IMPLEMENTING THE FIRST PALESTINIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM: A NEED FOR TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract – *The educational system in Palestine is totally unique. The Palestinians assumed control of their educational system only in 1994, following hundreds of years of outside rule. This educational system 'emerged against a backdrop of chronic crisis' (Nicolai 2007, p.20). A new Palestinian curriculum has been developed and introduced progressively since 2000. For the first time English language became a core subject starting from the first grade (age 6 years) in an educational system which traditionally introduced English as a curriculum subject only in grade five (age 11 years). This article describes the current situation of English Language Teaching in Palestinian schools. It consists of three distinct but interconnected parts. The first part introduces the Palestinian English Curriculum with a focus on English for Palestine series. The second part discusses teachers' preparedness to teach English and overviews English teachers development programs. The third part describes educational initiatives taken by Qattan Centre for Educational Research and Development (QCERD) in Ramallah to empower teachers to implement the new curriculum in more fun and effective ways. Finally some recommendations for future research are discussed.*

Introduction

*E*nglish language education in Palestine today faces serious challenges. With unmanageably large class sizes, virtually no resources, unreliable Internet access and unreasonably low salaries, there are few incentives for teachers to be motivated, energetic and creative in the classroom. Teacher dissatisfaction, combined with both a traditional methodological approach focusing on rote learning and repetition, and a school leaving exam (the Tawjihi) which has neither a listening nor a speaking component, has resulted in a local population which has generally poor communication skills in English.

The Palestinians, through generations of conflict and military occupation, have always placed emphasis on education as a means to a better future. For young Palestinians to be successful in today's global economy, they need to be articulate and artful communicators. The curriculum document construes the English

language as a key resource which can offer Palestinians a competitive edge in the world of global communications. In acknowledgment of its importance in global communications, English is now a core subject in the first Palestinian National Curriculum from the first grade (age 6 years). Although it was a challenging process for the Ministry of Education, cooperation with McMillan Education and a number of bilateral and multilateral donors led to the introduction, in 2000, of the first series of Palestinian English language textbooks for state schools. *English for Palestine* textbooks (published by McMillan in cooperation with the Curriculum Centre) represent one of many local initiatives aimed at improving the quality of English language education in Palestine.

In this paper we explore the ways in which the first English language curriculum and textbooks are impacting English language teaching in Palestine. We provide an overview of the *English for Palestine* Grade 3 textbook (age 9 years), discuss its points of strength and weakness, and describe teachers' perceived and real challenges in using the new textbooks. Finally, we detail a number of empowering initiatives taken by individual Palestinian teachers, in collaboration with us in our role as researchers at the Qattan Centre for Educational Research and Development (QCERD) in Ramallah, to implement the texts using communicative methods suitable for the young learner.

The first Palestinian English language curriculum: background[1]

The Palestinian English language curriculum is realized in the *English for Palestine* series of textbooks, which marks the first time the Palestinian people have had control over their educational destiny. From 1948, when Israel became a state and the West Bank fell under Jordanian control and the Gaza Strip fell under Egyptian control, Palestinian students studied the English language through the lens of Jordanian and Egyptian textbooks and cultural values, and those residing from now on in Israel fell under the Israeli educational system.

The year 2000 saw the introduction of the first Palestinian-designed textbooks for grades one (age 6 years) and five (age 11 years), and two new texts have been introduced each year since then. *English for Palestine* was warmly welcomed by school administrators and teachers, despite the challenge it posed to an educational system which traditionally introduced English as a curriculum subject only in grade five. The pupil's book and workbook for grades one to three are accompanied by a teacher's guide, a cassette, a set of flashcards (alphabet, numbers, etc.) and a set of large posters which serve as useful and colorful visual aids. The grades one to three textbook are designed around 24 one-week units, with three 45 minute lessons per unit. There are four unit types, each focusing on

a particular topic or function and rotated on a weekly basis so that skills are developed over time. The teacher's book provides guidelines for the teacher, showing that:

The unit of the first week:	Promotes listening and speaking skills by means of a "read and act out" activity.
The unit of the second week:	Promotes writing and reading skills through an *English Club* magazine page.
The unit of the third week:	Promotes listening and pronunciation via dialogue and song.
The unit of the fourth week:	Is an integrated skills unit utilizing project work.

When summarizing the aims and approach of the textbook series, the teacher's guide states that "*English for Palestine* provides a comprehensive and structured introduction to English. The language is carefully controlled and graded. Children will become involved in a wide range of classroom activities, promoting all four language skills. This will provide a solid foundation for further learning as they get older" (*English for Palestine*, Teacher's Book 3: 5).

The *English for Palestine* series of textbooks represents a solid first attempt at realizing a national curriculum. Indeed, the texts could be described as a departure from the traditional grammar-based ones characteristic of the region in general, in an attempt to adopt a communicative approach. The textbooks are aesthetically pleasing, using brightly colored pictures to convey information. The inclusion of a limited number of songs, games and projects in the texts has been received positively by teachers, students and parents. Despite reports of teachers' difficulties using the texts in the first year (primarily because of a lack of teacher-training programs), the Curriculum Development Centre[2] maintains that teachers, parents and the wider community are, overall, pleased with the new texts. However, a close reading of the texts, and a number of focus groups[3] with Palestinian teachers, suggest that teaching English in Palestine remains a challenge.

