

Introduction of EFLPS in an Arab Context

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Introduction

This study investigates two inter-related topics in foreign language learning. First, it assesses the impact of introducing English as a foreign language in the primary stage curriculum, on the scholastic achievement of pupils in their native language. Achievement in Arabic is taken as a yardstick for this comparison: pre- and post-EFLPS introduction. Second, it explores Arabic-language teachers' perception of positive and negative change in school "environment" as a result of such introduction.

In most Arab countries, FL teaching is confined to intermediate and secondary stages of schooling. The primary stage is considered appropriate for teaching Arabic, the native language. The potential advantages of starting FL in primary school have been pointed by a number of studies. Many experiments have been carried out, especially in private schools.

As the world moves towards closer inter-dependence, the question of institutionalized FL learning in primary schools has come strongly to the fore. However, the practical aspects of FL teaching have been accompanied by many problems.

Attempts have been made in Kuwait to introduce EFLPS. They started as the State began its worldwide interaction as an oil exporting country. Moreover, the desire for globalization of the economic system has led to improvement in FL teaching. Nevertheless, there were frequent studies that indicated comparatively low levels of EFL learning at both the intermediate and secondary levels. English as a means for acquiring international knowledge and research was far from satisfactory at the university level. Consequently, the advocacy of primary foreign language teaching gained considerable ground. Extending teaching English downwards to the first primary grade is thought to allow more time for its assimilation, thus giving learners a wider chance for EFL exposure.

Various considerations slowed the pace of introduction. These considerations concerned the recruitment of proficient teachers, curriculum building, availability of periods in the overcrowded and rather strict timetable of the primary school. Furthermore, the introduction of a new subject in the curriculum of young children needs social support. This is especially the case when the subject concerned is a foreign language, and the children are still being taught the first lessons in their mother tongue.

Negative psychological and implementational considerations were cited to encourage the delay of EFLPS project in Kuwait. These considerations related to "the brain effort", "the teachable moment", "the linguistic interference", and "the cultural contamination".

The balance in favour of getting EFLPS project implemented was decisively tilted in the aftermath of the Gulf War. It became increasingly clear that there is a need for international co-operation as well as systematic coordination with coalition countries. The main thrust came in 1993 when EFL teaching started in primary schools in Kuwait.

All primary schools commenced teaching EFL as a school subject for three periods a week, concurrently with learning reading and writing in Arabic. However, teaching FL to young learners is not as simple as it may appear; it implies a reordering of priorities. It is not easy for such an arrangement to be accepted, particularly if it is perceived as a threat to the teaching of the mother tongue. Although recent research results indicated that such a measure had no negative effects, (AL-Hakea & Habib, 1994; Hanna, 1967; Khedr, 1986), the underlying fear of such threat persists. Considerable efforts were expended in order to secure public support, and wider avenues for research were opened.

An important factor is, naturally enough, the impact of introducing a foreign language on the native language still in its initial stage. In an attempt to deal with such fears, oriented educational programme was started in Arabic-language teaching. It focused on a broad range of activities, based on oral work, play activities, the use of simple audio-visual materials, and giving due attention to the four language skills. This programme might be in response to such fears, or an ordinary measure of curriculum development. Nevertheless, such possible impact has to be explored, as manifested in pupils'

achievement in Arabic. Moreover, fears of negative interference may envelope Arabic language teachers' reactions towards introducing EFLPS. These two points constitute the main axes of the present study.

Review of Literature

There is a large measure of agreement regarding the importance of FL learning. However, the best time for introducing FL and its effect on the mother tongue are still debatable. A number of previous studies indicate that introducing a foreign language as a school subject is not always risk free; (Eassa, 1986). The risk could increase if the FL is introduced in the primary stage, when the mother tongue is still in the process of consolidation; (Amin, 1976; Hanna, 1976). This view received official approval by the 7th conference (session) of the National Council for Education and Scientific Research and Technology (1980). It stated that FL at an early age was a major reason for the deteriorating level of children in their Arabic language. It argued that children in the primary stage should first acquire basic skills in their mother tongue and they should not start learning a foreign language except after mastering the basis of Arabic language; (Al-Safti, 1981:186).

In Qatar, Al-Mulla (1994) concluded that children exposed to EFL as early as their first school years were not up to the level of pupils who only study Arabic. She claimed that learning two languages simultaneously at an early age might interfere negatively in the child's learning of Arabic. She referred to the process of learning the mother tongue as structure and texture, and introducing another language would confuse such a process. Moreover, the child is already facing dichotomy in the contrasting elements between modern standard and colloquial Arabic. It seems that the child in the primary grade is learning two new language systems. It may be pointed out that she found such differences in the fourth, not the first, primary grade. It could be argued that her conclusions refute the claim of delaying such introduction. However, she found pupils learning English in an immersion programme are better in Arabic than those studying English as a school subject. Such differences were attributed to variables other than linguistic interference.

