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Learning and Teaching at Higher Education Level in Palestine: Challenges, Approaches and Achievements

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Abstract: ***The Palestinian educational system has gone through hectic phases characterized by being restricted and governed by occupation starting from the British Mandate up to the Israeli Occupation. However, the Palestinians supported by determination and insistence to build up their state and infrastructure, they first started by developing and upholding the educational system. Thus, they jumped over all the challenges which could have stopped them forever, build up the Palestinian higher educational system, planning the future of education and put up the solid pillars and plans, adopted in new curricula based on research and updated the criteria needed to judge, assess, and fulfill achievements. Therefore, many achievements are now on the ground expanding the number of Palestinian universities, adopting new educational programs and curricula, high scores in IELTS and TOFEL exams, new MA and Ph.D. programs were launched and achieving high ranks in the international university scale of QS.***

Keywords: educational development, curriculum, evaluation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Palestinian Ministry of Education is the authority that is in charge of creating, developing, and publishing textbooks for public schools. It was established in 1994 after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the Oslo Agreement between Palestinians and Israeli on September 13, 1993.

Since 1994, (MOEHE) has been spending lots of money and efforts for building the educational system from scratch. According to the ministry, "Education is a human right that should be provided to all children from kindergarten to the high school"(Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2005, p. 8). It is worth mentioning that the students in West Bank were studying the Jordanian English textbooks while Gaza Strip students were using Egyptian English textbooks before the foundation of (MOEHE).

Curricula designers faced critical problems such as triple period schools, lack of qualified teachers, and the other consequences of the recruitment practices… etc- shaped a new education during occupation time. However, the (MOEHE), realized that the Palestinian curriculum needed to be developed as well as prepare qualified teachers who can adjust to the new challenged.

Soon after its establishment, the (MOEHE) asked help from UNESCO and donor countries in the Arab Gulf and Europe in establishing the new Palestinian Curriculum Development Centre (PCDC). The PCDC now is the official authority that is in charge to develop the Palestinian curriculum for the first time in the history of Palestine. Afterward, it published Palestinian textbooks for the first and the second grades only as a first step for creating "English for Palestine" textbooks.

PCDC claims the following aspects are taken into consideration in designing the first English textbooks like newly published researches about the nature of learning a second language, language as well as human development, and pedagogy.

By 2006, English textbooks have been designed for all grades i.e 12 grade. A massive collaboration effort has been done by specialists in the field to continually revise and evaluate the new curriculum for modification and implementation of the proposed curriculum to achieve the intended national goals (English for Palestine, Student's Book 12, 2006; The Palestinian Curriculum Development Center).

A. The Educational Teaching System At Higher Education Institutions In Palestine

The educational system in Palestine displays a mixed picture. The population in Palestine is considered as one of the most literate, not only in the Arab world but also around the world. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 96.3% of Palestinians are literate (PCBS, 2014). However, a deep look at the Palestinian educational system shows disrepair and failing due to the effects of Israeli occupation in C Areas(UK Essays, 2018), lack of training for new teachers, and lack of schools in marginalized communities (see Save the Children Alliance, 2001). Teachers, families, and supervisors along with the university instructors usually complain a lot about the weakness in the students' performance and efficiency in the target language

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This critical issue has revealed an urgent need for a lot of research to point out the problems beyond the teaching methodologies used by teachers at schools and learning of English in Palestinian schools and finding solutions for these problems. Improving students' language skills is always the main purpose of EFL programs in universities. However, which skills are taught and how they are taught differ from course to course and program to program; therefore, the effectiveness of each textbook in helping learners acquire the necessary skills must be considered. (Khalil and Kattan, 1994 and Mahmoud 2006 /2008). There are 49 Palestinian higher education institutions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.More than 221 000 students are enrolled in these institutions. Higher education in Palestine was legally organized through the Law on Higher Education No 11 of 1998, which gives every citizen the possibility to access higher education. The law recognizes three different types of institutions in Higher Education: governmental, non-governmental and private institutions. The Ministry also provides partial support and funding to non-governmental Higher Education Institutions(HEIs). The HEIs are mostly independent but they have to follow the abovementioned law and regulations of the ministry.

