Learning English Language in Authentic Settings:
A Case Study with Foundation Level Students in Oman

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Abstract
This study explores factors impacting learning English Language through the implementation of an authentic task-based method, dubbed English Souk (or Market English), currently employed at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Muscat, Oman. The present mixed-method study specifically aims to find answers to the following research questions: (a) How do General Foundation Programme (GFP) students assess the English Souk initiative? (b) What challenges, if any, do the English Souk participants face during the simulation of the activity? And (c) What impacts do they state the English Souk has on developing oral communicative skills in them? The results were obtained via questionnaires returned from 50 GFP English Souk participants as well as a focus group conducted with eight voluntary subjects which were mapped against the views of six GFP teachers. They revealed a high degree of common satisfaction amongst the student and faculty respondents with the aim and intended outcomes of the English Souk approach. They also uncovered how the innovative practice had a positive correlation with developing learners' language skills, irrespective of the challenges they faced during the enactment of the activity. Implication of these and other issues for further investigation are discussed.

Key Words: authentic assessments, authentic task-based materials, English souk, General Foundation Programme, innovation, oral communicative skills

Introduction

With the passage of time, the provision of learning and the transmission of knowledge have been accompanied by major transformations necessary to keep up with the challenges of modernity. As opined by Ozverir & Herrington (2011), the approaches in teaching that may have been effective in the past may not now necessarily deliver the same outcome, as knowledge and the necessary skills needed to acquire them also undergo rapid change. The same is true with English language teaching. In fact, Oura (2007) mentions in his study in authentic task- based materials: bringing the real world into the classroom that the real challenge for English language teachers, especially those involved in ESL instruction, is how to capture the interest and to stimulate the imagination of their students so that they will be more motivated to learn. It is widely held by proponents of authentic based materials English as second language teaching like Nunan (2015), & Roessingh (2004) that this kind of learning process becomes relevant and more meaningful because the learner sees the activity as relevant to his or her learning needs reflecting real-world language. In this way, students are in a better vantage point to be more critical and appreciate better the usefulness of what they are actually learning.

At the core of this discussion is the aspect of creativity and resourcefulness of the teacher or mentor regarding the provision of learning using authentic materials or engaging language teaching in an authentic setting. It should be noted that by authentic here, this paper makes use of the definition provided by Nunan (2015) in which the author considers authentic materials as spoken or written language data that have been produced in the course of genuine communication, and not specifically written for purposes of language teaching. In short, this departs from the typical text-book approach towards English Second Language (ESL) instruction. A closer look at this concept reveals that in this teaching, students are encouraged to bring into the classroom their own samples of authentic language data from 'real-world' contexts outside of the classroom. They can practice listening to and reading genuine language drawn from many different sources, including TV and radio broadcasts, taped conversations, meetings, talks, and announcements. In addition, it is also possible to read magazine stories, hotel brochures, airport notices, bank instructions, advertisements and a wide range of other written messages from the real world in situations as they occur which affect what is called learning beyond the four walls of the classroom (Nunan, 2015). As used by Lombardi (2008), authentic learning requires materials that have been produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community.

It is imperative to understand the value of using authentic methods in ESL teaching. In the work of Bahrani & Sim (2013), the authors argue that ESL learning must not at all be based on a closed classroom setting. They opine that effective learning acquisition especially for non-native speakers of the language is important as it adds spontaneity as well as variety to learning. They even suggest that the choice of materials in an authentic setting is indeed very crucial. Yang (2010) hints that there are some researchers who point out that more authentic materials are needed in the classroom because of the wide disparity that is often found between materials developed specifically for English language teaching and authentic conversation. The author goes as far as discussing how the task-based approach can indeed be very useful in this regard. The author identifies what task based learning is, claiming that it is an overall approach to language learning that views the tasks that learner does as central to the learning process. The learning process is seen as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to curricular goals. There is an

emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language and enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning (Aksu Atac, 2012).

