

## Teaching English as a Foreign Language in the Early Grades of the Saudi Public Elementary Schools: Considering the Proposal

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**Abstract.** This paper addresses the proposal to teach English as a foreign language in the early grades in the Saudi elementary public schools. It considers the issues and concerns that are most frequently associated with this proposal, such as the age factor, the cultural and linguistic implications of the proposal. The paper concludes with recommendations for a sound implementation of the proposal.

### Introduction

In his model of language planning, Haugen (1983) includes a component which relates to the implementation of language plan and policy. A key procedure in the implementation of a language policy is language-in-education planning. Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) state that this procedure typically affects the educational sector. They indicate that language-in-education policy is part of human resource development planning. They further state that human resource development planning is called for the interest of modernization and community development.

This interest has always been a concern in Saudi Arabia. The country's Ninth Development Plan (2010-2014) stressed the importance of moving towards a knowledge-based economy "through focusing on education" (the Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2006) [in Faruk, 2013]. This is clearly exemplified in the lion's share of budget that education has consistently received from the government (more than a quarter of the national budget). Given the massive changes in the socioeconomic situation in Saudi Arabia in recent years, there has been a demand for a stronger English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in the country. To that effect, Saudi educators, represented by the Ministry of Education and members of the general public, frequently propose

various solutions. These proposals are concerned with the enhancement of the level of achievement in EFL in Saudi public schools.

One proposal that has been frequently considered is introducing EFL in the lower grades of Saudi elementary public schools. This proposal is most often based on the common belief that younger children are better language learners. Nevertheless, the same proposal is also rejected by some citizens on the ground that it may have undesired cultural, linguistic or academic effects on young Saudi children in the lower grades of elementary school. Historically, the same stance was also voiced when the Ministry of Education was considering introducing EFL at the upper grades in elementary school in 2003, and later at grade four in 2012. According to Elyas and Picard (2010), as many Saudis did not accept the language spontaneously, the government had to frequently convince them of its pragmatic importance and usefulness. This is normally done through the Ministry of Education by stressing the importance of the English language as a means of "acquiring knowledge in the fields of sciences, arts and new inventions", a means of transferring this knowledge to other communities, as well as a means to spread the faith of Islam and to serve humanity. (Faruk, 2013: p. 78).

In this paper I attempt to evaluate and discuss the proposal to teach EFL in the lower grades of

elementary public schools in Saudi Arabia. I base my discussion on factors that are of importance in order to reach a rational justification of the proposal. Particularly, since the proposal aims at teaching EFL at a different age level, comparing foreign language achievement in different age groups is important in this regard. Some of the research studies that compare children and adults with regard to foreign/second language learning are reviewed. Another concern that needs to be considered is the cultural aspect of the proposal, and how it may influence the children's identity and cultural orientation. Moreover, it is equally important to consider the linguistic aspect of this proposal, and how it may affect the children's first language development.

I begin by giving a brief description of the school and EFL systems in Saudi Arabia.

### **EFL Education in Saudi Arabia**

The need for language planning in Saudi Arabia emerged as a response to huge changes in various sectors in the country. The discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia has affected the country's modernization and development in many ways. Through the oil revenues which represent the backbone of the country's economy, expansion of education and the construction of social establishments have been witnessed. Such developments lead to social changes at individual and national levels (Al-Abed & Smadi, 1996). English has been of continued importance ever since Saudi Arabia got involved in the international economic, political and technological fields. A need for citizens proficiency in English to actively participate in the country's move toward development has been felt for the past decades. *Need* has been a key term in the majority of foreign language plans and policies (Sajavaara, 1994).

Because of such need for English, the Ministry of Education has undertaken the responsibility for planning and implementing language policies in public and private schools. There are 12 grades in the Saudi school system: six elementary grades, three intermediate grades, and three secondary grades. In all public schools, EFL is taught four times per week as a mandatory subject from the sixth grade of elementary school. Thus, students do not study English in earlier grades. In private schools, on the other hand, EFL generally starts in the first elementary grade (at the age of six) and in some cases as early as preschool level. Private schools are free to choose their English textbooks used at the elementary and preschool levels. However, starting from the

sixth grade level upward, they have to use the same EFL textbooks and curriculum used in public schools and prescribed by the Ministry of Education.

