

An Investigation of the Status of English Language Instruction in the Lower Basic Stage in Jordanian Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

English in action in Grades 1-6 was investigated in this qualitative study, which utilized a purposeful sample of five public schools in the Greater Amman area. The schools were urban and suburban, for boys and girls. Two strategies were used to collect data: descriptive classroom observation, and in-depth interviews using semi-structured questions to explore perceptions concerning the EFL policy and its implementation.

Data analysis revealed that some teachers exhibited hard work and some good teaching practices. Many had poor command of English and lacked competence in key- teaching skills. The Action Pack series needed development. The supervisory system and the in-service training programs were areas of weakness which the study identified.

In the light of the results of the study, the researcher addressed some recommendations to the concern. A two-fold training plan should be designed for both prospective teachers and those who are currently working in schools. English language proficiency should be a basic requirement for initial training and professional development.

Keywords: Early Introduction of FLT, Policy Implementation, Teaching Practices, Initial Training and Professional Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background and Significance of the Study

English Language Teaching (ELT) has always been a subject of concern to educational policy makers in Jordan. Before the turn of the new century, a program of English instruction for all pupils beginning in Grade Five was an integral component of Jordanian education for decades.

In the early 1980s and in view of national and international developments in education, a new English language curriculum with a notional-functional orientation was developed by the Ministry of Education (MOE). This was later followed by another curriculum based on the aims stated by the temporary Law of Education No. 27 of 1988. The curriculum as stated by its goals was expected to meet the needs of children who wanted to pursue their higher education as well as those who entered the labor force directly. However, complaints of students' weakness in the English language performance were often voiced by educators and university instructors (Ja'far, 2004, P.35, 89).

A review of the policy of education was recently undertaken upon recommendations made by the Consultative Economic Council, formed and chaired by His Majesty King Abdullah II. Accordingly, English was introduced as a course of study starting in Grade One instead of Grade Five in 1999. In June 2001, the Board of Education (BOE) approved the teaching of *Action Pack* series, aided by computers, for English language instruction in the first year of schooling (Session No. 6, 2001).

The policy was later confirmed in the general guidelines for English language which was issued as part of the Educational Reform for Knowledge Economy (ERfKE) Project (MOE, ERfKE, 2003, P.3).

The concern of the MOE about English language teaching is understandable. The fast developments in communication technology and its impact on world affairs give English, through which globalization is carried out, more importance, not only for Jordan but for all non-English speaking countries in the world. Moreover, because of globalization, Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) in general has been gathering momentum. Thus, the issue of when to start introducing foreign languages is being given much consideration by almost all educational systems worldwide. Educators,

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nevertheless, highlight cautions that should be considered in planning a foreign language program early in schools (Rosenbush, 1995). Such cautions include:

- Teachers' lack of sufficient language skills and appropriate teaching methodology for young learners.
- Inappropriate or unrealistic program goals.
- Inadequate teaching materials.
- Lack of evaluation procedures for students, teachers and the program.

This study attempts to give an account of English in action in the public schools after six years of introducing ELT in the first grade. Because of its qualitative approach, the study has been able to explore English in a sample of classrooms, draw a profile of teachers' practice in those classrooms and investigate perceptions of those involved in the process of implementing the MOE policy. Thus, exploring the match and mismatch between aspirations and reality is believed to be important for future decision making, especially when an ambitious project like the ERfKE is in process.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

There is a need to improve English language proficiency in public schools in Jordan. An underlying assumption of the new policy as stated by the BOE is that the earlier a foreign language is introduced in schools, the better it is acquired.

The 'younger is better' hypothesis does not have strong empirical support in school context. The research suggests that younger do not necessarily have advantage over older children. There is also the argument that the mother tongue should be well established before introducing foreign languages in schools. From a psycholinguistic point of view, this has a cognitive aspect. It is also associated with cultural identity. Thus, for many countries around the world, a policy of an early start of FLT means implementing it at the age of eight or probably ten.

Another assumption says that the more time students spend in a second language context, the quicker they learn the language. Such an assumption is justified only if the appropriate learning conditions are satisfactorily met. This entails, among other things, an appropriate curriculum framework, rigorous teacher education and effective teaching strategies.

Successful English language teaching and learning depend on the linguistic competence and confidence of the teachers. Moreover, knowledge of effective teaching

methods and materials suitable for primary schools is essential.

The purpose of this study is to explore the actual state of affairs about teaching English in the lower basic grades in public schools in Jordan after six years of introducing English in Grade One instead of Grade Five.

