

Assessing and Benchmarking reference EFL curricula in the Arab World in 2020

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Abstract

This research paper examines the efficiency of EFL curricula in the Arab world through assessing the status of EFL programs in terms of their appropriateness, applicability, and alignment to international curriculum standards. The study follows a mixed-method design where both qualitative and quantitative data are collected to gain insights into the EFL curricula designed in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Iraq before 2020. The findings of the survey questionnaire revealed that most of the 257 participants including teachers and coordinators had negative perceptions towards the curricula and considered that their drawbacks constituted a hurdle for reaching a high language proficiency level. The researcher conducted semi structured interviews with 20 teachers and coordinators who suggested restructuring and benchmarking curricula on a regular basis. Based on the results of the study, several aspects of EFL programs should be addressed to ensure an operative, efficacious, and practical implementation of curricula.

Keywords: Benchmarking, assessment, reference EFL curriculum, Arab world, EFL standards

Introduction

Lots of countries have customized the English language to their habitual environment, and spoken English has been daily embedded into students' communicative process. More and more students in the Arab world are opting for English because they need to guarantee social and future career opportunities both locally and internationally. Nowadays, in most non-English speaking countries, English words constitute a great percentage of students' vocabulary, especially when they code-switch and code-mix.

Alsagoff (2012) claims that teaching English as an international language prepares students with the tools needed in a global context. The English language is a leading communication factor globally and it is

becoming a necessity to ensure business productivity, global accessibility, and educational continuity. Nowadays, it is holding a high status as it is becoming the norm, a must for learners, and a motivational determinant to improve academic success and enhance career prospects. These learners should be competent and efficient learners and they should display proficient linguistic competency and oral fluency/accuracy in the target language when they reach the university level.

By and large, the fast pace of progress in the world, the migration and the global cultural exchange have made it a must to update and benchmark language curricula in order to cope up with students' patterns of thoughts, exposure to languages and cultures, and mainly interests and emerging needs. Hence, there should be a base upon which a curriculum is designed and English language curricula should entirely comply with the global standards and should be revamped and restructured in order to ensure a higher language proficiency level, better communication, and technological and intercultural skills.

Objective of the study:

The objective of the study is to conduct an in-depth study of the problems of Arab foreign language curricula and to delineate the use of benchmarking tools with the sole purpose of providing teachers, syllabus and curriculum designers with guidelines based on the most recent trends in ELT methodologies.

In the Arab world and in every country where English is taught as a foreign language, in addition to linguistic competencies, other types of skills such as interpersonal communication, ICT and digital tools, communicative linguistic skills, presentation, interaction, higher order thinking skills (HOTS) and soft skills are becoming necessary for the young generations. Thus, due to the transition to new skills and competencies, it is becoming quintessential to update and benchmark EFL curricula in the Arab region.

Problem of the study:

Unfortunately, educational curricula in general and language curricula in specific are rigid, have fixed ideologies, and do not undergo necessary changes and restructuring processes because these types of changes entail costly updates of syllabi, books, teaching materials, educational tools, ICT tools, and teacher training, etc. The findings of a study conducted in the Arab world countries by Shehdeh, F. (2010) showed that the main challenges are due to the cultural inappropriateness of the English textbooks and the negative attitudes of students towards learning English because of the lack of emphasis on skills development, and the inadequate pedagogical preparation of teachers.

For this reason, the researcher's contention is that it is of primordial importance to develop a framework for a continuous updating of EFL curricula. This means that the can-do statements, the vocabulary bands for each level, and the linguistic competencies should undergo simple adjustments if possible, accompanied with changes in the topics, study texts, and learning materials. In this respect, what teachers should be trained on is the design of contextualized, rich, authentic, sound and attractive instructional materials that address the demands and needs of students in a continuously changing world. With the advent of electronic and ICT tools, the design has become much easier especially that the real communication method is still emphasized as a communicative language teaching approach with an avoidance of artificial activities and drilling practices. In order to ensure that students can advance in a competitive world, it is important that curriculum designers update language planning regularly so as to conform to a standardized proficiency level.

