

Impact of EFL on the Mother Tongue of Arab Children

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1. The Controversy

Educators have been divided over the introduction of EFL curriculum in the primary school, each group rationalizing its views with various arguments. The notes incorporated in this paper seek to highlight the major topics raised by the various parties.

Supporters of EFL introduction in the primary school point to the longer duration in which it will be taught throughout the school curriculum. They further argue that teaching EFL at this stage will facilitate the overall process of language acquisition. They emphasize the clear emotional state of pupils at this stage where the anti-foreign culture has not been formed yet. In other words, they maintain that EFL is more acceptable to the pupils who have a better incentive to be proficient. Proponents of this approach, however, stress the need to supply pupils at this stage with adequate information about other cultures through EFL as well as the mother tongue itself (Kokonis, 1995).

Additionally, the following arguments are often put forward to support this view:

1. The introduction of EFL at the primary stage constitutes the basis for a successful educational experiment. Every child starts learning it without disrupting the amount of time or effort devoted to other subjects.
2. The acquisition by pupils of the necessary skills for participation in modern society contributes to the continuing advancement of communication technology, which becomes

easier when favourable views are held by all sections of the community.

3. The early commencement of EFL learning allows children an opportunity to absorb foreign cultures, thus contributing to the development of the child's personality and enhancing his abilities towards the mother tongue.
4. Learning EFL encourages tolerance in multicultural societies. Small children are better prepared to learn EFL, since listening skills diminish with time. Children also tend to restrict their choices as they become older (Shimek,1995).
5. Learning EFL at an early stage increases the tendency to learn other languages in subsequent stages.
6. Learning EFL will not have adverse effects on the acquisition of the mother tongue. The two languages are complementary.

Opponents of teaching EFL at the primary stage have their own arguments, however. In the first place, this they emphasize the negative impact of learning EFL at the primary stage on the mother tongue. The dual acquisition of languages at this stage could well be at the expense of the mother tongue. To support this view they cite studies carried out in psycholinguistics and empirical research as well as the financial and administrative aspects of learning.

The English educator Michel West is one of the prominent opponents of teaching foreign languages at an early stage. His counterpart in the Arab world is Abdul-Aziz Al-Gousei, the Director of the UNESCO Centre in Beirut during the 1950s. He campaigned for the complete abolition of EFL from the primary school curriculum. Similar opinions were echoed by the Arab educator Satii Al-Husari , who maintained that "teaching EFL in primary schools has negative implications for children and handicaps their intellectual development (Al-Qasimi, 1979).

Proponents of this strategy cite a number of arguments to support their point of view. Below is a brief summary of their arguments:

1. The intellect of individuals normally reaches a peak at age 15, remaining constant until his forties when it starts diminishing.

Accordingly, individuals between the ages of 15 and 40 are better equipped to learn EFL compared with children whose intellectual development is not yet complete (Al-Qasimi, 1979).

2. Learning EFL is a complex process requiring the use of the individual's psychological, intellectual, muscular and emotional abilities. It constitutes an exhausting experience for Arab children since they learn a second language (i.e. Classical Arabic) in the primary school . Indeed, Classical Arabic varies in various respects from the vernacular which is used as a medium of communication and in everyday situations. It would thus be asking a lot to burden them with English, which becomes a third language (Ayari, 1996; Albuainain, 1994). Some educators see the root cause of the problem in the difficulties of children trying to understand the conceptual meaning of words. If there are two different ways to express such a meaning, children will have even more difficulty in distinguishing between them (e.g. *naal - jezma*). There is in addition another way to express the same meaning (*kandra - subbat*). The child will thus find it even more confusing if the English word "*shoe*" is added (Al-Qasimi, 1979).
3. The kindergarten and nursery stages (3 – 6 years) are considered by psychologists as early childhood. At this stage children have an overwhelming need to learn their mother tongue ; they have to learn correct pronunciation , new structures and vocabulary items . Furthermore, they need to enhance their proficiency in L1. This process necessitates training the muscles of the tongue and the vocal cords, which are at an early stage of development. If – in addition to Classical Arabic - EFL is introduced at this stage, his progress in learning the mother tongue is hindered since each language has its own vocal requirements, which may be impaired when learning more than one language simultaneously. Moreover, each language requires its own linguistic skills in terms of speaking, reading and writing , which are different from skills required by other languages. It will thus be difficult to ask small children to learn the productive and receptive skills of two unrelated languages at the same time. The child can be

proficient in either English or Arabic. In other words, proficiency in one can only be achieved at the expense of the other. This logically requires the postponement of teaching EFL until the child has mastered his mother tongue. Once this is achieved, it will be relatively easy for the child to make a transition to the other language. The experience of industrialized countries is instructive in this regard, since only the mother tongue is taught at the primary stage (Jalal, 1993).

