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Students' Preference of Theoretical and Practical Teaching in ELT Libyan Higher Education Setting: An Action Research Study on the Impact of Integrating Technology to Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Shifting the focus from merely theoretical teaching to balancing between theory and practicum in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Libyan Higher Education setting is a challenge, and it is the concern of this article. ELT Libyan students need to be capable enough to implement what they learn in universities and to integrate technology in language classrooms. At the Department of English Language in the University of Benghazi Al. Marj Campus, the author –a teacher and educator- investigated 47 eighth semester students to know their feedback about the style of instruction they are experiencing and what they prefer instead, their opinions about the practical and technological classes of the subject Technology and Language Learning E506 (taught by the author), and to assess their immediate performance after attending a workshop. Unlike their educational experience which relies on providing only theoretical knowledge, students expressed a desire to equate theoretical and practical education. They enjoyed participating in workshops as well as using technology in teaching and learning. Students performances were evident to be better, therefore, the current study recommends that attending workshops helps students teachers to revise and apply what they are learning to improve their teaching and technical skills.

KEYWORDS: ELT Libyan Higher Education Setting, Practical Teaching, Theoretical Content, Educational Technology, Educational Applications, Students' Preference, Students' Performance, Teaching and Learning Skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

Theoretical concepts are important in any educational process as well as the practical implementations related to such concepts. It is said that these two types of knowledge are two sides of the same coin Such conceptual understanding can be achieved not through blind learning but through experience and exploration which lead to genuine understanding, pieces of information we discover are absorbed more effectively than information we are taught [1]. Learning by doing is considered to be one of the best methods of acquiring new knowledge and skills. Supporting teaching with job-related learning makes the transition from being students to employment easier, this can be reached through stimulating classroom interest by the application of academic content to job situations. In Higher Education context it is the Ministry of Higher Education role to make cooperation with organizations, institutions and business community in providing practicum programs to university students [2].

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In Libya, Colleges of Arts do not offer practicum sessions, as the outputs will go to sectors other than education. On the other hand, it is the Education Faculties' function to prepare students practically in order to become teachers. It seems to be a perfect situation, but in the Libyan Higher Education context it is important to repeatedly remind that the outcomes of universities and colleges (Arts, Education and Sciences) are all directed toward schools, so the skills of new teachers must match the students' needs. The problem according to Halliday [3, p. 38] is that "the sort of instruction which young people get in their colleges does not easily match industrial reality". The field of work often requires theoretical knowledge that supported by practical skills, these two educational phases are referred to by Warnock [4, p. 170] as "the two great arms of the educational system".

Lovell and Lawson [5] state that the first method of acquiring knowledge is by personal experience (observation and records). To grasp a piece of information is to experience its practice. In terms of language education, language acquisition comes across two stages, knowing about the language (structure) and knowing the language (communication) [6]. Therefore, consideration must be given to practices, especially in Libyan Higher Education settings (Arts Colleges) where theoretical teaching is the dominant. According to [7,p.14] "because of this dominance Libyan universities are far away from

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applying strategies that promote effective learning". Shafter and Ruth [8, p. 20] stated "theoretical teaching led to deficiencies in the activation of educational activities and student services and an inability to meet students' needs".

Students' needs are changing due to the new generations dependence on using technology and the internet. All international educational systems utilize technological practices inside and outside classrooms. In ELT classrooms students' skills can be better improved by integrating technology to teaching and learning considering that technical experience has a vital role in shifting from merely theoretical education to practicum. Isman [9] defined technology as the practical application of knowledge, involving machines, tools and interactions with humans and the environment.

Research Questions

1. To determine the dominant education style at the Department of English Language in Al.Marj Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Benghazi University.
2. To determine the type of teaching environment that students prefer.
3. To find out what students think of practical classes in general and of the subject Technology and Language Learning E506 in particular.
4. To assess the students' performance after attending a workshop class of the course Technology and Language Learning E506.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES

2.1. Why not to reach practical competences in Libyan Higher Education contexts:

According to Shafter and Ruth [8, p. 22] "competency is the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that human force should have and establish to facilitate the ability to function appropriately at the job market". The authors pointed out that Higher Education in Libya has encountered several and severe challenges to the government, faculties, departments, teachers, students, and society at large. The reason why the expansion of universities and the growth in the enrolment are considered shortcomings not features [8].

Alsanousi [10, p. 139] states that "Higher Education contributes to the national development by producing higher-level skills and competencies needed for a shift towards knowledge-based economy". Brydan and Abdulnabi [11] studied the students' benefits of Higher Education internationalization in Libya and concluded that it is important for universities and technical institutions to achieve the targeted employability skills in order to produce graduates who are ready to join the labor market.

