

# Speaking in Tongues Across Lingua Cultural Boundaries

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**Abstract-** The Libyan government used to invest fully in the English language teaching curriculum, which focused on improving the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) in schools and universities. As English becomes a dominant language of power in global commerce, science, and technology, the need to teach and learn English has made a significant increase. The purpose of giving emphasis on the teaching and learning of English in Libya is to enable the country to go along in the development of its economy and to promote international exchange. But researches revealed that very few studies have been done on teaching English in Arabic countries in Africa, specifically in Libya. Thus, this paper delved on empirical method to carry out the linguistic description of how Libyans expressed their sentiments during the Libyan uprising in 2011 using English language. Through linguistic and sociolinguistic analysis of the different graffiti found on the roads of Tripoli and Benghazi, the study revealed that group identity, social class and the influence of L1 has a lot to do with Libyan's L2 learning. But, despite the deficiency of English, the power of the English language heightened the sentiments of the people who cried and waited for freedom in the last 42 years. This shout for freedom was heard internationally. Despite Libyans' limited knowledge of English, they made use of this language as a global lingua franca. How the people actually used it and made it work recorded an impact in the world. This study clearly saw how English as a medium of political purposes played an important role in shaping the future of Libya.

**Keywords:** *English for political purposes, graffiti, lingua franca, sociolinguistics*

## 1 Libya Free!

Libya was in the limelight in 2011. In all the corners of the world, the voices of the people were heard. Banners, streamers, tarpaulins, flags and all other means of communications were unfolded just to let the world know of their sentiments and feelings. The global media like BBC, CNN, and Aljazeera battled their way in just to get exclusive news from the citizens. An important and significant event occurred in Libya. And they were victorious.

But the former regime didn't go down without a fight. That government sought to control streams of information, and in the waning days of his rule, Gaddafi and company cracked down on their countries' newspapers, radios, television and access to the Internet. Notwithstanding, the war succeeded, largely due to social media and their ability to bring local and international attention to unfolding events, to coordinate and communicate vital information in the vacuum left by traditional news outlets. The possession of cell phones, computers and laptops also allowed ordinary people to become, not merely witnesses, but also crusading citizen-journalists. However, the attractive posters, clever slogans, and catchy graffiti that tackle the issues on the ground, particularly in the Libyan streets, were the most symbolic gesture of the Libyan's ire and sentiments. And these were written in extraordinary outburst of emotions using the English language.

While education has definitely received focus, an area of easily discernible absence has been the pace of English teaching and learning in the country. For almost ten years from 1986 to mid 1990s, foreign language teaching including English was banned in the country. Black (2007), states that this made a huge dent in the level of English language learning in the country. However, the country realized the importance of English and initiated several steps to revive the language. So, as English becomes a dominant language of power in global commerce, science, and technology, the need to teach and learn English language has also grown. Even the aims of most educational curriculum around the world, including the Arabic governments, have been developed to suit the curriculum of teaching and learning English inside their countries.

According to the study of Sinosi (2010), Libya is one of the Arab countries where the former government has invested so much in the English language teaching curriculum. The goal on the teaching and learning of English is to enable Libya to catch up in the development of its economy and to promote international exchange. Despite the government's efforts towards improving English language learning, there have been claims from various quarters in the

education field that students at all education levels are not performing successfully in the language, with regard to literacy, in all the four language skills. It seems not easy for Libyan students to communicate in English outside the classroom if teachers of English do not provide them with opportunities or circumstances relevant or similar to real life situations. As such, one of the assumptions that Dr. Sinosi studied in his dissertation showed that EFL teachers in the Libyan social context seems to have failed to link English language structure with the social meanings where this language is used. (Sinosi, 2010)

The Ministry of Education replaced the old textbooks of English that were being used in the preparatory and secondary schools, because they were more focused on grammatical forms, which were perceived to contribute to students' communication problems and use of language. In collaboration with "Garnet Education", the Libyan National Centre for Education Planning and Vocational Training has introduced an "*English for Libya*" series at preparatory and secondary school levels. Native speakers of English designed these series of teaching material. Moreover, local Libyan graduate students of English are sent abroad to countries such as Canada, England, and South Africa to obtain higher degrees in English language teaching. Additionally, the government hires people from India and Africa to take up jobs in the language teaching profession, especially at the university level. Apart from this, the government has recently provided most of the colleges and universities in Libya with English language teaching and learning facilities such as language laboratories and audio visual resources. English forms a compulsory subject at several levels of education in the country. The British Council has also been roped in to provide assistance to improve English language teaching and learning in the country. The General People's Committee of Education & Scientific Research (GPCE&SR) and British Council, Libya has initiated a project called Libyan English Teaching in Universities Project (LETUP). The project envisages establishing sustainable, independent language centers in Libyan Universities, staffed and run by highly competent Libyan personnel.

