The business of teaching English as a second language: A Libyan case study

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Abstract

In the increasingly globalised world, English has come to play a major role in several countries of the world including the African country of Libya. English language teaching and learning in Libya, over the last fifty years, has undergone varying official stances, often with detrimental effects. Though English was recognised as the official second language of the country in 2005, there are challenges galore. This paper touches the slated education reforms in Libya, in the aftermath of the change of guard in Libya prompted by a civilian uprising, and recommends an official policy that promotes bilingualism. Arabic and English languages should be equal preference.

Keywords: Africa; Libya; English; Second language; Bilingualism

Introduction

In an increasingly globalised world, learning an additional language other than one's own mother tongue is always an asset. Moving away from the independent way of functioning, globalisation has given rise to a system in which world nations are often joining hands for enhancing efficiency and productivity. Key to the success of any collaborative efforts is requisite language skills.

While there is no dearth of learners seeking to learn additional and second languages like Chinese, Japanese and Spanish, the majority of language learners veer to English as the second language. A press release of the British Council in 1995 stated that world-wide there are 1,400 million people living in countries where

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English has an official status. “One of out five of the world’s population speak English to some level of competence. Demand from the other four fifths is increasing”.

“The current competent users of English number up to seven hundred million, living in every continent … of whom less than half are native speakers”, writes Brumfit (2001)². A recent study by Graddol (2007)³ reports that “a massive increase in the number of people learning English has already begun, and is likely to reach a peak of around 2 billion in the next 10–15 years.”

In an age dominated by Information and Communication Technologies, English is rated as the most widely used language of the Internet, with 536.6 million English language users in 2010⁴. English is also the main language of books, academic conferences, international business, diplomacy and sport.

English is also proving to be a key ingredient of higher education. Graddal (2007) points out that around two-thirds of the world’s top 100 universities are in English-speaking countries. This is one reason why English is used increasingly as the medium of education in universities across the world … The number of international students coming to English-speaking countries seemed to be ever-rising … Over half the world’s international students are taught in English.”

Richards (no date)⁵ refers to the ever-growing demand for good communication skills in English and adds, “fluency in English is a pre-requisite for success and advancement in many fields of employment in today’s world.” Thus there can be no doubt that English is an undeniable factor of the future and as Graddal states, “more countries are establishing English-medium courses.” For countries hitherto unexposed to English, teaching English can be both an opportunity and challenge.

It is in this backdrop that this paper attempts to understand the various dimensions of teaching English in Libya as a case study.

Libya – A Brief Educational Profile

Libya is the fourth largest country in Africa, with a population of 6.6 million. The country enjoys a high level of economic prosperity due to the presence of 44 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and more gas than any other African state. These oil revenues and a small population give Libya one of the highest per capita GDPs in Africa and have made it possible for the government to provide an extensive level of social security, particularly in the fields of housing, health care and education.

When Libya attained Independence, about 90% of its population was illiterate, and there were few university graduates⁶. Since Independence, the country has invested heavily in the improvement of its education system after realising the importance of education for the development and empowerment of its population.

Primary education was made free and compulsory in Libya. Children between the ages of 6 and 15 attend primary school and then attend secondary school for three additional years (15- to 18-year-olds). According to figures reported for the year 2000, approximately 766,807 students attended primary school and had 97,334 teachers; approximately 717,000 students were enrolled in secondary, technical, and vocational schools; and about 287,172 students were enrolled in Libya’s universities. In 2001, public expenditures on education amounted to about 2.7 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP)⁷.
Even though Arabic is the predominant language of the country, English came to occupy an increasingly important place as the second language. It was taught from primary school onward, and in the universities numerous scientific, technical, and medical courses were conducted in English.

A Government decision in the late 1980s eliminating English meant that a whole generation grew up with no exposure to this language. Though English language teaching was resumed in mid 1990s, the students had to go suffer through the lack of qualified teachers and limited curriculum. In 2005, English was recognised as the official second language of Libya. More on English language in Libya is being presented subsequently in the case description.

**Literature Review**

Before proceeding to explore the case of teaching English as a second language with specific reference to Libya, the paper will attempt the dynamics of teaching second language with a brief literature review.

