobile phones in the school. This is due to the density of tasks and exercises to be completed within 40 minutes. Basically, teachers and students are following two textbooks, a skills book and a class book for every level and both the textbooks are mandatory. Teachers are obliged to complete the two textbooks in a certain time by the end of the first semester and start two new books for the second semester. Each book encompasses from five to seven units at some levels, such as grades three and four. Four to five exercises need to be carried out within one lesson, including grammar, vocabulary, writing, speaking and reading activities. Adding to that, the 21st century competencies and skills are injected into the textbooks using an integrated approach.

Nonetheless, 56% of teachers appreciated the new changes related to the textbooks, specifically in grades 11 and 12 according to Teacher (Maryam a

SET in post-basic school): ***“Of course, it is helpful for our students as now they have an idea about what is happening around them.”***

The contemporary changes were viewed by Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) as an inspiration for her to modify, create and develop her teaching strategies and tasks: ***“In the past, I used to criticise everything in the course book, but now I am aware of the opportunities these activities give to integrate these skills. So, I look at the activities critically and try to locate the connections between the activities and the 21st century skills.”***

5.5.3 Lack of training and preparation: “Training...was out of context and outdated”

The participants complained about the lack of training and preparation when they were asked about the challenges they faced during the implementation of 21st century competencies and skills in EFL classrooms. According to the data revealed from the questionnaire, 84% of teachers strongly agreed that the lack of training and pre-service preparation is a major challenge. This finding was echoed frequently during the interviews. As the participants indicated that university preparation was inadequate for the process of learning and teaching 21st century competencies, as teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle one school) expressed: ***“Well, during my studies at the university, I haven’t come across the term ‘21st century competencies’; however, I was trained in some of the thinking skills like creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, but it wasn’t enough at all.”***

Yet, 61% of teachers surveyed believed that in-service training is vital in developing their skills and gaining a better understanding of the importance of the implementation and integration of these skills in EFL classrooms. Teacher

(Sumayha teaches grades 3 and 4) shared her point of view: **“And now since we have been trained in the specialised centre besides the training in the region, we as teachers are able to adapt the tasks to match these skills and change some activities.”** Teacher (Kareema teaches grades 11 and 12) also praised the in-service training: **“I got some training on these skills – I mean in-service training for two weeks.”**

However, 27% of participants, such as Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school), reported that they had not received any training on the integration of these skills: **“I haven’t received any in-service training with regard to these competencies.”** Teacher (Naeema teaches grade 11 core and elective) also complained about the lack of training: **“Although I have many years of experience still I think we didn’t have enough training for these skills.”**

Thus, 84% of the teachers agreed that they require more training in the implementation of 21st century skills and competencies; they consider the lack of training to be a major challenge that prohibits the integration of the skills in their daily teaching, as Table 16 reveals.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
62	Lack of teacher training in learning/teaching of 21 st century competencies/skills	53.42%	30.59%	9.59%	5.02%	1.37%

Table 15. teachers’ views of lack of training

Teachers who had received some in-service training expressed their dissatisfaction with the kind of training and preparation they had received. They described the training courses as traditional and outdated; as Teacher (Saeed) stated: **“All the training that I had previously attended related to teaching**

was out of context and outdated. As teachers we received different training and we come from different institutes; we are coming from different universities and colleges and there were different ways of training us and we are all supposed to teach the same curriculum which is really hard for us as teachers, so we need something that unites us and give us the right directions to follow.

In agreement with this point of view, Al-Belushi (2017) claimed that training and professional development in the Omani context need to be transformed to suit the requirements of the 21st century.

Nonetheless, interviewed teachers started to develop themselves professionally in order to cope with the demands of the process of integrating these skills in their classes.

5.5.4 LRC: “Only one LRC...usually overbooked.”

A lesson was observed in the LRC hall at Al Shifa girls' school. The hall was equipped with around 10 computers with internet access, a small library and a smartboard. There were also some tables and chairs in groups of six. The lesson was engaging and the girls moved around the different resources searching for information about transportation. The students were working on their projects independently and creatively. The teacher was supporting the groups and directed them to work co-operatively in their teams.

Teachers claimed that the lack of suitable resources and facilities has a negative impact on the whole process of teaching and learning in general, and 21st century competencies and skills in particular. Teacher (Haifa teaches grades 2 and 3) stated: ***"The electronic technologies' availability is a big problem in our school. We need a number of halls in the school and***

equipped places to teach instead of classrooms. LRC is the only available hall for all the teachers at school. Only one LRC...usually overbooked."

Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) strongly supported the previous argument and explained openly: ***"We have to buy materials by ourselves, we have to modify our timetable, the space, because our classrooms are not suitable for the application of these competencies; there is no technology in them, we have to modify the places for our lessons. No one offered us these at all, REALLY."*** Teacher (Sumayah teaches grades 3 and 4) complained that they had only one LRC hall in the school for all subjects. It had to be booked in advance and it was usually overbooked.

Yet, some schools were able to provide the English department with a resource room. Teacher (Zahra a SET in cycle one school) expressed her gratitude that the school had provided them with a special EFL hall which included different facilities like a smartboard, a projector and a TV set: ***"our school managed to allocate one empty room to be used for these purposes and to apply these strategies and techniques; it was a solution for us to put our resources in that room."***

However, 76% of teachers complained the internet in their schools was very slow and took ages to download a piece of information; Teacher (Hafidah teaches grades 6 and 8) said: ***"The weak connection of the internet. For example, if I ask students to search for a piece of information on the computer, it will take them ages as the signal is very weak and sometimes it disconnects."*** Teacher (Kareema teaches grades 11 and 12) suffered from the same problem. She complained about the slow internet connection in the school: ***"In addition, the internet connection is very weak in our school and***

I waste a lot of time waiting for the signal or downloads if I prepare a lesson to be conducted in the LRC.”

Therefore, providing schools all over the sultanate with proper infrastructure, such as multipurpose halls equipped with suitable technological devices and internet connection, is a justifiable demand. This is due to the rapid change of the world in terms of technology, students, teachers and workplace (Greenstein, 2012).

5.5.5. Students’ level: “They lack very basic skills...”

The participants in the interviews reported that the students’ level is one of the major constraints. The learners’ weak level in English competency has a negative influence on the process of teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills. According to teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle one school) her students lack the basics of the language: ***“Students’ level is also a challenge. They don’t know how to process and manage information they receive or find. They lack very basic skills like finding a word in a dictionary and, to be honest, I don’t blame the students, but I blame myself as a teacher. I didn’t train them in these skills. I just do it like other teachers do it: go home and search for it!”***

Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) complained that her students are very weak, to the extent that she used to use the first language, Arabic, to explain things to them: ***“Students’ level is another challenge because students who live in cities usually are exposed to English quite often. So somehow they are better at learning and acquiring the language, while in the remote areas, they struggle. For example, when I was teaching in *Dhofar, I used to use the first language a lot (Arabic) because the students could not***

understand a word in English or sometimes one of the good students would translate for the others. For that reason most of them have failed in the English subject. So, for example, grade four levels of English in this school can be compared with grade 11 in my previous school. They can form sentences and write short paragraphs.” *Dhofar is in the south of Oman near the border with Yemen.

Gender differences were prominent in this regard, as observed by Teacher (Saeed), a male teacher teaching grade 8 and 9 boys. He suggested that the situation is worse in boys’ schools compared to girls’ schools: ***“Let me add this, in my grade 9 class, for example, I have very weak students; of the total 43 students, 30 of them have failed in English in the first semester. I have a lot of repeaters in the class who have failed three or four times. So students’ level is a challenge.”***

In agreement with this statement, the weak level of competencies in English among Omani students was revealed in the teachers’ survey as one of the crucial constraints. 84% of participants believed that the weak level of learners hindered teachers from fully integrating the skills in their lessons, while only 5% of them disagreed. Table 17 provides the frequencies.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
64	Students’ level of English competency	50.00%	33.94%	10.55%	5.50%	0.00%

Table 16. Teachers’ views of students’ level as a challenge

Therefore, teachers in many cases skip teaching 21st century competencies and skills; Teacher (Saeed) continued to share his experience of teaching these

skills: ***“As they will try to avoid teaching these skills as much as possible, I am mainly talking about male teachers and boys’ schools.”***

On the other hand, Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school) taught a grade 11 elective English course, so she applied a lot of these skills in her lessons and when I asked why she did for this class in particular, she said: ***“Unfortunately we do these activities with elective classes only! Because most of them are excellent students and we can do whatever we want with elective classes.”***

Hence, students’ weaknesses in reading, writing, speaking and spelling constitute one of the crucial constraints leading to a negative impact on learning and teaching 21st century competencies and skills. This was clearly evident during the lessons observed. I have noticed that students’ weaknesses were a stumbling block for both teachers and students in terms of effective teaching and learning of these skills. For most of the lessons observed, the students were using a lot of Arabic during discussions, although some observed teachers believed that this is not a weakness as long as the students are acquiring the skills. In addition, students were struggling while reading the questions or providing answers. For instance, pupils in a year 9 class were asked to write three questions in their groups about “Tourism” after reading a text about it in their textbooks (appendix 9). Only good students were able to accomplish the task on time, whereas two weak students in the last group were stumbling when reading the text. Moreover, the teacher was also suffering while trying to help the weak students to pronounce the words in the text. In another class, about the solar system, the teacher asked year 10 students to write down three items they would like to take with them to their favourite planet and explain why. The

same scenario occurred; students competent in the language were able to achieve the task, while the weak students, who were the majority, were struggling to write the items in English with correct spellings. Luckily the teacher provided some dictionaries for them to search for the words, which also took them a while.

Despite the fact that the students' level had resulted in negative student attitudes towards learning 21st century competencies, teachers applied different strategies and tactics to praise and encourage their learners. Teachers tried their best to motivate them to apply 21st century competencies and skills. For instance, Teacher (Raya) frequently uttered words like "Excellent work", "Good idea", "Brilliant drawing", while the groups were working on their transportation posters. On the other hand, Teacher (Hajar) praised the girls by literally giving them apples, as the main theme of the lesson was "A healthy lifestyle". Whenever a student contributed in the group or in the lesson, the teacher handed her an apple. There was an interactive and lively classroom atmosphere. In addition, these strategies had a constructive impact on the students and on the process of teaching and learning 21st century skills and competencies. I noticed that students started asking critical questions, and raised the degree of communication with the teacher and their classmates. For instance, one student was addressing the issue of using mobile phones in the school and she said: "Teacher, I don't think that using mobile phones in school is harmful because there are some benefits too; besides, we don't want to be left behind in the world of technology." The girl continued stating the benefits in an impressive and convincing manner. The teacher then asked her to discuss

them with her group, and write an article about it to be published in the school magazine.

In a classroom with young learners (year 3), teacher Nasra deployed a star chart. The chart included the names of the six groups in the class and each time a group contributed positively in the lesson, the teacher stuck a star beside the group name. At the end of the lesson she counted the stars and the winners received applause from the rest of the class. Another teacher, (Khadijah teaches grades 3 and 4) explained her strategies for motivating students to apply 21st century skills through using cards with the names of superheroes. Students selected the name they preferred as a name for their home group: ***“So, for example, my students like watching TV or cartoons, so I asked them to pick the names from the cartoon characters they like for groups. Then they write the names on cards. I also once prepared a lesson around superheroes like Batman, Spiderman, etc. and I tried also to use rockets as the unit is about space. So I try to vary my methods to meet the students’ needs and interests.”***

During interviews, participants commented on the benefits of field trips. Teachers perceived organising field trips to be very important in developing 21st century competencies and skills. These trips attract learners’ attention and boost their motivation. In addition, they develop students’ language learning as well as enhancing acquisition of 21st century skills. Teacher (Abeer teaches grades 1 and 4) described her experience of joining a field trip and how it increased the students’ enthusiasm for using the second language and applying these skills: ***“Last year we went on a field trip; it wasn’t for English, but we participated in the social sciences subject – it was a project for the social***

sciences and I went with them. So we took them to Nizwa Fort and the teacher, before going on the trip, gave the students some questions and they had to search for the information during the trip. So I took the chance and put some questions in English and they had to answer them in English. For example, 'How tall is the tower?' It was very successful because young learners like to use their senses and touch objects because they are visual learners in general."* *Nizwa is a region in the interior of Oman. It is about 150 km from Muscat, the capital city.

Nonetheless, field trips are not always available. Teachers felt short-staffed when it came to organising field trips.

5.5.6 Large numbers of students per class: "It exceeds 37 sometimes."

The number of students in the classroom was one of the major obstacles in the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) believed that large number of students was a hindrance for her as she explained: *"I think the biggest challenge is the number of students in the classroom ... 28 students are difficult to manage."*

Teacher (Kareema teaches grades 11 and 12) also emphasised that student numbers impose a constraint on the process of teaching and learning as a whole, not only for these skills. She reported that: *"I face a challenge with the big numbers of pupils in the classroom. Sometimes I blame them, sometimes I find excuses for them. How am I going to ask them to do this and work on certain skills – and they have different levels in that big size?"*

Teacher (Saeed) said that he is struggling because one of his year 9 classes has 42 students: **“Let me add this, in my grade 9 class, for example, I have very weak students; of the total of 43 students!”** Teacher (Khadijah teaches grades 3 and 4) also complained about this and considered it a major challenge: **“The huge number of students in one class. It exceeds 37 sometimes.”**

According to the Ministry of Education statistics (2017), 79% of public schools have a classroom density of 20-29 students per class, whereas schools with a density of 35 students and above made up 1.05% around the whole Sultanate. However, 45.55% of the participants in the online questionnaire were teaching classes with more than 31 students per class! Figure 5.1 shows the percentages revealed by the questionnaire.

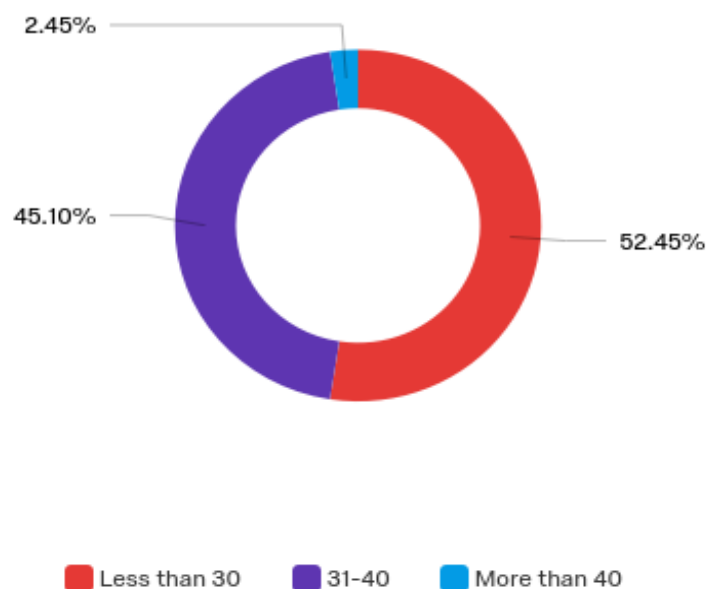


Figure 5.1: Distribution of Students numbers per class

In practice, through classroom observations, the teachers were struggling to move around the large groups of students in the lessons. Typically, each classroom observed was arranged into five or six groups, each group including six or seven students. So, the average classroom had at least 30 students. As Teacher (Hafidah teaches grades 6 and 8) described it: ***“In my opinion the number of students in the classroom, I mean the size of the classes, at maximum we need to have only 15-20 students per class in order to enforce these skills.”*** Teachers considered this to be a major reason for lack of time because they moved a lot around the groups and give adequate support to each student.

5.5.7 Lack of time: “By the way, most of the challenges revolve around time.”

Teachers required more time for planning, implementing and assessing these skills. In total, 14 teachers out of 15 during the interview repeatedly complained about the shortage of time when teaching 21st century skills and competencies. This was clearly noticed during the classroom observations. Only one teacher of the 10 observed teachers managed to finish the lesson on time. She was able to do so because she managed to arrange double English lessons for the class. For instance, in a lesson observed with Teacher Marwa in grade 11, the teacher gave the girls around 20 minutes to prepare their talk about using mobile phones in the school. Apparently, this was not enough and the girls required more time. However, the teacher had to stop them and move on to the next task. As the remaining time for the lesson was 20 minutes, each group (total of

six groups) had only three minutes to present their ideas. As a result, the bell rang before the last two groups had the chance to present.

In another lesson with Teacher Asma, in grade 1, students were instructed to create their own monsters using materials located on the front table. Basically, the lesson was the fourth lesson after the break and the students needed some time to settle. Thus, five minutes were lost before the students started to focus and follow the instructions. Then the students had to move around to collect the material they required to build their monsters. They actually started working 10 minutes later. The teacher told them that they only had 15 minutes to finish their monsters. As observed, this time was not reasonable and practical for a class with 28 students. The teacher was planning to ask some students to talk about their monsters in front of the class but, unluckily, the bell rang to announce the end of the lesson. Thus, most of the students had not finished their activity. In fact, most of the lessons had the same dramatic ending.

According to the observations, I have noticed that the majority of students were incapable of completing the tasks; therefore, the teachers tended to skip them and move on to the next activity, as Teacher (Hiafa teaches grades 2 and 3) explained: ***“So sometimes we skip these tasks that need creativity and critical thinking as they need a lot of time to teach and prepare.”***

Apparently the same view is shared by interviewed teachers. As Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) said: ***“I think time is the key challenge; the duration of the lesson is very short, 30-40 minutes. And when the lesson is – in the morning or in the afternoon.”***

Despite the fact that 81% of teachers perceived a positive attitude towards the inclusion of 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context, they

struggled with time when it came to practice. 88% of teachers emphasised that they would like to integrate the skills quite frequently; however, they couldn't because of time pressure. In addition, observed teachers underestimated the time required to acquire the skills, given the level of students and the large numbers of students per class. Consequently, time pressure resulted, firstly in decreasing the time available for the students to acquire the skills, and, secondly in skipping tasks and activities.

One of the main reasons for such behaviour was the condensed content, as Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) reported: ***“One of the major challenges is that the course book contains lots of information and knowledge but there are very few chances or activities to practice and apply that knowledge. By the way, most of the challenges revolve around time, because when we want to design activities to give our students the chance to practice these skills we don't have enough time.”***

Correspondingly, 89% of the respondents to the online survey agreed that one of the key challenges for integration of 21st century competencies and skills in the EFL classroom was time, as Table 18 shows.

Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
63	Time constraint	55.50%	33.94%	6.42%	2.75%	1.38%

Table 17. Teachers' views of time as a constraint

5.5.8 Workload and heavy timetable: “The heavy timetable is a burden.”

The workload and heavy timetables were frequently mentioned during the interviews. Almost every participant directed the discussion towards them. In

reality, the number of lessons per teacher in Omani public schools is between 18 and 21 lessons per week, in addition to two or three substitution lessons. In general, an EFL teacher might teach five or six lessons per day (the school day starts at 7am and goes on to 2pm in Oman; it is divided into eight lessons of 40 minutes each). This is considered a major challenge from the participants' points of view and plays a negative role in terms of restricting teachers from teaching 21st century competencies and skills. One of the teachers explained that the number of lessons she teaches per day distracts her from planning and teaching these skills: **“So the heavy timetable is a burden, like the substitution lessons; most of my teachers have 20 lessons per week. Add to that the substitution lessons, marking, preparing exams and other duties.”** Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school) stated the same issue of heavy timetables and recommended recruiting assistant teachers to help the EFL teachers in the classroom: **“In addition the teachers are overloaded with timetables and other duties they have to do in the school. That’s the most important thing, so we need an assistant teacher, for example. We want to design tasks and be creative but we have a lot of things to do – imagine, as English teachers we have 21 lessons per week between five and six lessons a day, which is a short day.”**

A senior teacher in cycle one school, (Fatima), confirmed the previous complaint. Although SETs have relatively lighter timetables, they also stressed the overloaded timetables and other duties that they have to accomplish during the school day.

5.5.9 Social and cultural context: “Social challenges that may work as a barrier.”

The participants in the study had conflicting stances with regard to the social and cultural background of their students. Some teachers believed it hindered the acquisition of 21st century skills and competencies, while others viewed it as a facilitator. Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) compared the two regions she taught in and how the social background of one set of students had a positive influence, and in other region had a negative impact, as she explains:

“Another challenge I have noticed since I have taught in the south of Oman is cultural differences. Because when I compare the students in the south with students of the north, I can see lots of differences, I mean culturally. They are totally different from the students I teach now. Their ideas, their physical appearance, their communication abilities are different. For example, people who used to live in the desert are different from those who live in the mountains or the coast. For example, we have a unit about the sea and sea life. Students in the interior have no idea of what the sea looks like; they might have seen pictures or TV programs about it but they can’t make sense of it. They have never touched the sea water or felt the sand on the beach.”

