

# The Role of English as a Medium of Instruction in Reshaping Bahraini Senior Teachers' Perceptions of Their Roles as Middle Leadership in Their Schools (An Exploratory Study)

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This paper investigates the role English plays as the medium of instruction in reshaping Bahraini senior teachers' perceptions about their actual role in their schools during their professional development program at the Bahrain Teachers College at the University of Bahrain. The data were collected using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion with an opportunity sample of the senior teachers who recently graduated from the program. The quantitative findings show that using English played a significant role in motivating the participants to form positive attitudes towards their professional development program while the qualitative data reveal how the target language participated in enabling those teachers reshape their perceptions about certain professional practices and assisted them in gaining new skills to improve the overall performance of their teachers in school. The study concludes with implications of how using English as the main medium of instruction facilitates conceptual change in professional development programs.

*Keywords:* teacher development, English as medium of instruction, in-service professional development, head/senior teachers, perception of change in teacher education

In modern schools, senior or head teachers and other school leaders play a multifaceted role in improving the teaching learning process by changing certain values, cultural perceptions and teaching and learning practices. Ideally, these teachers are considered to guide the direction of professional practices at school in ways that prove positive and increase learning opportunities for students (Al-Baharna, 2003).

This fundamental role that is perceived of and expected from senior teachers has led education colleges and institutions to design special professional programs for senior teachers to develop their leadership skills and prepare them to become change agents who foster the change process in their school. However, though programs that develop senior teachers' leadership are spread widely, their major focus has been on examining the best ways to prepare and develop effective school leaders within, usually, a

broad scope, and without a proper contextualization (Holliday, 1999). According to Jones (2003), to improve the head or senior teachers' professional development programs, a serious attempt to investigate their existing knowledge and understandings about how they view and perceive change in their practices during and after their professional development program is fundamental. Foster and St. Hilaire (2003) concur and suggest that the best way to prepare and develop effective school leadership programs for head teachers is by exploring how these leaders conceptualize the issue of change when reflecting on their actual practices and role within their teaching environment and the school's improvement and reform initiatives.

This focus on the importance of realizing and understanding issues of change as perceived by teachers has been approached from different perspectives. The first is through the form of reflective practice. The

pioneer in this field is the German scientist Schön (1983, 1987), who views reflection as a way in which teachers express their views of change and develop a constructive knowledge that helps enhance their professional autonomy and supports them to examine the beliefs and thinking patterns which underlie their classroom actions. Richards and Lockhart (1996) also report that when teachers practice reflection, they become more aware of what they need to change towards how certain beliefs should be conceived or how some practices can be improved. Another perspective to measure teachers' change of perceptions has been approached through focusing on investigating the 'Theory of Variation' and how it can be used to explain change in the beliefs, attitudes and actual practices of teachers. Hargreaves (2001) and Marton and Amy (2004) suggest that teachers' awareness of change and their readiness to illustrate it in their professional context can be clearly observed when they try to practise or express new techniques and beliefs that coincide with their current views of their teaching context. The researchers even suggest that utilization of this theory may lead to improving these teachers' existing reality. Nonetheless, change of perceptions at certain times can also be interpreted or illustrated in the teachers' constructed knowledge. According to Banks (2010), knowledge construction refers to the ways teachers seek to enable students to understand, investigate and determine how new information 'fits in with' existing frames of references and perspectives (Banks, 2010). In this sense, the degree of change in teachers' beliefs and performance are reflected in the level of the constructed knowledge developed by the learner, and not by the amount of the delivered knowledge (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996). Overall, some other researchers (e.g. Grossman et al., 2001; Prestridge, 2009) state that change of perceptions during professional practices is more easily fostered and reflected upon when: strong professional learning communities are formed with a professional group identity and, norms for interaction; a sense of communal responsibility for the regulation of norms and behaviour; and a willingness to assume some responsibility for colleagues' growth and development are formulated and respected. These represent an indicator of teachers perception of change, as they involve an engagement the way teachers try to identify deficiencies in their existing practice and learn new approaches and integrate them within their personal repertoire and check their impact. Amy Hollenbeck and Kalchman (2012) report that teachers do not develop better teaching approaches through abstract reflection outside the school context; on the contrary, they develop meaningful insights through their attempts of trial and error while teaching inside the classroom.

