Second Language Acquisition In The UAE: Refocusing Attention On Teacher Professional Development

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ABSTRACT: Numerous education reform initiatives of the decade have not improved student performance as was initially hoped in the United Arab Emirates. This has been borne out by the results of international assessments. After studying English throughout their K-12 years, school leavers are, in many instances, unable to speak or write coherently in English. This naturally raises questions about the skills and qualifications of teachers. It certainly appears there is a major issue confronting English education and education reform in the United Arab Emirates.One reason is that scant attention has been paid to what really transpireson a daily basisin the classroom. This paper refocuses attention on the classroom, specifically on how efficient professional development can change teachers' classroom behaviours in ways that lead to demonstrable improvement in student performance. One of the paper's principal observations is that continuousprofessional development programs are generally better than individual seminars and workshops which are one-time events. The paper concludes by showing that perhaps a combination of online professional development and face-to-face trainingwill help,by giving teachers opportunities to practice what they learn over relatively extended periods of time, and offering a level of convenience that conventional professional development does not.

Keywords: Education reform, teacher professional development, UAE

I.   INTRODUCTION

General education reform and effective organizational change usually flounder when there is either unwillingness or failure to recognize the extent to which the change process itself is vulnerable to powerful cultural influences (Dooley, 1995). Simply put, structural change cannot happen without using a cultural approach to reform.

Some research (Angrist &Lavy, 1997) has found that bilingual education programs (which use some native language instruction) and English-only programs are not significantly different in their impact on standardized test performance. This suggests that it is time to change the focus from use of the native language, which has tendedto somewhat overshadow the education reform debate in Gulf countries, including the United Arab Emirates, to program quality.

For the most part, improving schools is ultimately about improving student performance. Many believe student achievement to belinked directly to higher expectations, more accountability, high-stakes tests, more time on task, new curricula and materials, or more resources and facilities, but this is only tangentially so. Instead, and rather more prosaically, it is the result of improved teaching skills focused on what can be termed average students (Hargreaves, Lieberman & Fullan, 2010).

While education reform ought to be significant and sustained student improvement, every reform initiative shouldbegin with recognition of the centrality of the teachers' role in raising student performance (Goodson, 2013). Thus, one would expect to have witnessed comprehensive changes in the way teachers are educated and in what they do in the classroom. Yet there continues to be a disconnect, even when formal teacher education has changed in many over the years, thanks to the advent of newer educational theories, continually updated degree plans at colleges of education. Though newly-qualified teachers are eager to try out new pedagogical strategies, when confronted with the realities of the classroom and the job, day in, day out, manyend up doing in the classroom a variation on the same thing their predecessors did a generation ago. Clearly, we are failing such teachers, with the knock-on effect being that student achievement is also adversely affected.

II. BACKGROUND CONTEXT

To keep up with the socio-economic challenges facing the country, the global situation, and the new advances in education, the UAE has made huge efforts to implement educational reforms that match the fast pace of change all over the world. These reforms have focused on the "creation of a comprehensive system that applies world-class standards and expertise in line with the federal strategy" (Al Abed et al, 2008, p.230). In addition, the United Arab Emirates has made significant efforts to recruit expatriate expertise with the knowledge and skills needed (Davidson, 2005).

Free education is offered to all local male and female students from kindergarten to university. Primary and preparatory levels until grade nine are compulsory for Emirati nationals. There is also aprivate education sector which admits local as well as expatriate students. Furthermore, Emirati students can also pursue higher education either in the country or abroad fully funded by the government.

Numerous education reforms have been initiated at various levels, both in the K-12 sector and in higher education (Fox, Mourtada-Sabah and Al-Mutawa, 2008). One more recent example of this has been the recruitment of English speaking teachers from countries including Australia, Canada, Ireland, South Africa, the U.S.A. and the U.K. Those teachers have either worked directly in public schools at primary and secondary level, often in collaboration with other Arabic speaking teachers (both Emirati and expatriate Arab teachers). The objective is to increase the use of the English language in schools through promoting English as a medium of instruction (EMI). According to researchers such as Troudi (2009), what is implicit in such a policy is that English language proficiency is a prerequisite for taking one's place in the global economy.Consequently, much dissension and debate has arisen over the use of Arabic in the classroom, particularly as subject areas such as Math and Science are now taught in English in many of the country's public schools. This policy thus secures the primacy of English as the gateway to educational and professional opportunities, for both learners and teachers.