Another negative impact of the local and cultural context is when students follow the instructions of the teachers or parents without any criticality or objection. Teacher (Saeed) reflected upon his own experience as a student: ***“I think during our studies in the school for 12 years we haven’t been taught how to express our thoughts against, for example, the teachers’ ideas or the course book as they want us always to follow their ideas and we have to***

say what they said and when we moved to the university (SQU)." Such conditions impede the development of critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity as he further commented: **"I found it different at university because they taught us that we must be independent in our thinking; we don't have to follow anyone and can be critical even with our parents, even the religion – for anything we have to think critically and creatively."**

Therefore, lack of confidence, and hesitation among students, during the implementation of 21st century skills and competencies, was evident. In some of the traditional classrooms, most students were silent and hesitant when asked to give their opinion or reflect critically in the group discussions. Teacher (Hafidah teaches grades 6 and 8) also confirmed this by stating: **"There are social challenges that may work as a barrier. Parents were used to old methods of teaching and learning; they might reject the new methods of learning."**

On the other hand, some teachers viewed the social and cultural factors as positively enhancing the development of 21st century skills and competencies. For example, Teacher (Nawal) made use of the students' cultural background and social life in a creative manner to attract her students' interest. She took them on a field trip to the nearby fort and discussed with them the information they gathered during the trip.

Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) was thankful for the course she attended in the specialised centre. They emphasised the positive impact of culture on the development of 21st century competencies and skills, as she stated: **"And in the specialised centre they added to that some skills which are related to our culture. They showed us videos from other cultures and**

how we can adapt the skills to suit our culture and they also taught us about ‘active learning’ with skills like critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity embedded within this approach.”

Fascinatingly, during lesson observations, most of the teachers connected the social and cultural background to the lessons so students could develop these skills intuitively. For instance, Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) used examples related to the students’ real life, i.e. camels, the desert and mountains. Teacher (Hajar) also used real-life examples connected to the students’ social and cultural context when discussing ‘Healthy habits’. The girls in their groups mentioned walking to the mosque five times a day, serving fruits and dates to visitors and so forth. This socio-cultural linkage created an interactive, critical and motivated learning environment which facilitated the acquisition of 21st century competencies and skills.

This section addressed the challenges of the integration of 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context. The challenges were one of the main themes revealed by the data analysis phases. The data gathered from the thematic findings found from the deployment of the three research instruments related to the issues under investigation. The following section will present teachers’ strategies, techniques and suggestions for overcoming the challenges.

5.6 Implications of the challenges

This section will focus on the participants’ suggestions to foster the implementation of 21st century competencies and skills. Paradoxically, teachers believed they had been neglected in the whole process of integration of 21st century competencies and skills, though they were resilient in coping with the

challenges they faced when teaching them. Therefore, teachers developed their own pedagogical strategies, and voiced their needs and their students' needs to the administration, trainers, supervisors or parents, and suggested some resolutions to effectively and appropriately integrate these skills in the EFL classroom. The following sections discuss these strategies in detail, based on the data revealed by the semi-structured interviews and the open-ended questions in the survey to answer the following question:

- How can these challenges be overcome from the teachers' points of view?

5.6.1 “We are not machines!”

The participants were disappointed at the need to constantly neglect their roles in the process of integrating 21st century competencies and skills in the EFL classroom. Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3) expressed her ideas strongly by saying: ***“We need our voices to be heard by the policymakers, especially regarding the syllabus and the course book; we need, as teachers, some flexibility and space to try out new ideas, innovations and approaches because we are the ones who deal with students daily and we know their needs, interests and levels. We are not machines!”***

Teacher (Naeema teaches grade 11 core and elective) also stressed the flexibility teachers need to perform well and be creative: ***“Teachers need some flexibility and space to be more creative in their teaching methods.”***

Unsurprisingly, the lack of flexibility and credibility resulted in frustration among teachers and unwillingness to implement the skills. As Teacher (Naeema) continued, expressing her disappointment: ***“So what is the point? I will stay***

as I am, doing the same traditional things, because those people want us to do so! “Those people” refers to policy makers, supervisors, trainers and school administrators, as she clarified later during the interview.

Another suggestion from the teachers was that these competencies and skills should be taught and learned from an early stage of schooling. They believed that if students are practising 21st century skills in the early stages, starting from cycle one schools in grades one to four, it will ease the process of integration and students will develop their skills comprehensively and build a foundation for them, as Teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle one school) stated: ***“We need to give these skills attention now because hearing that a project has failed here or there, or is struggling, is very devastating because it impacts our social life and our national economy also. So we need to teach these skills from the early grades. We need to look at these skills seriously because we see how other countries are transformed through using these skills in their school systems.”***

In addition, Teacher (Saeed) commented that teaching these skills from grade one would not only transform students academically but it would transform their lives in general. He pointed out: ***“I think if our students learn that from grade one, for their first step in school, it will not only change their view of life but it will change how they see everything in their lives and they will be more responsible and independent.”***

Appropriate publicity was another suggestion proposed by a couple of participants. They claimed that lack of awareness of the importance of these skills among teachers, students, the community and other stakeholders had a negative influence on the integration process. Teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle

one school) struggled to convince her teachers to implement these skills: ***“This is something good but we need to make good propaganda and advertise it well for teachers. We need to sell it to them in the first place and then ask them to apply it.”*** Teacher (Zahra a SET in cycle one school) also believed that lack of awareness, not only among teachers but among other stakeholders, hindered implementation; as she suggested, ***“It is a prerequisite to spread the awareness of these skills and competencies among the teachers, the administrators and the society in order to ensure an effective implementation of them in the schools.”*** So, to overcome this challenge they suggested proper awareness and publicity would solve part of the challenges they face during the implementation of the skills in their classrooms.

5.6.2 “I am the only one who can solve it.”

Although the participants expressed their frustration at not being involved in the process of integration of the 21st century competencies, they were brave enough to take some responsibility for overcoming the difficulties they face during the implementation of these skills in the classroom, as Teacher (Saeed) proclaimed: ***“Actually in the past, I was only blaming others about everything wrong and the challenges I have in school but this year I started to notice the weaknesses in myself and blame myself. I said ‘Come on; if I am a teacher I have to be a good teacher, there is no way to be a bad teacher. And if I face any challenge, I am the only one who can solve it.’”***

Teacher (Zahra a SET in cycle one school) was totally in agreement with the previous comment. She expressed her opinion: ***“From my point of view [it is important] not to blame the students but we, as teachers, should***

investigate why our pupils are demotivated; it might be because of something wrong in our teaching because our job is to teach so we should take most of the blame. It is our role as teachers.”

Thus, they have presented their thoughts of how 21st century competencies and skills can be developed effectively in their classrooms.

5.6.2.1 School level

Teachers in this study provided some suggestions that they follow in their classrooms or in their schools which helped them to reinforce the teaching and learning of the 21st century competencies. The following sections classified these suggestions into two parts; at school or district level and at classroom level.

5.6.2.1.1 “We spoon feed them and everything is ready for them!”

The interviewed participants believed that the educational system in the Omani context has underestimated learners' capabilities and not sufficiently trusted their aptitudes. Consequently, the system has created unreliable and reliant students, as Teacher (Naeema) declared: ***“That’s why our students are lazy; we spoon feed them and everything is ready for them!”***

Hence, the participants suggested their fellow teachers should avoid “spoon feeding” and start trusting their learners' capabilities. Teacher (Sumayha teaches grades 3 and 4) sent the following message to herself and to her fellow teachers: ***“We need first to believe in our students' abilities. We should trust them and make them more independent to help themselves and help the others and the community.”*** Teacher (Abeer teaches garde 1 and four) talked about her experience in trusting her students even though they were

young; she commented: ***“I am very grateful to some of my students who took the responsibility and take the role of the teacher; even if they are in grade 4, some of them can help and they take responsibility very seriously so we need to build trust and train them.”***

Therefore, teachers were determined to give the learners the appropriate opportunities and choices to raise their aptitudes towards learning in general and acquiring the skills in particular .

5.6.2.1.2 “Team planning would save us time, effort and resources.”

The participants in the current study also suggested that one of the ways that might help them as teachers to overcome the challenges of integrating the skills would be to form a network with teachers within the school and around the schools in the region. In their opinion this technique would save them a lot of effort and time, as Teacher (Houda) mentioned: ***“As for other ways, why don’t teachers meet together and divide the units of the course book among themselves and each teacher is responsible for designing a training pack, for example, for a unit in grade 6 which has everything, the materials, videos, unit planners, and save it on a CD or a flash memory and distribute it to the schools in the area. So, in my opinion, team planning would save us time, effort and resources.”*** Teacher (Fatima a SET in cycle one school) also echoed the idea of team planning and team discussion as being a cost-effective procedure in terms of time and effort: ***“I think why not feed these competencies in our current course book and not create and develop new ones as it costs a lot of time, effort and money. Why not invite creative teachers from every region and form a group to develop a framework or guidelines through analysing the current course book and***

just providing teachers with opportunities for these skills to be linked to the activities available in the course book!”

Yet, this process of team planning and team discussion should be systematic and scrutinised by different authorities, as the same teacher further explained:

“It also should be monitored and followed up by school principals, supervisors and trainers to give the teachers the appropriate support.”

In addition, Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school) believed that team planning and team discussions would motivate teachers to implement and integrate these skills: ***“Team discussion and team planning is one of the ways that will help to integrate these skills in our context.”***

The idea of team reflection and discussion was also suggested by Teacher (Abeer teaches grades 1 and 4) as a way of improving the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies: ***“One of the ways is to form a network or a group with teachers who are open and flexible and ready to try out ideas and methods.”***

Teachers in these practice networks usually discuss lesson techniques, reflect upon their lessons together and discover what went right and what went wrong in order to improve their teaching/learning strategies. Therefore, encouraging and supporting teachers to form these communities of practice is vital.

5.6.2.1.3 Extra-curricular activities

The interviewed participants agreed that planning extra-curricular activities enhanced the development of 21st century competencies and skills. These activities are performed by the majority of the students within the same school, or in the schools around the area, voluntarily, away from the formal lessons.

Basically, these activities are planned to foster 21st century skills during or after the school day.

Teachers asserted that participation in such activities fostered 21st century skills as well as academic achievement. These activities provided opportunities for the students to practise these skills in different situations, i.e. outside the classroom environment. Through these provisions, students practise a variety of approaches to creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking and collaboration. Moreover, students develop other supplementary skills such as brainstorming, organising, team-building and gathering information. Therefore, these activities provide students with occasions to solve real-life problems.

Through the interviews, teachers emphasised the significance of the extra-curricular activities for developing these skills. Teacher (Hafidah teaches grades 6 and 8) stressed the issue by stating: ***“I even run competitions for classroom presentations in my classes and then we did it for the whole school.”***

Correspondingly, Teacher (Naeema) expressed the benefits of the activities in enhancing students' skills and abilities: ***“Indoor and outdoor activities, this kind of thing that supports the enhancement of these skills, not only teaching them in the class – but what about application? We don't have it most of the time – they want us teachers in the classrooms only.”*** Teacher (Saeed) gave the example of debates as a powerful extra-curricular activity that equips students with 21st century competencies and skills. However, only competent students join such activities, as he explained: ***“Last year we had an English club and this kind of extraordinary activity. We just had the best students from different classes join and we gave them some activities to***

do like debates and projects inside the classroom; the problem is that the majority of students are not that good, even to speak or participate in these kinds of activities.”

In fact, supporting these activities, not only within the EFL curriculum but cross-curricula, might empower students with these skills efficiently and competently. Therefore, embedding programmes such as Cognitive Research Trust (CoRT) and Creative Problem Solving (CPS) as part of the extra-curricular programmes might be a promising initiative to help learners to acquire 21st century skills and competencies (Alnesyan, 2012).

5.6.2.2 Pedagogical suggestions: “I was amazed by the creative ideas and projects...”

The participants developed and created their own instructional techniques and strategies that foster the integration of 21st century competencies and skills. One of these techniques was drawing. Teacher (Abeer teaches grades 1 and 4) believed that using drawing as a technique to integrate these skills develops students’ creativity and mental abilities. As she stated: ***“I foster creativity through arts; I change my English lessons to art lessons so my lessons integrate lots of creativity.”***

This technique was also used by Teacher (Nasra). During the lesson observed in grade 3 (appendix 15), the unit was about the life-cycle of a plant and it was the third lesson on this theme, so instead of delivering the lesson traditionally, the teacher turned the lesson into an art class. Students started drawing the different parts of the plant. All of them were drawing using A4 paper and crayons. They drew beautiful pictures of different plants and wrote the names of their parts. The students were creative and involved and enjoyed the lesson.

Another strategy was collaborative learning. During lesson observations it was noticeable that the majority of the classes were arranged in the form of small groups (five or six students), or pair work. Thus, teachers implemented collaborative learning as much as possible in the process of teaching and learning 21st century skills. Collaborative learning generates a variety of types of interaction and communication patterns. It also develops students' intellectual abilities in solving problems and creating new ideas and products (Greenstein, 2012, p. 28). Accordingly, the lessons were dynamic and interactive. Students interact with their peers to develop ideas and solve problems by engaging in constructive dialogue.

In addition to the benefits of effectively using group and pair work for the acquisition of 21st century skills, teachers believed that using this technique helped them to overcome the challenge of crowded classes. Teacher (Souad a SET in cycle one school) elaborated on the issue: ***“Another key challenge is the class size. So what we do to overcome this challenge is activating group work; to manage the class we assign roles for each member of the group. This technique helped me to gain my role as a guide for the students so it was less effort on me!”***

Other strategies the participants suggested were debates and competitions. During these types of activities, students work in small groups – three or four students or sometimes in pairs. These techniques help students to develop 21st century competencies and skills, as Teacher (Saeed) described: ***“Debates and competitions might help in developing these skills. So focusing on debates and organising national and international competitions between schools will encourage our students to be critical and independent***

thinkers, to be creative and change their ways of thinking about everything around them.”

Teacher (Sumayha teaches grades 3 and 4) commented on the benefits of debates in the EFL lessons. She stated: ***“I like applying debates in my lessons because I have beautiful girls with beautiful language, so when I ask them to do debates I really enjoy it as if I am in another world and not in the classroom. My students are confident, creative and critical thinkers during these debates.”***

Likewise, Teacher (Houda a SET in cycle two school) praised the implementation of competitions within her lessons as she explained: ***“In my teaching, I am using a lot of competitions because I feel that my students are very engaged during them.”***

During one of the classroom observations carried out in grade four with Teacher (Nawal), she told the learners that there was a competition between the two groups. I noticed that the students were active and there was a huge amount of interaction between the students. Within the groups, students were discussing the task, they were critically commenting on each other's answers, and there was remarkable teamwork.

Another common technique implemented by teachers is the “Little Teacher”, especially in the early grades. Some of the interviewed participants mentioned the positive impact of using of such a technique in fostering 21st century skills. It is a situation where one student takes, or a couple of students take, responsibility for teaching a small part of the lesson to the whole class or to a group of students. Then they will ask some questions and will answer any queries related to that part of the lesson. This activity develops students’

abilities to problem-solve and be creative, as they are required to prepare the lesson in advance and be creative in delivering the lesson. Teacher (Maryam a SET in post-basic school) frequently used the technique and she is quite happy with the results.

One of the key approaches to teaching and learning 21st century skills, which the teachers implemented, is projects. Although projects are not new to teachers and students at public schools and for all grades, they are mainly used to assess students' performance and achievements; the assessment framework (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 16) states:

A project is an activity which, within a given time-frame, aims at producing some end-product, e.g. a piece of writing, a spoken performance, a poster, a collection of words and/or pictures, etc. It is generally longer and more complex than the usual kind of classroom activity and it may involve the collection of information and material from the outside environment.

Consequently, the participants used projects not only as an assessment tool but also as a strategy to enhance the development of 21st century skills and competencies. Teacher (Naeema teaches grade 11 core and elective), during the interview, explained the benefits of implementing projects in her ELT classroom: ***"Using projects to assess students is very helpful because they include a number of skills like communication, problem-solving, creativity and so on."***

The following participants shared their experience of implementing projects as a tool for fostering these skills at different levels and for different ages of learners. Teacher (Zahra a SET in cycle one school) reported that she used projects with grade three students: ***"Also doing projects for each unit depends on the***

unit and time. For example, we use the ‘my dictionary’ project at the end of each exercise book; we ask them to find any words that are new to them and write them down with their definitions either in Arabic or in English and this project lasts for almost a full semester.”

A further example was described by Teacher (Sara teaches grades 1 and 3). She talked about her implementation of projects with grade 11 girls: ***“For example, when I was teaching grade 11, we were thinking and designing projects for community service and I was amazed by the creative ideas and projects my students came up with although they were not competent in English.”***

Regardless of the positive influence of such strategies in developing 21st century skills and competencies in EFL classrooms, there are some drawbacks of such strategies, as some teachers voiced during the interviews or as were noticed during the classroom observations. These methods are time-consuming compared to the traditional teaching and learning methods. The domination of the higher ability students in the activities, and the possibility of automatically switching to Arabic, are threats to such strategies, as was frequently witnessed during the classroom observations. In addition, it requires thorough and comprehensive planning from teachers. In practice, they are required to identify the skills they will focus on while teaching and how to assess them. Teacher (Abeer teaches grades 1 and 4) complained: ***“For example, I applied these competencies using enquiry-based learning; it took me around five lessons to finish the tasks I prepared.”*** Therefore, teachers can avoid using them because they are time-consuming with regard to preparation, implementation and assessment.

5.7 Reflections on the classroom observations

Encouraging learners' interactions was a good example of how to teach and learn 21st century competencies and skills. Luckily, in the observation lessons, the pattern of interaction was pretty much pupil to pupil, as almost every class was arranged in groups and the tasks were carried out within the groups. All teachers encouraged students to discuss the exercises within their groups, yet, it was done under the teacher's directions and control.

Teachers deployed different methods depending on the context and the ages of the learners. Thus, teachers teaching grades one to four applied the Total Physical Response and Grammar Translation approaches when teaching grammar rules or vocabulary. Whereas I noticed, in higher grades from nine to 12, teachers implemented a mix of Grammar Translation and Communicative approaches. This was despite the fact that the Ministry of Education developed the EFL curriculum to implement topic- and skills-based approaches as well as the communicative approach:

In developing objectives, curriculum and content for all grades an integrated, topic- and skills-based approach to curriculum has been implemented as well as a communicative teaching methodology aligned to the context of Omani classrooms (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 9).

There might be different justifications for not strictly following the suggested methods. One of these justifications is that applying these methods is time-consuming and teachers need to prepare in advance. Another reason could be that teachers' assumptions are that Grammar Translation and Total Physical Response are effective for their learners' language development. Besides, they consider these approaches to be best suited to their context and the heavy

content which they have to cover. In fact, this concurs with Greenstein's (2012) point of view that teaching 21st century competencies and skills is context situated.

5.8 Summary of the chapter

This chapter has presented an analysis of the thematic findings that emerged inductively from the data collection instruments. The data analysis process was carried out in a holistic manner in order to provide a rounded perspective on the teachers' experiences within the process of implementing 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context. The data revealed that teachers face some challenges while implementing the 21st century competencies and skills in their classrooms. The main challenges found were time, large numbers of students per class, heavy teaching content and workloads.

The chapter concluded with the teachers' suggestions of how to cope with the challenges they face while teaching the 21st century competencies. Teachers offered their ideas on and experience of implementing different strategies while teaching the 21st century competencies; among them are team planning and teaching, extra-curricular activities and competitions.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings that emerged from the current study. The discussion in this chapter is driven by four main aims: to investigate Omani EFL teacher's perceptions of the integration of 21st century competencies and skills in their classrooms; to identify the alignment of assessment approaches teachers deploy with teaching and learning the skills; to identify the main challenges of the integration and implementation of 21st century competencies and skills; and to explore teachers' practices to overcome the challenges they face during implementation. Therefore, the three research tools i.e. the teachers' questionnaire, the teachers' semi-structured interviews and the classroom observations, were exploited to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do Omani ELT teachers perceive the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum in Omani public schools?
- 2) What are their views with regard to the assessment procedures that measure 21st century competencies?
- 3) What are the anticipated challenges with regard to the integration of 21st century competencies into EFL classrooms?
- 4) How can these challenges be overcome from the teachers' points of view?

