Beyond Marginalized Fragmentation: Technology and Innovation in English-Language Learning in Palestinian HEIs

Aida Bakeer[1], Alan Bruce[2]

Al Quds Open University, Palestinian Territory, Occupied[1]
Universal Learning Systems, Ireland[2]

Abstract

Advanced ICT and digital learning platforms are not just wonders of modern technology. They exist in contexts of real human relationships, mirror prevailing systems of power and control and extend the possibility of transformative educational practice if deployed well. This paper examines the critical need for innovation in teaching and learning English in the exceptionally complex conditions of Palestine. For socio-political reasons, English language learning in Palestine is fraught with challenges and difficulties. The ineffectiveness of traditional lectures, outdated curricula, psychological factors, and teacher centered classrooms are the norm. Academics struggle to communicate and interact with international peers. The exchange of knowledge, skills and culture with others poses huge problems for Palestinian institutions. ICT supported English language teaching can create a new dynamism regarding quality education by encouraging local HEIs to update methodologies, strategies and contents. The occupation in Palestine impacts the movement of people, divides the territory geographically and fragments social relations. This has led to inequitable access to quality education for all students in Palestine. This paper describes the TEFL-ePAL capacity building project funded by the EU. This builds on the results of Emancipatory Action Research on 21st century skills initiated in 2015. This confirmed that teachers felt insufficiently motivated, with inadequate ICT resources and developmental programs. The results accorded with the findings of the policy paper on Teacher Education Improvement Project funded by the World Bank, and developing inclusion for global education [UNESCO, 2005]. Palestinian educators are now striving to use advanced technologies and new trends that focus on principles of personalized-differentiated learning, student-centered instruction, and constructivism. There is the wider issue to adapt technology to facilitate student engagement and participation, and allow students to be more interactive inside the class and have wider opportunities that "can help English language learners further develop their academic language proficiency and confidence in using the language". The wider objective of this project is to implement initiatives that develop learners' linguistic capacity, skills, and English language excellence, to bridge educational and socio-political gaps, enhance modernization, internationalization and lifelong learning. To achieve this goal, European and Palestinian partners will share their knowledge, experience and expertise, and will support the process of developing and implementing new curricula to be taught in innovative approaches. Internationalizing the context and contents of Palestinian English-language learning is but one step in a process to circumvent the fragmentation and underdevelopment of Palestinian educational institutions as they try to engage with the wider world as equal players.

Keywords: *Technology; TEFL; Innovation; Palestine*.

Overview

Advanced ICT and digital learning platforms are not just wonders of modern technology. They exist in contexts of real human relationships, mirror prevailing systems of power and control and extend the possibility of transformative educational practice if deployed well. This paper examines the critical need for innovation in teaching and learning English in the exceptionally complex conditions of Palestine. For socio-political reasons, English language learning in Palestine is fraught with challenges and difficulties. The ineffectiveness of traditional lectures, outdated curricula, psychological factors, and teacher centered classrooms are the norm. Academics struggle to communicate and interact with international peers. The exchange of knowledge, skills and culture with others poses huge problems for Palestinian institutions.

ICT supported English language teaching can create a new dynamism regarding quality education by encouraging local HEIs to update methodologies, strategies and contents. The occupation in Palestine impacts movement of people, divides the territory geographically and fragments social relations. This has led to inequitable access to quality education for all students in Palestine. This paper describes

the TEFL-ePAL capacity building project funded by the EU. This builds on the results of Emancipatory Action Research on 21st century skills initiated in 2015. This confirmed that teachers felt insufficiently motivated, with inadequate ICT resources and developmental programs. The results accorded with the findings of the policy paper on Teacher Education Improvement Project funded by the World Bank, and developing inclusion for global education [UNESCO, 2005]. Palestinian educators are now striving to use advanced technologies and new trends that focus on principles of personalized-differentiated learning, student-centered instruction, and constructivism.