Now I turn my discussion to reviewing some of the research studies that investigated the issue of age and its effect on the learning of a second/foreign language.

### **The Age Factor**

There has been conflicting research on age and its effect on learning a second language. While some studies show that children are better language learners, other studies favor adults. In general, research seems to reveal that adults and adolescents learn a second language faster than children, and that children ultimately become more proficient in the second language. In reviewing research on the age factor, Krashen, Long & Scarcella (1979) concluded that adults learn a second language faster than children during the early stages of learning. Gass & Selinker (1994) suggested that the language skills involved also make a difference, as the ability of older learners to learn phonology seems to diminish quickly. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) found that English-speaking adolescents acquired Dutch more quickly than younger children when they were tested in Dutch shortly after arriving in Holland. But when they were tested again in the following months, younger children's scores were in most respects as high as the older learners' and in some respects higher.

Many studies seem to agree that learners generally do not achieve a native-like accent in a second language unless they are exposed to it at an early age. Thompson (1991), for example, studied accents in Russian immigrants in the US and found that the English accents of those who had arrived before the age of 10 were more native-like than those who arrived after this age. Other studies like Oyama (1967), Harley (1986), and Dong & Ren (2013) subscribe to this finding.

An abundance of research studies revealed that children showed greater proficiency compared to adults in the long run, though many studies limit this superiority to oral proficiency. One of these studies is that by Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) in which they tested native Koreans and Chinese on their grammaticality judgment of spoken sentences. They found a high negative correlation (-0.77) between age at arrival and judgment scores, suggesting a younger learners' superiority. In his summary of previous studies, Singleton (1989) [in Ellis, 1994] concludes that there is good evidence to support the hypothesis that learning a second language in childhood results

in achieving higher levels proficiency in the long run, compared to learning it in later life. Curtain (1997) [in Marcos, 1998] indicates that proficiency in a second language is greater when more years are devoted to learning the language and consequently more opportunities are available to use it in everyday situations. Thus, studying a foreign language at an earlier age logically provides a longer time of exposure to the language and, hence an enhanced opportunity for higher proficiency.

Abdan (1991) mentions a study conducted in Jordan, (Mukattash, 1980), in which the researcher found that students who began learning English in kindergarten and the first elementary grade had better proficiency than those who began at the fifth grade. Likewise, the same researcher found that students who began learning English in kindergarten even scored higher than those who began at the first elementary grade. The researcher concluded that the early beginning of learning English indicates better achievement in this language. He cautioned, however, that other factors might have an effect, such as the length of exposure and the type of schools involved in the study. He explained that students who started English at kindergarten had had four more years of English instruction than those who started at the fifth elementary grade.

Vilke (1998) reports a project that was started in 1973 in Croatia to seek the optimal age to begin the learning of foreign languages. This project indicated that the eight-year-old beginners in English were quite successful. She further indicates that children learning English or any other foreign language showed more understanding of language in general as a system (p. 89). Vilke cautions that their results are limited in validity to their sociocultural environment and that any other country will need to verify the findings on the basis of that country's specific linguistic and cultural environment. It seems particularly relevant in the Saudi situation, where English is a language that is linguistically different from Arabic, the native language in Saudi Arabia, to carry out a similar project specifically designed for the Saudi educational environment.

Another issue that is worth mentioning when we talk about the age of learning a foreign language is the affective and attitudinal orientation of learners. Children are less likely to have negative attitudes towards the foreign language and culture or to be aware of other factors (e.g. fear of rejection), which may introduce barriers to interaction and learning (Richards & Rogers, 1994). Moreover, children tend to be less inhibited than adults and therefore less afraid to make mistakes. Therefore, they are generally more active, which is a trait conducive to success in language learning.