Regarding English language teaching, the surrounded circumstances often lead to bad results, as for instance, laboratories in some English departments at Libyan universities suffer from the lack of equipment and overcrowding due to the large numbers of students, these conditions prevent the implementation of theoretical content the students extensively learn in their syllabus. In addition, the Libya Organization of Policies and Strategies (LOOPS) [12] listed some obstacles that face the sector of Higher Education including the poor curricula and teaching methods, the universities unclear policy of implementation, the cheating in secondary school exams that produces students who are unable to pass the introductory courses at the university level, and theoretical exams that result in students poor ability to deal with the practical reality in their majors after graduation. Also the deficiency of the teaching staff members and other workers in terms of qualification, performance and number.

2.2. Changing the orientation: Transition to practicum and technology:

As shown in the previous section, the desired change seems to be long-lasting. The thrill of analyzing a problem, detecting errors, experimenting solutions and finally watching that it has been solved successfully, brings to the researcher a joy of research, a desire to gain knowledge and apply activities to solve some of the most demanding problems faced by the English Language Teaching ELT in Libyan Higher Education environment. In this respect, the researcher as a teacher had the chance to build a new vision for a specific syllabus design to put its objectives in use through the application of a new technique (teaching instruction integrates theory, practice and technology using educational applications). According to Isman [9, p. 209] a technique is a body of technical methods or a method of accomplishing a desired aim. Chukwuere and Kuttikattu [13] adopted a narrative literature review (NLR) research approach to look at some academic materials determining their usage of mobile educational applications for their academic purposes. They concluded that university students invest a good amount of time using mobile educational applications to improve their academic performance. However, limited studies exist on the usage of mobile educational applications at the university level [13].

2.3. Technology and language learning E506: General aims and intended outcomes:

The course Technology and Language Learning E506 is offered to students in the last semester at the Department of English Language in Al.Marj Faculty of Sciences and Arts at Benghazi University. It was prepared and developed by the teacher (the researcher) in order to obtain the following general aims mentioned in the course description form:

- Teaching about educational technology.
- Teaching with educational technology.

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- Integrating educational technology into the design and delivery of curricula.
- Engaging in research regarding the use and effects of educational technology in the teaching/learning process.

To achieve the ultimate goal of making balance between theoretical knowledge and practical implementations, the intended outcomes of this course are divided into four types (according to the course description template):

- Knowledge and Understanding. (theoretical)
- Intellectual Skills. (theoretical)
- Professional and Practical Skills. (practical)
- General and Transferable Skills. (practical)

The variety of modules ranging between lectures, small group discussions, applications and practical sessions, provides a good balance between theoretical and practical knowledge. The various projects of lesson planning, presentations on Google Slides, PowerPoint and Canva, browsing educational websites and experimenting online platforms provide students an opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge in practical situations. The uniqueness of this subject lies in the fact that its modules focused on improving employability skills like lesson planning, lesson designing, lesson presenting and team working.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study took place at the Department of English Language in Al.Marj Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Benghazi University. The department was established in 1990. It is Applied Linguistics general section that offers a variety of educational materials, including literature, language skills, linguistics, applied linguistics, translation and educational technology. All staff members in the department are Libyan. Some of them graduated from Benghazi University, others from the Libyan Academy, whereas the rest of the teaching staff members received their degrees from native-English speaking countries. The educational system of the department was based on academic year system for several years and then changed to semesters system, three months for each semester. Throughout this period students are required to complete specialized academic subjects, and then present graduation papers in order to be certified by Bachelor of Arts in English language.

3.1 The study design

The study was carried out during regular lectures according to the department timetable, so that the students do not feel discomfort, and that they are under study. Within six months (two academic semesters) two groups of students participated, each group was taught for three months using the same teaching strategies and educational technologies. Throughout this period the teacher (the researcher) used different types of tools to collect data and evaluate students. A descriptive research model was utilized. According to Lovell and Lawson [5, p. 23] it is "A type of educational research that concerned with both syllabus and curriculum reform and with an examination of the aims and methods" A variety of data collection instruments were adopted to insure the validity of this study, questionnaire, lesson plan templates to be filled by students and students' narratives feedback. The instruction used was based on making balance between theoretical and practical teaching methods using technology.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study were 47 eighth semester students studying in the Department of English Language in Al.Marj Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Benghazi University. They were about to graduate, and their ages range from 22 to 25 years old.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

