

Contextual Influences on English Language Teaching in Libya

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الملخص :

من المؤكد أن العملية التعليمية في أي إطار تتأثر بعوامل البيئة المحيطة بتلك العملية، وعليه فإن ما يحدث داخل الفصول الدراسية بين المعلمين والطلاب عادة ما يتم بحسب هذه العوامل المحيطة. تتشابك هذه المؤثرات إلى حد ما وتتأثر بثقافة النظام التعليمي التي من ضمنها عدة عوامل ومنها معتقدات المعلمين عن التعليم والتعلم وأيضاً توقعات المدرسين والطلاب داخل الفصول الدراسية، وعلي ذلك فإن هذه الورقة البحثية تلقي الضوء حول هذه التأثيرات البيئية في محاولة لتسهيل عملية تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في ليبيا. هذه الورقة تبعث برسالة مفيدة إلى واضعي السياسات التعليمية وعمليات تحديد المناهج وبرامج تطوير المدرسين في ليبيا والعالم.

Abstract

There is no doubt that the educational process in any context is affected by the contextual influences that are prevalent within this particular context. Thus, what happens inside the classrooms between teachers and students is often decided by these contextual influences. These influences are to some extent intertwined and affected by the culture of the educational system including elements such as teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching and the classroom expectations of both teachers and students. This paper therefore sheds light on these contextual influences in an attempt to facilitate the process of English language teaching in Libya. This paper provides useful messages and implications for educational policy makers, curriculum reform processes, teacher education programs in Libya and elsewhere.

Key words: contextual influences teachers' beliefs, classroom expectations

1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that the educational process in any society is influenced by the socio-cultural factors within this particular society Coleman [1], Holliday [2]. Educational stakeholders including teachers and learners work within a socio-cultural setting and their expectations are influenced by the norms of that particular setting. When teachers and learners come to classrooms, they bring with them their beliefs and expectations about what to teach and how to teach. Thus, the educational process in any context is not only an exchange of information between teachers and students, but it is also a set of conventions,

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which decides what happens between these parties (teachers and students). These conventions are determined by the social and cultural norms within this particular context Coleman [1], Holliday [2], Tudor [3], Tudor, [4].

Stressing the central role of the social context, Tudor [3], argues that “the classroom is a socially defined reality and is therefore influenced by the belief systems and behavioral norms of the society of which it is part”. This coincides with Locastro’s [5](p495) argument that “classrooms are social constructions where teachers, learners, dimensions of the local educational philosophy, and more general socio-cultural values, beliefs, and expectations all meet”

Nunan and Lamb [6](p33) add “classroom decision making and the effective management of the learning process cannot be made without reference to the larger context within which instruction takes place”. Holliday [2](p24) also notes “the culture of the classroom provides tradition and recipe for both teachers and students in the sense that there are tacit understandings about what sort of behavior is acceptable”

In the field of language teaching and learning, it is important for educational stakeholders (educational policy makers, curriculum developers, teacher education and training programs etc) to consider that pedagogical and social-cultural differences could be a source of conflict if they were not taken into consideration in the implementation of English language teaching curricula and methodology.

Considering the above discussion, this paper sheds light on the contextual factors that are inherited within the Libyan educational system in an attempt to facilitate the process of English language teaching in Libya. It is hoped that this paper will provide significant contributions and recommendations to English language teaching in Libya and elsewhere. Before we proceed, we provide an overview about the status of English language teaching in Libya.

2. ELT in Libya

English is taught in Libya at preparatory and secondary schools as a foreign language. Teaching English as a foreign language started in 1946 during the British administration. English was taught as one of the main school subjects at primary five and six stages up until 1973 but then it was restricted to preparatory schools. The first Libyan English books were

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developed in 1961 by Gusbi and John for the preparatory stages. Later in 1971, Gusbi developed a new series of English books called “English for Libya” and another series of English books for secondary stages called “further English for Libya” that curriculum was based on the audio-lingual approach with a focus on grammatical rules. In 1982, Gusbi again developed another series of English books called “living English for Libya” (Abusrewel [7]. The focus of English language teaching in Libya was on grammar and reading comprehension. Lessons were characterized with oral drills (with a focus on correct grammar and pronunciation), memorization of vocabulary, and reading aloud. Arabic was widely used in English lessons by teachers and students Orafi and Borg, [8].

During the time between 1986 and early 1993, teaching and learning English and all other languages were banned as a result of the political clashes between Kaddafi and the west Jalova, [9]. This step made by the government led to a giant dent in the process and level of teaching and learning English language all over the country. This ban had long-term impact on students, especially if they became employees in fields, which require English language to communicate with foreign workers. When English language teaching was resumed in 1993 there was a lack of English teachers beside the returning English teachers who came back to teach English at schools.