Questions of the Study

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What does an investigation of the status of English language instruction in the lower basic stage in Jordanian public schools reveal?
- What perceptions do principals and teachers have of the new policy of introducing English in Grade One instead of Grade Five?

Definition of Terms

The study adopts the following definitions of terms:

Policy: The researcher adopts the definition made by Gorman (1975) who points out to the difficulty of attempting to distinguish between policy formulation and policy implementation. He considers them to be two stages of regulative activity rather than two different kinds of decision-making. Therefore the study of educational policy encompasses all phases of the regulative process from the statement of general objectives to an examination of the means by which these objectives are realized.

The Lower Basic Stage: According to the MOE document, *The General Guidelines and Curricula for the Basic and Secondary Stages* (MOE, 2002), the term 'lower basic stage' refers to Grades One to Six of the ten grades that constitute the basic stage in the school system in Jordan.

Research Limitations

- The study is limited to English language instruction in the first six grades of basic education in public schools in Jordan.
- The study concentrates mainly on English language teaching practices through classroom observation.
- The sample of schools is selected from the Greater Amman Area, urban and suburban.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

Age is one of the factors which are considered

important in second language (L2) learning. Research has shown that a statement like the 'critical period', which biologically determines when the first language (L1) can be acquired, may apply to certain aspects of second language acquisition (Brown, 1994). Children, for example, can learn how to speak with a native-like accent while adults can not. According to Scovel (1988), adults can excel in the grammatical and communicative complexities of a second language but not in learning to speak it like a native speaker.

Guiora, Brannon, Robert and Dull (1972) proposed what they call *language ego*. Language ego involves the interaction of the native language and ego development. The child's ego is dynamic, transient and flexible through the age of puberty. Thus, a new language for a child does not represent a threat to the ego. Guiora et al. (1972) suggested that the language ego might account for the difficulties that adults have in learning a second language.

It was argued on the basis of first language acquisition, that if L2 learners were exposed to 'comprehensible input', and were provided opportunities to focus on meaning and message rather than grammatical forms and accuracy, they would be able to acquire their L2 in much the same way as L1 learner (Krashen, 1981, 1982, and 1985).

It is important to add that other researchers claimed that interaction and output were crucial to L2 acquisition. By engaging in the process of conversational interaction, it was thought that learners would be forced to negotiate meaning, thus develop the language forms, which carry the meaning (Spada and Frohlich, 1995).

Although there are important differences between first and second language acquisition, there are similarities that support a common theory, particularly, when it comes to process. Richard-Amato (2003) reported evidence that second language learners use many strategies similar to those used for learning a first language to simplify utterances like saying 'sitted' instead of sat in an effort to communicate.

There is similarity also in the order of acquisition like the use of the progressive before the past and the prepositions before the articles. Researchers' explanation of this order is based on the principle that generally what the child first understands will be that which the child produces. This principle applies also to second language acquisition (Steinberg, Nagata and Aline, 2001).

When a second language is learnt in an informal setting outside a classroom, it is sometimes called natural

second language learning (Steinberg et al., 2001). Accordingly, natural and classroom second language learning are affected differently by age. Some of the differences they reported are:

- The benefits of the natural situation decline with age.
- The ability to learn in a classroom improves with age because older children and adults can adapt better to classroom atmosphere.
- In the classroom situation, older children will do best.

The rate of learning a second language is influenced by age. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) reported that Krashen (1979) had found that adults appeared to be superior on the rule-governed aspects of language. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) referred to research supporting the idea that adults were faster than children; and older children were faster than younger children. They also referred to the limitations of the findings because of the research being short-termed, and the differentiated rate was that of acquisition and not absolute abilities (Pavli, 1997). Ellis (1985) stated that, where grammar and vocabulary are concerned, adolescents do better than children and adults when the length of exposure is held constant. Older learners may have inhibitions and anxiety about making errors. Richard-Amato (2003, P.34) asserted that "older learners demonstrate much greater variation in their rate of acquisition and in their degree of ultimate proficiency than do younger learners".

Psycholinguists often address the role which L1 plays in L2 acquisition (Seliger, 1988, Steinberg et al., 2001 and Richard-Amato, 2003). Learners of L2 will attempt to relate the new concepts in L2 to what they know about their first language.

Another question addressed by psycholinguists is the nature of the first language and its relationship to the second language. The higher the similarity, like that between English and French, the faster the learning of L2 is.