As mentioned above, three data collection instruments were used, questionnaire, lesson plan forms and narrative feedback. The questionnaire was distributed to students online through the private Telegram channel of the course. So that, students' responses were smoothly and confidently collected, 47 forms were submitted. The main purpose of using questionnaire in this study was to collect students' opinions about two subjects, firstly, their preference of theoretical or practical teaching. Secondly, their opinions about the practical sessions of the subject Technology and Language Learning E506. The questionnaire consisted of fifteen closed multiple choice questions, seven questions for the first subject and eight for the second. This questionnaire was created by the researcher and revised by a faculty member from Benghazi University and then modified in light of the feedback provided. Lesson plan templates also used as a tool for data collection to assess the students' performance after attending a workshop entitled (the lesson planner). A sample of 19 lesson plan templates were collected from students. The third instrument that used for data collection is narrative of student's feedback which is considered as a tool of reflection that teachers can use to observe and evaluate the way they behave in their classroom [14], the researcher asked students to give feedback about the method used to deliver the subject Technology and Language Learning E506 as well as their opinions about the instruction they are experiencing. A Google Slides presentation was shared with 25 students to collect their feedback narratives, a total of 14 students commented on the slide.

The researcher depended on inductive content analysis to categorize the raw data into concepts. The technique involves reducing the raw data, grouping similar relevant

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material under certain categories and then calculating the frequency of the students' responses [15]. The findings of this study were divided into two main themes, the discrepancy between the prevailing teaching style and the type of education desired by students, and students' opinions and performance in practical classes.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The discrepancy between the prevailing teaching style and the type of education desired by students:

From the students' narratives, it is concluded that their educational experience was based on enhancing theoretical knowledge. Whereas practical implementation is considered to be new for them. This determines the type of teaching method dominated at the Department of English Language in A.Marj Faculty of Arts and Sciences which is traditional lecturing. Some of students' narratives about the instructional change that they have experienced with practicum and technology reflected their desire to develop some practical skills, they stated:

Student (13)

We as graduate students and students of the English language need to have a skill in studying and teaching. Mastering the language is practical and not theoretical…,

Student (12)

It was a new and special method…This experience taught me a lot through the new teaching, unlike ever before…

Student (11)

I had the opportunity to know a new teaching method…one of the useful methods…it is not just depend on the method itself, but on the teacher…

Student (7)

…the old methods are no longer contemporary with educational technology

Data in table (1) below answered the research question about teaching style preference, a good number of students prefer to be taught using a mixed teaching method that contains both theoretical knowledge and practical experience. From their humble experience attending some practical classes, students tend to choose equality and balance between practical and theoretical classes. Only five participants from the forty-seven prefer to be taught theoretically.

Table (1): Teaching Style Preference

Teaching Style Preference	Students' Number	Percentage
Theoretical	5	10.64 %
Practical	12	25.53 %
Mixed	30	63.83 %

In addition to the above data, the majority of the participants (97.87%) stated that some theoretical subjects they are learning need to be supported by working on projects, and that (72.34 %) of them like to work in groups not individually, as well as (68.09%) strongly agreed that doing projects facilitates learning. The data in table (2) shows students' preference of working on presentations.

Table (2): Project Type Preference

Project Types	Students' Number	Percentage
Presentation	26	55.32 %
Assignment	5	10.64 %
Portfolio	7	14.89 %
Research Paper	9	19.15 %

According to the students' responses, subjects that need to be supported by practical classes are as follows:

Table (3): Subjects need practical support

Subject	Number of Students	Percentage
Listening	25	13.23 %
Translation	20	10.58 %
CALL	20	10.58 %
Speaking	20	10.58 %
Teaching Methodology	17	8.99 %
Phonetics and Phonology	15	7.94 %
Language Acquisition	13	6.88 %
Language Testing	11	5.82 %
Grammar	11	5.82 %
Writing	10	5.29 %
Semantics	8	4.23 %
Reading	8	4.23 %
Morphology and Syntax	6	3.17 %
Pragmatics	5	2.65 %

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The table above illustrates two types of subjects that have been focused on by students to be supported by practical classes, subjects that teach language skills (e.g. listening, speaking and translation), and subjects that teach teaching skills (e.g. teaching methodology and computer assisted language learning (CALL). This indicates the students understanding of their needs as future teachers. In addition, there is a considerable low percentage that goes to some linguistic subjects (e.g. morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics) apart from their importance in acquiring the language skills, students put these subjects at the end of the chart clarifying that some linguistic details might not carry the characteristic of being practical.

4.2. Students' opinions and performance in practical classes:

All the participants (100%) agreed that using technology in the language classroom is a top priority, they enjoyed working on educational applications (Google Slides, PowerPoint and Canva) and using AI tools (chatGPT) during Technology and Language Learning E506 classes. Mobile educational applications greatly impact the learning process and progress and make open access for all [13].