In conclusion, although there are different interpretations of how teachers' conceptual change can be precisely observed or interpreted, most researchers find it fundamental to be investigated as an internal factor of the school and the teaching-learning process and not as an exogenous factor that interacts with external relationships and situation outside the school and the classroom (Johnson, 1999). This entails that change of perceptions for teachers is a progressive process of conceptualisation and this can be best shown and observed during their joining to one of their professional development programs as it will clearly illustrate how these teachers make sense of, rationalize, and justify for themselves aspects of their teaching within their organizational or regional education context (Hollenbeck & Kalchman, 2012).

## Materials and Methods

The government of Bahrain has implemented in the last five years an education reform project to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all Bahraini teachers and students. Teacher pre- and in-service training is seen as a key for achieving this goal. In 2008, the Bahrain Teachers' College (BTC) was established in line with the Kingdom's Education Reform initiatives as outlined in the Government of Bahrain's Vision 2030 proposed by the Economic Development Board (EDB). Collaborating with the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore, the BTC worked on designing and developing various teachers' education programs in accordance with the needs of the Kingdom. Currently, the BTC offers the following programs with the support and funding of the Ministry of Education (MOE):

- Bachelor (B.Ed) programs for Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 primary school teachers;
- Full time Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) (specialized subjects teachers for intermediate and secondary schools);
- Professional Development courses for in-service teachers (Cadre PD Modules);
- Educational Leadership Program for senior teachers and school principals (ELP).

Since 2008, 312 B.Ed students had graduated from BTC. Currently there are 1627 candidate teachers enrolled in the four years B.Ed program. In addition, 2803 teachers and school principals have graduated from the in-service programs: PGDE, Cadre PD, and ELP. Each year hundreds of candidate and in-service teachers enrol in the PD programs. Being the only and main provider for teacher professional development programs outside the MOE, in 2013 the BTC issued a new strategic plan that focused on improving the

school leaders, specifically the senior teachers, in their professional and academic knowledge and skills.

### **Methodology & Research Questions**

This is an exploratory study that examines the link between the Educational Leadership Program – level 1 (ELP1) and potential change of perceptions of senior teachers who participated in the program. For the purposes of this study, efficacy will be broadly conceived, but the shift in the Bahraini professional persona of participants, as exhibited and understood by the Bahraini senior teachers (BST), will be explored in depth. Therefore, two main research questions in this study are:

1. To what extent did the BSTs find the ELP1 effective in changing their perceptions about their actual practices as middle school leaders after completing the program?
2. What role did English as a medium of instruction play in helping BSTs reshape their perceptions about their practices during/after the program?

### **Method of Research**

A mixed method approach was implemented to allow for in-depth data sources about the participants' views and opinions regarding their ELP1 and perceptions of themselves as agents of change in their schools. This was achieved through:

- a questionnaire to survey the BSTs' attitudes towards their ELP1 and how they felt about using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in that program;
- conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with BST participants to further explore what and how those teachers reshaped their perceptions about themselves as middle leadership authority in their schools. In addition, the issue of using English as a medium of instruction and how it contributed to their re-conceptualization of certain practices and perceptions was also highlighted through the interviews;
- having a focus group interview drawn from participants to discuss perceived efficacy and issues related to the ELP1

For validity and reliability purposes (Guba & Lincoln, 1998), the questionnaire was shared with other colleagues who taught on the program; their concerns were considered and necessary adjustments were made to make it simple and practical for the participants when they responded to its statements. Regarding the interviews, the questions were firstly piloted with one of the colleagues before using them with the participants. Though the questions were formed in English, the use of mother tongue [Arabic

in the context of this study] was used during the interviews with the participants. The purpose behind this procedure was to ensure that the participants were not only able to express themselves clearly, but also to feel free and comfortable during their individual and group interviews. Most interviews took between 30 to 45 minutes and all were conducted in one of the BTC classrooms where the participants felt relaxed and secured. All interviews (n=10) were recorded for transcription and analysis of the data and they were shared with the participants for respondent validation in order to ensure a representative presentation of the BSTs' views and opinions.

