

ELT and ESP in Yemen: Then and Now

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Abstract:

The Republic of Yemen is one of the Arab countries. It is located in the Middle East. It is a monolingual country where Arabic is the mother tongue of the Yemeni population. As in many Middle-Eastern countries, English is used as a foreign language in Yemen. It is taught as a subject in the school curriculum, but it is neither used as a medium of instruction in education, except in limited cases as in private schools and some tertiary institutions, nor a language of day-to-day communication within the country. It is taught as a compulsory or mandatory subject in government schools and universities, and it is the medium of instruction (i.e. the language of the prescribed textbooks and the medium of oral instruction) in some private schools and university departments. For this reason, this paper aims to scrutinize the former and current situation of teaching and learning English in Yemen.

Key words: English Language teaching (ELT) ; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); Yemeni students

1. Introduction

By and large, Yemeni students need English to communicate with foreigners within the country, and outside it when they go for study purposes or for any other purposes. Therefore, there is an urgent need to learn English efficiently. Above all, in the current globalized milieu, Yemeni students of engineering and technology need a specific set of language skills for their success in education and learning. They need English to read literature in their own fields of study. Although the professional profile of modern qualified engineers should include well-developed communicative skills and high English language proficiency for their success in the modern highly competitive global work arena, the graduates of Yemeni engineering colleges endure difficulties largely due to the lack of communicative skills in academic or work settings. Consequently, engineers should learn the essential communicative skills and rhetorical elements in English for Science and Technology (EST) discourse.

2. Objective

This paper aims to achieve an important goal, i.e., scrutinizing the previous and current situation of teaching and learning English in Yemen with special reference to the ELT &ESP.

3. Historical Review

Historically, English was first introduced in the schools of North Yemen, through a textbook, by Imam Yahiya in 1926 (Sulaiman, 1994, quoted in Ghanim, 2005); whereas in South Yemen, namely Aden, it was introduced by British in the early thirties of the 19th century (Ghanim). Before revolution, in the northern part of the country, there was no regular education in both Arabic and English; in the southern part the situation was better because British colonizers, in need of interpreters, permitted some kind of English education in Aden. With 26th September 1962 and 14th October 1963 revolutions in north and south parts of Yemen respectively, all spheres of life have been completely changed for the better than they were in the pre-revolution era. Education is one of those fields, which has undergone many radical changes.

Nevertheless, the situation has become better than before with the declaration of Unification between the two parts of Yemen on May 22nd, 1990. As a result, there are thousands of schools, technical and vocational institutions and tens of governmental and private universities all over the country. There are also three ministries which look after these educational institutions, viz. Ministry of Education (school education), Ministry of Technical Education and Vocational Training (technical institutions) and Ministry of Higher Education (universities). All these three ministries give English education a priority in their plans, agendas and strategies, since officials realize the importance of English in the world today.

3.1. School Level

School education in Yemen consists of basic education (9 years) and secondary education (3 years). There were about 2,699,788 students and 90,478 teachers in Yemen in the year 1997. The students received Intermediate School Certificate after nine years of their schooling. Secondary schooling continues for 3 years. After passing the Secondary school examination, the pupils receive General Secondary Education Certificate also called 'Al Thanawiya'.

Yemeni students start to learn English from grade seven only in public schools, but some private schools provide English-medium education from primary or pre-primary (i.e. kindergarten) stages, and they, in some cases, use English as a medium of instruction. However, the private schools which present this kind of education are few and more expensive. Both government and private schools use the same textbook series from grade seven, entitled '*Crescent English Course*' which has been prepared and published in 1995-1996 by Oxford University Press for ELT in the Arab World. Despite some shortcomings, the book series is a communicative course that pays more attention to all macro skills, while the previous series 'English for Yemen' focuses only on one skill, i.e., reading. Besides, some private schools use different materials before grade seven. Sometimes, they take on their curricula and education system from some inner circle countries (e.g. UK,

USA). Nevertheless, this may not suit Yemeni pupils, since they are EFL learners, and the contexts are totally different. Some of these schools, also, do not take care of teaching/learning process. They only concentrate on the profit, and how much money they can earn.

