

Evaluating the Open Educational College Academic Programme for In-service English Language Teacher Development in Iraq

Assist. Prof. Dr. Muayyad Naji Ahmed

Department of English / Open Educational College / Ministry of Education / Iraq

muayyad_naji@yahoo.com

Abstract

This research is to evaluate the in-service English language teacher development programme of the Open Educational College in Iraq. The aim of this evaluation is to identify the academic programme and the positive aspects and the ones that need to be updated, improved or changed. The researcher hypothesizes that the programme satisfies the English Language teachers' needs from their own perspectives. The evaluation tool used for achieving the aim is a five-scale questionnaire of (21) items based on Peacock's (2009) model. The data is collected from the fourth year students of the academic year (2021-2022) and the students who graduated in the academic year (2020-2021) as those two groups had experienced the curriculum that was recently recommended by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research for Colleges of Basic Education in Iraq. Focus-group interviews were also conducted in order to collect further data.

Keywords: (In-service programme, The Open Educational College, Teacher development, Teacher education, curriculum)

المخلص: إنّ هدف هذا البحث هو تقويم البرنامج الأكاديمي للكلية التربوية المفتوحة لتطوير معلمي اللغة الانكليزية في العراق لغرض التعريف بجوانب البرنامج الإيجابية وتلك

التي تحتاج إلى تحديث أو تعديل أو تغيير. يفترض الباحث بأن ذلك البرنامج يُلبى حاجات المعلمين من وجهة نظرهم. تمثلت أداة البحث في استبيان ذو الخمس درجات احتوى على (٢١) فقرة استبائية وفقاً لنموذج (بيكوك ٢٠٠٩). تم جمع البيانات من طلبة المرحلة الرابعة للعام الدراسي (٢٠٢١-٢٠٢٢) وأولئك الذين تخرجوا في العام الدراسي (٢٠٢٠-٢٠٢١) بما أن هاتان المجموعتان من الطلبة قد درست المنهج الدراسي الذي أقرته وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي لكليات التربية الأساسية في العراق. كذلك تم إجراء مقابلات جماعية مركزة لجمع معلومات إضافية.

أظهر المعلمون اتفاقاً ذات دلالة بأن المنهج الدراسي مناسب لتطوير كفاءاتهم اللغوية ولكن يحتاج إلى المزيد من الأنشطة التطبيقية، وبأن التوجه التربوي يحتاج إلى تعزيز لغرض مواكبة الواقع المحلي. ويستنتج الباحث بأن هناك سوء فهم لمتطلبات تطوير المعلمين أثناء الخدمة جاء نتيجة لاعتماد منهج دراسي لإعداد المعلمين قبل الخدمة ومن أجل ذلك يقدم الباحث اقتراحاته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (برنامج أثناء الخدمة، الكلية التربوية المفتوحة، تطوير المعلمين، إعداد المعلمين، المنهج الدراسي)

Section One

Introduction

1.1 The Statement of the Problem

English language teaching (ELT) is a vital field of education for both formal and informal schools in Iraq. Therefore, it is very important for in-service teacher professional development to have a structured academic programme through which the theoretical as well as the pedagogic knowledge of EL teachers can be developed. As a response for this serious demand, the Ministry of Education in Iraq established the Open Educational College (OEC) in (1998) to start its first academic year in (2000-2001). It is worth re-explaining here that the curriculum of instruction followed by the Department of English is similar to that taught in Colleges of Basic Education, however, the only difference is in number of attendance days due to

the reason that the teachers are involved in work at their schools. Many attempts have been world widely carried out to design evaluation models for EL teacher education programmes, but none has been applied to the Iraqi particular situation. Having completed (20) years of experience as the Head of the English Department, the researcher intends to fill this gap.

Evaluating the ELT academic programme of this college may be, as the researcher believes, a complementary point towards improving the field of ELT professionalization in Iraq that has not been researched before.

1.2 The Hypothesis

The in-service ELT education programme provided by the OEC in Iraq satisfies the needs of English language teachers from their own perspectives.