The result is that learners' cognitive abilities have been affected, with a negative impact on those with little proficiency in the language and a lack of preparedness to undertake higher education study (Troudi&Jendli, 2011). Similarly, there has been considerable on non-native English speaking teachers to achieve proficiency in the English language, despite their subject specialist knowledge.

It is widely acknowledged that students need to improve their levels of attainment in the English language and other subjects in order to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century marketplace (Vine, 2009) and take their place as contributing citizens in a global society. Traditionally, large numbers of school leavers undertook one or two-year foundation courses in order to increase their performance in Math, Science and English (Collins, 2011). These programs will no longer be available, as the long-term plan is to enable school leavers to raise their levels of achievement prior to entering higher education, with equal proficiency expected in English and Arabic (Khalaf, 2009).

However, one issue that has arisen is that many teachers who teach Math and Science in schools do not have the English proficiency required to teach those subjects in English. Professional development has thus become imperative for such teachers, though many question whether issues of identity and culture have received adequate consideration when it comes to the teaching of such subjects in English (Ahmed, 2010; Salama, 2010). The pressures on teachers have substantially increased (Dhal, 2013).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first question that arises is why the average English language performance of a school leaver in the United Arab Emirates is so low. At university level, students need to be able to write well and demonstrate critical thinking skills (Shaila&Trudell, 2010). Teaching students to think critically has in many cases been superseded. After all, teachers are judged on the performance of their students in tests. by teaching to the test. Students themselves also need to show willingness to think critically.

3.1 Critical thinking

Defining the concept of critical thinking is by no means an easy task (Facione, 2011).Facione shows that all the definitions proposed agree that critical thinking is composed of interpretation, analysis, inference, explanation and self-regulation (pp.9-10).There is a significant relationship between use of English language learning strategies and leaners' way of thinking, which leads to the suggestion that critical thinking is a crucial element of syllabus design.

Huang (2011) explores how a dual emphasis on critical literacy and conventional literacy can be benefit learners in second language acquisition, emphasizing the need to take into consideration the learners' perspectives. Likewise, Bendriss (2012) demonstrates how integrated curriculum, class-related activities, and real-world experiences affect Arab students' critical thinking abilities.

Similarly, a Saudi Arabia case study examining learners' perceptions of studying critical thinking in pre-service teacher education programs, at two universities in Saudi Arabia (Allamnakharah,2013),highlighted

the need for education reform based on critical thinking. Critical thinking was also found to encourage motivation.

3.2 Motivation

Researchers such as Lambert (1963), Gardner & Lambert (1972), Gardner (1985, 2010), Au (1988), Lennon (1993),Graham (1997) and Nakata (2006) highlighted affective variables such as motivation and attitudes and their impact on successful second language acquisition. attitude towards language learning, willingness to learn the language, and level of motivation. Gardner (2010) has proposed that both instrumental (language is seen as a means to achieving other objectives, such as educational or professional) and integrative (a desire to belong to the community in which the language is being used) orientations are powerful motivators in second language learning. It is also argued that an integrative orientation is more enduring and more directly related to success than an instrumental orientation (Gardner, 2010), though both have merit.
Feng and Chen (2009) highlighted the influence of a teacher's behaviour on learning:

"An enthusiastic and considerate teacher can offer satisfaction to the learner's extra needs. This helps strengthen the learner's study motivation. On the other hand, a teacher's attitude towards the learner has a major influence on the learner's learning. As regards emotional cramming, a teacher's physically and mentally pouring into his teaching, and being filled with affection, will help arouse the learning enthusiasm of the learners. However, if the teacher only works as a 'teaching craftsman' and puts no emotion into teaching, the classroom will become static to lessen the learning enthusiasm of the learners."(Feng & Chen, 2009: 64)

Changes in teachers' perception of learning tasks, pedagogical methods, and in teachers' own motivation may therefore lead to a classroom environment where second language learning is celebrated and promoted with success. Of course, attribution theory (Dornyei&Ushioda, 2009; Zhang, 2009), whereby individualshave a tendency to attribute their performance to the effort they give, the difficulty of the activity, or to their ability, also affect motivation. Learners more likely to attribute their performance to task difficulty or ability may have lower levels of motivation, due to the perception that these are elements which are outside the learners' control, and cannot therefore be changed by the learners.

