Chapter 4
Multiple Intelligences
Theory Applied to Folklore in Omani EFL Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (MI) precipitated a revolutionary change in the process of teaching and learning. Previous theories of intelligence had merely measured the intelligence quotient (IQ), but Gardner’s theory offered a fresh perspective on intelligence, supporting a pluralistic view of mind that incorporates diverse aspects of cognition and individual learners’ cognitive styles. MI theory, therefore, has the potential to guide EFL/ESL teachers in addressing all manner of learners, developing their intelligence, and encouraging autonomy. This chapter defines the theory, while examining its origins and importance within EFL/ESL. Insights are offered on how MI can be applied particularly in tertiary-level EFL teaching and learning in the Omani context. These insights are then tied to Oman’s rich cultural heritage by concluding with a lesson plan featuring folklore-based activities that range across the four language skills and cater to different kinds of intelligence.

INTRODUCTION

“All students can learn and succeed, but not all on the same day in the same way” – William G. Spady (1998, p. 6).

The closing decades of the 20th century were marked by innovations in the field of second and foreign language acquisition. Gardner’s (1983, 1999) theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) was a landmark event, precipitating a revolutionary change in the process of teaching and learning. Previous theories of intelligence had merely measured the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), while Gardner’s theory opened up new avenues of thought and practice. Gardner believes that practically every individual can develop all
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nine intelligence types (see Section 2 for discussion of number of intelligences proffered by Gardner) if given appropriate instruction, an encouraging environment, and reinforcement.

MI theory draws attention to the fact that a large percentage of students entering schools today is inadequately prepared for success in a traditional classroom environment. Conventional teaching methods, mainly emphasizing linguistic and logical-mathematical skills, do not cater to students’ needs holistically. Proponents of this theory prefer not to label these students as “underachievers”, arguing that it is highly likely that many of them can be taught or trained in a mode that differs from the teaching style adopted for the class. As a result, educational institutions should customize curricula to meet the needs of each student. Armstrong (2002, cited in Solmandardottir, 2008) develops this point by maintaining that:

Language teachers today have to be aware that students have different strengths, learning styles and even learning potentials but with the multiple intelligence theory we can teach students effectively in different ways. It is a good idea to give students a Multiple Intelligence Test to see which intelligences are outstanding for each student. Then the teacher can create a learning environment that is suitable for each student. By observing the students and by keeping track of they react to different activities, it is possible to improve the teaching by appealing to the students’ strengths. As long as teachers use a range of different activities according to the intelligences, there will always be a time during the day or week when students have their highly developed intelligence(s) actively involved in learning (p. 7).

Subsequently, it can be argued that it is very important for teachers to identify their students’ strengths and weaknesses. MI theory can change teachers’ perspectives through a simple inventory which indicates the kinds of intelligence their students are strong and weak in, thus providing instructors with a new perspective on teaching and learning. Once students become aware of their strengths, they can also become more responsible for their learning which will have a positive impact on their autonomy and self-esteem.

Using folklore, this paper focuses on the application of MI theory to EFL teaching in Oman. In recent years, literature’s role as a source of authentic texts for the language curriculum has been gaining appreciation among practitioners. This is not surprising, as literature plays an important part in teaching the four basic language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a, 2012b). According to Tuzlukova and Al-Mahrooqi (2010, p. 46), “In the higher education context, many English teachers now realize the importance of representing the culture of the learners in the curriculum to personalize their learning experiences and teach them the language in a familiar context that they can relate to”. Folklore reflects the traditions and heritage of a culture. Although Oman has a rich oral tradition of folklore, its potential has not yet been fully harnessed within the field of teaching and learning.

In Oman, English is taught as a foreign language in schools, higher education institutions and universities. Until recently, English was introduced as a subject in public schools only from the fourth grade onwards. Now, however, it is taught from the first grade on as a compulsory subject in Basic Education, though all other subjects are still taught in Arabic. Due to large class sizes, the curriculum, issues with prescribed textbooks, teacher-centered teaching (Al-Balushi, 2001), foreign language communication anxiety (Khan & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015), and a lack of parental guidance (Khan, 2018), most students leaving state schools lack the linguistic and communicative skills required for further academic success (Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010). As a result, before they can pursue undergraduate programs in higher education institutions in the country, these students must pass their institution’s Foundation Program in English – a program that takes most students around one year to complete.