Previous International Studies

Pavli (1997) examined the extent to which age influences achievement in foreign language learning. The belief that an early start is beneficial in learning a foreign language has influenced educational policies and has led to the introduction of foreign languages at elementary schools in Europe and the USA. Pavli's study reported many researchers who favored an early start of FLT: Stern (1992), Stern and Weinrib (1977), van Els,

Bongaerts, Extra, van Os and Janssen-van Dieten (1984) and Singleton (1989). They all agreed that their finding was due to the amount of time spent in learning the foreign language provided that favorable conditions were made available. Pavli concluded the study by stating that research is very often contradictory and that researchers have not reached any conclusions on whether there is an optimal age during which foreign languages could be introduced.

A comparative study was carried out by the European Commission on FLT in twenty-nine European countries (Eurydice, 2001). The study reflects efforts at all levels in the promotion of foreign language learning. These efforts include, among other things, consideration of research findings in the approaches recommended in the curriculum and introducing languages among the compulsory subjects from the earliest years of the primary school in many countries.

To help improve foreign language education in the United States, an Eric Digest was created from a study conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in the USA (Pufahl, Rhodes and Christian, 2001). Information was collected from educators in twenty two countries selected from all continents. Participants responded to a series of questions about language teaching methodologies, strategies and policies in their countries. The researchers identified eight exemplary characteristics of a successful policy from responses to the question: *'What do you think are the three most successful aspects of foreign language education in your country?'*

Following is a summarized list of those characteristics:

- An early start in the elementary grades, mainly at the age of eight.
- A well-articulated curriculum framework depending on The Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 1996).
- Rigorous teacher education as a major factor related to excellence in foreign language education.
- Comprehensive use of technology.
- Effective teaching strategies.
- Strong Policy that gives importance to the learners' first language and culture.
- Assessment administered at the national level, as part of school leaving examinations.
- Maintenance of heritage by focusing on the importance of the mother tongue as it contributes to foreign language success.

Previous Studies Related to Jordan

A number of postgraduate studies conducted at Jordanian universities evaluated aspects of English language teaching in Jordan. Such aspects should usually include one or more of the three constituent components of the teaching/ learning process: students, teachers and teaching materials. According to a survey list recently prepared by the Curriculum Department at the MOE, most of those studies were mainly concerned with evaluating *Petra* and *Amra* textbooks used for different grades in the educational system.

Tahboob (1998) conducted an analytical study to evaluate teachers' conformity to the underlying principles of the communicative approach in their classroom practices. The study came out with a list of problems encountered by teachers in teaching according to the principles of the communicative approach. Chief among these problems was the dominance of the oral-aural method and the Grammar-translation method. There was also the problem of the teachers' ignorance of the theoretical foundations underlying the approach. Teachers' behavior in correcting errors and their concentration on accuracy rather than fluency; and the constant use of Arabic as a major tool for communicating with children drew evidence of the reasons behind the problems.

A report covering two visits to evaluate English in basic schools in Jordan was submitted to the MOE by a British Council (B.C.) consultant (Bax, 2001). The visits' main purpose was to examine teachers' classroom practice in basic schools (Years 1, 2), largely through classroom observation. The two visits covered 31 classes in 28 schools representing a whole spectrum of school types and localities across the country.

The Consultant took detailed notes, which he later analyzed to identify patterns of classroom practice as well as strengths and weaknesses, which appeared to be common. Following is a summary of the main findings:

- Teachers were found to be weak, and to need development and training in a number of key areas like teaching literacy skills, getting each pupil to learn actively and checking pupils' learning.
- The syllabus at primary level (Year1, 2) needed restructuring. It was also urgent to start work on planning the remainder of the primary syllabus from Year 3 onwards to see how it would integrate with the *Petra* course.

- It was important to continue monitoring and checking the performance of pupils and teachers to see whether improvements were taking place.

Another B.C. consultant submitted a report to the MOE on the teaching of English in basic schools in Jordan (Hurst, 2004). Her mission was to assess the teaching of English in Grades 1-3 in a variety of urban and rural schools.

The Consultant visited nineteen schools in the Directorates of Amman One, Amman Two, Jerash, Madaba and Karak. She observed twenty-seven classes across Grades 1-5 and held meetings with teachers, principals and MOE officials in examinations, curricula and teacher training divisions.

Following are some of the main findings reflected in the report:

- Most of the teachers observed had difficulty in teaching the *Action Pack* materials effectively. Only four of the twenty seven lessons observed were of a high quality.
- The textbook series was found to be bright and attractive. However, the development of the language structures does not follow logical progression.
- Many of the teachers had limited knowledge of the world outside the immediate region of Jordan. They had very poor command of English.
- There were training needs of teachers which should be addressed immediately. The current supervisory system does not allow for effective monitoring of teachers.
- Evaluation mechanisms to monitor learners' progress were almost absent (Hurst, 2004, P. 34).