According to Christison and Murray (2014), an excessive burden of commitment and dedication is required from the teachers when English is not the mother tongue and is taught as a second language. Therefore, reflecting on the Omani context, English is considered as a foreign language and is not widely used

within the community; as opposed to the idea of English as a 'lingua franca' (Al-Issa,2014) discussed earlier in chapter two.

Although EFL has undergone continuous reforms and developments, i.e. educational models and teaching methodologies, advances in English language teaching continue to be unsatisfactory (Mathew, Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2017). Teachers usually find themselves in a dilemma, due partially to learners' low competency in the language. Thus, it is left to the teacher to explore numerous ways and methods to address different challenges while teaching the language and implementing 21st century competencies. In my opinion, this is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, teachers are allowed to experiment, and explore their own ways, methods, and strategies as a form of teacher empowerment and control; while on the other hand, it is a burden on teachers, especially novice teachers who are new to the teaching field. The following sections will discuss the main findings of the current study.

6.2 Omani EFL teachers' perceptions of the integration of 21st century competencies and skills

This section focuses on the respondents' perceptions on the changes and transformations on the EFL textbooks with regard of the integration of the 21st century competencies.

6.2.1 Teachers' perceptions of textbooks

Teachers in the current study held contradictory views when they were asked to what extent the current textbooks enhance teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. Some teachers praised the textbooks, as they include wide and contemporary themes, especially in the course books for grades eleven and twelve. However, other teachers believed that the textbooks are “out

of date” and “boring”, and so require significant amendment and adaptation to meet the aims of the 21st century.

Additionally, although teachers were satisfied with the implicit approach to teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills, for some of them, the course books lack sufficient references to these skills. In fact, this apparent contradiction in teachers' views is revealing. While it seems that some teachers are satisfied with the textbooks, others appeared to be unsatisfied, as they asked for “up to date” textbooks that would enhance the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies. These diverse feelings are considered part of the whole package of any educational reform (Fullan,1999). Eventually, these divergent views are crucial to meet a wide range of aims while teaching and learning the skills; however, the lack of specified aims for teachers compels them to search for and adapt teaching materials to fill the unintended gap that the books have left. Hence, in the current study, this raises questions about the curriculum development policy, which neither addresses the needs of 21st century learners, nor takes into consideration teachers' input when designing a textbook and the relevant teaching material, as Jesry (2014) and Mawed (2016) claimed. The upcoming section elaborates more on the issue of the textbooks' shortcomings.

6.2.2 Textbooks' shortcoming regarding teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills

The limitations the textbooks have, and their inability to meet the learners' needs when acquiring 21st century competencies and skills, highlights the gap between policymakers and practitioners. Thus, both teachers and students are demotivated; they describe the curriculum as “boring” and “out of date”,

especially when aiming to teach and learn 21st century skills. One of the main issues teachers in the current study identified, with the textbooks and teaching materials, is that they lack any emphasis on teaching these skills. This finding is in line with Al-Qahtani (2016) in his investigation of teaching creativity and thinking skills in Saudi schools. He concluded that one of the constraints is that the available EFL textbooks are not supportive of creativity, and the activities that develop students' creative thinking are extremely limited.

The participants of this study viewed 21st century skills as crucial, as they reflect the modern trends in ELT (Canagarajah, 2014). Indeed, the course book significantly fails to meet the learners' needs for creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills to meet the demands of the 21st century. As stated by Pellegrino (2012, 2017), the calls for the inclusion of such skills have attracted much attention, especially in the light of the economic, social, and political challenges the Arabian Gulf is facing. This could be due to the top-down approach of the integration process, and the view of curriculum as 'God-given' as Kelly (2009) described the traditional development approaches. Teachers need to be viewed as active participants in the process of development. They take part in formulating the curriculum through interaction with their students and colleagues, negotiate ideas and collaboratively take the decisions. In such situations the process of curriculum development will be converted to a bottom-up approach and depoliticised (Apple, 2004 and Slattery, 2013).

Although it is beyond the scope of the current study, the issue imposes itself on the discourse regarding the importance of teaching these skills in order to face the various challenges in the region. An examination of teachers' remarks showed that the continuing disparity between what exists in the course book,

and what is expected, was dominant in the current context. In addition, teachers emphasised the textbook because textbooks are the most elemental part of the curriculum for teachers and indeed they use the word “textbook” synonymously with “curriculum” (see section 3.3).

Therefore, teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the course books as a result of the gap between theory and practice. This evidently highlights the failure of the textbooks to achieve the desired goals and aims. It also accentuates the negative impact, on both macro and micro levels, that learners and societies experience in terms of social development, awareness, understanding, and change. The flaws in the textbooks, which were revealed from the semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, can be summarised as follows: there is too much content and knowledge to be covered within a lesson and semester; some tasks and activities are challenging and demanding, or difficult to comprehend, such as questions, terminologies, or unfamiliar tasks; there is a gap between some grades, for example, between grade four and grade five in terms of the difficulty and complexity of the activities; there is an excessive number of themes, activities, and vocabulary which are not supported by tasks that would enhance the acquisition of 21st century skills; and, despite the fact that the course books are relatively new, teachers consider them out of date because they do not reflect the demands and the needs of the net generation.

Although the Ministry of Education’s officials and supervisors asked teachers to provide their feedback on the textbooks, and teachers offered their suggestions on many occasions, the teachers were still demotivated by the curriculum flaws, as they were excluded from the whole process of developing and designing the

curriculum. In addition, these suggestions have not yet been implemented, as the changes are time-consuming. This places an extra load on teachers and eventually increases teachers' levels of frustration. Subsequently, teachers' frustration reduces their ability to take decisions, and hence they feel powerless and unproductive.

It seems that the conflict between decision-makers and practitioners is persisting, and the gap between theory and practice is widening, as a drawback of the top-down approach implemented in the Omani context (Fullan,1994; Alsagoff, McKay, Hu & Renandya,2012; Nation & Macalister, 2010; Khan & Law, 2015). However, while most of the teachers criticised the limitations of the course books, a few teachers viewed these limitations as a stimulating factor. They claimed that these shortcomings made them more critical and creative, and helped them to develop their skills in designing and adapting teaching materials, to accommodate their learners' needs and interest levels, and foster the teaching and learning of the essential 21st century skills. In such cases, as Kumaravadivelu (2003) argued, teachers need to act independently and autonomously to cope with the challenges they face, whether administrative or academic, that might be introduced by the institution, policymakers, curricula, and textbooks. This autonomy and self-dependence, in searching for the appropriate teaching materials which solve part of the problem teachers face in their classrooms, proves that teachers are capable of overcoming challenges and of designing workable plans to serve their students' needs. In fact, this approach of adapting and designing teaching materials is a common trend for teachers from four European countries (Austria, Finland, Spain and Netherlands) (Gray, 2013), to bridge the gap between the learners' needs and

the prescribed textbooks (McGrath, 2013). This actually illustrates that teachers in the Omani context believe that they have to go beyond the textbooks to provide their learners with relevant and authentic materials, to facilitate the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills.

However, to reach this stage, teachers are seeking intellectual, practical, and emotional support from their colleagues, senior teachers, supervisors, and school principals.

Teachers are required to develop their skills to deal with various challenges, and seek the maximum support available to gain empowerment and take decisions in a way that will improve the process of inclusion, and eventually achieve the broader aims of learning in the Omani context.

To conclude, three main aspects can be inferred from the previous arguments. Firstly, the course books are unsuitable for teaching and learning 21st century skills. Secondly, the centralisation of policymakers regarding designing and developing curriculum has had a negative impact. The third aspect is that Omani EFL teachers are fully aware of the effectiveness of adapting and designing extra teaching materials to meet the learners' needs towards acquiring 21st century skills. This assumption that the teachers hold is congruent with the literature, as Biesta (2016), Mawed (2016), and Alwan (2006) all argued that teachers are best positioned to meet their learners' needs and enhance teaching and learning through developing and implementing suitable teaching materials and strategies.

On the other hand, some of the participants were hesitant about the change. This might be due to various constraints and circumstances in the Omani context. In addition, some teachers are incapable or feel insecure (Mawed,

2016) when carrying out modifications to textbooks by themselves. This drawback can be attributed to what is known as the “teacher-proof curriculum” (Taylor, 2013), and the centralisation of the teaching system, where power and hierarchy play a key role in hindering teachers from challenging the status quo and carrying out developments.

6.3 Assessment

In this section of discussion, I will consider the findings related to the practices for assessing 21st century competencies and skills, in an attempt to construct an understanding of teachers' perceptions of the assessment approaches regarding teaching and learning these skills.

In general, assessment of students' skills and knowledge is in itself a challenging task, and when it comes to assessing 21st century skills, it could even be described as critical. According to Trilling and Fadel (2010), traditional assessment practices have focused on assessing only the content that will be required for tests, and not the skills. Therefore, these assessment approaches have ignored the assessment of the essential 21st century skills and the need to gain the deeper understanding and practical knowledge that can be derived from teaching and learning these skills. Similarly, Greenstein (2012, p.36) expressed her concerns over traditional or “time-honoured assessment approaches” in that they have not been able to assess learners' ability to analyse, synthesise, or create effectively.

Consistently, the participants in the current study confirmed that traditional assessment approaches, such as tests and exams, are not appropriate for assessing 21st century competencies. The teachers called for more authentic assessment procedures to assess these skills, as currently they are neglected

and overlooked. Teachers believed that methods such as self- and peer-evaluation, projects, classroom observations, and presentations are good examples of approaches to measure essential skills like collaboration, teamwork, evaluation, and creativity. Despite teachers' awareness, that a balanced assessment that includes summative tests and formative evaluations that measure a combination of content knowledge, basic skills, higher order thinking skills, deeper comprehension and understanding, applied knowledge, and 21st century skills performance is more effective in their context, they are frustrated by the grade-oriented system. In Al-Sadi's (2015) study, the participants complained about over-testing as the main tool of assessment, and wanted a variety of authentic assessment tools to enhance their critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. Students emphasised that non-conventional methods of assessment are more appropriate and have a positive impact on their learning.

In addition, teachers criticised the mismatch between curriculum and assessment in the Omani context, due to the top-down system and the lack of teachers' participation in the decision making. Conversely, a clear alignment between curriculum and assessment would develop schools into 'Schools for Life' (Westbrook et al, 2013).

6.3.1 Formative vs summative assessment

In the area of 21st century competencies and skills assessment, the participants called for more systematic and comprehensive assessment of the skills. They stressed that formative assessment approaches are the best measurement approaches, as they claimed that they provide realistic measurements of students' development of these skills. Luckily, the teachers in the current study

were competent in applying assessment tools, such as self- and peer-assessments, projects, classroom observation, and portfolios, to enhance the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. This phenomenon was in contradiction with a study conducted by Gattullo (2000), who investigated the formative assessment approaches EFL teachers implemented in an Italian primary school context. However, they complained that the demands and the pressures they were under to focus on summative assessment were immense. The drawbacks of the classical humanism Grundy (1987) or examination-oriented model of assessment is critical in the Omani context. The knowledge (truth) or content is absolute, therefore, as the top-down model of curriculum, exams, and tests is emphasised, and learners are ranked accordingly. As a result, these drawbacks created some complications in the process of teaching and learning essential 21st century skills. Although there is some flexibility in assessment in general, in terms of applying a variety of tools in the Omani context, the challenge is to include these skills in the national assessment, as educational policies are heavily dependent on the outcome of the summative assessment as part of accountability. Therefore, many teachers and administrators focus on grades and tests most of the time (Pellegrino, 2017). Thus, flexible assessment systems need to be developed to reflect the inclusion of 21st century competencies and skills in English language classes in Oman. According to Pellegrino (2017, p. 246), the new assessment needs to focus on designing tasks, scenarios, and situations that foster a range of essential 21st century competencies as applied in each of the major content areas. In the same vein, Greenstein (2012, pp. 43-44) proposed a number of assessment fundamentals, as figure 12 depicts; these principles are suitable to

assess 21st century competencies, emphasising the integration of both formative and summative approaches, as this will provide effective and efficient assessment of 21st century skills.



Figure 12. 21st century assessment principles [adopted from Greenstein (2012)]

In fact, improved assessment approaches will enhance the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. The participants of the current study claimed that improvement in the assessment procedures needs to be aligned closely with the syllabus in order to tighten the gap between assessment and the curriculum (Al Zadjali, 2017). Additionally, teachers

expressed their concerns about the political, social, and economic powers that affect assessment development and application (Troudi, 2018; Pellegrino, 2017).

Finally, assessment is an important component of these arguments for teaching and learning 21st century competencies. There was a sense from the participants' point of view that the assessment was not suitable, even though programmes and resources were developing well. This is attributed to the grade- or marks-oriented context in the Sultanate (Westbrook et al., 2013).

According to Carroll (2018), assessment is another area of challenge that schools face, as the quality of the learning and the success of the curricular enactment was tested against the assessment. This indicates a high degree of teacher care for the new curriculum, although sometimes they show a lack of confidence in terms of assessment.

6.4 Centralised system: a call for a change

The dominance of the top-down system was revealed explicitly in the current study. Teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with their roles in the process of teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills. They claimed that their remarks and comments on curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy were disregarded or downgraded; their main role was as implementers of a pre-developed curriculum and teaching materials and packages (El-Okda, 2005; Al-Issa, 2009; Dammak, 2017). Consequently, teachers have developed a negative attitude toward changes and reforms and appear to be demotivated in their teaching and learning practices (Hudson, 2013). The need for a wider involvement of teachers in the process of curriculum reforms is essential in the Omani context to create a supportive and committed teaching environment; as

Troudi (2009) argued, teachers' engagement in various educational issues creates a sense of ownership and commitment.

Limiting the participation to a small number of teachers and excluding the majority of them from decision-making about different educational issues indicates the adoption of the top-down strategy by the educational system in Oman. As a result, teachers do not develop any sense of ownership of the curriculum, which eventually affects implementation, as Carl (2009) noted. Restriction of teachers' involvement in curriculum development, and its implications, highlighted in the current study, echoed the findings of other studies like Dammak (2017), Troudi and Alwan (2010), Fullan (1999), and Enayat, Davoudi and Dabbagh (2015). They concluded that teachers have limited participation in curriculum planning and reforms, and in the modification of textbooks, as a result of the implementation of the top-down approach to the curriculum compared to the bottom-up approach. In such approaches, teachers' voices are considered an integral part of any educational development or change (Carl, 2009; Troudi and Alwan, 2010; Al-Senaidi and Wyatt, 2014).

There are intensive calls nowadays for teachers' voices to be heard and for them to have a comprehensive involvement in the process of educational reforms and curriculum development. For instance, Dammak (2017) and Al Zadjali (2017) highlighted that educational systems in the region must consider approaches that place teachers at the centre of the process to achieve an active involvement in and influence on policy and practice. Thus, as Kumaravadivelu (2012, p.9) stressed, any serious attempt to reach the maximum engagement "must take into account the importance of recognising teacher's voices and visions, the imperatives of developing their critical

capabilities, and the prudence of achieving both of these through a dialogic construction of meaning.”

Therefore, the need for the decentralisation of the education system in Oman is one of the findings of the current study. The participants revealed that the centralised system is one of the main reasons for their frustration and demotivation. Teachers claimed that the detailed, condensed, and prescribed syllabus prohibited them from being imaginative and creative during teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. The decentralisation of decision-making with regard to prescribed textbooks, pedagogical approaches, and assessment is vital to ensure a comprehensive integration of these skills in the Omani context. However, decentralisation needs to be envisaged in a way that promotes and develops learning and teaching in general and supports the acquisition of the essential 21st century skills in particular. This can only be achieved through the inclusive and genuine involvement of teachers in decision-making. Teachers need to be provided with opportunities to practise their roles in the curriculum development process as designers, analysts, researchers, evaluators, and critical thinkers (Al Riyami, 2016; Pei-Ling Tan et al., 2017), in order that they may gradually detach from the widespread notion of curriculum as “God-given” (Kelly, 2009).

Thus, an open and power-free discourse is required to negotiate policies, syllabus, assessment, and techniques between teachers, learners, policymakers, and other involved stakeholders.

6.5 Communities of practice

The data in the current study revealed that forming communities of practice among teachers fosters the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies

and skills in the Omani context. The concept of communities of practice and networking is not new to the field of education and has gained popularity in many educational systems around the world (Wenger, 2009; Canagarajah, 2016). However, it is neglected or overlooked in the Omani context.

According to Stoll et al. (2006, p.3 cited in Carroll, 2018), a community of practice is defined as “an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils’ learning.” As Wenger (1998, 2009) argued, there are three main processes in any community of practice: firstly, establishing forms of reciprocal participation; secondly, understanding and fine-tuning the institution; and thirdly, developing repertoires, dialogues, and styles. Evidence from educational research has indicated that through various interactions, collaborations, shared experiences, and communication between the members of the community, new knowledge and professional development is promoted and enhanced (Carroll, 2018).

Referring to the Omani educational context, which as described earlier is a centralised system that lacks active teachers' participation, the current study advocates the initiation and reinforcement of school and district communities of practice. These communities will provide teachers with practical opportunities for collaboration, knowledge creation, shared experiences, and contribution to learn new and better approaches that enhance the process of teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. Furthermore, through the interaction within these professional communities, teachers will share their experiences, approaches and ways to overcome the challenges they face, while

implementing the skills; they are teaching under the same conditions and come from similar contexts, backgrounds, and challenges.

The participants in the current study showed a desire to be fully engaged, in various aspects of the process of teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills, that exceeds their actual involvement. Therefore, they were desperately searching for guidance and support to discuss, attempt, and share new approaches.

These suggestions from teachers, that emerged from the interviews, involved establishing a baseline of viewing curriculum as praxis (Grundy,1987). Teachers wanted to perform change, and take responsibility for the authenticity and practicality of the experiences of teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills, through the creation of professional communities of practice. They believed that knowledge is constructed through social interactions (Pennycook, 1990; Grundy,1987) and not imposed in the form of a prescribed curriculum. It was clear that teachers wanted to share practices, resources, materials, and ideas within the school and with nearby schools in the area. Therefore, constructivism and social constructivism are relevant in this perspective as teachers are opting to share ideas, experiences and views of the teaching and learning of the 21st century competencies. In addition, through their social interactions and through joining these communities, they will be able to construct and make-meaningful realities (Richards,2001) of the best practices of teaching and learning of the 21st skills and competencies.

This finding is congruent with the findings of Carroll (2018) when analysing Australian teachers' responses to the implementation of a new curriculum. Similarly, teachers within the current study shared resilience, adaptability, and

commitment to meet the demands of implementing 21st century competencies and skills in their classrooms. However, there was a common call for systematic follow-up, and for leadership; from the school administration, from other schools or from the key supporters, such as trainers, supervisors, or senior teachers.

6.6 The role of ICT in enhancing 21st century skills

ICT plays a pivotal role in supporting and developing teaching and learning; in particular, it provides a variety of opportunities for fostering the teaching and learning of 21st century skills (Greenstein, 2012). The findings of the study revealed that ICT has a major influence on the process of inclusion of the essential 21st century skills in the Omani EFL context. The participants expressed that using the appropriate and available technological devices or methods had a positive impact on the learners' motivation and interest. They claimed that fully technologically-equipped classrooms and language laboratories are an essential requirement in fostering the skills. During the interviews, most teachers referred to their learners as the “net-generation”, or “digital natives”, or “netizens” (Fadel & Trilling, 2012, p. 27). Teachers believed that teaching and learning the skills is inseparable from ICT, as it offers valuable prospects for teaching and assessing 21st century competencies (Griffin, McGaw and Care, 2012). This assumption had a direct implication for teaching the skills. Teachers in the study argued that implementing technology in their classes created an interactive environment. The learners were engaged and attentive most of the time. Thus, new ways of teaching and assessing supported by technology need to be developed. These ways might include making learning interactive, personalised, collaborative, creative, and innovative in order to attract the “net generation” and keep them active learners. In

addition, these learners of the technological revolution and information explosion ought to be competent in “appropriately accessing, evaluating, using, managing and adding to the wealth of information and media they now have in their thumbs and fingertips” (Fadel and Trilling, 2012, p.64). Yet, ICT is a resource can be used by learners, to achieve specific aims (Griffin, McGaw & Care, 2012) and not an end in itself. Technological tools such as videos, social networking, audio and music, virtual worlds, and global connections are utilised to help learners acquire the content and application of knowledge, collaborate with others, synthesise and evaluate learning, and create and share new ideas (Greenstein, 2012). Therefore, these tools move learners forward towards dealing with authentic world issues of interest and create knowledge socially and culturally (Grundy, 1987).

