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Changing Practices in a Developing Country: The Issues of Teaching English in Libyan Higher Education

Abushafa, Mohamed

Subject: English language, Libyan universities, transition

Abstract:

Libya is a country which is trying to find its place in the international community. It has a mainly youthful population of about 5.6 million with a median age of 24.8 years and large numbers of young people are accessing university courses. This creates a demand for university places which is increasingly difficult to meet. The recent political changes in Libya have compounded these difficulties. This study investigates the challenges of teaching English in Libyan Higher Education as the country prepares its young people for living and working in a global environment where the English language is predominant. The investigation finds that there is recognition of the importance of English, but the level of language skills of students entering university is well below an acceptable standard, and both teachers and students advocate an early start for learning English in schools. Within the universities the curriculum is not consistent and leads to graduates in English having a limited command of the language. Some evidence suggests that students are not motivated to study English and often choose the programme simply as a means of guaranteeing them a job in the future, or because it is at the most convenient location for them. There is a lack of resources and facilities, with large classes and few rooms for teaching, limited internet and communication technology, and little access to libraries. Teachers are not prepared well for their teaching roles nor supported with development activities, and there are few opportunities for teachers or students to practise their English. The thesis makes a number of recommendations including running summer schools in English speaking countries, online courses with native English speakers, and exchange programmes where teachers can benefit from updating their methodology as well as their language skills. Further recommendations are for the Ministry of Education to have overall control of the curriculum, and for the Libyan government to continue its building programme and prioritise access to technology. One year exchange programmes with English speaking countries would enable native English speakers to be available in all university English departments. It is also recommended that students are motivated by providing courses relevant to them, and that more workshops and activities such as competitions and monthly magazines written by students and teachers are used to encourage involvement.

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