English in Libya: The Language of Development

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The gentle but unmistakable breeze of change has wafted across Libya; a quaint desert country in North Africa that is blessed with bountiful supply of the precious golden liquid. Formerly a colony of Italy, this land of 679,359 square miles, have in its years since Independence and especially after the fall of the Gaddafi regime last year, introduced changes that have made the world look up and ponder. Under the secure and steady leadership of the National Transitional Council, the country has made periodic revisions of legislations to ensure that the Libyans have a rightful place in the emerging world order. Braving challenges of the tumultuous and chaotic months which followed the February 17, 2011 Revolution, Libya has marched ahead to open up, a move which has not gone amiss with the international onlookers.

One area of critical interest has been the regular surge in importance accorded to education in the country. Education is free to all Libyans and is compulsory up to the secondary level. The country’s policy at making education compulsory augurs well with human development and is also in line with the current thinking of education for sustainable development. In fact the United Nations has declared the decade 2005-2014 as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

Since 1969, concerted efforts have gone into raising the quantum and quality of education in the country at various levels - primary, secondary and higher education. It is worth highlighting certain facts pertaining to education in Libya at this juncture.

The total school enrollment before 1969 was 150,000 and it more than doubled to 360,000 in 1969. By 1986 the figure reached 1,245,000. In 1987, education was made free at all levels. University students received substantial stipends. Education became compulsory between the ages of six and fifteen years or until completion of the preparatory cycle of secondary school (Metz, 1987). According to “All World Factbooks” (2003 – 2008), this seems to have paid rich dividends with 82.6% of the total population attaining literacy.

- In the realm of primary and secondary education, the country has a scheme which consists of six years of primary school, four years of high school and three years of secondary school. By the late 1980s schools were well distributed around the country, and boarding facilities for students from remote areas were available at some schools at all academic levels.

- The University of Libya was founded in Benghazi in 1955, with a branch in Tripoli. In 1973 the two universities became the Universities of Benghazi and Tripoli, respectively, and in 1976 they were renamed as Garyounis University and Al Fatah University, respectively. In 1981 a technical university specializing in engineering and petroleum opened at Marsa al Burayqah. Enrollments were projected at 1,700 students. In addition, there were technical institutes at Birak, Hun and Bani Walid. In the academic year 1975-76 the number of university students was estimated to be 13,418. As of 2004, this number has increased to more than 200,000. The rapid increase in the number of students in the higher education sector has been mirrored by an increase in the number of institutions of higher education. Since 1975 the number of universities has grown from two to nine and after their introduction in 1980, the number of higher technical and vocational institutes currently stands at 84. Libya's higher education is financed by the public budget. The main universities in Libya are Al Fateh University in Tripoli, Sirte University (formerly Al Tahadi University) and Garyounis University in Benghazi (Virtual Campuses).

While education has definitely received focus, an area of easily discernible lacuna has been the pace of English learning in the country. For nearly ten years from 1986 to mid 1990s, foreign language teaching including English was banned in the country. Black (2007), states that this made a considerable dent in the level of English language learning among the population of the country. However, the country woke up to realize the importance of English and initiated several steps to revive the language. 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 to establish sustainable, independent language centres in Libyan Universities, staffed and run by highly competent Libyan personnel.
Poised as Libya is for expansion and growth, this article tries to look at how and what the country should do to stake its claim in the global arena. The purpose of this article is not to sermonize but to point out and reiterate the importance of English language for achieving international effectiveness. Specifically, this article looks at how improving and expanding knowledge of the English language can trigger multiple prospects for the country’s biggest industry - oil and natural gas.

**Oil and Gas Industry – Libya**

The Libyan oil and gas industry has played a major role in the economic growth and development of the country. Significantly, the industry has also driven forth huge volumes of investment in the sectors of infrastructure and construction in Libya.

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<th>Table 1 – Contribution of Oil Industry</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Years</strong></td>
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<td>Revenue (Million LD)</td>
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<td>Oil Revenues</td>
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<td>Non-Oil Revenues</td>
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Note. Data retrieved from [http://www.libyaonline.com/pdf/0bfqfaS6992jmtp3ZE0.pdf](http://www.libyaonline.com/pdf/0bfqfaS6992jmtp3ZE0.pdf)

Oil exploration in the country began in 1955 and the key National Petroleum Law No.25 was enacted in April 1955. The first oil fields at Nasser (formerly Amal and Zelten) were discovered in 1959. Though export of oil commenced in 1961, the shift in perspectives to recognize oil as a primary source of revenue and premium export happened only after 1969. The oil industry is run by the government-owned National Oil Corporation (NOC) along with smaller subsidiary companies, which account for around half of the country’s oil output. The contribution made by the industry can further be understood by analyzing relevant figures. Over the years 2004-2007, Libya has recorded regular and steady rise in its revenues; the major proportion of which came from the oil industry (U.S.Energy Information Administration).