The wider objective of this project is to implement initiatives that develop learners' linguistic capacity, skills, and English language excellence, to bridge educational and socio-political gaps, enhance modernization, internationalization and lifelong learning. To achieve this goal, European and Palestinian partners will share their knowledge, experience and expertise, and will support the process of developing and implementing new curricula to be taught in innovative approaches.

This paper will describe the method and intent of the project as it relates to building capacity in advanced technologies, access and universal design for learning, open methodologies and quality in EFL teaching – all within the context of Palestinian socio-economic realities.

Technological revolution, curriculum stasis

New technologies are often heralded with excitement and claims for their transformative power. Educational technologies are a strong example. Examples of productive use of new technologies are present in many educational contexts: internet use connecting global students in international learning communities; online learning projects giving rural students access to courses; use of handheld computers for data collection. But after decades of widespread computer deployment in schools, their role in expanding opportunities for teachers and students remains largely elusive. Despite their potential, these technologies are still used largely to support old goals, methods, and assessments that operate in unchanged traditional contexts. It is clear that educational systems and curricula impede teaching and learning for all. The framework of *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL), articulates a new view of the nature of learner diversity and shows that designing digital tools and content to respond to diversity yields a viable blueprint for change.

Although it seems that computers have been in the classroom for a long time now, as a technology they are still relatively young. Like most technologies in the early stages of application, classroom computers are mostly being used in traditional ways—new tools to do old things. Word processors, calculators, and learning games have been assimilated into conventional curriculums to support and augment traditional instructional activities (Reinking, et al., 2000). Core components of the curriculum—goals, media and materials, teaching methods, and assessments— remain essentially as they always have been.

In Palestine, English is the primary source of communication with the international world and is known as the window to that world. English language instruction has many important components, but the most important one of many EFL classrooms and programs are the textbooks and instructional materials used by language instructors. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest: "The textbook is an almost universal element of English language teaching. Millions of copies are sold every year. No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has a textbook". Decisions related to textbook selection affect teachers, students, and overall classroom dynamics in learning and teaching processes. Quality English language textbooks should contain contextualized content to respond to sensitive cultural and social variations and expectations; it should be authentic, natural, recent and relevant. This project investigates instructors' and students' perspectives on teaching and learning English in four Palestinian academic institutions. Textbook evaluation and innovative ICT deployment are key processes for future curriculum development plans for TEFL programs in Higher Education Institutions in Palestine.

Methodology

Emancipatory approaches to education are a means to mobilize disenfranchised individuals and groups towards democratic engagement. Central to this view is that teaching and learning should enable critical thinking and facilitate meaningful knowledge building to indigenous populations (Giroux,

2011; McLaren, 1995). By raising awareness of the root causes of social marginalization, economic inequalities and political exclusion, oppressed people are set free from fatalistic, irrational and deterministic mind sets and collectively empowered to improve their living conditions.

Technology demonstrates that world-class capabilities can be provided and developed in educational systems. If the technology is provided freely and openly, the potential for innovation increases significantly. The increase in innovation is due to the decrease in transaction costs. Lower transaction costs decrease the overall cost and risk of experimenting with various innovations, thereby increasing the number of actors capable and willing to innovate. (Wiley and Hilton, 2009). A number of organizations already combine their particular business knowledge with openly available world-class educational material. Open service providers are those individuals or organizations that provide access to world-class capabilities under open licenses and at lower transaction costs. Because open service providers lower the cost and risk of educational experiments, they are a critical piece of the infrastructure necessary for enabling rapid educational innovation. It is in this sense that Wiley (2009) argued that "content is infrastructure," referring to the important role of open educational resources in enabling educational innovations.

Open service providers will be at the center of many future educational innovations due to their role in enabling rapid, inexpensive, low-risk experiments. For Higher Education Institutes, this involves two issues. First, availability of world-class capabilities from open service providers and other organizations creates an increasingly fierce competitive climate for higher education, resulting in significant pressure to adopt a strategy of dynamic specialization.

Second, because open service providers play central roles in facilitating future innovation, conventional universities must decide what role they want in the evolution of higher education. If institutions want to exert a significant influence on the direction of higher education, they will likely need to become open service providers in order to maintain their central positions of influence.