Multilingualism is better for the knowledge society of the 21st century; state King and Johnstone (2001)\(^{10}\). “It is better for countries and states whose shared ambitions are for peace, growth and prosperity. It is better for business whose purpose is increased trade, greater competitiveness and greater employability.” Marland (1977)\(^{11}\) drives home the importance of language by stating that “language is central to learning. Learning involves language not just as a passive medium for instruction but as a principal means of forming and handling new concepts.”

Brumfit (2002)\(^{12}\) explains the different kinds of experience provided by different languages. Major languages of national and international communication including English provide a basis for action in the world as well as learning and conceptualization. Mother tongues, especially in early years, are crucial as the major means of learning. Classical languages with strong literary, religious and scientific traditions will have a major role in reinforcing the understanding of heritage.

Oxford (2003)\(^{13}\) has brought out the difference between second and foreign language. “A second language is a language studied in a setting where that language is the main vehicle of everyday communication and where abundant input exists in that language. A foreign language is a language studied in an environment where it is not the primary vehicle for daily interaction and where input in that language is restricted.” The Wikipedia\(^{14}\) simplifies it further and notes that a foreign language is used in an area where it is not generally spoken.

Attitude and aptitude are important factors in second language learning. Krashen (2002)\(^{15}\) notes that attitudinal factor encourages intake for language acquisition and enables the “performer to utilize the language heard for acquisition.” Aptitude is reflected through grammatical sensitivity and inductive ability. Citing Carroll (1973)\(^{16}\), the author explains inductive ability as the ability to “examine language material... and from this to notice and identify patterns and correspondences and relationships involving either meaning or grammatical form.”

Curtain & Dahlberg (2004)\(^{17}\) note that “the positive impact of cultural information is significantly enhanced when that information is experienced through foreign language and accompanied by experiences in culturally authentic situations.” Premawardhene (no date)\(^{18}\) argues that the curriculum of a foreign language should include an insight into historical and cultural aspects of the relevant speech community in order to provide students with them a better background knowledge.

Resnick (ed. 2006)\(^{19}\) after a study to understand the right age of initiation of foreign language learning, teaching methods to be adopted and extent of special aptitude for foreign language learning has concluded...
that foreign language instruction is dependent on a number of variables like “learner’s age, aptitude, and motivation; the amount of time available for instruction; and the difference between the native and the foreign language.” The author states that young children generally absorb languages faster than adults and calls for an integrated approach in teaching foreign language to older students and adults. Lee (1996) offers that an early start and continued progress toward bilingualism is desirable as there are evidences of cognitive benefits to early childhood bilingualism.

Sierra (no date) has discussed the relative strengths and problems of various approaches and methods of foreign language teaching like grammar-translation method, structuralist method, audio-lingual method and communicative and procedural approaches. After a detailed elaboration, the author concludes that teaching should not be approached following a particular method but should be seen as a “dynamic and reflective process, which means a permanent interaction among the curriculum, teachers, students, activities, methodology, and instructional materials”.

While contending that methods and approaches have their relative efficacies, Krashen (2009) states that language teaching should not be delimited to structures and methods alone but rather explore alternatives like conversation and pleasure reading. Krashen has examined some of the newer methods in language teaching like direct method, natural approach and total physical response. Resnick (ed.2006) argues for a “judicious mixture of practice and communication” involving deliberate direct instruction through study of grammatical structures and memorizing vocabulary lists coupled with ample classroom and study time. “A program consisting of a few hours of foreign language teaching per week is not enough,” he states.

Sierra (no date) also proposes an active role for teachers, “who design her or his own content and tasks, classroom interaction, materials, methodology, evaluation, etc., instead of a passive role which means dependence on other people's designs and methods”. With a view to making foreign language learning easier for the students, Oak and Martin (2003) recommend that expatriate teachers learn as much as the culture of the place they are working in.

Krashen (2009) has dwelt into the role of a classroom in second language teaching. After exploring the efficacy of classroom teaching for beginners and advanced learners, the author has concluded teaching can benefit those who cannot get “comprehensible input” from elsewhere. Teaching will be of less help when “rich sources of input are available”.

Geva (2006) notes that second language or L2 language proficiency takes a long time to develop and that it is “important to continue to provide L2 children with sustained and systematic opportunities to develop their L2 oral proficiency. To enhance academic achievement, it is important to be mindful of this point and not be complacent when acceptable levels of everyday oral language fluency have been reached”.

