

## Teaching English in Libya: Reflective Views

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**Abstract:** *Teaching English as foreign language in Libya has experienced different conditions ranging from prosperity in the 1960s and 1970s to stagnation in the 1980s and 1990s. The stagnation was the result of the cancellation by Gaddafi's regime of English from school curriculums due to political reasons. This stagnation continued for almost ten years. In the late 1990s, English teaching started to revive due to the restoration of political relations with the West following the resolution of the Lockerbie case. Since then, English teaching has been gaining momentum as an academic profession and as a business despite the hard conditions experienced by the country in the aftermath of the revolution, which led to the downfall of Gaddafi's regime. What is needed now is to develop this profession through the integration of Libyan teachers' professional experience with the latest theoretical and methodological developments in the discipline. The aim of this paper is to share reflective views on English language teaching in Libya with fellow teachers of English in Libya and elsewhere. These views are based on integration of research and at least fifteen years of teaching experience. Five topics of relevance to the teaching of English as a foreign language in Libya are discussed in this paper; namely: (1) Developing materials for teaching listening, (2) Teaching reading strategies, (3) Teaching grammar, (4) Raising students' awareness of their learning strategies, and (5) Teachers' professional development.*

**Keywords:** *English Teaching in Libya, Material Development, Raising Students' Awareness, Teaching Grammar, Teachers' Development, Peer Observation.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as foreign language in Libya has gone through different times ranging from prosperity in the 1960s and 1970s to stagnation and deterioration in the 1980s and 1990s. The stagnation came following the cancellation by Gaddafi's regime of English as a subject from the junior and high school curriculums due to political reasons. This was followed by a deterioration in political relations between the regime and the West. In the late 1990s and following the resolution of the Lockerbie case and restoration of political relations with the West, the teaching of English as a foreign language started to flourish again. Since then, English language teaching has been gaining momentum as an academic profession and as a business despite the hard conditions experienced by the country in the aftermath of the revolution, which led to the downfall of Gaddafi's regime. What is needed now is to develop this profession through the integration of Libyan teachers' professional experience with the latest theoretical and methodological developments in the discipline.

The aim of this paper is to share reflective views on English language teaching in Libya with fellow teachers of English in Libya and elsewhere in the world. These views are based on the integration of research and at least fifteen years of teaching English to Libyan students of different language levels and at different universities, institutes and language centers. Five topics of relevance to the teaching of English as a foreign language in Libya are discussed in this paper; namely: (1) Developing materials for teaching listening, (2) Teaching reading strategies, (3) Teaching grammar, (4) Raising students' awareness of their learning strategies, and (5) Teachers' professional development.

## 2. DEVELOPING MATERIALS FOR TEACHING LISTENING

The three materials development principles suggested by Joan Morley; namely, relevance, transferability/applicability and task orientation, are very important for maximizing the effectiveness of EFL/ESL listening experiences; especially in making choices regarding language content and language outcomes. These principles address two significant aspects of the listening teaching process: the way information is presented within the listening instructional materials and the way it is put to use in the classroom and in real life (Morley77). The three principles can be applied successfully in selecting or designing listening materials for teaching English as a foreign language to Libyan students of English.

‘Relevance’ means that the content and outcome of the listening practice should be related to the learners’ reality to attract their attention and provide them with effective motivational incentive, which encourages them to listen (Morley 77). To apply this principle to the Libyan teaching context it requires that we either modify the existing materials, use supplementary materials or design new materials, which include aspects of life in Libya, such as social life, environment, music, history, politics and business.

Because “successful listening involves the integration of information encoded in the message itself with broader knowledge of the world” (Nunan25), aspects of real life can be incorporated into audio and video clips containing descriptions of local places, food, animals and people, interviews with Libyan TV stars or famous football players, or conversations between Libyan students talking about their study experiences or recent local events, such as the recent revolution in Libya.

