RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teachers' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Fourth Grade English Curriculum in Saudi Arabia: A Case of Saudi Schools in Kuala Lumpur

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Manuscript Info

Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of contents, inputs, and process of fourth grade English Curriculum set by the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia and to explore the range that products meet teachers' expectations in Saudi Schools . The research compares the level of English language delivered by the new curriculum with the language needs of the students as well as investigates the challenges faced by teachers in employing that curriculum within the limited duration of lessons. The researcher considered the "Saudi School in Kuala Lumpur" and interviewed three Grade Four teachers using a semi-structured interview method. The findings of the study indicate the following points: extrapolation of the results of the study suggest that the content provided by the new course book for Grade Four of Primary School is proven to be useful and interesting but at the same time does not meet the contemporary needs of Grade Four students. The course book provides very basic yet useful vocabulary for communication purposes but insufficient assistance in developing students' language skills. Teachers deals with the challenge of limited duration of lessons to develop the four skills by separating parts of the units in the course book into several different lessons.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) in Saudi Arabia was adopted and developed based on the country's integration into Wallenstein's global structure. Indeed, the SELEP (Saudi English Language Education Policies) were formulated and developed by the Saudi Education Ministry to enhance the nation's progress as well as growth within the global system. Following the KSA integration into the modern global structure, English alongside its acquisition and teaching was adopted in a gradual manner, however, many Saudis were not willing to embrace the change. Thus, inter alia, the English ascribed status, the goals that have been designed for teaching and learning of English. The SELEP was successful in winning the citizens' acceptance by officially recognizing English acquisition as well as teaching objectives. Following the declaration that English may be pertinent in the spread of the dawah and the Islamic faith, and for providing services to the Saudis, the status of the language on Saudi documents has grown. English is considered as an avenue for acquiring scientific and artistic knowledge, as well as in new discoveries. The language serves as a means for transferring scientific skills to different communities (The Ministry of Education 2004). Additionally, Alamri (2008) observed that English was a widely used language around the globe, particularly in global communication. The MOE's (Ministry of Education) message to the instructors of the English language is found on page 2 of the elementary, intermediate as well as high school English learning materials. The critical KSA development mechanisms include the ELT (English Learning and Teaching) (The Ministry of Economy and Planning 2006). The ELT objectives within KSA are created basing on the

development of English proficiency amongst learners in all schooling stages, for six main reasons. They include 1) for Islam expansion, 2) for KSA's cultural and economic improvement, 3) for worker's quality improvement, 4) for communicating with other individuals around the globe, 5) for developing speech as well as listening skills 6) for knowledge and information provision and gathering (Alamri 2008;The Ministry of Education 2004).

The Saudi government established elementary as well as secondary schools in 1927. In that year, students in secondary schools began learning French and English without a curriculum. After two decades, intermediate learning institutions were established for learners with 11 and 14 years. Additionally, for intermediate as well as high school levels, a specific English syllabus was formulated (Al-Subahi, 1988). Although the government imported the English syllabus from Egypt, it did not serve the Saudi learners' needs. Moreover, the learning process was delayed by various issues such as high illiteracy levels amongst people coupled with an impoverished community (Al-Sadan, 2000). The introduction of English as an important FL (foreign language) in learning institutions by the MOE sought to prepare learners for further studies abroad, particularly in the US and the UK; this was based on the notion that upon completion of the studies the learners would have acquired enough skills that would be necessary for development in the country. The Saudi government recruited trained instructors from Egypt for English teaching in Saudi learning institutions (Al-Ghamdi& Al-Saadat, 2002). English learning is considered a key subject by Saudi learners in all KSA schools. Furthermore, in over 32 KSA universities, English divisions were created. In addition, English became the language of communication in many organizations and firms such as SEC, MOH, Saudi Airlines, STC and Aramco among others.

Statement of the Problem

From 1932, ELT as a L2 (second language) in Saudi learning institutions has gone through several stages and changes. When the education system was altered by creating intermediate phases for students in 1958, English language teaching is yet to become a specific subject alongside its syllabus that borrowed much from neighboring countries, particularly Egypt and Jordan; however, the syllabus was redundant because it failed to measure up the Saudi education customs as well as address the learners' needs. Additionally, there was general belief among Saudis that TEFL in the initial phase may have a negative effect on Arabic language and Islamic studies, which are critical components in Muslim childhood development. As Salman al-Maliki (2010) observes, Saudi parents are wary of the effect caused by English teaching in the early phases over the L1(first language), thus disputing, the study findings, which claim that FL acquisition in most cases promotes children's ability in L1, as they indirectly concerning their mother tongue by studying the FL structure.