English for Palestine: Notes on a curriculum and textbooks

Textbooks and course materials for young learners should be the product of extensive research and thorough understanding of how children learn languages (Scott *et al*., 2004). The Palestinian Ministry of Education's curriculum document, drafted in 1999, exhibits in-depth knowledge of how children learn languages. Drawing on a range of theories of second language acquisition and learning, the curriculum document asserts an adherence to a number of general principles on

language learning and teaching, including, for example, the following concepts: language is functional; language acquisition occurs through meaningful use and interaction; language learning and teaching is shaped by student needs and objectives in particular circumstances; and, language learning should be fostered through the use of every possible medium and modality (English Language Curriculum Document, 1999: 2-5).

Based on widely accepted principles of second/foreign language learning and teaching, the Palestinian English curriculum is also informed by the curricula of neighboring Arab and other developing countries. The result is said to be "a model that is appropriate to Palestinian students" and which is "mainly consistent with the principles of learner-centered approaches to learning" (English Language Curriculum Document, 1999: 5). The curriculum goals, which focus on the learners' ability to "communicate freely and effectively in different situations and settings with native and non-native speakers" (English Language Curriculum Document, 1999: 5) reinforces the claim of communicativeness. The curriculum, as it is outlined in the curriculum document, fosters linguistic competence in the four language skills by providing opportunities for the learner to use acquired language structures and vocabulary items in thematic contexts and practice activities which represent the range of real-life situations and communicative functions the language has evolved to express.

The curriculum document displays an awareness of the most recent trends in ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) teaching, and knowledge of the importance of viewing English not only as a curriculum subject, but as a vehicle through which broader social and cultural values (both English speaking and Palestinian-Arabic speaking cultures) can be instilled, and critical and analytical thinking skills developed. However, the discussion of the grade three textbook will show how the curriculum's goals are not always successfully translated into practice in the *English for Palestine* pupils' book.

ESL textbooks for young learners should be "topic, content or story based" (Scott *et al.*, 2004: 277). It is difficult to determine if the *English for Palestine* textbook series is, indeed, topic/content or structure based. The units of the text vary between being organized around a theme (as in families, seasons, etc.) and a structure (obligations, plurals, going to, etc.). Within the unit itself, there seems to be an odd switching of topics. For example, one unit randomly switches from hobbies to telling the time (*English for Palestine*, Pupil's Book Grade 3: 7-8). It is, presumably, difficult for the children to follow and to focus when the lesson is so disjointed. In another example, the unit opens by drawing children's attention to the Old MacDonald song, yet the song is never sung, nor are animals included in the unit; instead, the children are asked to discuss vegetables in a market using prepositions of place (*English for Palestine*, Pupil's Book Grade 3: 16).

Although there is a clear attempt at making the textbook content based (families, seasons, likes/dislikes, transport, etc.), the same cannot be said of a story-based approach to learning. All children love stories, and all cultures tell stories. It seems then, that the use of stories in the ESL classroom would not only be fun and interesting for young learners, but also as would allow for more meaningful interactions. It would also positively influence children's language development, resulting in greatly improved literacy skills (Isbell *et al.*, 2004). A further benefit of story-based English lessons is that stories will naturally develop students' imagination, thinking skills, emotional intelligence and appreciation of other cultures (Al-Jafar & Buzzelli, 2004; Kelley, 2005). However, *English for Palestine* grades one to three textbooks contain no stories (picture or written). In one focus group with English language teachers and Ministry officials and administrators, it was a generally held opinion that stories are 'too difficult' for young children who have very limited knowledge of English. While discussing strategies for incorporating stories into the curriculum which use simplified language and detailed illustrations to aid comprehension, one administrator raised the point that 'the curriculum was not designed for the elite.' Such a perspective has resulted in a lost opportunity for the *English for Palestine* textbooks (grades one to three) to capitalize on child- centered teaching methods.

English for Palestine (grade 3) makes attempts at incorporating acceptable values. For example there is a lesson about class rules: you must come early, you must not come late, you must listen to the teacher, etc. At the bottom of the page a parrot reinforces these rules, saying 'you must obey the class rules' (*English for Palestine*, Pupil's Book Grade 3: 50).This lesson, emphasizes obedience and discipline. An alternative way, which we present to teachers in our workshops, is to tell the children a brief story about a naughty character in the class (the parrot, for example), and then to ask them to evaluate the behavior of that character. For example, 'screaming in the classroom' the children have to say either 'yes, yes, yes!' or 'no, no, no!' depending on their understanding of the classroom rules. This is a more fun way for setting classroom rules that requires pupils to be reflective decision-makers.

