

**THE TEACHING OF INFERENCE-MAKING
SKILLS IN READING COMPREHENSION IN
POST-BASIC SCHOOLS: OMANI EFL TEACHERS'
PERCEPTIONS, CHALLENGES AND PRACTICES**

BY

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Ph.D in Education (TESOL)

**Kulliyyah of Education
International Islamic University Malaysia**

MAY 2022

ABSTRACT

Inference-making skills are crucial for reading comprehension. They represent the ability to combine explicit information from the text with background knowledge or experiences to build a coherent representation of intended meaning. Inferencing is seen by many researchers as the heart of the comprehension process, and therefore failure to teach it properly may contribute to students' failure in reading comprehension. However, Omani EFL students are still facing many challenges affecting their reading comprehension, including a lack of background knowledge, a limited repertoire of reading strategies, and a poor ability to infer meaning from written text. Empirical observations also show that teachers lack knowledge and skills to build students' inferencing ability adequately. Building on this, a mixed-method study sought to conduct an in-depth exploration of the perceptions and practices in the Omani EFL context in order to have empirical data on post-basic education teachers' perceptions and instructional practices when dealing with inference-making in reading lessons. Also, the study aimed at investigating the challenges teachers face when developing inference-making ability among students. In addition, the study aimed at exploring the extent to which curriculum and assessment facilitate the development of students' inference-making ability. The data were collected through different instruments: a questionnaire, an observation checklist, and a semi-structured interview. Also, the data were collected from two primary informants; EFL teachers and specialists of curriculum and assessment. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire and classroom observations. So, the questionnaire was administered to Omani EFL teachers in post-basic schools and received 324 responses. The classroom observation was limited to 10 EFL teachers from Batinah North and Batinah South governorates. Each teacher was observed during two reading lessons, for a total of twenty reading lessons. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the same EFL teachers and two specialists from the curriculum and assessment Departments. The findings mainly show that Omani EFL teachers hold a good understanding of the relationship between students' comprehension skills and inference-making ability and of the importance of inference-making. However, they had very limited knowledge of the best ways to teach and assess students' inference ability. Also, they have a narrow view of explicit reading instruction and lack a common definition of inference. These findings revealed a discrepancy between teachers' stated perceptions and observed practices. A limited number of strategies were used to develop students' inference-making ability when building meaning from reading texts. Also, the study revealed challenges regarding the implementation of inference-making instruction during reading lessons. These challenges include the lack of explicit instructions in the teacher's guide on implementing inference-making strategy, the difficulty of some reading text, and students' low level of language proficiency that makes it difficult to teach them advanced skills like inferencing. Participants attributed their lack of awareness of implementing inference-making strategy systematically to the lack of training. Based on the challenges, the teachers reported some useful suggestions that may improve the current situation. The study also provides some directions for policymakers, curriculum developers, supervisors, and teachers to improve the current situation.

