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Book: Innovation in language learning and teaching: the case of Middle East and North Africa

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Introduction

The book is research based and provides evidences on innovative techniques in teacher preparation, learning, assessment, and teaching across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Reading and writing proficiency in language, the presence of technology, and technology-enhanced instruction are among the significant advancements examined throughout the nations. For people who work in the teaching or learning industries, this book is essential reading. The book's sections give readers a look at some of the cutting-edge teaching, learning, and evaluation techniques that are now used at practically all levels of English language instruction and learning, from elementary schools to universities. The book has a total of thirteen chapters.

In chapter 1, Coombe et al. explain how innovation has been taken in Middle East and North African context. They bring the reference of the countries like Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, and Egypt. According to the authors, innovation is about helping organizations grow in terms of efficiency and quality. Teachers are seen as champions in promoting more interactive and caring relationships with students. Innovative approaches are applied with the demand of teachers' professional development. Smartphones, internet and low-cost computers and laptops are some of the innovative tools used by teachers in schools in the region.

The authors claim that teachers in the Gulf countries are encouraged to use as much technology as they can in their classrooms. The classrooms are equipped with projectors or smart boards and many tertiary-level universities are also moving from traditional text books to greater use of e-books, with access to Moodle. Moreover, Gulf nations, especially UAE, have been setting world records in MOOC tests because to their emphasis on technology. Language-based initiatives like TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages), TAESIG (Arabia Testing Assessment and Evaluation Special Interest Group), PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) are crucial in bringing about this change in the countries. In the chapter, the editors give a hint that English is taken as important subject and in most Gulf countries.

In chapter 2, the authors argue that the adoption and application of online learning varies from region to region, culture to culture and language to language. The issue is arguably more sociocultural than technological. A broader definition of digital literacy needed to learn online would need to be both culturally and contextually specific. One of the key skills for the modern age is digital literacy. The writers do, however, present the paradoxical notion that digital literacy is Eurocentric. Migrants from the MENA region who are not accustomed to digital learning encounter challenges and need assistance integrating socially and professionally.

In Chapter 3, the authors describe the development of a training workshop for senior English teachers which led to the production of culturally appropriate 'big books' (very large format books) for shared reading instruction. Twenty-six of the big books and associated lesson plans that were developed in the workshop were subsequently made available online. Now, the books were made available nationwide which would reflect the Omanian culture. In consideration to this, a decision was made by the Ministry of Education to secure funding to make hard copies of big books available to teachers.

The fourth chapter, authored by Boraie, El Badry and Habashy, reflect on the curriculum innovation that was aimed and applied in the administered education, English language programme at the American University in Cairo. The innovation affirmed introduction to a Task-Based Learning and Teaching (TBLT) approach. Results highlighted the successful components of the system and strategies used to implement and sustain the innovation.

The innovation that was experimented in Egypt was the outcome of the defect prevailing in the traditional method of instruction. Traditional education system focused on rote learning, memorization and grammar translation approach. The new innovation would focus on integrated new knowledge with the existing knowledge in a context of social interaction and dialogue. Innovations are not easy to bring into effect. According to the authors, this was felt in the process of applying the new TBLT in language learning classrooms. The process of bringing students, teachers and administration together went through like a problem-solving process. Still, effective leadership was felt as key to success to innovation.

In Chapter 5, author Leki Esseili describes an innovative approach to the teaching of freshman writing at a private university in Lebanon. Students were found unengaged in the readings, demotivated to write, and not proficient enough to write in their second language. Findings revealed, such policies had negative effects on the development of students.

Until the end of the civil war (1975-1991) schools in Lebanon followed grammar translation and audio-lingual approaches to language teaching. In the mid-to-late 1990s curriculum reforms were initiated focusing on trends of theme based teaching learning, integrated, content-based teaching learning. Following the findings, a number of curricula that successfully addressed the issues were introduced. Students learned how to deal with subject matter beyond their own particular histories and experiences, thanks to the introduction of a new technique.

Chapter 6, is on extensive reading competition which energized Emirati students in reading using the MReader programme. Post-intervention data collected from 83 of 179 participating students by survey and focus groups. 87% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the competition motivated them to read. A further 82% felt that vocabulary acquisition was the skill most enhanced by extensive reading. Researchers claim that students who read more will become better and more confident readers. They will also improve their reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities and their vocabularies will get richer. Emirati students do not read extensively in Arabic or English.[1,2] Reading for pleasure is not encouraged in Arabic society because of negative connotations associated with grades and punishments. The oral tradition is meant to transfer culture to their children by parents through stories. MReader was able to address the gap between rich and poor students by providing more books at home.