Reflecting on the school visits and classroom observations, I noticed that teachers and school administrations are doing their best to cope with the rapid technological changes in the world. They have carried out some initiatives to embed technology in their lessons through equipping the classrooms with TV sets or CD players or projectors. Some schools had managed to create a multipurpose classroom equipped with almost every technological instrument required in the school; however, most schools complained about the lack of facilities. Although the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate has provided each school in all regions with a Learning Resource Centre (LRC), which is equipped with a number of PCs, a projector, and a smartboard in some schools, it is not adequate to serve the large numbers of students, an issue most of the teachers complained about. Therefore, providing schools with an extra LRC will improve and facilitate the process of including 21st century skills and competencies in

the Omani context. This demand for more technological resources is echoed by researchers and scholars of 21st century competencies such as Fadel & Trilling (2012), Greenstein (2012), Griffin, McGaw and Care (2012), Al-Qahtani (2016), and Pellegrino (2017).

6.7 Professional development

The inclusion of 21st century competencies and skills must not happen fragmentally. It needs to be linked with other educational chains, i.e. professional development and teacher training, either pre-service or in-service. Unfortunately, as Greenstein (2012, p. 190) claimed, professional development has been identified as “one of the weakest links” in any educational intervention and especially in the integration of 21st century competencies and skills. Therefore, maximum attention must be paid to the quality of teacher training. In fact, the participants in the current study complained about the effectiveness and quality of pre-service and in-service training, as they described them as “out of date”, “out of context” and “boring” in terms of content and procedures. In addition, they complained about how these training opportunities are disconnected from their needs, and about how the training is mainly theoretical, without any practice or implementation of the theories, especially in the teacher preparation programmes (pre-service). On the other hand, teachers praised some of the in-service programmes conducted by the Specialised Teacher Training Centre in the Ministry of Education. The programmes in the centre lasted one or two intensive weeks, or were conducted throughout the period of one or two academic years. The teachers described these courses as systematic and comprehensive. These training programmes include assessment, pedagogy, 21st century skills, SET courses, and ICT and

curriculum studies. Thus, better pre-service training, and continuous in-service training and mentoring, are vital in teachers' professional development and the application of 21st century competencies and skills.

Pellegrino (2017), Darling-Hammond (2006), and Greenstein (2012) proposed that major improvements and reforms were required to lift professional development practices to the next level, which includes conception, purpose, structure and organisation. In addition, creative approaches need to be designed to support the integration of 21st century skills.

According to the literature, such as Windschitl (2009), Al-Balushi (2017), and Pellegrino (2017), the integration of continuums of teacher preparation inductions, facilitation, mentoring, and ongoing professional development is required to replace traditional and disjointed teacher development programmes. Additionally, research on professional development has recognised that for the training programmes to be of high quality, they should embrace teacher research, action research, case study methods, performance evaluation, portfolios, and assessment approaches that help teachers to relate theory to classroom practice (Al-Balushi, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2006). This approach correlates with the programmes the Specialised Teacher Training Centre in Oman has developed, as the participants praised their approach to training. This was evident in the teachers' attitudes and motivation in acquiring the skills and applying them in their classrooms. During these programmes, teachers were engaged in research and assessed accordingly. In addition, they created a portfolio that included samples of their work, which were evaluated against set criteria to judge the quality of work presented in the portfolio. Moreover, the participants, especially the SETs, were motivated to cascade what they had

acquired during the training to their fellow teachers; that is, not only EFL teachers but other subject teachers, as one of the participants proclaimed.

In the same vein, Windschitl (2009, cited in Pellegrino, 2017) identified several characteristics of quality professional development with regard to teaching and learning 21st century skills. These features include practical learning opportunities related to context and aligned with the curriculum, an evidence-based approach, joint participation of teachers from the same school or subject area or grade, and finally, adequate time for planning and implementation of the skills in their classrooms. Furthermore, as a priority, teachers need to be involved in the decisions related to training, especially during the in-service training, to implement the participatory model of training recommended by Al-Balushi (2017); this will enhance the teaching and learning of the essential skills in the Omani context.

In addition, many participants applauded the role of the senior teachers in supporting the implementation of 21st century competencies. Teachers in the study expressed their satisfaction with the role of the senior teacher and how the good relations with their SETs had a positive impact on their performance and development. Teachers also praised the SET approaches to support and mentoring, as they conducted regular meetings, group discussions, workshops, and peer observations. This finding contradicts the findings of AIKhars (2013), who claimed that the EFL senior teachers in Kuwaiti schools were one of the factors that hinder EFL teachers' creativity and performance, due to the negative relationships between them and their colleagues. The Ministry of Education in the Sultanate has to invest in the senior teachers' preparation and professional development. The attention to the training of SETs has had a

promising impact on the process of integrating the essential 21st century skills in the Omani context. Thus, conducting high-quality SET courses that implement creative approaches to training might help to accelerate the processes of inclusion of the skills in the Omani EFL classrooms.

By way of summary, as teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills are crucial in supporting the fulfilment of the broad educational aims in Oman, systematic development issues and policies need to be addressed. These issues include new and creative approaches to pre-service teacher preparation and in-service professional development.

6.8 Challenges of implementation

Educational reforms and development are demanding, and the challenges teachers and learners face are unavoidable (Castro, 2013; Alwan, 2006; Mawed, 2016; Alnesyan, 2012). The findings of the current study tally with the findings of previous research conducted in similar contexts. The participants experienced some challenges whilst applying 21st century competencies and skills, including: time constraints; large classes; incompatibility of the textbooks; and students' low levels of competence in English. The following sections explore these challenges in greater depth.

6.8.1 Time constraints

Time is one of the main issues, as the findings of the current study revealed. Unsurprisingly, time was the main challenge in many studies (AlKhars, 2013, Alnesyan, 2012; Al Zadjali, 2017; Al-Qahtani, 2016; Mawed, 2016; Al-Issa, 2017). Teachers complained about the lack of time when implementing the skills in their lessons. Indeed, the classroom observations revealed that only two out of ten observed teachers managed to complete the tasks they had

planned. This factor had a negative influence on the process of teaching and learning of the essential 21st century skills. Usually, students require ample time to practise these skills, and according to Jones (2008), lack of time is an inherent challenge in teaching the skills. As a result, time allocated for the skills may affect the time allocated to the other activities and tasks planned in the lesson. Therefore, in many cases, teachers avoid teaching these skills or miss some of the planned tasks. Time constraints, whether in the planning and preparation stages, or in searching for and developing materials and resources (Castro, 2013) for teaching 21st century skills and competencies, are considered an overburden on EFL teachers.

Although the teachers in my study recognised the benefits the integration of 21st century skills offered to their learners, they were critical about the scope of the content implied in the course books as being a major cause of time constraints. The participants reflected that what pressured them in terms of time was the extent of the content and knowledge they had to cover within a semester, particularly in grades five to ten. Therefore, a revision of the number of themes and tasks in the course books was explicitly suggested to overcome the challenge of time; this was the revision of the scope of themes conducted for grades eleven and twelve. This kind of need was also identified by Castro (2013) during the implementation of the new curriculum in the Dominican Republic.

6.8.2 Large numbers of students per class

The large numbers of students in the EFL classrooms in Oman was another challenge the participants experienced during the implementation of 21st century skills and competencies. Teachers complained about the time allocated to

manage the large numbers of students in their classrooms. This, as they stated, made it challenging to facilitate and promote the acquisition of the skills. The participants argued that large numbers of students in a class create disorder, lack of attention, and poor interaction (Bahanshal, 2013). In addition, crowded classrooms were criticised by the participants, as crowding creates an unattractive setting in terms of space and classroom arrangements (Alnesyan, 2012) while, in a well-organised classroom, the physical environment enhances creativity and smooth interaction (AlKhars, 2013). Consequently, the acquisition of the skills will be affected either positively or negatively according to the physical setting of the classroom and the number of the students in the class.

As a result, the reduction in the number of students per classroom from thirty and sometimes even forty to a maximum of twenty to twenty-five was clearly proposed by teachers. Most of these complaints were expressed by teachers who teach in the main cities of the sultanate, i.e. Muscat and Batinah. Despite the Ministry of Education investing in building new schools in these regions, the issue persists because of the imbalanced demographical distribution of the population in Oman; most of the families prefer to settle in the main cities, due to the facilities available in these regions and the variety in the job market. For instance, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) (2018) around 1.7 million people live in the capital city Muscat alone, while the number of public schools of all levels is 170, alongside a huge number of international and private schools. Moreover Al Batinah, the second biggest region in terms of population, is occupied by 1.2 million people and there are 306 schools located in the region to accommodate students of all levels. Hence, policymakers were urged to focus on investing in constructing more schools in

these crowded areas, to accommodate reasonable number of students per school. Reducing the number of students would create a positive learning environment and effective classroom interactions (Castro, 2013; AlKhars, 2012; Bahanshal, 2013) and, in addition, would foster the acquisition of 21st century competencies. Teaching fewer students would reduce the pressure on teachers, so they would be more relaxed and would avoid the “complications found in large classes which raise more demands and actions from language teachers” (Bahanshal, 2013, p. 57). Thus, teachers will allocate enough time to support their learners through applying a variety of teaching techniques, teaching resources and materials, and individualised learning instructions.

6.8.3 Students' low levels of competence in English

The participants of the current study and the data from the three instruments revealed that the students' weaknesses in the language represent a key challenge that teachers face in the process of the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. In fact, underachievement of students in the EFL competency in the Sultanate of Oman is a challenge for any reform (Al Zadjali, 2017); hence, school leavers are required to take a foundation year in higher education institutions (Al-Issa and Al-Belushi, 2012). Classroom observations revealed that students' low levels of English were hindering their acquisition of the essential 21st century skills, as the teachers and students were focusing on using correct English instead of learning the skills. During classroom observations conducted within the study in hand, when students were working in groups, it was noticed that students with difficulties and low levels of literacy in English copied what their classmates produced rather than developing their skills of interaction and communication. They were making no

effort to gain the new skills, as they struggled in the core skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This challenge was also posited by Alnesyan (2012) when investigating the teaching of thinking skills in Saudi primary schools. He concluded that interaction, whether student-to-student or teacher-to-student, has a positive impact on the development of thinking skills if it is executed well in the lessons.

To conclude, in such circumstances, teachers face some powerful challenges while teaching the essential 21st century competencies and skills, such as time constraints, unsuitable textbooks, inappropriate training, large numbers of students per class, and demotivated learners, and these challenges have a significant impact on teachers' performance and productivity. These factors suppress teachers' creativity, and support traditional teaching techniques and strategies; as Mansour (2008) argued, such limitations and constraints in schools nurture traditional practices and obstruct creative and constructive ones. However, teachers in the current study were determined to do their best for their pupils, and so had developed skills and strategies to cope with these challenges; and this was the case even with the novice teachers (Chaaban & Du, 2017). These suggestions and coping strategies will be discussed in the following section.

6.9. Implications and suggestions to overcome the challenges

The participants proposed a variety of suggestions to cope with the challenges they faced in the process of teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills. This question is addressed on two main levels: first, on the personal level; and second, on the organisational level either of the school or of the school district. The emergent themes presented in this section start with

suggestions for policymakers, school administrators, and fellow teachers. The themes include teachers' engagement in decision-making, the introduction of skills in the early grades, comprehensive publicity of the skills, and teachers' initiatives as "agents of change" within the school. The emergent themes are team planning, developing autonomous learners, enhancing extracurricular activities, and finally, some personal coping strategies for teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills.

6.9.1 Teachers' involvement in decision-making

The participants in the current study called for more involvement in decision-making in the process of curriculum development in general, and in the process of integrating 21st century skills in particular. However, the educational system in Oman, like many other educational systems in the Arab world, is rigid and lacks flexibility (Mawed, 2016). As a result of this bureaucratic stance, teachers are demotivated and lose interest in any curriculum development and reform. Teachers do not believe that their contributions will be recognised, or their suggestions put into action. This feeling of marginalisation of the teachers' role in curriculum development has resulted in inappropriate implementation of 21st century competencies and skills in the EFL classrooms. Findings by Alwan (2006), Castro (2013), and Mawed (2016) are consistent with those of the current study. Teachers' passive roles in the process of integration created feelings of demotivation and dissatisfaction, and negative attitudes in some teachers towards the entire process of development, whereas active participation in the process would lead to a comprehensive implementation of the curriculum development and successful inclusion of the skills. Thus, a flexible and inclusive educational system is a resolution for such problems and

challenges from the teachers' point of view. Teachers perceived their roles as “agents of change” (Fullan, 2007), and they were opting for active involvement in the process of integration. In fact, their participation would increase teachers' motivation levels and create a positive classroom atmosphere. In addition, it would provide teachers with a better understanding and with more effective teaching strategies, which will in turn improve learning outcomes. Active involvement of teachers at all different levels and stages of curriculum development, i.e. planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating, is the teachers' right, as they are the primary implementers of the curriculum. In addition, teachers' contributions to the curriculum development process will enforce the professionalism of teachers in the long run (Mawed, 2016). In fact, teachers will be able to evaluate and reflect upon their performance and adjust their teaching accordingly. In addition, involving teachers in the process of curriculum development will raise teachers' awareness of the aims and objectives of the integration of 21st century competencies and skills in the EFL classrooms. As Fandiño Parra (2013) posited, teachers need to “analyse critically what the 21st century movement offers in order to enrich their pedagogical process and instructional practices” (p. 204). Hence, teachers should be able to develop a holistic understanding and appreciation of the aims and objectives, which will help them to direct all their efforts toward the appropriate implementation of the skills, and develop themselves professionally to acquire the skills and the strategies so they can teach them to their learners. Consequently, teachers might be able to focus on achieving the aims rather than directing their efforts to conflicts between them and the policymakers. Instead, their attention will be on the effective implementation of the aims of the

21st century competencies reform as well as on the complex aspects, such as promoting social justice, equity and change, and enforcing the development and integration of mind, body, and spirit on their learners. This broader perspective involves harmonising the general aims of education in the Omani contexts; it aims to develop learners who are well-rounded physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Furthermore, it also aims to promote equity, justice, and peace and the protection of the Omani community and the world (Ministry of Education, 2009). Put simply, if integrated well, 21st century competencies and skills have the ability to change the way learners live and learn.

The curriculum development process should be a broad democratic exercise; publicising and raising awareness among teachers and other stakeholders in the community about the process of the integration of 21st century skills is fundamental. Thus, teachers and learners are active creators of the curriculum, and emancipatory interest (Grundy, 1987) is the key for empowering teachers and learners to carry out change. Thereafter, adopting curriculum development frameworks or models that places the teachers, learners and the community at the heart of the process is worth considering in the Omani context. Thus, the Nation & Macalister curriculum model (2010) or Christison & Murray model (2014) are good examples of such frameworks, as teachers and learners play an active role in the process of development. In addition, their roles shift according to the context, needs and phase of development.

It is argued that raising awareness, as stated by Fandiño Parra (2013) and Kurth-Schi & Green (2009), means educational reform does not simply comprise focusing on the implementation of the new political and instructional perspectives. Instead, these reforms need to promote collaborative discourse

and involve all the stakeholders, something which goes beyond basic awareness. This awareness will facilitate a smooth and effective implementation of the skills in the EFL classrooms (Al-Qahtani, 2016). Moreover, raising awareness of the skills will increase confidence and independence among both teachers and students, as they will be motivated to develop their skills and abilities and create a lively and encouraging classroom climate. Therefore, the critical pedagogy ideology – which basically originated from the emancipatory interest ideology (Grundy, 1987) – needs to be promoted and enforced in order to give a voice to teachers and students, in order to address the critical issues and serve their needs as well as the needs of their communities. This approach is promising for the Omani context, as it still developing knowledge (Al Riyami, 2016), in the sense that 21st century competencies and skills are constructed and connected within a particular cultural, social, and historical context (Pennycook, 1990). Furthermore, the cultural background of the students and teachers had an impact on the process of integration of the 21st century skills. Interviewed and observed teachers claimed that some of the themes and topics in the textbooks do not match students' cultural background, although the textbooks are nationally developed. This is due to the centralized system, as predesigned packages of teaching materials are imposed on schools around the Sultanate. For example, all students study sea-life, deserts and mountains; while, some of the students have never seen the shore or the desert. As a result, teachers complained that some of the terminologies and descriptions are unfamiliar to students and it is challenging to comprehend them. Therefore, teachers tried to adapt and modify their lessons to suit the students backgrounds see section 5.5.9.

6.9.2 Introducing the skills in cycle one (grades one to four)

The participants in the study collectively agreed that the teaching and learning of 21st century skills needed to be introduced from cycle one, i.e. grades one to four of formal education in Oman. Teachers believed that training their learners from grade one would make a significant difference, as learners would acquire the skills and competencies easily while learning the foreign language (Fandiño Parra, 2013; Esterik, 2013; Zhao, Pandian & Singh, 2016). The approach of combining the teaching of the essential 21st century skills to young learners with the teaching of a foreign language has two motives (Puchta and Williams, 2011). The first is to stimulate the cognitive engagement of the learners with the task. The rationale behind this is to challenge children cognitively and keep them engaged in the activity, as they are capable of developing the skills and so are encouraged and coached to do so. The second motive, according to Puchta and Williams (2011), is to use the language for authentic purposes. Therefore, learners use the language meaningfully through problem-solving, communication, critical thinking, and collaboration. Thus, learners develop their language at the same time as they are acquiring the essential 21st century skills and competencies. Thus, in my opinion and through my long experience in the EFL teaching and learning, teachers' demands to start teaching the skills from grade one in the public schools is justifiable and logical. I also recommend supporting cycle one schools as much as possible, through providing them with all the possible facilities, utilities, and resources in order to achieve the aims and objectives of the inclusion process. As these skills are learned, developed, and improved, proper support for the EFL teachers is a priority, as they are

crucial to facilitating the acquisition of the skills by their learners (Puchta and Williams, 2011; Fandiño Parra, 2013).

6.9.3 Teachers as “agents of change”

The respondents in the study took the initiative, having decided that they were the only ones who could affect the necessary change. Teacher autonomy was one of the aspects considered by the emergent findings in the study. This finding is congruent with findings in the worldwide literature, which claims that teachers are a crucial influence regarding what happens in the classroom. Therefore, the enacted or actual curriculum is not always guaranteed to closely match the centralised curriculum aims (OECD, 2005). Although the Omani educational system is considered strict and centralised, providing teachers with a prescriptive curriculum, the majority of Omani EFL teachers select what and how to teach. They emphasise some aspects of the curriculum according to, for example, assessment/test requirements, the level of their learners, or the needs and vision of the school (Kärkkäinen, 2012; Al Zadjali, 2017). This standpoint was also affirmed by Hakala, Uusikylä and Järvinen (2015) when investigating curriculum development and the manifestation of “creativity” in Finland. The study involved expert teachers, artists, and university-level educated engineers in different Finnish institutions. The study concluded that it is important to have teachers “who have an idea of creative education and how it should be taught at school” (p. 260). A similar study conducted by Enayat, Davoudi and Dabbagh (2015) in Iran investigated the teaching of critical thinking in the Iranian EFL curriculum. They maintained the same perception that teachers can still do something in strict and centralised conditions. Therefore, teachers are considered the “agents of change” (Fullan, 2007) and as key role players in the

effectiveness or ineffectiveness of educational reforms in the Sultanate (Al Zadjali, 2017). However, the semi-structured interviews with teachers in the current study revealed that teachers are excluded from the whole process of curriculum development due to the rigid bureaucratic system. Therefore, applying the participatory frameworks such as Chistison & Murray or Nation & Macalister models, will enhance teachers' roles in the curriculum development process as well as empowering teachers so that 'teachers matter' and are 'agents of change' (Priestley et al. , 2015; Heijden et al., 2015; Fullan, 2007). In addition, teachers' engagement in the process will develop their lifelong learning skills, autonomy and knowledge. Yet, this can be fulfilled through equipping teachers with the appropriate pedagogical knowledge (Li, 2016) which facilitates the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. Therefore, it is important to engage teachers in pre-service and in-service preparation in order to qualify them to take the different roles in the process of curriculum development. Besides this, they should be trained to use appropriate teaching strategies such as problem-solving tasks, critical thinking, evaluation skills, and communication and collaboration skills. Once teachers are well trained they will get practically involved in the process. Additionally, the teachers in foreign language classrooms will be able to take decisions on, what is considered a priority of teaching, the curriculum aspects that suit their surrounding context, social and cultural demands, and learners' levels of competency. Nonetheless, the concept of 'teachers matter' should not be overemphasised. There should be a balance between teachers' own abilities, and the structural, relational, and the cultural and global conditions that shape teaching and learning of the 21st century competencies (Priestley et al., 2015).