ملخص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف تصورات معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في مرحلة التعليم ما بعد الأساسي وممارساتهم العملية فيما يتعلق بتدريس مهارة الاستنتاج في دروس القراءة. وهدفت الدراسة إلى استكشاف التحديات التي يواجهها المعلمون عند تطوير قدرة الطلاب على الاستنتاج. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تهدف إلى استكشاف دور المنهج الدراسي وأساليب التقويم في تطوير قدرة الطلاب على الاستنتاج. ولتحقيق أهداف الدراسة، استخدم الباحث ثلاث أدوات للإجابة عن أسئلة الدراسة. الأداة الأولى استبانة للتعرف على تصورات معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في تدريس مهارة الاستنتاج في دروس القراءة، والصعوبات التي تواجههم، ومقترحاتهم لتطوير قدرة الطلاب على الاستنتاج. والأداة الثانية، الملاحظة الصفية لمجموعة من دروس القراءة للتعرف على الأساليب المستخدمة لتطوير قدرة الطلاب على الاستنتاج. أما الأداة الثالثة فكانت عبارة عن مقابلات للتعرف أكثر على الجوانب التي شملتها الدراسة. شملت عينة الاستبانة ٣٢٤ من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية من مختلف المحافظات التعليمية لمدارس ما بعد التعليم الأساسي، أما الملاحظة الصفية فقد اقتصر على ١٠ معلمين من محافظتي شمال الباطنة وجنوب الباطنة. وجمعت البيانات النوعية بواسطة مقابلات شبه منظمة مع نفس معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية، واثنين من مختصي المناهج والتقويم التربوي. أظهرت نتائج البحث أن معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لديهم فهم جيد للعلاقة بين مهارات الفهم لدى الطلاب والقدرة على الاستنتاج وأهمية الاستنتاج عند تدريس القراءة. في المقابل كانت لديهم معرفة محدودة جداً بأفضل الطرق لتدريس وتقييم قدرة الطلاب على الاستنتاج. وكشفت نتائج البحث عن تناقض بين تصورات المعلمين المعلنة والممارسات المرصودة، حيث استُعمل عدد محدود من الاستراتيجيات لتطوير قدرة الطلاب على الاستنتاج عند بناء المعنى أثناء قراءة النصوص. وكشفت الدراسة أيضاً عن مجموعة من التحديات التي تواجه المعلمين في تدريس مهارة الاستنتاج أثناء دروس القراءة، منها: عدم وجود تعليمات واضحة في دليل المعلم تتعلق بتدريس مهارة الاستنتاج، وصعوبة بعض نصوص القراءة، وكذلك نقص التدريب المقدم للمعلمين. وعلى ضوء تلك النتائج قدمت الدراسة بشكل عام بعض الإرشادات لصانعي السياسات وواضعي المناهج والمشرفين والمعلمين لتحسين الوضع الحالي في كيفية تطوير قدرة الطلاب على الاستنتاج أثناء القراءة.

APPROVAL PAGE

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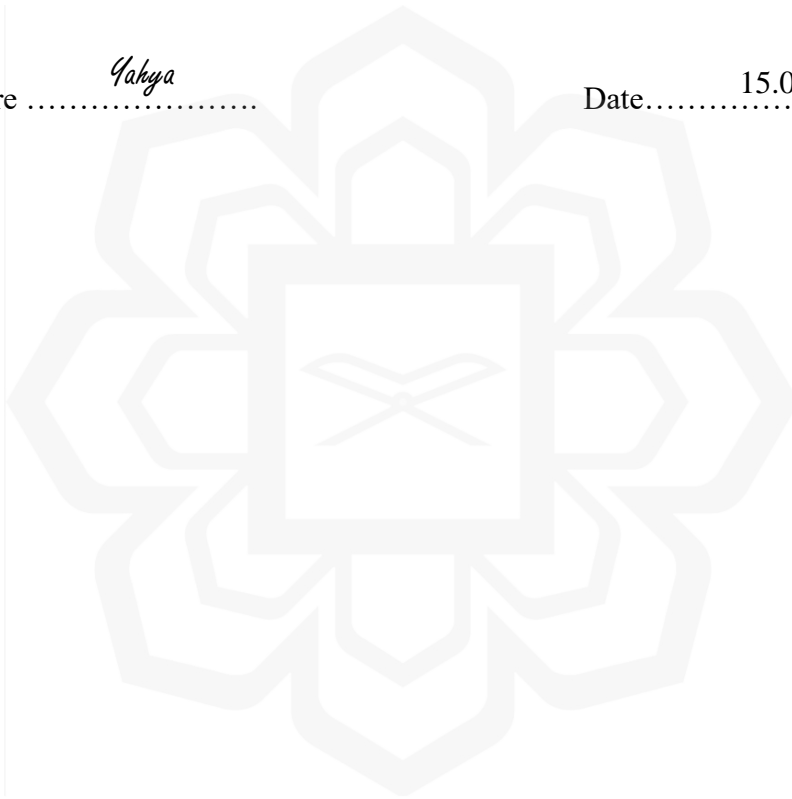
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DECLARATION

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To

I dedicate this work to my mother for her endless love, support, and prayers, to my father's soul, and all family members for providing support in the completion of this challenging endeavor.

I also dedicated this work to my beloved wife and children (Zakariya, Ibrahim, Affaq, and Mithaq), who were my inner drives and motivation in each stage of this study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I thank Almighty Allah for giving me strength, guidance, and the ability to complete this work. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all who have helped and encouraged me during this study. Without their support and encouragement, this achievement would not be fulfilled.