Research questions:

The research study attempts to answer the following questions through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from seven countries in the Arab world:

1. What is the best curriculum philosophy and what are the standards that should be set when designing EFL curricula?
2. What type of theoretical perspectives, schools of thought, and scientific elements should be included in EFL curricula?
3. What are the curricular objectives that meet the needs of students in the Arab world?
4. How should teaching methods, materials design, and instructional practices be chosen?
5. What are the mainstream academic topics that meet the needs of Arab students?
6. On the basis of which criteria should lexis be chosen?
7. How should EFL curricula be designed in terms of strategies and approaches?

Review of the related literature:

An EFL curriculum is a map of the educational plan and framework that addresses the profile of the student whose native spoken language is any language other than English and who is studying in a non-English speaking country. The soundness in an operational curriculum framework should produce proficient language learners who can recall and communicate content in the English language. In this respect, curriculum designers' priority is to make sure that there is no discrepancy between the planned and the operational curriculum.

In fact, what is common among the multitude of definitions given to a curriculum is that it is a product of a comprehensive plan of the subjects or course teaching which is organized around the philosophical aims and objectives of the content, assessment criteria, teacher instruction, and learning strategies. A curriculum is conceived as a tool to inculcate in the student's mind learning principles that enable them to meet the demands of 21st century's requirements in terms of knowledge, skills, competencies, and practices.

Wiggins and McTighe (2005) defined curriculum as a "map of how to achieve the 'outputs' of desired student performance in which appropriate learning activities and assessments are suggested to make it more likely that students achieve the desired results." The results involve students' advancement in their oral and writing skills to meet global educational needs. Students' language acquisition skills should be enhanced and they are called upon to appreciate the culture of the language they are studying.

To guarantee success, students as well as institutions seek international recognition by standardized tests approved by institutions worldwide. To meet this objective, one of the foundations and standards of effective English language teaching, planning of syllabi, and assessment is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) which gives a prominent value to the multifaceted quality of foreign language acquisition/learning (English Language Teaching Global Blog, 2013).

The CEFR was established and developed by the European council in the 1990s as a general framework for assigning students into their corresponding competency levels through testing evidence of learning. It is language-neutral and it has been produced in 40 languages across the world (English Profile: The CEFR for English, 2015). It can be easily adapted to specific contexts of use and it serves as a foundation for the conceptualization of language syllabi, courses, materials, tests, foundational vocabulary bands, chunks, and grammar lists used for written and spoken discourse for the different proficiency levels. The CEFR recommends the use of descriptors scales that serve as tools to measure the levels of learners, to standardize assessment criteria, and to map learners' advancement across the three levels (the basic, the independent, and the proficient) (English Language Teaching Global Blog, 2013). These descriptors are formulated in the form of "can-do" statements (Newby, 2007). Other sources such as the Global Scale of English (GSE), and the Australian Curriculum (AUS) can be used for the formulation of "can-do" statements.

The CEFR that is established by the Council of Europe in 2001 follows an action-oriented approach that stresses the cognitive and affective impact of real-life educational tasks and activities to which students intensely and profoundly relate. The CEFR has become one of the benchmarking tools of

the academic standards for the evaluation of the linguistic proficiency level and the communicative fluency of learners of any language that an institution uses as a foreign language. To make an effective use of the CEFR, there should be an examination of the language user and the purposes for which the user learns this language for the sake of identifying the skills and activities to be taught at each of the six levels of the scale: A1, A2 (basic levels), B1, B2 (independent levels), C1, and C2 (proficiency levels) (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

This is the basis of curriculum design and this implies that it can be narrowed down, developed, and contextualized. Teachers can keep track of students' progress through portfolio reports that document every single achievement at a certain level of study. Bellar, M. (2013) recommended the use of these reports because they enable institutions to agree on a unified view of what learners should know and can do in terms of skills and competencies. Hence, mapping students' developments and setting up norms of language leveling and advancement are feasible through EFL referencing tools.

