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The Need for Change in Teacher Education in Yemen: The Beliefs of Prospective Language Teachers

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Abstract

This study focuses on exploring the beliefs of prospective teachers related to the current (2009-2010) status of the English Language Teacher Education Program (ELTEP) in Yemen. Major beliefs about teaching take shape within the context of teacher education programs (Pajares, 1992) and the investigation of Yemeni prospective teachers' beliefs provides an opportunity to understand the developmental paths of teachers in a relatively little researched setting (Al-Goufi, 2006). In this study, primary data sources were available education policy documents and semi-structured interviews with four prospective teachers before program completion. We found several themes that highlight various aspects of the ELTE program in Yemen. The findings showed that several academic and administrative problems prospective teachers reported were related to the lack of clear-cut standards and program philosophy statements. The analysis revealed that the education policy-makers paid little attention to program improvement and the application of the strategies they had planned. These results point to the need for a curriculum reform focusing on both theory and practice. While the participants expressed concerns related to various challenges, they also underscored the critical need for a strong ELTE program in Yemeni universities.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the beliefs of four prospective language teachers related to their English Language Teacher Education Program (ELTEP) in Yemen. Studying how

prospective teachers' beliefs affect their teaching and professional growth is an important area of focus in research on teacher education (Mohammed, 2006). Over the course of their undergraduate education focusing on teacher preparation, teacher candidates form their own conceptions of teaching as they reflect on various experiences and evaluate their program. Prospective teachers' beliefs can be studied to have a deeper understanding of the dynamics of their program. (Al-Goufi, 2006). Here, it is necessary to clarify the focus on beliefs. Various interpretations of beliefs exist in the education literature. For example, according to Graves (2000):

> to understand where beliefs come from you need to look at your past experience and the beliefs about learning and teaching that grow out of and guide that experience. Experience includes your education and its discourse. (p. 26)

When we refer to beliefs, we can assume that the concept "describes a proposition that is accepted as true by the individual holding the belief" (Green, 1971, as cited in Munby, Russell, and Martin, 1997, p. 885). Pajares (1992) proposed sixteen fundamental assumptions about the origin, nature, and roles of beliefs. These assumptions can be summarized as follows:

1. Beliefs are conceived in early stages by reasoning processes, passing of time, and schooling experiences.
2. Beliefs can strongly affect the behaviors of individuals and how they plan and make decisions.
3. Beliefs and knowledge are overlapping terms or constructs.
4. Teaching beliefs are better established and developed in the undergraduate programs.
5. Beliefs formed early in the childhood are difficult to change during the adulthood. (Pajares, 1992, pp. 24-26)

In this paper, by focusing on prospective teachers' thinking and experiences, we explore their beliefs related to teacher education.

2. Background

2.1. The Setting

Yemen is located in the southern half of the Arabian Peninsula and is bordered by Saudi Arabia and Oman. The Constitution of Yemen guarantees access to education for all citizens. There are both formal and non-formal education opportunities in Yemen. The ELTE program is within the frame of formal education. In this program, 58 required courses are offered during the four years of study.

In Yemen, the primary focus of the education policy is to eradicate illiteracy, make education compulsory for all citizens, and establish programs for teaching and training. There are different strategic plans in different governmental sectors for developing education in Yemen. The ELTE program is overseen by the Ministry of Higher Studies and Scientific Research and it is this ministry that prepares strategic plans for program development. In 2006, a five-year strategic plan was announced. Among the aims of strategic plan were: reforming the curricula of the eight state universities, reframing the ministry itself, developing the teaching-learning process, providing all universities with

language labs and electronic-system libraries, and encouraging the translation and publication processes (Ministry of Education, 2008, pp. 4-11).

2.2. Research Design

In this qualitative study, the data sources were available education policy documents and interviews with prospective teachers of English. The participants were Ali[1], *23*; Zakarya, *23*; Nuraldeen, *24*; and Yousif, *24*. In our review of education policy documents: *The Development of Education in the Republic of Yemen: the National Report presented to the 48th session of the international conference on Education, Geneva and The National Strategy and the future plan for Higher Education in the Republic of Yemen: 2006-2010,* we found that several educational development goals were expressed. Since we were interested in understanding "the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience," we conducted interviews with prospective teachers (Seidman, 2006, p.10). As we interviewed prospective teachers, we observed how the goals stated in the policy documents were perceived. Here, triangulation in collecting data "provides stronger substantiation of constructs" (Eisenhardt, 1989 as cited in Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 14). The interviews with the four prospective teachers were semi-structured and they were audio-recorded. We then transcribed the recordings and coded segments related to beliefs about the program and experiences. With the patterns emerged, the interpretation led to the identification of several themes.

3. Findings and Discussion

The processes of qualitative coding and analysis led to the emergence of several major themes. These themes highlighted the various aspects of the ELTE program in Yemen. Below are the most significant themes.