Effective ESL textbook will most likely revolve around tasks and activities which are both purposeful and meaningful for learners and will cater to diverse learning styles and intelligences (Scott *et al.*, 2004). One general comment that can be made about *English for Palestine* (grade 3) is that it has a serious limitation, in terms of pedagogical effectiveness and student motivation, in that it relies on a very small number of activity types. The main activities the students are asked to engage in are: listen and point, listen and say, count and say, and point and say. These exercises have little real communicative purpose and do not foster a great deal of cognitive development. They focus on memorization, rote repetition and

recall of isolated language chunks and do not provide students with the opportunity to use the language in any spontaneous or unfamiliar context.

In keeping student's interest level and motivation high, a useful strategy is to reflect the real interests of the learners by varying the types of activities engaged in, also by varying text types and using examples of real English that is relevant, useful and common to pupils' everyday lives (Scott *et al*., 2004). In this regard, *English for Palestine* (grade 3) falls short. There is a very limited range of text types introduced in this book. The children are exposed primarily to postcards and letters, two text types which, incidentally, are not common in Palestine (the military occupation tends to impede postal delivery). Email as a text type would therefore be a more logical choice, both in terms of genre in English, and in terms of linking the English curriculum to aspects of technology addressed in other curriculum subjects. The context of the texts' *English Club* units, where the children are asked to write letters to children in England, provides an ideal opportunity to incorporate email into the textbook.

One other area that *English for Palestine* (grade 3) is weak in is providing opportunities for pupils' self-assessment. The gradual increase of student responsibility for assessment is part of developing students' autonomy as lifelong learners. Tools that help students to reflect on their learning are: learning logs, statement of goals, self-reflective captions on portfolio items and self-assessment rubrics (Panwar *et al*., 2007). One strategy for incorporating these tools is project work. It is a credit to the *English for Palestine* grade 3 textbook that projects feature regularly. There are a few shortcomings, however, in the sense that the projects do not, in all cases, challenge the students or require them to use acquired language or skills in new contexts, work creatively or imaginatively.

Further still, the projects do not tend to have a real communicative purpose. For example, a school timetable activity is included just to have the students use new vocabulary items. The children could have been asked to personalize the language by writing a schedule for their dream- day at school and then share it with others!

The curriculum document repeatedly stresses that the goal of the Palestinian English curriculum is to give students the tools they need to be able to communicate. One way to reach this goal is to provide students with the opportunity to speak and listen, and therefore communicate, for real purposes. One of many ways *not* to reach this goal is to have students repeat language patterns in meaningless ways. The primary source of listening and speaking exercises/activities/tasks are derived from the dialogue that appears in the first lesson of every unit (with the *English Club* and revision units being the exceptions). The dialogues consist of four frames, each frame usually consisting of short utterances, or sometimes a full sentence. There are three main weaknesses

in the dialogues which lend themselves to merely practicing language patterns rather than providing real language models. The first is that, apart from sometimes being quite illogical, the dialogues cannot be considered as actually representing real, human dialogue. An example of this is Unit 15, Lesson 2:

a. Hello Waleed. What are you doing?
b. I'm running. I'm hot.
c. What are Sami and Khalid doing?
d. We are all running in a race.
e. Waleed, you're the first. Well done, Waleed. Well done, Sami.
f. I'm thirsty.
g. I'm tired.

When read in conjunction with the pictures, it becomes clear how this dialogue is not consistent with natural dialogue (daily conversation). The first speaker asks the second speaker (Waleed) what he is doing, even though the first speaker has already seen Waleed running. Afterwards, the question is repeated, this time in reference to two other children who are also running. In this dialogue the question is not a question that seeks to discover unknown information (which is normally the case of real life questions). Instead, the question merely maps English words onto an already known context. Second, the dialogues exhibit none of the false starts, repetitions or other features common to natural spoken discourse (Eggins & Slade, 2005; Gilmore, 2004; Thornbury & Slade, 2006).

Related to this is the fact that the language in the dialogues does not seem to flow smoothly the way natural speech does, i.e. there appears to be no authentic communication taking place in the dialogues. Third, the dialogues fail to make use of a very good opportunity to show, at a very basic level appropriate to grade three, how language can express logical relationships using conjunctions and transitions. Each frame in the dialogue is, in a sense, isolated from the one preceding it. For example, looking again at the dialogue above, the final frame includes the statements *I'm thirsty* and *I'm tired*. The pictures give the meaning for the children, but the opportunity is not taken to show the causal relationship between running and feeling thirsty and tired. For example, the boys might have said 'I'm happy the race is over because I'm really thirsty'. In short, the dialogues, which are the basis of oral communication activities, neither provide a model of real-life communication, nor do they provide a real reason for communication. In order for the dialogues to be effective, teachers will have to develop their own strategies for creating meaningful speaking activities, such as having students work in pairs to describe or share similar experiences of running a race.