‘Transferability/applicability’ means that the EFL/ESL listening material should include transferable/applicable information that qualifies both listening content and outcome to be used later by the learner in the classroom and in real life (Morley 77). This is because “the objective of listening comprehension practice in the classroom is that students should learn to function successfully in real-life listening situations” (Ur 105). To apply this principle to the Libyan situation, listening comprehension may include activities and materials (e.g. video games, social conversations and parts of local radio programs or TV news) that contain transferable information that students can later use outside the classroom. For example, descriptive words and phrases, action verbs, language patterns, place names, time-telling patterns, politeness expressions, and jargon terms.

The third principle, ‘task orientation’, is important because it fosters task-oriented teaching which provides real meaning by focusing on verifiable tasks mediated through language. These are language-use tasks and language-analysis tasks. In language-use tasks, learners practice listening for information and are then immediately asked to do something with that information (Brumfit and Johnson, quoted in Morley 77). In language-analysis tasks, learners are given an opportunity to analyze specific aspects of language structure and use with the purpose of developing personal strategies for learning (Morley 77). For Libyan students, language-use tasks may include listening and performing simple actions (e.g. get in, stand up, sit down.), listening and performing operations (e.g. fill a form, repeat a phrase, find a linking word), listening and solving problems (correct a linguistic structure), and listening and transcribing (writing idioms, technical terms). Thus, “listening activities based on [real or] simulated real-life situations are likely to be more motivating and interesting to do than contrived textbook comprehension exercises (Ur 107). Language-analysis tasks can be used through activities, which include analysis of parts of real public speeches, academic discussions, and political debates on Libyan issues (e.g. spread of arms in Tripoli). The aim is to identify features of speech (e.g. stress, intonation), analyze utterances (statement, request, command, or exclamation), describe sociolinguistic aspects (dialect, register), and describe/analyze communicative strategies (e.g. paraphrasing, use of loan words).

In conclusion, the three principles suggested by Morley are very important for teaching listening. They can be successfully used to maximize the effectiveness of listening learning experiences of Libyan EFL students. Listening materials reflecting aspects of local social, political, and business life can be selected or designed to achieve desired learning objectives. As students fall into different language levels (e.g. Beginner, Pre-intermediate and Intermediate), listening

comprehension materials should focus on language-use tasks and language-analysis tasks with gradual variation in difficulty.

### 3. TEACHING READING STRATEGIES

Based on research in the area of EFL/ESL reading and reading instruction, Singhal stresses the significance of teaching students how to read in order to build up their competence in reading. For this purpose, she suggests six guidelines for effective reading strategy instruction and emphasizes that teachers will be failing students if they fail to teach them a variety of reading strategies they do not know. Based on my classroom experience and observation, three of the suggested guidelines in particular are very effective: (1) reading strategies must be taught over the whole academic year to allow strategic instruction to pervade the curriculum, (2) teachers should provide opportunities for students to practice strategies they have been taught, and (3) teachers must allow students to teach each other about reading (Singhal8).

Teaching reading strategies (e.g. cognitive strategies, memory strategies, compensation strategies, social strategies) to our students of English over an entire academic year, and not just in a single lesson or unit, can always help them to learn these strategies and improve their reading skills, especially in dealing with texts of varying levels of complexity. Following Ur (1977), “reading skills need to be fostered so that learners can cope with more and more sophisticated texts and tasks, and deal with them efficiently: quickly, appropriately and skillfully”, and this requires continuous training over a long period of time. Continuity of teaching reading strategies allows strategic teaching to pervade the whole curriculum and not just part of it. This meant that students would have enough time to learn reading strategies and to apply them to different types of content (e.g. descriptive, narrative and argumentative passages) and various levels of text complexity.

Applying the second guideline, providing opportunities for students to practice reading strategies they have been taught, can help students to master reading strategies and improve their reading skills in general. This is because, as the wisdom says, practice makes perfect. For example, we teachers can create opportunities for our students to practice reading strategies through intensive and extensive reading. In intensive reading, we may choose reading comprehension passages from the curriculum or from supplementary reading materials. In extensive reading, we may ask students to choose for themselves the reading materials they like. We can use both types of reading to teach and/or improve their reading strategies through reading tasks in which they apply specific reading strategies, such as note taking, summarizing, use of dictionaries and peer cooperation. In this respect, Harmer (2007) stresses that “to get maximum benefit from their reading, students need to be involved in both extensive and intensive reading”.

