

## Introducing English as a Second Language to Early Primary School Curriculum in Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract

Teaching and learning language at early ages is easier than learning it at older ages as Chiswick & Miller, (2007) emphasized in their study that proficiency in spoken English decreases with age. With that notion in mind, it comes as a surprise that the English language is introduced so late in the public school education curriculum in Saudi Arabia. This article begins with an overview of introducing the English language in Saudi Arabia. Next, the critical period hypotheses of second language acquisition is used to analyze different studies pertaining to the introduction of English language at primary schools in various countries. Finally, the article is concluding with the implications of the research by offering practical suggestions that teachers can use to support their teaching of young students.

**Keywords:** Teaching English, foreign language, second language teaching, young learners

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### **Background of Introducing English Language in Saudi Arabia**

In Saudi Arabia, in 1927 the English language was introduced at the secondary schools without a specific syllabus. In 1953, teaching the English language was introduced at intermediate and secondary schools with a specific syllabus (Al-Subahi, 1989). Over the years as more Saudi students left their home countries to study in English speaking countries, the demand for English speaking skills beyond just being conversational has increased. Students now need English not only for communicating and for connecting with the domestic and foreign cultures they encounter away from home, they also need the language to cope in academic settings. Particularly useful skills in academic setting include understanding others when they speak or in speaking and writing fluently. Saudi Arabian educational curriculum should be doing much more to prepare their students for such opportunities.

### **The Problem**

In many countries, non-native English speakers are introduced to English as a foreign language in public schools as a required subject beginning in early primary schools. For many years, in Saudi education curriculums English courses were compulsory and started from middle school and continued through secondary public schools. However, there are a lot of students who still find mastering English very difficult, and their performance is still weak.

### **Why it is important to learn English language?**

In today's world, English language is considered the international language. Learning foreign languages as a means to communicate with people in other countries; has become important for those who want to earn higher degrees or who want a good job in other countries such as the United States, England, or Australia. Teaching English language to Saudi children will open up new opportunities for their future because children have innate ability to learn language quickly as compared to older children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Bialystok & Hakuta's (1999) demonstrated as the explanation of the critical period hypothesis in language acquisition related to age differences that they believed that children learn second languages better than adults do. In general, it is been known that children have higher rates of learning acquisition when they are younger, while learning acquisition declined the older they became.

### **Literature Review**

Teaching a second language to students at elementary school grades has advantages. Naserdeen (2001) cited these advantages as enhancement of the cognitive development of students; assists them in their communication with diverse people, and guides children in their development of different cultures. Saudi Arabia has introduced English as a second language in middle and high schools onward. While a lot of other non-English speaking countries, have implemented English

as a foreign language in early primary schools. There are several studies which have demonstrated the positive effect of introducing a second foreign language in primary schools on students' acquisition of the second language at early ages. In general, it was believed that young children learned better than older children did. For example, Hoti et al (2011) conducted a study that involved 928 students in Swiss primary schools. The subjects were divided into two groups. Group one included 552 children who were learning English from third grade onwards and French from fifth grade onward. Group two were 376 children learning only French from fifth grade onward. They concluded that students from third grade with previous English as their first foreign language, who learn French as a second foreign language learned French more efficiently than the students who learned French as their first foreign language at fifth grade. The same study summarized the result that earlier language learned better serves as resources in the process of acquiring new languages. Likewise, the researchers Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2009) proved the effects of age of acquisition of a second language. Their study was conducted on 195 Spanish/Swedish bilingual students who had self-identified as native-like in their second language. They found that only those who had started their second language acquisition after age 12 were perceived to be native speakers of the Swedish language, and only a few of the early learners demonstrated native-like competence. Thus, native-like attainment of a second language has been shown to be rarely attained by adult learners, and it is much less common among younger learners than previously assumed. This consistent with what Gawi (2012) found. He indicated that there are significant difference between students who start learning English at age five or six in private schools as compared with those who start learning it at age twelve or thirteen in public schools. These differences tend to be in their performance and in their English speaking fluency in Saudi Arabia schools. In addition, Mooij and Driessen (2008) in their work, which include students in grades 2 and grades 4 from primary schools in The Netherlands, have clarified that it is good for preschool and primary schools to match students' differences in abilities to develop their learning in language. Their analyses showed that students improved scores in language and arithmetic proficiency. Similarly research conducted by Stewart (2005) noted that introducing a foreign language study or increase study in the early elementary schools develops and improves students' cognitive abilities. The research also showed improved achievement in reading and math test scores. These findings are repeated by research from the past such as Mouton (1995) who found an improvement in fifth grade students at KwaZulu schools in their cognitive and English language skills using the English and Operacy Programme. In contrast, there are some researchers who do not believe that a student's ability to learn language at an early age is better than the ability of older students to learn language later in school. The proficiency of learning a second language in early ages and adults return to the nature of the languages according to research Dekeyser, Alfi-Shabtay, & Ravid (2010) illustrated that there is a significant correlation between achievement and proficiency for the adult but not for the early learners. Also, MacSwan, and Pray (2005) reported in their work on elementary schools in Central Arizona that students at school age in each level from K to third grade take the same amount of time to achieve English language proficiency as the native speakers. Therefore,

