

DELIVERING INNOVATIVE, ONLINE TEFL COURSES TO FOSTER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND POSITIVELY IMPACT ENGLISH LEARNERS

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Abstract

This paper reports on findings from a U.S. federally-funded research project involving American universities that created online courses to develop Jordanian K-12 English teachers' instructional strategies and communication skills who are employed in disadvantaged or vulnerable rural and urban schools. The four innovative, online courses address Jordanian English teachers' desire to motivate learners (Al-efeshat & Baniabdelrahman, 2020), develop students' critical reading skills (Bataneh & Al-Shbatat, 2018), reduce students' reading anxiety (Al-Shboul et al., 2013), and foster metacognitive reading strategies (Alsarayreh, 2020) among other challenges. Studies have found that increasing mobile technologies to students and teachers and integrating basic technology in public and refugee schools would profoundly impact the scope of learning and instruction (UNESCO, 2018; UNHRC, 2018). Further, research on teacher quality shows that weaknesses in teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and classroom practice undermine effective student learning and achievement (Phetla & Newman, 2020; Pontefract and Hardman 2005). Continuing professional development and PCK positively impact schools and embodies the ability to evaluate students thinking, plan appropriate learning opportunities, and modify, combine, and use instructional materials to develop conceptual understanding (Darling-Hammond et al., 1999). Teachers' professional development through teachers' collaboration has been reported to be effective for the improvement of schools' performance and students' learning outcomes in all curriculum subjects. Research repeatedly demonstrates that continuing professional development makes a difference to teachers' pedagogic knowledge and skill which is reflected in enhanced student learning outcomes (AL-Wreikat & Bin Abdullah, 2010; Mahmoud, 2015). This project seeks to narrow these gaps and positively impact learning outcomes and student competencies through the innovative online and in-person PDP with Jordanian teachers of English. Using gathered qualitative and quantitative data, we identify the program's impact on TEFL teachers' integrated service learning projects and culturally relevant pedagogies to positively affected students' learning, advanced teachers' knowledge of research-based instructional strategies, and addressed other challenges identified by the teachers. We will also share the process for selecting teachers to participate in the program and collaborations we developed with international stakeholders.

Keywords: TEFL, distance education, learners, innovation, service learning.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on findings from a U.S. federally-funded program, *English Education for All* (EEFA), involving two American universities delivering online courses, seminars and workshops, and an exchange program to Jordanian K-12 English teachers who are employed in disadvantaged and/or under-represented rural and urban schools. The program's four online courses – two Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certification courses and two courses that incorporated service learning projects as high-impact strategies to teach English – sought to address Jordanian English teachers' desire to motivate learners (Al-efeshat & Baniabdelrahman, 2020; Malkawi, N.A.M. (2020).), develop students' critical reading skills (Bataneh & Al-Shbatat, 2018), reduce students' reading anxiety (Al-Shboul et al., 2013), increase English vocabulary (Alhabahba et al., 2016; Al-Jarra. & Al-Ahmad, 2013; Obeidat, & Abu-Melhim, 2008), and foster metacognitive reading strategies (Alsarayreh, 2020; Aljoudi, 2019), among other instructional and learning strategies.

Research on teacher quality shows that weaknesses in teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and classroom practice undermine effective student learning and achievement (Phetla & Newman, 2020; Pontefract & Hardman 2005). Studies have found that increasing mobile technologies to students and teachers and integrating basic technology in public and refugee schools would profoundly impact the scope of learning and instruction in public school classroom (Aljaraideh, 2014; UNESCO, 2018; UNHRC, 2018). Research-based instructional strategies are sought by teachers to address pedagogical shortcomings.

2. Methods

A criteria was used to select forty Jordanian English teachers for the EEFA program.¹ Many of the participants teach Jordanians as well as immigrants and refugees in classrooms lacking resources and access to technology. In the online courses (utilizing the LMS *Brightspace* (D2L)), Jordanian teachers participated in weekly asynchronous discussion boards to advance their reading and writing skills. Answering prompts based on weekly readings and videos, a participant's discussion posted was often more than three paragraphs and sometimes included a cited source. Course instructors evaluated the participants' posts and assessed summative projects and essays using rubrics.

The following concepts were embedded in each course: differentiation, English language standards, global competence, social emotional learning, and the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. Through readings, podcasts, discussions, graphic organizers, and developing and answering questions, the English teachers explored strategies and techniques to differentiate the content, process, product of instruction in mixed-ability classes based on students' readiness, interests, and learning preferences. For the service-learning component, participating English teachers identified a community issue, integrated four stages of a unit plan map, and developed a sample plan. They created a step-by-step plan for a service-learning project using best practices (i.e., the IPARD process) developed by the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC). The participants indicated that they previously did not have a large amount of knowledge or experience with service-learning as an instructional strategy and learned other pedagogical approaches from the online courses to integrate in their English classroom.