Thus, valuing the voices of teachers – their interests, priorities, and demands – is crucial in developing autonomous and active teachers. In fact, the current study emphasised the perception of ' teachers' matter ' and ' agents of change ' as the participants proved that they are able and willing to perform change.

6.9.4 School level suggestions

This section will discuss the participants' suggestions and recommendations for teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills at the school level. Teachers constructed these tools through their daily interaction with learners and their colleagues. The underpinning assumptions of constructivism and social constructivism leading these suggestions. Interviewed and observed teachers were challenged and confronted with different contextual situations that impede the implementation of the 21st century competencies in their classrooms. Thus, through their experiences and through sharing knowledge with each other they formed some strategies that helped to overcome the challenges. The data revealed these main suggestions: teachers' team planning and collaboration; developing autonomous learners; and initiating extracurricular activities. The following is a detailed description of the recommendations.

6.9.5 Teacher's team planning and collaboration

Collaboration is a key factor in improving learning for both teachers and students while enforcing the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills. As Farrell (2015) argued, 21st century language teachers should be able to “respond to every issue, dilemma and problem they face” (p. 83). Hence, it is important that they move beyond their content area knowledge and skills to build their skills on evaluating the possible solutions which suit the needs and

levels of their students, their schools and institutions, and finally, their communities. Similarly, Richards & Rodgers (2014) affirmed that teachers' development depends upon teachers' initiatives and efforts as well as their desire to contribute to activities that involve reflection, monitoring, and evaluation. Research on teachers' collaboration and their engagement in professional communities of practice (see section 6.5) has indicated that these shared activities among teachers, either within the school or in the broader community, have been praised for their "transformative potentials" (Trust & Horrocks, 2017, p. 646) on teachers' skills and knowledge. These activities can take the form of face-to-face interactions, or in many cases nowadays, online interactions. During these activities, professionals work collaboratively to solve some of the authentic challenges (Trust & Horrocks, 2017) they face in the classroom whilst teaching 21st century competencies and skills. Besides, for solving real problems, teachers in the current study claimed that team planning and collaboration between teachers provided them with opportunities to share experiences and gain communal knowledge. This claim is aligned with the findings of the scholars in the field, such as Darling-Hammond (2010) and Trust & Horrocks (2017). As a result, teachers need to be empowered and encouraged to initiate such activities, as they are of great value to their personal and professional development. Additionally, providing them with the appropriate support, from senior teachers, supervisors, mentors or school administrators, as well as from the higher authorities in the Ministry of Education, would have a major impact on the whole process of teaching and learning. Providing such an environment of positive support that stimulates teachers to work collaboratively and initiate a variety of formal, informal, face-to-face, and virtual learning

opportunities for teachers to participate in would ensure ongoing and professional growth. Besides the professional support, creating leadership roles for the teachers, to encourage them to take an active part in the team planning and collaboration activities, will produce a sense of ownership and control from the teachers' perspective. Taking the lead to initiate these activities will enhance teachers' empowerment, and will affect their performance and practice, resulting in better learning outcomes. This empowerment and independence will shift the approach from top-down to bottom-up, and towards teacher-driven learning opportunities and initiatives.

6.9.6 Autonomous learners

The respondents in the study also suggested that they had to direct their teaching efforts and strategies towards developing autonomy for their learners; as teacher Fatima expressed it, they had to “stop spoon feeding the students.” Most if not all of the teachers who participated in the study complained about how exhausting it was in terms of the effort and time they spent teaching students all the basic bits of information in the course book using all possible teaching strategies. This approach of teaching has created totally dependent and reliant individuals. Therefore, teachers opt to practise different teaching strategies that promote autonomous and life-long learners (Al-Saadi, 2011; Al Qahtani, 2016). Paradoxically, Omani students learning EFL are metacognitively aware of the usefulness of autonomy in their language learning process, but lack the actual practice inside and outside the classroom (Al-Sadi, 2015). Not only students, but teachers as well hold positive attitudes towards learner autonomy in language learning (Al Maashani, 2016). However in reality, learners are not given the opportunity to practise autonomy. They are

instructed to follow teachers' commands, follow the prescribed course book and take tests. Hence, developing autonomous learners requires creative and innovative methods of teaching and instruction. For instance, students could practise autonomy through engagement in decision-making in what they are learning, and through being given choices on assessment approaches. This involvement would raise their motivation towards learning the language and they would practise 21st century skills as well. They would negotiate, think critically and use different modes of communication to make critical decisions with regards to their learning.

Unfortunately some, especially novice, teachers in Omani public schools underestimate or in many cases neglect these skills in their learners, for a number of reasons. One of the reasons is the assumption that their learners have weak levels of proficiency in the English language, and they require massive guidance and support to raise their levels of proficiency. As a result, it is the Omani EFL teachers who take complete responsibility for learning and not the learners themselves (Al-Issa & Al Belushi, 2012; Al Qahtani, 2016). Students have almost no choices to make about their learning, and “spoon feeding” is a prevalent practice in most of the EFL lessons. Regrettably, this approach has had a negative impact on the learners’ ownership of learning, motivation, self-direction, and autonomy (Al-Sadi, 2015; Al Maashani, 2016).

Thus, Omani EFL learners deserve more opportunities to practise autonomy in their daily learning situations. Additionally, teachers need to perform their roles as facilitators and train their students to take decisions related to their learning and take control of their own learning of what, how and when to learn. On the other hand, teachers need constant support through training programmes to

build their knowledge, experience, and techniques in order to enhance learner autonomy and gradually switch their roles from dominators to facilitators.

Although the EFL curriculum includes tasks and activities that stimulate learners' independence and self-direction skills, such as portfolios, projects, and self- and peer-evaluation, they are not utilised effectively (Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012). Therefore, teachers need to help their learners construct a sense of ownership of their own learning. This can be achieved through developing teachers' skills and teaching strategies that reinforce autonomy in their learners. These strategies, such as team or peer teaching and project-based approaches, would provide the learners with a variety of choices during the lessons, through selecting tasks or evaluation tools to trigger learners' motivation and eagerness to take control over their own learning.

Briefly, the different stakeholders of the educational system in Oman, including teachers, students, curriculum developers, supervisors, top authorities in the Ministry of Education, as well as parents and the outside community, share the responsibility for developing autonomy in Omani students.

6.9.7 Extracurricular activities

At the school or the school district level, the participants also suggested the need to focus on extracurricular activities, both within the school and outside the school, to foster the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context. This finding or suggestion supports the recommendation from Voogt et al. (2013, p. 410), namely that there are substantial opportunities for learning and acquiring 21st century competencies in informal learning settings of extracurricular activities. They argued that extracurricular and other informal activities create “reconceptions of these skills

to be acquired through everyday life in the society away from prescribed and controlled settings of the classrooms.” In addition, they claimed that the introduction of the new technologies will facilitate and create a linkage between formal and informal learning situations.

Extracurricular activities are not new in the field of L2 teaching and learning, where they are referred to as “Functional Practice” (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016, p. 1); therefore, there are a variety of language teaching methods and techniques ranging from traditional to creative/innovative ones. Thus, selecting the most suitable strategy depends on the learning objectives, available time, and learners' ages and levels of proficiency. Extracurricular activities might be face-to-face or online with the assistance of the developed educational technologies. The activities might include games, English societies, drama clubs, debates, and competitions in music or sports. The available literature on the benefits of extracurricular activities as a helpful method of acquiring the language is encouraging. Makarova & Reva (2017) argued that extracurricular activities enhance the knowledge and development of professional competencies. They also indicated that these activities have a positive impact on behavioural and psychological aspects of students' lives, such as increasing motivation, concentration, and attendance and reinforcing personality traits and personal abilities. Likewise, these activities have a great influence on the students' acquisition of 21st century competencies, as they help in the development of real-life skills, improve time management, and offer opportunities to practice creativity (Alnesyan, 2012). However, extracurricular activities in the EFL context have attracted little attention from scholars, according to Vermaas, van Willigenburg-van Dijk & van Houdt (2009), although

they are popular among students. This also applies in the EFL context in Oman, as almost every public school in Oman has an English club, and it is very common among students of all levels. Indeed, Omani EFL teachers strongly promote and motivate learners to participate in the English club activities. Additionally, in some schools, especially big and post-basic schools, the teachers have managed to allocate a special room for the English club or society where the members meet voluntarily to plan, initiate, and conduct the activities. Therefore, supporting such initiatives in every school in Oman would have a great influence on the process of teaching and learning 21st century competencies and reinforce learners' autonomy.

6.9.8 Personal pedagogical suggestions

Mutta et al. (2018) identified coping strategies as teachers' cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage and face challenges. As soon as teachers join the teaching profession, they start to construct a repertoire of experiences, skills, and efforts to help them solve the contextual problems and challenges they face (Chaaban and Du, 2017). The following section offers the personal instructional coping strategies shared by some of the participants of the study.

6.9.8.1 Drawing

It was evident from the data that some teachers conceptualise drawing as a form of creativity. They assume that they can use it as a creative method (Alnesyan, 2012; AlKhars, 2013) to enhance the acquisition of 21st century competencies, especially with young learners. This technique was found to be effective in helping students to make relations between what they have learned in the course book and what they have experienced in their daily life, such as drawing camels, as explained in section 5.5.9. This technique stimulates

learners' abilities and sharpens their essential 21st century skills (Alnesyan, 2012). During these integrated art activities, learners gather information and think of solutions, and then negotiate, evaluate, and finally discuss the outcome with their peers or with the teacher (Mutta et al., 2018). Therefore, the benefits of combining art with foreign language teaching/learning activities matches the assumptions of some the teachers in the study who implemented this approach. They believed that a combination of art and language not only enhances the students' linguistic abilities, but also facilitates their acquisition of soft skills, such as creativity, collaboration, negotiation, and critical thinking, as supported by the literature.

6.9.8.2 "Little Teacher", or " Peer-teaching"

Most of the respondents of the current study claimed that using the techniques of a student as a junior teacher, or what the teachers call "Little teacher" is an effective approach in developing different basic 21st century skills and competencies. In this technique, the teacher assigns one of the students to take on the role of the teacher to teach his/her classmates one aspect or more of the lesson, depending on their proficiency level and age. Then, he/she answers the questions the rest of class pose, and they evaluate the performance. Teachers argue that this approach develops learners' autonomy as well as their linguistic competence. This finding is in agreement with the findings of the studies by Alnesyan (2012) and AlKhars (2013).

In addition, some teachers adopted the project-based technique as a substantial approach that enhances language acquisition as well as the development of 21st century competencies and skills (Greenstein, 2012; Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

To summarise, techniques like “Little teacher”, drawing, project-based tasks or extracurricular activities were among other examples of approaches deployed by individual participants. These techniques and approaches have demonstrated their positive direct or indirect impact on the learning and teaching of 21st century competencies and skills. Some of these techniques were specified in the textbooks, like the project-based tasks, yet the others were explored by the teachers themselves, such as drawing tasks and debates.

6.10 Summary of the chapter

This chapter has addressed the fundamental thematic findings of the current study, that were revealed from the qualitative and quantitative data analysis and were supported by the existing literature in the area of teaching and learning 21st century competencies and skills. It has attempted to answer the research questions directing the study by exploring teachers’ perceptions of the process of integration of 21st century competencies in the Omani EFL curriculum, the alignment of the assessment procedures with the integration of the skills, the challenges teachers face as a result of the implementation of the competencies in their classrooms, and finally the coping strategies they developed to address the challenges. An interpretive stance was adopted for this investigation to interpret the lived experiences of each of the respondents and construct a mutual understanding of knowledge through social interaction between the participants involved and myself as a researcher.

The next chapter, the conclusions and implications chapter, will focus on the implications and limitations in the area of the inclusion of 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context. In addition, some recommendations for further investigation will be offered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This research study sought to gather information and deeper knowledge about the perceptions of Omani EFL teachers regarding the integration of 21st century competencies and skills in EFL classrooms. The investigation aimed to: examine Omani EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences of the process of integration of 21st century competencies and skills; explore the assessment procedures teachers implement to assess 21st century skills; specify the challenges that teachers face whilst teaching and learning 21st century skills; and identify coping strategies that will overcome the challenges the teachers face.

To pursue and fulfil these aims, the following questions were formulated:

- 5) How do Omani ELT teachers perceive the integration of 21st century competencies into the EFL curriculum in Omani public schools?
- 6) What are their views with regard to the assessment procedures that measure 21st century competencies?
- 7) What are the anticipated challenges with regard to the integration of 21st century competencies into EFL classrooms?
- 8) How can these challenges be overcome from the teachers' points of view?

The interpretive paradigm was implemented in a mixed-methods design, as it was an appropriate design to tackle the research questions and achieve the specified aims. This investigation was conducted to gain a shared understanding of the experiences of the participants regarding the process of integration through deploying different tools within the natural setting, i.e. schools and classrooms. The study used a survey of teachers' views, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and classroom observations to gain a detailed and profound understanding of the issue under investigation. The implemented tools produced rich and complex data in terms of the integration process allowing triangulation to form robust findings.

Eventually, the emergent themes with regard to the teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context were teachers' experience, assessment, challenges, and implications.

These themes were explored in detail in Chapter Six, with reference to the existing literature in the area of teaching and learning of 21st century skills.

7.2 Summary of the main findings

Exploring teachers' perceptions and experiences of any educational reform is vital in order to ensure the effectiveness and success of the change (Iemjinda, 2007). Therefore, this investigation shed light on Omani EFL teachers' experiences of the process of integration of 21st century competencies and skills in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of what the teachers undergo, what kind of knowledge of the 21st century competencies they socially construct, and how it affects their world view of teaching and learning these skills. Although these findings do not offer an absolute answer to all of the problems and

challenges teachers face, they critically help to identify some of the aspects that must be addressed during the implementation of the reform. In addition, they draw some attention to the constraints which hinder successful implementation. According to the research instruments mentioned above, the main themes that emerged from the data centred around teachers' perceptions of the integration process, the assessment procedures deployed, the challenges faced during implementation, and the coping strategies teachers practise to overcome the challenges and constraints. After the thematic analysis was conducted, the findings were reported and recommendations were generated to address the issues under investigation.

7.2.1 Teachers' perceptions

Teachers in the current study had contrasting views regarding the process of integrating 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL context. Some teachers held a negative impression of the process of integration, due to their marginalisation and exclusion from the whole process although they had a positive attitude towards teaching the skills to their learners. However, they did not promote the changes effectively, due to the constraints and their passive role in the process of inclusion. In turn, they were demotivated by and dissatisfied with the entire process. In contrast, some teachers perceived this reform as an opportunity rather than a threat, despite the constraints they faced during the implementation of the skills in their lessons. The participants expressed their enthusiasm for the integration through their openness and collaboration with the integration process, which helped them to devise and deploy coping strategies and maintain a positive attitude throughout. Yet, their enthusiasm did not prevent them from feeling disappointment about the lack of

support they received from their supervisors, the school administrators, and the higher authorities in the Ministry of Education. This lack of recognition and appreciation was also affirmed by Troudi (2009), Alwan (2006), and Mawed (2016). The teachers in the current study collectively valued the presence and support of the senior teachers. Indeed, senior teachers were viewed as a source of encouragement, appreciation, and co-operation, as they played a key role in raising teacher motivation through appreciating teachers' work, experience, suggestions, and efforts. Senior teachers praised their teachers through explicit expressions of gratitude during meetings, and provided teachers with opportunities for professional improvements, such as conducting workshops for their fellow teachers or sometimes giving them personal or professional advice when they asked about a particular issue in their lessons or life. Therefore, one of the main recommendations of the study, for policymakers and professional development departments in the Ministry of Education, is to invest in the quality and training of the senior teachers, as they play a key role in establishing good working environments for both the teachers and the students, as well as the school or other educational organisation.

7.2.2 Teachers' voices

One of the significant findings revealed from the data is the call to involve teachers in the decision-making process. Teachers' participation in the whole process of integration, i.e. planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating phases, is crucial to ensure the sustainability of the implementation and enhance the quality of outcomes of any reform. The importance of their input and their recommendations for improvement during the implementation stage, and for putting these suggestions into action, was acknowledged. Thus, giving

the teachers the opportunity to play an active role in the initial stages of curriculum development (Al Zadjali, 2017; Waytt and Al-Sinidi, 2014) is also important. Prior consultation with teachers is essential in any educational reform to ensure its successful implementation, as the teachers gain appreciation and ownership of the development. Changes, like curriculum development, that are initiated and carried out by teachers themselves, are considered a gain for the educational system compared with imposed development, such as syllabus reviews, assessment reforms, leadership innovation and evaluation systems, which usually create tension between teachers and the authorities. Teachers perceive imposed changes as giving them an extra load and increasing their stress levels and job dissatisfaction (Chaaban & Du, 2017).

Comprehensive inclusion of teachers in the process of development is vital not only in the curriculum reforms, but also in their professional development. Teachers' autonomy will be enhanced and will be aligned with the aims and objectives of curriculum development. Therefore, taking into consideration the voices of teachers will have a positive impact on the overall outcomes of the educational system in Oman. Teachers' self-esteem and confidence will be high, and it will help maintain high levels of enthusiasm among teachers; as Brown (1995) argued, involving teachers in a comprehensive way in any curriculum development process may be the only way to keep them interested in and enthusiastic about teaching. In addition, this will help teachers to overcome their professional demands and increase the prospects of job satisfaction (Chaaban & Du, 2017).

7.2.3 Communities of Practice

Learning is a social practice and is promoted through collaboration (Dewey, 1986; Wenger, 2009). Wenger & Wenger-Trayner (2015, p. 1) identified the Community of Practice (CoP) as “a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” In education, these activities usually take place in informal settings and for professional development purposes to enable teachers to enforce school outcomes. In addition, as the participants of the current study pointed out, these activities saved them time and effort. They believed that sharing experiences, materials, ideas, resources, and so forth helped them to gain knowledge and develop professionally. The CoPs vary in size and format, with some being formed with nearby schools in the region according to the levels, while some are planned to be larger, even global. In addition, these interactions might happen face-to-face or in virtual settings through technology. Nonetheless, although these activities are informal and voluntary, they are also systematic, meaningful, authentic, and relevant (Trust & Horrocks, 2017) as indicated by some teachers. The teachers also confirmed that these activities are productive and insightful either face-to-face or online, for teaching and learning 21st century skills and competencies. It saves them time in planning, and in searching for materials and resources from experienced colleagues, they claimed. This is in alignment with the conclusion of Trust and Horrocks’ (2017) investigation of a blended CoP, in that it provides teachers with opportunities to work together to solve real challenges and gain knowledge for different members with varying levels of expertise. In addition, another critical feature of CoPs, which might also be an influential factor in the process of the integration

of 21st century competencies and skills, is that they have a transformative feature. In other words, these activities can transform teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices through critical reflection and negotiation. This, in particular, will accelerate the integration process, as teachers will be more supportive of and raise awareness about the aims of the development. These characteristics of CoPs, e.g. fixable, ongoing, informal, and contextualised, made them very attractive to teachers and practitioners. The reason for this trend of popularity of CoPs is that teachers are reluctant to attend professional development courses that are described as one-size-fits-all, that are formal, and where attendance is mandatory rather than voluntary. Therefore, one of the major implications for the policymakers in the Sultanate of Oman is to plan a national policy that encourages and supports CoPs. They ought to enhance CoPs among teachers, as they are required to provide teachers with the appropriate support, both financially and professionally. Thus, these activities need to be sustainable and systematic, and also well organised, facilitated, and promoted.