3.3 Bilingual education

To keep pace with the global and socio-economic challenges facing the country, the United Arab Emirates has made a concerted effort to implement bilingual educational reforms that match the rapid pace of change worldwide (Al Abed et al, 2008:230).

Sometimes the conditions needed for a bilingual education program are not available. First, it is difficult to recruit enough certified bilingual education teachers for some languages and grades. While teaching in English-only programs also requires special training, there is a larger pool of candidates since proficiency in a non-English language is not generally deemed necessary. Second, pedagogical materials are not available in many native languages, subjects, and grades. Thus, implementing bilingual education programs as intended becomes more difficult. This is something that education reforms in the United Arab Emirates schools have struggled with for a number of years.

Anecdotally, school teachers in the United Arab Emirates have been saying for many years that there is a marked mismatch between what they need to teach and their students' literacy skills. In addition to this, education reform policies, curricula and syllabiare all deeply anchored in Islamic values and concepts, with the aim of cultural preservation. With such aneducational and cultural ethos, there is natural resistance to learning other languages like English, which may beseen as agents of cultural dilution and unwanted change. Developing curricula whilst taking all of the above into consideration becomes a fraught task, which is why the involvement and capability of teachers deserves far more attention than has hitherto been the case.

3.4 Teachers' professional development

Teachers' beliefs play a significant role in teaching efficacy (Wolfolk& Hoy, 1990; Abou-Assali, 2013). By the same token, they can be the most difficult barriers for professional development to overcome, since in many cases they have evolved through years of teaching experience. What appears to be self-evident is what many policy planners have singularly failed to grasp, which is that professional development often fails to produce its intended results for the following reason: When teachers' beliefs are contradicted by the information and teaching strategies presented, those same teachers usually go right back to what they had been doing before professional development commenced.

Professional development cannot therefore succeed without strong content. Professional development needs to have as its intended outcome an increase in student achievement, as well as the ability of learners to learn (Joyce & Showers, 2002). The content of the professional development that is associated with high-performing schools is always part of a strategic plan that is long term in scope, thereby making it more focused in nature. In addition, professional development should (1) deepen teachers' knowledge of the subjects being taught; (2) sharpen teaching skills in the classroom; (3) keep up with developments in the individual fields, and

in education generally; (4) generate and contribute new knowledge to the profession; and (5) increase the ability to monitor students' work, in order to provide constructive feedback to students and appropriately redirect teaching (The National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century, 2000).

It is necessary for teachers to comprehend that the primary objective of professional development is to address identified gaps in student achievement. The content of professional development should center on subject matter, pedagogical weaknesses within the school organization and measurement of student performance. Most importantly, professional development should focus on instructional strategies that are proven to have a demonstrable impact on student achievement.

Professional development should be designed around research-documented practices that enable educators to develop the skills necessary to implement what they are learning (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001; Joyce & Showers, 2002). It should be noted that not every useful strategy can be addressed in a conventional professional development setting.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTION

The paper aims to answer the main key question: 'Is second language acquisition a barrier to education reform in the United Arab Emirates?' This area will be explored by examining the following questions:
1. What are the major challenges that second language acquisition pose to education reform?
2. How can teacher professional development facilitate effective education reform?
3. What are some of the policies that we must consider to effectively address the barrier that second language acquisition poses to education reform?

V. METHOD

This paper uses a qualitative, exploratory approach by exploring the perceptions of those who are dealing with the effects on a bilingual policy in schools on a daily basis, namely administrators, teachers and students, in order to understand their perception of their experience and the meanings they attribute to it (Hays and Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

To ensure triangulation of data, individual in-depth semi-structured interviews, critical incident method and document analysis were used. Face-to-face interviewing allows for the posing of clarifying questions for additional information and for flexibility. The critical incident method (Serrat, 2010) provides for a deeper perspective of issues that participants face and further illustrates any areas for improvement, as participants re-examine their responses to certain situations, allowing for more examination of their lived experiences.

Eighteen(six teachers, six Grade twelve learners and six administrators, three in each category from a girls' school and three from a boys' school in Abu Dhabi emirate) were interviewed individually at times that were convenient for them. Each interview typically lasted between 45-60 minutes. With the permission of all participants, interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded as soon as possible, allowing for themes to emerge.Participants were given the opportunity to check the transcriptions and amend as they saw fit, thus ensuring reflection was evident at all stages.Confidentiality was assured.