3.1. Technical Education

Technical education and vocational training is another scheme of education in the country which consists of three levels: preparatory, secondary and tertiary. It is encouraged by the government for certain reasons, and the corporate sector start to contribute in supporting it recently. As an evidence of interest in this kind of education, some pivotal steps have been taken by the government to encourage students to join these institutions and improve their proficiency and to increase the institutions' numbers and capacities. One of the reasons for the significance of this kind of education is that the graduates from these institutions will contribute to the development process inside the country and in the region (Gulf Countries). Now, English is being taught as ESP courses in the Trading Secondary, Industrial Secondary, Mechanical Secondary, Engineering Secondary, etc. and in technical tertiary institutes and Community Colleges. All these technical institutions use English either as a subject or requirement courses, but some of them start to teach specialized courses through English. However, they still use more traditional approaches to teaching. Hence, these courses can hardly be called typical ESP courses, and they need improvement.

3.3. Tertiary Education

At the tertiary level, English is taught as a specialized field in English departments in the Yemeni universities (i.e., in Arts, Languages and Education colleges), but, unfortunately, it is dominated by many literature courses, or there are many other requirement courses that are totally taught in Arabic, especially in Education colleges. English is also taught as a college requirement for one or two years. It is presented as requirement courses, as they are commonly called in Yemen, in other colleges such as Engineering,

Medicine, Commerce, etc., and in other departments of Arts, Languages and Education colleges. The English courses in all the Yemeni universities are proficiency courses, and their main purpose is to improve the English proficiency of the learners. They are generally known as English 101 and English 102. Some colleges add other courses such as English 103 and English 104, or Technical English, etc. These courses are taught in the first and second year in all humanities and scientific colleges. "On the basis of a close examination of these courses it is maintained that they fall within ESP" (Moharram, 2004, p.347). Nevertheless, ESP has not yet acquired a prominent status in Yemeni institutions of tertiary education, and it may be said that it is still in its infancy in Yemen.

Lately, the numbers of private universities, colleges and institutes have rapidly increased in the country. They also contribute, to some extent, in teaching of English in Yemen, but they should be strictly supervised by the government. As Bose (2007) puts it, what the students "get in these institutes in return for their money, in most cases, is not worth the money they pay through their nose" (p. 295). Most of EFL/ESP courses presented in private institutes are ad hoc in nature. Currently, some of these institutes offer also diploma courses in English and some ESP courses, and some private universities offer also Master and PhD programmes.

All these developments in the education sector allow Yemen to occupy a good position among other countries in the Middle East and Arab World. Attention was paid to English, so English departments were established in almost all Yemeni universities which help to produce many qualified graduates and learners. The country also sends thousands of students and scholars abroad per annum to study in the inner, outer and expanding circle countries. India, for example, is one of those countries which receive many Yemeni students and scholars annually.

4. Major Findings and Recommendations

Although all these positive developments have taken place, the current education system in general and English learning and teaching in particular

suffers from some problems and shortcomings. English in Yemen is suffering from some inconveniences up to now. ELT is beset with a multiplicity of problems. One of the problems facing ELT in Yemen is that learning English is still confined to the four walls of the classroom. Furthermore, the motivation of students is not high. Many reasons are attributed for these challenges, such as the lack of long-term planning, lack of motivation and interest on the students' part and the inadequacy of financial resources. Generally speaking, the output of Yemeni secondary schools is at lower level of English proficiency. "Yemeni students complete their secondary education without benefits from all the courses they study" (Al-Fattah, 2003, p.1). Thus, English in Yemen suffers a lot, as it is only used as an academic subject or a requirement course in schools and universities. As a result of this poor state of ELT in Yemen, ESP is negatively affected. ESP, for many Yemenis, means the same as EGP.

