

## History of English-as-a-Second-Language Teaching in the Middle East and the Current Scenario in Bahrain

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### Abstract

In the Middle East, independence from the colonial powers was synonymous with ‘Arabization,’ making Arabic fundamental to education (Findlow 2006). With the member nations of the Arab League striving to promote Arab-Islamic culture and the Arabic language, Arabic came to symbolize tradition and Islamic values and the English language and Western culture, modernity and materialism (Al Zeera 19990; Charise 2007; Findlow 2006). While government-run schools adopted Arabic as their medium of instruction relegating English to the status of a second language, most of post-secondary education continued to be imparted through the medium of English, leaving English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners inept at coping with the academic demands of higher education. The introduction of ESL in Grade Four in primary schools is partly to be blamed for the ESL learners’ inadequacies. Rising criticism from tertiary level educators and employers necessitated the introduction of ESL in Grade One in 2004 in Bahrain (Bahrain Ministry of Education, 2003). Sweeping national reforms in the educational arena in Bahrain have led to the revamping of curriculum, instruction and assessment standards in an attempt to ensure Bahrain’s educational system is of international standards (Quality Assurance Authority for Education & Training 2011). The purpose of this review article is to trace the way English Language teaching has changed since the colonial days in the Middle East, especially in Bahrain and the reasons necessitating the change. This paper also has implications for research on the English proficiency levels of freshman students today who have learned ESL since Grade 1.

**Key words:** English as a second language, English curriculum, English language teaching in Bahrain, English language teaching in the Middle East, English proficiency

**Cite as:** Ponnuchamy, G. (2017). History of English-as-a-Second-Language Teaching in the Middle East and the Current Scenario in Bahrain. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (4).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no4.30>

## Introduction

In the Middle East, English is commonly used as one of the lingua francas, given the cosmopolitan nature of its immigrant workforce from the South Eastern, Far Eastern countries, (Charise 2007) and the English-speaking West. English has been the medium of instruction at tertiary level in the Arab world of post-colonial times (Farooq 2001; Zughoul & Taminian 1984). To succeed in higher education or procure satisfactory jobs, English proficiency is not just a desired asset but also a required skill in growing economies (“English Exam Sparks” 2008). In Bahrain, English is the mostly widely used language outside the government sector (Farooq 2001), and it is the language of business (Educational Documentation Section 2004). However, tertiary educators and employers continue to express dissatisfaction over the inadequate English proficiency levels of Bahraini public school leavers. The history of English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching in public schools in the Middle East and Bahrain in particular, and the current ESL scenario in Bahrain are discussed in this research paper.

## History of ESL in the Arab World and Bahrain in Particular

In the Arab world, independence from the colonial powers was simultaneous with the call for the use of Arabic in social, educational, economic, and political arenas (Zughoul & Taminian 1984). In the era of post-colonial nationalism, a powerful wave of ‘Arabization’ swept over the Arabic-speaking Gulf, Mediterranean, and North African nations. Adoption of Arabic as a national language granted these nations an Arab identity (Charise 2007) and membership in the Arab League established in 1945 (“Arab League” n.d.). Language came to be recognized as the most important characteristic of nationality (Zughoul & Taminian 1984). Even more important than the sense of belonging was the long-held belief of Muslims that command of Arabic is the only way to understand the teachings of the Qur’an, which gave impetus to the ‘Arabization’ movement, making Arabic fundamental to the curriculum literature of Islamic schools and universities in the Gulf (Findlow 2006). After years of suppression under colonial rule, promoting the Arabic language, and the Arab-Islamic culture inside and outside the Arab world became the prime aim of Arab League’s Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (ALESCO n.d.), and the official use of Arabic came to be regarded as a symbol of unity among the Arabic-speaking Muslims of the world (Charise 2007).