During the online courses, weekly synchronous conversation classes were scheduled as an opportunity for the Jordanian English teachers to cultivate their speaking and listening skills through interactions with classmates discussing questions related to the weekly course content. Conducted using Zoom during the spring courses, participants prepared questions to lead a small group discussion in one of the breakout rooms, attended by other teachers and a course instructor or program administrator. Discussion leaders received feedback from their peers and course instructor or administrator based on their leadership and communication skills facilitating the discussion. Participating English teachers and course instructors faced few technological challenges delivering or accessing the materials and course content, with the exception of Zoom connection difficulties for some participants. Course instructors and administrators maintained continual communication with the program participants through the course website, WhatsApp, a closed Facebook page for the participating teachers and administrators, and weekly one-hour synchronous conversation class.

The EEFA program followed the model of continuing professional development and PCK which positively impacts schools and embodies the ability to evaluate students thinking, plan appropriate learning opportunities, and modify, combine, and use instructional materials to develop conceptual understanding (Darling-Hammond et al. 1999). Teachers' professional development through teachers' collaboration has been reported to be effective for the improvement of schools' performance and students' learning outcomes in all curriculum subjects. Research repeatedly demonstrates that continuing professional development makes a difference to teachers' pedagogic knowledge and skill which is reflected in enhanced student learning outcomes (AL-Wreikat & Bin Abdullah, 2010; Mahmoud, 2015).

In addition to the four, 8-week courses delivered in fall 2021 and spring 2022, an in-person Summer Institute was delivered after the online courses on the University of Jordan campus that involved three-days of workshops, seminars, and presentations facilitated by the EEFA course instructors, program administrators, and participating teachers in the program. The EEFA program also integrated a train-the-trainer model in which fifteen teachers selected from the forty would participate in a two-week exchange on two U.S. campuses involving K-12 school visits, workshops and seminars on train-the-trainer model,

¹(i) level of English language proficiency and ability (intermediate or advanced): 1- Trouble Communicating; 2- With Some Hesitation; 3- No trouble communicating (see rubric), (ii) level of commitment to participate in the program, (iii) access to technology to participate in online classes each week in fall 2021 and spring 2022, (iv) location of vulnerable school (consider the three geographical governorates in Jordan: North region, central region, and south region), (v) gender of participants, (vi) did not possess a terminal degree or were a doctoral candidate, (vii) years teaching English: consideration was placed on novice (1-3 years) over veteran educator, (viii) possess English teaching degree, and (vix) experience teaching in primary or secondary school, located in urban or rural setting.

and excursions to cultural and historical sites to advance their English and teaching skills. The trained fifteen teachers would then train other teachers in their school and surrounding communities in fall 2022 and spring 2023.

3. Findings

Participating teachers claimed the EEFA program increased their confidence writing and speaking English as well as informed their instructional strategies to actively engage students learning English and integrate activities to motivate students through service learning projects and communicative-based, student-centered activities.

- I've learned a lot about methods, approaches, and strategies about how language should be learned and taught. Class management, using technology, using games, and assessment were great topics to study and examine. Reading and reflecting on my teaching practices helped me a lot to grow as a teacher (male, second year).
- I have learned new innovative strategies to develop my teaching abilities as well as my students learning abilities too. Now, I can utilize technology effectively in my classroom, manage classroom using positive behavior management strategies, adapting materials according to the age group and implementing the PPP [presentation, practice and production] in my week's lesson plan focusing more on the four skills in English language, besides incorporating games and activities that highly increase my students' learning competencies. I have learned the best ways to assess and handled multilevel classes using several types of assessments and rubrics, giving positive feedback (female, fifth year teaching).
- The program aided me in the development of my language skills. It has exposed me to a variety of innovative teaching strategies that have had a big impact on my students' educational levels (female, fourth year teaching).
- I learned how to use technology effectively to transform your ESL classroom also I learned about Benefits of Technology Integration in English Education. I learned the purpose and value of a PPP lesson plan and the value of teaching critical thinking skills in the EFL classroom... I learned (t)he most important strategies for handling multilevel classes and some strategies for increasing interaction and encouraging quiet students to speak in class more frequently (female, sixth year).

Through interviews, surveys, end-of-course written assignments, and written feedback on teacher-led discussions, participants claimed the courses increased their confidence writing and speaking English, and stated that they integrated in their teaching some of the instructional strategies such as differentiation, a PPP (presentation, practice and production) lesson, and service learning to motivate and actively engage students to speak and write in English. One participant stated that this program provided her a unique opportunity because she had not communicated with native speakers of English.

4. Discussions

Results from the EEFA program provide insights for other international projects that seek to foster educators' oral and written English communication skills as well as cultivate their pedagogical knowledge to positively impact learning outcomes through professional development courses, seminars and workshops, and cultural exchange program. Findings from this research address the efficacy of online, distance learning (asynchronous and synchronous) and report on challenges Jordanian educators confront teaching English in disadvantaged and/or under-represented rural and urban schools. Jordanian teachers consistently participated regularly during the online courses as they grappled with new concepts and shared insights and reflections during the synchronous conversation classes. While the development of the online courses were modeled on existing TEFL and teaching courses, there was an identifiable need to consider aligning the online courses with the Jordanian teachers' curriculum, textbook, and learning outcomes from the Ministry of Education as well as connect with sustainable development goals 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9 (Abu shaqra, 2021). In future programs, detailed rubrics would be identified for scoring the twelve constructed categories when selecting English teachers who would participate in a two-week train-the-trainer program in the U.S.

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