

The Efficacy of In-service Teacher Training in Optimizing EFL Learning in the South of Algeria: the case of Biskra

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Abstract :

Although geographical boundaries are never accounted among the parameters of success and failure in education, the southern states' learners in Algeria are constantly obtaining the substandard rankings in official achievement tests of English. This stereotyped image could be partially due to the inadequate reflection on the linguistic and socio-cultural specificity of the region. Yet, the Ministry of Education still questions the quality of teachers and their competences as one of the chief reasons in the deteriorating of learners' results. This paper, therefore, addresses the contribution of the ministerial-devised in-service teacher training programs into the optimization of learning English in the south of Algeria, Biskra as a case study. A descriptive study that surveyed 15 Secondary School teachers probes the efficacy of training programs in bettering learners' results. It concludes that learning English in the South cannot be improved only through the training programs, but also through the bilateral collaboration between the political authorities and the local schools' representative bodies. The study recommends a serious consideration of the socio-linguistic, cultural and environmental factors, besides the attitudes of learners and their community towards EFL instruction.

الملخص:

رغم أن الحدود الجغرافية لم تكن أبدا معيارا لتحديد النجاح و الفشل في الدراسة، إلا أن ولايات الجنوب الجزائري لا تزال تتذلل قائمة ترتيب نسب النجاح في الامتحانات الرسمية. هذه الصورة النمطية تعود جزئيا إلى النظرة غير الوافية للخصوصية اللغوية للمنطقة و متطلباتها الاجتماعية والثقافية. رغم ذلك فإن وزارة التربية لا تزال تعتبر عدم كفاءة الأساتذة سببا رئيسا في تدهور نتائج المتدربين و خاصة في مادة اللغة الانجليزية. لذا فإن هذه الورقة تتناول دور برامج التكوين الوزاري الموجهة للأساتذة في تفعيل تعلم اللغة الانجليزية في مناطق جنوب الجزائر، ولاية بسكرة كدراسة حالة. و لقد اعتمدت هذه الورقة على الدراسة الوصفية من خلال استبيان لـ 15 أستاذ لغة انجليزية في الطور الثانوي لمعرفة أسباب نقائص التلاميذ و التحديات التي تواجه الأساتذة. و قد خلصت الدراسة إلى أن تحسين تعليم اللغة الانجليزية في مناطق الجنوب لا يتم فقط من خلال برامج التكوين و إنما أيضا من خلال التعاون المشترك بين السلطات و ممثلي الهيئات التدريسية. و تقترح الدراسة الأخذ بجدية الاعتبارات السوسiolغوية، الثقافية و البيئية إلى جانب موقف تلاميذ المنطقة ومجتمعهم تجاه تدريس الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

Introduction

The current debate on the quality of EFL education in Algeria is controversially multidimensional. The stakeholders of the debate have not consented yet on a single ground of the problem, being it political, socio-linguistic, cultural or merely pedagogical. In spite of the subsequent governmental efforts to remedy the quality of English language education via curriculum reforms and progressive teacher training programs, many learners have failed to experience the pleasure and the sense of learning English as a vital school subject, especially in the southern regions. Despite being a nationwide educational concern, learners' low grades in foreign languages, particularly English is still associated with learners of the South. Ministerial reports of exams' means of scores frequently record learners in the southern Willayas in the last ranks compared to their counterparts in the North. (Chellal, 2015). This annually repeated scenario of unpleasant results of English language' achievement tests have stereotyped pupils of the South as incompetent learners of English. Since the teacher's role is inevitably undeniable in ameliorating the quality of education and optimizing learning, the Ministry of Education counts on teacher training programs as a policy to handle the issue. The present paper, therefore, seeks to figure out if in-service teacher training programs can solely optimize the learning of English in the South and mount learners' results to the desired expectations.

1. Teacher education: a general overview

Teacher education has ever since been well grounded in education as a necessary policy to build quality teachers whose mission is to improve learners' achievements and enhance the way teachers "value their own knowledge generation and dissemination" (Northfield and Gunstone, 1997:48). Effective teachers follow an endless journey of learning, a never-ending process as Celani (2006) names it, to develop their linguistic and pedagogical skills, and they are committed to constant progressive development, Murray and Christison (2011) state. Moreover, Tucker and Stronge (2005: 2) assert that "years of research on teacher quality support the fact that effective teachers not only make students feel good about school and learning, but also that their work actually results in increased student achievement". Scott (1994, Qtd in Sockette et al. 2001: 12) inquired the ways of improving education, and he located double-sided answer; "control teachers more effectively, or find ways to enhance teachers' professionalism, creativity, and autonomy". In both cases, the teacher is in the core of the solution. Hence, teachers' development reflects in many ways the development of learners as they mirror teachers' beliefs, knowledge and practices on the ground.