3.1. Conceptions of Teaching

Past and present experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and perceptions related to the teaching-learning process help the teacher candidates construct their own philosophies of teaching. These theories of teaching, then, can be associated with their own beliefs and the education philosophy of the country they are living in. Among prospective teachers, the experiences and beliefs related to conceptions of teaching vary. For example, in the following excerpt Ali grounds his vision of good language teaching in the Total Physical Response (TPR) method (Asher, 1969). He said:

> *I believe in TPR/Total physical Response. For example, if you tell me, then I will forget, if you teach me, then I will remember, if you involve me, then I will learn. This is a teaching method…. This is what I believe teaching is.*

In the following excerpt, Zakarya explains what demands the greatest emphasis in the teaching profession. For Zakarya, a teacher has to play the role of a good model and advisor and act collaboratively. He stated:

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[1] Listed participant names are pseudonyms.

...the teachers must instil the love of English into the hearts of their students before teaching them English. First, teach them the aims and benefits of learning English.... A teacher also should motivate his students. This is a necessary condition. All these things should be achieved before teaching them.

According to Nuraldeen, the most important element of an effective teaching-learning process is the presence of "an interesting educative environment." He said:

... I would like to create an atmosphere inside and outside the classroom where students should speak the language. I will also give students many pieces of advice. The most important thing is that there should be an interesting educative environment.

Another prospective teacher, Yousif believed that a teacher should rely on her own individual capacities and thinking when constructing a teaching philosophy. He stated:

... the university sometimes will not give you the right philosophy of teaching. You do not have to accept it. You have to change it according to your personality. For example, in the university the relationship between the teacher and the student is not friendly. They are dealing as if they are principals. There is no relationship between them. They are always dominant dictators.

The excerpt above shows how this participant rejects his university lecturers as models for effective teaching. For Yousif, a good rapport between teachers and students is of utmost importance. For Yousif, teaching cannot be described by delivery of information. As he explained what 'teaching' means to him, he said:

... Teaching is not only a kind of transferring of information. Teaching is to change the behavior and this is my philosophy: that when I want to teach something, I want to see the outcomes of my teaching in the behaviors of my students.

Yousif also believed that it is a must to respect and collaborate with students. These two actions (respect and collaboration) will result in the students' love to the teacher and the course he is teaching.

These candidates' teaching views are interrelated. For example, if a teacher does not have confidence and does not respect his students, there might not be collaboration, participation or discussion between them, and the educative atmosphere might potentially become intimidating and galling. In general, these views seem to differ initially but they all concentrate on a major point that is the real effective teaching which might not take place in the absence of one of these candidates' teaching perceptions.

In conclusion, initially all the study participants reported that they did not have written teaching philosophy statements. The construction of the teaching philosophy is very significant in the ELTE program. The program developers should consider the creation of sound teaching perspectives as one of the program standards. The results showed different teaching conceptions which are all important voices in the ELTE program. In developing a vision for the ELTE program, the policy makers must refer to all these stakeholders' perspectives. A

great number of these participants can be interviewed in all regions. Program developers must study these perspectives in their work.

3.2. Teacher Preparation in ELTEP

In Yemen, the ELTE program offers 58 courses with a primary focus on helping teacher candidates to acquire the language skills, be familiar with different teaching methods and strategies, English literary genres, materials evaluation and development, psychology and education issues and so on. English and Arabic are used as mediums of instruction for the courses offered.

Two prospective teachers, Nuraldeen and Yousif, expressed modest satisfaction with their teacher education program. They found that the curriculum was dominated by focus on theory and they called for re-designing it way that would involve a balanced emphasis on both theory and practice. However, they highlighted the advantages of the practicum courses and some other courses that help candidates with personal development and the acquisition of language and teaching skills.

Unlike the aforementioned participants, Ali was discontent with the program preparation of the pre-service teachers. He believed that some literature courses are redundant and need be replaced by ones related to the field of teaching. He added that using English as a medium of instruction is more preferable when compared with the use of Arabic. Another participant, Zakarya, was discontent with the preparation of candidates. He argued that curriculum was not well planned and criticized the use of materials that emphasize rote learning in the program. He suggested that a greater involvement of teacher candidates in course discussions would lead to better instruction.

Overall, the results have shown that participants called for a higher number of methodology courses. They also demand that English be used as the medium of instruction for most courses and disapprove rote learning. Here, there is also an emphasis on an immediate reform of the curriculum. These results support the findings of Al-Majeedi's (2003) study that highlighted the significance of practicum courses; Modhesh's (2009) study drawing attention to the need for curriculum reform; and Raskhan's (2005) study highlighting the need for more courses on classroom management, teaching methodology, and speaking skills.