1.3 Previous Studies Review

This section reviews the studies that were carried out in different settings with a description of the context for the current research followed by a presentation of the evaluation tool design. Some of those studies evaluated pre-service teacher education programmes that, the researcher thinks, may compensate for the lack of in-service programmes evaluation studies.

Al-Gaeed (1983) carried out a study to find out the strong and weak points of the English teacher education programme in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by using a questionnaire asking about the students and the graduates' perspectives on the methodology, the performance of the faculty members and the linguistic courses. The participants evaluated the programme positively in terms of the areas covered by the questionnaire. Besides, they mentioned that the

opportunities for improving their spoken English are not enough and that the literature courses are irrelevant to their preparation demands.

In (1997), Barkhuizen's study revealed that the teachers in South Africa were mostly concerned with how to deal with their students' low English proficiency, their mother tongue interference and their own English proficiency.

Chong and Cheah (2009) conducted their study in Singapore to evaluate the subject matters, rather than English, which provide conceptual educational basics of values, skills and general knowledge. They evaluated how these courses help teachers initial professional preparation claiming instead that teachers need to develop a problem-solving attitudes and the skills of learning from experience.

The researcher has chosen the procedures that he thinks suitable for evaluating the Iraqi context of EL teacher development; a questionnaire and focus-group interviews.

1.5 The Significance of the Research

The researcher hopes that the findings of this research may present significant information for local and global interests about the importance of evaluating the ELT in-service programme of the OEC.

1.6 The Abbreviations Used

EL: English Language, ELT: English Language Teaching, OEC: The Open Educational College

Section Two

Teacher Development in Iraq

2.1 Pre-service EL teacher training and in-service EL teacher development

Carter and Nunan (2001:72) give a clear distinction between these two fields when they say that “teacher education describes the field of professional activity through which individuals learn to teach second languages. These formal activities are referred to as teacher training, while those that are undertaken by experienced teachers on a voluntary individual basis are referred to as teacher development.” Teacher education, in general, refers to the sum of experiences and activities through which individuals learn to be language teachers. (ibid: 72)

2.1 The context of in-service ELT open education in Iraq

In-service teacher training in Iraq is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. In 1998, this ministry established the (OEC) that has self-financing study centres all over Iraq to provide a four-year BA academic programme for teachers with courses already adopted by other colleges of basic education run by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research as a general formal educational programme for teacher preparation . The only difference, as mentioned before, is that the (OEC) provides less face-to-face teaching hours but the same number of course credits. The ultimate goal of this academic programme is to develop EL linguistic and professional teaching skills of formal and informal primary school teachers without requiring fully face-to-face education and the assessment is based on mid-term and final written exams besides two main monthly exams for each semester. The (OEC) accepts EL teachers who are currently teaching English in primary schools without any admittance test. Diploma teachers will then get the educational BA certificate. The textbooks selected for the courses are shown in the table below.

2.2 The EL course of the OEC in Iraq

It is worth showing here the OEC English course for the purpose of pinpointing the scope and sequence of the adopted curriculum as a case study research where "data collection and analytical methods can be used" as Nunan and Baily (2009: 157) assure.

First Grade

First Semester (15 weeks)			Second Semester		
Course	Hours	Credits	Course	Hours	Credits
Grammar	3	3	Grammar	2	2
Literature	2	2	Literature	2	2
Conversation	3	2.5	Conversation	3	2.5
General English	2	2	Pronunciation	2	2

Second Grade					
First Semester			Second Semester		
Course	Hours	Credits	Course	Hours	Credits
Grammar	3	3	Grammar	2	2
Short Story	2	2	Novel	2	2
Phonetics	3	2.5	Phonetics	3	2.5
Comprehension	2	2	Comprehension	2	2
Composition	2	2	Conversation	3	2.5

