

In my Reading Classroom...Emirati Student Teachers Constructing Teaching Styles in the College Classroom

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Abstract

Those entering the education profession in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) often face considerable obstacles in the government's primary school system, particularly in the teaching of English reading. Traditional curricula and methodologies, reliance on rote learning, teachers shouting and instilling fear and too few qualified teachers pose a threat to the establishment of a reading culture in schools. As part of a larger case study, this article discusses a teacher educator's path toward the development of a reading culture, with a focus on the perspectives of Emirati student teachers' developing reading teaching styles as they engage in a revised teacher education Vygotskian constructivist reading methodology module in the college classroom. Particular reference is given to student teachers' online teaching identities, reflections of self and aspirational accounts of their future reading classrooms.

1. Background Issue: The Power of Prior Reading Experiences

Teacher education programs are not the only influence on becoming a teacher of English. As Kennedy (1991, cited in Freeman, 2002, p. 6) states "teachers, like other learners, interpret new content through existing understandings and modify and reinterpret new ideas on the basis of what they already know or believe". Developing an identity as a reading teacher is therefore a long process of socialization, involving school experiences (Lortie, 1975). Based on memories as students, as language learners themselves, their beliefs and reflections about teaching are instrumental in shaping the type of teacher they become (Busher, 2005). This 'apprenticeship of observation' marks teachers' socialization as students throughout their schooling, as a significant influence on their teaching practices (Lortie, 1975). For example, Emirati B.Ed. students enter college with years of exposure to behaviourist reading instruction including a focus on reading comprehension, direct translation and intensive reading skills.

The quality of this instruction has a lasting impact on how they define themselves as developing reading teachers (McNally et al, 2002; Clarke et al, 2007).

Teachers' beliefs and past experiences as learners may conflict with the images of teaching promoted in teacher education programs (Freeman and Richards, 1996). These preconceptions may be resistant to change unless an awareness of that prior learning is developed and opportunities for practical experiences and reflection upon those experiences are provided (Freeman and Richards, 1996). Peer-observation, micro-teaching, problem-based learning and reflection on practice can help student teachers move from a philosophy of teaching and learning developed as a learner to a philosophy of teaching, consistent with their emergent understandings of the language learning and teaching processes. This is what Freeman (1994, p.5) refers to as "Interteaching". However, it is well recognized that teachers can espouse particular knowledge and beliefs, yet still employ classroom practices that contradict these (Woods 1979; Cameron, & Baker, 2004). Eilam's (2002) study in Israel shows that external behaviours of Arabic student teachers are rooted in cultural beliefs and perceptions. It is therefore an important and challenging role for the teacher educator in the Arab world, not only to incorporate student teachers' prior knowledge into its curricula but to introduce different forms of knowledge and teaching practices and listen to their aspirational accounts of their future classrooms. This is the beginning of their identity as Arab teachers of English.

2. Introducing the Research Context

In response to a demand by government authorities to significantly improve educational practices in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and simultaneously Emiritize and professionalize the teaching profession (Mograby, 1999; UAE Ministry of Education and Youth, 2000; Clarke & Otaky, 2006), the development of Vision 2030, a plan to reform education in the UAE by encouraging effective teaching methods was developed. Within this recognition of the need for reform in UAE schools and

classrooms, one issue of concern to educators and teacher educators is the need to develop a reading culture.

However, partly because of the common belief that Arabs share an oral, rather than a written culture (Sowayan, 2003) and partly because of what Isomura (2009) sees as the impact of a basic cultural ignorance that result from a lack of love of learning; the fostering of a reading culture among students as a pleasurable and useful activity is a challenge in both the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Arab world in general. With this, those entering the education profession in the UAE often face considerable obstacles in the government's primary school system, particularly in the teaching of English reading. Despite the enormous wealth of the UAE, many public schools are ill-equipped, lacking basic facilities such as proper libraries. Nor are public libraries common; the city of Abu Dhabi, with a population of 1,000,000+ currently has only one. In what is described as an oral culture, there are few bookstores in the UAE and, while literacy has risen dramatically in recent years, Emirati literacy rates still rank a lowly 113th among 160 countries surveyed. A consequence of this is that many Emirati parents are unable to fully support their children's learning. Moreover, schools are most commonly staffed with poorly trained and poorly paid Egyptian, Lebanese, Syrian, and Tunisian teachers who operate within a traditional confrontational behaviorist model of transmission based on rote memorization. Ironically, these same teachers supervise Emirati student teachers who have been exposed at extremely well-funded colleges and universities to radically different western ideas of the processes of teaching and learning reading.

