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A Teacher's Retrospective View of the Syrian Educational System

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ABSTRACT This is a descriptive, as much as an interpretive, article about the Syrian educational system and the first-hand experience of an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) practitioner describing the system from within, as much as from without. 'From within' because it is based on observations derived from his own teaching experience at a private school in Syria. 'From without' because of his looking back at that experience from the vantage point, and with the wisdom, of hindsight.

Describing the ins and outs of the Syrian educational system for a foreign audience is a tricky business. I hope that this piece will shed light on major aspects of that system in addition to my own personal experience within the system, and so make it easier for readers to better understand the workings of the system and learn more about it through the practices of a fellow teacher who was involved in the system for a while.

The educational system in Syria is similar to the one in the UK in that it has three main stages: primary, secondary and then the university level. In the Syrian system the first nine years are egalitarian: all students learn the same material. At age 15, all students sit a national exam – the 9th-grade exam – after which, and based on their scores, they attend different types of schools: regular schools, vocational schools, agricultural schools, industrial schools, commercial schools, religious studies schools and girls-only schools. For the next 3 years, students study subjects which are related to their field of specialisation. And then comes the high school exam, called the Baccalaureate exam. It is a cumulative type of exam in that it supposedly covers material from the final year of secondary school but also takes into consideration (and sets questions on) the material which students studied in the first and second years of secondary school. It is also a turning point in the life of the students. Scores in this exam determine whether they can go on to university or institutes, and what specialisation they can follow. It should be noted that a large portion of the

student population deals with this traditional exam in a traditional manner: learning the material by heart. To have passed the exam with flying colours is not necessarily a sign of academic prowess, but rather is proof of the examinee's retention ability.

In Syrian schools, learning English is crucial for two reasons. First, English is essential in the educational process and is taught in Syrian schools starting at Grade 1. English is taught throughout all the school and university stages, no matter what the field of specialisation is. Second, for anyone to get a decent job in the Syrian labour market, they need to possess acceptable knowledge of the English language – as demonstrated by certificates from the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) institutes. For this very purpose, in 2010 the Ministry of Higher Education set up a 'National Test of English', which is held four times a year. It can be taken by university and institute graduates and used as a certification of their English language proficiency for employment purposes. It is also used as an entry requirement for enrolment in higher studies at Syrian universities.

I should point out that in Syria we have two parallel school systems: one private-owned, and the other state-run. In private schools, students learn the core curriculum set by the Ministry of Education, in addition to supplementary subjects that each school is free to assign on its own. Private schools are usually attended by students from families of the upper or upper-middle classes, although it is not impossible for students from the working classes to join private schools under very special circumstances. The most likely scenario is that the student's parents secure a loan from relatives or a bank. There is no governmental support for such loans for a very simple reason: the state-run, public schools are open to everyone, and are free. However, the picture is different at the university level. Here the government does offer scholarships to distinguished students who score high marks in the Baccalaureate examination. Such students get the chance to study at a private university.

Incidentally, in Syrian society the words 'rich' and 'poor' are almost never heard in everyday life. In a sense, they enjoy a taboo status. Euphemisms abound to refer to the social and economic status of individuals or families. Hence, people who are actually 'poor' are described as follows: 'their [economic] situation is difficult'. On the other hand, people who are 'rich' are said to be 'high, high'.

I should say that the class system in Syria is not set in stone, at least not at the surface level. So, social upward mobility is very common, and there are thousands of stories of renowned and prosperous doctors, dentists, teachers, professors and scientists, for example, who hailed from humble origins. Even so, a prevalent notion amongst private school students is that they stand at a socially higher level than students in the state schools.

My Vow; My Fate …

I came face to face with this attitude when I was teaching at a private preparatory school back in 2010.

How I came to be a teacher in that school is an experience worth looking into, according to some. But first, I will provide some background information on the qualifications needed for such a job. Being an English literature graduate makes it ostensibly 'inevitable' for people like myself to end up as schoolteachers. It is regarded as our fate: the Syrian system dooms graduates in English to one career path, and prepares us for going back to school. And yet, a student at the English Department of Damascus University can follow no course which is teaching- or classroom-oriented. Responsibility rests with the prospective teacher to familiarise him/herself with teaching methods, approaches and styles on their own. Not until as late as 2009 did Syria witness the setting up of professional teacher-training services, at the British Council and the American Language Center.