### **Participants**

An opportunity sample of the BSTs (n=25) who recently finished their ELP1 at the BTC were interviewed. They were all senior teachers of different subjects (e.g. English, Arabic, science, math, social studies, and physical education) in their schools. All were Bahrainis with professional experience that ranged between 15 to 20 years in teaching in the Bahraini context. They all were heads with not less than four teachers in their departments and they all went into several in-service training programs (INSET) at the Ministry of Education. However, this was their first time attending an academic program at the BTC and, therefore, it was their first time to go through a comprehensive professional development program that was linked to their overall professional development in their current position as BSTs. Nevertheless, the participants in this study can also be considered as highly distinguished and motivated as they were from the first two cohorts that were nominated by the MOE to join the ELP1 offered by the BTC. During their ELP1, the participants met daily and away from their actual work at school for one academic semester (3 months). The participants studied two courses related to leading and managing curriculum innovation and designing professional teacher training programs. Both courses were led and instructed by a university professor and they were based on sharing and integrating both the academic theoretical knowledge with their professional experience and represented in writing reflective entries, conducting studies analysing some of their curriculum or training projects and designing new projects for improving the quality of their teachers' performance in school. English was the language of the content and instruction in this course (see Appendix 1 for the course syllabi). Although the participants were found to have an average level of language proficiency, they were able to express their views and opinions and comprehend the reading materials given and shared with them.

### Significance of the Study

1. This study allows a participant-led review of the BSTs professional development program, offering insight into the role of BSTs specifically as a middle leadership and more generally as a school leadership body in general in the governmental schools in the Kingdom of Bahrain.
2. Direct access to qualitative data related to issues of interest about the BSTs in public schools, with a focus on how they can be empowered and supported to be agents of change in their schools after their completion of their ELP in response to new professional culture and practices that are promoted for by the BTC and the education reform project.
3. Gain an insight into what and how English as a medium of instruction might contribute to teachers' professional development in terms of the possibility of reshaping their understanding of certain concepts and assisting them construct new knowledge in their profession.

## Results and Discussion

### Quantitative Findings

The questionnaire results reveal overall satisfaction on the part of the BSTs towards their ELP1 plus an appreciation of using English as the medium of instruction. An overall summary of the participants' attitudes towards their ELP1 can be shown in the Table 1.

According to the table, the ELP1 is viewed by the BSTs as sufficiently designed and that it meets with most of their professional needs as middle leaders in their schools. Responses to items (4, 10, 12, 13, 15, 19, 20) illustrate this where 24 to 25 participants expressed their agreement on this regard. This result reflects how the participants were satisfied with the program's content and its correlation to the actual projects and duties required from them in their schools and the MOE. This was further reflected in their responses to items (3,5,11, 16, 23, 24) as they show how the program

improved their knowledge about concurrent issues in education and developed their leadership professional skills. However, the obtained responses also show some contradiction with the participants' attitudes towards the benefit they gained from the program. The results obtained for items (1, 7, 8, 9, 17) show that not all the senior teachers found their ELP1's content new to them nor that it helped them with some of their duties at school. In fact, several of them felt that the program did not equip them with new professional skills or that it changed their perception about their role as senior teachers in their schools. Yet, the responses for the items (2, 6, 14, 18, 21, 22) indicate that the majority of the participants managed to change their perceptions about certain practices and concepts. This was clear in the way they have become more reflective about their actual practices and how they now view professional development in the teaching profession. The participants also indicated how they reshaped their ways in expressing certain issues and concepts in education becoming more precise and concise when expressing a concept or an issue that would lead to definite practice or performance that they might ask or request of their teachers. This sign of reflective thinking corresponds to what is reported in the literature. According to Richards and Lockhart (1996), reflective practice normally becomes a trait of those experienced teachers who have several years of service in the profession but it becomes more advanced and critical for those teachers when they practice it in a teacher education program. Johnson (1999) states that teacher education programs normally represent a good opportunity for those teachers to develop their questioning and reasoning by reexamining the whole experience of their practices in the profession as they feel more empowered and confident and respected. Borg (2001) mentions this too and specifies that language teachers shape their integrated model of conceptual change that is usually based on the theory of possible selves in psychology and become more able to create their autonomous professional identity when they go through a professional development opportunity especially when this opportunity is well linked to their educational context.