Although the sample was limited to two schools, it is hoped that the results may be transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Major &Savin-Baden, 2010) to other schools throughout the emirate, and perhaps, other emirates also.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Five themes emergedduring the course of this study, namely: lack of language proficiency, classroom practices, professional development that is not fit-for-purpose, expectations differing from reality and prevalence of culture.

6.1 Lack of language proficiency

This emerged as the most common theme, with all participants referring to their fears regarding lack of language proficiency on numerous occasions throughout the interviews.

Afra reveals how learnersfeel about their level in the English language:

"I worry about my level of English, because it seems I can never write a prefect sentence. I know everyone says students always expect their marks to be really high, but we worry that if we don't get high marks, we won't be able to study what we want at university. It's one thing to study English, but another when we are expected to study other subjects in English. Even though we have the ideas, we can't say what we want to, so English doesn't help us."

Abdalla, a male student, concurs:

"We don't have the vocabulary we need in English to be able to say what we want, write what we want. It's a problem, because often, the teachers face the same thing! We use Arabic whenever we can."

Yassin puts forward the teacher's point of view:

"It seems being good in the English language is valued more than the knowledge of the subject. Students and teachers are all being disadvantaged. English becomes something we are all afraid of."

Lack of language proficiency would appear to be causing the participants feelings of fear and frustration. The persistence of such negative feelings makes a policy of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) all the more difficult to implement.

Many attribute their perceived lack of proficiency in English to poor-quality teaching, with Aysha, a school principal, believing that:

"All too often, the teacher translates things into Arabic first for the students. This doesn't help them to learn. Also, they need to have better relationships with students, which is a problem in many schools."

What happens in the classroom, then, is key to the success or failure of any education reform. It means that not only language proficiency, but subject knowledge and pedagogical strategies must also be taken into consideration.

6.2 Classroom practices

Student behaviour was mentioned by all teachers and administration, and also by some student participants. Classroom management was felt to be an issue that negatively impacts meaningful learning and teaching in the classroom. According to Yassin, a teacher of English:

"I wish everyone would be honest and talk openly about what we all know the reality is, which is that classroom management is not easy in many public schools. With Emirati students, if the teacher isn't local, they feel they can do as they like. They will sometimes tell teachers that it doesn't matter, because their father is an important businessman, or they will intimidate teachers. Some people say class size should be smaller, but I personally don't see that this is the issue. It's that so many of these students feel entitled. This makes it extremely difficult to teach in a meaningful way. Why isn't there a discussion about this? It's been happening for years and things won't improve until something drastic happens."

Lack of regular learner attendance was also felt to be an issue in the boys' school.Badr, a school principal, had the following remark to make:

"How are things supposed to get better when so many boys don't attend school regularly? You can have the best teachers in the world, the best curriculum, but why don't parents make their sons go to school? It's having a negative effect on what is being taught, as well as on the learning of the good students."

On the other hand, four of the six learner participants commented on the lack of passion and commitment they observed on the part of their teachers. Yousef expressed the following view:

"It's easy to know why there are problems in boys' schools, when you see that most of the teachers don't care about the students; they don't care about teaching. How are we supposed to trust them? It's easy to always blame the students, but teachers have to take responsibility too."

Noura has a similar view about teachers in her school:

"Before, being a teacher was seen as a job with high status, something to be proud of. However, none of my friends wants to be a teacher, because we don't often see that our teachers care about us. They tell us to go away and not bother them, that they're busy. They also seem to think that our writing should be perfect with grammar, but they don't care about our ideas. They don't want to try interesting activities, because that means more work for them."

Part of what the education reform is trying to achieve is to create meaningful and more interactive learning opportunities. The learner participants in this study cast doubt on whether this is actually happening. However, Naeema, a school principal, has a different view:

"It's easy to blame administration, to blame teachers, to blame students, but I believe most are trying their best in the situation they are in. What is needed is a proper kind of professional development, that focuses on the reality, not the fantasy. Teachers are willing, if you give them materials that are relevant and strategies that allow them to deal with managing their students. Students are willing if you provide interesting classes and expect the best of them. They need to be taught about behaviour. Administrators are willing if they have some say over how they run their schools. They would also like PD that is useful and practical. Give us the training and the tools, and we will take care of the rest."

What is implied in what Naeema is saying is that current professional development provision needs to be overhauled and made more relevant to the needs of all those in schools.