Allowing students to teach each other about reading is also very useful in EFL teaching. It has been noticed that students, especially friends in class, do teach each other some reading strategies such as how to use dictionaries, how to summarize passages, and how to guess meaning from the context. Successful students can be encouraged to exchange knowledge of reading strategies with less successful students through spontaneous interaction. This interaction fosters communicative learning inside the classroom. For this purpose, reading tasks can be designed for students to do in small groups of three or four during which they collaborate to construct meaning out of comprehension passages. During the task, students usually teach each other reading strategies in different ways (e.g. how to identify key words, cultural-bound words, and how to read for the gist).

In conclusion, the above mentioned three guidelines suggested by Singhal for effective reading strategy instruction are particularly useful for students to learn new reading strategies or to use strategies they already know. In the Libyan teaching context, these three guidelines can prove very helpful for our students to improve their reading comprehension skills in many ways.

### 4. TEACHING GRAMMAR

Ways of teaching grammar have always been a source of concern among teachers of English and controversy among language teaching theoreticians. In teaching English as a foreign/second language, Larsen-Freeman (1986) 256-258 suggests a number of processes for grammar teaching, or, as she puts it, developing ‘grammaring’ or helping students develop the ability to use grammar skillfully. In teaching English as a second language, three of the processes suggested by Larsen-

Freeman can be very useful, namely: (1) promoting students' noticing of some features of grammatical structure, (2) enhancing the input to focus students' attention on grammatical structures that operate at the discourse level of language, and (3) input processing to push students to attend to features of language during activities where grammatical structures are being used meaningfully.

In teaching English grammar, the above mentioned processes are very effective if used within a mixed approach of inductive and deductive teaching. Different types of activities can be used to enable students to establish links between the forms of grammatical structures and their meanings and uses. For example, in teaching Libyan students how to use forms of the auxiliary verb 'to be' in the present tense (am, is and are) with singular and plural forms of nouns and pronouns we can start by giving them interesting reading passages with enhanced input to draw their attention to the different forms of verb 'to be'. The passages may contain underlined noun/pronoun-plus-verb-to-be-plus-noun/adjective structures (e.g. I am a student. / The man is a mechanic. / The students are Libyans. / You are a teacher. / The girl is clever. ). This is useful in learning because "if learners pay attention to the form and meaning of certain language structures in input, this will contribute to the internalization of the rule" Bat stone (qtd. in Noonan 2). After reading, students can be divided into groups of three and ask them to answer an exercise in which they have to select suitable forms of verb 'to be' and fill gaps in a story of one paragraph. Then, in a collective class activity, the groups' answers are reviewed where a spokesperson of each group gives his/her group's answer.

When listening to the groups' answers, we can use another process if necessary. This process is promoting students' noticing of the target structures. If the spokesperson uses the wrong form of the verb or noun in a sentence, the teacher can say the sentence with the correct form of the verb or noun so that the students' attention is drawn to the correct grammatical structure.

To consolidate the students' ability to use the noun/pronoun-plus-verb-to-be-plus noun/adjective structures skillfully students can be engaged in an input processing activity in which each student uses the structure to talk about him/herself, other students and the teacher in class, (e.g. We are class 3-A./ Our teacher is Libyan./ She is my friend./ You are students.). Teachers can do this many times in class because "the aim of grammar practice is to get students to learn the structures so thoroughly that they will be able to produce them correctly on their own" (Ur 83).

In conclusion, three of the grammar teaching processes suggested by Larsen-Freeman can be very effective in teaching English as a foreign language to Libyan students. In making use of these processes, a mixed approach of inductive and deductive instruction with various activities can be adopted to help students learn and use grammatical structures skillfully.