Like in most other EFL countries, English language learners in Yemen lack a real environment to use it. Most people use Arabic to communicate in all circumstances; there is rarely an English speaking environment for people to communicate in the real world in Yemen. In particular, one-to-one practice for English is limited or absent. Arabic is the mother tongue of learners, who face many difficulties in using English for communicative purposes. They cannot communicate for a long time. The failure comes from the shortcomings which accompany the teaching process of English initially during school days and later in tertiary institutions and the environment itself. The unsuitability of materials, the use of traditional methods of teaching and the overcrowded classes are also among the reasons which negatively affect teaching/learning English in urban and rural areas of the country. However, the situation in rural areas is more complicated, as students from those areas may well have had rather lesser exposure to English and may have been less well taught at school level. The lack of competent teachers is also one of the current problems which have an effect on ELT in Yemen. English teachers do not have enough training (in-service, or pre-service), and, like their students, they do not use English in their teaching most of the time. There is also a lack of well-trained and efficient teachers of ESP, in particular. All in all, these key

difficulties definitely affect the language proficiency of Yemeni learners and the whole ELT scenario.

In the same vein, at the tertiary level in Yemen, the English language courses are mostly knowledge-based. “The general opinion of the students studying these courses seems to be that the courses do not enable them to use English for their purposes” (Fasil, 2001, quoted in Bose, 2007, p.293), so the universities should introduce skill-based courses with focus on communicative skills. There is an urgent need for redesigning English courses on communicative skill basis and with definite emphasis on learning rather than teaching. A syllabus focussing on the communicative aspects of language might satisfy the needs and desires of young Yemeni learners. In his article, ‘Designing a Model Curriculum for Proficiency Courses for Yemeni Learners of English’, Bose (2007) presents some problems related to teaching these courses in a Yemeni university, i.e., Hodeidah University. Based on Bose’s experience and observation, the examples and problems are the unmanageable large number of students (with more than 200 students in some cases), the impossibility of individual attention and group or pair work and many other difficulties. As a result, most of the students consider these courses as ‘necessary evils’ (p.292), so they try to pass exams by hook or by crook. Students are obligated to pass these courses, in which the minimum pass marks is 50 %.

All these problems are common to all Yemeni universities where English is taught as requirement courses with little differences. Consequently, all universities should now start to evaluate their English programmes in all departments to help students to achieve their goals, improve their language proficiency and to cope with the demands of the 21st century as creating a large number of English users is undeniably a high national priority. The educational system itself suffers from some problems and shortcomings, but the government always tries to overcome them by taking convenient steps.

5. Conclusion

There are many political and economic developments, which have taken

place in Yemen and Arab Gulf countries in recent years; Yemen has become a member of some organizations of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), such as Labour, Education, etc. Yemen and GCC countries signed a treaty on this issue, giving qualified Yemeni workforces priority in GCC countries. All these positive changes may help Yemeni graduates to get some jobs in these countries, but they should improve their skills. Therefore, Yemeni government has taken many steps to refine the educational system to cope with all these developments. One of these steps is primarily correlated to ELT; therefore, just on May, 2009, the Yemeni government held a cabinet meeting to review measures to accelerate the integration of Yemeni workers into Gulf labour markets and took some key decisions regarding this matter. The meeting approved the next steps that need to be taken by the various government agencies and their partners, including training, advisory services and technical assistance. English and computer skills were identified as areas in need of improvement. In the meeting, the Cabinet has decided to introduce “English language and computer curricula to the current mainstream education system in order to improve the skills of graduates as per future needs in Gulf countries.” (Assamiee, 2009, p.1). The cabinet also instructed all concerned ministries “to adopt English language from the initial grades in the primary hierarchy of school education and teach all specialized courses in technical, vocational and tertiary education through English” (www.althawranews.net [*the researcher’s translation*]).

All these steps, for sure, will help students to acquire English in the initial stages of their life and get more exposure to it. To learn second language in the early stages of life will help a person to acquire it very easily. To the researcher’s knowledge, the adaptation of English from grade four has been implemented in some schools in Yemen, but the process is still under trial, and there are also many organizations like UNESCO which supports it. In a word, the Yemeni government realized the importance of English in the life of students after graduation, so it takes such decisions. However, since 2011 many problems are created and the current war has created more obstacles in this regard.

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