  In contrast, the MOE requested stakeholders to fast track the adoption of English teaching as a L2 for the K4 learners and training English language instructors. According to Naif Al-Roumi (2013), K4 English curriculum introduction is aimed at promoting and improving the English language skills for learners aged 10 -11years; teachers focus mainly on the quantity of lessons instead of quality implementation of the curriculum. The curriculum is broad thus making it difficult for instructors to cover and for learning among students. Moreover, Some teachers and supervisors' criticisms included mismatch between content to be covered and the time allotted for the English lessons. This study aims at evaluating the K4 English Curriculum basing on what has been considered as redundant by instructors as well as parents. The following example is an instructor's comment:

"It is easy for children to learn the English language. It is hard to teach English to students who are 12 years or older and do not know anything about the language. English textbooks that Saudi schools use are for a mixed audience between the primary and secondary level. For instance, the first lesson of the ministry's English curriculum focuses on the alphabet. In the third or fourth lesson you will find some difficult vocabulary and tough grammar, while students still cannot read, or spell or understand the grammar," (Mustafa Abdul Nabi, 2013).

Research Objectives:

1. To investigate the effectiveness of contents, inputs, and process of fourth grade English Curriculum set by the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia.
2. To explore the range that products meet teachers' expectations in Saudi Schools .

Research Questions:

1.How do the teachers of Saudi Schools perceived the effectiveness of contents, inputs, and process of fourth grade English curriculum in Saudi Arabia ?

2.To what extent do the products of fourth grade English curriculum meet the teachers' expectations in Saudi Schools?

Literature Review

The focus of this chapter evolves the related theoretical reviewed literature with the following sub headings :The significant of teaching English as a foreign language, Teachers and Curriculum, Overview of models of program assessment   (Discrepancy-oriented model, Objectives-oriented evaluation model, Goal-free-oriented evaluation model (GFE), Illuminative-oriented evaluation model, and The formative and summative evaluations) , Purpose of Evaluation and the Applicability of CIPP Model , and Rationale of selecting **Stufflebeam's CIPP Evaluation model for this study.**

The significant of teaching English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia

One main reason for English teaching in the Saudi education curriculum is to transform the economy of Saudi Arabia. KSA relies largely on a large number of foreign firms that promote development in the country. In 1978, about 90 percent of employees in organizations as well as firms were foreigners (Al-Barik, 2007). Within that period, TEFL became a critical goal in KSA for developing learners who can communicate effectively with the foreigners. In 1990s, 'Saudization' became an important term in KSA. Saudis wanted to achieve high proficiency levels in English, which would enable them secure top jobs in firms and organizations (Looney, 2004)

 Moreover, the growth of military supremacy is emphasized by the KSA government. It requires proficiency in English language to facilitate communication between the US military experts who have assisted KSA since 1948 and the locals (Cordesman,2003). Furthermore, many Saudis learned English by watching television programs and listening to radio. In contrast, there was a necessity for understanding different techniques of English teaching (Abir, 1988).

Teachers and Curriculum

Curriculum is defined as the sum of all experiences, which are to be provided in an educational institution (Bharvad, 2010). According to Wheeler (1967) curriculum means the planned experiences offered to the learners under the guidance of the school. Furthermore, curriculum has been defined as the planned guided learning experience and intended learning out-comes formulated through a systematic reconstruction of knowledge and experiences under the auspices of the school for the learner's continuous and wilful growth in academic, personal & social competence. George (1999) claims that English Language teachers has always faced enormous and diverse challenges. Teachers need to equip English language learning strategies and this should be integrated with the methods and approach of teaching English as a foreign language. According to Kizildag (2009), the lack of Instructional planning, socio-cultural and economic differences, the efficacy of language teachers lack of proper students' interest, insufficient leaning materials stimulate enormous challenges in teaching English as a foreign language. While teaching English as a foreign Language, "English" seems "intruder" in the already established communication atmosphere. Learners use their mother language while communicating, taking instruction inside the class which creates a great barrier for the teachers to create learning environment while teaching English in the foreign context. Some students use their own "youth Language" which includes blending of their first language with English and also use of short forms of words make the process of teaching and learning English more difficult (Wanjiru, 2013). Haboud (2009) mentions one of the teachers from an indigenous school gave opinion that students should be taught a foreign language particularly in the primary level because childhood or early age is the best age to learn.