Ja'afar (2004) conducted a study to measure the quality assurance of the English programs which the public universities in Jordan provide for the BA degree. The Hashemite University was selected as a model to represent public universities, which are the main 'suppliers' of English Language teachers in public schools in Jordan. The researcher used a set of standards adopted from the American standards of teaching a foreign language. She also 'developed' standards derived from the private universities criteria for accreditation, and goals and objectives of the English program adopted by public universities in Jordan.

The study compared the university English program to a system with three components: the input, the process and the output. The findings implied that the input is rather weak and there are problems in most of the

elements within the system. The main result of the study was that the degree of congruence between the English language programs for the BA degree at the Hashemite University and the 'developed' quality assurance standards was below average.

This study managed to pinpoint one of the main issues that have an impact on English language teaching in schools. It highlights where the problem starts concerning a major aspect, which is the teachers and their linguistic competence.

The current study is an investigation of the status of English language instruction in the lower basic stage in Jordanian public schools. It attempts to reveal a pattern of teachers' behavior in the classroom through qualitative research instruments. Many of the national studies revealed findings related to textbook evaluation and other English language teaching areas, mainly through quantitative research instruments. Data of the current study is collected in face-to-face situations and by interacting with selected people related to the field of the research at hand.

Methodology

This research was designed to use a qualitative approach with an interactive mode of enquiry described by McMillan and Schumacher (2001). Observation and interview strategies were used for collecting data.

Site and Population

The site selected for the study was public schools in the Greater Amman area which consisted of 196 schools, of which 124 were for the basic stage. The total student population was 117089 students of whom 62166 were girls (MOE statistics for 2003-2004). The population of the English language teachers consisted of 1780 teachers of whom 1062 were female teachers (MOE statistics, 2001-2002).

Sample

To ensure a close representation of all types of schools, a purposeful sample of five public schools accommodating Grades 1-6 were selected from the Greater Amman area. They were urban and suburban schools for boys and girls. Thirteen teachers of Grades 1-6 in the sample schools were selected for classroom observation.

Participants for the interviews were the five principals and six of the thirteen teachers who were observed.

3. DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

1-Classroom Observation

According to Lincoln and Guba (1986), a major advantage of direct observation is that it provides here-and-now experience in depth. It permits the observer to use himself or herself as a data source. The researcher made extensive search on language classroom observation forms developed for different purposes. The technique developed for observation was a description form of six subheadings, which narrated what occurred in the classroom. According to Sheal (1989), the subheadings provide some focus and structure of the narrative. They included: classroom environment, lesson objectives, language use, lesson presentation, classroom management and assessment.

2-In-Depth Interviews

The purpose of this research instrument was to explore the principals' and teachers' perceptions of aspects related to the study. The questions were about the general status of English language instruction (ELI) in the public schools, principals' and teachers' perceptions on the policy of introducing English in the first grade, training and the supervisory system, and problems related to ELI as perceived by the interviewees. Questions concerning the curriculum and textbooks were mainly addressed to teachers. The questions were open-ended and semi-structured to allow for a better understanding of opinions.

Validation of Instruments

The observation form and the interview questions were judged for validation by four research specialists in the field of ELT. The comments made were taken into consideration.

To enhance validity, the study employed procedures such as the use of verbatim accounts and digitally recorded data for the interviews. Low-inference descriptors were utilized for observation (MacMillan and Schumacher, 2001).

Procedures of the Study

The researcher took all formal measures to initiate contacts with the sample schools and arrange for the observation sessions. Assertion was made that the observation was not intended to evaluate the performance

of any of the teachers but to gain knowledge and understanding of how the MOE policy was being implemented in schools.

Observations were carried out in the second semester of 2004-2005. The researcher took descriptive notes every time the lesson was proceeding. These notes were recorded under the main headings of the observation form described above; and on the same day the researcher revised the notes, categorized the data, and wrote them on separate forms for analysis.

Arrangements for the interviews were made in advance with the principals and teachers as convenient to them. The sessions lasted for thirty to fifty minutes each.