## **5. RAISING STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF THEIR LEARNING STRATEGIES**

As language teachers, we can help our students maximize their learning effectiveness by taking into consideration their learning styles and strategies. In order for our students to reach their full potential, we should help them "learn to think about what happens during the language learning process, which will help them to develop stronger learning skills" (Anderson par. 2). One way of helping our students develop stronger learning skills is to raise their awareness of their learning strategies. Furthermore, our students' language learning can be enhanced by incorporating learning style differences and learning strategies into our lesson planning.

Raising students' awareness of their own learning strategies means helping them develop their meta cognitive awareness, that is, to help them think about the way they think. Following Anderson, "learners who are meta cognitively aware know what to do when they don't know what to do; that is, they have strategies for finding out or figuring out what they need to do". To make our students aware of their learning strategies we need, first, to identify the learning strategies they know and use, the learning strategies they know but do not use and finally the learning strategies which they do not know. Second, we should engage our students in a process of strategy awareness raising.

Regarding the learning strategies which they already know and use, we can help them foster their effectiveness by proper planning, selection, and coordination of those strategies. Proper planning involves training students to set specific learning goals such as learning how to use specific

vocabulary items or linguistic structures in specific contexts, and specifying learning strategies to achieve the goals. Enhancing students' awareness of strategy selection involves training activities in which students are asked to try a number of strategies for conducting similar tasks. Then, students are asked to grade the tried strategies in terms of effectiveness. Finally, we should help students coordinate their learning strategies; that is, how to use more than one strategy in one time, such as the use of 'componential analysis' and 'contextual clues' to figure out the meaning of a lexical item in a given text.

In dealing with the learning strategies the students know but do not use, we may engage the students in class activities in which they would be asked explicitly to use those strategies. After proper practice, we can ask them to evaluate the usefulness and effectiveness of those strategies. In the following days and weeks, we should monitor the students' performance to check their awareness of their learning strategies following this process of training. In addition to all this, we can help our students learn new strategies through explicit instruction and continuous practice. The new strategies should complement the strategies they already know and/or use.

Our students' language learning can also be enhanced by incorporating learning style differences and learning strategies into our lesson planning. This means we have to use different instructional methods, techniques and activities. This variation should be based on our identification of our students' learning styles and strategies. Lesson plans may include tasks and activities suitable for different types of learners. For example, oral discussion activities for auditory learners, use of posters and diagrams for visual learners, making models for tactile learners, and items classification for analytic learners (Haynes 1 and Putintseva<sup>4</sup>). The tasks and activities should be selected or designed in a way that requires the use of different learning strategies and requires students to plan, coordinate and evaluate their learning strategies as explained above.

In conclusion, as language teacher we can help our students maximize the effectiveness of their language learning by raising their awareness of their own learning strategies in different ways. This involves attracting students' attention to how they can develop their metacognitive processes in order to reflect on their own ways of thinking. Furthermore, students' language learning can be enhanced by incorporating learning style differences and learning strategies into lesson plans through the use of different teaching methods, techniques and activities.

## **6. TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Teaching is a significant source of learning about the subject one teaches and about one's own way of teaching. Both types of learning, if pursued consciously and methodologically, can contribute immensely to one's professional development. Following Ur 318, teachers can and should develop their professional experience and knowledge throughout their careers. Professional development does not depend on formal training only. Teachers also have (1) their own teaching experiences and their reflections on them and (2) interactions with other teachers in their institutions. Teacher development happens when teachers make use of such resources to advance their own professional learning. In what follows, two ways of professional development will be reflected on; namely: training courses and peer observation.

### **6.1. Training Courses**

Stressing the importance of learning throughout one's life, Prophet Muhammad once said to his companions "Seek knowledge from cradle to grave". This concept is gaining currency in modern times as 'learning' is regarded a life-long process. Based on my belief in the idea of continuous learning, three years ago I asked to be nominated for an on-line course on TESOL Methods organized by an American university. The course was a source of great benefit to me in many ways. It has (1) enhanced and/or transformed aspects of my understanding of English language teaching methods and practice and (2) provided me with a theoretical framework that has given shape to my long experience in the field.