Despite all these measures, the teaching of English in schools in Libya still seems inadequate and lacks authentic communication between teachers and students, even though the curriculum emphasizes the importance of communication competence and intercultural understanding. (Sinosi, 2010).

## 2 Learning and Teaching English in Libya and Other Arab Countries

The problem of communicative competence in English has not been able to excite much research interest in the Libyan social contexts. There were two researchers who explored a research in the Libyan social contexts as a part of their Master Degrees. Eleshab (1999) examined how communicative language teaching has become a widely used method in ESL classes in North America and Europe. It seems important that this approach can be introduced to Arabic speaking countries. To that end, this project started by defining communicative competence and communicative tasks and reviewing the relationship between the two. This research project discussed the importance of preparing EFL learners in Arabic countries to communicate in the target language and the importance of showing EFL teachers how to teach communicatively. It demonstrated EFL classroom oral communicative activity types providing more specific description of oral communicative activities that can be implemented in EFL classes. Finally, this project discusses the purposes and the advantages of oral communicative activities in EFL contexts and the difficulties that might be encountered by EFL teachers in Arabic countries.

The second research was carried out by Gende (1999) as a part of his Master's Degree under the title "Students' Perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching Practice: A Libyan Example". This research studied second and foreign language students' perceptions of communicative language teaching practices in both ESL and EFL programs. These perceptions include: students' thoughts, beliefs, and insights into the language learning process; their expectations, and reactions to certain classroom practices; their perspectives; and their knowledge and experiences from which they perceive these programs. The research focused on Libyan students in Canada and examined how students' perceptions may affect their participation in the classroom. This research "project" tried to address some pedagogical concerns and offers some suggestion for improvements. Both studies did not look deeply into the problems of Libyan students in English communication. Furthermore, they did not link language learning to the social contexts where this language can be used.

More researches were explored in this field in other Arab speaking countries such as in Jordan, Sudan, and Egypt. Yet the situation in these countries is

different from the Libyan situation because in the former, students are exposed to English very early and widely, while the latter has few exposure in the language. However, researchers such as Kambal (1980) in Sudan, Abdulhag (1982) in Jordan, and Wahba (1998) in Egypt, found that EFL learners met problems in both spoken and written English in these countries. The researchers concluded that the sociolinguistic environment of these countries is not conducive for English language learning, as Arabic is used for communication in all domains of social life. Students' performance problems in EFL as identified by these researchers relate to all the four language skills and covering higher discourse organisation to clause structure level. Below, few examples of such problems as identified by the researchers in the social contexts of Arab countries.

In Sudan, Kambal (1980) analysed errors in three types of free composition written by first-year Sudanese university students. The study gives an account of the major syntactic errors in the verb phrase and the noun phrase in an attempt to improve the quality of the remedial English programme in the contexts of Arabisation in the Sudan.

Kambal (1980) reported on three main types of errors in the verb phrase: verb formation, tense, and subject-verb agreement. He discussed errors in tense under five categories: tense sequence, tense substitution, tense marker, deletion, and confusion of perfect tenses. With regard to subject-verb agreement, three types of errors were identified. These involved the third-person singular marker used redundantly, and the incorrect form of the verb "to be."

Abdulhag (1982:1) states that, "one of the linguistic areas in which students in the secondary cycle commit errors is in the writing skill." He adds "There are general outcries about the continuous deterioration of the standards of English proficiency of students among school teachers, university instructors and all who are concerned with English language teaching." In support of Abdulhag's view, Zughoul and Taminian (2009) found that "Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English."

Wahba's (1998) study in Egypt focused on spoken English. His study shows that Egyptian students face problems related to stress and intonation. Most of these problems are attributed to the differences in pronunciation between English and Arabic.

### 3 ENGLISH AWAKENING IN LIBYA


The war in Libya not only awakens the long-lost freedom of Libyans but it also marks the phenomenon of English language in Libya. This has led to significant change in the teaching-learning process. Graddol: 2006-87 states that the objective in English language teaching should no longer to enable the student to attain native-like competence but rather to make her/him able to communicate fluently, understand the other speaker (who is most likely not a native speaker her/himself, either) and make her/himself understood. The minimal use of English by Libyans did not serve a barrier to be heard.

### 4. METHOD AND ANALYSIS

The graffiti in Libyan streets in Tripoli and Benghazi showed how Libyans struggled with the English language but it did not impede their desire to communicate to the world. The shout-outs in the graffiti revealed the story of Libya for 42 years. These were studied and analyzed.



Figure 1. "Browd to be Libyan. My is back."