Songs provide a fun and effective way of practicing vocabulary and grammar, while implicitly focusing on pronunciation, stress and intonation. Children generally love to sing, integrating experiences with music in the early childhood classroom supports English language learners' literacy development. Paquette Rieg (2008) note that the value of fostering creativity and enhancing literacy instruction through music is vital in classrooms. Music can transform classrooms into positive learning environments where children thrive academically and emotionally. The teachers we have worked with all say that their students really enjoy singing the songs in *English for Palestine*. Although the songs do present a good attempt at using language in a fun, communicative way, there is still room for improvement. Generally speaking, the songs are poorly constructed and focus on a very small set of vocabulary items and often only one language structure. The songs are weak in providing opportunities for incidental learning (e.g. through repetition and context) of unknown language items. For example, the ice cream song in Unit 19 Lesson 3 focuses just on the theme of likes/dislikes by focusing on the formation and answering of yes/no questions. The song could have incorporated a number of different lexical items, such as the flavors vanilla, chocolate and strawberry. This is quite a logical suggestion because the picture accompanying the song is of a bowl containing three scoops of ice cream: chocolate, strawberry and vanilla. Furthermore, it would make the song more authentic, as the native speaker would ask about the flavor of ice cream someone likes, rather than simply whether or not s/he likes ice cream.

After looking closely at the textbook, it became apparent that effective implementation of the texts would require a teacher-training program focusing on ESL methodologies as well as on the specific learning styles and needs of the very young learner. Such a training program was designed by the textbook series editors; but, only two weeks into the start of the 2000 school year, the second Palestinian uprising for independence (the Intifada) erupted, halting all planned activities. Subsequent years saw the introduction of other textbooks as planned, but without the teacher-training program originally intended. Instead, introductory workshops for the texts were left to Ministry of Education and UNRWA English language supervisors. Unfortunately, many of the supervisors themselves had little experience with teaching very young learners of English. Although some training has been carried out, Palestinian English teachers generally have not benefited from the skills development necessary to effectively implement textbook material.

The next section gives a brief overview of the types of teacher-training currently available in Palestine, and provides a better understanding of teachers' abilities to implement the *English for Palestine* textbooks.

Implementation of the English curriculum: an overview of teacher-training programs in Palestine

Most English teachers in Palestinian schools are graduates of either the English Literature or Education departments in local universities, or of vocational training institutes run by the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education or the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). If teachers are graduates of Literature departments, they will have had very little, if any, training in teaching methodologies. If they are graduates of Education departments, they will have had very few, if any, opportunities to improve their own English language competence. There is therefore the combined challenge of the majority of newly qualified teachers being unskilled in methods and having a very low level of English, sometimes lower than the level they will actually be teaching.

Any teacher-training programs which do offer a course on ELT methods are, unfortunately, focused on theory rather than feasible ideas for practical application in the classroom. An evaluation of teacher-training programs in Palestine finds that this focus on theory is not unique to English as a core curriculum subject; indeed, the study concludes that many programs are overly theoretical and neglect the practical dimension of real school settings. The study finds, moreover, that training focuses on the coverage of theories and facts more than developing critical and reflective practitioners (QCERD, 2001). Sabri (1997) calls for improvements in Palestinian teacher training programs, arguing that competencies related to the practical issues of classrooms are more important than other theoretical issues of education. Teacher-training programs in Palestinian universities should, Sabri (1997) argues, place more emphasis on classroom applications and teaching techniques rather than concepts and theories of learning.

If Palestinian teachers were equipped with solid English language teaching methodologies as pre-service teachers, they would presumably have the necessary skills and strategies to implement the textbooks in a communicative manner. They would be able, for example: to introduce vocabulary items using pictures, mime, gesture, realia, personalization, etc. which ensures students' comprehension and storage in the long-term memory; to utilize pair and group work activities which help to manage large classes and promote communication; and make the classroom more fun and more alive. In addition, a suitable teacher training program would train teachers to foster pupils' critical thinking skills and to provide plenty of opportunities to personalize the language. For example, teachers would learn to encourage the pupils to talk about themselves, their likes and dislikes, what they love, hate, and fear and then compare their answers with

each other. Teachers would learn to invite the children to talk about their challenges and successes in learning a language, and learn to encourage them to keep a little diary to note down their thoughts and opinions about each project or unit. Finally, teachers would learn to support the children to express themselves in English, using different modes of expression including drawing, stickers and puppets. All of these practices, introduced in a solid teacher-training program, would enhance pupils' thinking skills, develop their creativity and foster their emotional intelligence.

English for Palestine: the Teacher's Guide

As has just been described, Palestinian teachers who have graduated from local teacher-training programs are generally ill-equipped and unprepared to enter the classroom. The teacher's guide accompanying the pupil's book (for grade 3) is an invaluable resource, particularly for new teachers. The *English for Palestine* Teacher's Guide (for third grade) provides some useful teaching tips and encourages teachers to experiment with their classroom practices: teachers 'should feel free to vary the methodology according to what seems right for [their] class at any particular time' (Teachers' Guide 3, p. 5). Furthermore, the guide insists that any textbook is merely a tool, and that successful implementation depends on the teacher: 'Remember, no classroom material can be successful without an enthusiastic teacher who enjoys teaching' (Teacher's Guide 3, p. 5).

