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Exploring Saudi English Language Teachers' Professional Development

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Abstract **– Teachers' performance in the classroom may be influenced by support received in a variety of forms and from various sources. In Saudi intermediate schools, several sources of support were potentially available to teachers. In my paper, I will discuss two important issues respectively: in-service training in Saudi context and colleague support.**

Keywords **– English, Professional , Teachers, Schools, Classroom, Intermediate.**

I. INTRODUCTION

From 1965 until now, the MoE, in order to support teachers' training, established the General Administration of Educational Training (GAET), and it has opened teacher training centres all round the country, equipping them with extensive facilities and appointing qualified trainers in order to meet the teachers' training needs (GAET 2002). The main objectives of in-service training in Saudi context, as GAET claims, are to:

1. Improve the individual's performance and develop his or her ability to achieve job satisfaction.
2. Provide trainees with the latest technical, theoretical and scientific knowledge.
3. Help trainees to implement the new ideas, opinions and solutions that emerge from research, to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

According to my knowledge, GAET organises many pedagogical short training courses free of charge for teachers in Training Centres in each educational zone. These courses last for 1 -3 days, and they are in generic as well as special educational topics. There are only four training courses which are specially for English teachers and they are on general information in how to teach the language skills. In addition, due to the recent launch of new textbooks for English language, the publishers of these series organised temporary short training courses, under the supervision of MoE, in order to show how these books were constructed and which teaching methods would suit them.

In-service teacher training and other professional development activities can play an important role in consolidating, refreshing and updating teachers' professional competences.

This is also, purportedly, a focus of the Tatweer (development) project for educational improvement, integrated by the Saudi government, to be implemented from 2013-2023 (Asswlaimani, 2019). However, my research on an intermediate school English language teaching (ELT) highlighted a lack of professional development as an issue of concern. Many teachers felt ill - prepared to implement the communicative approach currently advocated by the Saudi government. Given their poor background concerning the use of the language in real life and their lack of opportunity to meet English native speakers, they expressed an urgent need for more training, mainly in ELT methods and spoken English. This is especially important in Saudi Arabia where it is possible to teach on the basis of an academic degree, without any specific pedagogic training. The aims of this

paper are twofold: highlighting the in-service training provision, and shedding light on the possible role of collegial support in teachers' professional development.

II. Role of Saudi Teachers

To date no one knows with absolute certainly how a second/foreign language is acquired. All we have are theories. Brown (2007: 99) said that theories do not capture all the elements and principles of human learning. Instead they are a starting point for understanding how humans learn a second/foreign language. Theories are generally seen to represent sets of insights and concepts that form grounds for formulating teaching methods.

Understanding how people acquire a foreign language the nature of foreign language learning the role of the learning differences and the type of methods and techniques involved inevitably requires viewing the theoretical foundation on which foreign language learning is based.

Brown (2007) draws teachers' attention to the fact that language teaching is not easily categorised into one method. Instead, teachers are encouraged to develop an understanding of the available methods and to build on this in her/his own teaching practice.

Teachers in the Saudi schools are required to follow the curriculum objectives of the subjects they teach, which are assigned by the Ministry of Education. The principal of the school and a supervisor (from the Educational Guidance Office) attend lessons for each teacher at least twice each term in order to guide their teaching performance and to evaluate the quality of their lessons. However, whether teachers perform well or badly, they all receive the same salary and there is annual promotion for all teachers. A teacher is required to prepare a lesson using the book assigned to the class (the teacher's book). The principal of the school should check the lesson preparations once a week, write her comments, sign and write the date she checked them. Students stay in their assigned classrooms and teachers move from class to class, although for drawing, economics and computing only, the students go to special rooms. The teacher delivers the lesson using the board and the students' books and sometimes educational posters. During the 45 minutes of the lesson most of the focus is on teaching the information in the students' books. Each month the students memorize rather than learn the information in their books and reproduce it in the monthly tests and then the final exams of each term (Alzaidi, 2011).

The teacher evaluates the student's classroom participation, corrects the students' notebooks and marks the monthly exams. However, the final and mid-term examination in each subject is corrected by a group of teachers for that specific subject. Most of the teachers have other roles besides teaching, evaluating their students' progress and correcting their students' notebooks. They may be responsible for a specific class, have to participate in extracurricular activities, write the students' certificates and stay late at school at least once a week until the last student leaves (Alqassim General Directorate, 2014).

III. In-Service training in Saudi Context

Since English was introduced as a subject in the school curriculum, the ministry of education has hired a number of English teachers to teach English in public schools; these teachers include native speakers (in very limited numbers) and non-native speakers (in large numbers, mostly from Arabic-speaking countries). Also, the number of local universities and colleges has increased and foreign language departments have been established

to meet the massive demand for foreign (specifically English) language specialists and teachers in Saudi Arabia.