Therefore, as part of a larger study, this paper affords insights into the teaching of reading in the UAE context and specifically demonstrates, through innovative examples, how Emirati student teachers aspire to make a difference in increasing the quality of reading teaching in schools. The exploration of the perspectives of young Emirati student teachers helps point the directions in moving Arab students toward a reading culture. It concludes with implications for developing teacher education reading programs, particularly as the pressing need for change in college pedagogy has been acknowledged in the research literature (McNally, Harold & McAskill, 2002; Syed, 2003). Drawing on this research, the pedagogical implications for policy and practice within education courses include establishing the importance of linking reading theory and

practice, engaging in curriculum review processes, implementing constructivist-based teacher education, addressing student teacher prior reading experiences and prioritizing the development of socio-culturally appropriate materials and pedagogy.

2.1: Participants

Into the above context come the subjects of this study: 90 Emirati female student teachers completing Bachelor Degrees in Education across six campuses in the the UAE, 16 of whom were core subjects from college x. Using 'homogeneous purposive sampling' (Patton, 1990), the production of meaning, tacit knowledge and naturalistic generalizations was emphasized in both online and focus group discussions which demonstrated an increased self-awareness, reflection on practice and a problem-solving orientation to the EFL reading classroom. Eight international teacher educators were involved in this research and participated in non-participant observations, one of whom was the researcher. This partially ethnographic aspect (Hammersley, 2002) involving the researcher in the everyday life of the key participants, as their teacher educator, is also mirrored in the study's pedagogical orientation – using Vygotskian socio-cultural approaches.

All participating student teachers, regardless of background (i.e. Bedouin or merchant) dress in a black 'abaya' (cloaks) and 'shayla' (head scarves), with only their faces uncovered. Most of these women are driven to and from college by a male relative or driver in vehicles with tinted windows. Their home lives, "which play a central role in their experiences, is very restricted compared with women students from Western countries" (Richardson, 2004, p.432). For example, the reality for most of these young women is a pre-destined life where marriage is arranged, often during their B.Ed. degree. The student teachers' home lives are often controlled by elders and most of them are prohibited to socialize with men, shop alone or travel without chaperons. However, despite society's adherence to a strict Muslim code of behaviour for women and contrary to the perceptions of the typical Emirati woman who is "protected from public display and not involved in the public arena" (Richardson, 2004, p.433), this study's core group of student teachers are enthusiastic and empowered to contribute to the building of their country's education system. As the first generation of Emirati student teachers to attain a degree in education and as much needed 'agents of change', they are a product of behaviourist schooling and it is negative memories of previous learning

experiences that fuel their desire for educational change, especially when it comes to the issue of creating a reading culture.

3. A Case Study: Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Within the context of a larger case study over an six month period, (Gardiner-Hyland, 2010) that used a variety of tools, this paper specifically looks at a relatively small corpus of 79 online discussion postings by both the core and secondary Year two participants enrolled in a four year education degree over six UAE college campuses. The topics of the postings center around guided questions related to the teaching and learning of reading as well as the impact of teacher education pedagogy upon their prior beliefs, current teaching identities and subsequent reading teaching practices. In keeping with the collaborative nature of the medium, some of postings are reactions to other postings rather than to the guided question and many of the issues discussed seemed to be written for a peer audience, although still conscious of their teacher educator as a potential audience. Postings were anonymous, so these EFL student teachers were not self-conscious about their writing being examined and the nature of the online mode provided them with time to develop their thoughts and arguments, (Le Cornu and White, 2000) the written versus the spoken mode. The dialogic nature of online discussions also provided student teachers with opportunities for ongoing negotiation of identity that Bloomfield (2000) and Britzman (1991) sees as fundamental to learning to teach. Drawing on the social construction of mind, language and discourse (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978), this also maintained an emphasis on reflection and 'reasoning teaching' (Johnson, 1999). With a focus in this paper on the thread "In my reading classroom..." student teachers outline their own observations, aspirations and reflections of themselves teaching reading as they develop and become teachers.