Table 1  
*BSTs' Attitudes towards their ELP1 (n=25)*

Nº	Statements	Agree	Don't know	Disagree
1	The content was new for me.	11	6	8
2	The content was exciting.	22	3	-
3	The content match with my professional growth as a middle leadership member in my school.	23	-	1
4	There is a strong relation between the content and my actual practice as a senior teacher in school.	24	-	-
5	The content helped me change some of the pre-conceptions I had had about some issues and practices as a senior teacher.	23	2	-
6	I've become more reflective upon my practices after the program.	20	-	5
7	I cultivated many of my current professional skills during the program.	21	2	2
8	I gained new professional skills from the program.	21	2	2
9	Most of the skills I learnt during the program are relevant to my actual practices in the school.	22	1	2
10	The professional skills I learnt in the program are relevant to the MOE projects.	24	-	1
11	Using English as the medium of instruction was helpful for me to understand the content of the courses.	23	-	2
12	I enjoyed studying the program in English.	24	1	1
13	Studying in English increased my professional confidence.	25	-	-
14	Using English made me become more precise and focused when expressing my thoughts and views.	22	2	1
15	Studying in English facilitated my research readings.	24	-	1
16	My perceptions of certain practices have changed.	23	1	1
17	My perception of my role as a senior teacher in school has changed.	21	-	4
18	My perception of professional development has changed.	22	1	3
19	My perceptions of innovations in curriculum and teacher training have changed.	24	-	1
20	I've become more accurate in using educational terms/concepts.	25	-	-
21	I've become more able to make innovations in the curriculum and teaching in general.	20	2	3
22	My skills in organizing professional development sessions for my staff at school has improved.	22	1	2
23	My social skills in communicating and interacting with my staff have improved.	23	2	-
24	I've developed better understanding of my role in relation to the school's administration members (i.e. the principal & assistant principal).	23	1	1

### A) A mean for professional empowerment : 'A sign of legacy'

A very common and immediate response was captured from almost all the respondents' (n=10) during their interviews that reflected their perception of themselves as more qualified professionals because of the language proficiency level they developed after the program. The following testimony by one of the respondents illustrates this view clearly:

Of course I find myself now different than before I joined this program, it taught me how to read materials in English, how to write my reflective entries in English and also I learnt the names of the technical terms in English that can help me when I speak and discuss things with officials in English ..." (T1)

This change of perception about self becoming more professional because of being qualified in using the target language has its justifications rooted in the respondents' practical context. To start with, some BSTs explained that English would help them to interact with experts and other officials whom they meet with at the MOE:

I've always been facing problems that I know what I want to talk about but I had never been able to express it well because I didn't know what such terms to be used and how?! Learning in English through this program has helped me go over this problem, I can express my thoughts and opinions very well now when I meet with any official. (T3)

Respondents 6, 2 and 4 explained how English as the official medium of instruction in the program was the main element that allowed them to feel more confident about their abilities as professional senior teachers and not the program content. Teacher 6 said:

I was very shy to express or share my professional practices or suggestions for any projects at the ministry but now I feel I am more able to do this, I am different now, I speak and read and write in English. (T6)

Two other respondents elaborated further on this:

I already know most of the content covered in this program but studying it in English made it different for me, yeah ... I need to know how it is said in English so that when I explain my suggestions in English all members ... the principal, the assistant principal, the schools' district

chef and all the other officials at the MOE accept what I say (T2);

and:

My both bosses at school [principal and vice-principal] won't argue with me anymore as I studied everything in English! (T4)