Before that course, my understanding of English language teaching methods was not the outcome of formal training, but it had developed out of practical experience as a teacher of English in secondary schools and at university. My study of English at university did not involve any training in ELT methodology because I graduated from the Faculty of Arts not Faculty of Education. Through years of practical experience, I have learned how to teach English including

how to plan and give lessons, develop instructional materials, manage classes, and submit reports to course administrators. However, I always knew that I had gaps in my ELT background in both theory and practice. Through the TESOL Methods course, I have developed a clearer understanding of many ELT concepts, such as ‘English as an international language’, ‘communicative curriculum’, ‘learning strategies’, ‘learning styles’, ‘peer observation’ and ‘class management’.

The course has helped me sharpen my view of ELT methodology in general and teaching approaches, techniques and strategies in particular. I can now give better explanations of what ELT methodology means, what it involves, its significance for teachers of English and its implications for the process of language learning. In particular, I have developed a clearer understanding of ELT approaches such as communicative teaching, deductive versus inductive teaching, learner-centered versus teacher-centered teaching, and task-based learning. I have, further, developed better understanding of many teaching techniques and strategies such as how to teach listening and speaking, reading and writing and grammar and vocabulary, how to motivate students, how to create energy in class, and how to handle differences in learning styles among students. Furthermore, I have learned many new concepts of methods, strategies, and techniques such as ‘constructivism’, ‘learning centers’, ‘strategy awareness raising’, ‘metacognitive strategies’, ‘Bloom’s Taxonomy’, ‘multiple intelligences’, ‘materials development principles’, ‘style and strategy-based instruction’ and ‘culture of learning’. The change in my understanding of TESOL methods has been reflected in my teaching and in discussions with colleagues in my institution.

The course has also enhanced my ELT practice, which is reflected in the modification of old strategies and techniques and/or the application of newly learned ones. Examples of these include strategies for teaching listening and speaking, strategies for student motivation, use of materials development principles, effective reading strategy instruction, grammar teaching strategies, and raising students’ awareness of their learning strategies. Explicit and implicit feedback from my students has shown that my application of modified and/or new strategies and techniques has had a positive effect on their learning. They showed more motivation and enjoyed the new activities and games I designed. In addition to enhancing my teaching practice, the course has helped me develop the skills of ‘peer observation’ and ‘reflection on one’s own way of teaching’, two important aspects of any teacher’s professional development.

The course has provided me with a very well structured theoretical framework that has given shape to my long experience in the field. In other words, I have learned many theoretical views on many aspects of language teaching and learning, such as foreign/second language acquisition, learner motivation, socio cultural factors in language learning and the role of psychology in the process of language teaching and learning. This has positive implications for my conceptualization of ELT issues. It enabled me to establish links between theory and practice for better lesson planning, a more realistic materials design and a more effective instruction.

To sum up, this course was very useful to me as a teacher of English. It has enhanced my understanding of English language teaching methodology and practice and equipped me with a very well structured theoretical background that has given shape to my long experience in the field.

## **6.2. Peer Observation**

One way of making interaction with colleagues a source of learning and development is ‘peer observation’ where teachers organize programmed sessions to observe and comment on each other’s teaching. Peer observation help teachers “to reflect upon their teaching and make such reflection a permanent part of their teaching regimen” (Ali 16). In what follows, an objective description of my peer observation experience will be presented. The description includes the way my colleague covered some aspects of language teaching, constructive feedback focusing on what could be improved, and what both of us have learned from this peer observation experience.

First, I must say that my colleague (who did not want his name to be mentioned) has accepted to be observed based on his belief that observation, as a technique, is usually useful for both, the observer and the observed. During pre-observation discussion, both of us agreed that observation, if conducted professionally, functions like a mirror, which helps one to improve his/her image.

The observed teacher (henceforth the teacher) was friendly and cooperative, two characteristics required for any joint project.