Having graduated from Damascus University in that very year, I enrolled in the Applied Linguistics MA programme at the English Department. I had no formal teacher training, though I had done some actual teaching at an English language institute following two years of English major studies in the United States. For me, this was practical, first-hand experience to supplement the theoretical element of the MA programme. Later that year I was recommended to an English supervisor at the above-mentioned private school to teach 7th and 8th graders – aged 13 and 14.

Given the amount of mischief I caused in my own days as a student, I had 'vowed' to myself I would never set foot back in school as a teacher, ever…

Syrian state schools are co-educational in only one stage – the primary stage – or the elementary stage, as it is better known in Syria. Preparatory and secondary schools are single-sex. However, private schools have the choice of being either single-sex or mixed. The school I taught at was a single-sex school, but in a unique manner. The school admitted pupils of both genders, while housing them in two adjacent buildings, one for girls, and the other for boys, and providing two schoolyards, one for girls and one for boys. The genders did not mix. I taught in both the boys' and the girls' areas.

Assessment in that school was very traditional in that it was done, almost exclusively, in a summative manner. As in the American system, midterms and finals were an essential part of the assessment process. However, each teacher had the freedom to choose their own assessment tools with the help of the supervisor. I chose pop quizzes, to keep the students on the alert, always.

A typical day for me as a teacher would proceed as follows. I would get up at six in the morning, catch the school minibus, spend an hour or so on the road to school, which was on the outskirts of Damascus, get into the teachers' room, chat informally with the other teachers, and then head to class. I taught four different classes – 7th and 8th grades (aged 13-14), boys and girls separately within each grade. The books I used were the Ministry of Education English books, rich in vocabulary and grammar. Too rich, actually.

In addition to the Ministry English books, the students were required to study a 'language arts' book – Macmillan & MacGraw-Hill's *Treasures* – and a 'science' book.

I quickly found that the course plan handed to me by the English supervisor was unrealistic in its aims. The classes could not keep pace with what was planned. The classes included students of multiple levels of proficiency in English, from absolute beginners to students who were already at intermediate level. This can be quite challenging for the language teacher. The way I dealt with this was to present new information in English first, and then make sure that everyone understood by using a comprehension check in Arabic. I know this approach will sound alarms in the heads of proponents of using English-only in the language classroom, but in my far-from-ideal situation I had to be realistic.

A word about my supervisor. She was responsible for choosing the foreign English material – that is, the material not assigned by the Ministry of Education. She was also in charge of designing the study plan, choosing the 'appropriate' books according to the students' levels, and following up with the teachers.

This alone should be enough to indicate how busy she was. Later on, I learnt that she was also under certain restrictions exercised by the school owners/managers. For instance, she did not have room to manoeuvre in terms of designating the level of the books I had to use. These were pitched at a far higher level than the actual working level of the students. The management specifically asked her to provide the students with books which corresponded with the level of their *American* counterparts. As far-fetched as it sounds, this was their *unique selling point* to the outside world of 'upper class' parents.

As a general observation about the unique school setting in which I found myself, I can say that the girls' classes were always better and more rewarding than the boys'. From a professional point of view, and based on the classroom interaction, the quizzes and exam results, I noticed that the girls' English proficiency was far superior to the boys'. Although they were of the same age, I felt that the girls took a more mature approach than the boys, in relation to study and language proficiency in particular, and to life in general.

Under the Eyes of the Inspector

In terms of teaching, I was free to adopt any kind of teaching approach I deemed fit for the classroom environment. Yet with the Ministry of Education inspectors going back and forth to the school, I realised how huge the gap was between the Ministry's expectations and the reality of the situation I was in. For example, one time, I had to present a new grammatical concept to the girls in the 8th grade in the presence of one of the Ministry's English inspectors. The lesson was chosen by the inspector herself. It was on the present perfect tense. Sadly, the many examples of this tense I put forward did not lead the students to deduce what kind of grammatical material I was presenting to them. So, in all

good conscience, I clearly explained to the girls *which* tense I was talking about. After the lesson, the inspector criticised me for teaching grammar *deductively* and not *inductively*. I ask myself even now why I did not explain to the inspector what was going on. And yet she was there! She could see how the girls were at loss to grasp the new grammatical item. It seemed to me that inspectors had an unrealistic view of how the newly adopted English courses should be handled.