Teacher enthusiasm is a critical element of any classroom; however, the very real limitations of the teaching context in Palestinian schools (e.g. classes of 40 students in average, very few periods per week, and extremely limited access to native speaker resources) are not addressed by the Guide. In fact, one of the main limitations of the Guide is that there is not enough focus on helping teachers manage unreasonably large classrooms. Instead, there are a number of suggestions for classroom activities which are ill-suited to the Palestinian teaching context. One repeated suggestion throughout the guide is that teachers have one student come to the board and point to the correct word, or write the correct word. When classes have 40 students, and the dynamic is one in which only one student is involved at any time, it becomes impossible to maintain students' attention. The Guide could be a more useful tool for teachers if it made frequent mention of the benefit of group work and provided explicit instructions for implementing pair and/or group work activities.

Although the Teacher's Guide does encourage teachers to be flexible and adapt their ideas to their own teaching realities, two questions come to mind.

First, do teachers have the teaching confidence necessary to deviate from the Teacher's Guide and modify textbook material? Second, to what extent is teacher flexibility and adaptability actually supported in practice in schools by principals, Ministry/UNRWA supervisors and other officials? Throughout our focus groups, teachers regularly voice complaints that they are closely monitored (by principals, supervisors and parents) and must complete each and every activity, laboring on the language points in an uncommunicative way until every student has memorized everything. Based on our work with teachers and also the supervisors who have attended our workshops in the past, we can conclude that there is a gap between the desired classroom atmosphere (as revealed in the curriculum document) and actual teacher experiences. The concept of teacher autonomy is generally not followed-through in practice.

The next section will describe how a Palestinian educational NGO has worked in recent years to strengthen teaching skills, thus empowering teachers by developing their teaching confidence, and to work with administrators to raise awareness about the necessity of shifting from a traditional grammar-based classroom to a more communicative one.

Initiatives taken by Qattan Centre for Educational Research and Development to empower English language teachers

The Qattan Centre for Educational Research and Development (QCERD) is an independent Palestinian research institution whose primary mission is to assist teachers in acquiring new skills and improving their knowledge base. The QCERD is committed to promoting the highest standards of excellence in school-based education through action research and cooperative educational projects. In order to reach this goal, QCERD organizes educational workshops and training programs for in-service teachers in all disciplines in several educational fields, such as: enhancing pupils' thinking skills; matching teachers' methodologies with students' learning styles; developing emotional intelligence; and, using drama for better teaching and in other innovative educational themes. Researchers in QCERD have published several teacher guidebooks on these educational areas and several articles about their experiences. The Qattan Centre for Educational Research and Development (QCERD) has supported a number of practical initiatives aimed at strengthening teachers' capacities to adapt the textbooks and implement their content via communicative teaching strategies.

QCERD Initiative 1: Training in Communicative English Language Teaching methodologies

These initiatives began in the summer of 2002 with a core group of ten teachers. They attended a week long workshop which introduced them to key methods in communicative language teaching, and prompted them to reflect on their own practices in the classroom. Furthermore, the workshop provided an opportunity for teachers to examine a range of internationally-produced ESL textbooks, games and activities and, an opportunity to work together to devise ways of adapting materials to the specific classroom realities of Palestine. The workshop's feedback forms revealed that, for these teachers, the workshop brought to their attention, for the first time, the importance of using language to learn language, of managing large classes by group and pair-work activities, and of using child-centered activities (i.e. songs, games, play, Total Physical Response, etc.) in the primary classroom.

In the fall of 2002, this same group of teachers met again to share their experiences using their newly acquired skills and knowledge in the classroom. They all reported that the children loved the songs and games, and that they themselves were enjoying teaching more, but that two primary challenges remained: one, convincing the headmaster/mistress that a totally silent classroom where only the teacher talks will not lead to the students' ability to communicate in English; and two, that with only three 45-minute English classes per week, the curriculum itself is a challenge to complete, leaving absolutely no time for supplementary games and activities.

The second challenge was something that QCERD could address directly. Two strategies were adopted. First, the core group of teachers decided that they would meet on a bi-weekly basis. The purpose of these meetings was to identify and practice, with the support of the QCERD researcher, strategies for covering the *English for Palestine* textbook material in a timely, yet effective, communicative and fun manner. The teachers were encouraged to keep a journal of their experiences, noting the ways in which their teaching strategies made their job easier, also were clearly contributing to the raising of children's comprehension levels and general desire to learn English. Over the course of the year it was clear that a real transformation was taking place. The teachers relayed that they found the journal writing to be a very useful tool in their professional development. When meeting as a group to discuss their journals, they identified recurring problem areas, engaged in critical debate about how the textbooks material, and developed solid lesson plans that utilized group work and fostered creativity and imagination.

The teachers were not always successful and they faced many challenges along

the way: the children did not always respond to the lessons with a positive attitude; the teachers were not always successful in developing a network of exchange with other English teachers at their school or changing school administrators' and parents' perceptions of what English classrooms should look like. Despite these challenges, the teachers remained committed.