My first special thanks and gratitude are due to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Ismail Sheikh Ahmad. He has been the main source of inspiration in writing this thesis because of his broad reading knowledge. He has been a great mentor and advisor for me. Without his guidance and help, this study would never be completed; I will forever be thankful. Also, the same thanks go to my co-supervisor, Associate Prof. Dr. Zainurin Abd Rahman, for his support and the valuable comments that enriched the study.

I also wish to thank International Islamic University Malaysia, especially the faculty members and staff of Kulliyah of Education, for their invaluable contributions, support, and assistance extended to me whenever I contacted them.

I wish to express my special gratitude to all my friends, especially Dr. Bashir Oueslati, who worked all the way with me and offered his support and affection. He always believed in me and never hesitated to provide support at all times, which has made the completion of this thesis possible.

I would like to acknowledge the Omani educational governorates and schools in which this study was conducted. Thanks to all the participants who completed the questionnaire from different educational governorates. I deeply thank the ten teachers who agreed to participate in the classroom observation and interviews for the valuable time and information they added to this study. My gratitude is also extended to the curriculum and assessment specialists for sharing their professional experience and being entirely open to talking about the current situation in Oman. I am also thankful to all English Language supervisors, especially Mr. Rashid Al-Moqbali and Mr. Talib Al-Dhehli, who provided me with support and assistance while collecting the data.

Last but not least, I would like to show my appreciation to my mother for giving me moral support, to my brothers and sisters for their encouragement. Also, to my beloved children and my wife for their love, sacrifice, and patience during this challenging process. Without their support, I would have never been able to accomplish this study.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore perceptions, practices and challenges related to inference-making instruction in the Omani context. The importance of the study lies in providing a better picture of the current instructional situation related to inference-making in the Omani post-basic context. It provided empirical data from various participants and research tools by shedding light on perceptions, practices, challenges facing inference instruction, and suggestions to overcome them in the Omani EFL contexts. This introductory chapter attempts to provide the research background and statement of the problem of the present investigation. It also explains the purpose of the study, its objectives, and the research questions that will guide it. Furthermore, it discusses the significance, limitations and delimitations of the study. Finally, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the study is described.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Reading is a complex cognitive process that involves the interplay of visual, auditory, cognitive, contextual, and affective factors. According to Pardo (2004), comprehending a text involves combining prior knowledge, previous experiences, and textual information. Therefore, learners are required to think about what they are reading and how it connects to what they already know to construct meaning.

In fact, the most researchable topic in the EFL classroom today is the issue of reading comprehension because of its impact on students' overall achievement and

because of its importance as a life skill related to higher-order thinking skills. Therefore, several studies have been conducted to identify the most important challenges facing students in EFL context (Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; Hamra & Syatriana, 2015; Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2015; Davoudi & Yousefi, 2015; Samad, Jannah & Fitriani, 2017; Keezhatta & Omar, 2019, Mohammed & Rashid, 2019; and Syahabuddin, Yusny, & Zahara, 2019). They have identified several EFL learners' reading problems such as low proficiency level, insufficient vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, and a limited amount of reading strategies which can affect reading comprehension. However, previous studies and other related studies have investigated general reading problems and factors affecting students' reading comprehension in the Omani context and in other EFL contexts. Hence, this study attempts to focus on one of the fundamental skills in reading comprehension: inference-making ability. Specifically, the study seeks to explore EFL teachers' perceptions and practices related to inference-making instruction in the Omani context.

In Oman, Basic Education system was introduced in 1998 to replace the General Education system. The new system runs from grades 1 to 10 and is divided into two cycles: Cycle One (grades 1-4) and Cycle Two (grades 5-10). Then, students move to Post-Basic Education (grades 11 – 12), similar to high school in other countries (Ministry of Education, 2020).