Naffee (2013) asserts that English language was first included in Saudi Arabia's primary school curriculum starting at grade 5. Later, it was made to start at grade 4, where students' age ranges from 10 to 11 years old (Hendrickson, 2013). Mustafa Abdul Nabi, a teacher at an English language institute, categorically claims that it is challenging for teachers to teach English to Arab-native students at age 12 or older who do not have basic knowledge of the language. When these students are introduced to the English alphabet for the first time, they will find some difficulty to comprehend new vocabularies and grammatical rules in the first few lessons while they are yet able to read, spell, or understand the grammar (Naffee, 2013). There is ample evidence to show that after age fifteen, flexibility in the acquisition of new sound patterns is greatly stunted. This is where the young child differs notably from the older child, and it is the main reason why teaching/learning methodologies likewise need differ.

Overview of models of program assessment and Approaches:

Assessment models differ with respect to strategies of curriculum assessment (Tunc, 2010). Worthen and Sanders (1998) posit that these differences are dependent on the aim of assessment, distinctive assessment features, method of assessment judgments, and the advantages of the respective assessments. The researcher investigated succinctly the discrepancy-oriented model, objectives-oriented model, goal-free-oriented model, the illuminative-oriented model, and Srnfflebeam's CIPP model.

Discrepancy-oriented model

According to Wholey, Hatry and Newcomer (2004), Malcolm Provus, a Ralph Tyler`s student designed the initial logic models in the year 1972, which formed a part of his project on discrepancy evaluation. The discrepancy evaluation model is centered on the gaps present between the highlighted objectives and the results from data measuring the given objectives. A conceptualization of the five phase process was developed by Provus (1971). The process entailed the following;

The method and design of the study

In this study, the qualitative research methodology will be used, with exploratory case research design. Qualitative research methods are particularly suited to uncovering meanings people assign to their experiences (Hoshmand, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1991 as quoted by Creswell, 1998).

Qualitative research is a type of educational research in which the research relies on the views of the participants by asking broad, general questions, and collecting data consisting largely of words (or text) from the participant (Creswell, 2000). It involves an in-depth understanding of human action and the reasons that govern human behaviour.

The qualitative method was developed to enable researchers to study social and cultural phenomena. "Qualitative data sources include observation and participant observation (fieldwork), interviews and questionnaires, documents and texts, and the researcher's impressions and reactions" (Myers 1997). Qualitative research generally involves on the spot investigation using unstructured or structured in-depth interviewing (Alan Bryman, 1988). This entails sustained immersion of the researcher among the people he/she seeks to study and this will be made possible by the length of the study.

Why case studies approach? The reason for choosing case study approach it makes easier to get deep understanding, information and perception through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and participant observation, meanwhile, it represent the participant observation of the research. It is also the best way to deep understanding of meaning and revealing meanings of that people assign to their experiences

The Sample is a set of individuals selected from a population, usually intended to represent the population of interest (smaller, more manageable group from the population, representative of the actual population) (Gravetter and Wallnau, 2002). Purposive sampling method will be the sampling procedure conducted in this study to select 3 teachers from Saudi School due to the time and cost constrains. The participants as mentioned above will be 1 female and two males at any age of teachers. Once the participants are identified, they will be interviewed. The interviews will be conducted out separately. The data and time of the interview will be at the convenience of both parties to ensure a smooth interview.

Findings

Learners' Age Consideration

The readiness of the children to learn even when they are just born triggered the ideas of necessity of early childhood education both for the individual child and for the society as a whole, in broader sense. Children between the ages of 6 and 13 are active. This springs from their physical need to move about, their curiosity, play and creativity. To create the opportunity for effective experiential learning it is of utmost importance to build on their age-specific characteristics. The materials are based on the social-constructivist learning theory, which considers learning as a dynamic and complex process within a framework composed of the learners, the teacher, the task and the learning context (classroom, school, cultural context).Therefore, students' age consideration in the process of curriculum development is a crucial part in the suitability of the curriculum contents. As far as this article is concerned, first interviewee highlighted that that the content of the curriculum is applicable to the determined students.