There were three phases of research involving a twenty week intervention of a revised college reading methodology course; application of reading theory and practice in Emirati Government primary schools during a teaching practice placement and interpretation of the intervention through online discussions.

Table 1 summarizes the thematic focus of this paper.

Table 1:

Online Discussions	Focus	Participants
Topic 8	In my reading classroom... it looks like...	Six women's colleges participated in online discussions *79 student teachers in total
Topic 9	The type of reading teacher I aspire to become is...	

The process of analyzing data from the thread 'In my reading classroom...' was complex, involving a hybrid approach to qualitative thematic analysis. Emergent themes related to student teachers 'developing identities, aspirations and teaching styles became the categories for analysis. Deductive analysis, advocated by Crabtree and Miller (1999), involved manual encoding of online discussion postings, categorized a priori based on issues derived from a review of literature and related to the key research questions. Flanagan's (1954; Farrell, 2008) Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to draw out the most memorable aspects of student teachers' past and present learning experiences that had made a difference to their understanding of themselves as developing teachers (Goodson and Sikes, 2001) and particularly to their style of reading teaching during Teaching Practice. Manual colour coding was used where necessary to organize the material into 'chunks' (Rossman and Rallis, 1998) and the data-driven inductive approach of Boyatzis (1998) highlighted key emergent themes and words. This further coding process enabled the researcher to identify coherent patterns across the data, providing a degree of cross-referencing between the different types of data collected.

4. Findings and discussion

Many student teachers went beyond the minimum requirements and posted lengthy messages "as part of extended discussion threads, despite communicating in a foreign language. This clearly evidenced genuine passion and commitment to the issues being discussed and debated" (Clarke, 2005, p.87). Occasional syntactical and grammatical errors, slight irrelevancies, awkwardness caused by word,

idiom or register choice may have impeded explanation of thought processes. Nevertheless, discussions were expanded upon and seemed to be well organized with a clear and overall progression of ideas.

The discussion threads ‘In my reading classroom...’ and ‘The type of reading teacher I aspire to become is influenced by...’ seemed to arouse a mixture of emotions in these Emirati student teachers, particularly referring to negative experiences of past teaching methods to which they were exposed as children. Their identity construction as EFL reading teachers is clearly influenced by both past and present teaching experiences. Yet all student teachers position themselves as agents of change, bringing interactive reading teaching methods to Emirati classrooms, previously dominated by ‘traditional teaching’. Personal embrace of student-centred approaches, in contrast with teacher-centred behaviourist approaches observed in their past, are passionately described in student teachers’ constructions. In the following example posting, a student teacher contrasts her previous learning experiences where the physical environment consisted of bare walls and paints a counter-image of her own reading classrooms in which a print and literacy-rich environment is evident:

When I have my own classroom, I will paint it with a light yellow to give an impression of a wide class and I will design the walls with some English letters and make a board for students’ work to be displayed. This is the opposite of when I was a learner.

(Online Discussion Posting (ODP) No. 23, 2007)

In another posting a student teacher expands on what her classroom will look like and refers to education literature, namely one of the course textbooks, reinforcing the student teacher’s distinctness as an agent of change, in contrast with traditional classroom environments:

In my reading classroom I will create a reading corner and I will provide a variety of genre that suit students’ levels and interests. Moreover, I will supply cushions that make students feel comfortable. As Neuman, Copple & Bredekamp (2000) state “children love comfortable, cosy places where they can sit and read”. Also, I will

enrich my classroom with a print-rich environment that promotes students' literacy skills such as interactive displays. The seating arrangement in my class will be groups where students can interact with others and in the reading sessions students will sit on floor close to the teacher where they can hear the teacher while she is reading.