For the convenience of the interviewees, many of the interviews were conducted in Arabic and quotes were translated into English to convey the same meaning. The interviews were recorded on a digital sound recorder and transformed into script form for analysis. Units of themes were categorized under general titles.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Results Related to Question One

To answer the first question about the status of English in the lower basic grades in public schools, classroom observation revealed the following:

The physical classroom environment in all the classes visited had similar features. Small or large rooms accommodated the maximum number of pupils they could take, ranging between twenty and forty-six. In such classrooms, children are seated in rows hardly leaving space for the teacher to move around or to change the seating design needed for certain activities. Only Grades 1-3 in the three urban schools were lucky enough to have unconventional furniture for group seating arrangement which usually allows the teacher to move around and to organize pair work or group work activities when required.

Among the teachers observed, approximately 31% had a good command of English while 38% were only able to manage with the simple level of English offered in the lower grades. However, these lacked verbal fluency. The remaining 31% had poor level of English in terms of language use and pronunciation.

The target language was used by 38% of the teachers most or all of the time in their classes. For the rest, translation into Arabic unnecessarily accompanied English, even when the meaning was obvious.

The textbook served as a curriculum-planning instrument for all teachers. In all the classes observed, none of the teachers indicated to the pupils what to expect as learning outcomes. Based on that, the practice of assessment to check how far the outcomes had been attained was absent in most of the classes observed.

There was an extensive use of the chalkboard as a teaching aid. Teachers of grades 1-3 used flashcards. Cassette recorders were always brought into the classroom. Nevertheless, the audiotapes were not used to their maximum value.

Although the use of computer as a tool was a major element in the policy statement of introducing English as a foreign language in the lower grades, teachers of those grades (1-6) had not yet been given that opportunity.

As for teaching the four skills, listening and speaking was confined to what the books and the exercises required, with a pattern of teachers asking questions, and pupils responding with a one word answer. Free conversation exchange was absent.

Development of the reading skill seemed to be negatively affected by the text type in the series. Short dialogues encouraged memorization, which usually disguises the inability to read.

Writing was a skill that was hardly touched upon in the classes observed. Individual pupils practiced the mechanics of writing when invited to write on the board words and their meanings or to write answers to questions already answered orally. Creative writing, in

particular, had no place in the English language classes observed.

Excluding Grades 1-3 in the urban schools, the classroom seating as described above emphasized the teacher's dominance in a traditional teaching model. The classes were totally teacher-centered and did not encourage independent learning. Pupils did not receive equal chance of attention and no activities were directed towards the fast or slow learners.

In teaching vocabulary, words and their meanings were written on the board for pupils to copy and memorize. Recycling of lexical items did not seem to be part of teachers' practices.

However, from the descriptive notes of ten class observations (two in each school), a record of effective teaching practices was accumulated and quantified in the researcher's notes according to the different variables considered in the choice of the sample (see Table 1). The practices were meant to be recorded even if they were not a pattern of a teacher's behavior. In other words, they did not necessarily constitute deeply rooted teachers' behaviors. Yet, the researcher considered them indicators of some positive characteristics that teachers were aware of and should be enhanced in the future.

The record indicated that English language teachers in the girls' schools had better practices than those in the boys' schools. It also indicated that those in the urban schools had better practices than those in the suburban schools.

Table 1. Effective Teaching Practices Observed in the Five Sample Schools

Effective Teaching Practices Observed	Descriptive Indicators	Percentage of Incidents Recorded in the 10 Observation Sessions
1. Use of non-verbal messages for communication	Teacher (T) used signs to correct mistakes or to ask for silence.	30%
2. Use of games and/ or songs to enhance motivation for learning	Example: T mentioned the number of a picture and learners guessed what it was. T started a lesson with a song playing a cassette. All children would sing.	60 %
3. Relating form to function	T focused on the function of a grammatical form (ex. the possessive) by using it in different contexts.	20 %
4. Use of warming up activities	T revised previous language items and was able to create motivation.	50%
5. Effective use of recorded materials	T was able to play the cassette and stop it as needed to complement an activity.	40 %
6. Balanced use of structured and open-ended activities	Example: T used questions related to text, and others related to pupils' general knowledge to check understanding.	20 %