The majority (91.49%) stated that workshops of the subject Technology and Language Learning E506 are valuable, they narrated that this method is a useful idea to know the appropriate techniques for each level, a pleasant way that facilitates lessons, a great environment to learn, and a distinctive method that will make a big difference in the future. (93.61%) of them will use technological devices that their teachers use. Table (4) below shows the types of devices used by teachers in this department:

Table (4): Devices used by teachers

Device	Number of students	Percentage
Projectors and laptops	34	72.34 %
Smart phones	13	27.66 %
Smart boards / screens	0	0 %

In addition, (89.36%) of the students think that using the internet might improve teaching and learning processes, some of them indicate that it is the best way to inform and receive information, they wrote:

Student (3):

….communication and reminders of the details of lectures on social networking sites motivating the students to think outside the box and develop their creative thought…

Student (10):

Sending e-mails, add comments on it, doing a midterm exam Online, sharing exam scores by e-mail, and repeat what was said in the lectures on Telegram Channel….All of these methods helped and gave everyone of us the opportunity to receive information by interesting ways…

Student (4):

We did not worry about the midterm exam, as it was very interesting and we wished that the all exam materials were like this or in a similar way…

Students' performance was also questioned after working on lesson plan templates, they showed a higher level of thinking, responsibility, and creativity while filling on the templates, they were excited to reach the intended goal of each activity, and their results were ranging from good to excellent.

5. CONCLUSION

It is obvious from the above data that practical activities and sessions e.g. workshops, small group discussions and working on projects are somewhat ignored in the study context, and the entire program relates itself to theory more than practice. This finding reflects the extent to which Higher Education in Libya is ineffective in terms of providing students with practical skills that they need for their future career. Despite their advanced level in this department some of the participants lack communication skills as well as teaching skills. This is due to several reasons including the department's policy in dealing with practical subjects, the absence of workshops and discussion seminars, and the lack of students' self-development. Students teachers need to revise and apply what they are learning, to seek new lines in teaching methods and techniques to cope with what is happening around the world, and to improve some skills that enrich their work (e.g. learning how to teach and doing action research). The role of technology in facilitating teaching and learning was focused on from the participants, as they presented preference to variation in using teaching and learning methods. In addition, the types of activities and tasks in practicum motivated students to communicate, work together and with teacher, improve language skills, integrate technology in teaching and learning, and perform better.

5.1. Recommendations

This study recommends that the current type of instruction may be changed by adding accredited practical classes for each course, and providing the required places, equipment and tools. The study also highlights that all the previous projections lead to the possibility of classifying courses of Applied Linguistics offered by Libyan Arts Faculties as continuing professional development programs for those in English language departments. On one hand,

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this type of programs could be available in the evenings and weekends, and planned to be as practical as possible to provide students with opportunities to activate their knowledge by playing teacher roles in classroom-like environments, or through collaborations between Arts Faculties and schools in the frame of observational visits. In addition, these programs should supply effective use of communication technologies in teaching, especially now that the world is turning to digital education. As in-service training is not available for teachers in Libya, it would be better to provide students teachers with opportunities for pre-service professional development sessions during their active learning.

5.2. Acknowledgement

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Appendix

Questionnaire items

1. **What type of teaching do you prefer?**

Theoretical \Practical \ Mixture

2. **Do you occasionally have practical sessions or workshops in your department?**

Sometimes \ Rarely / Never

3. **Do you think that some theoretical subjects need to be supported by working on projects?**

Yes \ No / Sometimes

4. **What is your opinion about using technology inside the language classroom?**

The most important priority / A top priority / Not very important priority

5. **Do your instructors use technological devices in teaching?**

Yes / No / Some of them

6. **what type of technology do they use?**

Projectors / Laptops / Smart phones

7. **Do you exchange assignments online with teachers?**

Usually / Rarely / Never

8. **What do think about the practical sessions of the course Technology and Language learning E506?**

Extremely valuable / Somewhat valuable / Not so valuable

9. **Will you make efforts to use technology in your classes?**

Yes / No / Maybe

10. **Do you think that using the internet may improve teaching and learning processes?**

Yes / No / Sometimes

11. **Do you think that using technology might turn some boring theoretical material into interesting ones?**

Yes / No / Sometimes

12. **What are the courses that you think they must have practical sessions?**

Teaching methodology/Language Acquisition /Language Testing/CALL/Translation/

Semantics/Morphology and Syntax/Phonetics and Phonology/Pragmatics/Listening

Writing/Reading/Speaking/Grammar

13. **Do you like working on projects? In groups\ individually?**

In groups / Individually / I don't like working on projects

14. **What type of projects do you enjoy working on?**

Presentation / Assignment / Portfolio / Research paper

15. **Do you agree that making projects facilitates learning?**

Strongly agree / Neutral / Disagree

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