As mentioned, the critical aspect of authentic teaching of ESL lies in the creativity and resourcefulness of the activities to be done. In the Sultanate of Oman, post-secondary school students must be able to complete their Foundation education, which consists of three levels, prior to acceptance in Higher Education (HE). It is to be understood that English is not the primary language. As such, Omani students especially in the Level 1 General Foundation Programme (GFP) at a specific HEI in Muscat participate in an activity of authentic learning through the English Souk. The Souk is an open-air marketplace or commercial quarter in Middle Eastern and North African cities. The equivalent Persian term is "bazaar". In here, the students primarily engage themselves in selling activities in this marketplace provided that the language that they will use is English. Students in this level can sell anything they want but they need to use English as a medium of transaction. They also have to fully explain the products and services to the customers using the English language. The Souk is made for students to be confident in different language skills. In addition they design posters and brochures, they do some market research and other related tasks. There are also some prizes and recognition given to the best product and group. In effect, the goal of the English Souk is to make the students appreciate and utilize English in a real world setting. In this way, they may also come to fully realize the practical utility of the English language, which in itself is the global language used by a great majority worldwide (Muller, 2005).

This study shall primarily look into the effectiveness of the English Souk as an intervention and innovation in ESL language teaching at the selected HEI under study. The main thrust of the paper is anchored on how this authentic setting can be beneficial in providing ample learning avenues for students to develop their ESL skills.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to explore how effective can the English Souk be as an authentic setting for ESL language instruction, through defining the concept behind its utilization in teaching ESL level 1 GFP students. The study also intends to measure the extent of the implementation of the Souk activity and how successful it has been to build language skills among the targeted students. Further in line, the study intends to underscore the challenges faced by students in such an authentic setting and attempts to propose solutions to the perceived issues with discussing defined recommendation for possible modifications and/or changes in order to ensure a more meaningful and progressive learning environment through the Souk as an authentic language learning avenue.

Research Questions

This study explores the following research questions:
1. What is the concept behind the English Souk as an authentic learning activity in teaching ESL to Level 1 General Foundation students?
2. To what extent has the English Souk activity been successful in building language skills among the students?

3. What are the issues and challenges confronting students engaged in English Souk as an authentic English language learning activity and how can these concerns be properly addressed?
 4. What changes can be recommended or interventions activated to ensure a more progressive and meaningful implementation of the English Souk?

Significance of the Study
          The study is considered significant for the following reasons; first and foremost, for the Level 1 General Foundation students, so that they can be able to learn not only the dynamics involved in organising the English Souk, but more importantly be able to learn the proper usage and application of the English language in the real world setting. This is important so that they can fully appreciate the over-all usefulness of the said language. It can also serve as an effective way for them to be able to gauge their English language proficiency. In this way, they will be provided with ample grounds to appraise and check their strong points as well as their weak areas so that proper adjustments can be effectively carried out.

          The study is also deemed significant for teachers/ mentors and faculty members handling ESL courses as this innovation may provide them with an additional learning avenue to teach and gauge at the same time the learning of the students. For the academic institutions, they can continue to strive to better this learning programme and for those who are not yet adopting such practice to include it in their respective curriculum, there should be a curriculum development that must integrate innovative techniques such as the English Souk. Lastly, this paper can be of great value for other researchers, students and academicians, who wish to embark on a related study.

Research Design
          Data were obtained from the quantitative design that was carried out, which in the case of this investigation was through a survey. In addition, a Key Resource Interview (KRI) was also conducted with some student participants and faculty members facilitating English Souk classes in order to corroborate or negate the findings in the survey conducted. Through these methods, effective triangulation is achieved with the survey, the KRI and the Literature review utilized for a more comprehensive analysis. A total of fifty respondents from Level 1 ESL Foundation class were purposively chosen for the survey. The survey was mainly done in order to understand the perception of the students regarding the English Souk as well as to underscore any modifications that need to be done to make it more reflective of student's aptitude and responsive to the changing needs of ESL learning especially for Level 1 Foundation students in Oman.

1.1 Research Locale
          The study is located in one of the leading higher education institutions in the Sultanate of Oman and is affiliated to several universities in the UK and the Netherlands. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in different areas of Engineering, Computing, Business Management, and Archival Studies.

          Prior to admission to any undergraduate programmes, some students need to undergo the General Foundation Programme (GFP) in compliance with the Ministry of Higher Education. On successful completion of the GFP, students acquire the required degree of proficiency in four learning areas: English language, General Study Skills, Computing and Mathematics.