Whereas government-run schools have adopted Arabic as the medium of instruction, private schools catering to learners hailing from higher socio-economic backgrounds impart education through the medium of English. Tertiary education, however, in both government and private sectors, is characterized by a marked bifurcation (Almekhlafi 2006; Findlow 2006). In higher education, traditional subjects like Islamic studies are taught through the medium of Arabic, whereas, subjects related to medicine, commerce, industry, and internationalism are taught in English considering the fact that the bulk of academic books and research studies are published in English, not to mention the information explosion since the advent of the Internet. Arabic has thus come to connote religious affiliation, authenticity of culture, tradition, emotions, and localism; in contrast, English represents modernity, business, material values, and secularism (Al Zeera 1990; Charise 2007; Findlow 2006). Al Zeera (1990) and Zughoul and Taminian’s (1984) views seem to be applicable to today’s Arab world, too: English is the choice of instruction for people with modern values, and career goals, whereas Arabic is the preferred medium of instruction for learners with religious and traditional values.

A good command of English is the stepping stone to better educational, and job opportunities, and higher social status (Charise 2007; Guilherme 2007; Zughoul & Taminian 1984). With the intention of equipping the younger generation with the English communication skills required for higher education and career opportunities, public schools in the Arab nations, as in other non-English-speaking countries of the world, introduced ESL in the second decade of learners' lives. The rationale behind the late introduction to the second language was based on the popular belief of the early 20th century educators that introducing a second language early in a child's life was counterproductive to the development of cognitive abilities and educational achievement (Bialystok 2008).

The late introduction to ESL, especially beyond the critical period for language learning and the consequent reduced exposure to the language combined with socio-cultural factors could be implicated in the low English proficiency levels of Arab public school students (Ponnuchamy 2011). Penfield and Robert (1959) posit when learners learn a language for survival purposes, rather than for the sake of learning a foreign language, foreign languages are acquired more easily and faster. Learning English might be easier for non-English speaking students studying in English-speaking countries, given the frequency of exposure to the language and the necessity to communicate in English. In the Arab countries, considering the absence of necessity to learn English for survival purposes, English was taught as a subject of study in public schools with little emphasis on the communicative aspect of the language, resulting in poor levels of proficiency, provoking dissatisfaction from college instructors and criticism from employers.

### **The ESL Scenario in Bahrain**

In Bahrain curriculum revision instituted in 1994 (Bahrain Ministry of Education [Bahrain MoE] 2003) saw Bahraini public schools introduce ESL in Grade Four (at age nine), with four sessions of ESL instruction a week (Charise 2007; Farooq 2001; Kjeilen n.d.). In 2000-2001, English was introduced in Grade Three, and in the face of mounting criticism regarding the inadequate English proficiency levels of ESL learners, further curriculum revisions in 2003 led to ESL being introduced in Grade One (at age six) starting 2004 (Bahrain MoE 2003).

In the meantime, contemporary Bahraini ESL students accepted to tertiary institutions continue to experience problems especially in their first year. Despite spending nine years learning English in public schools, the ESL learners are less than competent to cope with the academic demands of tertiary education. This predicament is not uncommon among ESL students in countries which were former British colonies, such as India (Ponnuchamy 2011). Similar concerns were echoed by other Middle Eastern countries. Al Qadi (2008), who conducted a study in the United Arab Emirates, commented adoption of English as the medium of instruction in higher education has been the cause of student drop-out rates at universities because Low English Proficiency students were often unable to deal with the stress of coping with conceptual knowledge and English language learning concurrently. Mukattash (1978) succinctly summed up the plight of Jordanian Arab students faced with the challenges of instruction through the medium of English at university, concerns which resonate among most Bahraini ESL students even today: "Eight years of English in the relatively artificial environment of school is not enough to enable them to absorb

ideas, and concepts in English nor to express themselves properly, either verbally or in writing, in that language" (cited in Zughoul & Taminian 1984, 156).