B. Teaching forms at Higher Education in Palestine

The minimum requirement for the enrolment at the following higher education institutions is the completion of the General Secondary Exam Certificate (Tawjihi), IB, SAT, or GCE certificates.

1) *Universities:* Each university should have at least three faculties. The universities follow the credit hour system, in which the student has to finish a certain number of hours, which usually takes three to four years to finish. After the completion of these hours, the student is granted a Bachelor's degree. Some Palestinian universities grant Master degree or even Ph.D. in certain disciplines.
2) *University Colleges:* These colleges offer academic, technical or professional programs, which may last two or three years, after which the student is granted a Diploma.
3) *Polytechnics:* They offer Diploma or Bachelor degrees in professional or technical areas.
4) *Community Colleges:* They offer a one- year program with a diploma degree in professional or technical programs. (FOBZU, 2016).

C. Challenges of the Teaching and Learning Process in Palestine

From the outset, the researcher underscores that although Palestine has some kind of autonomy, it is still not independent; it is not a sovereign state. Therefore, it is still in the status of “NO State”. In other words, it is still occupied by Israel. No procedure or action can be taken without the prior approval from the Israeli occupation. Even, the President of Palestine cannot travel abroad without the permission of the Israeli authorities. Accordingly, the following challenges slow down the drive of development in the field of education in general.

1) *Infrastructure:* Due to the Israeli constant assaults, many schools and universities were closed and some were demolished. Even, rebuilding new institution requires the approval from the Israel authorities, which is not easy to achieve. Therefore, Palestinians are short of schools and universities.
2) *Restrictions on Movement:* Daily access to the schools and universities is a journey of discomfort and oppression. Students are forced to cross Israeli checkpoints and barriers, and wait for long hours to reach their destinations. In addition, East Jerusalem is separated from other Palestinian cities by barriers and the segregation wall. This causes delays and deprivation from accessing the educational and cultural centres.
3) *Harassment and Imprisonment:* It is common to see great numbers of students and schoolchildren in Israeli prisons. They are usually detained for no reasons and kept in prison under the so called “Administrative detention” which is inherited from the British Mandate. Since the year of 2000, more than 12000 have been detained.
4) *International Isolation:* Palestinian universities are genuinely isolated. The Israeli authorities have the upper hand in Palestine. They put restrictions on the exit and entry of the foreign academicians and educational institutions; they all should apply for visas, which are usually refused, and if approved, they will take longer time.
5) *Academic Freedom and civil Liberties on Campus:* No freedom or political activities are allowed at the Palestinian universities. As a result, many students and academics were expelled out of Palestine, among whom is the then President of Birzeit University Dr. Hanna Nasser, who was exiled from 1974-1996.
6) *Funding:* Due to the failure of Israeli authorities to meet the needs of the higher education in Palestine, the Palestinian education is reliant on the foreign aid. Thus, Palestinian education is permanently under pressure. (FOBZU, 2016).

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D. General Principles for English Language Learning and Teaching in Palestine

The following are general principles of the English curriculum adopted by the Palestinian Ministry of Education:

1) Language is functional.
2) Language varies.
3) Language learning is culture learning.
4) Language acquisition is a long-term process.
5) Language acquisition occurs through meaningful use and interaction.
6) Language processes develop interdependently.
7) Native language proficiency contributes to second language acquisition.
8) Second/Foreign language learning is a developmental process.
9) Language learning is a developmental process.
10) Language learning is a decision-making process
a) Language learning is not just a matter of linguistic knowledge
b) Language learning is an emotional experience.
c) Language learning is, to a large extent, incidental.
11) Language learning is not systematic
a) The student is the language learner.
12) Language learning and teaching is shaped by students' needs and objectives in particular circumstances.
13) Language learning and teaching is based on normal uses of language, with communication of meanings (in oral and written form)basic to all strategies and techniques.
14) Every possible medium and modality should be used to aid learning
a) Testing is an aid to learning.