The English Souk is an activity for GFP English level 1 students where they can showcase the culture and cuisine and sell products of different nations. This is usually held during the first three weeks of the semester as an avenue for students to be acquainted with each other and help them adjust to college life. Students are divided into groups for the creation of their booths. Some group members will be responsible for advertising and issuing invitations; another team will display and sell the products and the last team will be presenting the nation's rich culture and heritage to the audience through video presentation and games. The best groups are judged by an inter-departmental panel of faculty and are awarded with prizes.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The paper's thrust is mainly anchored on the analysis of the English Souk as an authentic setting for ESL instruction among selected Level 1 foundation students in Oman. The following data sought to see whether it has a significant correlation with ESL aptitude and learning of the students.

Descriptive results:

Table 1 *Respondents' feedback on the efficiency of the English Souk as an Authentic ESL tool (%).*

ON THE EFFICIENCY OF SOUK AS AN ESL TOOL I have :	Yes	To some extent	I don't know	No
1. an awareness regarding what English Souk is, its purpose and intent.	75	17	8	/
2. an understanding of how English Souk is effectively carried out.	59	29	9	3
3. a firm belief in the goals of English Souk as it fosters a collaborative environment for the improvement of the ESL instruction in Oman.	79	14	5	2
4. seen improvement in my English communication skills and those of my peers through the English Souk.	70	16	14	/
5. gained confidence speaking in English	76	17	6	1
6. an ample perception that the English Souk activity is beneficial and realistic in developing my speaking.	69	28	3	/
7. some reservations regarding the materials that are used like the posters , there must be more use of multimedia.	15	18	25	42
8. some observations regarding teacher training and guidance for English Souk activity as well as proper evaluation of student performance.	12	20	27	41
9. some observations regarding carefully prepared guidelines on the conduct of Souk activity especially with how students are gauged	21	17	15	47

It can be argued that based on the responses, there exists a positive correlation between the levels of competency of students under Level 1 ESL when subjected under the English Souk. This means that the English Souk is perceived to be an effective tool that corresponds to an increase in student ESL aptitude and practical use. This is also the same line of reasoning presented by the teachers who were interviewed as they opined that students who undergo the English Souk are more "confident and expressive" They are also held to be more decisive and bold in their undertakings. Figure 1 shows clearly that majority of the students have a firm belief in the goals of English Souk as it fosters their collaborative environment for the improvement of the ESL instruction in Oman. This is indicative of the high level of trust that students have regarding the English Souk. These findings correlate well with Brown (2007) who asserts that with the help of both the surroundings and the teacher, students can become more confident in using the English as the target language. As the students gain confidence using the target language, they can then be transferred outside of the classroom. This real-world context outside the classroom can be a place where students look for opportunities to initiate conversation in the target language, thus enhancing their communication skills. This also goes in line with Francom (2010) who reveals that authentic tasks promote more confidence and foster creativity.
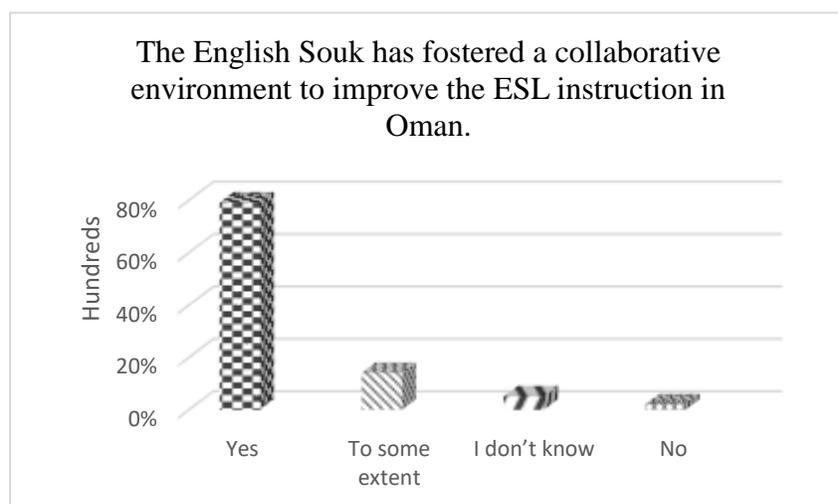

The English Souk has fostered a collaborative environment to improve the ESL instruction in Oman.