Many educators believe that a language teacher requires both knowledge of the subject matter (i.e. content knowledge), and generic teaching strategies, e.g. classroom management; motivational and organisational skills (i.e. pedagogic knowledge); and specialised knowledge of ways of delivering the subject matter, including language teaching methods in general and skills for teaching and evaluating language skills in particular (i.e. pedagogic content knowledge). In addition, a teacher also requires skills in sociolinguistics and the acquisition of a second language (Day and Conklin 1992; Rubio 2009). Kasule (2003) also argues that the role of teacher as a facilitator of the learning process requires the teacher to acquire some specific foreign language teaching skills, along with a good command of the target language, particularly when the language of instruction is not the native hence, the language teacher‘s repertoire will be enhanced by the acquisition of knowledge and skills in pedagogy, pedagogic content, and support knowledge, as well as assisting in the delivery of the subject matter in an effective and efficient manner. However, a lack (or deficiency) in such knowledge and skills may limit a language teacher’s teaching repertoire, and consequently the effectiveness and efficiency of the teaching and learning process.

However, English language teaching education in Saudi Arabia has been introduced mainly in three different kinds of colleges: Arts Collages, Languages and Translation Colleges and Education Colleges. This leads to the question concerning the extent to which the three pathways of EFL teacher preparation in the Saudi context support their graduates to be effective EFL teachers.

In-service training is one potential source of support, and was claimed to be designed according to teachers’ needs and open to all. However, the examples of training topics that I was given, such as ‘use of the board’ or ‘writing a lesson plan’ did not correspond with the needs expressed by teachers (spoken English), and most teachers had not attended any courses. Moreover, the headteacher in the case study school, while describing courses as ‘useful’ and claiming to encourage teachers to attend them, also cast doubt on their effectiveness as manifested in teachers’ post-training performance.

If training is seen predominantly as a remediation measure for weak teachers, there will be little to attend, for those not explicitly invited for training. However, I was told that training documents and video tapes were also available. I found out more about the ‘supporting programme’ from a Sudanese teacher who worked at the Training Centre for one day a week. He reported that training courses were prepared according to the supervisors’ notes made during their field visits to teachers and their assessment of trainees’ needs. The number of trainees on these courses is between 12-20 and the course contains theoretical and practical elements. He said:

“The whole idea is to exchange ideas with other people and try to help them as much as we can”.

However, this teacher's feedback suggests that the courses may not be entirely successful in meeting teachers’ needs, whether because they are too short or too theoretical and divorced from teachers’ real classroom experience. Such a view is supported by the comment of one headteacher, that he had not noticed any change in teachers’ performance as a result of training.

During the interviews, some teachers acknowledged their limited English proficiency level. The data revealed that those teachers did not have a good basis in the English language. One of them said:

"I prefer myself as a teacher but not as an English teacher. I speak a lot of Arabic Language because the students do not know how to speak in English".

This finding indicated that this teacher is confident about his ability as a teacher but his limited English language did not allow him to show his real potential in delivering lessons to his class.

Teacher's talk during lesson instruction can be improved if teachers are trained to understand the important role of interactional adjustment in target language and L-I interaction. Thus, they can pay more attention to their teaching aims and pedagogic purposes in order to allow students to use the foreign learning environment. Shamsipour and Allami (2012) investigated the ways in which teachers' talk can create opportunities for students to use English as a foreign language in the class-rooms and how the teacher's talk can lead to more students' involvement in an English foreign language context. Shamsipour and Allami chose three expert Iranian teachers with their students in three different classres to conduct their study. The participants were aged between18 to 26, the level of English was intermediate and they had similar reasons for learning English. The study's focus was on increasing oral fluency. The study data were analysed based on the interactional features within a proposed Self Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT) framework. The findings supported the importance of teachers' talk in the classroom in relation to their awareness of teaching aims and whether teachers should improve their talk to optimize learner's contributions to the FL classroom.

However, in the Saudi context, although in-service teacher training is available, there is a doubt as to how well it supports English teachers' development, due to the small number of participants, the brevity and limited scope of courses, and the possible mismatch between course content and teachers' needs. Moreover, the headteacher in the case study school, while describing courses as 'useful' and claiming to encourage teachers to attend them, also cast doubt on their effectiveness as manifested in teachers' post-training performance.

Thus, in-service teachers (regular school teachers) should be encouraged to educate themselves in order to develop professionally. Kumaravadivelu (2005) pointed out that a post - method teacher is an autonomous teacher who self-directs, self-develops, and self-explores. In teacher education there is a need for evidence based policy, where teaching becomes an evidence based profession; that is to say, in-service teachers should be helped to explore, 182 evaluate and reflect on their teaching practices (Kumaravadivelu, 2005; Kinchin, 2007).