6.3 Professional development not fit-for-purpose

Without exception, all administrators and teachers felt that the professional development being provided is not meeting their needs. As Kevin, a native English-speaker teacher, says:

"There needs to be a drastic overhaul of PD. We've all been saying it, and I gather it's been said for years, but ADEC just doesn't seem to pay attention. Expecting these teachers to stay after the teaching day or come in the evening just doesn't fit with their culture or their lives. There also seems to be a disconnect between what is delivered in these workshops and what the real needs of teachers and students in the classroom are. Honestly, it just seems to be a paper exercise."

Maryam, who has been teaching for more than ten years, echoes the view of many of her colleagues when she expresses the view that:

"Reforms come and go, but we, the teachers, will be here after each reform fails. So, we will do what we feel is best for ourselves and our students. We don't like being dictated to, as if these workshops are giving us knowledge we didn't have before. Just talk to us and we will tell you what we really need. We don't need what we are getting now."

What Maryam's remarks illustrate is that there needs to be a shared - and urgent - sense of the need for change amongst all stakeholders. If this is not evident, then it is likely that professional development will fall on deaf ears. In addition, the setting and type of professional development need to be re-evaluated, as Asma, a newly-qualified teacher, believes:

"Many of us would like to have online professional development, as this allows us to fit things in with our lives and our families. We have many family responsibilities, and spending more and more of the working day at school is not something we want to do. Why can't it be online? This would be more relevant and more interesting."

To effect real and sustainable change, the type of professional development on offer certainly needs to be looked at. A combination of online and face-to-face professional development would likely motivate and enthuse more teachers, who would feel less conflicted about their responsibilities outside of the classroom. Unless professional development is more conducive to the needs and lifestyle of those who have to attend, it is likely that real change and reform will be limited.

6.4 Expectations differing from reality

The expectations of education reform have been confronted head-on by reality in the United Arab Emirates, First, Saif, a school principal, comments on the apparent mismatch between the school curriculum and the local context:

"You know, many of my teachers are actually good in terms of their methods in the classroom and their knowledge of their subject. However, they are not being helped by the curriculum. The Science teachers are the ones who find it hardest, because they have to teach things that are not relevant. When they are no familiar with something, this means they do not come across as experts in the classroom."

Mohammed, who teaches Science in the same school, agrees:

"It makes me angry sometimes, that I must teach things I am not familiar with myself. How must the students feel, when I feel bad? I do my best to adapt materials for my students, but I don't want them to b disadvantaged in exams. We keep saying the same thing year after year, and it seems nobody listen; they just see us as troublemakers. But let me say this – if these materials writers ever spent time in a real classroom here, their idea would change!"

Jean, a native English speaker teacher, shares the view of many of her colleagues:

"There's such a gap between what ADEC (Abu Dhabi Education Council) believes should be happening, and what the reality is. I really feel for the teachers and students, as everyone pretends that standards are improving, that English language levels are increasing, when we know for ourselves in the schools that the reality is very, very different. Time for a wake-up call, guys!"

What emerges during the interviews is that those who are on the front lines, so to speak, feel that their voices re not being heard, something that policy planners must acknowledge is a shortcoming on their part. Teachers and administrators need more autonomy in their work, as current prescriptive practices do everyone, most of all students, a disservice.

Hassan, a student, comments on the disconnect between the curriculum and the actual level of learners:

"We're expected to have a really high level in English, but we don't. This makes it hard for us to cope in class, because it's frustrating, when you have good ideas but you can't express them in English. It's stupid to have to use only English when everyone in class understands Arabic! Lots of times we just will use Arabic instead. It's easier."

All teachers expressed negative views of the level of learners, not only in terms of language proficiency, but also with regard to cognitive skills and knowledge. It appears that everyone's expectations are being frustrated at every turn when confronted by reality. As a consequence, when stakeholders feel powerless, they do not feel inclined to look favourably upon education reform. This inevitably leads to the rise of negative emotions, with the thoughts of many turning towards what they perceive as the adverse effect upon their cultural heritage and sense of identity.

6.5 Prevalence of culture

Reservations about the possible erosion of identity or culture were expressed by all but two of the participants.Adbul Sattar, a school principal, said that many of his peers share his concerns:

"Change is not always bad, and indeed, we see how it can be good in many ways. But I worry that it is too much change too quickly. Everything is about English not Arabic. Curriculum isn't always relevant to the UAE or its

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people. My colleagues and I worry about this, because we need to keep ur Emirati culture and traditions. Children need to know what it means to be an Emirati, to be a Muslim, to be an Arab."