3.3. Major problems related to ELTE program

Sustaining an effective ELTE program demands regular reviews of major problems. The candidates believed that there are major problems rooted in academic and administrative issues. Ali believed that problems such as the presence of unqualified teacher educators, insufficient references in the library, the use of Arabic as a medium of instruction for many courses, and the unsuitable teaching methods (lecturing style, no discussion, and no participation) used by teacher educators were leading to serious problems. He stated:

> *No rich library, the scarcity of qualified teacher educator… they just teach us the materials they have given us in the beginning of the semester. They don't teach anything new. So I just read the material and prepare myself for the test. It is like our Yemeni proverb "Ahmed goes into the class, Ahmed goes out of the class and no change has occurred"…. The medium of instruction for many courses we have had in this program is Arabic. For me*

this is a problem. I believe that they should be taught in English, for we are students of English and not Arabic. Teacher educators do not give students time/chance to show their abilities; a student goes to the class and just listens like a parrot, like an animal; he does not participate.

Zakarya also stated similar problems. He believed that the major problems are: educators' discrimination between males and females, poor curriculum design, the lack of qualified educators, the lack of dormitories for male students, ignorance of students' opinions and suggestions, and discrimination based on political party membership at the university. He said:

The great numbers of girls compared to boys in my class was a problem for me. So educators were tending to favour girls more than us. No chances were given to us to discuss or participate in the class. Another problem is concerned with the curriculum. The curriculum needs reform. There is no creativity is the present curriculum of the Yemeni universities. The present curriculum, in other words, does not prepare good teachers. There is a lack of professional educators. Another problem lies in the absence of dormitories for males. This is a big problem…. Another problem is that students' suggestions or opinions are thrown behind the bars. Both educators and employers in the university always turn down our suggestions…. Another example is that of educators. There is a professor who belongs to the other party. And because of that, he has not yet been given any good position in the university.

Nuraldeen argued that the problems are administrative and academic ones. According to him, the administrative problems are the university administrators' unpunctuality, changes in course schedules, overcrowded lecture halls, power-outages, the scarcity of resources, poor facilities and library system. Among academic problems Nuraldeen referred to were: the lack of professional teacher educators, the unpunctuality of educators, a static curriculum, and outdated evaluation processes. He said:

Yousif believed that the major problems are very similar to the ones mentioned by his peers. He said:

the lack of activities in the courses given to us. Also Spoken is not taking a high priority in the classes as if the language is just written, as if we will graduate as translators not as teachers who will use their language all the time.... There is no cooperation between the teaching staff members and the students….. Also the problems of the electricity. The board and the chairs should be static … I feel sad that there is no encouragement from the teaching staff…. The classes are also crowded…There is also a problem with the curriculum we had taken.

The academic and administrative problems discussed by the prospective language teachers are summarized in Table 1.

Academic Problems	Administrative Problems
• vercrowded classes	• bsence of dormitories for male teacher candidates
• ender discrimination	
• se of Arabic as a medium of instruction in many courses	• npunctuality of administrators and teacher educators
• neffective planning and design of curriculum. (emphasis on theory and few courses focusing on speaking skills and teaching methods)	• bsence of key technologies (particularly language labs)
	• oor infra-structure (facilities)
• carcity of resources and absence of an electronic library system	• ower-outages
• se of traditional teaching methods (lecturing and memorization strategy and no variation in activities)	• eliance on political party membership for power
	• nconsistent course schedules
• ack of specialized teacher educators	
• Absence of collaboration between educators and candidates and negligence of candidates' opinions and suggestions	

Table 1. Major problems of the ELTE program in Yemen according to participants

In sum, the results of this study showed that there are many problems that lessened the effectiveness of the ELTE program in Yemen. These problems are connected to the teaching-learning processes in the program. Prospective teachers that participated in the study hope that these challenges would be addressed so that the program would function more effectively. Here, it is important to note that many of these major problems were listed among the issues to be targeted in the strategic plan of the Ministry of Higher Studies and Scientific Research. But, this study showed that the strategic plan failed to alleviate these problems in this program. This could be due to the ineffectiveness and disinterest of the policy-makers and administrators towards the improvement of the ELTE program. Some of these problems were also discussed by Al-Majeedi (2003) based on an evaluation of practicum in the education faculties in Hadhramout University. Shiryan's (2008) study, which analyzed the programs of Sana'a University, also listed similar concerns related to the program. We argue that policy makers must rethink how they apply strategic plans and track implementation processes. Clearly, there is a need for change in the ELTE program in Yemen. This change needs to commence as soon as possible and the processes should involve all stakeholders of the teacher education program.

4. Conclusion

In this study, prospective teachers reported several academic and administrative problems that were related to the lack of clear-cut standards and program philosophy

statements. We also found that the education policy-makers paid little attention to the program improvement and the application of the strategies they had planned. There is a need for rethinking and change in language teacher education. Despite the problems encountered, all participants agreed on the critical need for the ELTE program at Yemeni universities.

Acknowledgements

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