7.3 Assessment

Assessment and evaluation are among the major pillars in any educational reform, and this is also applicable in the process of integrating 21st century competencies and skills. The findings of the current study revealed that the mismatch between curriculum and assessment persists (Al Zadjali, 2017; Alnesyan, 2012; Coombe, Troudi & Al-Hamly, 2009); and unfortunately this gap has not been resolved in the assessment research in the EFL/ESL domain (Troudi, 2018). Although assessment procedures in the Omani curriculum are presented as a combination of formative as well as summative, teachers

complained about the gap between curriculum and assessment. Fortunately, the participants in the study perceived that these skills are assessed through both types of assessment (formative and summative) if the learners are well trained and have practised the skills. This perception is in agreement with scholars of teaching and learning 21st century competencies, such as OECD (2013), Trilling & Fadel (2009), Greenstein (2012), and Pellegrino (2017). Nonetheless, the educational system in Oman is practically test- and grade-oriented, as are many systems in the area (Dammak, 2017; Alnesyan, 2012; Troudi & Alwan, 2010). As expressed by Bourke et al. (2015, p. 89), "The external pressure from high-stakes testing forces teachers not only to operate as regularity authorities demand, but also focus entirely on enhanced examination." Therefore, it is crucial to have a national educational policy that focuses on 21st century skills, and that supports teaching and assessment practices of the skills rather than designing national tests that assess them. This is more important for teachers; to understand the link between the theory and purpose of the integration of 21st century skills and the assessment approaches, as well as the alignment between the two (Troudi, 2017).

7.4 Implications for policy and practice

The findings in the current study revealed teachers' positive attitudes towards teaching and learning 21st century skills in their EFL lessons; however, they were dissatisfied with their exclusion from the process of integration. They perceived their role in such reforms to be passive and very limited. Nonetheless, they appreciated the value of the combined system of assessment that is applied in Oman, i.e. both formative and summative, as they believed that a combination of both types of assessment is best to assess the skills. The

findings also revealed that teachers face a number of challenges, during the implementation of 21st century skills, that need to be addressed and resolved. The following section will outline some of the implications for policy and practice with regard to the process of the integration of 21st century competencies and skills.

7.5 Implications for the Omani educational ELT curriculum policy

Teachers should have the right to participate in the development of the ELT curriculum, including the framework, textbooks, assessment procedures, and other aspects of an educational reform, as they are the initial implementers of the curriculum that should be delivered to their learners. Indeed, the current study encompasses salient findings about the inclusion process of 21st century skills in the ELT curriculum, and in particular about teachers' participation in the process. The study confronts the consequences of marginalising teachers in the whole process of curriculum design, and how this neglect of teachers' roles affects learning outcomes; and it sheds light on the practical and theoretical realities related to the issue. The existing literature supports the active participation of teachers in any educational reform (Fullan, 2009; Troudi, 2017; Alwan, 2006; Castro, 2013; Alnesyan, 2012; Alkhars, 2013; Mawed, 2016; Al Zadjali, 2017). The marginalisation is causing teachers to perceive the reforms negatively. In fact, teachers miss a clear and comprehensive understanding of the actual aims and objectives, as well as the content of the curriculum. Hence, the study emphasises that it is crucial for teachers to understand the rationale underlying the ELT curriculum development, because their participation helps them to decide on the elements of the development that are included or

excluded from the curriculum. Unfortunately, this understanding is not always achieved in Oman.

As outlined throughout the study, teachers' attitudes have a vital influence upon any educational reform. Thus, providing teachers with chances to have an active voice in the curriculum development process raises their motivation and interest. Listening to teachers' opinions regarding their practice, textbooks, assessment, challenges, limitations and suggestions usually helps to illuminate the possible changes and required support. Therefore, taking into consideration teachers' attitudes throughout the whole process of curriculum development is a priority. Teachers, as the study revealed, have the potential to provide profound and realistic resolutions for many of the limitations and challenges they face during implementation of the skills. It is clear that policymakers should be more aware of the teachers' mindset and mentalities and how teachers think during any change. Appreciating the teachers' point of view can help identify the support needed and eventually raise the quality of teaching and learning.

One of the significant findings of the study is that neither teachers nor students were consulted in the process of curriculum development. Thus, the pressure teachers received from the authorities – school administrators, supervisors and the rest – to finish the syllabus on time, might result in a loss of interest by teachers to implement the skills in their lessons. Therefore, a revision of the national English curriculum framework is a priority in the near future. The revised version of the ELT curriculum, the policy document, and teachers' professional development and appraisal systems should explicitly include guidelines about the teaching and learning of these skills. In addition, the participation of teachers in the whole process is a prior requirement for any step

forward. Their involvement should go beyond a formal and purely nominal approach. Instead, the Ministry of Education should be required to adopt an inclusive strategy that aims to involve teachers, learners, and other stakeholders in the community and not only a sample of them.

The revised curriculum framework is required to explicitly include the essential 21st century skills as well as the core knowledge of the English language. This framework ought to be flexible so teachers can develop their own teaching approaches according to their learners' needs. The framework might contain some examples of the skills and proposed teaching methods as well as the possible assessment procedures. Additionally, the teachers' textbook needs to be revised and renewed in such a way that it guides teachers to select the appropriate method and shows them how to adapt some teaching methods or content. The revised framework and teachers' textbook will provide novice and experienced teachers with suitable approaches, yet its flexibility will guide them to design their own syllabus. In this way, teachers will be empowered and autonomous through being provided with the chances to design their own methods of teaching the essential 21st century skills while simultaneously focusing on the content.

7.6 Implications for practice

The findings also revealed a lack of appropriate collaborative professional development activities. Teachers complained about the lack of professional development opportunities; however, they praised the training they had received from the Specialised Centre for Professional Training of Teachers in Oman.

7.6.1 Training: pre-service and in-service

The findings revealed a shortage of training, and limited training opportunities focused on teaching and learning of 21st century competencies. The Ministry of Education was more concerned with the integration of 21st century skills in the textbooks rather than in the training aspects of the integration process, such as teacher training. This limitation had a direct impact on the successful implementation of the skills in the EFL classrooms. Therefore, addressing teachers' needs for training is one of the recommendations teachers proposed. They face many challenges while teaching 21st century skills because of the lack of competence and, in some cases, lack of knowledge. Thus, including both pre-service and in-service training programmes about the teaching and learning of 21st century skills is a priority in achieving a successful integration and implementation of the skills. These training programmes will improve teachers' capabilities and will increase their awareness of the significance of 21st century skills. The Ministry of Education ought to provide adequate professional development for all teachers, as they have expressed their desire to understand and practise their roles as facilitators in the process of integrating the skills. Hence, there is a high demand for well-planned and organised courses for the process of integration of 21st century skills including the theoretical framework, the aims and objectives, the content, and the teaching and assessing strategies. In addition, these quality training courses might help teachers to anticipate challenges and provide suggestions to resolve them. The training, as mentioned earlier, needs to be up-to-date and creative, like the training models applied in the Specialised Centre for Professional Training for Teachers. Teachers opt for clear guidance and clarification of their roles and

are conscious of the obstacles that their learners might face during the process of learning and teaching 21st century skills. This awareness will be reflected positively in their practice of the skills and will fine-tune their teaching skills in order to overcome the challenges. In addition, it will encourage an interactive teaching environment for teaching 21st century skills.

7.7 Contribution to existing knowledge

The study is considered as an addition to an ever-growing body of research in the area of integration of 21st century competencies in particular and EFL curriculum development in general. The findings derived from the study offer valuable insights about how to facilitate the integration process of 21st century skills in the context of the EFL curriculum in Omani schools. The study provides a valued account of the perceptions of the EFL teachers towards the integration process, which includes planning, implementing, and evaluating the process. It is considered one of the pioneer studies to tackle the issue in the local Omani context. Based on the scarcity of research intended to investigate the integration of the essential 21st century skills in the EFL curriculum in Omani schools, the current study aimed to gain an insightful understanding of the issue from the teachers' perspective. In addition, it shed light on the alignment of the assessment approaches teachers implement to measure the skills. Furthermore, it identified the challenges regarding a successful implementation of the skills, such as the limitation of the textbooks, misalignment of assessment approaches, and teachers' marginalisation and lack of professional development. Alongside the challenges, the study examined how teachers cope with these challenges and their recommendations for better implementation. The analysed data might inform decision-makers, EFL professionals, and

trainers, as well as teachers of other subjects, to develop a clear and comprehensive conceptualisation of the issue of integration.

Most of the international studies on EFL curriculum models adopt a general stance towards developing the EFL curriculum; yet this is not considered a weakness in the models, as they provide an opportunity to adapt and synthesise these models to extend or contract their range. In other words, these models are flexible either to include or omit some elements according to local and international demands. Therefore, the current study is proposing a theoretical framework which not only adds to the international literature in EFL curriculum design and the teaching and learning of 21st century competencies, but also functions as a starting point to examine the issue of teaching and learning the skills locally. It also suggests a model for integrating 21st century competencies in the EFL curriculum that is lacking in the public education system in Oman.

The model for the integration of the 21st century competencies in the Omani EFL curriculum, shown in Figure 13, is informed by the rainbow framework by Trilling & Fadel (2009).

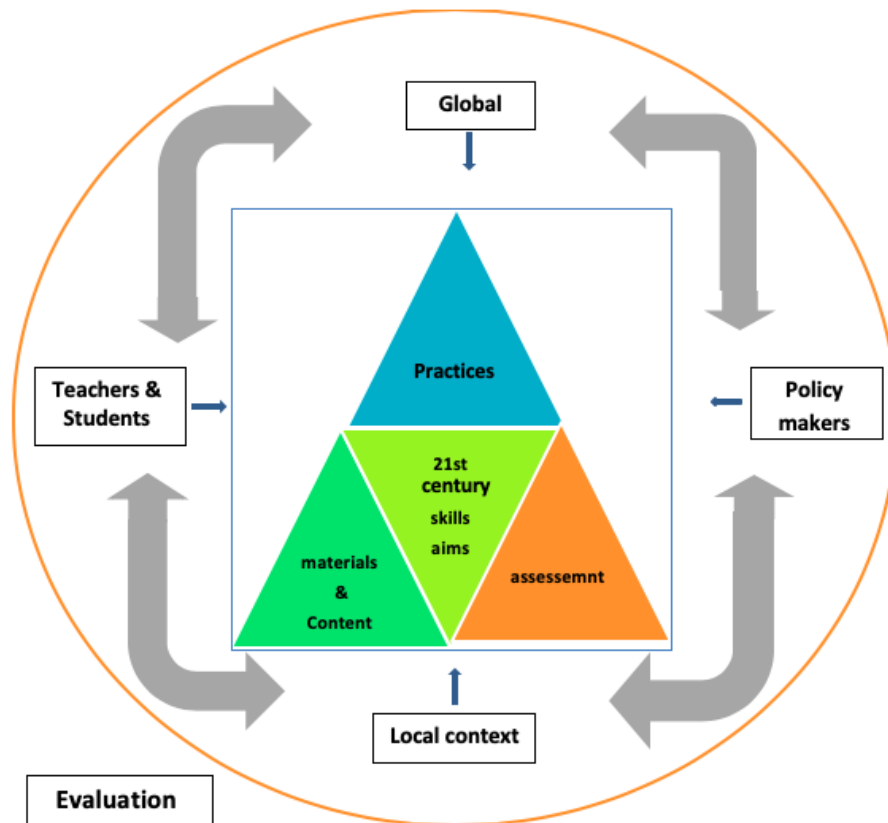


Figure 13. Proposed 21st century competencies integration framework

Although their model is not oriented specifically toward EFL, it depicts a broad model for all subjects considering the supporting systems for any integration process. Therefore, to overcome this limitation, another model was utilised, i.e. Christison and Murray’s model (2014) (see section 3.7.4).

Hence, a combination of the two models helped to construct the proposed framework, which serves the aims and findings of the study and suits the Omani educational context. However, while it is informed theoretically by the two models, it has formed a unique perspective of prioritising the integration process according to the curriculum reform aspects revealed in the findings of the current research.

The heart of the framework is presented in pyramidal formation to represent the main components of the integration, as they are building on each other without

any separation and without focusing on one aspect and neglecting the other. These are the 21st century skills' aims, practice and methods, materials and content, and the final component is assessment. These are adapted from Trilling & Fadel's (2009) framework. In their framework, they referred to them as the support systems, while in the proposed model they are considered as central systems that influence the integration process directly according to the findings and reflections upon the Omani context. One feature about the pyramidal formation is that it is consistent and stable; in other words, it works in both directions, i.e. top-down or bottom-up, as all aspects of curriculum design are fundamental and have equal significance. These aspects of integration are affected by four main sources: teachers and students; policymakers; global demands; and local context demands. All of these influential facets have a role in shaping the integration process. The double-ended arrows represent how these aspects interrelate and interact with each other. In addition, they offer reflexivity and reflectivity of the whole process of integration. Evaluation plays a crucial part of any development process, and subsequently, it is included in the suggested framework. Evaluation is represented by the large circle that encompasses all the elements of the integration process and functions as consistent and continuous evaluation of the process.

The proposed framework is suitable in educational contexts similar to the Omani context, which is described as strictly centralised and rigid. These contexts are distinctive in different ways. There are a variety of factors that interact and shape the educational system in Oman. Islamic principles, Arab values and Omani traditions are among the basic factors. In addition, the Omani EFL curriculum is nationally developed and taught mostly by Omani teachers.

As a result, any curriculum reform needs to consider these factors beside the global factors that interfere directly in the process, such as the geopolitical, economic, labour-market and technological factors.

Thus, the framework highlights that the process of integration is participatory. Hence, all parties are involved, i.e. teachers, students, parents, the community, policymakers, curriculum developers and ELT professionals. Through this participatory model the integration will be practically bottom-up as all parties are involved from the early stages of the process. Yet, the shift from a top-down to a bottom-up system needs to be carefully and systematically designed to ensure a smooth transition. Therefore, the framework is hoped to gradually transform the system to be more flexible and inclusive.

7.8 Further studies

The current study is likely to encourage other researchers to initiate their own investigations with regard to teaching and learning 21st century competencies. They might extend the scope and depth of their studies with respect to their own context and available resources.

The current study investigated Omani EFL teachers around the Sultanate of Oman, but other studies might be conducted to investigate other subjects such as maths, science or Arabic language teachers, because there is an intertwined factor between the subjects and the skills. In such investigations, we will draw a clear picture of the perceptions of teachers with regard to teaching and learning the skills. In addition, it will assist the curriculum development department to highlight the topics, tasks, and activities across the curricula.

The study highlighted the power of both pre-service and in-service training in decreasing the gap between theory and practice. Therefore, focusing on

continuous training programmes that are designed to train teachers on teaching and learning of 21st century skills might illuminate some limitations of the training programmes and provide solutions for the challenges teachers face.

The current study has not investigated the impact of gender differences between male and female teachers; thus, a further investigation might be conducted to explain the difference in relation to gendered perceptions of EFL teachers while teaching and learning the essential 21st century skills. This might lead to deeper understanding of male and female perceptions of integrating the skills in their classrooms, and how male and female teachers interact with the process and the challenges they face. This could be done by conducting research to explore the differences between male and female teachers, or between boys' and girls' schools.

In addition, it would be worth investigating and exploring teachers' perceptions of the integration process at the higher education level in the Sultanate of Oman. This study could identify the attitudes, factors, methods, and challenges teachers in higher institutions face during the implementation of 21st century skills, and compare them against the findings of the current study. In addition, it would be helpful in pre-service teacher training in the higher education institutions, as they will be equipped with the different strategies and approaches of teaching and assessing the 21st century skills and competencies. Further research could also investigate students' perceptions as well as those of the teachers, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue. This investigation would give the policymaking process insightful information to consider during the forthcoming language curriculum design, and indeed other subjects as well.

In terms of methodological perspectives, the current study deployed an explanatory design to investigate the issue of integrating 21st century competencies and skills in the Omani EFL curriculum. It explored the perceptions revealed by teachers' responses and attitudes towards the integration process and the challenges they face. However, it could be used in other divergent studies applying the same form and design of study.

I also suggest replicating the study using a different design, either an exploratory or a convergent parallel design; in such cases, the issue could be explored thoroughly and so enhance the findings of the current study.

Moreover, the investigation of 21st century skills could be conducted quantitatively. The data gathered would need to be measured and analysed statistically. Thereafter, the findings can be generalised. In addition, the positivist paradigm is commonly welcomed in the Omani context and statistical findings including graphs, bar charts or pie charts have attracted policymakers when planning different educational strategies or reforms.

Furthermore, the topic of the study could be investigated from the critical stance. In my opinion, this stance is appropriate as a further step to investigate the issue of the integration process in the EFL curriculum. The exploration could deploy this design to investigate the underlying political dimensions, as one of the significant features of the current study was to involve teachers in the decision-making and give them a voice.

7.9 Limitations of the study

The current research tried to investigate the process of integrating 21st century competencies in the Omani EFL curriculum. However, as is common in educational research, there are some limitations to be considered.

As this research is mainly interpretive in nature, it deployed a mixed-methods design. The results were analysed using thematic analysis and interpreted accordingly. Thus, the findings cannot be generalised. However, the aim was to gain a deep understanding of the issue and investigate the multiple realities among teachers.

The key data collection methods implemented in this research were surveys of teachers, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and classroom observations. The sequential design helped me to gather rich data from the three tools and triangulate the data. However, the statistical and quantitative data that the surveys provided did not enable me to go beyond participants' responses and dig into their opinions, to unveil what they were really thinking. In spite of the open-ended questions I included at the end of the questionnaire, very few participants replied to the questions, and their answers were not significant. In addition, there was a great deal of missing information, and I had to exclude quite a number of questionnaires ending up with 350 completed ones.

The semi-structured interview had its shortcomings in the current study. It was time consuming. It took me around 9 months to complete the different phases of constructing, piloting, interviewing, transcribing and finally analysing the data. Some of the interviews took more than an hour, besides the time spent finding a quiet room for conducting them.

On the other hand, the classroom observations were consistent in terms of time (40 minutes per lesson) and place. However, they were time consuming in terms of arranging the visits and in terms of analysis.

Therefore, another tool that could be added is focus-group interviews with the participating teachers. This might be helpful to gain a better understanding of the issues between teachers with different levels of experience and prompt for more clarification and justifications.

Another limitation of the study was the sample. The sample of the investigation comprised only EFL teachers. Hence, the findings could not be generalised to teachers of other subjects. The other limitation with respect to the sample is the distribution of the sample. Although the questionnaire was sent to all eleven educational governorates, the semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were conducted in the main and biggest regions, i.e. Muscat, Batinah North, Batinah South, and Al-Dakhlya only. This was due to the feasibility and accessibility in those regions. Therefore, including the other regions might enrich the data, especially in terms of challenges and implications. Despite the fact that all regions share similar characteristics due to the centralized system, some regions like Dhofar and Musandam are culturally and geographically diverse. Therefore, they might face different challenges, and different approaches to overcome the challenges with regard to teaching and learning the 21st century competencies.

7.10 Notes on the PhD journey

This section is a reflection on my PhD journey and the transformation I have undergone during the past four years. Although the journey was challenging

and stressful, I have gained a lot as a person, as an ELT professional and as a researcher. Within this period of time I was extensively immersed in the topic and the approaches for investigating it. On a personal level, the study has contributed to widening my thinking about and awareness of a number of issues around me, such as life, people, and nature. Before starting the journey, I was somehow confident that I had the acquired knowledge to pursue my studies. However, I was completely wrong; I realised that the knowledge I had was not enough. I started gaining more knowledge, thoughts and passion. The more I read, the more I felt that what I had gained was worth only a very tiny bit and that the world offers more. There are more salient issues around me that require my attention and consideration. I have realised that everything in this world is worth living with and has a role to play. The challenges that I went through were for a purpose, although it is quite difficult to figure them out. I also discovered that difference in general is not an obstacle but rather a gain. The PhD journey has significantly reshaped my personality, beliefs and attitudes. Academically, the study has enhanced my intellectual skills and fine-tuned my research skills. It has taught me that to be sceptical and critical about theories, ideologies and set models or frameworks is acceptable. I recall how I was confused at the beginning, and worried about which approaches to implement in order to reach my aims. The topic itself caused a lot of confusion to me because of its distinctiveness in my context. I learned how to narrow it down and search for very specific issues. I also figured out the possible connectedness of world issues to the Omani context. I learned that we are part of the world and we don't live in isolation. Therefore, whenever I read an article or a book, I directly relate it to my context and think of the pros and cons. I also

challenged and confronted my assumptions about what were the best ontological and epistemological stances from which to approach my investigation. Frankly speaking, I can claim that this process of learning has not only equipped me with theoretical knowledge, but has prepared me to use my critical “specs” to view curriculum from different or opposing perspectives. As I have continued with my research, I have realised that learning is endless. Every chapter included in the thesis was a separate intellectual and cognitive experience that does not match any other. Every chapter had its own challenges and breakdowns as well as its rewards and achievements. My research skills were sharpened and improved dramatically, and I am equipped with the latest philosophical and methodological principles that supported my argument and created harmony throughout the different pieces of the investigation. Beyond the theoretical and methodological stances, I feel that this research has developed in me the ambition to carry on researching and join the ranks of academia.