Hind, a female learner, concurs:

"What we learn should be more about our own culture, not other countries. A lot of what we do doesn't really interest us, because we can't relate to it. I think the people in charge of this thing should talk to students about what we want to learn, and we want to be proud of who we are."

Sara, a female principal, worries about the influx of foreign teachers:

"We all have these foreign teachers in our schools, native English speakers, who ADEC (Abu Dhabi Education Council) tell us are qualified and experienced. This isn't true in many cases, as they are new graduates who have no experience. They know nothing about our culture, and we are supposed to trust them with the cultural values our students need to know? It has created many problems for us, as they don't know our ways."

The issues of culture and identity do not appear to have been fully addressed by policy makers and curriculum/syllabus designers. With much debate in the media and in society at large, more attention needs to be focused on these areas, if 'buy-in' of education reform is to happen. Language has always been intrinsically linked to matters of culture and identity.

What is evident from this study is that language and education policy planners need to take into account that negative feelings regarding proficiency (or lack thereof) in English have a corresponding impact on the implementation and success of education reforms. This is true for teachers, who feel frustrated when they have issues when communicating in the classroom, and is also true for students, who feel afraid that their level in English will adversely affect higher education opportunities. The most common coping strategy used by all is to revert to the Arabic language.

What is also apparent is that there is a need to focus on meaningful professional development opportunities, that focus on content and pedagogical knowledge, at a place and time that is more convenient to the busy lives that teachers and administrators need. Perhaps this is where a greater focus on online opportunities might be to the benefit of all concerned. As it currently stands, the success of the education reform policy if recent years is by no means a fait accompli. Particularly where second language acquisition is concerned, unless teachers feel comfortable with using English as a medium of instruction, they won't be effective in teaching their subject area, and learning will thus be adversely affected. Abu Dhabi Education Council needs to listen to what all stakeholders are saying, and make realistic efforts to reduce the gap between policy and practice.

VII.   CONCLUSION

The findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge and support the findings of other studies in education reform literature that professional development that is fit for purpose plays a major role in affecting teaching and learning outcomes in the classroom and beyond.

Instruction should be of adequate intensity, provided by teachers qualified to teach limited English proficient students, and supported by appropriate teaching and learning materials, regardless of the language of instruction.Receiving instruction at school in the native language may also improve students' skills in their native language. Additionally, parents of limited English proficient students, who themselves typically lack proficiency in English, may be better able to assess their children's school progress, help with schoolwork, and communicate with teachers in a bilingual education setting, as communication and understanding are facilitated. Instruction in the native language, Arabic, might develop general language skills that facilitate learning other languages, such as English. For example, some strategies developed for reading in Arabic may be applicable for reading in English.

At a time when increasing emphasis in education reform is being placed on measuring student performance according to standardised international assessments and, as a result, on "teaching to the test," it is critical that we don't lose sight of what ultimately makes a real and lasting difference in student performance—the classroom teacher. Teachers must be furnished with knowledge and skills that will enable them to best teach content, through a sustained, effective and responsive, multi-layered professional development program.

One theme emerging clearly in this study is that imposing a top-down English as a medium of instruction policy might be ineffective, primarily due to limited English language proficiency. A low level of language proficiency might apply to some teachers, as well as students. Consequently, the question to be asked is whether such a policy is appropriate in the Emirati context.

Policy planners and administratorsshould understand that a systemic change, such as that involved in education reform, will have a greater chance of being a change that is sustainableand successful if the values and beliefsof teachers are taken into consideration and acknowledged. The kind of education form sought in the United Arab Emirates is a deep-rooted cultural change for school administrators, teachers, students and parents. The overwhelming pressure to improve test scores make it very difficult for educational policy makers to give sustained attention to the planning and implementation of high-quality professional development. Doing things

as they have always been done will no longer work in a globalised environment. When policy makers become serious about improving teaching for the benefit of all students, and do not merely pay lip service, different forms of teacher professional development will take centre stage. Current professional development programs are clearly insufficient to meet the challenges faced by classroom teachers. Let us create professional learning that is a more blended style, making it part of everyday classroom practice.

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