In Oman, English is taught as a foreign language. The English language curricula are developed based on the Ministry of Education Curriculum Framework (2010), which defines the main outcomes of each educational stage and the specific objectives for each grade level. The textbooks are developed by the Omani Ministry of Education and taught across the country. The teaching material comprises of

'coursebook,' 'workbook,' and 'Teacher's Guide.' The coursebook is divided into five themes, and each theme is divided into five different units. Each unit focuses on a particular skill: reading, grammar, vocabulary, listening and speaking, and writing. The workbook includes writing and further language practice activities based on the units in the coursebook. The Teacher's guide provides the EFL teachers the detailed guidelines of teaching approaches and methods. Although the themes support the integration of the language skills, only one unit of each theme focused mainly on reading. Students are exposed to a variety of text types and genres such as; informational texts, narratives, articles, and instructions. The specific reading objectives for grades eleven and twelve, as stated in the Ministry of Education Curriculum Framework (2010), are:

- Learners should be able to read a variety of text-types and genres.
- Learners should be able to select appropriate reading strategies when reading for different purposes.
- Learners should be able to use strategies to improve their reading speed.

The Ministry of Education Curriculum Framework emphasized that the topics included in grades eleven and twelve deal with global issues. Accordingly, students need to reflect on them based on their previous experiences in the Omani context. Therefore, some students may find it difficult to link the topics to their previous knowledge and experiences (Al Ajmi, 2006). Another important aspect raised by the World-bank study (2012) is that the current textbooks of grades eleven and twelve are overcrowded in terms of the content expected to be covered within the time available. Therefore, the time allocated for reading in the classroom seems insufficient, and therefore, many teachers tend to use silent reading to cover their lessons.

With regard to the assessment of reading comprehension skills, the Omani Ministry of Education Assessment Document mentioned (2018) that teachers need to assess students' ability to: comprehend the general idea of a text, recognize the type of a text, arrange the sequence of information in a text, use pre-reading activities to predict what a text would be about, guess the meanings of particular words from context, extract specific information from a text, and use different reading strategies, e.g., skimming, scanning.

Hence, there are several motives for selecting this research topic, all of which are related to Omani students' reading performance.

In Oman, EFL students face similar problems related to reading comprehension as EFL readers elsewhere. Among these problems include understanding the meanings of individual words, inferring meanings, dealing with a text's cohesion and coherence, and the ability to activate their background knowledge, and low of motivation (Mustafa, 2002; Shannon, 2003; Mourtaga, 2005; Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; and Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2015). Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2015) analyzed tenth graders' exam marks of the academic year (2013/2014). They found that Omani EFL students have a serious lack of success in both vocabulary and reading sections. Although several studies have investigated the general reading problems and the factors affecting EFL students' reading comprehension, the review of the literature reveals a lack of empirical studies that have investigated inference-making in the Omani context. Also, in general not only in Oman, there is a dearth of empirical studies in similar EFL contexts which attempted to explore students' inference-making ability, the types of strategies used by students or teachers, or any other relevant aspects. The researcher's efforts to find relevant studies on inference-making in EFL reading comprehension in Oman and neighboring countries have not yielded any results.

Taking into account the existence of this gap, the present study seeks to explore perceptions and practices related to inference instruction in the Omani context.

The second reason for selecting this area derived from the researcher's earlier study of the "Role of prior knowledge in EFL reading comprehension," which showed that Omani EFL teachers have limited use of reading strategies attributed to the lack of training they receive, particularly on how to activate students' prior knowledge. So, it is very important to continue exploring the current situation of teachers' practices to shed light on what and how reading comprehension strategies are taught, in particular, inference-making strategy.

The third reason for selecting this research topic is that inferencing is seen by many researchers as the heart of the comprehension process ((Schank, 1976; Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; Dole et al.,1991; Oakhill & Cain, 2012; and Ahmed et al., 2016). According to Kintsch & van Dijk (1978), reading with comprehension involves building a mental model of the text in the reader's memory to make connections between text's elements without explicit links; these connections are known as inferences. The term inference can be defined as "any information about events, relations, and so on that the reader adds to the information that is explicitly presented" (van den Broek, Risen, & Husebye-Hartmann, 1995: 353).

Many studies emphasized the importance of inferencing skills for reading comprehension. According to Elbro and Buch-Iversen (2013), inference skills are crucial for reading comprehension. They represent the ability to combine information from the text with background knowledge or experiences to make a reasonable guess. Likewise, Oakhill and Cain (2012) indicated that individuals that demonstrate weak inferencing abilities do poorly in reading comprehension. Inferential skills help students to learn how to think critically and ask meaningful questions about the text.