On another occasion I was criticised by an inspector for sitting on a table while my students were taking an exam. I was reprimanded, and reminded that I ought to be a role model for students. This again struck me as an example of how out of touch the inspectorate can be. Culturally, the younger Syrian generations, students and teachers alike, find it appropriate and acceptable for the teacher to sit on the table. On the other hand, the Ministry inspectors, who belong to my parents' or even my grandparents' generation, seem to disagree and are willing to make a fuss about it.

State schools in Syria are famous, or perhaps I mean infamous, for their lack of discipline. The many reasons for this are beyond the scope of this article. However, the common view of Syrian private schools is that they enforce a tighter code of discipline than the state schools, and I had this in mind before joining the school teaching board of the private school where I was employed. However, the reality I met did not match the common view. In my experience, socio-economic factors play an important role in students' awareness of and attitude to the whole school experience. This is reflected in their attitude to learning. Upbringing also plays its part. One example may serve to illustrate what I mean. A particular student did not like how keen I was on the whole classroom experience. I wanted students to listen to me, answer my questions, ask me questions, write down what was on the board, and read out their assigned homework. So he complained. 'It's as if we were in a public school! As if we hadn't paid 135,000 Syrian pounds [roughly £2000] for tuition!' In other words, he did not want the classroom setting to be *that* studious. In the minds of the students, since they had paid such a large amount of money for tuition, things should be different from the way they were in the state schools. And by 'different' read 'more relaxed and easier'. Unfortunately, such misconceptions on the students' part were bolstered by the attitude of their parents.

Each student had a whole set of private tutors at home, so school could seem more a place to socialize and have fun than a place to study. I tried to change this view, and to impress on my students that they *were* 'the school': it was not separate from them. Whenever anyone spoke ill of the school or how things were going in it, I asked them what they had done to improve things or make them different. It was a deliberate attempt on my part at raising their awareness about the concept of responsibility and instilling a sense of belonging in them.

Even as I played my allotted role of the stressed teacher racing against time to catch up with the over-idealistic course plan and ready my students to do well in their midterms (which were all about germs and types of rocks), I somehow managed to establish a decent amount of interaction with the

students. I learned the names of their favourite wrestlers, sports teams and singers. I learned more about their lives, about their past schools, about their hopes, ambitions and future plans, and about their own observations on the school.

The Vicious Circle

Syrians often ask who is to blame for the difficulties and mishaps of the educational system, in its private form particularly. The standard answer is: everybody! The parents blame the school; the school blames the parents. The students blame the teachers. And the teachers blame the parents, the students *and* the school! There may be some truth in this general blameworthiness. When teachers make the classroom environment unbearable for the students, how do they expect students to be actively involved in whatever activities are going on? And when students make the classroom environment intolerable for the teacher, how do they expect the teacher to have a smile on his/her face when they arrive? And when the school's owners charge parents 135,000 Syrian pounds for tuition (an exceedingly expensive sum at the time), how are they encouraging the parents – or the students, for that matter – to think of their school? As an educational institution? Or merely as a business project?

So we are in a vicious circle: parents who are attracted to private schools teaching American curricula; supervisors who are requested to choose such curricula; teachers who are required to teach such curricula; students who get lost thanks to such curricula. The students blame it on the teachers, who blame it on the supervisors, who blame it on the management, which blames it on the 'supply-and-demand' nature of the 'school market'. And everybody goes home *miserable*! At least, *I* did!

This vicious circle can and must be broken by the joint efforts of all those involved in the learning process: Ministry inspectors, curriculum designers and planners, school principals, school owners, school supervisors, classroom educators, parents and students. Everybody is responsible for making an effort at bettering the circumstances and improving the bigger picture, which is the whole of the educational system.

Finally, I tip my hat to schoolteachers everywhere for their lifelong commitment, their sustained efforts, and their remarkable powers of endurance tested on a daily basis inside the boundaries of the miniature world that is the classroom.

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