The innovation outlined in Chapter 7 by Nunn et al., presents an inclusive, interdisciplinary view of a community of practice engaged in innovation that goes beyond narrow departmental specialization. The authors argue that innovation is not a limited intervention by leadership alone and requires the mutual engagement and social learning of all. A holistic approach of innovation was designed with the collaborative tactic of science, math and arts departments through various activities including specific teaching of reading strategies. The Dean was satisfied with the outcomes of the student's reading habits and the importance of working together collaboratively with different faculties.[3]

Chapter 8 reports from Israel's HEIs on reforms to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in the form of the innovative CEFR-Aligned Framework for English in Higher Education is a grassroots initiative. Prior to this, many EAP programs focused solely on reading comprehension of academic texts. A comprehensive needs survey indicated the need and demand for a new integrated four-skill approach to EAP. The emergence of a government-sponsored initiative severely undermined the prospects for implementing the curriculum reform and underscored the subjugation of educational and linguistic needs to political ones. The proactive response of the innovators turned the tide in the direction of curriculum reform. The authors suggest practical recommendations for innovators based on their experience. The innovation in language is taken as the approach to English instruction in higher education, driven by an up-to-date conception of what it means to know a language. The framework was multi sourced, relevant for local context and valid. It helped learners understand common language, and more importantly, common standards for evaluating English proficiency.

The innovation in language is seen as the approach to English instruction in higher education, motivated by a modern idea of what it means to know a language, according to Littlejohn and Mehta's Chapter 9. The framework was valid, multi-sourced, and appropriate for the local setting. It assisted students in comprehending a common language and, more significantly, a set of standards for judging English competency. The new course's success was attributed to its fresh teaching approach and emphasis on writing abilities. Starting out with a high level of cognitive challenge, the teachers' regular comments were helpful. Additionally, it emphasized learning with autonomy, ownership, and accountability. Equally, helped as a process of accumulation in undergraduate studies.

In Chapter 10, the authors, Craig and Bielenberg describe a programme of study, designed to promote the acquisition of language skills through a communication course for engineering students. The approach adopts a GOAL protocol framework (gathering information, organizing a process, analyzing a phenomenon and learning from their efforts) that offers students an opportunity to develop communicative competence, thinking and information literacy. The innovation began by engaging in a CURE (Course-Based Undergraduate Research Experiences). The authors claim that the course was able to plant the learning of lifelong skills of English language. These focused on reading, writing and oral presentation skills through the context of involvement in a research project. They also claim that to maintain this learning ability, the students need to be exposed to such skills from an early age through research experience.

Chapter 11 explores the literature on why digital technologies are still not playing a more serious role in education. The author describes her own decade-long efforts to introduce computer assisted language learning (CALL) in Iran. She recounts the steps taken, the lessons learned, the challenges and opportunities she faced. The author says, the definition of literacy today is more complex than traditional definition of language teachers. She talks a lot about the necessity of introducing CALL in education. Yet also asserts that it is not always easy because many parts of the Middle East and North African region are struggling with various economic, political or security challenges.

Abednia and Crookes describe an effort to disseminate the innovation through an online teacher development program run by volunteers in Iran in Chapter 12. Insights gained through course reflection are offered in terms of the course's components and its ability to help participants adopt the innovation through the growth of their networks. Social justice is a key component of the second language teaching strategy known as critical language pedagogy. It seeks to engage students actively and democratically throughout the instructional process and, ideally, beyond it. Through discourse, this method promotes classroom participation, and students are encouraged to bring up personal or social issues.

In the book's last chapter, authors Eslami et al. discuss how globalization has acted as a catalyst for enhancing engineering students' cross-cultural competency and intercultural communication abilities. The engineering students involved in this telecollaboration project interacted with American pre-service teachers while taking a semester-long multicultural education course at a HEI in Qatar. Students were asked to remark on four current cultural issues in journals. They looked at issues of racial diversity, gender, pedagogy, and cross-cultural communication. Students from TAMUQ and TAMU were shown in a video how to use telecollaboration to converse with peers around the globe. Universities are under pressure to provide students who want to be global citizens with the knowledge and abilities they need to participate actively in the multicultural world.[4]

It is clear not only from the chapters in this book but also from the literature cited that innovation in ELT and learning is not a new topic. Innovative teaching, learning and assessment practices are alive and well in the MENA and are happening at virtually all levels of ELT and learning from primary school to university to adult education sectors. The 13 chapters in this volume highlight the diversity of the innovations and look at possible ways forward for innovation in the field of TESOL and ELT in the MENA. The book is a very nice inspiration to those who want to bring technology in their classrooms. However, the way the book starts is not that convincing as it misses out the context how technology emerged in ELT. Somehow, the history of technology use in ELT could have glorified the book more.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no direct or indirect conflicts.

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