They also allow readers to expand current knowledge through reading. Therefore, teachers' role includes developing students' inferencing skills. This can be done by decoding print, vocabulary building, questioning, and making story structures explicit (Graesser, 2007). Teachers can use direct instructions to help learners construct meaning from any reading text.

So, it would be beneficial to know how inference-making is perceived and practiced by teachers, curriculum, and assessment in the Omani context.

Another reason for focusing on inferencing skill stemmed from the increasing interest in developing 21st-century skills in students, inference being one of these essential skills. Marzano (2010) mentioned that inferences-making is the foundation to many of the higher-level thinking skills that students should utilize effectively in the 21st century.

In addition, teachers' perspectives regarding reading influence classroom practice and what students learn. Many studies showed that teachers' perceptions greatly impacted their instructional practice and their students' achievement (Wilson & Wineburg, 1988; Johnson, 1992; and Prawat & Anderson, 1988). The teachers have a direct influence on students' reading comprehension. According to Kamil et al., (2008), developing students' ability in reading depends upon the use of serious instructional practices and building up positive attitudes towards reading by teachers. Similarly, Tovani (2000) stated:

If teachers can slow down their thinking and notice what they do as expert readers..., they will know how to design effective reading strategy instruction. They can show students through modeling their own reading process how proficient readers attack different kinds of texts.

However, several studies showed that EFL teachers did not receive enough pre-service or in-service training to teach and assess their students' inferencing ability.

Thus, it is crucial to understand teachers' perceptions and the impact they have on their classroom practices to improve educational practice, as indicated by Borg (2003) and Singhal (2001). To the researcher's best knowledge, there is a lack of empirical studies on Omani EFL teachers' perceptions regarding inference-making strategy and their actual practice during reading lessons. This study will shed light on the current situation regarding inference-making instruction and the challenges that EFL Omani teachers face. It will be explored by investigating perceptions and actual practice, which will help to identify the challenges in the Omani context and recommendations to overcome them.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There is a strong relationship between students' ability to infer as a higher-order thinking skill and their general performance in reading comprehension (Cain et al., 2001, Oakhill & Cain, 2012, Silva & Cain, 2015, and Kudret & Baydik, 2016). However, studies have not focused on this skill to find out the reasons for students' poor reading. In general, there is a dearth of empirical studies in similar EFL contexts which attempted to explore students' inference-making ability, the types of strategies used by students and teachers, or any other relevant aspects. The researcher's efforts to find relevant studies on inference-making in EFL reading comprehension in Oman and neighboring countries have not yielded any results. Taking into account the existence of this gap, the present study seeks to explore perceptions and practices related to inference instruction in the Omani context.

Since inference-making is very essential in reading comprehension, not teaching it properly may cause students' failure in reading comprehension (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Van den Broek, Risdén, & Husebye-Hartmann, 1995; Keene &

Zimmerman, 1997; Cain et al., 2001; and Beers, 2003). The lack of empirical studies addressing the inference-making in the Omani context requires in-depth investigation to know the current situation. The current studies revealed poor higher-order comprehension skills.; however, did not investigate precisely the perceptions of EFL teachers and their actual practices, especially about inference-making as a fundamental comprehension skill.

The review of the literature reveals some of the problems affecting reading comprehension among Omani students, which included some factors or elements that are related to inference-making, such as; lack of background knowledge, insufficient vocabulary, and a limited amount of reading strategies (Mustafa, 2002; Shannon, 2003; Mourtaga, 2005; Al-Mahrooqi & Asante, 2010; World Bank 2012; and Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2015). For instance, a study by Al Ajmi (2006) found that the first reading difficulty encountered by Omani students was related to ‘content/world background knowledge’. She attributed this difficulty to the type of reading texts and teachers' instructional strategies. Another study conducted by Al Brashdi (2002) also found that ‘background knowledge’ is among the three most serious problems facing Omani students when constructing meaning from written texts. Both studies focused only on Omani teachers’ and students’ perspectives on the reading difficulties but did not examine English teachers’ instructional practices.