Effective Teaching Practices Observed	Descriptive Indicators	Percentage of Incidents Recorded in the 10 Observation Sessions
7. Use of additional material.	T encouraged pupils to look for additional material related to the topic at hand. Articles retrieved from web-sites were read and discussed by pupils.	10 %
8. Errors handled discretely.	T encouraged conversation. T showed agreement and repeated a correct version of what was said to correct errors indirectly.	10%
9. Use of visual aids.	Flash cards with words or phrases on one side and pictures on the other were manipulated for teaching vocabulary and reading.	50%
10. Use of T.P. R. method to give messages to children and for the practice of dialogues	T gave instructions to children who responded showing understanding of a certain message like: *Put your hands on your ears, to mean listen. *Put your hands on the table, to mean: sit down and pay attention. etc. T made pupils act or move around pointing at things in response to what they were instructed to do.	10%
11. Integration of the four language skills	Pupils listened to recording; answered teacher questions; read the text; described what they could see or do with the help of pictures; wrote a paragraph about what they described orally.	30%
12. Pressure- free classroom atmosphere	A friendly classroom atmosphere prevailed.	100%
14. Classroom well-managed	Teacher was able to cover many activities and integrate all language skills.	30%
15. Use of pair work or group work	Learners were given opportunity to work in pairs or groups.	50%
16. Use of assessment mechanisms	Teacher made continued checkpoints to assess pupils' understanding. Teacher walked around to assess written work.	30%

Results Related to the Second Question

The second question of the study was about the perceptions of principals and teachers of the new policy and its implementation. Analysis of the answers to the questions addressed by the researcher revealed the following:

All principals and teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the level of English proficiency of public school graduates, especially in their conversational skills. All, except one principal and one teacher, agreed that the policy decision of introducing English in the first grade was an excellent decision. They considered that the age factor was supportive of the policy. One principal expressed belief that 'young children of six years of age, or even preschool children, are more capable of acquiring foreign language skills than older children.' The principal and teacher who were against the policy considered that priority should be given to learning L1 skills. Therefore, they proposed that L2 should not be introduced before the third grade.

All teachers expressed their satisfaction with the *Action Pack* series. The important element which the teachers found missing in the *Action Pack* series was

enough information about the culture of the English speaking people. The teachers gave high consideration to this element of curriculum content. One teacher claimed that 'pupils do not know anything about the American people except what they get from the media, so they form negative attitudes towards Americans'.

Another teacher stressed the importance of the local culture. She thought that books should also have something about others' cultures.

Two of the principals who had English language background made negative comments about the curriculum. One claimed that 'the curriculum content is too simple and the methods used do not focus on communication skills'. Another commented that teaching aids and supplementary materials for young learners were not adequately provided.

Teachers who received training as part of the preparation for teaching *Action Pack* in the first grade thought that the emphasis in the training was on using computer technology for the teaching of English. Those teachers ended up not using computers at all for the teaching of English.

Both principals and teachers expressed the need for

pre-service and in-service training. One principal made reservation about the courses offered by the MOE. She claimed that 'the trainers are not always competent enough, the time is not convenient and the content is not always relevant to the needs of the participants'. Similar comments were made by teachers: 'We want to have training courses that are beneficial to us: not training on things we do not need'.

As for the role of supervisors in the development of English language teaching, the interviewees did not reflect a positive role: 'Supervisors come to count your mistakes. They attend one class a year to evaluate a teacher's performance. This is not fair,' claimed one teacher.

Considering measures taken for the implementation of the policy, two principals expressed reservation. One stated that 'the teachers are not adequately prepared for the linguistic and pedagogical demands of teaching the language, nor for the developmental needs of the age group in the lower grades'.

A major problem for teachers was their lack of confidence in their own level of proficiency. 'We, teachers, have weakness in expressing ourselves fluently. My English language is good enough for classroom teaching but in communicating in English outside classroom, I have weakness'.

Some of the difficulties teachers talked about were related to the shortage of certain basic teaching aids. In one school, four or five teachers had to share two cassette recorders. Another teacher complained that the recorders they had were old and needed maintenance. They wondered how schools in the present situation could provide time or facilities for computer-aided teaching required by the ERfKE project. So they called for an MOE major plan to achieve this ambitious practice. Both teachers and principals considered large classes a problem that needed to be resolved.

Schools in the suburbs have their own problems, the most serious of which is the turnover of teachers and the appointment of substitute teachers who are usually appointed on a temporary basis. One principal thought that decision makers should realize how disadvantaged most schools in the suburbs and remote areas are.

Casual interviews were conducted with two parents. The first was a mother of a sixth grade daughter working as a secretary in one of the urban girls' schools. The second parent was a father of a fifth grade son whom the researcher met by chance at the assistant director's office in the urban boys' school of the sample. Both the mother

in the girls' school and the father in the boys' school confirmed that they welcomed the decision when their children started learning English in the first grade. They expressed disappointment because the level of English of their children was much below their expectations.