Figure 1 says <Browd to be Libyan. y is back.> There is no "P" sound in Libyan Arabic. Browd is Proud in English and Browd to be Libyan refers to his national identity. The heart symbol shows his deep love in being a Libyan. It is evident that the writer spells the word "proud" the way he pronounces it. Supposedly, the letter 'u' should be used instead of 'w'. It is clear that he spells the word based on how it is pronounced in Libyan Arabic. The use of the voiced bilabial stop [ b ] instead of the voiceless bilabial stop [ p ] in the word 'proud' reflects the absence of [ p ] in Libyan Arabic. The latter has only one bilabial stop and that is [ b ] which explains the letter 'b' in browd.

It showed that the error in spelling has a lot to do with the influence of L1 in the learning of L2.

Sociolinguistically, the error in spelling is indicative of the writer's social and educational

background, gender, ethnic group, and competence in L2.

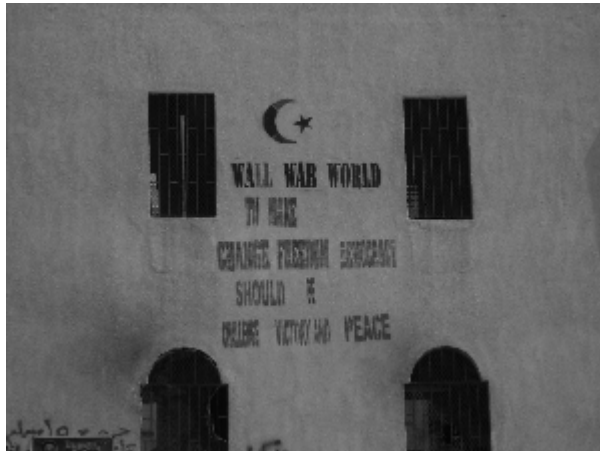


Figure 2. “Wall war world to make change freedom democracy should be challenge victory and peace”

Figure 2 shows <Wall War World To Make Change Freedom Democracy Should Be Challenge Victory and Peace>...Syntactic and semantic errors are evident in this writing.

The phrase 'wall war world' instead of 'world war wall' showed that Libyan Arabic is a head-initial language because the writer carries it over in learning English. Again, it is a manifestation of L1 influence in the learning of L2. In English (head-final language), the head of the phrase (the one that carries the meaning of the phrase ) is written last. If Libyan Arabic is a head-initial language, the head of the phrase is written first which accounts for the wall (head) being written at the beginning of the phrase. This is also consistent with the phrase 'Libya free'.

However, the second error in syntax (sentence structure) is an evidence of the writer's incompetence in L2. Sociolinguistic factors such as educational and social background, ethnic group, age, and gender may explain the occurrence of such error.



Figure 3. “No foregin, go to hell Gadafi, Gadafi children kilier.”

Figure 3 shows the phrases <No foregin, Go to Hell Gadafi, Gadafi Children Kilier> Foregin and kilier show spelling mistakes.

The reordering of the letters 'g' and 'i' is an instance of metathesis. Metathesis is a phonological process which refers to the reordering of the sequence of sounds in a word.

Sociolinguistic factors also explain such error.



Figure 4. “We have got dream. That is to be free.”

Figure 4 shows We have got dream. That is to be free.

'Have got' is a British English used in spoken English to emphasize something that is true. The structure of the first sentence is almost correct. What has been omitted is the article 'a' before the word 'dream'. The omission of the indefinite article 'a' can

be attributed to its absence in Libyan Arabic. Indefiniteness is not marked in the said language.

#### 4 Libya's English Language "Tipping Point"

Libya has one language spoken all throughout—Libyan Arabic. The people have been speaking Arabic only all their lives. Since the goal of global English is to communicate without having to focus so much on grammar or pronunciation, the people's manner of expressing themselves in English as shown in the graffiti is a manifestation of achievable goal to learn English language. The government's relentless campaign to promote global English study but the so-called "tipping point" is not yet in sight. It is unclear where this will lead 10 or 20 years from now given the status quo among the young learners who still grapple with the language.

But the war experience using English as global English could be an interesting lead to follow as the students develop the realization that mastery of English is essential to attain one of the country's strategic goals. Their willingness and enthusiasm in this endeavor will certainly help sustain the momentum of a nation on the way to make English as a Lingua Franca in Libya.

New Libya introduced changes that have made the world look up and ponder. The new government has to ensure that the Libyans have a rightful place in the emerging world order. Braving challenges of the interim years, Libya has marched ahead to open up, a move which has not gone amiss with the international onlookers.

The role of English language during the revolution in 2011 has a deep impact in the dreams and expectations of the Libyan people in order to help them reach the democratic state they have always dreamt of. It's about time that their dreams become a reality.

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