I have also adopted mindful techniques to stay focused and positive throughout the journey; thankfully I was surrounded with supportive supervisors, instructors, colleagues, teachers and family members that made the journey manageable and successful. This experience has been truly memorable and remarkable.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 : Teacher's Questionnaire

Teacher's Questionnaire

Aims/Consent

Research Aims

The research aims to investigate the views of Omani ELT teachers about the integration of 21st century competencies in the EFL classroom and explore the assessment procedures applied in alignment with the integration of 21st century competencies in the EFL classroom. In addition, it examines the challenges and their solutions from their point of view.

Contributions

Your participation is valuable and will help to enrich the teaching and learning of EFL in the Omani context. It will also have beneficial implications regarding the inclusion of 21st century competencies in the EFL classrooms in particular and across curricula in general.

Data Confidentiality & Anonymity

The survey will take 10-15 minutes of your time. Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the research at any time and in any stage of your survey completion. The information you provide will be used for research purposes and your personal data will be processed in accordance with current data protection legislation and the University's notification lodged at the Information Commissioner's Office. Your personal data will be treated in the

strictest confidence and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties.

The results of the research will be published in anonymised form.

For more information about this research, please click [Information](#).

By clicking the "Take the survey" button below, you agree to take part in this research.

Your gender

- Male
- Female

Your Governorate

- MUSCAT
- BATINAH NORTH
- BATINAH SOUTH
- DAKHILYAH
- DAHIRA
- BURIEMI
- MUSANDAM
- AL WUSTA
- DOFAR
- ALSHARQIYA NORTH
- ALSHARQIYA SOUTH

Your qualification

- BA
- MA
- PhD
- Other

Level taught

- Cycle One (1-4)
- Cycle Two (5-10)
- Post Basic (11-12)

Experience (years of teaching)

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- More than 30

Class size (number of students in the classroom)

- Fewer than 30
- 31-40
- More than 40

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements .

I know what the 21st century competencies/skills are.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

The integration of the 21st century competencies/skills in the current EFL curriculum is suitable.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

I am aware of the 21st century competencies/skills introduced to the Omani EFL curriculum.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

The information about 21st century competencies/skills sent by the ministry were clear to me.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

I think the changes with regard to the integration of 21st century competencies/skills are appropriate.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Not sure
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Knowledge of 21st century competencies and skills includes:

	Yes	No
Critical Thinking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Problem solving	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Creativity and Innovation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Collaboration and Team work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learning to Learn	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Literacy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Openness, Flexibility and Adaptability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Communication skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Perception Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements .

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
21 st century competencies are important for language learner proficiency.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
21 st century competencies/skills are not suitable for the Omani learner.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
21 st century competencies/skills should be a core element in the EFL curriculum.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Language learners of all ages can develop 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social and cultural contexts influence the development of 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
There should be 21 st century competencies a/skills activities in the EFL textbook.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is more challenging to promote 21 st century skills with advanced EFL learners than it is with beginners.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
21 st century competencies/skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

can be promoted through teacher-centred approach.					
21 st century competencies are important for personal development.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Motivated learners are more likely to develop 21 st century competencies/skills than demotivated learners.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learners' participation in decision making about their own learning enhances the acquisition of 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
21 st century competencies/skills can be promoted through learner-centered teaching.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learner's proficiency in English has no impact on the development of the 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Incorporating technology in EFL classrooms promotes the development of 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am well trained to facilitate the development of 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Practice Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements .

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I encourage co-operative group work tasks to support the development of 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I encourage activities using the technology to promote 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I provide my students with opportunities to use English in real situations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I don't focus on 21 st century competencies/skills activities because I have to cover the content in the textbook.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I apply a variety of teaching strategies that promote 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I spend enough time on tasks that foster 21st century competencies /skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I encourage creative answers that promote 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I teach the activities in the textbook as they are.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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Assessment Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements .

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I invite my students to apply peer-and-self assessment during my lessons.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is difficult to assess 21 st century competencies/skills in the EFL lessons.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have been introduced to assessment approaches that support the acquisition of 21 st century competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I integrate both formative and summative assessment in my lessons.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
21 st century competencies/skills are best measured through formative assessment approach.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have the right to implement the suitable assessment approach when measuring different competencies/skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am against the	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

inclusion of test items that measure 21 st century competencies/skills in tests.					
I use technology as tool of assessing some skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I apply different assessment tools for different students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Challenge

To what extent you agree or disagree with the anticipated challenges of integrating 21st century competencies/skills in the Omani EFL context.

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Lack of teacher training in learning/teaching of 21 st century competencies/skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of support and pedagogical resources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time constraint	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students' level of English competency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q9.1 Are there any other challenges which are not mentioned above? Please list them

Q9.2 Are there any other comments regarding teaching/learning of 21st century competencies/skills?

Appendix 2 : Teacher's Interview schedule

(Interview schedule)

The Perceptions of Omani EFL Professionals on the Integration of 21st century Competencies and Skills in EFL Curriculum.

Governorate :

Interviewee's code:

Date:

The Interview

I am investigating the perceptions of Omani ELT teachers on the integration of 21st century competencies and skills on the EFL curriculum .

This interview is in four sections. In the first section, I will ask you some background information about yourself. The second section is about your knowledge of 21st century competencies/skills and in the third section I will ask you to tell me about your own practice in relation to teaching and assessing 21st century competencies/skills. Finally, I will ask you about what you feel are the advantages and challenges you're facing. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. I appreciate your contribution and patience.

Do you mind if the interview is recorded?

Q1: When did you start teaching?

Q2: Where do you teach and which levels you teach?

Q3: What is the number of students in the classes you teach?

Q4: Could you please tell me your understanding about 21st century competencies?

Q5: How have you learned about 21st century competencies? (pre-service training or in-service training)

Q6: Are you satisfied with the recent updates in the EFL curriculum? **If yes**, in what way/**if no** why not?

Q7: What kind of support, if any, have you received regarding the integration of 21st century competencies/skills in the EFL curriculum? Is it adequate? **If yes** in what way/**if not**?

Q8: How often do you teach 21st century competencies /skills in your classroom? If **frequent why** /**if infrequent why**?

Q9: Do you think the inclusion of 21st century competencies/skills has modified your teaching? *In what way?* Can you give me some examples?

Q10: What is your experience in assessing 21st century competencies/skills?

Q 11: Do you prefer to include items that measure 21st century competencies/skills in the national tests? **If yes**, why, **if not** , why not?

Challenges

Q 12:In your opinion, are EFL teachers keen to promote 21st century competencies in their classrooms? If yes, how, if not, why not?

Q13: In your context what are the challenges you face when teaching 21st century competencies and skills?

Q 14: Do you have any strategies to overcome the challenges?

Do you have any further comments?

Thank you for your kind cooperation and contribution!

Appendix 3 : Ethical Certificate

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

When completing this form please remember that the purpose of the document is to clearly explain the ethical considerations of the research being undertaken. As a generic form it has been constructed to cover a wide-range of different projects so some sections may not seem relevant to you. Please include the information which addresses any ethical considerations for your particular project which will be needed by the SSIS Ethics Committee to approve your proposal.

Guidance on all aspects of the SSIS Ethics application process can be found on the SSIS intranet:

Staff: <https://intranet.exeter.ac.uk/socialsciences/staff/research/researchenvironmentandpolicies/ethics/>

Students: <http://intranet.exeter.ac.uk/socialsciences/student/postgraduate/research/ethicsapprovalforourresearch/>

All staff and students within SSIS should use this form to apply for ethical approval and then send it to one of the following email addresses:

ssis-ethics@exeter.ac.uk This email should be used by staff and students in Egenis, the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies, Law, Politics, the Strategy & Security Institute, and Sociology, Philosophy, Anthropology.

ssis-gseethics@exeter.ac.uk This email should be used by staff and students in the Graduate School of Education.

Applicant details	
Name	Atoom Alkhatri
Department	Graduate school of Education
UoE email address	amaa212@exeter.ac.uk

Duration for which permission is required		
You should request approval for the entire period of your research activity. The start date should be at least one month from the date that you submit this form. Students should use the anticipated date of completion of their course as the end date of their work. Please note that <u>retrospective ethical approval</u> will never be given.		
Start date:22/03/2017	End date:29/12/2019	Date submitted:17/02/2017

Students only	
All students must discuss their research intentions with their supervisor/tutor prior to submitting an application for ethical approval. The discussion may be face to face or via email.	
Prior to submitting your application in its final form to the SSIS Ethics Committee it should be approved by your first and second supervisor / dissertation supervisor/tutor. You should submit evidence of their approval with your application, e.g. a copy of their email approval.	
Student number	630063821
Programme of study	Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
Name of Supervisor(s)/tutors or Dissertation Tutor	Salah Troudi and Esmaeel Abdollahzadeh
Have you attended any ethics training that is	Yes, I have taken part in ethics training at the University of Exeter For example,: i) the Research Integrity Ethics and Governance workshop:

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

Title of Project: Omani ELT Professionals' Perceptions on the Integration of the 21st Century Competencies and Skills in the ELT Curriculum

Researcher(s) name: Atoom Al Khatri

Supervisor(s): Salah Troudi
Esmaeel Abdollahzadeh

This project has been approved for the period

From: 22/03/2017
To: 29/12/2019

Ethics Committee approval reference:

D/16/17/32



Signature:
(Dr Philip Durrant, Graduate School of Education Ethics Officer)

Date: 22/03/2017

Appendix 4 : MoE Letter

المحترمة

الفاضلة/ مديرة المكتب الفني للدراسات والتطوير

الموضوع/ طلب موافقة لتطبيق دراسة اتجاهات وآراء اخصائي مادة اللغة الانجليزية حول دمج كفايات ومهارات القرن الواحد والعشرين

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته ،،، وبعد

يسرني ان ارفق لكم نسخة من مخطط الدراسة التي اود ان اجريها في المحافظات التعليمية والجهات المعنية التابعة للوزارة وذلك كمتطلب رئيسي من متطلبات رسالة الدكتوراه والتي انا بصدد الحصول عليها من كلية التربية والدراسات العليا بجامعة اكسيتر بالمملكة المتحدة ، كما اود ان اؤكد تعهدي باستخدام البيانات والمعلومات لغرض البحث العلمي فقط وسوف يتم التعامل معها ضمنا كإحصاءات عامة دون اي اشارة مباشرة الى اسماء المشاركين في الدراسة او الجهات المساهمة بها.

لذا ، ارجو التكرم بالموافقة على تطبيق الدراسة بجميع المحافظات التعليمية ومخاطبة الجهات المعنية بالمحافظات التعليمية بالإضافة الى مخاطبة المركز التخصصي لتسهيل الوصول للمعلمين اللذين تم تدريبهم على الكفايات استعدادا للمرحلة الميدانية من الدراسة والتي تبحث في اتجاهات وممارسات اخصائي اللغة الانجليزية في دمج مهارات وكفايات القرن الواحد والعشرين حيث يشكل معلمي ومعلمي اوائل اللغة الانجليزية عينة الدراسة للمرحلة الاولى ، والادوات المستخدمة في الدراسة كالآتي:

- 1- استبانة لقياس اتجاهات وممارسات معلمي اللغة الانجليزية في جميع المحافظات التعليمية حول دمج مهارات القرن الواحد والعشرين حيث سيتم توزيع الاستبانة خلال شهر ابريل 2017.
- 2- اجراء مقابلات لإخصائي مادة اللغة الانجليزية (كما هو موضح في الجدول رقم 3 من مخطط الدراسة) لمعرفة آرائهم وممارساتهم حول دمج مهارات وكفايات القرن الواحد والعشرين بتعمق اكثر والوقوف على التحديات التي يواجهونها والأساليب المتبعة من قبلهم لتخطي تلك التحديات وتجاوزها والتي من المتوقع اجرائها مع نهاية شهر ابريل وشهر مايو 2017.
- 3- اجراء مشاهدات صفية لبعض المعلمين في العينة للوقوف على الممارسات الفعلية داخل الغرفة الصفية في الفترة من ابريل 2017 الى مايو 2017.

حيث سيتم توزيع الاستبيان الكترونيا في جميع المحافظات التعليمية لتقوم عينة الدراسة بتعبئتها بمساعدة المشرفين التربويين كما انه سيتم اجراء المقابلات والمشاهدات الصفية من قبل الباحثة شخصيا في المحافظات التي سيتم اختيارها بالتنسيق مع المحافظات والجهات المعنية.

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق التقدير والاحترام ،،،

مقدمة الطلب : اتوم بنت محمد بن عبدالله الخاطرية

طالبة دكتوراه بجامعة اكسيتر المملكة المتحدة

المشرف: صالح ترودي

للاستفسار والتواصل : amaa212@exeter.ac.uk

Appendix 5 : Observation Schedule

Classroom Observation Sheet

Teacher:
students:

Class:

Number of

Length of the lesson:

Theme:

Unit:

Core skill	
21 st century skill	
Procedures	
Materials &Technology	
Assessment	
Challenge	

Appendix 6

(A Sample of Transcribed Teachers' Interviews)

The Perceptions of Omani EFL Professionals on the Integration of 21st century Competencies and Skills in EFL Curriculum.

Region: M

Interviewee's code: 01

Gender of interviewee: Female

The Interview

I am investigating the perceptions of Omani ELT professionals on the integration of 21st century competencies and skills on the EFL curriculum .I would like to ask you about your knowledge and understanding of 21st century competencies and skills, your experiences of teaching and assessing these competencies/skills. In addition, I will ask you about your reflections on what challenges, if any, you have faced and, in your view, how can be resolved.

This interview is in four sections. In the first section, I will ask you some background information about yourself. The second section is about your knowledge of 21st century competencies/skills and in the third section I will ask you to tell me about your own practice in relation to teaching and assessing 21st century competencies/skills. Finally, I will ask you about what you feel are the advantages and challenges you're facing. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. I appreciate your contribution and patience.

Do you mind if the interview is recorded?

No , I don't mind to be recorded

Q1: When have you started teaching?

- In September 2005, almost 12 years of teaching
When have you appointed as a SET?

- In 2010

Q2: Where do you teach and which levels you teach?

This year I am teaching two classes of grade 8.

Q4: What is the size of your classroom?

Between 30 to 36 students per class , big number of girls in the classroom although we have a number of cycle 2 schools around the area.

Knowledge

Q5: Could you please tell me your understanding about 21st century competencies? How have you learned about 21st century competencies? (pre-service training or in-service training)

- Actually I got to know about these skills in the specialized centre during our third module in the course, then I have to train the teachers and apply them . so it was only during the in-service training.

What about the pre-service training? Did you have any?

- Well during my studies at the university , I haven't come across the term 21st century competencies , however, I was trained in some of the thinking skills like creativity, critical thinking , problem-solving and so forth.

Q6: Are you satisfied with the recent updates in the EFL curriculum? Do you think they are constructive? **If yes**, in what way/**if no** why not?

- I don't know may be we are blaming the curriculum a lot , yes we are blaming it , I don't know because of the skills and the way the curriculum deal with the skills . And by the way since 2005, I didn't see any changes in the curriculum ,

Really ?!

- Yes until now not even a single letter in the course book , the only change was the edition dates , seriously ,but there were some changes in the assessment but for the past four years it is the same , none of these classes from 5-10

Q7: Do you think the inclusion of 21st century competencies/skills is beneficial for the Omani students? **If yes**, why/**if not**, why not?

- First we need to consider different things , we need to train teacher s, we need to train students from cycle 1 how to use for example simple things like how to use technology in their classes to train them the right way to design something for their class or subject , this is very important and then this is my idea they have to include teachers , we have some bright ideas from teachers , I guess they are working in isolation from the real life sometimes I feel this ,hahhah
- Of course , you know these competencies enables students to be ready for future , for future learner to be independent learner even in their personal life and working life they need them. I think they are important skills for everyone to acquire and to be competent on them not only students. Yes so it is important and essential actually at this era, it is essential to include them.

When do think to start and train students to acquire these skills in your opinion?

- In my opinion from cycle 1 but in a way that suites the students age and levels and they have to be trained as they say 'training makes perfection'

Q8: What kind of support, if any, have you received regarding the integration of 21st century competencies/skills in the EFL curriculum? Is it adequate? **If yes** in what way/**if not**?

- No actually we didn't get any support . During the course they just said 21st century competencies go and read about them in the specialized centre . Then , the trainer asked us to write a paper of 5 pages about them as a preparation and then we had to conduct a workshop about them depending on ourselves and the other teachers from other groups . Then they told us to train other teachers in the school . so first I needed to train myself . That's why I searched in the

internet and YouTube in order to familiarize myself with the skills then I conducted the workshop as introducing the idea of 21st century competencies to my teachers. Now if you ask my teachers what are the 21st century competencies ? they will be able to mention some skills and subskills but honestly not to the level of acquiring them , yes we planned some lessons together but we don't consider ourselves professionals in applying them we need more training on them. So the support was limited as I explained and not enough at all, we need more , you know , especially in the practical side of it ,not the theory of it so we need support from that part . We even wrote it as a recommendation as part of the evaluation form of the course.

Practice

Q9: How often do you teach 21st century competencies /skills in your classroom? If **frequent why /if infrequent why?** What competencies/skills do you teach most (problem-solving, creativity, communication skills, critical thinking..etc.? Why?

- Not very frequent you know some days when there is an opportunity to do so . I tried to apply them at least once a unit so for example using technology , work in groups with a certain role of each member of the group, so I use them in a limited way.

Q10: Do you consider yourself skillful in teaching 21st century competencies/skills? **If yes** in what exactly (selecting the appropriate skill, using the suitable teaching method, assessment of the skills, communicating the results...etc.) **if not** why?

- I mainly teach communication skills and IT so I don't consider myself skillful in teaching the skills because I teach them depending on my understanding and experience but Am I doing it right ,am afraid am not sure of that . Are we in the right track am not sure. You know sometimes I feel that I am skillful in communication these skills to my students and teachers but I am facing challenge when it comes to assessment of the skills.

Q11: Do you think the inclusion of 21st century competencies/skills modified your teaching strategies , styles and techniques? *In what way?* Can you give me some examples?

- You know that if I compare myself in the past and my teaching in the present after the course , I can see huge differences . I use to teach these skills implicitly without any background and knowledge of them. So for example I asked the students to create or design but not in the proper way as 21st century competencies. So when I attended the course , I was able to adapt some activities to add the element of 21st century skills or part of the skill in the lesson in order to include these skills. In the past , I used to criticized everything the course book , but now I am aware of the chances the activities have to integrate these skills. So I look at the activities critically and try to locate the connections between the activities and the 21st century skills. For example, if I have a grammar rule to teach in the past I used to teach it in a very traditional way I start explaining the rule then give the girls some tasks to practice it. But now I might ask them to work in groups and create a role play using the

grammar rule and I train my pupils to follow certain criteria for their work and the complete the work according to this criteria. Then I add the element of critical thinking which originally comes from the girls themselves when they assess each other's work . Honestly, this a credit for the MoE and for the course I attended in the specialized centre.

Assessment

Q12: In your opinion, what is more appropriate for assessing 21st century competencies/skills formative or summative assessment? *Why?*

- I think formative assessment is more appropriate .

Why?!

- Because these skills you notice them in your daily teaching but not in the tests . Tests is for something else but through teaching , observation ,communicating with students , self-assessment and peer-assessment , projects and presentations ,because I can see their progress actually I can say that my students have improved in their skills since I have included the 21st century competencies in my teaching. At the beginning they were lost and I was shocked with their level of English but now I can't claim there is a huge difference but there is a progress.