Ideally speaking, the ultimate aim of teaching, whether in English or other disciplines, is to make a significant progress in the learners' education,

which cannot be successfully achieved unless the teacher possesses the talent besides training. Broughton et al. (1980: 37) confirm that “the professional English language teacher should have not only the required personal qualities, but also training in the disciplines and fields of study appropriate to the language teaching process”. Therefore, both content knowledge and content practice contribute to the professionalism of the EFL teacher.

As teacher education is a process that targets teachers’ professional development, this indispensable development commences with an initial pre-service training of tertiary level learners whose predetermined goal is to endorse the profession of teaching whether in primary, middle, or secondary level. It, then, continues along with in-service training as long as the teacher continues to practice the teaching business and occasionally ends with advanced training for teachers’ trainers who crane forward to become senior personnel (Bowers, 1987) . Teacher education, thus, is the teachers’ career ladder (Skinner, 2005:109) that shapes the major progress steps of a teacher in different layers: personal, social and professional (Northfield and Gunstone (1997) .

The advantage of teacher education in theory is of no doubt guaranteed to better the entire schooling practices, yet in practice the literature revealed a dispute in research’ findings on its effectiveness (Bressoux, Kramarz, and Prost 2008 ; Smithers, Robinson, and Coughlan, 2012 ; Kazemi & Ashrafi 2014 ; Bokdam & Ende 2014) .

The advocates of teacher education acknowledge its rewarding benefits on teachers’ effectiveness in class. In its grounded theory, teacher education supplies teachers with working ideas that guide them through substantial revisions of their knowledge and practices. Only “successful teachers integrate these ideas into their classroom role and regular thinking about curriculum, teaching and assessment, and into their work as a member of a school team” (Skinner, 2005: 118) . By doing so, trained teachers have more chances of improving learners’ achievements than their untrained counterparts. To illustrate, Rahman et al. (2011) conducted a study on 180 secondary school teachers in Islamabad, Pakistan probing the relationship between teacher training and effective teaching in which they statistically found a positive correlation between teacher training and learners’ exam scores.

Unlike its advocates, teacher education opponents view no link between trained teachers and learners’ achievements, especially the newly recruited teachers. In the USA, two major reports were released in 2000 by National Council for Teacher Accreditation (NCATE) and the Public Agenda Foundation in which the principles of teacher education were questioned (Socket, 2001) . The two reports revealed the challenges and complexities of the classroom that may obstruct both pre-service and in-service teachers from achieving their goals.

In African countries, the scenario varies from one state to another. In his study on the impact of teacher knowledge on student achievement in 14 Sub-Saharan African countries in Mathematics and reading, Altinok (2013) found that factors as teacher knowledge, education and experience, teacher quality effect, and socio-economic level of learners are the main determinants of success in school.

What did these studies suggest is that classroom success results from a combination of factors including learners' socio-cultural background, attitudes towards learning, intelligence, classroom atmosphere and previous education besides the role of teachers' long years of expertise dealing with learners and the curriculum.

2. Teacher education in Algeria

What has been traditionally believed to be a teacher is nowadays a passive, handicapped provider of knowledge as there is no sign of contemporary practitioner who possesses it all; teacher's pedagogy, learner's psychology, content knowledge and updated technology. After all, it was ever since recognized that the well-accomplishment of the teacher's duty relies on a pedagogical tripod of appropriacy, organization and excitement. Broughton et al. (1980: 174) declare that "the teacher's duty is to make sure that his teaching is appropriate to his class, that is organised systematically, and that it is exciting". These three key requirements are attained and developed constantly through continual training.

However, the reality of Algerian context of teacher education is not promising as long as the only criterion to recruit a teacher is having a university degree (Master's of English language). The scoring scale in recruitment contests does not include the knowledge trinity of teacher profession; knowledge of subject matter and curriculum goals, knowledge of learners and their development in social context, and knowledge of teaching (Darling-Hammond 2006: 4-5) .

In spite of the subsequent ministerial reforms to improve the quality of English language education, the results are still below the international standards of English proficiency. To illustrate, the Ministry of National Education in Association with the British Council has "launched a three-year teacher training project, SEEDS, which aims to reach all 32,000 secondary school teachers in the country" (EF EPI, 2015: 46) . The project is very promising as the scores of English in official exams record the lowest ranks of the school subjects.

Meanwhile, a research conducted by the National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom (NARIC) in 2012 on the assessment of International Teacher Training (ITT) systems scored Algeria 14 out of 52 points on the basis of its comparability to the English ITT system. Although the research profiled a satisfactory teacher training system in Algeria, it concluded that "no English language requirements are in place for ITT

programme admission” (UK NARIC 2013: 18) . It also highlighted the limited scope of teacher training systems as they are exclusively provided by ENS (Ecole National Supérieur).