Third Grade					
First Semester			Second Semester		
Course	Hours	Credits	Course	Hours	Credits
Grammar	2	2	Grammar	2	2
Drama	2	2	Linguistics	2	2
Linguistics	2	2	Translation	2	2
Comprehension	2	2	Methods of ELT	2	2
Essay	2	2	Academic Writing	2	2
Methods of ELT	3	3	Textbook Analysis	2	2
Academic Writing	3	3	Measurement and Evaluation	2	2

Fourth Grade					
First Semester			Second Semester		
Course	Hours	Credits	Course	Hours	Credits
Transformational	2	2	Graduation	2	2

Grammar			Research		
Translation	2	2	Practicum	12	12
Language Tests	2	2			
Listening	3	2.5			
Teaching Observation	4	2			

2.3 A Concluding Remark

It is obviously noted that the same academic curriculum for pre-service teacher education is adopted by the OEC as an in-service teacher development programme.

Section Three

The Procedures

3.1 The Evaluation Tool

Evaluation focuses on the syllabus and the programme content in order to determine, as Richards (217: 278) explains, how relevant it is, how easy or difficult, and how successful tests and assessment procedures were. For verifying the hypothesis of this research, a 21-item questionnaire is developed by the researcher following Peacock's (2009) model that is world-widely considered practical and can help collecting valuable data from respondents. Peacock himself assures that his model would facilitate the evaluation of teacher education programmes in different contexts. The developed questionnaire asked the students about their opinions (strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree, strongly agree) on the following items.

1. The ELT curriculum was complementary to my previous diploma linguistic knowledge.
2. An appropriate study infrastructure was provided.
3. An online teaching platform was available.
4. The study system was similar to the traditional study system, but with fewer educational opportunities.
5. Adopting a curriculum that is identical to the curriculum of the other colleges increased my confidence in the reliability of the certificate granted by the college.
6. The open education system provided me with a convenient opportunity to learn ELT without having to leave my school.
7. Success in the first grade courses (grammar, conversation, literature and communication skills) was the motive to continue studying.
8. The second grade courses (grammar, phonetics, poetry, composition, comprehension, short stories) are linguistically and literary rich.
9. I realized that the third grade courses (methods of ELT, the English theatre, linguistics and essay writing) are supplementary courses.
10. My practical experience in ELT, textbook analysis, EL tests, transformational grammar and translation increased in the fourth grade.
11. The online lectures helped me understand the subjects more than the face-to-face lectures.
12. I did read various resources that I had never thought of reading them before I joined the college.
13. The examinations didn't help me refresh my memory.
14. The reason for my anxiety was that I was thinking only of passing the examinations.
15. Homework did not have a positive effect on improving my handwriting, my style of expression and my spelling accuracy.
16. During my study in the college, I missed opportunities to verbally interact with the instructors.

17. The curriculum did not provide extensive information about how to write the graduation research project.
 18. The annual study system is better than the semester study system because it gives more time to study the prescribed material.
 19. It would have been better for me if I hadn't attended the face-to-face lectures.
 20. I am now able to reflect what I learned into practical applications in my English lessons.
 21. I can add more information about the programme.
- The participants' answers to items (1-20) will be statistically analyzed whereas the item number (21) is dedicated to know who agrees to attend the interview.

Ten of the (35) participating students, who agreed to give more information about the programme (item 21), were randomly selected for the focus-group online interview. In the interview, they discussed their ideas and experiences. Thomas et.al (1995) assures that the data collected by this type of interviews are richer than those obtained from one-to-one interviews. Patton (1990) also assumes that focus-group interviews are essential evaluation procedures. Nunan and Baily (2009: 312) also confirm that the researcher can use all the ways in which he tries to obtain data directly from informants as an elicitation procedure. However, the two questions discussed in the interview for this research were; "What are the programme components that need to be improved?" and "What suggestions can you give for the improvement of the programme?"

The questionnaire and the interview, in this research, work well together. While the questionnaire permits the researcher to sample broadly, the interview provides a chance to explore deeply the students' ideas and let them expand upon their comments.