they concluded that younger students didn't learn English as fast as older students. These studies show that the young children learn second foreign language slower than older children do and their achievement is lower than older. While Schuster (2005) found that, there is no statistically significant difference between elementary students' achievement of K to 12 levels when implemented a foreign language on elementary schools. She conducted a study that used a comparative analysis of 13 elementary schools who implemented a foreign language program from grades 2 and 5 with 8 elementary schools who did not implement a foreign language program during same grades.

I came with notion that learning English language at early ages always benefits students, but I found that there are studies that argue against that as showed in literature review. Therefore, the findings are in confusing, some are suggest that works and some studies suggest that does not work. When looking to the same program in different studies in many countries I can see that there are advantages to young learners. Since Saudi Arabia have not tried that in their early schools, we cannot know if it goes work or not unless we actually test it in that area.

### **Need for preparation program to ESL teachers at elementary schools**

In order to introduce a foreign language in primary schools, teachers would need preparation program to understand that new language curriculum and how they can reach the needs of their students. Introduction of teaching English as additional language at early levels created difficulties for the teachers Kirkgöz (2008) who suggested that there is significant difference between teachers understanding of what the need of young learners and teachers instructional method of teaching English language. She recommended "in-service teacher training" and development programs for teachers who participate in teaching English to young learners. Moreover, Eapen (2011) supported the same previous finding that teachers who teach English at primary schools need to be prepared with new strategies for teaching, to be adopted with any problem they faced, and need of training programs for teachers who already on the work. In addition to training program Li and Siu, (2009) advocated that English language teachers become innovative in their instructional design in teaching styles they use, instead of relying on official curriculum which is dependent on textbook and teachers efforts.

### **Implications**

When applying English as a second language at early schools we have to consider collaboration across the school environment. School administrators and teachers should work together to determine the best bilingual programs to meet students' needs in the classrooms as indicated by Naserdeen (2001). He showed the advantages of three programs to parents, teachers, and students; a) Immersion, b) Foreign Language in the Elementary Schools program, and c) Foreign Language Experience Program. In some cases including Saudi Arabia, Rixon, (2011) point out that the earlier introduction of English is a part of a wider educational reform which would require adjustments be made to teaching and learning practices across the education system as a whole. However, introducing the teaching of English in primary schools represents learning

challenging in the education field, within classroom, administrators, teachers, test writers, materials, and those who led them, Alshumaimeri & Wedell, (2014). On the other hand, Alshumaimeri & Wedell, (2014) concluded their study with supervisors' experiences of introducing primary English in Saudi Arabia that acknowledging the value of these implementers' experiences and considered that their suggestions could help the implementation of teaching English to young learners to become more consistent. In addition, methodology is the important guiding principle when teaching English as a foreign language in primary education. Bucura & Popab, (2013) stated on their investigation with some of primary school stakeholder's teachers, parents, and students, that the curriculum of English as a subject can provide methodological guidelines and training for teachers. These guidelines assist teachers to be qualified with necessary skills and to know what their student's needs since the main goal for teacher in teaching knows how their students achieve the best.

### **Recommendations of supportive tools in teaching English as additional language to young learners**

At first, introducing English language to early school levels will be challenging for both students and teachers. It will take time for teachers to teach and for students to learn. It was mentioned in previous about teachers training programs. When teachers well prepared, they can use some additional tools in their teaching methods. Therefore, it is recommend if teachers can use different programs to facilitate their instructions on teaching young children and adapt the new English classes. According to Woodgate-Jones & Grenfell (2012), they suggest Introduce Intercultural Understanding as a part of learning and teaching of primary modern foreign language curriculum at primary schools from seven to eleven years old. They considered language as part of culture and provide a curriculum as a tool to build instructional strategies for modern foreign language learning in primary education. Moreover, to motivate students in learning English language, and to enhance their reading and writing skills in English Barton, Bragg, and Serratrice (2009) mentioned Discover Language program. It is a program that represents an alternative to traditional foreign language programs in elementary schools. The goal of implementing this kind of program to make language awareness between students to enjoy learning English language. Additionally, teachers can use more methods in English classes to develop children's thinking and make them interpret new information such as using narratives and videoconferencing as explained by (Fojkar, Skela, and Kovac, 2013; Pritchard, Hunt, and Barnes,2010). The use of narrating techniques by reading stories and the use of video in teaching English as a foreign language to students are effective methods for delivering new knowledge to children. These could assist both teachers and students respectively in the teaching and learning of English language, making it as a piece of cake.

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