Emhamed and Krishnan (2011) have discussed the role of technology in second or foreign language learning and term is as useful as it gives both “teacher and student more accessibility to the target language in various aspects. “ Pennington (1996) offers that “technology in language education can increase the variety or diversity of learning opportunities and the quality of the learning experience in making input of more varied kinds learnable and accessible to each individual learner.”

Cummins and Davison (ed.2007) refer to the ambivalence in the embrace of English in the Information Age global economy. English “can no longer be neatly packaged and controlled by governments or even publishing companies”... English has replaced other languages as the second language taught most
frequently and intensively in school in countries around the world … Bilingual and trilingual programs involving English have increased significantly both in the private and public sector schools.

The Reform and Development of General Education (1995) of the Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman reads, “English is the most common language for international business and commerce and is the exclusive language in important sectors such as banking and aviation. The global language of Science and Technology is also English as are the rapidly expanding international computerised databases and telecommunications networks which are becoming an increasingly important part of academic and business life.”

Cummins and Davison (ed.2007) have also discussed the way English is taught in former colonial and non-colonial contexts. “In the former, language carries complex baggage related to its historical role and establishing and reinforcing patterns of power relations both between colonizer and colonized and within the colonized population. In non-colonial contexts, access to English is also associated with social stratification both with respect to who gets access the social advantages of access.” Referring to the importance accorded to English in Oman, Al-Issa (2002) states, “the choice of English here is primarily for transition purposes and based upon sociolinguistic, socioeconomic, sociocultural, historical and political factors.”

**Teaching English as Second Language in Libya**

As indicated in an earlier section, Libya has taken an ambivalent approach to English. The 1980s ban of English and the subsequent resumption has significantly impacted the approach of language teaching in Libya over the years.

This section begins a backgrounder on Libya and the changing stance to English language teaching, explores the methods used and the use of technology in English language teaching before mentioning the challenges faced.

Libya was an Italian colony from 1912 to 1943. Formal schools were opened this time for the education of the offspring of the Italian settlers, soldiers and bureaucrats. The medium of instruction was Italian and Libyan nationals were denied entry to these schools. Libyans continued to send their children to religious schools where they were taught the Holy Quran and the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. This scenario continued for about two decades after which children of influential Libyan families were permitted to study in the Italian schools. Even then, these Libyan students could attend the Italian schools only till they completed the fourth grade.

When King Idris, the first and last king of independent Libya came to power, tremendous transformation began to take place in the education sector. Under the monarchy, all Libyans were guaranteed the right to education. Libya saw a surge in the establishment of primary and secondary schools. Religious schools that had been closed during the struggle for independence were reactivated and new ones were established, which lent a religious hue to Libyan education. The monarchy encouraged the formal education of women, rural and Bedouin children and also education of the adults.

The University of Libya was founded in Benghazi in 1955, with a branch in Tripoli. In 1973 the two campuses became the universities of Benghazi and Tripoli, respectively, and in 1976 they were renamed Gar Yunis University (Benghazi) and Al Fatah University (Tripoli). Students were sent abroad for higher studies on government scholarships.
In 1965, the Government of Libya changed the system of instruction of English language that had operated in preparatory and secondary schools for over 10 years after releasing the handicap faced due to the inadequate standards of English teaching for the extension of higher education at home and abroad. The first of a new series of textbooks ‘English for Libya’ was introduced. The British Council and the American Cultural Centre provided support to the teacher.

However, things changed in 1981 with the introduction of compulsory military training for students. The regime demanded the return of thousands of Libyan students who were studying abroad especially those who were in the U.S. At this time around 5,000 Libyan students attended American universities. Many of them were reluctant to return to Libya. These measures were unpopular and university students became restless.

In March 1986 students of the faculties of English and French at Al Fatah University rose in protest against the regime and successfully thwarted Colonel Gadhafi’s attempt to close their departments and to destroy their libraries. A compromise was reached whereby the departmental libraries were spared, but both foreign languages were gradually to be phased out of university curricula. This caused much consternation and practical difficulties to the students.

**Methods in English language teaching** - The old system of teaching in Libya was through a series of five books and their companion volumes, ‘The Modern Readers’. The teaching was by a translation method which emphasised the acquisition of vocabulary through reading. It was generally taught by the repetition of one or two stereotype lesson plans. Any variation from the stereotypes was left to the initiative of the teachers. The new series ‘English for Libya’, initiated in the mid 1960s called for a different type of teaching as it was primarily designed to build language skills through learning basic sentence patterns rather than vocabulary.