The main justification of implementing technology in Palestine lies in the lack of both resources and expert native speakers. Students need to value their classes in a clearer, more effective and attractive manner in learning English. Utilizing modern technology in developing educational interventions means that new methods will reduce complexity in English learning. In addition, these tools will help teachers to transfer information easily and also pass suitable information to the students in easier ways.

Blended learning, a new approach in educational planning, is defined as an applying more than one method, strategy, technique or media in education. Today, due to the development of network infrastructures and improved student access, the Internet can be utilized along with traditional and conventional methods of training. Most students believe that using ICT during lessons has a positive effect on class atmosphere and various deep learning processes (European Commission, 2013). Al-Quds Open University, the first Palestinian academic institution which adopted open learning systems, has been delivering a variety of blended learning courses since the academic year 2007/08, to overcome constraints of space, time, and cost associated with traditional instruction using virtual classes, video streaming, and Moodle (Shawish and Shaath, 2010). Students can supplement school learning with high quality advanced courses offered at a distance, and access to supportive information. Blended learning environments are increasingly used in the world, especially in university degrees and are based on integrating web-based learning and face-to-face learning environments. Educationists are looking at many approaches to improve students' performance in English and one of the approaches that stands out is blended learning (Siew-Enga, Muuk, 2014).

In this project, the aim is to increase creative thinking and hands-on innovative training of students in universities and make education processes simpler and more engaging. The key objective is to focus on English language skills and competences (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). These skills need to be represented in technology frameworks used in lectures and tutorials that develop models in Palestinian society to increase the value of education, equip students with lifelong learning and provide them with the 21st century skills needed to participate successfully in sustainable labor market outcomes. To achieve this main aim and other specific objectives, European and Palestinian partners are collaborating by sharing information and knowledge to develop Palestinian skills through training on content design, technology integration in education and teaching best practices. Consequently, the

Palestinian partners will develop 4 courses and establish the infrastructure needed in blended learning (platforms, language labs, etc.). The new curricula will provide more freedom and participation, and will be taught in a blended environment (face to face and online). The new curricula will be piloted and then adopted by the HEIs participating in this project.

Locating context and competence

An understanding of the profound issues confronting multilingualism begins with consideration of the educational, social, cultural and economic needs involved. Our approach settled on a research perspective located in the theory of linguistics (reflecting concerns voiced by Noam Chomsky over 40 years ago), pedagogical methods, rights, multiculturalism and self-confident competence for learners – and their teachers. This project recognises that interculturalism in itself is increasingly part of pedagogical perspectives. At a time of profound change and socio-economic shock/transformation, it is critical to refocus on the contribution multilingual education makes to processes of socio-economic development. For example, multilingual education forms the basis of a range of activities that stimulate collective cultural processes of meaning, innovative thinking and creative approaches to joint working.

Over recent decades a revolution has occurred in understanding concepts of knowledge and theories of learning. This revolution has enabled changed thinking about educational approaches in significant ways. Education is linked to - but very separate from – structures of schooling. Education systems and schooling structures have mirrored the societies and cultures of which they are a part, reflecting society in terms of values, structures and processes. Traditional learning systems in the Western world, for example, had classrooms structured in strictly didactic ways in terms of pedagogy. Students received, teachers delivered. In addition, classrooms were located in fixed places – even the architecture reflected notions of hierarchy, order and control.

Learning today reflects a world that is, in a contradictory sense, both more connected and more fragmented. The impact of globalization and new technology has produced a planetary connection. Deep divisions of labor, chronic levels of underdevelopment and unequal access to wealth have, however, also produced great inequalities and discrepancies in social order and structure. This has a huge resonance in Palestinian contexts.

Among the key issues facing learners today is:

- Relevance of education for future employment prospects
- Availability of learning
- Quality and progression routes that are unbiased and transparent
- Enhanced access for all
- Removal of barriers around prejudice, discrimination and exclusion
- Addressing issues around cultural and ethnic difference and diversity
- Flexibility to meet individual learning needs in non-traditional contexts.