4. Teaching EFL at the primary stage may have a negative influence on the child's motor-visual collaboration. The child finds it difficult to write two distinct languages, one from left to right and the other from right to left. The experience of introducing EFL at an early stage in both the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait has been accompanied by instances where the pupils write the mother tongue in an opposite direction due to the influence of English. In addition, it has been noted that some children tend to read numerals in an opposite direction and to write numbers in the opposite way. In these cases, EFL teaching in the primary stage will only add to their confusion (Al-Thwadi, 1995; Kuwait Ministry of Education, 1994-1997).

5. Teaching EFL at an early stage will be at the expense of the Arabic language and Islamic education, both of which constitute the bulk of the curriculum in the early years. The time allocated for EFL has to be deducted from these basic components. Teaching EFL is considered inappropriate at this stage because children need to learn their mother tongue and the principles of their religion, while the introduction of EFL will lead to confusion, reduce the confidence in the mother tongue, and promote foreign concepts at a tender age. This situation may continue in later stages. This argument was duly emphasized by Fatma Hussein (1993) in her comments on the decision of Kuwait Ministry of Education to introduce EFL at the primary stage:

The decision is not necessarily a magic solution, but a temporary cultural renovation that may help the increasing momentum to push our children towards foreign schools. It is a renovation that does not constitute sufficient means of protection. For this protection can only be

maintained by a complete overhaul of the Arabic language curriculum ... indeed we need the foreign language, but we have to present it to children as an attractive block to be added to a strong foundation of their mother tongue - Arabic.

6. Teaching EFL at an early age will contribute to the exaggerated notions that many parents hold about the importance of English, which is normally associated with some illusions English leads the learner to a better future. This exaggerated notion has resulted in some parents insisting on sending their children to learn EFL (starting with the kindergarten) in private schools, overlooking the educational, linguistic and emotional dangers that may face children at this early stage (AL-Mamouri, et. al, 1983).
7. Some studies have advocated teaching EFL in its own cultural context. Such a suggestion ignores the dangers that will result in the child losing confidence in his culture and language. Instead, he may feel more sympathy with the foreign language and culture, a situation that could affect his loyalty towards his religion, his mother tongue and his culture.
8. An early start in EFL teaching will increase the deficiency of EFL teachers. It may lead to the appointment of teachers with inadequate levels of training or language proficiency , which will in turn be reflected in the pupils' standards.

2. Some Relevant Studies

Studies on this subject frequently emphasize the duality in language and culture in multicultural and multilingual communities such as the USA, Canada and some European countries. Attention is normally focused on the impact of foreign language teaching on the mother tongue.

The studies carried out during the first half of the twentieth century were concerned with the linguistic handicaps in children learning two languages. The general conclusion of such investigations is that children learning two languages tend to develop some sort of linguistic deficiency compared with those learning one language. The deficiency was clear in such linguistic fields such as vocabulary items

and their meanings, as well as composition and grammar. Macnamar (1966) rationalized this by referring to "balance and factor" where the second language achievement is made at the expense of absorbing the skills of the mother tongue. However, Cummins (1978) criticized this argument, emphasizing the need for taking into consideration the time allocated to learning the mother tongue when the second language is used as a medium of instruction. In other words, if the number of classes in which the mother tongue is taught is small, the standard of pupils will deteriorate regardless of the nature of the curriculum or the medium of instruction.

Again, the general conclusion of the investigations carried out during the second half of the twentieth century on the impact of teaching two languages simultaneously, was that children learning one language tended to achieve better results in writing compared with children studying two languages. They also emphasized that bilingual children suffer from linguistic handicaps that arise from the endeavours to master two languages.

Results of studies carried out in some Arab countries on the same issue are far from being conclusive. Afify (1989) investigated the impact of science teaching in English on the comprehension of fifth year primary pupils, and their inclinations towards science as a subject. The results of his study indicated that there was a low level of achievement by the first group, which studied science in English in contrast to the second group, which studied science in Arabic.

Another investigation was carried out in Egypt by Khedr (1986) on the type of influence that an early start in EFL has on the mother tongue of children. The sample consisted of pupils in the fourth and sixth grades that had two years of K.G. The conclusion was that children who studied foreign language at an early stage had a lower standard of achievement in the mother tongue, compared with those who were not been exposed to the foreign language. It was also concluded that the negative impact of learning a foreign language at an early age diminishes as children get older. A similar conclusion was arrived at by Hanna (1967), whose findings indicated that EFL teaching to fourth year primary pupils (i.e. ages 10-11) has no negative impact on achievement in the mother tongue. On the contrary, it may raise the performance of pupils in the skills of listening and speaking.