The teacher seemed to be very well organized. He had a lesson plan, which included the lesson title, main lesson objectives, language skill focus, procedures, and distribution of time, assessment and homework. However, the plan did not mention the teaching method or technique to be used by the teacher. The class consisted of twenty-five adult students (25-43 years old). This meant that the teacher was dealing with mature students who, supposedly, realize the importance of their study. This was a great help for the teacher if compared to classes of teenage learners who sometimes do not show enough responsibility and can change teaching into a hated experience. The teacher seemed to make use of this advantage. He did not need a lot of effort in managing and controlling the class. Almost all his time and effort went to teaching the planned lesson that was on how to write a descriptive paragraph. He was very friendly with students but assertive in leading the class towards completing all the lesson parts. However, his keenness on completing the lesson parts has affected the way he should teach the lesson. For example, instead of doing teaching that is more communicative where students are encouraged to interact and communicate with the teacher and with each other, he restricted students' participation to answering questions he posed from time to time. There was more teacher talk than student talk. The U-shape seating layout of the class using fixed furniture did not allow for dividing the class into groups of more than two or three students.

At the beginning of the class, most students did not show motivation for learning how to write a descriptive paragraph, but after example sentences were written on the board, they started to show interest. Most students suggested good sentences that reflected their thoughtful effort, though some students showed some difficulty in producing grammatically well-formed sentences. Correction of sentences produced by some students was made by other students upon the teacher's prompt. This created some interaction in the class.

The teacher moved smoothly from one part of the lesson to another, but I was not sure if students had absorbed all the ideas of the previous parts. For example, moving from the phase of correcting ungrammatical sentences to the phase of linking sentences within a paragraph required much more time and practice than was given by the teacher. Following Scholink et al (15), "a fast pace may come at the expense of reflection and experimentation". Experience shows that in teaching, "transmission is probably less time-consuming than discovery and absorption and therefore may appear more 'efficient'; but if we are interested in effective learning, we need to allot time for that purpose" (Ibid: 15).

For assessment purposes, the teacher checked students' work orally either by asking students to read out their written sentences and paragraphs or by asking them direct question if they had problems. He commented on students' work and gave feedback, which seemed to satisfy students. The teacher gave no indication of how the students' homework will be assessed. No rubric of any kind was introduced.

We know that no work carried out by a human being is perfect and improvement is always possible and desirable. For the sake of improvement, I shared the above mentioned observations with the teacher. We agreed that in order to have a learner-centered teaching environment a number of improvements could be made: (1) the lesson plan should indicate the teaching method and/or technique to be used by the teacher, (2) emphasis should be made on communicative teaching by allowing more time for interaction in the class, which was possible and would have led to better student outcomes, (3) giving more time to students to practice and digest ideas of one part of the lesson before moving to another, and (4) use of a clearly defined learner-centered method of assessment for students' class work and home work.

The peer observation experience was very useful for my colleague and for me as well. We have learned that allowing a colleague to observe our teaching with the purpose of giving us feedback would be a fruitful experience, as this would help us reflect on our teaching experiences and interact with other teachers. All this will be useful for our professional development.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This paper was devoted to the discussion of issues and sharing of reflective views on how to boost English language teaching in Libya following years of stagnation and deterioration. The stagnation was the result of the cancellation by Gaddafi's regime of English from school curriculums due to political reasons. This stagnation continued for more than ten years. A few years ago, English language teaching started to flourish again due to the restoration of political relations with the West following the resolution of the Lockerbie case. Since then, English language teaching has been gaining momentum as an academic profession and as a business despite the hard conditions experienced by the country in the aftermath of the revolution, which led to the downfall of Gaddafi's regime. What is needed now is to develop this profession through the integration of Libyan teachers' professional experience with the latest theoretical and methodological developments in the discipline. The views discussed in this paper were based on the integration of research and at least fifteen years of teaching English at Libyan universities, institutes and language centers. The views are related to five ELT topics; namely: (1) Developing materials for teaching listening, (2) Teaching reading strategies, (3) Teaching grammar, (4) Raising students' awareness of their learning strategies, and (5) Teachers' professional development. By linking views on these issues to the Libyan context the paper paves the way for serious steps for the development of the English language profession in Libya at both methodology and practice levels.

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