3.2 Data Analysis Procedures

Four experts were asked to judge whether the questionnaire and the interview items are appropriate for the targeted context in order to achieve construct validity. Their feedback didn't suggest any modifications. The data collected via interviews were also assessed by those experts in order to ensure inter-rater reliability. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient value of (0.90) assures that the questionnaire was reliable. The questionnaire was sent to the participants as a Google Classroom multiple-choice grid form. The questionnaire collection data were calculated by using the SPSS statistical package. Content analysis is done to analyze the interview. Brown (1995) states that common trends in the interviews may emerge during the analysis and can make sense for the evaluation of the quality of the programme.

Section Four

The Findings, Conclusions and Suggestions

4.1 Student Questionnaire Results and Discussion

Table (5) below illustrates in detail the statistics obtained.

Table 5: Results of the Statistical Analysis

Item Number	Content	Weighted Mean	Percentage	Significance
12	I did read various resources that I had never thought of reading them before I joined the college.	2.43	81.11	Positive
8	The second grade courses (grammar, phonetics, poetry, composition, comprehension,	2.27	75.56	Positive

	short stories) are linguistically and literary rich.			
10	My practical experience in ELT, textbook analysis, EL tests, transformational grammar and translation increased in the fourth grade.	2.27	75.56	Positive
14	The reason for my anxiety was that I was thinking only of passing the examinations.	2.20	73.33	Positive
20	I am now able to reflect what I learned into practical applications in my English lessons.	2.20	73.33	Positive
4	The study system was similar to the traditional study system, but with fewer educational opportunities.	2.10	70.00	Positive
16	During my study in the college, I missed opportunities to verbally interact with the instructors.	2.10	70.00	Positive

5	Adopting a curriculum that is identical to the curriculum of the other colleges increased my confidence in the reliability of the certificate granted by the college.	2.07	68.89	Positive
7	Success in the first grade courses (grammar, conversation, literature and communication skills) was the motive to continue studying.	2.07	68.89	Positive
17	The curriculum did not provide extensive information about how to write the graduation research project.	2.07	68.89	Positive
9	I realized that the third grade courses (methods of ELT, the English theatre, linguistics and essay writing) are supplementary courses.	1.99	65.60	Negative
18	The annual study	1.97	65.56	Negative

	system is better than the semester study system because it gives more time to study the prescribed material.			
19	It would have been better for me if I hadn't attended the face-to-face lectures.	1.96	65.54	Negative
13	The examinations didn't help me refresh my memory.	1.95	65.22	Negative
6	The open education system provided me with a convenient opportunity to learn ELT without having to leave my school.	1.93	64.44	Negative
1	The ELT curriculum was complementary to my previous diploma linguistic knowledge.	1.90	63.33	Negative
11	The online lectures helped me understand the subjects more than the face-to-face lectures.	1.90	63.33	Negative
15	Homework did	1.89	63.11	Negative

	not have a positive effect on improving my handwriting, my style of expression and my spelling accuracy.			
3	An online teaching platform was available.	1.87	62.22	Negative
2	An appropriate study infrastructure was provided.	1.70	56.67	Negative

4.2 Discussing the Results

The items (12, 18, 19, 13, 6, 1, 11, 15, 3 and 2) respectively got the highest weighted means that ranged between (2.43 and 2.07) and percentages of (81.11 – 68.89) indicating that these items have positive statistical significance as the value of each item is more than the hypothetical average.

The items (9, 8, 10, 14, 20, 4, 16, 5, 7 and 17) respectively got the lowest weighted means that ranged between (1.99 and 1.70) and percentages of (65.60 – 56.67) indicating that these items have negative statistical significance as the value of each item is more than the hypothetical average.

To conclude, the researcher identifies the positive aspects of the programme that deserve to be highlighted as shown in Table (6) and the negative aspects that need to be improved or changed as shown in Table (7).

