

Teaching English in Elqubba primary schools: Issues and directions

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ABSTRACT

The Libyan Ministry of Education has taken important steps to introduce English from the 1st grade (age 6) since autumn semester 2018/2019, yet without taking into considerations the issues that will be faced in teaching English in primary schools. This study, therefore, aimed to identify the issues encountered in the teaching of English from the 1st grade to the 4th grade in primary schools in Elqubba, a city in Eastern Libya and how to overcome these issues. Data were collected through focussed observations and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that crowded classrooms, lack of teaching tools and equipments, insufficient exposure to the target language, extensive use of Arabic language, some deficiencies in "English for Libya" coursebooks, poor knowledge of teaching methods, and non-English major teachers were the challenges faced in teaching English. Directions are proposed to overcome these issues.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, many countries have introduced English into primary education as the early instruction of English as a foreign language/second language is better [1, 2]. Also, the Libyan Ministry of Education has taken important steps to introduce English from the 1st grade (age 6), and it has become an obligatory course since autumn semester 2018/2019. However, the Libyan Ministry of Education has not taken into considerations the issues that will be faced in teaching English in primary schools.

The challenges faced in teaching English have been investigated around the globe [3, 4]. The study of [3] used a general scanning method to investigate the challenges of teaching English in Turkish primary schools and found that large classes, poor teaching and learning facilities, lack of English major teachers, and a limited exposure to the language were the challenges encountered in teaching English. A recent study was done by [4] who studied the problems facing teaching English in primary and secondary schools in Yemen. The study investigated the issues from the viewpoints of English foreign language teachers and supervisors via a questionnaire. The findings revealed that the challenges faced in teaching English were lack of teaching aids, large classes, teachers' low proficiency in English, and lack of motivation.

However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have been done to investigate the issues faced in teaching English in Libyan primary schools since English has been introduced recently. This study, therefore, aimed to identify the issues encountered in the teaching of English from the 1st grade to the 4th grade in primary schools in Elqubba, a city in Eastern Libya and how to overcome these issues using a focussed observation and semi-structured interview. It is hoped that the results from this study may be beneficial to teachers, policy makers, textbook writers, researchers, and syllabus designers who are interested in the field of English language teaching related to young learners.

2. TEACHING ENGLISH IN LIBYAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

English was introduced from the 1st grade to the 4th grade in primary schools in the academic year 2018/2019. Since then, English has become a compulsory subject from the 1st grade up to 12th grade in Libyan state schools. The number of periods for teaching English from the 1st grade to the 4th grade is restricted to three periods of 45 minutes each. It means that English is only taught two hours and fifteen minutes. The primary school system is divided into two semesters, each lasts for 3 months. At these primary stages, English teachers use a series of coursebooks called *English for Libya* published by Garnet Publishing, United Kingdom. Even though these coursebooks are organised around activities based on communicative approaches, most English primary teachers, if not all, still use the grammar translation method, focusing on the basic rules of English grammar and vocabularies, and the audio-lingual method with a focus on drill and repetition.

Most of the primary teachers of English hold a Bachelor of Arts in English language. These teachers depend only on one resource, a coursebook, in classroom while teaching. Dependence on this resource could be due to the English language policy in Libya or the limited knowledge that these teachers have about techniques and principals in language teaching. These teachers assess their students by using only form-focused tests as the four macro skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking were not part of the assessment tests of the primary schools.

3. TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

3.1. Approaches and methods to teaching

As the goal of learning English as a foreign/second language is to communicate in it successfully, communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches, stressing the importance of communicative competence (CC), have played a significant role in the second and foreign language teaching field. There has been an increasing interest in engaging such approaches in curricula design and in teaching English as a foreign/second language in that they facilitate the process of leaning a foreign/second language.

CLT and TBLT have been considered the most effective approaches in teaching English as a second/foreign language. Accordingly, they have been adopted in many countries such as Korea [5], Hong Kong [6], China [7], Turkey [8]. However, some researchers [9, 10] warned that it can be difficult to export a method from one context to another, as CLT and TBLT have their origins in teaching English in western countries.

CLT cannot be suitable for teaching young learners in crowded classrooms with insufficient resources [11]. The teachers also misunderstand the principle and techniques of CLT by virtue of lack of training. According to [11], recent policy government recognizes the inappropriateness of CLT and seems to move away towards the Chilean context.

Even though there has been a debate among second language researchers about the suitability and unsuitability of CLT in the field of teaching-learning English as a foreign language context, this approach, to date, is still dominant. The inappropriateness of CLT in the foreign language context could be related to many factors such as, overcrowded classroom and lack of pre-service and in-service training for English teachers in the principles and techniques of this approach, and these issues can be overcome.