In the 1980s, the Grammar-Translation Method was used to English in schools of Libya. After the reintroduction of English in the 1990s, the new English language syllabus was based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The shift was prompted by the demands of the society to produce skilled teachers who can function well in the changing work environment and the desire to keep up-to-date with the constant innovations that shape human life. In a CLT-oriented classroom, students are given various opportunities to engage in communication in the target language (Emhamed and Krishnan, 2011). The function of the instructor is that of a facilitator or coordinator whereby he or she prepares students for active learning through interactive, and communicative learning tasks like discussions and role plays in order to engage students with authentic, meaningful, and contextualized discourse (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

**Technology in Language Teaching** – The Ministry of Education in Libya had recommended that teachers integrate technology in teaching English (Saaid, 2010). Emhamed and Krishnan (2011) conducted a study of 40 Libyan English language teachers in the city of Sebha to understand teachers’ attitude towards embracing technology. They have arrived at the conclusion that Libyan teachers depict a positive attitude towards integrating technology in teaching English. The most common type of technology used were CDs as they were easily available and used extensively in the syllabus. The study covered 8 males and 32 female teachers between the ages of 23 and 40 from 7 public secondary schools and 3 private secondary schools in the city of Sebha. The teachers had experience ranging from 2 to 23 years.
Challenges - English is a compulsory subject from the 5th grade of elementary school in Libya and there is significant official will to upscale the promotion of the language. However English language teaching suffers from several challenges.

Though officially Libya has made the switch to the more relevant CLT, the Grammar-Translation is still used by some instructors in Libya (Saaid, 2010)\textsuperscript{39}. In the classroom, the instructor stands in front of students in using the Grammar-Translation method to teach students directly from textbooks. The instructor uses Arabic (the official language) to explain grammar and the meaning of EFL texts, and the students are asked to translate English sentences to Arabic, or vice versa. As a result of using this method of teaching, students’ proficiency in English language has deteriorated. (Emhamed and Krishnan, 2011)\textsuperscript{40}.

The adoption of technology is also far from encouraging. Emhamed and Krishnan (2011)\textsuperscript{41} point out that tools like overhead projectors are unavailable in classrooms. Teachers also lacked the skills in operating this equipment. Further, teachers have not been trained in the use of sophisticated technology, thus inhibiting their use. Teachers have to contend with lack of support from the school administration and time constraints. Non-integration of technology in language teaching has negatively impacted the learners. The students become bored with the same style of teaching approaches i.e. reading, translating, and memorizing and lose interest in learning the language. The aim of studying English is to pass exams. This creates a lot of difficulty in their studies in universities abroad or when they take up fields like Medicine and Petroleum Engineering which require a high level of English language proficiency.

Rajendran (2010)\textsuperscript{42} points out that the absence of opportunity to use English anywhere other than the language class acts as a de-motivating factor among students. The students seem to have no reading habit, accentuated by the absence of news papers, weeklies, monthlies and journals in English. Arabic is used everywhere; even name boards of shops, hospitals and banks are in this language. “Teaching English in the Libyan universities is a Herculean task. The complete lack of exposure to English of the students makes even more the task difficult to the teachers. Students seem to have no idea of proper sentence structure in English. They do not know the correct spellings and grammatical rules.”

The challenges notwithstanding, the positive and significant aspect is the general will and desire to learn and develop English language. As Rajendran (2010)\textsuperscript{43} states, “the Libyan students have excellent memory, interest in humour, communicative language and stories … The need for learning English is intensely felt for the social and economic development and for the advancement in the field of science and technology in the country.”

Current Scenario in Libya

In February 2011, protests broke out in several parts of Libya challenging Colonel Qaddafi’s iron rule. In July 2011, the United States had recognized the Libyan Transitional National Council (TNC) as the legitimate governing authority for Libya until an interim government is in place. After more than six months of mass uprising and civilian unrest, Colonel Qaddafi was ambushed and killed in October 2011. Media reports\textsuperscript{44} indicate that a change in education policies and reforms are on the cards. The importance to English language accorded by the new regime remains to be seen.

In the interest of the student community and with the larger welfare of Libyan economy in mind, this paper recommends that for strong policy that promotes bilingualism. The author would wish to call for an all-round sensitization that gives equal preference to Arabic and English languages in Libya. A patronising approach to English at the cost of Arabic language in education can have detrimental effects and water down all the good work done towards building the profile of English language in Libya.
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