The presumption of unfavourable effect of introducing a foreign language is rather due to psychological or cultural reasons, than to linguistic ones (Jakobovitz, 1970). A common procedure used in many studies on the impact of introducing a foreign language on achievement in the mother tongue is through analysing points of interference. That is, they depict errors resulting from dissimilarity at some level or in a certain aspect. Such negative interference is investigated from both perspectives; i.e. the effect of introducing a foreign language on mastering the native one, and vice-versa. The underlying assumption for such a procedure is that the unfavourable effect of learning a foreign language is due to such factors, as "brain effort" (Jespersen, 1922), "linguistic interference" (Talmy, 1984) and "sociological factors" (Jakobovitz, 1970). When two languages are dissimilar, such as Arabic and English, children may exert extra efforts to switch from one language to another, or to keep alternating between the two linguistic systems (Khedr, 1986; AL-Khuli, 1990).

In the recent past, there has been a reversal in viewpoints, with a more favourable attitude towards foreign language. Research findings have indicated that negative interferences are groundless. On the contrary, a positive effect has been revealed (Boseiri, 1966; Dannan, 1984; Remsbury, 1988). The favourable outcome may support the hypothesis that all languages are highly related at some infra-linguistic level. Consequently, learning another language helps to consolidate the existing one.

In the Arab countries, studies have reported a positive influence of learning a foreign language, even at an early stage (Aziz, 1974 a,b; Boseiri, 1966; Dannan, 1984; Remsbury, 1988). They indicate that young Arab learners exert more effort to guard against a tendency for the phonological, lexical, and syntactic systems of their language, and vice-versa. Such conclusion has been refuted by other researchers. Abu Humas (1992) studied interlingual and cross-modalities relationships of mother tongue and foreign language of adult EFL Arabic speakers. He found significant positive correlation between linguistic performances in both languages. Al-Shami (1976) points to positive influence of Arabic on learning English as a foreign language. He argues against the premise of a "linguistic vacuum" to be filled with the new language. He is also in favour of the idea that capacity to acquire a language is constant implying what is adequate for learning one language cannot be

adequate for learning two. The mother tongue, however dissimilar from the foreign language, has already created a linguistic base strong enough on which a new foreign structure is built. It has constructed linguistic schema that help in mastering a new language.

It has often been argued that FL learning reactivates the process by which the mother tongue was learnt. Therefore, learning will be more efficient when the two experiences are close together in time. That is, FL can be introduced as early as the primary stage or even earlier; (McDonough, 1981). Hamdan (1985) advocates teaching children a foreign language at an early age to grow concurrently with the mother tongue. He argues that such practice helps develop cognition and creativity on the child's part, and enhance verbal fluency and language usage. Others have reached similar conclusions revealing good results of implementation; (Eassa, 1978; Gudschinsky, 1971). Some researchers have even suggested switching between the mother tongue and the FL intermittently, (cf-Critchlow, 1975).

It may be noted that studies carried out in advanced countries are oriented towards exploring possibilities to increase achievement in foreign language learning. Research has focused on controlling extraneous variables to study those predicting such achievement (Carroll, 1966). Interest has shifted from studying mutual effect, whether positive or negative, between the native and foreign languages to components, in both languages or the individuals, especially those pertaining to higher achievement.

In Arab countries, the focus of attention has varied between critical period (Zikri, 1994), attitudes (Al-Mutawa, 1996) and time allotted (Abbas, 1991). On the other hand, there are those who claim existing linguistic interferences between the foreign and native languages (Abdullah, 1976; Amin, 1976; Hanna, 1976). Nevertheless, the majority of these studies have a common feature, namely the need for introducing English at earlier stages of education, mixed with a fear of negative effect of its introduction on the mother tongue.

The present study evaluates probable effect of introducing EFL at an early age on the pupils' achievement in Arabic. A related question, pertaining to the perception of teachers of Arabic of such effect on their teaching practices, is also tackled. Two main questions are posed: 1) Does a significant difference exist between first graders' achievements in Arabic: pre- and post- introduction of EFL? 2) Do

teachers of Arabic perceive a negative effect of introducing EFL on their teaching practices ?

Limitations of the Study

- The study is based on pedagogical orientations. Consequently, it deals only with academic achievement in one language (Arabic). Psycholinguistic aspects are excluded.
- Scores have been collected from different schools, regardless of the testing instruments. Inconsistencies in test administration have been ignored. This assumes a perceived similarity of teaching and evaluation methods as communicated to schools through the General Inspectorate of English.
- The same basis is utilized to deal with scores of different school subjects.
- The study uses a global comparative method, and not classroom-centered comparison, dealing mainly with means, within an ex-post facto approach.