Change and learning are two sides of the same coin. Accelerating change confronts communities, professionals and organizations with new problems. In turn, these demand new skills. The market selection of change-oriented firms further accelerates innovation and change. There is nothing to indicate that the process will slow down in the near future. This is one reason why, over the next couple of decades, innovation policy will be crucial for economic performance. A major objective must be to contribute to the learning ability of firms, knowledge institutions and people. At the same time society must address the possible negative effects of the learning economy in terms of social and regional polarization or imbalance.

The 1993 Oslo Peace Accords created a period of limited Palestinian self-rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). The first-ever Palestinian *Ministry of Education* was established in 1994 to prepare aspirant Palestinian citizens for institution building, state formation, and the global information economy. The Ministry serves approximately 75% of students in the OPT, with 15% by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the remaining 10% through private enterprise, mostly ecumenical. This has entailed rebuilding an outdated educational system with severe shortages of qualified teachers and school buildings, and an outdated foreign curriculum. For financial assistance,

the resource-deficient Palestinian National Authority (PNA) turned mainly to international sponsors. The World Development Indicators identified Palestinians as among the highest per capita recipients of assistance in the world. PNA reliance on international donors and expertise for wide-scale educational reform exacted a heavy price on Palestinian educational autonomy. The results of this dependence can be seen at geopolitical and policy formation levels.

Considerable research exists on the challenges and issues surrounding second language acquisition. Some of these relate to pedagogical principles involved in developing awareness, competence and fluency. Such research generally looks at teaching methods and contrasts them with less formal second language acquisition modalities. The wider objective of this project is to implement initiatives that develop learners' linguistic capacity, skills, and English language excellence, to bridge educational and socio-political gaps, enhance modernization, internationalization and lifelong learning. To achieve this goal, European and Palestinian partners will share their knowledge, experience and expertise, and will support the process of developing and implementing new curricula to be taught in innovative approaches. Internationalizing the context and contents of Palestinian English-language learning in the difficult circumstances of Occupation is but one step in a process to circumvent the fragmentation and underdevelopment of Palestinian educational institutions as they try to engage with the wider world as equal players.

References

[1] Krashen S., (1987) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
[2] Krashen, S., (1988) *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
[3] Unesco 2005: Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions
[4] Marshall, H., & DeCapua, A. (2013). *Making the transition to classroom success: Culturally responsive teaching for struggling language learners.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press.
[5] Wiley, D., & Hilton III, J. (2009). Openness, Dynamic Specialization, and the Disaggregated Future of Higher Education. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *10*(5).
[6] Pica, T. (1994). Questions from the language classroom: Research perspectives. *TESOL Quarterly, 28*. pp.49-79.
[7] Reinking, D. et al. From assimilation to accommodation: a developmental framework for integrating digital technologies into literacy research and instruction, *Journal of Research in Reading, ISSN 0141-0423 Volume 23, Issue 2, 2000, pp 110-122*
[8] Heath, S.B. (1986). Sociocultural contexts of language development. *In Beyond language: Social and cultural factors in schooling language minority students*. Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University.
[9] Bianchi, A, (2076). 'The English Language Teaching Situation in Palestine' in Kirkpatrick, R (ed.), *English Language Education Policy in the Middle East and North Africa,* Cham: Springer International Publishing.
[10] Dwaik, R., & Shehadeh, A. (2013). 'Motivation Types among EFL College Students: Insights from the Palestinian context'. *An-Najah University Journal of Research (Humanities)*, 24 (1), 333-360.
[11] Abu Shawish and Shaath, (2010). 'Al-Quds Open University Learners Attitudes Toward Blended Learning', *Palestinian Journal of Open Education*, Vol. 3 No. 6, January 2012.
[12] Ramahi, H, (2015). *Education in Palestine: Current Challenges and Emancipatory Alternatives - A study*, RLStiftung: Ramallah.
[13] Nicolai, S. (2007) *Fragmented Foundations: Education and Chronic Crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) UNESCO.