Most ESL students in Bahrain are underprepared and ill-equipped for the transition to tertiary education where the medium of instruction is English (Farooq 2001; Traynor 1985). After millions of *dinars* of government spending on teaching ESL for nine years in government schools, a huge number of Bahraini ESL students fail to meet entry-level English language requirements. Most of the ESL students' English proficiency levels are inadequate to qualify for direct entry to undergraduate programs ("English Exam Sparks" 2008) necessitating Foundation English courses.

Bahraini high school graduates' English language skills are not adequate for the workplace ("Bahrain Sets Quality" 2008; "English Exam Sparks" 2008; "School Leavers' English" 2007). A research study conducted by Allen Consulting Group ([ACG] 2009) found Bahrainis lacking in certain employability skills, and where necessary, the skills gap was met by expatriate labor. Bahrainis lack employability skills, especially English communication skills, and employers have to invest heavily in training their young Bahraini employees ("School Leavers' English" 2007) to become employees of choice (Bahrain Economic Development Board [Bahrain EDB] 2009). Fifty five per cent of Bahraini labor force is expatriate (Charise 2007; "Expatriate Labor Force" 2008) while the Bahraini government is keen on 'Bahrainizing' the labor force (ACG 2009; Farooq 2001) and enhancing its human capital (Bahrain EDB 2009). Hence Bahrainis have to be equipped with the highest quality education. Faced with the demands of the employment sector, the Bahraini government is revamping the vocational curriculum and technical education to meet the demands of the labor market ("Bahrain Sets Quality" 2008; "Economic Vision 2030" 2008). Ensuring graduates possess adequate English proficiency is an aim of higher education ("English Exam Sparks" 2008).

In the wake of acceptance that English has gained a firm foothold as the global language of communication and commerce, public schools and tertiary level colleges in Bahrain are working on equipping students with adequate soft skills including English communicative abilities and producing work-ready graduates. Currently, in Bahrain, most ESL students accepted to colleges or universities require Foundation or Orientation courses in English before they are ready for the academic demands of undergraduate education imparted through the medium of instruction. Foundation English courses are aimed at helping students transition to an English-only academic environment and cope with the academic demands of undergraduate studies where everything from instruction and textbooks to reference materials is in English.

Bahrain's Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training [QAA] was established in 2008 to ensure quality in education at all levels (Quality Assurance Authority for Education & Training 2011). The QAA has been directing its efforts at ensuring public and private schools and higher educational institutions meet international standards through its training programs, visits, and institutional reviews. The QAA's chief focus includes evaluating curriculum and teaching and assessment standards with the goal of developing a world-class educational system (Quality Assurance Authority for Education & Training 2011).

## Conclusion

ESL learners' under-preparedness in terms of English proficiency is a growing concern for the Bahraini government aspiring to enhance its human capital and replace expatriate labor (Bahrain EDB 2009). Producing professionally strong, communication-savvy English-proficient, work-ready graduates assumes greater significance today as the government has declared plans and measures to accomplish the country's economic vision for 2030. In view of the growth of Bahrain's economy, the problems of expatriate labor and Bahraini unemployment are challenges to be addressed by education ("Economic Vision 2030" 2008). The Crown Prince and Chairman of the Economic Development Board of the Kingdom of Bahrain Shaikh Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa announced "A better education system is key to empowering every Bahraini to pursue his choices and get the necessary skills for the labour market" ("Bahrain Sets Quality" 2008). The effect of the introduction of ESL in Grade One in government public schools in 2004, combined with the QAA's efforts to ensure quality education, on the English proficiency levels of the first generation of ESL learners, who started learning ESL in Grade One and will be leaving school in 2016, remains a topic for future research.

## About the Author

**Dr. Gita Ponnuchamy**, M.A., M. Phil., B.Ed. P.G. Dip TESOL, Licentiate Dip. TESOL, Ed.D. served as a Professor of English in India and Bahrain for around 25 years. Motivated by a desire to study the way ESL learners acquire English, she has now moved to school administration. As an educational consultant, she has trained teachers from numerous schools and is currently Principal of Tylos Private School, Bahrain.

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