## Cultural and Linguistic Concerns

### Cultural concerns

Since language and culture cannot be separated (e.g., Fairclough, 1992), and given the cultural differences that exist between the Arab and Islamic culture, on the one hand, and the western culture on the other, it is important to be aware of which aspects of the foreign culture we are presenting through the teaching of EFL in Saudi Arabia. Particularly, since this proposal is aimed at the early grades of the elementary level, cultural values should be given much attention, when a foreign language is taught at this level, as children are still in the early stages of internalizing their own culture and values.

Adaskou *et al.* (1989) [in McKay, 1997] mention four dimensions of culture that could be involved in language teaching. One dimension is the aesthetic sense in which language is associated with the literature, film and music of a particular country. Another dimension is the sociological sense of a culture in which a language is linked to the customs and institutions of a country. A third dimension of culture is the semantic sense in which a culture's conceptual system is embodied in the language. Finally, the pragmatic dimension of a culture determines what language is appropriate for what contexts. Adaskou *et al.* (1989) maintain that the last two senses of culture—the pragmatic and to a lesser degree the semantic—are necessary to the development of communicative competence since, in order to be competent in a language, individuals need to understand the concepts that individual words embody as well as how to use the words appropriately. Therefore, language planners in Saudi Arabia need to be cognizant of the type of foreign culture that is presented to children through the teaching of EFL. Their awareness will be enlightened by the goals of such introduction of EFL into the education of Saudi pupils at the early grades of the elementary level.

EFL in Saudi Arabia serves as an instrumental tool for promoting the individuals' personal career interests and for promoting the country's international economic and political communications. Jernudd (1993) states that "people in EFL societies recognize that learners' subsequent uses of English will not be anchored in native-speaker discourse, cultural practices and society, but in international interaction between people from anywhere on the globe" (p. 141). Therefore, the introduction of EFL in the early grades of elementary school in Saudi Arabia should not bring with it all the cultural aspects of the language. In congruence with the cultural background of the

Saudis and with the goals of learning English, the pragmatic and semantic senses of the culture, mentioned above, seem to be the most suitable to be promoted and accepted in Saudi schools.

Hyde (1994) mentions a comment made at the 1991 conference of the Moroccan Association of Teachers of English, which says: “let us use English for our specific purposes, and not let English use us for its specific purposes” (p. 297). I tend to endorse such a trend as it goes with the objectives of learning English in Saudi Arabia—as an instrumental tool—and at the same time controls some of the cultural aspects of the language that may not be acceptable within the society. This is especially favored in the early grades of children’s education during which emphasis should be directed towards strengthening their own cultural values and beliefs, something that is articulated in the objectives of the educational policy in the country. Carefully designed curriculum and locally produced materials are key issues towards satisfying the objectives of the educational system and the society at large.

### Linguistic concerns

Another concern that is often articulated by opponents of EFL at the early grades of the elementary level is that such action would adversely affect the acquisition of the mother tongue, Arabic. However, research suggests the opposite. A study of the reading ability of four- and five-year-old native English-speaking children showed that bilingual children were able to understand the general symbolic representation of print better than monolingual children (Bialystok, 1997) [in Marcos, 1998]. This positive effect of learning a foreign language on children’s mother tongue is supported by Cummins’ interdependence hypothesis, which looks at the relationship between the learner’s first and second languages. “There are aspects of language proficiency that are common to both first and second languages: aspects that are interdependent” (Corson, 1999:178). It seems that children can learn much about their first language by learning the structure of another language. This will enhance their ability to understand and contrast structural patterns in both languages.