Similar conclusions were found by Al-Hakea & Habib (1994), who carried out a study of introducing EFL in the primary schools of Egypt. They carried out tests in both English and Arabic on fourth and fifth grade pupils at the primary school. According to them, teaching EFL at these fairly advanced grades has no effect on leaning the mother tongue.

Al-Mamouri , et. al. (1983) undertook the most comprehensive study in this field. They focused on the effect of teaching foreign languages on the mother tongue of the pupils in the primary, intermediate and secondary stages in different Arab countries. The study involved the distribution of questionnaires to a sample of 700 students throughout the Arab world. The major conclusions were:

1. The students are more inclined to study Arabic than foreign languages.
2. Vernaculars are frequently used in the classroom instead of Classical Arabic.
3. There is an indirect negative impact of foreign language teaching as can be seen in the students' preoccupation away from the mother tongue which may eventually result in weakening their proficiency level in Arabic.

Accordingly, the researchers propose the postponement of commencing EFL teaching to later years, after the child has become more proficient in the mother tongue.

Al-Shikhaibi (1990) carried out a study to assess the attitudes of Egyptian educators towards the positive and negative impacts of teaching EFL in the primary school. The majority of the respondents thought that it has no impact on pupils' acquisition of Arabic. They pointed out that a child at this stage had the ability to learn more than one language. They further argued that a language consists of a number of skills and therefore learning some of these skills in one language would assist the learner in acquiring the other skills in the other language .

Another study consisted of Egyptian University students. The majority of the sample favoured the introduction of EFL at an early stage in order to prepare pupils to more advanced levels (Sadek, 1988).

In Jordan, Mukattash and Al-Khatib (1983) carried out a study evaluating achievement in EFL in various schools. Their findings showed that pupils who started learning EFL at the K.G. and first year primary

achieved better results in Arabic compared to students whose started English at the fifth grade. In addition, pupils who commenced their EFL study in K.G. achieved better results than their counterparts, who started learning it at the fifth grade. The investigations concluded that an early start in EFL may in fact boost the learning of the mother tongue.

In Qatar, a study was undertaken to assess the Arabic language development by pupils of the fourth and sixth grades, and the type of influence that EFL teaching at an early age has on mother tongue acquisition (Al-Mullah, 1994). The major conclusions of the study were:

1. Fourth grade pupils who did not study EFL had significantly better results in listening and speaking compared with pupils who had received their education in English at an early age.

1. There were no significant differences between pupils of the sixth grade who did not study EFL in government schools compared to others.

2. Language proficiency was found to increase with age.

In Kuwait several studies were undertaken to investigate the effect of EFL teaching to primary school children on Arabic. One study by Al-Mutawa (1996) aimed at soliciting the opinions of 1200 Kuwaiti citizens regarding EFL teaching at the primary stage. Results showed that the overwhelming majority expressed their fear that EFL might have adverse effect on pupils' achievement in Arabic. Rifki and Al-Mutawa (1997,1998) assessed the impact of introducing EFL in the first and second grades at the primary school on the scholastic achievement of pupils in Arabic. The first study concluded that a child's performance in Arabic shows improvement compared with the year prior to the introduction of EFL. An important implication of this result is to ameliorate fears about negative linguistic interference. The second study, however, concluded that Arabic language acquisition of second year primary pupils was not affected by EFL learning.

Similar studies, carried out by the Unit of Measurement and Evaluation at the Ministry of Education in Kuwait, concluded that the reaction of Arabic language teachers was moderate with regard to the impact of EFL on teaching Arabic at the primary school. There was no noticeable trend in their responses, either for or against EFL teaching (Ministry of Education, 1994-1997)

3. Concluding Remarks

The conclusions that can be drawn from the above studies , arguments and counterarguments are:

1. There is no compelling empirical evidence to substantiate and thus lend credibility to either side of the controversy with regard to the ideal age for starting foreign language education in the Arab world.
2. EFL should not be considered the sole factor responsible for pupils' weakness in the mother tongue, since vernaculars continually compete with classical Arabic .
3. Sufficient attention should be paid to the Arabic language curriculum and to those who teach it in order to dispel the fear that EFL may have a negative impact on Arabic..
4. It may prove educationally appropriate to postpone the age of starting EFL teaching until the child has mastered his/her mother tongue - Arabic.

Obviously more research is still needed to ascertain with reasonable degrees of confidence the impact of foreign language education on the students' mother tongue as well as on his attitudes and overall scholastic achievement.

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