3. Background of the study

The 2015 Ministry of education’ report on secondary learners’ underachievement in Baccalaureate exam of English identified the obtained results of learners in Biskra as unsatisfactory, which requires instructional remedies. The subscribed remedy by the Ministry of education is to devise a three year plan of in-service teacher training in a hope to ameliorate the success rate of learners.

The first phase of the program was launched in November 2015. The program commenced with a proficiency test for in-service Secondary School teachers to classify them according to their scores. The test was devised by the Centre of Intensive Language Teaching (CEIL) at Biskra University. The low-graded teachers, therefore, were selected for the training.

4. Participants

The program was initially planned to involve 30 teachers; however, only 15 of them (5 males and 10 females) who seriously joined it. The participants’ experience in teaching ranges from 3 months to 9 years. Most of them (13 teachers) teach in the suburbs of Biskra city, including Sidi Okba, Lioua, Aoulad Djallal, Zeribet El-Ouad, Sidi Khaled and Tolga. Only 2 teachers are currently teaching in Biskra city. They teach English for 4-6 secondary school classes of different streams and levels in a work load of 15-20 hours a week in average. Over half of teachers (9) teach in crowded classes of 35-40 pupils per class. 13 teachers claim previous involvement in pre-service training programs which lasted for 6 months to a year. However, not all of them were addressed in English during the training (only 4) because the training programs were not exclusively devised to EFL teachers.

5. Method

To probe the effectiveness of teacher training in bettering learners’ achievement in Biskra, a questionnaire was administered to participants on Thursday, December 12th, 2015, during one of the training sessions. The questionnaire addresses two focal concerns; teachers’ attitudes towards training programs and believes in the substandard results of students in the southern Willayas, particularly in Biskra.

6. Analysis of results

The results of the questionnaire are hereby expressed statistically in percentages and interpreted accordingly.

6.1. Teachers’ belief in training as a part of their development

Response	Yes	No
Participants	14	01
Percentage	93.33%	6.66%

Table1. Participants’ attitudes towards teacher training

One way to achieve professionalism is to join any devised training to take advantage of the trainers' experience and discover the different dimensions of pedagogy. The table shows that 93.33% of participants believe that teacher training is a part of their development, which reflects teachers' awareness of the training importance.

6.2. Reasons for the training

Response	Professional development				classroom	discipline
problems	Deficient classroom performance				Inadequate	
knowledge						
Participants	12	11	6	01		
Percentage	80%	73.33%	40%	6.66%		

Table2. Participants' training motives

Though they do not agree on one purpose for the training, improving their professional career is what they share in common. The table shows that 80% of the participants need this training to develop themselves as professional teachers, 73.33% need it to cope with some classroom challenges they often encounter, and 40% need it due to their deficient performance in class. Only one teacher (6.66%) states that his/her language knowledge and competence are not adequate for his/her current profession. Two teachers expect that the training aims to update their teaching methods so that they could help learners enjoy learning English. Hence, the chief reason why these trainees are involved in this in-service teacher training is due to their concern of developing themselves as professional classroom practitioners.

6.3. Teachers' belief in geographical division of learners

Response	Yes	No
Participants	06	09
Percentage	40%	60%

Table3. Participants' view of geographical distinction of pupils

9 teachers (60%) do not believe in regional division of pupils i.e. they think that pupils are the same regardless to their geographical identity. However, 6 teachers (40%) think that there are learners of the north and their counterparts in the south and they are distinctively different in learning abilities due to the geographical boundaries. Although literature has not confirmed any difference among learners because of their spatial belonging, there are teacher who still believe in the difference between learners in their learning abilities and achievements as a result of environmental settings.

6.4. Learners' regional- determined competence

Response	Yes	No
Participants	05	10
Percentage	33.33%	66.66%

Table4. Participants' belief in learners' distinct competence

The table shows that the majority of teachers (66.66%) do not support the

opinion that supports the regional determination of the difference in learning competence. Yet, some teachers (33.33%) think that learners of the South are less competent than learners of the North. The lack of the political attention to the region and the insufficiency of the governmental provided teaching equipments are reported as two contributing factors into the existing dissimilarity among learners of one state. However, the main reason that most teachers agreed on is the socio-cultural environment that does not support learning foreign languages, namely English. The Algerian southern people are known for their reserved life style, cultural restricted openness to other cultures and traditional constraints that do not encourage pupils to be open to other languages and cultures. Other teachers (66.66%) who disregard competence inferiority of learners in the South justified their belief on the substandard results of learners in the official exams by the lack of objectivity among exam raters. Some stated that raters in the South tend to be more rigorous than their counterparts in the North. Moreover, they consider the hard environmental conditions as the hindrance that stands against their teaching practice; especially hot climate, housing and health requirements. Moreover, socio-cultural specificities of the region and learners' linguistic attitudes are not seriously considered by the government as they are done in the North. These impediments among others such as lack of experienced teachers and the absence of training for novice teachers led to the teaching ineffectiveness and consequently learners' failure in exams.