(Education General Administration of Curricula, 2015).

E. Approaches of Teaching English as a foreign language in Palestine

To achieve the aforementioned principles, the following approaches were used in designing English language curricula:

1) *The Grammar Translation Method:* The grammar-translation method is a method of language teaching, which emphasizes grammar rules and vocabulary. Therefore, teaching grammar rules was in the native language through literal translation of these rules. In addition, the main goal of this approach was not teaching speaking or communication; it was just for the sake of exercising the mind and reading the language. Later, it was proved that teaching grammar in such a way is infective and will impede communication. For a certain period of time, this method of teaching English was used in Palestine and accordingly the curriculum was designed.
2) *The Direct Method:* This method came as a revolt against the grammar translation method. It emphasized the teaching of speaking and listening instead of reading and writing; the native language is prohibited. The target language is only allowed. Therefore, the teachers and curriculum used objects, audio-visual aids and regalia to convey the intended message or meaning. As to grammar, it was taught inductively, in which students try infer and guess the rule instead of directly translating it. Some communicative were also included in curriculum.
3) *Audio - Lingual Method:* This method was based on behaviourism, in which language is a set of habits. It also emphasized that language is speaking not writing. Thus, this method used dialogues , memorization, repetition, drills, substitution drills and rote-learning to teach new structures and functions. Of course, the native language was not allowed. It was thought that through practice repletion, language will be learned.
4) *Suggestopedia:* This approach focuses on the affective domain of language teaching. The focal point is that if the learner learns in a relaxed atmosphere, he/she will learn. Thus, this approach uses drama, music and role- play in teaching English. It also teaches listening, speaking, reading and writing traditionally, where the native language is allowed. The class itself is arranged in a comfortable manner; the students are seated comfortably with soothing music. The underlying philosophy of Suggestopedia is " I think I can, I know I can." The psychological dimension is clearly shown in replacing the class meetings with "sessions".
5) *The Silent Way:* This method minimizes the teacher's role and maximizes the student's role. The students should talk more to each other before they resort to their teachers; the teacher just models once and the students have to produce what has been modelled. The policy of "three then me" can be used. That is, the students need to ask each other three times before asking their teachers.

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Thus, the name of this method is silent since the teacher keeps silent.

6) *The Natural Approach:* This approach was developed by Tracy Terrel based on Krashen's monitor model. It regards learning a language as a reproduction of the way humans naturally acquire their own native language. It is an approach of English teaching, which adheres to the communicative approach of language teaching. Therefore, almost all class activities are designed to promote communication. In addition, this approach focuses on providing the students with the opportunity to acquire the language rather than forcing them to learn it. Additionally, the acquisition of vocabulary is regarded as the key to comprehension and oral production. In this approach, teaching grammar should be outside the class and error correction is negative in terms of motivation and attitude. This reflects Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, which says the affective filter will rise if the student is put under pressure. Thus, the teacher's role would be supporting the overflow of language and providing comprehensible inputs.

7) *The Communicative Approach:* The communicative approach is said to be the product of the applied linguists, who were dissatisfied with the audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods of foreign language teaching. This approach focuses on providing the students with realistic, whole English. It also emphasizes the students' mastery of communication using appropriate social language, gestures or expressions. Tis approach is based on three main principles:

a) The communication principle: Activities of communication leads to promoting language acquisition.
b) The task principle: Engaging students in the completion of real world tasks promotes language acquisition.
c) The meaningfulness principle: Learners are engaged in meaningful use of the language.

It is clear that the main emphasis of this approach is to make the learner communicatively competent. The communicative employs the "information gap", in which the students have to work in team or groups to narrow the gap.

This approach also focuses on fluency and the students should be encouraged to speak freely and naturally in a less stressful environment. UkEssays, 2018).