(ODP, No. 29, 2007)

Student teachers' enthusiasm, youthful energy and somewhat naivety is evident in their idealistic constructions, above and below:

My classroom will be full of useful displays and labels that promote literacy. Also, I will put a book corner to encourage children to read all the time at their own level and also I will try to provide the class with comfortable places for the students to feel more relaxed in reading.

(ODP, No. 40, 2007)

The focus on using student-centred interactive reading approaches is one of the key articles of faith defining student teachers' constructions, as exemplified in the following discussion posting. Encompassing notions of differentiated reading, varied approaches, an established daily routine for reading aloud and opportunities for home-school links, distinguishes student teachers from the past, and propels them into a constructivist reading environment:

In the future, I will try to provide my classroom with a small library at the back where students can borrow books and read them at home. In addition I will divide my students into differentiated groups according to their reading level, so that can help me to observe their reading progress. Moreover, I will try to implement several reading approach that help EFL to develop their reading skills like reading aloud sessions, either at the end of the day or at the beginning of the day. I would like to involve parents, something new in our culture.

(ODP, No. 49, 2007)

While the student teachers in this study are still beginning teachers of reading, it is evident that they are visionaries of the future in a UAE context, constructing new beliefs and practices. The following examples derived from the discussion thread 'The Type of Reading Teaching I Aspire to Become Is...' extends the discursive construction of evolving philosophies as EFL Student Teachers:

I aspire to become a student teacher who encourages students to love reading, engage and involve them in reading sessions. Also, I will use different approaches like Reading Aloud, Shared Reading and Reader's Theatre to motivate students and encourage them to participate in discussions. In addition, I will become a student teacher who applies the

three stages of reading – pre, while and post- reading that will help students to comprehend the storyline.

(ODP, No. 21, 2007)

I aspire to become a teacher that uses the different types of approaches that suit different learners. I aspire to differentiate the level of the students and give them appropriate tasks to engage them in the lesson.

(ODP, No. 38, 2007)

I aspire to become a teacher who makes a great development in her students' reading skills. To achieve that, I will try to create a classroom which creates a literacy-rich environment by having a small class library which contains different children's books, appropriate for their levels.

(ODP, No. 44, 2007)

As seen above, student teachers' constructions are philosophical in terms of their desires to 'make a difference' in developing students' reading skills and the type of classroom environment they want to create.

However, within this positive belief system lies the implicit negative evaluation of the past teaching practices observed by student teachers during their own schooling:

I think we should encourage the teachers or when we graduate we should read for our students at least two days a week to encourage them to read meaningful texts more and love the language because through reading, their language will improve and make the students use their imaginations.

(ODP, No. 37, 2007)

As enlightened practitioners, student teachers express a desire to encourage experienced teachers to actively read with their students. While justifying their perceptions, implicit in the lexical item 'should' lies an obligation on the part of the student teachers to change existing practices. This is amplified in focus group responses, the following which represents an example in which a student teacher criticizes past experiences in favour of her new beliefs of what constitutes an effective learning environment:

I think that the traditional way forced the students to read in UAE government schools, we have to let the student read for pleasure and establish a daily routine for reading aloud, not to force them to read books.

(ODP, No. 45, 2007)

This topic was also referred back to in other postings, indicating how interconnected many of the topics are. This type of cross-referencing can be seen as evidence of the depth of student

teachers' engagement in the discussions. In fact, most can be related back to a fundamental distinction between 'interactive reading approaches' versus 'behaviourist reading approaches. Looking in hope to a different future, these enlightened practitioners aim to be agents of change in the Emirati system of education.