It was evident that QCERD's initiatives to support these English teachers were working. Yet, with the core group comprised of only ten teachers, it remained a challenge to raise the quality of English language teaching in all Palestinian schools. Consequently, the second initiative QCERD undertook was to share the results of the year-long action research project with this core group of teachers with other Palestinian English teachers. It was decided that the most effective way of doing so would be to publish a series of teaching manuals, or guides, that were both theoretical and practical in nature. The first guide, *Strategies for Teaching English*, which was published in Ramallah in the spring of 2003, provides a broad range of methodologies for teaching vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. The guide also includes a number of practical classroom ideas and activities for developing the students' competence in each of the three areas mentioned above. The second guide, *Games, Activities and Worksheets for the English Language Classroom*, published in Ramallah in the autumn of 2004, is comprised entirely of practical classroom ideas in the areas of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation development.

The two guides, which were distributed at no cost to English teachers across the West Bank and Gaza Strip, received very positive feedback. Comments were generally related to the teachers' perceived appropriateness of the methods to Palestinian teaching realities, and their perceptions that the activities are not only fun, but are linked to content across the curriculum and encourage the development of critical and analytical thinking skills.

Despite the value of the two guides and the transformations beginning to take place in English classes across Palestine, our observations of classroom practice and teachers' admissions of shyness when engaging in song, rhyme, mime, drama and play with their students, revealed a need for QCERD's initiatives to focus more specifically on supporting teachers to create a classroom environment appropriate to very young learners (i.e. grades 1, 2 and 3). Although there was a general recognition that young learners have very different needs and learning styles compared to older students, very few teachers had the resources or skills necessary to teach the first three levels of the new curriculum. Consequently, the third guide, entitled English for Young Learners and published by QCERD in the autumn of 2004, presents teachers with suitable teaching methodologies for the first four years of English language learning. The guide also provides numerous classroom activities for grades 1 to 4 which reinforce the lexis, structures,

functions and themes presented in the *English for Palestine* textbooks. This guide was also distributed at no cost to English teachers across the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and was followed-up with a 15-hour participatory workshop in Jericho and Gaza cities.

This guide and accompanying workshop received mixed feedback. On the one hand, there were comments that such an approach to learning was specific to the West, and not suitable for children in Palestine who, living in conflict and poverty, have to contribute to the family's survival from a young age, leaving no room for trivial activities like song and play. Teachers making these comments believed that children should be made aware of the harsh realities of life sooner rather than later. On the other hand, many teachers thought that it is precisely because of the miserable daily reality facing Palestinian children that an atmosphere of song, movement and play is a crucial part of the learning process. A healthy debate on this topic was engaged in by the workshop participants, and one very positive result can be found in the change of belief of one teacher who, very much opposed to the premise of the workshop on the first day, was a vocal supporter of its underlying principles by the last day.

Overall, the specific initiatives taken by QCERD to develop the English teachers' implementation of the curriculum have been successful. Those initiatives have given the participating teachers a solid foundation in communicative teaching methodologies which focus on the needs of the very young learners. In addition, the initiatives have encouraged those teachers to become reflective and critical practitioners.

QCERD Initiative 2: Integrating stories into the curriculum

The QCERD has also led an initiative to help English teachers incorporate the use of stories into their lesson planning. Reading and listening to stories can be an enjoyable activity for both teachers and pupils and in principle should be engaged in at all grade levels. Stories offer natural language experiences for children. They encourage reading motivation and aid listening comprehension. Storytelling and story reading influence positively the language development and comprehension of young learners, and can be a powerful tool to engage the children in discussions. Besides, storytelling can be an important factor in developing pupils' imagination, thinking skills, emotional intelligence, and appreciation of other cultures (Al-Jafar & Buzzelli, 2004; Kelley, 2005).

Reading stories expands language, develops personality and increases the understanding of the culture and the people of the story language. Therefore, learners should keep listening, reading and telling stories at all grade levels.

Several English course books for primary stages, e.g. *New English Parade* (Pearson Education, 2000), *Story Magic* (Oxford: Macmillan Education, 2003), *Pingu loves English* (Pearson Education, 2001), use stories to make the material child-centered and to widen the pupils' knowledge of the world. It is unfortunate that *English for Palestine* book 3 does not include any story. This discourages children from becoming active readers of English and impedes their development of constructive and creative comprehension.