F. CEFR and the Language Teaching in Palestine

English as a foreign language is usually taught at the English Language Centers (ELCs) of the Palestinian universities. All English Language Centers prepare placement tests for the new students to classify them into the proper level of English proficiency. The levels are designed according to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). It is common to use Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPT),but some universities prepare their own placement tests.

G. What are CEFR levels?

The six levels within the CEFR are A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. With these levels, you can easily work out your ability in around 40 different languages.

H. The "A" Levels: Basic User A1 | Beginner

At the A1 CEFR level, a language learner can: needs. details. clearly.

1) Understand and use very basic expressions to satisfy concrete
2) Introduce themselves and ask others questions about personal
3) Interact simply as long as the other person speaks slowly and

I. A2 | Elementary

At the A2 CEFR level, a language learner can:

1) Understand frequently used expressions in most intermediate areas such as shopping, family, employment, etc.
2) Complete tasks that are routine and involve a direct exchange of information.
3) Describe matters of immediate need in simple terms.

J. The "B" Levels: Independent User B1 | Intermediate

At the B1 CEFR level, a language learner can:

1) Understand points regarding family, work, school or leisure- related topics.
2) Deal with most travel situations in areas where the language is spoken.
3) Create simple texts on topics of personalinterest.
4) Describe experiences, events, dreams, and ambitions, as well as opinions or plans in brief.

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K. B2 | Upper Intermediate

At the B2 CEFR level, a language learner can:

1) Understand the main ideas of a complex text such as a technical piece related to their field.
2) Spontaneously interact without too much strain for either the learner or the native speaker.
3) Produce a detailed text on a wide range of subjects.

L. The "C" Levels: Proficient User C1 | Advanced

At the C1 CEFR level, a language learner can:

1) Understand a wide range of longer and more demanding texts or conversations.
2) Express ideas without too much searching.
3) Effectively use the language for social, academic or professional situations.
4) Create well-structured and detailed texts on complex topics.

M. C2 | Proficiency

At the C2 CEFR level, a language learner can:

1) Understand almost everything read or heard with ease.
2) Summarize information from a variety of sources into a coherent presentation.
3) Express themselves using precise meaning in complex scenarios.

As per these levels of the CEFR, most Palestinian universities now adopts the British textbooks, which are classified according to CEFR. Nowadays, it is common to see the textbook **"Cambridge Unlock".**

N. What is Cambridge teaching series?

It is a series of textbooks starting from A1 level to C2 level. Each textbook is comprised of a hardcopy of the student's book and online activities controlled by a secret code for each student. It also has an application called "Cambridge Pocket", which can be downloaded and used in class together with the student's book.(university of Cambridge , 2011).

O. Achievements of teaching English at higher education institutions

Despite occupation and all aforementioned challenges, the Palestinian universities were able to build up a solid infrastructure for English teaching and even contribute to the development of English teaching in the neighboring countries.

1) The Palestinian universities built up exchange programs with all countries of the world. Thus, the university students have been given the opportunity to use English in survival situations.
2) Almost all Palestinian universities use accredited English textbooks and standard placement tests.
3) A great number of students excelled in the TOEFL and IELTS tests and were consequently awarded grants and scholarships to continue their MA or Ph.D in America or Europe.
4) The university graduates were able to establish a curriculum department at the Ministry of Education. As a result, Palestine, now, has its self-designed English curriculum at school level. It is called "English for Palestine".
5) MA programs for TEFL are launched at most Palestinian universities.
6) Continuing education centers are launched to bridge the gap for those who have some weakness in English.
7) EFL conferences and symposiums are held and which host keynote speakers from all over the world.
8) Most of major are taught in English like engineering, economics, pharmacy, Media, etc.
9) The British Council and AMIDEAST organize workshops for university students, and even provide scholarships. For example, AMIDEAST has been offering the Palestinian students scholarships for two years in terms of a project called " Access Microscholarship".
10) English is one of basic requirements to have any post or job in Palestine.

II. CONCLUSION

Although Palestine is still under occupation with limited resources and funding, it was able to create a well-organized educational system from which many countries learn and develop. This is just the outset; it is the first step in the thousand miles; the Palestinians have innumerable aspiration and dreams to fulfil. This is all attributed to the Palestinian brains and endless determination.