In the year 2000, the revised edition of “English for Libya” was introduced for preparatory and secondary schools. This curriculum was published by Garnet Education in the UK. The new English curriculum is embodied in a series of course books called *English for Libya*. These course books include units dedicated to reading, vocabulary and grammar, functional use of language, listening, speaking and writing. The broader scope of this curriculum was an obvious departure from its predecessor, where functional language use, listening and speaking had not been addressed. It is, though, in its methodology that the new curriculum departed most radically from its predecessor. This curriculum contains activities that are based on the communicative standards and which support the effective use of language, receptive and productive skills in both oral and written contexts.

In the year 2018, the Libyan government has decided to introduce English language teaching into its primary school levels in an attempt to enhance the performance of Libyan students in relation to English language learning, the course is called (*21st Century English*

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for Libya). It has been developed for teaching English from the first to the fifth primary school. The course *integrates a general English syllabus with skills, such as study skills, teamwork, critical thinking and problem-solving. It calls for the children to indulge into the process of learning English through the integrated approach to teaching, this approach is represented in the course through a systematic program of motivating activities for pre-writing, initial letter and sound recognition, blending letters together, and ultimately whole word recognition, as well as games, songs and stories. Suitable skills are also taught in this course such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity.*

Examples for such skills in the course are featured in the lessons through activities like pair work, puzzles, stories, 'find the difference' activities, dialogue practice and games. The speaking skill is also stressed in this course in which integrated speaking activities that give opportunities to repeat language, practice pronunciation and develop fluency in a meaningful context. The recorded materials also provide a model for speaking activities and a reference for pronunciation for both pupils and teachers.

3. The Educational Culture in Libya

It is widely acknowledged that the educational process is not only an exchange of knowledge between teachers and learners, but it is also a set of conventions and assumptions, which underlie the structure of this educational culture Coleman [1], Holliday [2], Tudor [3], Tudor [4]. What might be appropriate and acceptable in one educational setting might not be so in other educational settings. It is therefore important for educational policy makers, and other educational stakeholders to consider that cultural conventions and assumptions within the educational system could be a source of conflict they were not taken into account in any attempt to reform or improve the educational process in any educational system.

As mentioned before, different curricular reforms had been made to improve the status of English language teaching in Libya. However, these reforms often fail to achieve their goals and intentions Orafi [10]. We believe that one reason of this failure is the lack of understanding of the key assumptions, and conventions that underlie the Libyan educational culture. We therefore proceed to shed light on these assumptions and conventions including beliefs about language teaching and learning, and classroom expectations that dominate English language classrooms in Libya.

4. Teachers' beliefs

Curriculum reforms frequently require teachers to change their behaviours and practices. However, “we are unlikely to bring about change in practice unless we face up to and, if necessary challenge teachers’ deep rooted beliefs about the nature of knowledge transmission” Adey & Hewitt [11](p156). Spillane [12](p415) states that:

Reform cannot be accomplished by having teachers learn only the surface form of reform practices. It requires grappling with the underlying ideas and may require deep conceptual change, in which teachers rethink an entire system of interacting attitudes, beliefs and practices.

Thus, as Breen [13](p472) has proposed “any innovation in classroom practice from the adoption of a new technique or textbook to the implementation of a new curriculum has to be accommodated within the teacher’s own framework of teaching principles”. According to Breen et al, these principles stem from underlying beliefs or personal theories the teachers hold about nature of the broader educational process.

Tillema [14](p602) has argued that “beliefs serve as filters which screen new information, ultimately determine which elements are accepted and integrated in the professional’s knowledge base”. The filtering effect of beliefs has been also stressed by Pennington [15] who claims that teachers’ existing beliefs function as filter, hindering or modifying new information coming in.

Given the crucial role teachers’ beliefs play in accepting or rejecting curriculum reforms, one might ask what the term belief means. Pajares [16] argues that researchers cannot understand teachers’ beliefs without defining clearly, what belief is, and how it is different to other similar concepts. Fields such as anthropology, social psychology, and philosophy have added to our awareness of the nature of beliefs. According to Richardson [17](p103), there is a significant congruence of definition among these three fields in that “beliefs are thought of as psychologically held understandings, premises or propositions about the world that are felt to be true”.

In ELT, Borg, [18](p186) conceptualized the term belief as a “proposition on which may be consciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is

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therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour”. Ellis [19](p24) define beliefs as “statements teachers made about their ideas, thoughts, and knowledge that are expressed as evaluations of what should be done, should be the case and is preferable”.