Moreover, Genesee *et al.* (1989) showed the results of a Canadian immersion study which suggested that development of the first language of students was not negatively affected by immersion in a second-language school program, even when only minimal formal instruction in the first language was provided. In Saudi Arabia, however, even much more emphasis is given to Arabic in elementary school, so

the fear of a foreign language negative effect on the mother tongue appears to be unjustifiable. It is necessary to conduct research in Saudi Arabia’s public schools to investigate such issue.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, I have looked at some of the factors that seem necessary to explore in order to justify the proposal for introducing EFL in the early grades of elementary school in Saudi Arabia. I have looked at the age factor and explored some studies that compared children and adults in their learning of a foreign/second language. While some studies favored adults, other studies see children as better second language learners. Because of the presence of such debate and indecision, this issue should be further investigated specifically in terms of the relevant EFL situation in Saudi Arabia. However, it seems justifiable to state that if EFL were to be proposed for introduction at the early grades of the elementary level, this proposal could be based on good reasons: a greater length of exposure to EFL, achieved through early learning, and exploiting the positive affective characteristics of children at this age.

In studying the teaching and learning practices in Saudi colleges, Liton (2012) supported the positive effect of a longer exposure on learning English as a foreign language, and recommended that English courses should be introduced in primary schools which can “perceptibly progress the standard of English learning in the Kingdom” (p. 148). Studies similar to Liton (2012) that are specifically tailored to Saudi Arabia are necessary, considering that the cultural, economic, linguistic and educational structures of the country are different from those where the other studies were conducted. Research studies that investigate the issue in the country will enlighten language planners in their decision-making regarding the proposal of EFL teaching in the early grades in elementary school.

If this proposal were to be accepted, it has to be accompanied by a sound implementation plan. According to Kaplan (2013), a language plan in the absence of an implementation plan is “a useless bit of academic research” (p. 5). When such a plan is implemented, there are a number of issues or policies that need to be considered. These policies are included in Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) as part of their model for language-in-education policy development. In order to have a successful EFL program in the early grades of the elementary level in Saudi Arabia, care should be taken to ensure that each of the following policies is given attention: curriculum policy, personnel policy, materials

policy, society policy, and evaluation policy. Describing each policy in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. Generally speaking, the Ministry of Education needs to ensure that these policies are observed following clear objectives and guidelines before it attempts to start the EFL program in the early grades of elementary school. The program should be carefully designed to accommodate the introduction of this new subject in the curriculum. Care should be given to ensure coordination and link up with the EFL program already in place, i.e. in the upper elementary grades, as well as in the intermediate and secondary levels to provide for an uninterrupted sequence of instruction.

Also, appropriate teaching methodologies for young children have to be implemented according to the current trends in teaching methods. To ensure the implementation of the appropriate methods, teachers with sufficient language skills and qualifications to teach young children need to be available. Moreover, the materials used have to be appropriate to the age level of the children and their cultural values. They also need to be engaging and motivating. In general, the classroom environment should provide children with opportunities to develop the foreign language through play. According to Griva and Sivropoulou (2009), "play is a powerful, flexible, amusing and pleasant learning experience" which gives children the opportunity to communicate in meaningful situations.

Additionally, the Ministry of Education should ensure that the society is prepared for the implementation of the plan in the sense that they have positive attitudes toward such implementation. It needs to convince them of the viability of the plan, and how it will positively affect the enhancement of EFL education in the country. Finally, it is necessary to have appropriate evaluation procedures for students, teachers and the program in its entirety.

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## استعراض مقترح تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للصفوف الأولية في مدارس المرحلة الابتدائية السعودية

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**الكلمات المفتاحية:** اللغة الإنجليزية، المرحلة الابتدائية، الثقافة، اللغة الأم، المناهج.

**ملخص البحث.** تستعرض هذه الورقة مقترح تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في الصفوف الأولية للمرحلة الابتدائية في المدارس السعودية، وتناقش القضايا والمؤثرات التي عادة ما ترتبط بهذا المقترح، مثل عمر الطلاب، وكذلك التأثيرات الثقافية واللغوية الناتجة عن تدريس اللغة الأجنبية لهذه الفئة العمرية. تختم الورقة بتوصيات مناسبة لضمان نجاح تطبيق المقترح. ويتقدم الباحث بخالص الشكر لمركز بحوث كلية اللغات والترجمة وعمادة البحث العلمي بجامعة الملك سعود على الدعم المالي المقدم لهذا البحث.