In addition to CLT and TBLT approaches, Total Physical Response (TPR) coined by [12] is a language teaching method based on a form of CLT approach. In TPR learners "listen attentively and physically respond to commands given by the teacher" [13]. It is a preferable method among teachers of young learners as TPR appeals to young learners' physical energy. [14] points out that young learners are more interested in activities associated with physical actions. Using TPR activities such as poems, chants, songs, rhymes, stories or games, can create a stress-free environment in order to engage learners effectively in the learning process [13].

3.2. Primary school teachers of English

As teachers play an important role in teaching English to young learners, and young learners are, to a greater extent, dependent on their teachers, primary school teachers of English should be qualified. A qualified English teacher should not only be competent in all four skills but also knowledgeable of language teaching theories and language teaching methods and approaches. With respect to language proficiency level, teachers of English with a level of C1 on the CEFR are preferred to be "fully functional in the informal and incidental language regularly required in the primary classroom" [15]. In terms of teacher qualification, a master's degree as a basic qualification for teaching English in primary schools is needed to make certain that "teaching is a high-status profession attracting high performing students" [16].

3.3. Teacher education

Pre-service and in-service teacher training play an essential role in teacher development. As such, many countries have provided these provisions since the introduction of English into the primary level [17]. For example, to improve their language and teaching skills, teachers in Korea were offered 120 to 240 hours of pre-service training [18], whilst in Italy, teachers are required to undertake either 300 or 500 hours of initial training in methodology and language [17]. However, some countries lack the necessary training for primary school teachers of English [1, 2].

According to [16], pre-service training of primary classroom teachers "should have a focus on age-appropriate foreign language teaching methods as well as teachers' own language proficiency". When governments implement new curricula, in-service teacher training is required to ensure the quality of teaching process. Teachers should be given appropriate and timely in-service training in using both the materials and approaches in teaching and learning English, as noted by [16].

In addition to pre- and in-service teacher training in relation to materials, language, and teaching approaches, primary school teachers of English should be prepared to use technology, as it has played a key role in making language teaching easier and more effective.

3.4. Teaching tools and equipments

Tools and equipments, such as overhead projectors, smart boards, computers, flash cards, posters, cassette players, and CDs ... etc, have come into play in facilitating the process of teaching and learning English in primary classrooms. These tools and equipments can be used to ensure the quality of teaching and learning in these classrooms, since they can attract children's interest and thus motivate them to learn.

3.5. Language teaching-learning materials

Materials have the potential role to aid the process of teaching and learning in primary classrooms. Selecting materials that should be used to teaching young learners varies from country to country. According to [19], in some countries prescribed course books are provided while other countries do not take course books for granted. Depending heavily on only one course book could have detrimental effects on students' needs, teaching procedures, teaching techniques, and language use [20].

Instead of providing them with teaching materials, government should allow school teachers, if qualified, to choose their own materials in order to cater for their students' needs. However, as pointed out by [21], if teachers are not qualified, course books should be provided as they "appear to have a strong positive impact".

4. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

4.1. Research purpose and question

The purpose of the present study, as previously mentioned, was to identify the issues faced in English teaching from the 1st grade to the 4th grade in primary schools in Elgubba, a city in Eastern Libya and how to overcome these issues. More specifically, this study attempted to answer the following question: What are the issues encountered in English teaching in primary schools in Elgubba and how these issues can be overcome?

4.2. Research design

A research design is a detailed description of how a research task is achieved. It involves the data collection, measurement and analysis [22]. The study of identifying issues faced in the teaching of English from the 1st grade to the 4th grade in Elqubba primary schools adopted a qualitative research as a mode of inquiry. The intent of qualitative research is to obtain a holistic picture of the problem under investigation, as this approach is "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" [23].

4.3. Setting

This study was conducted in Elqubba, a city in eastern Libya. Four primary governmental schools were visited, and four classrooms (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade) from each school were involved.

4.4. Data collection and analysis

Before commencing the fieldwork, a permission was sought from the head of the educational affairs in Elqubba city in order to get access to the primary schools. After obtaining the permission, data were collected through focussed observations [24] and follow up semi-structured interviews [25] rather than general scanning method or questionnaire used in previous studies [3, 4], in order to obtain comprehensive details about the issues faced in teaching English in primary schools in Elqubba, Libya.

Through the focussed observations, the researchers observed 16 primary classrooms in terms of classroom size, instructional time, materials and resources, and instructional language. For recording the observational data, a checklist with the aforementioned list was used. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 8 female teachers who teach in these classrooms. The teachers initially participated in an introductory interview in order to obtain information about their teaching experience, educational background, qualification ... etc. The teachers were then asked specific questions in order for the researchers to know whether or not such teachers have an extensive knowledge of techniques and principles of the most effective approaches and methods in English language teaching in relation to young learners. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic rather than English due to the incompetence of these teachers. The semi-structured interview data were recorded by making hand written notes [23].