Figure 1 The English Souk has fostered a collaborative environment to improve the ESL instruction in Oman

This is also reflected in Figure 2, which is mainly about the students' perception of the improvement in their communication skills as well as those of their peers as it registered a percentage of 70. This can be correlated with the findings of Aladjem, & Jou, (2016) who opine that when students are offered the chance to engage in a professional relationship with real clients, they are learning useful real-world skills.
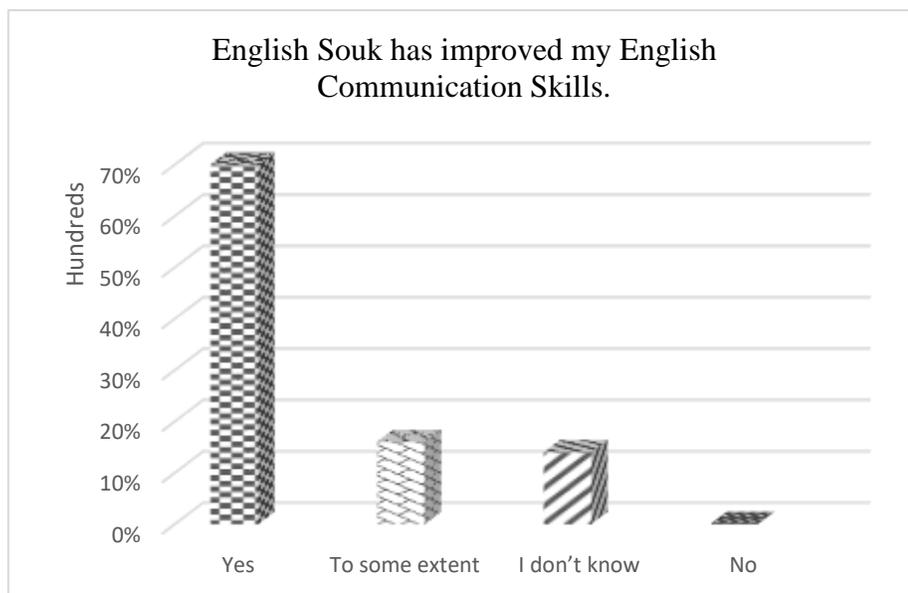
Figure 2 English Souk has improved my English Communication skills.

The two figures 3 and 4 indicate that there are some reservations and related observations regarding how the English Souk is being conducted. In effect, the student respondents believe that there must be some improvements that need to be carried out. This can be seen in Figure 3 which registers a total percentage of 33% (15% said yes and 18% said to some extent) as well as in figure 4 with a total rate of 32% (12% and 20%). This means that the students believe that while the authentic activity is good and beneficial, there exists a great need to develop its facilitation. This is congruent with the perception that students are not properly gauged in the English Souk activities, which can be done through effective teacher training and upgrading of competencies as well as the use of other instructional materials that could better equip students who undergo the English Souk practice. This is emphasized by Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves (2003) on the role of the teachers in authentic learning i.e. to coach, facilitate and support students as they fulfill authentic tasks.