Questions of the Study

- 1) Does Kuwait first graders' achievement in Arabic differ between 1992/93, and 1993/94 school years; i.e pre- and post-EFLPS introduction ?
- 2) Do demographic variables (such as pupil's sex, teacher's sex) influence these differences ?
- 3) Which of the three main school subjects (English, Maths, Science), is more correlated with Arabic, and thus more important in predicting achievement in Arabic ?
- 4) How far do teachers of Arabic perceive negative impact of introducing EFL in the first grade on their teaching environment ?

Method

To answer the first three questions, pupils' achievement test scores of Arabic were collected from 30 schools. The schools were selected at random from the five educational zones of Kuwait, for the school years 1992/93 and 1993/94. Scores of the other three subjects were also collected for the year 1993/94. The sample consisted of 6 schools from each zone (3 for female, and 3 for male pupils). Care was

taken to exclude any schools using a newly developed Arabic-language curriculum. The sample was distributed as follows (Table1):

Table (1)
Sample Distribution in
the Five Educational Zones

<i>Ed.Zone</i>	<i>Asima</i>	<i>Hawally</i>	<i>Farwania</i>	<i>Ahmadi</i>	<i>Jahra</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>School Yr.</i>						
92/93	594	984	756	926	1277	4537
93/94	730	869	658	931	968	4156

A questionnaire was also designed and administered to first grade teachers of Arabic (n = 136) to provide answers to the fourth question. It consisted of 18 items covering administrative, social and psycholinguistic domains.

- 1) The administrative domain assesses the perception of first grade teachers of Arabic, concerning change in the attitude of administration towards Arabic teaching after introducing EFLPS; (items # 1,4,7,10,13,16).
- 2) The social domain explores perception to the change in the context of relationships; (items # 2,3,5,8,11,14).
- 3) The psycholinguistic domain concerns the teachers' perception of such change in children's linguistic abilities; (items # 6,9,12,15,17,18). (See Appendix).

The questionnaire was developed and reconstructed to accommodate validity. Alpha Cronbach was (0.76) indicating internal consistency.

Results

In answer to the first question exploring differences in achievement in Arabic between years 92/93 and 93/94, means are compared, and reported in Table 2.

Table (2)
Difference Between Means of
Arabic Scores for Years 92/93 - 93/94

School Yr.	No	M	S.D	t
92/93	4537	15.73	3.44	3.05*
93/94	4156	15.96	3.61	

* = significant at (.05) level

The t-value indicates a significant difference in pupils' achievement in Arabic, with 93/94 being higher. Thus after introducing EFLPS had a substantial favourable impact. This result refutes the alleged negative impact since there are no grounds to support fears regarding the introduction of EFLPS. Moreover, they support the premise that children who simultaneously study English with Arabic (their mother tongue) achieve higher scores in Arabic compared to their counterparts who only study Arabic. Of course, this improvement cannot be exclusively attributed to linguistic promotion. The introduction of EFLPS may have engendered improvement in Arabic language teaching (ALT) as a defense mechanism, eliciting more effort in teaching Arabic.

As for the possible interaction as indicated in the second question, two way Anova was calculated using pupils' sex as in Table (3) and teacher's sex as set out in Table 4.

Table (3)
Two-Way Anova for Pupils' Performance
in Arabic by Year and Pupil's Sex

Source of Variance	D.F	S.S	M.S	F
Main Effect	2	264.37	132.18	10.64***
Year	1	176.68	116.68	9.40**
Pupil's Sex	1	148.86	148.86	11.99**
Yr. x Sex	1	111.74	111.74	9.00**
Explained	3	376.12	125.37	10.10
Residual	8689	107862.08	12.41	

The F values confirm the existence of difference in pupils' performance after the introduction of EFLPS, compared to the situation one year earlier. There are also differences between the two sexes. Interaction indicates that improvement in performance was restricted to females. In other words girls showed significant improvement in learning Arabic after introducing EFLPS, while boys did not show a marked improvement.

Since some boy schools have female teaching staff, the teacher's sex is introduced in the equation, (Table 4).

Table (4)
Two-Way Anova for Pupils' Performance
in Arabic by Year and Teacher Sex

Source of Variance	D.F	S.S	M.S	F
Main Effect	2	802.18	401.09	32.44****
Year	1	118.73	118.73	9.60**
Teacher's Sex	1	686.67	686.67	55.54****
Yr. x Sex	1	11.06	11.06	.895
Explained	3	813.24	271.08	21.92
Residual	8689	107424.95	12.36	

F values show significant main effects. Non-significant F-values for interaction indicate that female teaching proved better in making pupils achieve higher level of performance in Arabic, after introducing EFLPS, compared with male teaching. This makes it difficult to support the view that there was improvement in pupils' performance in Arabic. The result is highly related to teacher's sex. Assuming that school conditions are similar, it could be argued that female teachers exert more effort in teaching. Other variables might also have a bearing on this, such as female school administration, or school-parents relationship.