The process of analysing the collected data was done manually. First, the researchers scanned the observational checklists and then the hand written notes from the interviews in order to answer the research question.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of observations and interviews were grouped into seven issues. The first five issues obtained from the observations, and the last two issues from the interviews.

- Crowded classrooms
- Lack of teaching tools and equipments
- Insufficient exposure to the target language
- Extensive use of Arabic language
- Some deficiencies in "English for Libya" coursebook
- Poor knowledge of teaching methods
- Non-English major teachers

5.1. Discussion of the data analysis for observations

The findings revealed that the issues faced in the teaching of English in primary schools in Elgubba were as follows:

5.1.1. Crowded classrooms

The classrooms which were observed were crowded. These classrooms had more than 40 students. This finding is in consistent with other studies [3, 4]. This issue can make teaching English in primary classrooms less efficient. For example, a pair or group work facilitating the students to communicative in the target language may not be used in large classrooms. Also, crowded classrooms can hinder the teachers in managing classroom and maintaining discipline.

5.1.2. Lack of teaching tools and equipments

It was observed that teaching tools and equipments were not included in the classrooms. This finding is mirrored in other studies [3, 4]. The teachers used only a marker and a whiteboard to deliver their lessons. This could demotivate the young learners to learn English and make the process of teaching English ineffectual.

5.1.3. Insufficient exposure to the target language

The findings revealed that the instructional time of English was limited to three periods of 45 minutes each in primary schools, which is not sufficient. As stated by [16], "if instruction is organized in small periods of time over an extended period, it takes learners much longer to achieve target levels". Within the allotted time, the teachers cannot apply the communicative approaches which the series of the coursebooks called *English for Libya* are based on.

5.1.4. Extensive use of Arabic language

Findings from the observation in the classrooms showed that even though the instructional time is not enough as indicated in the above section, the teachers instructed their students in Arabic language extensively. This affected the process of teaching and learning English in general and the listening and speaking skills in specific. Learning via listening and speaking is very important in primary schools and should be incorporated into every lesson, as they "allow children to organise and rehearse ideas in advance of putting them on paper and it is a key factor in securing successful learning" [26]. One explanation for this issue is that the teachers could be incompetent in English language.

5.1.5. Some deficiencies in "English for Libya" coursebook

The findings showed that the coursebook used in teaching English in Elqubba primary schools has some deficiencies in terms of the content knowledge. For instance, the first unit including 8 lessons focuses only on teaching the alphabet. This confirmed the notion among English primary teachers in Libya that teaching English to young learners should be started from the alphabet. Indeed, all the observed teachers focused extensively on teaching the alphabet and sometimes linked the alphabet with some words, such as "a" "apple".

5.2. Discussion of the data analysis for interviews

5.2.1. Poor knowledge of teaching methods

The findings obtained from the semi-structured interviews revealed that the teachers lacked knowledge of the principles and techniques of communicative teaching methods even though most of them are BA degree holders. This can be attributed to the poor materials that these teachers received when they were students at university. It was also found that the teachers had no knowledge of Grammar Translation Method although they applied it in their English teaching. It can be concluded that these teachers taught the way they were taught.

5.2.2. Non-English major teachers

Through the interviews, the researchers found that three out of eight of the teachers were out-of-field teachers. This issue has a negative impact on teaching English to young learners in Elqubba primary schools since such teachers have no knowledge about English language except Alphabet and some vocabularies related to food and family.

6. CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS

This study has identified the issues faced in teaching English in primary schools from the 1st grade to the 4th grade through qualitative data in Elqubba, Libya and how to overcome these issues. The findings showed that crowded classrooms, lack of teaching tools and equipments, insufficient exposure to the target language, extensive use of Arabic language, some deficiencies in "English for Libya" coursebooks, poor knowledge of teaching methods, and non-English major teachers were the challenges faced in teaching English in Elqubba primary schools.

In the current study, the issues of teaching English were investigated in only Elqubba primary schools using focussed observations and semi-structured interviews. Further research is required to examine the challenges of teaching English in primary schools in other parts of Libya applying different instruments which might yield different results.

The aforementioned issues can be overcome if the following directions are taken into considerations:

- a. Ministry of Education should build more classrooms to solve the problem of crowded classrooms.
- b. Non-English major teachers should be avoided and more English teachers with advanced proficiency level should be employed.
- c. English departments at universities should conduct extensive pre-service trainings for English teachers in relation to teaching English to young learners.
- d. Teaching tools and equipments, such as overhead projectors, smart boards, computers, flash cards, cassette players, and CDs should be placed in classrooms in order to facilitate the process of teaching-learning English.
- e. "English for Libya" coursebooks should be revised in terms of content of knowledge.
- f. Ministry of Education should organize in-service trainings for the teachers of English in cooperation with English departments to improve their knowledge about teaching English to young learners.
- g. The number of periods for teaching English should be 5 periods of 1 hour each weekly at least.

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