In order to understand language teaching, we need to know more about language teachers: what they do, how they think, what they know, and how they learn. Specifically, “we need to understand more about how language teachers conceive of what they do: what they know about language teaching, and how they think about their classroom practice” Freeman and Richards [20](p1).

Research interest in teachers' beliefs saw development during the 1990s and emphasis on its significance in the field of language teaching has since become highly visible. Moreover, investigating teachers' beliefs has become essential because it presents "insights into the unique filter through which second language teachers make instructional decisions, choose instructional materials, and select certain instructional practices” Johnson [21](p440).

As mentioned previously, one of the factors that might led to the failure of the ELT curricula reforms that have been introduced to the Libyan educational system is the mismatch between the aims and principles of these curricula and Libyan teachers' existing beliefs about English language teaching and learning. For example, Orafi and Borg [8] investigated the congruence between the principles of ELT curriculum being implemented in Libyan secondary schools, and teachers' existing beliefs and classroom practices. Findings revealed that teachers' practices in most cases did not reflect the principles of the intended curriculum. Thus, although one of the curriculum aims is to “for the students to communicate effectively and fluently with each other and to make talking in English a regular activity” Macfarlane [22](p3). Classrooms were generally teacher centred and Arabic was the dominant language during classroom interaction.

Orafi and Borg [8] argued that teachers' practices reflected deeply held beliefs about the process of language teaching and learning that were contrary to those embedded in the curriculum. During the reading lessons, teachers' spent substantial time reading word by word and sentence by sentence, explaining vocabulary, translating into Arabic, and reading

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aloud. Little attention was given to activities included in the curriculum such as working out the meaning of words from the context, scanning the reading text for specific information, matching activities, and the after reading activities. Orafi and Borg [8] stated that the beliefs about teaching reading teachers expressed during the interviews were at odds with the curriculum's approach to this aspect of language teaching. They went further to suggest that there were little evidence in the teachers' comments that the teachers were aware of the communicative orientation towards teaching embedded in the curriculum Orafi and Borg [8].

More recently, Grada [23] examined Libyan teachers' beliefs and practices in relation to teaching English. Findings revealed that most teachers believe that the grammar translation method is the best method to teach English in the classroom, and that these ideas about language teaching had a great impact on how teachers taught and assessed their English language students. Most teachers incorporated teaching reading passages, comprehension questions, and testing students' knowledge of grammatical rules.

Abukhattala [24] emphasizes the role of teachers' past learning experience on how teachers conceive and deal with English language teaching. He argues that many Libyan teachers prefer to use methods familiar to them from their own learning days. Therefore, how teachers were taught will undoubtedly affect their way of teaching, This has been referred to as *the apprenticeship of observation*, it describes a phenomenon whereby student teachers arrive for their training courses having spent thousands of hours as school children observing and evaluating professionals in action. The term was coined by Lortie [25] and this apprenticeship is largely responsible for many of the preconception that pre-service student teachers hold about teaching Borg [18].

In summary, most Libyan English teachers tend to focus on a particular approach or method to language teaching according to what he or she believes the best for his or her students or what he/she feels more familiar to what he was taught before.

5. Classroom expectations

In the history of education, teaching a foreign language represents a challenge activity, as it involves a very complex and multi-layered issues, and demands interactional competence and awareness Jenks [26]. Thornbury [27] clarifies that in a language classroom,

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the communication patterns are complex and unique, differing from those found in content-based subjects such as mathematics and geography.

In many EFL settings, teachers' practice inside the classroom is mainly traditional where students mostly sit there passively and the teacher talks and explains the language alone inside the classroom. Lewis [28](p46) describes the role of the teacher using traditional methods as "a tap pouring water into an empty vessel. They are like any other teachers in which they tend to communicate what they have learnt before to their students.

The above description coincides with Abukhatala's [24] description of the teachers' role within the Libyan educational setting. According to Abukhatal [24], teachers in the Libyan schools have authority over classroom discussions and students' behavior. Moreover, the teachers are supposed to represent the accepted social-behavioral model of an educator who is responsible for developing the values and the character of his/her students. He goes on to emphasize that out of "respect" as he called that Libyan students tend to make their teacher the center of learning. The impact of this profound "respect" or "alienation" between students and teachers is the tendency among students in Arab schools to adopt a receptive or passive role in typical teacher-centered classrooms. Abukhattala [24]. This can be a result of culture and society as the educational process in any society is affected by the cultural and social factors within this particular society. Who does what in the classroom is sometimes culturally based Coleman [1], Holliday [2], Markee, [29], Shamim [30], Tudor [3].