"I think the book is suitable for the kids because basically covers all the skills like reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It has very good advanced technology with the pictures so basically when you click on the pictures they speak which is really good for the kids because attract their attention in speaking and listening parts"

This is also noted from the view of the second participant who explained that the curriculum contents prepared for fourth grade ESL in Saudi Arabia is suitable due to the various activities such as drawing, coloring, and acting out,

recognizing and using characteristics in guessing games, picture puzzles, reconstructing worksheets with gapped information in pair work included in the curriculum.

"basically all the skills, focusing mainly on reading, writing and grammar, and also a listening and speaking. So this is what we hope by the end of this term, by the time we're done with this book the students should have sort of accomplished or have internalized these skills. So I think, it is suitable for the kids".

However, another participant describes the curriculum as an interesting procedure but, for not the accurate age of learners. The participant explained that the curriculum developed should rather be for any other certain age not the students of age bracket (9-13). Thus, it would be better if could be used for children below that age.

"Regarding speaking, the topics introduced do not " greatly" develop the speaking skills for the students in grade 4 because students will focus on the sounds of the alphabet, the pronunciation of simple words and very limited vocabulary. In terms of reading skill, the topics are introduced in a very simple language. Students read and comprehend simple short sentences. I don't see topics as suitable to equip the students with the proper knowledge in a foreign language that they need to start communicate with English speaking people."

Materials Flexibility

Children might be engaged in an activity alone or with others, and are offered to provide further clarification of the variety of ways in which children demonstrate their knowledge and skills. These illustrate how children might articulate observations or explain their thinking related to the knowledge and skills outlined in the expectation. These examples are included to emphasize the importance of encouraging children to talk about what they are learning, as well as to provide some necessary materials for teachers on how to model language use and the processes of thinking and reasoning for the children. In this case materials developed for the curriculum is very essential. In the view of all interviewee, the materials provided enable them to easily implement the current curriculum.

First respondent said:

"The CD is perfect it is really good CD it is easy , flexible for the kids and any one can play it and the kids at the home can click anywhere they can speak by itself so that is why it is very well going , suitable for the kids at this age. I think the materials are perfect compared with other materials that they don't have any photos but this one has photos has everything if you click for example on one part it will read that so that why it really attract"

It is highlighted by second respondents that:

"Smart class books are appealing. You just get fascinated by the colors and organization of the book. Basically, it is a high quality product. The book contains two sections the pupil's book and work book. The books are supplemented with class DC which includes tests and flashcard. There is also student's CD . I can say that materials provided are highly effective to implement the curriculum."

This is also stated in the statement of the last respondents that :

"I was shocked actually when the first time I opened the CD because I was expecting something not organized, to be honest. But this CD is very well organized because you can see everything as the book. For example, you can see this one (pointing to a comic page). You can see these pictures on the screen, and you click on this and the conversation will be read out. This picture will be exactly on the screen. That's why it's very good for the students to see the pictures, to see the writing, so that they are able to connect all the speech with the pictures."

Therefore, the newly implemented fourth grade curriculum comprises of different fascinated material that can be used to engage students during the learning process. By this, the materials evaluated in the present curriculum are considered as suitable .Children will demonstrate their learning in many different ways. Their success in demonstrating what they know or are able to do will also vary, depending on such factors as the time of day.

Inadequate of Teaching Periods.

In the curriculum, despite the topics and units are just examples for teachers to reach the defined goals and objectives, according to the research regarding the use of 1994 Early Childhood Curriculum, it was found that teachers were taking the topics and units as the aim of the curriculum and detected that teachers were trying to teach those topics rather than concentrating on reaching the goals and objectives. As it is noted from the respondents that the time or period framed for the curriculum implementation are insufficient for the teacher in the process of teaching.

"I think the activities provided are very good . They covered the most activities kinds like games , role playing, questions and answers and so on . but what I want to say is that we don't have problem with the activities by itself

but our problem is about the lessons determined by the week. You know we have to teach the curriculum including the activities within 2 periods in the week."

Suitability of Learning Activities.

Teachers, in terms of education and planning, proposed that the activities provided are suitable only there is a need regarding which methods to use, what kinds of technological materials to be included in the daily plans. It is true that all the games and other learning provided are useful.

"well basically compared with other book, I think this book provides more activates for the kids because one part of the book at the end of each unites you can see that they mention activity of the kids, writing activity, games activity, playing activity so it is really good for the kids to participate or to play another role as students so you can see them when they are in front of the teachers acting or playing or doing activities that is why I think it is effective. I think this book is very well organize and it focus more on listening and speaking."