Other respondents found that joining any professional development course, with English as its main medium of instruction, added more reliability and accreditation to the program not only on the part of the participants themselves but to their role as school leaders as well:

In my opinion, any course that is taught in English or uses materials written in English is more beneficial for me as it sounds more accredited and reliable than those taught in Arabic. (T3)

### B) Reshaping work discourse – 'becoming more accurate':

Several respondents found themselves becoming more accurate regarding the terms, concepts or any of the issues related to their professionalism as middle leaders in their schools. According to these respondents, the way terms and issues are defined and explained in English developed a new kind of behaviour that made it easier for them to share a similar understanding and agreement on certain policies and practices at their workplace. For instance, Teacher 7 states that:

For me I was not that much specific and clear about some terms that I've been using with my teachers such as curriculum and professional development plan maybe because of the way they are defined in Arabic or because of the nature of the Arabic language that there are lots of adjectives and styles for expressing such terms. Using English helped me to go over this ... at least within my department. (T7)

Other respondents reported how discussing the concepts and issues during their program using English helped them resolve some of the constant challenges they usually face with their colleagues in their departments. Teachers 2 & 7 explained:

We [as senior teachers] normally have different interpretations of such practices and mix up with others such as curriculum development and curriculum innovations, which usually ends up with

me having either a long argument to persuade those who have a different view/ interpretation of the terms or a conflict with those who don't want to collaborate.

Teacher 5 added:

After studying these two courses in English, a new kind of behaviour has developed within my work place, a kind of behaviour during discussion with colleagues in the sense that you are committed to definite practices within a mutual understanding of its reference and terminology, a certain expected performance and role within the definition of the practice you've learnt and shared with your colleagues...

This changing tune of behaviour with their teachers from the participants' point of view has developed certain ethics that positively affected the way their teachers do their duties at school:

Because of the accurate referencing I've recently been doing, I gained more respect from my colleagues, and they became also specific and we both shared same perspectives towards things, this also was reflected in their punctuality towards the deadline I establish for finishing a project. (T9)

Another teacher adds that:

Because we learnt most of the concepts in English and those are the same ones used in some of the MOE's projects [referring to e.learning project], it was easier for me to share my thoughts and definite aspects of what an e.lesson should consist of ... in fact, it was hard for me to give my teachers the same meaning if it was explained in Arabic as the dilemma of having different interpretations will come up again ... now with sharing this article in English with my staff, we all came up to a unified meaning and same understanding ... T10

### **C) Reshaping professional identity – ‘*teach me in English and I change*’**

As expressed by many of the participants, the ELP1 participants perceived themselves after the program as more capable in adapting and contextualizing the skills and knowledge they learned in their program to improve the overall performance and practices of their teachers in their schools. To start with, six of them explained how their ELP1 enabled them to change their view of their leadership role as senior teachers and develop it further to the extent that they now affirm

how they consider themselves first and foremost as reflective practitioners and not only implementers of the school administration or MOE's policies. Teacher 2's response can best represent this:

For me my idea of what a senior teacher should do has changed now, he [or she] should be more involved not only in curriculum planning and design but also into innovative projects related to how the curriculum should be taught and train his [or her] teachers on it, For me now [after finishing the program] I see that I'm not just a senior teacher who links and creates connections between teachers and school admin. I have a more significant role in reflecting on our current performance, modify and change it, then develop it ... this happens when I create collaboration between teachers and my school admin."

This change in view of professional identity was associated with certain practices. For Teachers 3 & 8, they see that they started adopting some of the learnt strategies in the program and implemented it by collaborating with their teachers:

We both started using the lesson study strategy to develop our teachers' skills in teaching, of course this became easy because we studied this in our ELP1 and also because the language we studied this strategy in [English] enabled us to search and provide handouts to our teachers.

Another pair, teachers 9 & 7, also reported about another practice that informs their new perception of themselves as professional practitioners, Teacher 9 says:

I see myself now changed in more role, I now consider myself as a mentor to my teachers, I guide them and supervise them to enable them become professional teachers in their career.