Q13: Do you think assessing 21st century competencies/skills is difficult? *If yes*, in what way, *if not* , why not?

- Well if we base the assessment of these skills to our assessment framework , it will be difficult because there is a mismatch between our assessment criteria and the course book. So I tried to adapt the framework to suit my teaching methods and the inclusion of the 21st century competencies for example the two ways speaking , I use it to assess their communication skills. I also assess these skills through projects at the end of each unit so assess them through my observations and taking notes of their progress . I only take descriptive notes of their performance and not marks. So using projects to assess students is very helpful because they include a number of skills like communication , problem-solving, creativity and so on.

Q 14: Do you prefer to include items that measure 21st century competencies/skills in the national tests? *If yes*, why, *if not* , why not?

- Frankly speaking we do have some higher thinking skills types of questions in our final tests especially the reading and writing questions . They usually ask students to analyse , provide reasons and justifications and opinion, however, we as teachers we think that these types of questions are above our students' level and that is because we haven't trained them on such skills. So our students need training to think , to analyse and connect ideas . For example , when I compare the test paper for grade 10 from 2006 till now 2017 I can see big difference on the type of questions and length. From very simple paragraph to more sophisticated multi paragraphs with questions of connecting ideas and opinion towards the ideas in terms of agreement and disagreement. So I said earlier there is a gap between the course book , teaching methods and assessment!

Challenges

Q 15:In your opinion, are EFL teachers keen to promote 21st century competencies in their classrooms? If yes, how, if not, why not?

- I don't think so, the teachers are like the students they need training and something that attract them first. This something good but we need to make good a propaganda and advertise it well for teachers . We need to sale it from them in the first place and then ask them to apply it. Believe me without this they will not! may be only curious teachers will be keen to apply it and they are few but the majority will not because they feel it is a burden on them.

Q16: In your context what are the challenges you anticipate when teaching 21st century competencies and skills? How do you overcome the challenges?

- First of all I think lack of resources especially the technological one is a challenge in my school . The weak connection of the internet. For example , if I ask students to search for a piece of information in the computer , it will take them ages as the signal is very weak and sometimes it disconnects.

What else beside the limited resources?!

- Students level is also a challenge. They don't know to process and manage information they receive or find. They lack very basic like finding a word in a dictionary and to be honest, I don't blame the students , but I blame myself as teacher . I didn't train them on these skills . I just do it like other teacher does it go home and search for it!
- Lack of skills of teaching is another challenge in other words lack of training for both teachers and students . We as teachers not skilful in problem-solving , for example, or critical thinking or in creativity. You know sometimes we feel our students are better than us in such skills especially technology and creativity.
- Another challenge is the course book and the overloaded timetables. The course book is full of content and stuff it is very condensed, yes it is definitely a challenge. This course book also restricts teachers from applying the skills in their classes because I have a syllabus I have to finish.

How did you manage to overcome these challenges ?!

- You know part of it because I am a SET my timetable is a bit light than the other teachers although I have other duties like class visits, admin duties and buses duties but other teachers they have around 20 – 25 lessons per week. So sometimes to motivate my teachers in the school I organize a competition between them of preparing the best model lesson that includes these competencies. haahhha , to be honest , the teachers are creative but sometimes they are lazy and I don't blame them because they need time to rest .

Q 17:Are there different ways EFL teachers can apply to promote 21st century competencies/skills in their classrooms ? If yes, give examples.

- I think why not to feed these competencies in our current course book and not create and develop new one as it costs a lot of time , effort and money. Why not to invite creative teachers from every region and form a group to develop a framework or a guideline through analyzing the current course book and just provide teachers with opportunities for these skills to be linked to the activities available in the course book!, you know some teachers are not capable to design and adapt the tasks so this guideline will help them. It also should be monitored and followed it up by school principals , supervisors and trainers to give the teachers the appropriate support .
- I also think that the inclusion of these skills will motivate our students as I believe we will have an attractive content, because these skills and competencies are very important as they help our students to be competent in their real life. So

we need to look at them carefully, yes, and we need to give them attention here because hearing that a project has failed here or there or struggling is very devastating because it impacts our social life and our national economy also. The reason behind this in my opinion is that the foundation of these skills are lacking in our school systems. So we need these skills because our students right now they are not able even to write an application letter by their own! So we need to look at these skills seriously because we see how other countries are transformed through using these skills in their school systems, I really feel sorry for our students.

Do you have any further comments you would like to add?

- No thanks I feel that I have said a lot Hahhhhh.

No not all ,Thank you for your kind cooperation and contribution!

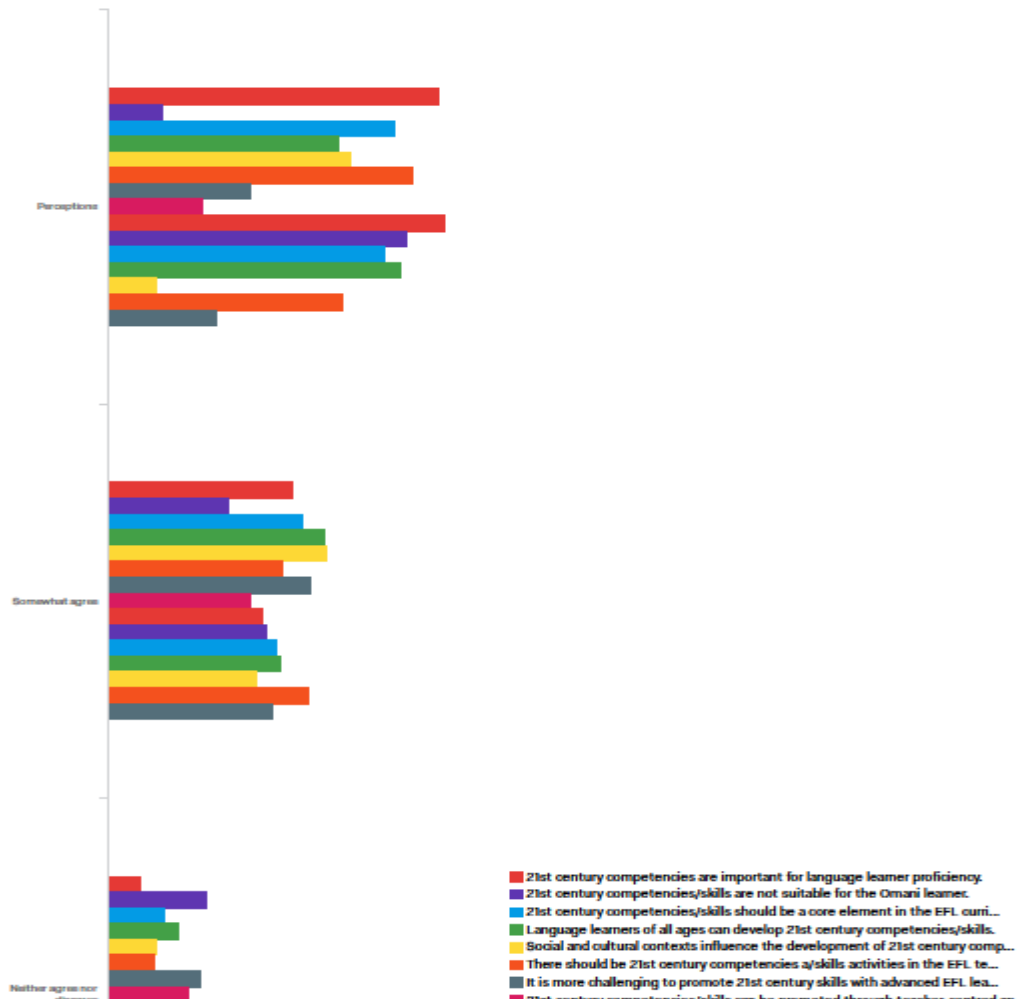
Appendix 7 : Screen shot of the Questionnaire analysis

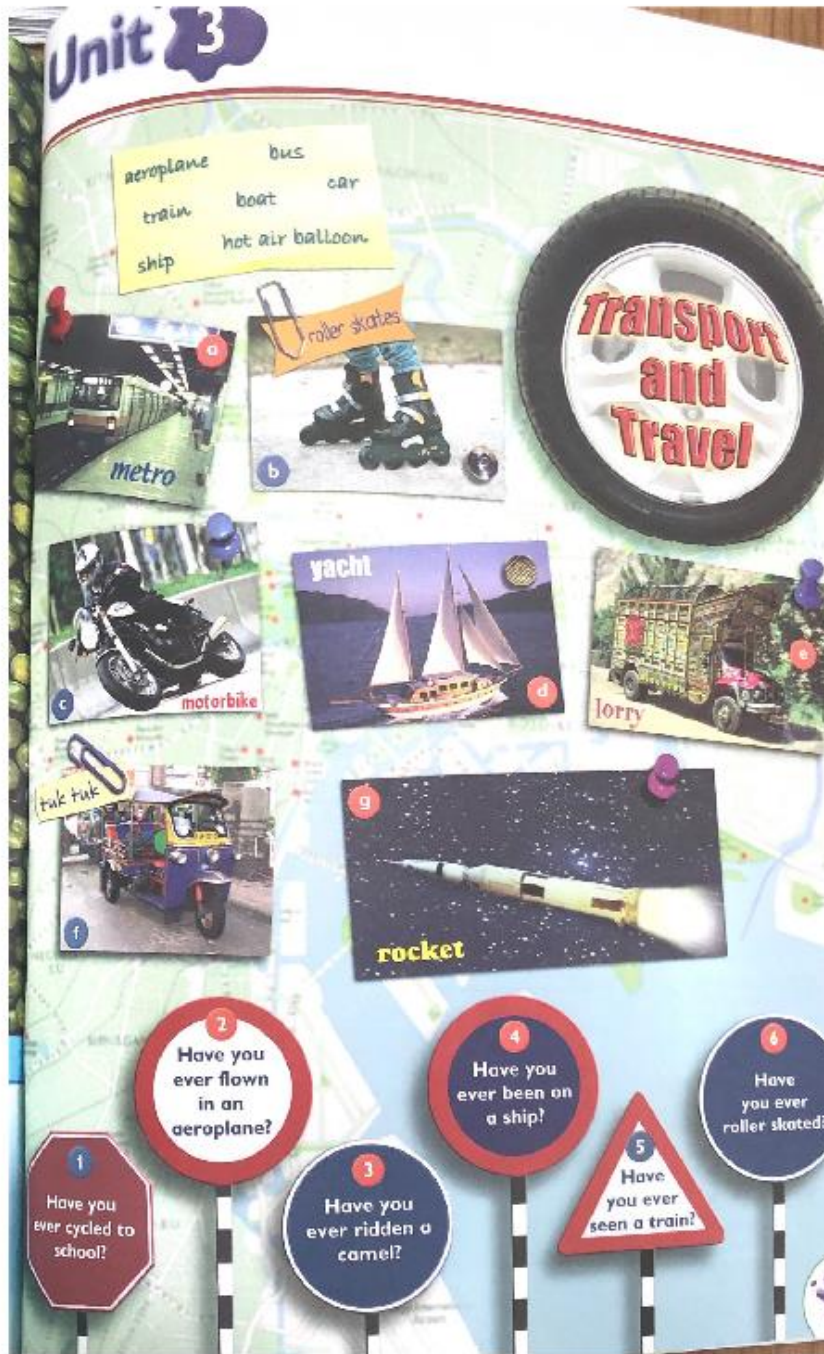
Default Report

PhD 2

May 15, 2019 2:41 AM MDT

Perception - Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements .





Grammar and Vocabulary

1 Read and complete.
 Read the texts on page 12 of the Skills Book again.
 Identify the missing causes and effects to complete the table.

Cause (What makes something happen?)	Effect (The result)
(1)	Arctic sea ice melting at a rate of 9% per decade
Melting ice	(2)
(3)	Nesting beaches might disappear
(4)	Female eggs
Carbon dioxide affecting Eucalyptus leaves	(5)
(6)	Koala's natural habitat is at risk

Grammar Focus Cause and Effect

We often link **cause** and **effect**.
 The cause is what happens. e.g. *global temperatures are rising*
 The effect is the result, e.g. *the Arctic sea ice is melting*

Sometimes we write the cause first cause → effect

As the ice melts, it is harder for polar bears to survive
consequently
therefore
so
many polar bears are dying.

cause
effect

One consequence of
 One result of
 One effect of

melting ice,
is many polar bears are dying.

cause
effect

Sometimes we write the effect first effect ← cause

Polar bears are dying
due to
because of
as a result of
melting ice.

effect
cause

2 Read and find.
 Read the text...

4 Think
 Draw
 Ask

Unit 2 The world of food

1 Look, read and answer.
What do you know about time? Do you know how many days there are in a year? Read the text below to find out.

It is not the same time all over the world. At the same moment all around the world, clocks show different times. What time you get up in the morning, it is time for people on the other side of the world to go to bed. For example, when it is 7 o'clock in the morning in China, it is 9 o'clock at night in Mexico. This is because the world is divided into 24 time zones. We measure the time zones from an imaginary line called the Greenwich Meridian. Can you find it on the map of the world?




2 Ask and answer.

What's the time in Moscow?
It's half past 6.

What's Maha doing?
She's eating breakfast.

1 Do a quiz.

Read the questions and choose the best answer.

Health quiz

1. What is the minimum number of times you should exercise each week?
 - a) 7 times
 - b) 5 times
 - c) 3 times
2. What is your average pulse rate when you are at rest?
 - a) 130
 - b) 110
 - c) 60
3. If you can bend, stretch and twist, then ...
 - a) you have stamina
 - b) you are supple
 - c) you are strong
4. Which of these exercises will help you build stamina?
 - a) skipping
 - b) weight training
 - c) yoga
5. When should you do warm up exercises?
 - a) when you are cold
 - b) after hard exercise
 - c) before you start any exercise

Now listen and check your score.



SCORE

5 points for each correct answer.

GOLD
20-25

SILVER
10-20

BRONZE
5-10

2 Do a project.

Make an information booklet about health.

In your booklet, write about healthy and unhealthy food.



Make a list of the different types of food and give advice on how much of each food we should eat.

Use the chart from the cut-out page at the back of your Skills Book. You can either write the names of foods, or find or draw some pictures and stick them in the different sections of the chart.

Write about why exercise is good for you and the different types of exercise that people can do to become fit and healthy. Find or draw pictures if you can.

You may want to write a rap or a song about food, health or exercise.

Put the booklet in your portfolio.

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Unit 3 Mobile Phones

1 Match the picture of these features on a mobile phone with the definitions below. Write each number in the box beside the correct definition.

1: Contacts icon
2: Gallery icon
3: Log icon
4: Messaging icon
5: Settings icon
6: Calls icon

2 Complete the sentences 1 - 6, using the words and phrases in the box below. Put ONE word or phrase in each gap.

hands free	voicemail	productive	text
buy	switch off	keyboard	ignore

3 Listen to the voicemail messages. Complete the table below with the missing information.

Name	Number	Caller	Why?	Where?	When?
Buddor	39768784				
Tony			pick up father		
Osama				Khalid's house	
Sara					2:30

4 Fill in each gap in the conversation below with one of the words in the box at the top.

somewhere	anyone	anything	nothing (x 2)
anywhere	no-one	everything (x 2)	anywhere

5 Complete the sentences 1 - 6, using the words and phrases in the box below. Put ONE word or phrase in each gap.

anywhere	anyone	anything	nothing (x 2)
anywhere	no-one	everything (x 2)	anywhere

6 Complete the sentences 1 - 6, using the words and phrases in the box below. Put ONE word or phrase in each gap.

hands free	voicemail	productive	text
buy	switch off	keyboard	ignore

7 Complete the sentences 1 - 6, using the words and phrases in the box below. Put ONE word or phrase in each gap.

anywhere	anyone	anything	nothing (x 2)
anywhere	no-one	everything (x 2)	anywhere

1 Don't forget to _____ your phone in the mosque.

2 When you want to send someone a message, you can _____ them.

3 If you want to have a phone in your car, you should get a _____ kit.

4 Suddenly I changed the _____ on my phone. I'm still getting used to the new sound.

5 Before you see there's taking your phone, you have to unlock the _____.

6 If you want to send a message quickly, use _____ text.

1 Where are you going? _____ Nice!

All: No, just to my brother's house.

Khalid: Which one?

All: _____ special, just dinner.

Khalid: Who is going to be there? _____ I know!

All: _____ special, just my family.

2 Excuse me. Do you know _____ about cars?

Paul: Yes, a little. Do you have a problem?

Paul: There's _____ wrong with the engine. I think you'd better find a garage. I know cars' one _____ around here.

3 Excuse me. There's _____ in your shop.

Assistant: Yes, Paul.

Customer: But the sign in the window says ' _____ must go'.




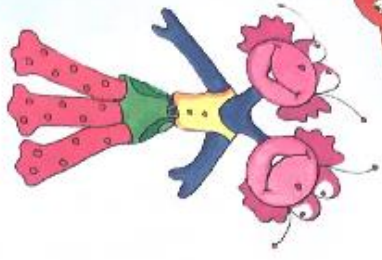
Assistant: Yes, Madam. _____ has already gone!

6 • Vocabulary •

• Vocabulary • 7

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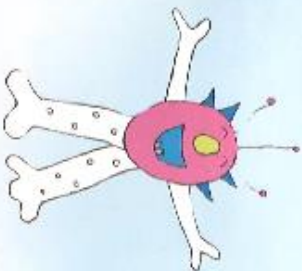
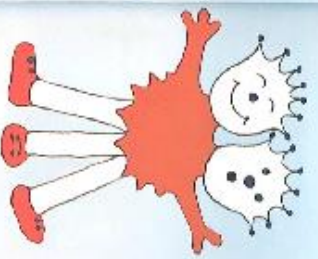

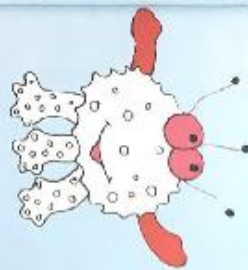
Listen and draw.





1 2 3 4

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Listen and match.

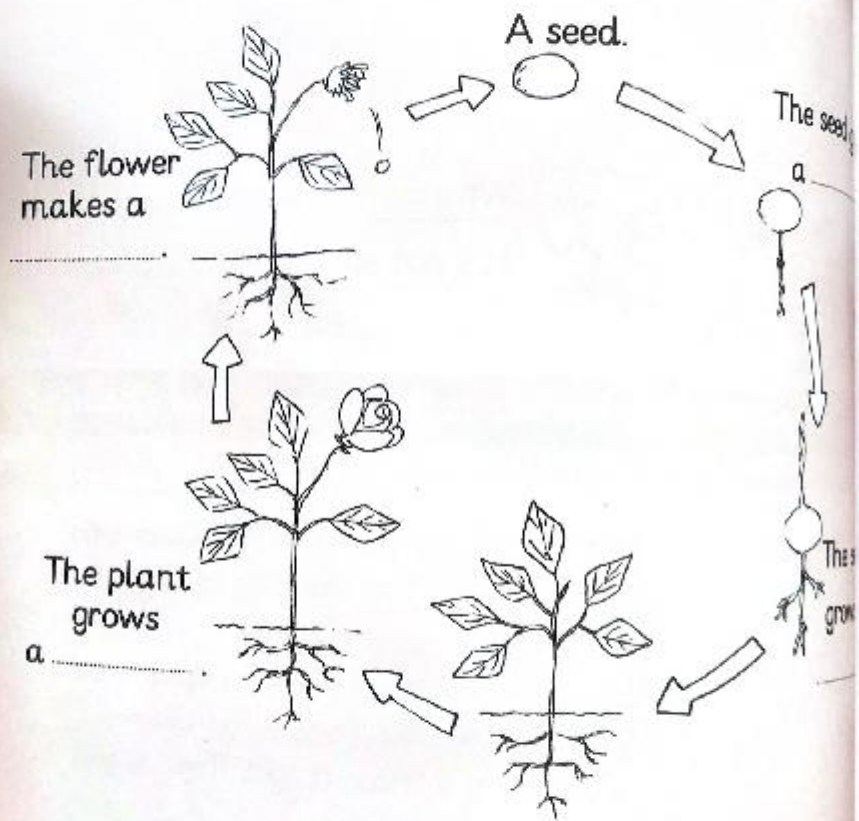


1 2 3 4



1 Complete the life-cycle of a plant.

plant leaves shoot seed root



The flower makes a

The plant grows a

The shoot grows some
..... This is a