5. DISCUSSION

1-The first question of the study was: 'What does an investigation of the status of English language instruction in the lower basic grades in Jordanian public schools reveal?'

Many teachers, according to the study, lacked competence in language skills. The low proficiency level of English language teachers was highlighted in the two B.C. consultants' reports (Bax, 2001 and Hurst, 2004) reviewed before, and in a study conducted by Nezami (2003).

The teachers also lacked key teaching skills. The variety of techniques, which should mark FLT for Grades 1-3, was not observed. In those classes one expects to see children actively engaged in games, role-play and action songs. Listening, responding and speaking should be the skills emphasized for children in those classes, with teachers using a multi-sensory and kinesthetic approach to teaching. In the upper classes, lack of teachers' awareness of integrating the four language skills in their teaching indicates their need for intensive training in that area.

Some teachers exhibited good teaching practices. Yet, to the researcher, and as reported in the study conducted by Tahboob (1998), they lacked knowledge and full understanding of principles behind these practices. One explanation of this is their exposure to short term training courses which are held sometimes to present new approaches and concepts like alternative assessment, pair and group work, etc. In cases like this the teacher, and usually the good teacher, might retain some surface images of what is presented without getting to the depth of what stands behind them. Here comes the importance of initial training, which should combine theory and practice in a way that trains the mind to select what practice to use, in what situation and for what purpose.

Analysis of the good practices observed by the researcher and recorded in Table (1) indicated that English language teachers in the girls and urban schools had better practices than teachers in the boys and suburban schools. These findings are supported by the 2004 MOE quality assurance tests results which showed

that, in English, girls outperformed boys and urban schools outperformed suburban schools.

The observations reflected a poor teaching environment. There was no presence of any EFL computer-aided learning. The low profile technology, the cassette recorder, was hardly in good shape; apart from the low quality of recorded course material. This makes one strongly propose that teacher training for a proper use of the technology at hand should precede a policy of high cost and sophistication, that is: computer-based instruction, which is at the heart of the educational reform project taking place at the moment.

2-The second question of the study was about perceptions of principals and teachers of the new policy and its implementation:

Many indicators reflect that the level of English of public schools graduates is below the general expectations of parents, educators and policy makers (Hashisho, 2005). Similar views were expressed by the interviewees. Most of them welcomed the new policy and thought that introducing English in Grade One would solve the problem. The few participants who voiced reservation argued that L1 should be well established before introducing foreign languages in schools. Such an argument goes in line with the policies reflected in Pufahl et al (2001) study. The policies are based on the belief that building on L1 leads to a successful learning of L2.

A review of the MOE policies and measures to solve the problem of English language teaching indicates that the target for change has always been the curriculum and the textbooks. Thus, the last three decades witnessed a development in many curriculum guides. The changes in curricula, accompanied most of the times by changes of textbooks, did not seem to have had a positive impact on the quality of English language teaching and learning as indicated above. Hence, the policy of introducing English in the first grade was made. The researcher believes that the questions that should be addressed are not only when English should be introduced but also how the whole program will be implemented. This entails, as Rivers (1981) puts it, the issue of how the language should be taught, the type of materials used and the training needed for teachers who will implement the program.

The ERfKE document entitled *'The General Framework: Curriculum and Assessment for the Ministry of Education'* (2003) calls for new roles for students in setting goals and exploring what is meaningful; new roles for teachers as facilitators for learning; new assessment

strategies; student-centered teaching and learning; a learning environment that accommodates a diversity of needs; to mention only some of what is advocated in the document.

Theoretically, these concepts are in line with the best practices in FLT. Current approaches in language teaching and curriculum development call for the integration of concepts, which include needs' analysis, an emphasis on process as well as product, a focus on the learner and learning and evaluation at every stage (Finney, 2002).

If one takes evaluation as an activity that should accompany all stages of curriculum development, one finds an absence of any reliable evaluation study of curriculum implementation. Besides, curriculum specialists assert the fundamental relationship between curriculum framework and instructional material. In theory, a textbook should represent the curriculum framework and its orientation (Al Sheikh, 2001). The *Action Pack* series was developed by publishers outside the educational system. As there is no theoretical framework to the series, it has become essential for the MOE curriculum specialists to revise and develop the series to meet the curriculum and assessment guidelines of the current reform project.

The series was found to be popular by most of the teachers. Nevertheless, the criterion of 'popularity' is seen by the researcher, as Tucker (1975) calls it, 'an ad-hoc simplistic' criterion reflected by teachers who considered textbooks their main curriculum reference. The popularity expressed by the teachers is probably due to the fact that the content of the *Action Pack* series, as one participant described it, is 'too thin'. Thus, it is least demanding in terms of its themes or language level.