This is the same sentiment as expressed by the ESL teachers handling the English Souk as they have lamented the need for greater administrative support with regards to the necessity of increasing their competencies through exposure, workshop/seminars and training. They have also pointed out the need for greater collaboration between the schools and government agencies handling the education sector in Oman.
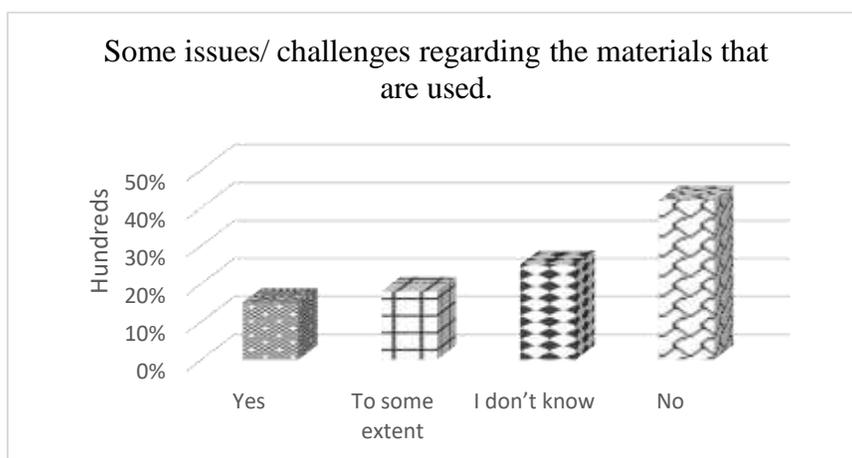
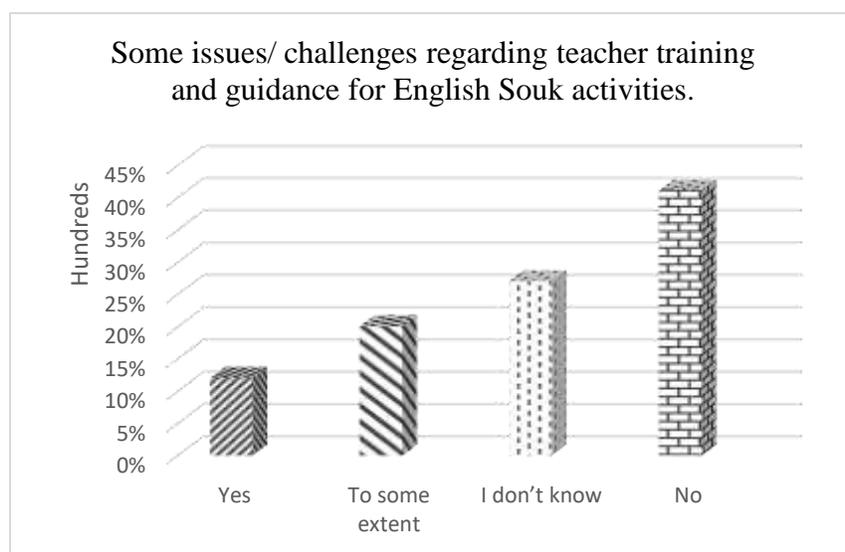*Figure 3* Some issues/ challenges regarding the materials that are used.

Figure 4 Some issues/ challenges regarding teacher training and guidance for English Souk activities.

Conclusions

      Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the English Souk is an effective authentic ESL tool that positively affected the students' aptitude, skills and practical use of English as a second language in Oman. This is observed based on the perception of the students regarding the impact of the English Souk upon them as well as on their peers. The teachers who opined that the English Souk has been an integral factor in providing confidence among the students also seconded this. Thus, it is apparent that the success of the purposeful real-life souk activity has boosted the EFL learners' confidence, motivation and reflected positive attitude towards learning (Aladjem & Jou, 2016).

The learners did not merely display knowledge or drilled practiced communicative skills but also exercised the process of thinking and doing to produce the result of buying or selling, that can also be known as, the production of the frame work of knowledge and skills (Roessingh, 2004). This, all in all, fosters language learning in a cyclical, ongoing manner (Pollari, 2015) where it allows the EFL learners to understand, perform, and reflect on the English Souk task, which can be produced with a wealth of real use target language (English).

Moreover, the English Souk activity supported the GFP level 1 learners to move into challenging cognitive domains through the utilization of dialogues or conversations that were going on during the period of selling and buying. By this, learners managed not only to develop their communicative skills, but also to develop their critical, independent thinking to share viewpoints and ideas. As such, the English Souk task can evidently be considered to be a productive genuine task and conductive enough to gain communicative goal, where the speaker and the listener exchange information in a flexible, relaxed atmosphere; a necessary environment for effective learning to take place.

Nevertheless, it can also be concluded that there are some issues and concerns regarding the English Souk, one of these is the fact that students believe they are not properly gauged with the English Souk. Another is the observation of the teachers that there must be more adequate support coming from the college's administration. It can also be concluded, as per the outcomes of the study and the collective response both from the students and the teacher interviewees, that proper upgrading of competencies through training is indeed necessary. This leads to proposals for viable recommendations to enhance future practices of the authentic task based learning.

Recommendations
Based on the conclusions presented, the following recommendations are given.
1. There should be a module that should be developed to have appropriate parameters and rubrics that can be used as a basis of assessment specifically for student progress and aptitude development in the field of ESL learning.
2. Additional funding from the government education sector in Oman should be promoted and exercised. The additional funding should be funneled directly to initiatives aimed at further improving the facilitation of authentic language teaching in the country.
3. There should also be added administrative support from the academic institutions that use authentic language teaching in order to provide skills upgrade for teachers through seminars, lectures and additional training; as well as, facilities for improvement and logistics support for the students and teachers.
4. Lastly, further studies and research can be conducted, along the line of the investigation pursued in this paper to have a more in depth analysis of Souk as an authentic ESL avenue.

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