Since there are many commonalities among Arab students, especially in the contexts in which they learn foreign languages, it is of utmost importance to study the reasons for which Arab students spend at least seven years studying EFL without real advancement in their linguistic competencies. These students are usually incapable of pursuing their university education without any linguistic hurdles. This is most probably due to a certain degree of inefficiency in the design and implementation of EFL curricula.

The review of literature of this field reveals several studies that have been conducted in an attempt to evaluate the status of EFL curricula in the Arab world.

In Lebanon, the English language curriculum has not been updated since the year 1997. Shaaban, K. (2013) reasoned that the main problem of the Lebanese EFL curriculum is due the disparity between all the elements of the thematic, content-based EFL curriculum and the classroom realities despite the fact that the curriculum follows international ESL/EFL standards.

In Syria, Khoja, B. & Mohapatra, D. (2017) analyzed Syria's design of the EFL curriculum and compared/contrasted it with the real teaching practices. They concluded that even though the "English for Starters" curriculum was implemented in Syria in 2000 with a special focus on CLT, students are not prepared for university education because of the over-reliance on Arabic and the neglect of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach (Shalash, S. & Hanna, N. (2009)).

In Egypt, the EFL curriculum aimed at enhancing the linguistic competency of K1-12 students (The National curriculum framework for English as a Foreign Language, 2012) to enable them to pursue their higher education in accordance with the National Authority of Quality Assurance and

Accreditation of Education (NAQAAE) but unfortunately, the quality of teaching is still low. McIlwraith, H. & Fortune, A. (2016) reported some of the challenges that the ELT system faces such as the below-standard quality of teaching due to the low pay, the class size, the constraints of time, the lack of teacher training and the high-stakes examination.

In Saudi Arabia, an English Language Development Project was supervised by the Saudi ministry of Education. Two studies were conducted to evaluate the efficacy of the project. Shah, S.R. et al. (2013) examined the EFL program in a Saudi Arabian context and reported the factor of unfavorable institutional policies and procedures that can be neutralized through study of the learners' need and work on the professional competence of teachers. In another study, Mitchell, B. & Alfuraih, A. (2018) suggest that the improvement of English language teaching and learning should be bolstered and that the National Transformation Program and Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia supports this goal.

Al-Saleem, B. (2011) assessed five EFL training programs with a focus on the objectives, content, assessment, and outcomes of EFL Teacher Education in Jordan, and came up with the conclusion that the curriculum needs to be revised in order to enhance the EFL proficiency level of Jordanian students.

In Morocco, Hattani. H. (2018) stated that the Moroccan Supreme Council for education and training has established a plan for restructuring foreign language education. That was accomplished through establishing strategies that enhance EFL learning and empower its educational, political, and economic domains (MATE, 2017 as cited in Hattani, 2018). Hattani (2018) conducted interviews with secondary EFL teachers who complained about the neglect of communication skills and called for a restructuring of the curriculum in a way as to meet the demands and values of the 21st century.

In Iraq, Amin, M.Y.M (2017) offered an overview of the teaching methods and reforms of the EFL curriculum in Iraq and noticed that even after the development of a new EFL curriculum called "Sunrise" in 2007, there were insufficient and fruitless teacher training programs that underestimate the linguistic skills as well as teachers' adaptation difficulties. In spite of the fact that the new curriculum is well-developed to cater for students' needs, systematized efforts are needed to cope up with the spread of English as a global language.

Some other studies expected a further decline in the status of EFL teaching in some other Arab countries. For instance, Al Rabai, A. (2014) conducted a study in Qatar and claimed that the teaching of English as a Foreign/ Second language (TEFL and TESOL) has blossomed over the past four to five decades in several Arab States but it started to slump because of cultural reasons.

In the same perspective, Al-Mahrooqi, R. & Denman, C. (2015) argue that although English continued to play across countries in the Arab world, it poses a number of significant challenges such as cultural preservation and identity, the heightened risk of individuals without access to English being marginalized within their own societies, and the potential for loss of native languages and cultures.