The researcher believes that the series does not promote the richness of cultural diversity as a social value that helps develop understanding and appreciation of one's and others' cultures. Apart from few pictures related to Jordan in Book 6, the series reflect a bias in the choice of the characters and settings, which belong mainly to a foreign culture.

The interviewees called for the provision of teachers' training before and during their service. The current in-service training courses offered to teachers are not popular. It is clear that the supervisory system needs to be revised to become more relevant to the professional needs of teachers, and to be able to monitor English language teaching and learning.

The English language teacher is the most important

implementer of the MOE's English language policy. Any attempt to change the curriculum and textbooks is not expected to bring about better results in the absence of well-trained and effective teachers.

At present, the teachers enter the ELT profession with no initial training. The English department programs at universities are literature oriented. Most of what students learn is of little use for them as teachers of English after graduation. Moreover, their proficiency in English is, generally, below what is desired for English language teachers (Ja'far, 2004).

The only training available at present is in-service training carried out by supervisors and officials in the Training Department at the central office of the MOE. The programs as reflected by the interviewees in this study were rather ineffective. They lasted for a short time and were not mandatory. Besides, any effective training program for the teachers of English should include two broad types of activities: 1) Improving teachers' grasp of English; and 2) Improving their professional adequacy.

A qualified teacher, as defined by the MOE, is one who meets the criterion required by the Law of Education no. 27 of 1988. A teacher of the basic stage is qualified if he or she holds a first university degree (B. A. or equivalent) in a discipline related to the subject he or she is expected to teach.

Countries like the USA and those of the European Council, for example, have different policies and definitions of teachers' qualification. In most of the European countries, teachers' initial training extends to an average of two years (Eurydice, 2001). In the USA, the general pattern for a teacher to be qualified is having a university degree and attending a program for certification. While licensure and certification are significant indicators of teacher quality, these factors alone are insufficient for teacher effectiveness.

'A highly qualified teacher is certainly a good starting point, but it is the highly effective teacher who yields high rate of student learning,' (Tucker and Stronge, 2005: 6).

This raises the question: What is a starting point in the case of the Jordanian teacher? Most teachers who are qualified in the formal sense find themselves working with a class of forty or more without being equipped with any knowledge or skills for handling them except what they experienced as learners. Many of the difficulties they encounter were also reported in the study of Tahboob (1998). They struggle in the use of their English for

communicating with students; then for relief, resort to their mother tongue. They automatically adopt teacher-centered methodology, which largely ignores individual differences. Interaction in the classroom is dominated by the teacher, with the students mainly responding to the teacher's initiatives. This does not mean that schools in Jordan do not accommodate effective teachers.

Although much more systematic concern must be given to the teaching profession at large, English language teachers have multiple needs for initial training and ongoing professional development. Hence, a two-fold plan should be drawn for preparing and training teachers: one for prospective teachers who will enter the profession and another for those who are currently working at schools. For those who will enter the profession, a one-year program of initial teacher training should be designed in collaboration with universities to graduates of English departments who are willing to become teachers. Minimum criteria requirement should be established for entry to the program. The criteria should include, among others, an acceptable level of English proficiency measured by international standardized tests.

For those currently in primary schools, the plan should include measures to assess their English language proficiency as a basis for professional development.

Programs of professional development for supervisors should be created in a way that is compatible with teachers' development. The supervisory system should be revised and made more flexible to accommodate other models to utilize competent and effective teachers already in the field.

The study reveals organizational problems in suburban schools, particularly those of the boys. Those schools seem to have multiple problems exemplified in the quality of building and facilities and most of all the quality of teachers. When appointed, teachers (male or female) temporarily stay in the school until the first opportunity comes to leave it to another in the urban areas, close to where they live or where they prefer to live. Boys' schools in general, have the problem of not being lucky enough to keep good male teachers. Better income and status provided somewhere else is enough to make them leave for what they think is a better opportunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) The materials of the *Action Pack* series for Grades One to Six should be evaluated for their effectiveness on

students' language achievement at the end of the lower basic stage. The information collected should form the basis for decisions regarding curriculum change.

- 2) A two-fold training plan should be designed for both prospective teachers who will enter the profession, and those who are currently working in schools. The

plan should include measures to assess English language proficiency as a basis for initial training and professional development.

- 3) Further research should be conducted to evaluate the effect of the supervisory system and the current training programs on teachers' classroom performance.

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