Putting out the fires: Supervisors' experiences of introducing primary English in Saudi Arabia

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A B S T R A C T

Teaching English to Young learners (TEYL) initiatives can represent an example of complex change (Fullan, 1992), whose classroom implementation implies those affected by the change learning new, or adjusting existing, practices and beliefs. Research (Levin and Fullan, 2008; Wedell, 2013) suggests that if contextually appropriate versions of complex change outcomes are to become visible in the majority of classrooms, both the parts of the change system (e.g. materials and assessment), and the way in which the people affected (change 'partners') carry out their roles, need to be as consistent as possible with change aims.

Saudi Arabia introduced the teaching of English in the last year of primary level in 2004, and expanded it to the fourth year of schooling in 2011. This study uses the reported experiences of representatives from one key group of change 'partners': Saudi Primary English Supervisors, to explore aspects of the first six years of TEYL implementation. Their reports suggest widespread inconsistency during the first phase of implementation and little attempt to address the issues before launching the second phase. We suggest that acknowledging the value of these implementers' experiences and giving greater consideration to their suggestions, could help enable the second phase of implementation to become more consistent than the first.

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1. Introduction

Today English is a subject in most state school primary curricula worldwide. The stated goal of many such curricula is expressed in terms of introducing new, more 'learner centred', approaches to teaching in order to familiarise children with the language and to begin to develop their ability to communicate using it. However, Schweisfurth's recent (2011) study of the implementation of learner centred education across a wide range of contexts, and the OECD's (2009) report on its Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) both suggest that visible evidence of widespread classroom changes in teaching approaches and learning outcomes remains limited.

This is not surprising since a substantial literature over the past 30 years (for example, Coleman, 1996; Kennedy, 1988; Markee, 1997; Nunan, 2003; Waters, 2009; Wedell, 2009, 2013) has discussed issues arising from the growing recognition that English language teaching (ELT) curriculum initiatives often represent a complex educational change (Fullan, 1992) for

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the contexts into which they are introduced. As discussed below, challenges are likely to be particularly acute when the teaching of English is being introduced across a country at an entirely new level of schooling. Within this literature, reports based on local participants' experiences of implementation remain under-represented. This paper explores aspects of how the first six years of trying to introduce English at primary level in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), was experienced by members of a key group within any change process; those officially acting as a link between national policy makers and school based implementers. In Saudi Arabia these are regional primary supervisors.

2. Literature review

Two main areas of the literature are touched on here, to provide a framework for consideration of the TEYL implementation process in KSA reported below. Firstly we provide an outline of some frequently occurring logistical and cultural challenges that can arise from a decision to begin to teach English to young learners. Secondly we draw briefly on the educational change literature to discuss factors that may influence how prepared a context is to meet such challenges.

2.1. Challenges in teaching English to young learners

The many recent Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) initiatives represent what Johnstone (2009:33) calls 'possibly the world's biggest policy development in education'. In some cases, including KSA, the earlier introduction of English is a part of a wider educational reform seeking to make adjustments to teaching and learning practices across the education system as a whole (Rixon, 2011). Furthermore there is evidence (Enever & Moon, 2009; Rixon, 2011) that in a number of contexts, again including KSA, the introduction of national TEYL has been extremely rushed. The aim of TEYL initiatives is often expressed in terms of establishing positive attitudes to language learning (and/or other cultures) and beginning to develop English communication skills. There is now a growing literature, (e.g.: Arnold & Rixon, 2008; Enever & Moon, 2009; Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011; Rixon, 2011) discussing factors that influence the degree to which initiatives are able to meet such aims: these include teacher preparedness, teaching approaches, materials, and assessment, which are discussed briefly below.

Due both to the range of contexts and the speed with which TEYL programmes have been introduced, there is a worldwide shortage of suitably qualified young learner English teachers. In her recent survey Rixon (2013) found that only 17 of the 62 different contexts responding reported having sufficient teachers of English to cover the needs of all primary schools. Different countries have responded to teacher shortages in different ways. In some countries such as Hungary (Nikolov, 2000), China (Hu, 2005), and Indonesia (Nur, 2003) existing, experienced, primary teachers have been expected to add English teaching to their responsibilities, regardless of their personal English proficiency. In others such as Brazil (Gimenez, 2009), Turkey (Onat-Stelma, 2005) and also KSA, qualified secondary level English teachers without experience of working with young learners have been expected to work at primary level. Elsewhere, again including KSA, a new category of TEYL teacher has emerged, recruited from outside the country and not necessarily TEYL qualified (Nunan, 2003; Rixon, 2011).

Given the large number of primary school classrooms, and the limited teacher education expertise in TEYL, training provision to compensate for the shortages of existing TEYL expertise has been often been limited. Where available, it has usually aimed to introduce teachers to basic principles about how children learn (language), to the recommended teaching approach (according to Garton et al. 2011, often some form of communicative or task based language teaching), and to techniques and young learner activities associated with the approach (for example, language games, role plays, singing, storytelling and drama). In many educational contexts (including KSA) such teaching approaches and learning activities represent a radical departure from existing 'cultures of learning' (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006).

Since the textbook is the de facto syllabus for teachers and learners in many TESOL and TEYL contexts, one means of helping to support teachers' implementation of new teaching approaches for young learners could be through the provision of supportive and appropriate teaching materials. However, as pointed out by Arnold and Rixon (2008) the novelty of TEYL and the speed of implementation has often meant that materials have been designed by textbook writers who themselves have little experience of TEYL, and are thus unable to produce learning materials that are suitable for young learners. For similar reasons of unfamiliarity and unpreparedness the development of appropriate assessment also poses problems. While TEYL curricula usually stress developing children's oral–aural communication skills in particular, existing assessment formats frequently remain written and form focussed (Pandian, 2003).

Introducing the teaching of English in primary schools in a manner that is consistent with the stated aims therefore represents a learning challenge not only for classroom teachers, but also for teacher educators, materials and test writers and those who lead and manage them.

2.2. TEYL programmes as examples of complex educational change

Introducing a new subject (English) at a new level of the education system represents a large-scale educational change for any context. Just ensuring that the most pressing logistical issues (see above) are dealt with requires careful planning. However, most TEYL initiatives also aim to introduce different teaching approaches and activities. This makes them more complex (Fullan, 1992), since in most educational contexts implementation of the recommended teaching approaches implicitly requires teachers (and others listed above) to adjust aspects of their professional thinking and practices.