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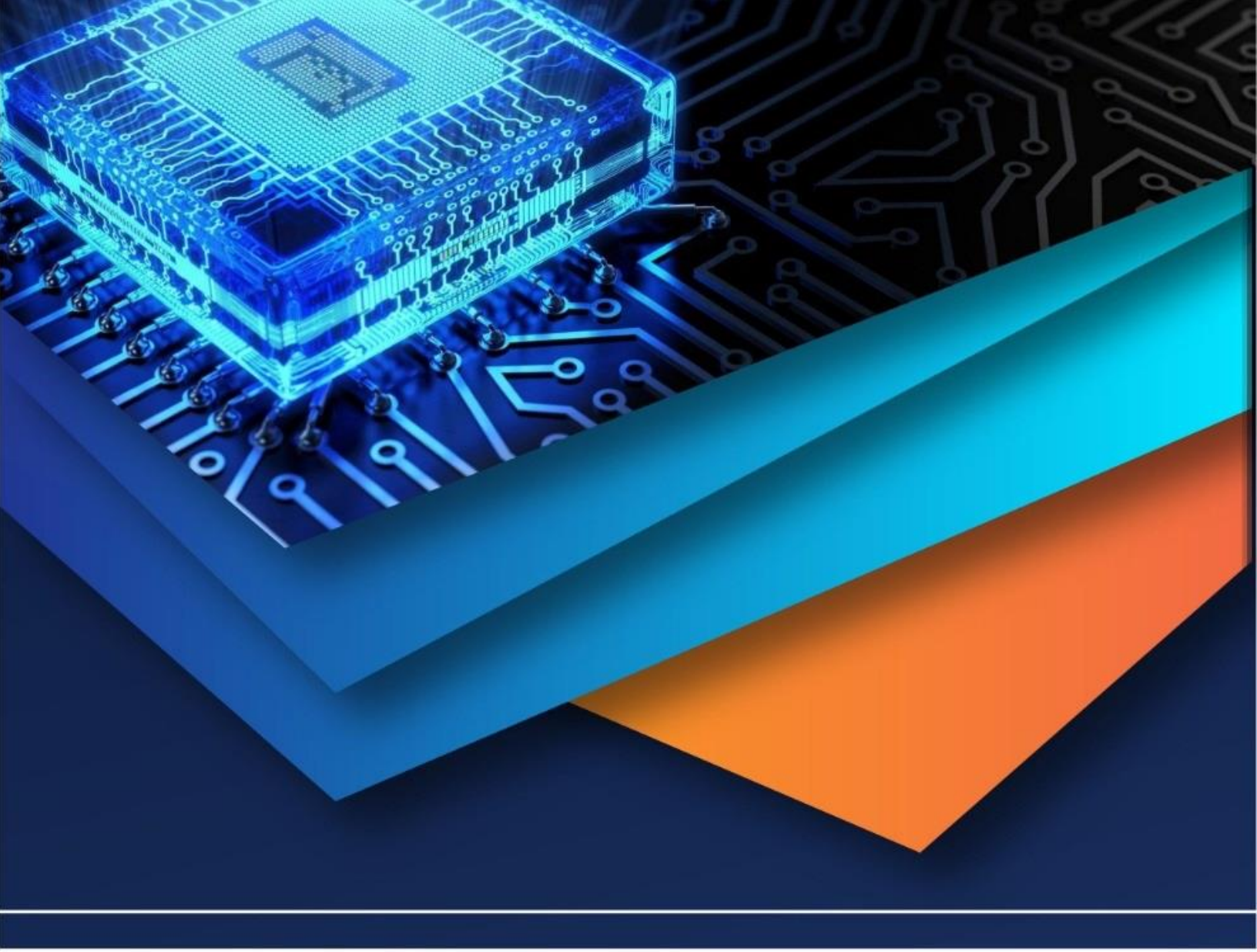

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