6.5. Improving learners' achievement via in-service training

Response	Yes	No
Participants	08	07
Percentage	53.33%	46.66%

Table5. Teacher training as a way to better learners' achievement

It seems that not all teachers agree on the effectiveness of such trainings in improving learners' achievements in the south. The table shows that participants are almost evenly divided into advocates (53%) and opponents (46.66%). Teachers who are not in favor of teacher training as a solution to the low achievement of learners gave a number of reasons. First, they believe that teachers are not the only responsible for learners' failure. One of them writes: "all the system should be recycled!" They state that the educational system should care more about learners' social well-being and provide classroom necessities for better performance. Second, they claim that teacher training program designers seldom adjust its content to the teachers' needs and practices in classrooms. The program often stresses theoretical ground of teaching and almost disregards practice. Third, they believe that training does not necessarily guarantee learners' improvement unless other success factors should be seriously considered.

6.6. Optimizing learning English in the South

Response	Participants	Percentage
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Recruiting teachers from the south	03	20%
Adjusting the schedule to the weather conditions	10	66.66%
Designing textbook to fit the socio-cultural background	08	53.33%
Providing necessary teaching equipments	15	100%
Improving teachers' working conditions	15	100%

Table 6. Participants' suggestions to improve learning English

Teachers' responses entirely agree on governmental funding of schools in terms of necessary teaching equipments and ministerial attention to the working conditions of teachers in the South. Over half of the participants call for the adjustment of the study schedule to the weather conditions. Similarly, half of the participants claim for a tailored textbook that fits the socio-cultural particularity of the south. Few teachers believe that recruiting teachers of southern origins could be an appropriate remedy to the declining outcomes of learners in the South since they are better acquainted with the region and its particularity. Other teachers suggest reducing the number of learners in classes to avoid discipline and load problems. Collaboration between Middle school and Secondary school teachers to avoid repetitions in the syllabus is one of the suggested solutions.

7. Discussion of results

The questionnaire reveals teachers' awareness of the importance of being involved in a teacher training program to develop their professional career and aid their learners to better their achievement results. Yet, some of them see no novelty and advantage of such events as the problem of learners' low achievement exceeds their limits. They, in a classroom open discussion, asserted the uselessness of such pedagogical strategies in their classes where learners claim zero knowledge of English. Thus, they recommended having a parallel training to Middle School teachers since they are the first instructional station of pupils. Learners show a remarkable progress if their primary foundation is well-launched, trainees confirmed. Therefore, looking forward to increase pupils' percentage of success cannot be fully achieved by a mere training program for their teachers to refresh their language proficiency level. Other considerations should be revised particularly learners' socio-cultural background and attitudes towards English language learning, teachers and learners' social well-being and more importantly a serious political attention to the South and the needs of their learners that suit their socio-cultural requirements. Hall (2011) and Day et al. (2007) make it clear that language learners experience differences in performance that is determined not only by the traits of their teachers' traits, but also by their linguistico-cultural background and socio-economic status.

Socio-linguistically speaking, geographical boundaries are never associated with learners' competence even though the climatic conditions may partially affect learners' physical readiness and enthusiasm in schools' daily routine. Psycho-linguistically, learners of the North are not scientifically proved to

have superior IQ rates than their peers in the South. Moreover, anthropological studies often exclude race as a contributing factor in school success or failure. What would speculatively impact learners' achievement in education, EFL education in particular are the pedagogical settings and the instructional provisions of school necessities besides the social and cultural background of learners. This may include the quality of teachers, adequacy of learning approaches, local folk attitudes towards learning foreign languages, namely English.

Therefore, burdening teachers the whole load of southern states learners' underachievement is an unfair judgment that cannot be adjusted by a mere training of teachers. Though indispensable for their individual, social and professional development, teacher training needs to be bound to other factors while looking forward to mount learners' school attainment, especially in EFL learning for the intricacy it entails.

Conclusion

Teacher training is a must have step for every teacher to assess his/her teaching and make relevant adjustments that would contribute positively in the instructional well-being of the learner. However, a training program should meet teachers' needs first before devising it to obtain the desired objectives. Besides, counting on teacher training as a sole solution to overcome the accumulated school deficiencies in the South makes it an unappreciated policy among the teachers' community as it implicitly points the finger at teachers being the cause of learners' underachievement. Disregarding learners' linguistic, socio-cultural, economic and environmental realities, besides their attitudes towards learning English as contributing arrays of factors continues to annually produce unpleasant school results, which stereotype learners in the South as incompetent learners of English.

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