4.2.1 The Positive Aspects of the Programme

Table 6: The Positive Aspects of the Programme

Item Number	Content
12	I did read various resources that I had never thought of reading them before I joined the college.
8	The second grade courses (grammar, phonetics, poetry, composition, comprehension, short stories) are linguistically and literary rich.
10	My practical experience in ELT, textbook analysis, EL tests, transformational grammar and translation increased in the fourth grade.
20	I am now able to reflect what I learned into practical applications in my English lessons.
5	Adopting a curriculum that is identical to the curriculum of the other colleges increased my confidence in the reliability of the certificate granted by the college.
7	Success in the first grade courses (grammar, conversation, literature and communication skills) was the motive to continue studying.
18	The annual study system is better than the semester study system because it gives more time to study the prescribed material.
19	It would have been better for me if I hadn't attended the face-to-face lectures.
13	The examinations didn't help me refresh my memory.
15	Homework did not have a positive effect on improving my handwriting, my style of expression and my spelling accuracy.

These results indicate that the programme is suitable for Iraqi EL teachers as an in-service development academic study and that the gradual sequence of the courses is scientifically and pedagogically founded to suit the Iraqi context.

4.2.1 The Negative Aspects of the Programme

Table 7: The Negative Aspects of the Programme

Item Number	Content
14	The reason for my anxiety was that I was thinking only of passing the examinations.
4	The study system was similar to the traditional study system, but with fewer educational opportunities.
16	During my study in the college, I missed opportunities to verbally interact with the instructors.
17	The curriculum did not provide extensive information about how to write the graduation research project.
9	I realized that the third grade courses (methods of ELT, the English theatre, linguistics and essay writing) are supplementary courses.
6	The open education system provided me with a convenient opportunity to learn ELT without having to leave my school.
1	The ELT curriculum was complementary to my previous diploma linguistic knowledge.
11	The online lectures helped me understand the subjects more than the face-to-face lectures.
3	An online teaching platform was available.
2	An appropriate study infrastructure was provided.

Those results indicate the following:

1. Exam anxiety has a negative impact on students.
2. Educational learning opportunities are fewer than those for the traditional system.
3. Instructor-student verbal interaction is not sufficient.
4. The curriculum did not provide extensive information about how to write the graduation research project.
5. The third grade courses (methods of ELT, the English theatre, linguistics and essay writing) are complementary courses.
6. Students need leave-taking permission from their schools.

7. There is no well sequenced relation to students previous diploma linguistic knowledge.
8. The online lectures cannot substitute face-to-face lectures.
9. There is a serious lack of online teaching platforms.
10. The infrastructure of some study centres is not appropriately established.

4.3 Focus-group Interview Results

The students who participate in the focus-group online interview stated their perceptions about the programme where they pointed out what can be here classified as points of strength and weakness of the programme with suggestions for improvement.

Firstly, they praised the comprehensive items of the questionnaire that really addressed their perceptions. Then they highlighted additional points of strength such as the graded sequence and scope of the theoretical and practical areas of the curriculum, the day-off that they have beside Friday and Saturday to attend the face-to-face lectures, the instructors' authority to adapt the courses to circumstances and current health crises, the marks allotted to homework and daily activities, the positive effect of the presentations that they made throughout their study. Furthermore, they said that getting a B.A. increased their income.

On the other hand, they underlined some weaknesses such as the shortness of the lecture time, the old resources of literature and conversation courses, and the lack of practicing teaching literature, homework feedback and language lab.

4.3 Conclusions and Suggestions

The researcher concludes that the 4-year ELT education programme provided by the OEC in Iraq satisfies the needs of English language teachers from their own perspectives, and thus he suggests evaluating the programme according to the instructors' perspectives. However, the researcher believes that the programme

needs to be oriented as teacher-development rather than as pre-service teacher education, as the proficiency level of non-native English speaking teachers is a very important concern in English teacher education (Richards, 1998:7) when they are already employed. EL teachers should connect the input that they studied at the OEC to their own pre-service knowledge, experience and to the ongoing practice. Assessment should focus on activities such as reflective practices, and on how language can be best taught. There is also a serious need for a clearly stated philosophy in the OEC programme for EL teacher development as Wallace (1991:8) recommends.

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