With respect to school subjects, a correlation matrix is calculated using the major four subjects of Arabic, English, Maths and Science, (Table 5).

Table (5)
Correlation Coefficients for All 93/94 Subjects

Variable	Arabic	English	Maths	Science
Arabic	1.00**			
English	0.72**	1.00		
Maths	0.82**	0.69**	1.00	
Science	0.69**	0.66**	0.71**	1.00

Significant correlations are found between Arabic and each of the other school subjects. The same remarks also apply to school subjects. To know which school subject is more important in predicting performance in Arabic, the absolute value of the correlation coefficient can be used. The larger this value, the stronger the linear association. Stepwise regression is employed to explore relative importance assigned to each subject in predicting scores of Arabic, (Table 6).

Table (6)
Stepwise Regression with Arabic as Dependent Variable and the Three Subjects in the Equation

Variable	R ²	Beta
Maths	0.66	0.81
English	0.71	0.30
Science	0.72	0.12

The results indicate that maths scores are the best predictor of scores in Arabic. Scores of English also appear to be important. There is evidence of collinearity: pupils who are good in maths are likely to score better in Arabic. Small changes in R² value after English and science entry still indicate influential relationship between Arabic and English.

In answer to the fourth question, regarding Arabic-language teachers' perception of any negative impact of EFLPS introduction on ALT, frequencies of responses on the questionnaire are calculated in percentages and presented in the Appendix. Slightly more than half the

Arabic-language teachers (53%) still think that parents are more responsive to English language teaching (ELT) than to ALT. However, 13% of those teachers appear reluctant to give a specific opinion regarding such measure.

Readjusting data and calculating means for the three domains, it appears that more weight is given to administrative domain, (Table 7).

Table (7)
Means and S.D. for the Three Domains

Domain	M	S.D
Administrative	3.15	0.54
Social	3.28	1.24
Psycholinguistic	2.62	0.58
Total	3.20	0.52

Thus AL teachers tend to believe that school administration pays more attention to ELT than to ALT. Anova did not yield significant differences of such perception among the five educational zones. A significant difference exists between male and female teachers regarding their perception of school administration role. Male teachers express more concern than females.

The results of this study offer some evidence for EFL teaching in the primary school, to establish itself. However, a curriculum innovation has to be seen within a wider framework. This requires a change in the pedagogical policy, new well defined objectives, suitable materials and training or retraining of teachers. It also implies horizontal and vertical mobility influencing all aspects of schooling. The danger is that such task is underrated in Kuwait as explicitly manifested by lack of planning, inconsistency in the provision of teaching, and absence of continuity through stages. If, as is the case in Kuwait, one envisages all schools being involved, it is difficult to evaluate such innovation using an experimental design. The study has to be replicated. A long term effect has to be explored, concurrently with adjustment referred to by evaluative studies.

Conclusions

The study indicates that introducing EFLPS will not impair ability of Arabic-language learners (ALL); it may even enhance it. With EFL included in the primary curriculum, children's performance in Arabic shows improvement compared with the year prior to the introduction of EFLPS. Broadly similar conclusions were reached by studies using other methods (EL-Hakea & Habib, 1994). An important implication of the present study is to ameliorate fears about negative linguistic interference and possible effect. While these findings are generally similar, there appears to be a need for further investigation because of the diverse issues involved. In particular, longitudinal studies are required if more detailed answers are to be provided to the following enquiries:

- i- the duration and importance of Arabic or English;
- ii- whether Arabic-language teachers need orientation towards accepting the "newcomer" EFLPS; and
- iii- if any negative effects are associated with introducing EFL at an early age, which led some investigators to recommend its delay until the post-primary stage.

The research reported in the present study is among the first empirical investigations of the subject in the State of Kuwait. If it presents EFL in the primary curriculum in a favourable light, it may be added that the subjects discussed are far from settled. Furthermore, the wider social setting has to be taken into consideration. Kuwaiti children are exposed to poor English in their daily life through contact with Asian domestic helpers. The Arabic they speak on entering the primary school is colloquial, which is different from Modern Standard Arabic. The weight of the study findings has combined with the positive social and administrative attitudes to tip the scale in favour of a wider range of EFL teaching. Thus recognition of EFL in primary school curriculum can be found at any level from the kindergarten to adult education. Another important consequence is a shift from primary education as exclusively vernacular schooling aimed at teaching the 3Rs to primary education including a foreign language and a multicultural element.

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