Within the Libyan educational culture, teachers are often regarded as the source of knowledge, and their role is seen to consist of imparting this knowledge to students. Students often assume that their role is to sit quietly and to memorize the information imparted by the teachers. Orafi [31]. Libyan teachers naturally play a key role in the whole learning process and have direct control over students because they are the main source of language knowledge. These values and perceived roles of Libyan teachers are so embedded that they may become an obstacle to adopting a new methodology Abukhattala [24].

In support of this idea Martin [32] argues that even during peer interaction in student-centered classrooms, it is always the teacher role that adds value to the learning opportunities, and that's because the teacher's role is an essential factor affecting students' academic

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performance through the influence of his/her expectations on students' attitudes towards learning.

There are number of factors and sources that influence teachers' expectations. Alderman [33] gave a useful summary of the major sources of the teachers' expectations: one potential source is related to teachers' beliefs about students' ability and their beliefs about intelligence. This judgment may be based on actual student performance. Alderman [33]. Studies have shown that the expectations that the teachers have about their students regarding behavior and academic performance can have a strong influence on achieving success in EFL/ESL learning, since they can act as self-fulfilling prophecies. Zabel [34].

It is worth mentioning that classroom expectations are prevalent within the Libyan school curriculum and are not exceptional for the English language curriculum. Changes in the English curriculum which imply new roles for teachers and students and thus not likely to have a major impact on actual classroom practices when instruction in all other school subjects remains grounded in traditional views of the roles of teachers and students. **6.**

Conclusion and implications

Throughout this paper, we have argued that the educational process in any setting is affected by the contextual factors, which underlie this particular setting. Thus, what might be appropriate in one educational setting might be inappropriate in other educational settings. This implies that educational policy makers and stakeholders within the educational process in any educational setting need to take into account the contextual factors when introducing any curriculum reform to avoid any frustration and obstacles during the implementation of this particular curriculum reform.

We recognize that the educational process is a complex process, and that they are many other factors that are not discussed in this paper may have a great impact on what happens within this particular educational process. However, we would argue that if a curriculum reform is not compatible with the contextual conventions of the context where this curriculum is to be implemented, conflict and frustration will emerge.

Curriculum planners and educational policy makers in Libya need to recognize that "curriculum innovation is not about putting into place the latest curriculum. It means

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changing the cultures of teachers, classrooms, and schools” Shakedi [35](p719). In many cases, ELT curriculum changes represent significant shifts in terms of what teachers and students do inside the classroom. This implies that teachers’ need support in order to make these significant shifts. As Wedell [36](p447) points out:

If planners introduce English curriculum change with stated objectives whose achievement requires teachers to make significant professional adjustments, it is clearly their responsibility to consider how teachers may be supported in making these. To be able to do so, planners themselves need to be clear about what adjustments the proposed changes will necessary involve.

Students as well need support to make the necessary shifts required by the proposed change. Shamim [30](p110) criticizes change agents for ignoring the learners’ role in the curriculum change process:

Whenever a change in the curriculum is planned, a lot of thought and attention is given to the resocialisation of teachers in new modes of thinking and behaving. On the other hand, the role of learners perhaps they have low status is by large ignored in planning and decision making concerning the introduction of an innovation

We would argue that we cannot expect students to develop new learning strategies and expectations for the sake of a change in one school subject. Thus, a curriculum change in English language teaching is inextricably connected with the educational system, and the attitudes to teaching and learning that underlie this particular system. Teachers as well might find it difficult to adopt new ways of teaching that are not grounded in the broader educational system. As Adey & Hewitt [11](p24) observe “an individual teacher finds it virtually impossible to maintain a radically new form of teaching while colleagues around them in the same school remain untouched by the innovation”.

Thus, teachers are not simply implementers of educational innovations that are handed down to them by policy makers, but they interpret, modify, and implement these innovations according to their beliefs and the context where these teachers work” Orafi, [31](p17). We would insist that within the Libyan context, both teachers and students need

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resocialisation in order for the effective implementation of the English language curricula within the Libyan educational system.

English language teachers within the Libyan context may not be aware of the influence of their existing beliefs. This implies the need for teaching training and education programs where teachers are given opportunities to reflect upon their own classroom practices, and where their existing beliefs are uncovered and confronted. As Kumaravadivelu [37](p552) argues “when teacher educators use the teachers’ values, beliefs, and knowledge as integral part of the learning process, then the entire process of teacher education becomes reflective rewarding”.

It is vital for educational policy makers within the Libyan educational context to understand that curriculum reform does not only mean introducing a new set of textbooks, but it also implies a change in the way teachers and students behave and think.

Finally, we cannot simply blame the teachers for any curriculum reform failure. If the Libyan society is willing to improve the status of English language teaching in Libyan classrooms, all the stakeholders including educational officials, curriculum planners, and educational policy makers need to commit to this process.

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