In spite of the absence of stories in the textbooks, there are outstanding teachers who work hard to include stories in their teaching. For example, an Instructor of English Teaching methodology at Al-Quds Open University focuses on useful practical ideas and instructional procedures for integrating stories, using big books, and combining shared reading and writing. We at the QCERD have worked with this instructor on a small project on storytelling for 3rd graders in the years 2003- 2004. We worked with five pre-service teachers and two in service teachers in an action research style. At the beginning, the in-service teachers explained that they are already overloaded with the material in the textbooks, they have little prior experience with integrating stories in their teaching, and they don't know how to select the appropriate stories. The teachers had training on how to choose the best stories for their classes, how to prepare the pupils, how to plan pre-reading, while reading, post reading activities, and how to implement these activities. At the end of the training, the teachers presented selected stories that they planned to the group. We had these presentations videotaped and later discussed. After that, teachers applied what they have learned in their classrooms (for third graders). We chose stories that reinforce pupils learning of the content of the textbook. For example, we worked on a story *My Friend* which is about a little girl and her animal friends. This story focuses on the names of animals and the actions that animals can/ can't do. It was a good choice because *English for Palestine* grade three concentrates on the names of animals, actions and ability (can, can't). In class the teachers presented stories in a lively manner, they used the colorful and descriptive language of the stories. Teachers experimented with their voice, tone, eye-contact, gestures, and facial expressions. They were successful in holding children's attention. Pupils played the roles of the characters of the story and had to accomplish a performance task that indicates their learning. For example, after reading the story about animals, they had to create a poster about their 'animal friend'. They had a checklist in Arabic that helps them to accomplish their task and to assess their performance.

One creative teacher has written innovative stories to help her pupils to overcome difficulties in their learning. In class, she introduced this story in the form of a big book:

LONELY IN THE GARDEN OF PRESENT TENSE

By Areej Ashhab

There were three friends. Their names were (He), (She) and (It). One day, the friends went to play in the present Tense garden.

In the garden the friends met (We), (You), (I) and (They).The three friends (He), (She), (It) sat together happily.

Into the garden came the (S).The (S) felt lonely.

(S) went to (We) and said: "Hello, can I play with you? "The (We) said: "No, No!"

The (S) went to the (You), and said: "Hello, can I play with you?" The (You) said: "No, No!"

The(S) went to the (I), and said:" Hello, can I play with you?" The (I) said: "No, No"!

The (S) went to the (They), and said: "Hello, can I play with you?" The (They) said: "No, No"!

"I am alone," said the(S). "No body wants to play with me." The (S) saw the three friends; (He), (She) and (It).

(S) Came to them and said: "Hello, can I play with you?" (He), (She) and (It) said:" yes, yes". (S) asked: "where can I sit?"

(He), (She) and (It) said: "Sit next to the verb."

Their verb said: "Come (S) and hold my hand like this. Stick to me and don't leave me." Their verb said to (S):

"We will always be with (He), (She) and (It) in the garden of present tense."

QCERD's Initiative 3: Teacher Empowerment – A conference in cooperation with IATEFL and the British Council

Palestinian teachers and educators have almost no opportunity to travel abroad or even to other areas of Palestine because of the Israeli policy of closure.[4] Thus, academics are kept out of all sorts of national and international educational collaborations. With limited chance of participating in collective gatherings, Palestinian teachers do not get the opportunity to realize their full capabilities, to engage in discussions or to share experiences. This conference was an attempt to remove boundaries on education by allowing Palestinian teachers to meet international experts.

An EFL (English as a Foreign Language) conference was held in August 2007 under the auspices of the IATEFL TD SIG (International Association for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language – Teacher Development Special Interest Group). The title of this conference was "Curriculum and Classroom Practices: A Need for Teacher Empowerment". It was organized by QCERD in partnership with the British Council.

Almost 300 professionals from different cities and villages in the West bank attended the conference, many of whom had to spend long hours of queues and questioning at armed checkpoints just to get to the Ramallah conference. This was an impressive reflection on the keen interest and enthusiasm of the Palestinian TEFL community.

The conference brought together EFL professionals, including internationally recognized experts and regional educators, to share their expertise and experiences in areas crucial to the development of English language teaching in the country. The conference was truly international not only in terms of the participants, but also in relation to the topics and issues tackled.

The two days of the conference were packed with workshops and presentations led by international and Palestinian professionals. Topics covered included teachers' experiences, motivating weaker students, curriculum and textbook development, teaching English in the Palestinian context, teacher development and classroom management. The presentations were well-received and got positive feedback.

Workshops managed by international experts, discussed important issues in English Language education that are often missing from teachers' training in Palestine. For example: the role of technology, creative grammar teaching, multiple intelligences and assessments. Workshops and papers presented by Palestinian professionals, described initiatives and continuous efforts taken by educators and individual teachers to improve the quality of English Language education in Palestine.

The conference connected the teachers with experts in language teaching and allowed them to reflect on their practices, to learn, to share their classroom stories and to discuss their challenges.

Conclusion and recommendations

Textbooks are often the main teaching resource in the classroom: they determine the content, the methodology and the learning process. Teachers and students tend to rely heavily on textbooks as the centre of instruction. For many novice teachers, the textbook can be an invaluable tool which provides security,

increases confidence and provides a framework for scaffolding students' learning. At the same time, a single textbook cannot possibly respond to the differing needs of a large group of learners. When exploring the usefulness of any textbook, it is important to keep in mind that what is more important than textbooks is what teachers did with them (Ansary & Babaii, 2002). In the case of English language teaching in Palestine, the *English for Palestine* textbooks are often the only learning material teachers have access to.

