Racial Discrimination and TESOL: A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of EFL Teachers at a University Preparatory Year Programme in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

While the field of TESOL/TEFL claims to be inclusive given that it is composed of a myriad of sociocultural backgrounds and environments, racial discrimination is a common phenomenon, especially in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, this issue has not been given enough attention by researchers, in that particular region at least. This article reports the findings of a small-scale qualitative study conducted in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia drawing upon the experiences of six non-Saudi male English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lecturers. Open-ended questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data to explore the relationship between teachers’ construction of their ethnic and racial identities and issues of discrimination within their professional environment. The study explored the participants’ construction of their ethnic and cultural identity and its possible relation to discriminatory practices in their professional environment. The research showed how certain discriminatory practices affected how the participants projected their ethnic and cultural identity in their professional context.

KEYWORDS

Discrimination, EFL, GCC, Gulf, Identity, Language and Culture, Saudi Arabia, TESOL

INTRODUCTION

The Gulf countries in general and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in particular have recently undergone radical changes in all aspects of their societies. More specifically, the field of education in the KSA has witnessed changes that had already been described thirty years ago by Saleh (1986, p. 17) as “almost unparalleled in history”. In more recent years, most universities in the KSA and throughout the Gulf region have established Preparatory Year Programmes (PYPs) to provide secondary school graduates with intensive English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in the aim of enabling them to pursue their studies in the medium of English. As a result, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is gradually being adopted in universities in the KSA for all Science Technology Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects. As far as EFL is concerned, it has been argued that PYPs support Saudi undergraduate students by equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to reach adequate levels of proficiency in the English language in order to pursue their studies in the medium of English. On the other hand, for a growing number of researchers, the use of EMI represents a serious threat to the status of the local language, Arabic (McLaren, 2011; Troudi, 2007, 2009). Despite this, the implementation of these PYPs also represents a golden opportunity for many EFL teachers attracted by the ‘competitive’ financial benefits generated by this sudden demand for EFL on the part of most Saudi educational institutions. It is beyond the scope of the study to discuss the effects of EMI and
all its political and pedagogical implications; however, this contextual element should be not ignored in order to appreciate fully the context of this discussion.

With regards the focus of this paper, having been involved in the field of TEFL in that part of the world for a number of years, as a language educator, it seems fair to say that the issue of racial or ethnic discrimination has not been given enough attention by researchers, in that particular region at least. Indeed, it would seem that, with particular reference to the KSA, despite its importance for research and professional practice, this problem has been somewhat ignored by the profession or at least by its main actors, namely, EFL professionals, educators and administrators. Based on this, instead of considering this problem from a merely scientific or exploratory perspective, this discussion has been motivated by a strong desire to uncover, denounce, and possibly change a state of affairs, or at least raise awareness on what can be considered as a deeply unfair or oppressive situation for many educators and ELT professionals in that part of the world.

Surprisingly, discrimination occurs in a field (TESOL/TEFL) that, one would believe, is inclusive given that it is composed of such a myriad of sociocultural backgrounds and environments, especially in the KSA. Nonetheless, this reflection on the issues of discrimination in TEFL in the KSA, yet grounded in empirical data, emanates first from the author’s personal experiences of racial discrimination, at various levels within educational institutions and within the KSA society at large. This discrimination operates at different levels and at different degrees; however, it is quite obvious and apparent in the recruitment process of EFL teachers where certain categories of people are overtly favoured based on their ethnicity while others are rejected and discriminated against on the same grounds. Interestingly, owing to these discriminatory practices in terms of recruitment, it is not uncommon to find teachers not willing to reveal their ethnic or cultural background to either colleagues or employers, fearing to be discriminated against or simply fearing that their teaching ability and competence might be questioned.

This is precisely why it is essential to tackle this problem by critically considering the issue of teachers’ cultural and ethnic identities in this particular context as problematic. As a result, this paper focuses on the relationship between teachers’ construction of their ethnic/cultural identities and discrimination at work in the field of TEFL in the KSA. In doing so, this paper attempts to highlight how teachers’ cultural identities, and teachers’ representations of their cultural identities, may be shaped, transformed or affected by issues of discrimination within that particular professional environment. In light of a brief review of the relevant literature and based on qualitative data collected among certain EFL teachers and administrators in the KSA, a number of significant issues are addressed. Hence, two main ideas are explored here: (1) the participants’ views, representations and understanding of the notion of ethnic and cultural identity and (2) the possible effects of discriminatory practices in ELT on teachers’ representations and understanding of their own ethnic and cultural identities. Finally, the paper attempts to show how the problem of racial discrimination in ELT closely relates to a Native/Non-native speaker dichotomous conception.

IDENTITY

Whilst the theme of identity has been thoroughly discussed in the literature in the context of language education, this paper is only concerned with what relates to ethnic and cultural identity. Nonetheless, it seems important to widen the focus on this notion by first attempting to gain a certain understanding of the scope of this concept and how it relates to education in general and language education in particular. The notion of identity has been defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness.” While the concepts of oneness, sameness and uniqueness are central to the notion of identity, such notions do not necessarily denote a deterministic and fixed dimension as it seems difficult to claim the existence of a certain intrinsic connection between identity and oneness. This, however, suggests that the above definition mainly
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