A study by Al-Jahwari (2015) investigated three aspects related to prior knowledge in EFL reading comprehension in Oman: teachers’ views of the role of prior knowledge, the instructional strategies they use for activating students’ prior knowledge, and the difficulties they face during prior knowledge activation. Results show that Omani EFL teachers are aware of the importance of prior knowledge in reading comprehension, but they have limited awareness of its instructional

implications. This was attributed to the lack of pre-service and in-service training teachers received on various techniques for activating students' prior knowledge. In addition, Al Brashdi (2002) indicated that the average readability score for EFL reading for 50 undergraduate students at Sultan Qaboos University was about 61.4% for the story passage and 26.3% expository text. This shows that the expository passage is harder than the story and most students lacked the necessary strategies to construct meaning from text. The study concludes that Omani EFL students' reading performance is often less than satisfactory.

These previous studies showed clearly how Omani EFL students suffered from poor reading comprehension skills and strategies. As mentioned before, many studies have investigated the general reading problems and the factors affecting EFL students' reading comprehension. In contrast, this study attempts to be more focused on inference-making ability as a fundamental skill that students need to deeply comprehend any reading text. The study is more concerned with, exploring educationists' perceptions and practices in the Omani context. Because students' ability to make inferences depends on teachers' reading instructional practices in the classroom, therefore, the focus in this study is on the teachers' perceptions and practices in developing students' inference-making ability. It aims at knowing how inference making is viewed by teachers, curriculum, and assessment specialists in the Omani context.

Since Omani EFL students face problems with reading comprehension, they need to be trained on reading comprehension strategies, especially the inference-making strategy. Therefore, teachers play the most crucial role in the implementation of appropriate instructional methods. However, as mentioned before, teachers' perceptions may affect their actual practices, consequently reducing students' chances

of acquiring the strategies needed for reading comprehension. So, another knowledge gap that this study attempts to fill is that most reading studies have not focused on actual practice regarding reading comprehension strategies. In Oman, to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, there is a lack of understanding of how such skills are taught and how Omani EFL teachers perceive inference-making and its instruction. Moreover, it would be beneficial to involve curriculum and assessment specialists in the study in order to explore their opinions about inference making since they are responsible for developing programs, textbooks, teacher's guides, and assessments that measure students' inferencing ability. Also, this can help to identify the challenges that teachers may face in teaching inferencing, which could be influenced by curriculum or assessment methods. Consequently, this will help to interpret the results of the teacher questionnaire and interviews.

1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this mixed-method study is to carry out an in-depth exploration of the EFL teachers' perceptions and practices related to inference-making in the Omani EFL reading lessons. Also, the study investigated the challenges that grades eleven and twelve teachers face when developing inferences-making abilities among students, and their suggestions to improve students' inference-making ability. In addition, it explored curriculum and the assessment specialists' views relative to inference-making instructions in Omani EFL context. This investigation relied on different research instruments: a questionnaire, an observation checklist, and a semi-structured interview. Also, the data were collected from two primary informants; EFL teachers and specialists of curriculum and assessment.

Studies on teachers' perceptions and their instructional practices in language education can shed light on what and how reading comprehension strategies are taught within classroom settings. Thus, it determines the aspects that need to be considered by decision-makers, the curriculum, developers, and teachers to effectively enhance the current reading instructions.

1.5 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study are to explore Omani EFL teachers' perceptions about teaching inference-making in relation to their classroom's instructional practices and the challenges they face. Also, it explores how curriculum and assessment specialists view inferencing and its instruction in Omani EFL context. To this end, the study seeks to:

1. investigate Omani EFL teachers' perceptions about teaching inference-making strategy in reading lessons.
2. describe Omani EFL teachers' classroom practices in teaching inference-making strategy in reading lessons.
3. identify the challenges Omani EFL teachers face when teaching inferencing in reading lessons.
4. describe Omani EFL teachers' suggestions to improve students' inference-making ability.
5. investigate the extent to which the curriculum and assessment facilitate the students' inference-making ability as perceived by specialists.

The above objectives address the different aspects related to inference-making in the Omani context. The first objective targets EFL teachers' perceptions by exploring their understanding of inference-making strategy, integration of inference-