And Teacher 7 says:

I no more see myself as an evaluator but rather an advisor who shares views and concerns with her staff and see how these issues or practices can be resolved or improved.

This change of perception of being "*a mentor*" or "*an advisor*" indicates how these respondents have reshaped their perceptions of themselves as senior teachers from being evaluators or fosterers of formal school/ministry policies to be more collaborative and sharing of thoughts with their staff of teachers. This

shift in view was influenced by the language those participants were taught in and how it led them to exemplify such expressions that reflected professional behaviour such as sharing, respect, and collaboration. Teacher 1's testimony states all of this below:

I really find myself different now as a head of my department especially after this finishing this intensive program [ELP1] and especially after studying it using English. Honestly, my colleagues and I benefited a lot from studying this program in English as we learnt to use some expressions like I think, in my opinion, as a group, as a team, and many other expressions that have been reflected upon our practices when we came back to work in school, I now do not say you must do this but instead I say I think you should do this, it's more respectful and more sharing to the other partner.

However, some respondents were had different reactions from their colleagues. Four of the ten interviewed participants were in agreement that they still see themselves as both mediators between school administration and their teachers and also leaders who seek continuous professional development for themselves and their staff. For instance, Teacher 10 says:

I still see myself as both, a channel through which my staff can communicate with the school principal and a developer of current practices through encouraging reflection among us in the department. Ideally, we are supposed to be reflective practitioners because we work in a field that is consistently changing but at the same time we must work to echo our staff's voice to the school principal to let them heard and listened to. (T10)

Teacher 8 shares the same view relating her perception of herself after the program and explains how her role still should be divided between both, being a leader and correspondent of her teachers' affairs to the school management:

I'm also both, a channel for teachers to send their concerns and requests to the school admin and a collaborator who seeks to improve my staff's performance through reflection and adaptation of new practices. I think that as long as I enter classes I have to be a teacher who shares concerns, thoughts and feelings with his [or her] colleagues, and also a facilitator

for performance development because I am a leader group of teachers.

In fact, regardless of the extent, the change in perception for respondents was definite and determined; they have become more aware of themselves being involved and collaborative with their teachers. In addition, it also reflects the amount of influence those senior teachers had had while studying in English during their ELP1.

## Conclusion

The results in this study, both quantitative and qualitative, reveal how using English as medium of instruction (EMI) can help senior teachers who work in a bilingual context, such as Bahrain, to become more open-minded, positive and confident to carry out new roles in their schools. This can lead those teachers to act as agents of change in their schools which will directly input into the overall education reform project that was launched in Bahrain in 2006. Luckacs and Galluzzo (2014) promote this approach and suggest that a new model for educational reform can be shaped in the way that the teachers' role becomes more active than recipient and that reform occurs by them and not through them. This is exactly where the impact of using EMI was noted when those teachers in the study expressed how studying in English enabled them to get access to diverse materials and techniques and how they found themselves more confident in proposing and suggesting new ideas and practices to improve their schools' actual practice. In this regard, Wong (2009) reports a similar finding that exposure to English has a great positive impact on shaping new views towards actual practice. To conclude, the findings in this study open doors for investigating the policy of implementing EMI in the in-service and pre-service teacher education programs in the Kingdom of Bahrain and suggesting recommendations to resolve any special challenges which teachers who have been trained either in English or Arabic could face when they act as agents of change in their schools.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview questions

1. *How do you view yourself as a SELT in your school?*
2. *How has been your role in contributing for any change that the MOE has called for within your department? Give examples.*
3. *Has this perception of yourself as a SELT changed after your join to the program? How? Give examples.*
4. *How do you feel after you finished your ELP1 regarding yourself as a middle school management authority? Why? Give examples.*
5. *Do you feel more capable of making a significant change in your school after you finished your ELP1? Give examples.*
6. *What skills/qualities/knowledge did the prramme provide to you to enable you make changes in practices with your teachers in your school?*
7. *How do you find the ELP1 as an in-service training program? Why?*
8. *Which areas do you think the program needs to be improved in future? Why? Give examples.*