5. **Conclusions and Implications for Future Research**

Any educational case is complex, changing, and contextualized (Gallagher, 2007). Idiosyncratic aspects of this case include the fact that the student teachers featured here are amongst the first nationals to become professionally qualified English teachers; the fact of the widespread reform of their country's educational system, the small numbers of student teachers involved, the relatively few constraints on innovation in this case due to a new programme - all of these circumstantial factors have combined to produce a degree of passion, identity formation and guided participation that is perhaps unlikely to be replicated as fully in other contexts, beyond the UAE. Also the fact that the data for this study was collected over an six month period represents a small chunk of the students' enrolment in their four year teacher education programme. Student teacher's own reading habits - are not much addressed either.

In the larger study (Hyland, 2010), findings showed how a Vygotskian constructivist-based contextualized EFL model of teacher education reading pedagogy could better prepare Emirati student teachers to enact pedagogic change in the government reading classroom. This paper specifically displays evidence of the power in listening to the voices of Emirati student teachers as they construct and reconstruct conceptions of practice and offer a dynamic process of identity formation involving past and present influences. Online discussion postings also revealed student teachers' perceptions of appropriate reading methods for EFL Emirati classes. The philosophy developed by the beginning student teachers seems to represent an eclectic belief system, reflecting many different educational discourses and methods. Key lexical items referred to include: student-centred interactive reading approaches, several reading approaches; reading aloud, shared reading, reader's theatre, encourages students to love reading; reading for pleasure; meaningful texts; an established daily routine for reading aloud, differentiated groups, pre-, while- and post reading and a print-rich and literacy-rich

environment. The very presence of so many references to reading practices in its own right says something about the potential power of teacher education to shape the belief system and identity of student teachers. It also distinguishes student teachers from the past, and propels them into a constructivist reading environment, as observed in the teacher education classroom. Having a lasting impact on how student teachers define themselves as developing reading teachers, the dichotomies of 'traditional' versus 'modern' are characterized by an overall consensus. This consensus is reinforced by the shared discussions represented in the online postings, which reifies certain ways of understanding EFL reading teaching, while simultaneously excluding others, such as behaviourist teaching methods. Based on their professional beliefs, they offer a testimony of change that suggests a personal embrace of the variety of reading methods promoted in the college classroom, in contrast to their past learning experiences.

While the participating student teachers view themselves as agents of change within a traditional Emirati system of primary education, referring to what Smith (2000, p. 12) terms "the folklore about student teachers 'changing' the schools", whether or not they will actually effect change in the teaching of reading will need further research. Descriptions and analysis of selected online discussion postings have been documented, yet it is ultimately for readers to construct their own meanings from the evidence of 'Emirati Student Teachers Constructing Teaching Styles in the College Classroom'. However, one study in the current research context conducted by Clarke, Hamston and Love (2007) found graduate teachers to be having an initial positive influence on their school communities and initiating change in the form of professional development for colleagues in the role of storytelling, integrating English with other subjects, creating a print-rich environment in their own classrooms and establishing processes for sharing curriculum materials.

Research literature indicates that the provision of systematic support for new teachers can increase the effectiveness of their performance in schools (Boreen, Johnson, Niday and Potts, 2000; Wong and Breaux, 2003), and that it is possible for beginning teachers to become change agents when they are supported by communities of teacher learners (Corrie, 2000). An extension of this research could involve assistance with professional development reading workshops, the establishment of links between the college classroom and graduate classrooms

through involvement in special events in schools (e.g., book week) and the provision of access to a wealth of reading resources. Exploring ways in which Emirati student teachers and graduates learn to teach reading is a long-term job. While few countries in the world have developed at a similar pace to the UAE over the past 30 years; it remains to be seen how that development helps foster a literate and literary population that promotes the educational values that will sustain future generations (Beatty et al; 2009). Teacher education programs are the first step in a professional journey that supports the promotion of a reading culture through exploring ways in which EFL Emirati student teachers learn to teach reading. It is, nevertheless, a journey that will never end because, no matter how effective we are as teacher educators, we can always improve.

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