Skills development

(Smart Class 4-Series) used in the National English Curriculum (NEC) in Saudi Arabia for Fourth Grade Primary Schools designated "integrated skills"; that is, students are to work on all four language skills in the class: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A number of commercial textbooks which implemented in KSA, especially those organized in a series like (Smart Class 4-series), are specifically written for this kind of class, often with each chapter based on a specific topic, for instance, the chapter entitled"Every Day", and with accompanying activities related to the four skills. Integrated skills use coincides the way we communicate in real life, and integrating the skills can bring plenty of benefits to English teaching, it is a worthwhile experiment in a communicative classroom despite its higher demanding for teachers (Jing, 2006).

The critique of the textbooks should be made, whereby it might investigate the identity of the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and to explore the relationship between the course book contents with the students' needs. Textbook is one of the most important instruments in teaching any subject or skill. It lays down the facts to be taught and more or less, determines the methods of teaching. McGrath (2002) asserts that textbooks can set the direction, content and they can propose ways in which the lesson is to be taught. The current National English Curriculum (NEC) contents for the Fourth Grade at primary schools in KSA consists of four chapters which are: (1) Hello, (2) School, (3) Family and friends, and (4) You and me. It is demanded by the curriculum that these chapters are to be covered within fourteen weeks, with two lessons per week where students are exposed to English for 45 minutes per lesson. The Male Teacher of the selected school describes the curriculum as an interesting curriculum which can be used in our daily life

" from first unit you can see they teach them the words that can use in daily life."

Also, he mentioned that curriculum is objective in daily life :

" it is very objective according to real life".

A similar point is noted from Female Teacher who directly mentioned her interest as well as the students' in teaching and learning this curriculum. She stated that majority of students apply what they learn from this curriculum in their daily life.

"So if we talk about whether or not the students can apply whatever they learn into daily activities and day-to-day life, I think it's very much applicable. If you look at questions, for example people at work, in my class for example they had to interview their parents because some students still don't know what their fathers do actually, and what do their mothers do. So there are many examples, maybe you can take a look at the book later on, see, there are many examples in which they do apply what they learn in the class. For example going to the park, having fun, what do we have for fun? We play volleyball, we play tennis and so on, there's many things that they can do. How did they help their mom in the kitchen, so it is that whenever we learn something, I make sure that they go back and they sort of try to apply. If the lesson is about helping your mom at home, they have to go and choose something and help up their mom at home, and when they come to the class they tell me about their experience".

Also, she believed that the National Curriculum for Fourth Primary Grade are usable in daily life activities:

" the book is very simple and the students easily can apply whatever they learn from the book."

However, the third teacher believed that the NEC is too easy and it is not suitable for the students' age. She mentioned that :

" Smart class for fourth grade does not equip the students with the necessary speaking skills.".

In Saudi Arabia, many students who attended school speaks Arabic as their first language as most communities in the country uses that language. Because of the presence of English in the Arab societies in KSA, students may also regularly use some English words in their daily speech, even though they may not be aware that these words are in fact English. In their day-to-day language they often use English words for common objects and

activities. For example, those who live in the cities have holidays, they work in factories or offices, and they go to school with a bag full of books, pens, pencils and water bottles, travelling in buses on roads, organizing the furniture items. Even those who do not live in cities may know many English words. For example, the words 'post office' or 'bus station' are understood all over Saudi Arabia. This can be found in what the first teacher mentioned during the interview where he stated that the book comprises different topics that enable students to practice it in daily activities. On the other hand, the second teacher buttressed the first opinion that the book is not suitable for students age. Although, it comprises the different topics as mentioned above but they don't suitable for the student's age.

In conclusion, the new English curriculum introduced to Fourth Grade Primary School in KSA should malleable according to students' need and flexible to changes. More careful planning and changes are required in implementing the topics during lessons.

Extrapolation of the results of the study suggest that the content provided by the new course book for Grade Four of Primary School is proven to be useful and interesting but at the same time does not meet the contemporary needs of Grade Four students. The course book provides very basic yet useful vocabulary for communication purposes but insufficient assistance in developing students' language skills. Teachers deals with the challenge of limited duration of lessons to develop the four skills by separating parts of the units in the course book into several different lessons.

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