IV. COLLEAGUE SUPPORT

Colleague support is very important issue. The potential for collegial support had, however, been little explored, apart from one short-lived experiment, and remained virtually unexploited. Timetable difficulties and lack of suitable meeting facilities appeared to play a part in this. Moreover, although professional cultures are the 'corner-stones' of any teacher's development, it seems that such cultures do not exist in government education in Saudi Arabia in the fullest sense of the word 'culture'. From the case study school and others visited, the overall impression, is that, contrary to espoused intentions, teachers actually received very little support to develop their teaching skills, reflect on their practice and cope creatively with the demands placed on them.

According to Johnson (1990) and Nias (1989), colleagues can offer teachers the adult contact and support they need, in addition to being good sources of pedagogical advice and academic expertise. According to Dinham and Scott (1998; 2000), a positive atmosphere of social support contributes to teachers' satisfaction and

increases their motivation towards their job. Conversely, collegial relations could be a source of dissatisfaction and demotivation, as reported in the literature (Travers & Cooper, 1996). Kyriacou (2001) claims that a strong sense of collegiality is one characteristic of a healthy school that makes for healthy organisational functioning. Thus, its absence could adversely affect the smooth running of the organisation.

Moreover, in most cases, even where collegial relationships were cordial, they played little or no role in professional development. None of my participants indicated that their colleagues gave them the support they needed to deal with the everyday life of teachers - they were polite acquaintances rather than fellow team-workers.

Teaching and learning an L2 or FL depends on preplanning a language lesson based on certain methods (e.g. the oral approach, The Audio lingual Method, Communicative Approach, Total Physical Response, Suggestopedia). Methods provide different ways of teaching and learning; however there is considerable overlap in their theory and practice in language classrooms. Searching for the best method that can be used all the time is far from practical and removed from the reality of classrooms (Kumaravadivelu, 2005). Teaching and learning methods need to be able to cope with unpredictable situations and to meet the challenges and complexities that teachers confront in their everyday teaching practices. Language teachers should teach according to their students' needs rather than focusing on prescribed methods. Therefore, the concept of method has lost its significance as an effective construct in language teaching and learning because it discourages teachers from developing their own methods based on their everyday teaching practices. Thus, there is a need for post-method teacher education that helps them to develop the knowledge, skills and autonomy to understand how their teaching can lead to the desired learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2005; Kinchin, 2007).

From my experience, Teachers should collaborate with each other. Such collaboration could take place in formalised meetings with other teachers at school, or in more informal meetings at a cafe, for instance. Such informal contacts occur in other jobs in Saudi Arabia and, indeed, took place in some schools, as one supervisor told me. There seems, therefore, to be no specific cultural constraint against such activity, although teachers might fear loss of face if they had to acknowledge inability in a certain area. None of the interviewed teachers, however, had participated in such relationships. They did not articulate any specific reasons why they did not have such relationships. My observations suggested a number of possible factors, including pressure of time and other commitments. Teachers have many tasks in their schools. I recall how difficult it was for me, as a researcher, to get time to sit with EFL teachers whom I observed in order to talk and exchange ideas. Moreover, with so little free time and so much pressure during school hours, teachers appeared to be unwilling to take on additional commitments after school, as they left the school very tired, and took large quantities of school work home with them every day.

Professional development issues include teachers' need to help each other, on the one hand, and talk to their supervisors, on the other hand. Teachers need to exchange points of view, explain what they are doing, and why they are doing it, and if they are asked to do something, they need to get explanations from their supervisors. Such communications would help to create moments of shared experience between teachers and supervisors, which would help to provide a basis for professional cooperation between them. Such communication may also generate a better picture of teachers' development needs which could be used to inform the planning of in-service courses, which might then be perceived as more relevant and attractive.

V. CONCLUSION

Despite the assertions of schools and the Saudi government regarding the importance of in-service teacher training and continuing professional development, in practice, it seems that such opportunities for Saudi teachers of English are limited. The courses available are not accessible by all teachers, and teachers may in any case be reluctant or unable to give up time for training, given their heavy teaching and administrative load. Those who have attended criticize courses for being too short and theoretical. Colleague support, as another option, has not been exploited, perhaps due to the same problem of time constraints. It is recommended that opportunities be created for teachers to meet informally to share their knowledge and experiences, and that wider opportunities be developed for various forms of in-service training, which should be available to all teachers.

My Recommendations are as Follows:

1. Based on teachers' interviews, it seems that teachers lack the opportunities to meet informally with colleagues. I would like to suggest the significance of creating opportunities for teachers to experience more of a professional culture by enhancing the chances to meet with colleagues from inside as well as outside the school.
2. All teachers should be offered opportunities to receive in-service training. There should be a variety of in-service training available to teachers, both formal (e.g. conferences, workshops, courses both inside and outside Saudi Arabia) and informal (e.g. between different schools or different regions of Saudi Arabia), which would enable teachers to experience the advantages of collegial support groups.

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