In this article we have given an overview of the grade three textbook and have discussed areas of possible development and improvement. It is our opinion that, despite the text's limitations, qualified teachers are able to adapt the content and activities of the text to create an interactive and stimulating classroom environment. It is important to reiterate here that not one of the Palestinian English teachers we worked with, or spoke to in our focus groups, has ever received any *English for Palestine*-specific training. Such a lack of training points to a serious need for teacher empowerment initiatives.

This work did not address the conditions and inequities prevalent in Palestinian schools in the area of English teaching which reflect socioeconomic inequalities. Such issues are complex by nature and needs dedicated research. Mastering the English language provides unprecedented social and economic mobility and allows access to an increasingly global world. Curriculum developers, policy makers, teachers and parents would like Palestinian children to learn English from early stages since the English Language is the language of science and technology, a fundamental tool for pursuing higher education, and a means for communicating with a wider community.

Palestinian schools, are divided into three sectors in terms of ownership: public schools that belong directly to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education MOEHE (70 percent of all students); UNRWA schools that belong to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (24 percent of all students); and private schools that belong to various charities, religious organizations, or Christian churches (6 percent of all students). The latter are located predominantly in the big cities of Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem[5]. Private schools teach all subject areas in early grades based on the same Palestinian curriculum of the public and UNRWA schools, However, private schools starts English language education as early as the kindergarten level, and their students receive two or three times more English sessions. Some private schools hire native speaker English teachers, they use well-known and tried textbooks, the medium of instruction is English. Thus, private schools prepare their students to communicate fluently in English and students become to believe that they are better and other students are understandably inferior.

According to Crystal (2003), 'language is a major means (some would say the chief means) of showing where we belong, and of distinguishing one social group from another' (p.22). Even teachers may be negatively influenced by the type of school in which they work. Teachers should not 'feel or to proceed as if they were inferior to dominant-class learners in the private schools who arrogantly mistreat and belittle middleclass teachers.' At the same time they should not feel superior 'to the learners from the slums, to the lower class children, to the children with no comforts, who do not eat well, who do not 'dress nicely', who do not 'speak correctly', who speak with their own syntax, semantics, and accent' (Freire 1998, 71-72). This paper did not discuss English Language teaching or the textbooks in their relation to broader issues of social diversity and inequity in the Palestinian community. It is recommended therefore that future research focus on issues of poverty, social injustice, class and regional disparities prevalent in Palestinian society, and their relation to English language teaching. In addition, future studies should address the contribution of English language textbooks and the role of English language teaching in engaging students and teachers with issues of justice, diversity and equity in Palestinian society. Teacher training programs should sensitize teachers to the unique needs and schooling contexts of their particular students. Work with teachers should allow them to realize that achievement gaps among their students mirror vast socioeconomic inequalities in the Palestinian community. Lots need to be done to enhance English Language teaching in Palestine. It is our hope that this work is just a starting point on a long, but successful journey towards teacher empowerment.

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Notes

1. In Palestine education is compulsory for 10 years, followed by two non-compulsory years of secondary education culminating in the Tawjihi general examination. The Tawjihi focuses on recall and memorization, and it is the sole criterion for graduation. Schooling, especially in the upper grades (grades 10–12), aims to prepare students for passing the Tawjihi test.
2. The Palestinian Curriculum Development Center (PCDC) needs to be seen as part of the Palestinian national endeavor to upgrade the Palestinian educational system. Its goal is to develop a new curriculum that meets the future needs, new circumstances, and social and moral values of the Palestinian people. The implementation of the Curricula Plan, ratified by the Palestinian Cabinet and the Legislative Council in 1998, is the mission the Curriculum Center set out to accomplish. A high level ministerial committee, headed by the Minister of Education and Higher Education, supervises the implementation of the Curricula Plan. For more information see: http://www.pcdc.edu.ps/establishment.htm
3. In 2003 we held five workshops with teachers, then two focus groups with supervisors and officials from Curriculum Department and Ministry of education. We had 7-10 participants in each focus group. Questions were asked in an interactive manners and participants were free to talk with other group members. The aim of the focus groups was: [a] To develop a better understanding of teacher evaluation of the different component of English for Palestine course book (PB), workbook (WB), teacher's book (TB), cassettes, posters and flashcards; [b] To elicit supervisor evaluation of *English for Palestine* with regards to their reports of the difficulties faced by teachers using *English for Palestine* inside their English language classrooms, and [c] To gauge if *English for Palestine* helps students develop the capacity to think critically and communicate effectively through a mastery of the language.
4. Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank are forbidden to enter Jerusalem or Israel because of the policy of closure or 'sealing off the territories'. Palestinians must obtain permits from the Israeli military government to work in or to visit Jerusalem. In order to apply for a permit, applicants must take a form filled out in Hebrew to the nearest Military Governor's office. There, they have to queue outside, waiting for their turn to be admitted, which can take hours or even the whole day.
5. See http://r0.unctad.org/palestine/economy2.htm.

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