The revenues are generated mainly from export of oil and petroleum products to various countries mainly in Europe. Data in this regard shows that for the year 2008, the maximum exports went to Italy followed by Germany and France.

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<th>Table 2 - Oil Exports by Destination 2008</th>
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<td>France</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
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<td>Others</td>
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Note. Source: [http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Libya/pdf.pdf](http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Libya/pdf.pdf)

**Importance of English**

Before proceeding to explore the importance of English for the development of the oil industry and therefore of the Libyan economy, an understanding of the importance of English in today’s world would be worthwhile.

The purpose of any language is to enable communication and transfusion of ideas and thoughts. To facilitate effective communication, it is important that the parties involved in the process of communication are able to comprehend the language spoken so as to evoke an action or reaction. According to the Wikipedia, there are
thousands of languages across the world. While some languages/dialects have effectiveness in a particular
neighbourhood, yet others are effective across a wider area. Sometimes another language other than the national
language enables effective communication across a nation. When we consider the world as a global village, the
major language that facilitates international effectiveness is English.
David Crystal (1997) states that the effectiveness of English as an international language emerges from the fact that
it is spoken by nearly 1.5 billion people of the world, which is a quarter of the world’s population. Considering that
English is spoken by a good majority of people, it is often referred to as a world language or international language.
Around 750 million people are believed to speak English as a foreign language; it is the lingua franca of the modern
era. It is, by international treaty, the official language for aerial and maritime communications. English is an official
language of the United Nations and many other international organisations, including the International Olympic
Committee.
English has an official or special status in around 75 countries of the world. English is the language most often
studied as a foreign language in the European Union (by 89% of schoolchildren), followed by French (32%),
German (18%) and Spanish (8%) (wikipedia).

English for the Libyan Oil Industry
While there is no contesting the fact that the oil industry is the prime stakeholder in the Libyan economy, one
observation has been that the sector has remained relatively undeveloped (BBC, 28 March 2010). In this backdrop,
the benefits which the knowledge of English language can harness are of prime importance. The huge potential has
to be tapped and fully exploited to reap rich dividends.

As the Table 1 shows, over the years 2004-07, there has been an increase in the share of revenues from oil industry,
achieved through increased quantum of exports. Table 2 reveals the major exporting partners of Libyan oil industry.
As earlier mentioned, the most common foreign language in the countries of France, Germany and Spain is English.
By developing mastery over English language, Libya can enhance business and trading prospects in these countries.
Further, given that English has an official/special status in 75 countries of the world, Libya can extend and expand
its trading partners by leveraging on English language as a tool for communication.

Research & Development and Maintaining Quality – Interestingly, the Science Citation Index, in 1997,
reported that 95% of its articles were written in English, even though only half of them came from authors in
English-speaking countries. To expand its knowledge horizons in the oil industry, it is imperative that Libya
shows an active presence in the international scientific community. In this context, knowledge of English will
prove to be an added advantage. In this age where Information Technology (IT) has come to acquire an all-
pervasive nature, it is highly impossible to think of R&D without IT or enabled applications. English is the
language of communication technology, programming, software etc. and it dominates the World Wide Web.
Around 70% of all information stored electronically is in English.

Conclusion – Oil being a scarce commodity, countries with plentiful supplies of oil have a distinct advantage
over the others. The prices of oil are determined internationally through a cartel. The Organisation of Petroleum
Exporting Countries is one such body which determines oil prices of which Libya is a member. The other
member countries are Algeria, Angola, Ecuador, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Nigeria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab
Emirates and Venezuela. The official language of the organization as mentioned in the Article 6 of the OPEC
Statute is English. Better knowledge of English language can improve Libya’s stake in determining the prices of
oil.

With development of the oil industry, there can open up avenues in the fields of oil exploration, extraction, refining,
transporting, distribution and retailing. For a country that is grappling with an unemployment rate of 13% (BBC
News, 5 May 2005), development of these avenues can contribute to solve this pressing problem. All these
processes can be materialized more professionally and in a business-like manner with better skills in English
language. And experts also opine that faster economic development and globalization go hand-in-hand with
increasing use of English language.

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