All the aforementioned studies were confined to the boundaries of specific countries and none of them has examined the common challenges that the Arab ministries of education and schools have encountered over the years. To be noted here that design process of the implemented EFL curricula drew from the expertise of educational consultants whose native language is English and despite this fact, EFL teaching in these counties is still shrouded with difficulties. To provide a comprehensive examination of the standing of Arab EFL curricula among others, it is of primordial value to gauge the perceptions of the stakeholders that are involved in either the conceptualization of EFL curricula, their implementation, or their continuous revamping and benchmarking processes.

Research methodology:

A detailed and thorough study of the update of EFL curricula leads to a comprehensive consideration of the opinions and the discourses of all the stakeholders in the EFL teaching/learning process: teachers, coordinators, administrators, language experts, consultants, and curriculum designers, on the basis of their experiences. This helps ministries of education in taking the right decision and in pondering about EFL problems.

The present study is based on surveys conducted on 457 participants, i.e. 377 teachers, 45 coordinators, 11 administrators, 7 educational consultants, and 17 curriculum designers from the Arab world, mainly from seven countries: Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and Iraq. Teachers are involved in filling out this survey questionnaire because their opinions have very scarcely been considered in the evaluation of EFL curricula.

The study investigates teachers, experts, and curriculum designers' perceptions towards changing and restructuring language curricula in EFL contexts. It utilizes the mixed method of inquiry design and its corresponding data collection tools and instruments consisting of questionnaires and interviews. The mixed methods research approach perfectly matches this research topic because it tends to provide the researcher with the data necessary for the investigation of EFL curricula.

The 457 participants were invited via e-mail to fill out a survey designed for the purposes of the study. The answers given in the questionnaire and the interviews enabled the researcher to investigate problems of EFL

curricula and proposals for updating and benchmarking them to a standardized framework because the participants' responses are based on their extensive in-depth experiences in EFL teaching and curricular design. To test the validity and the reliability of the questionnaire, it was field-tested on a group of teachers who teach at public schools in these Arab countries. The set of answers that the participants give to the questions of the survey is analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Studies (SPSS), version 26. The analysis of the answers yield data that education ministries can base their decisions on.

Research design and data collection:

As mentioned earlier, this research follows a mixed methods design through the survey and the interviews. According to Johnson & Christensen (2014), a mixed methods research is one that integrates elements of qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to ensure broad deep understanding and corroboration.

Hence, the research study gauges the stakeholders' perceptions of the examination, changes, updates and benchmarks of EFL curricula. Curriculum designers are not the only experts to give sound judgement about curricula. As a matter of fact, teachers are the most knowledgeable about the inherent problems of curriculum content and practices. As Eisner (1981, p. 9, cited in Gerber, R., Williams, M. & Biilmann, O. (1995)) puts it, "to know a rose by its Latin name and yet to miss its fragrance is to miss much of the rose's meaning". Thus, the researcher involved 377 teachers in the investigation with the aim of voicing their opinions because they are the best judges of the efficiency of EFL curricula and their practices.

The survey questionnaire:

The participants answered a questionnaire consisting of background questions, and 10 attitudinal questions. The survey questionnaire data was collected at the end of the year 2019 and then analyzed to enable the researcher to understand the status of EFL curricula in the seven Arab countries under investigation.

To further understand the participants' attitudes of EFL curricula, the survey questionnaire is comprised of 10 statements using a 5-response Likert scale: 'strongly agree,' 'agree,' 'neither agree nor disagree,' 'disagree,' 'strongly disagree.' The rating responses were carefully examined in terms of frequency and percentage of responses in order to determine the attitude of participants towards the current status of EFL curricula.

1. The current EFL curriculum ensures a high English language proficiency level after K-12 classes
2. The current EFL curriculum is well structured and efficient.
3. The EFL curriculum is restructured and benchmarked on a regular basis.
4. The EFL curriculum is aligned with EFL international standards.
5. The EFL materials, and books fulfill students' needs and requirements.
6. The EFL curriculum presents all the language skills and competencies in an equal distribution.
7. The EFL curriculum is compatible with the assigned textbooks and instructional materials.
8. The EFL curriculum designers take into account the peculiarity of my Arab country's culture.
9. The EFL curriculum clearly outlines the assessment criteria that are appropriate to the content.
10. The teaching methods and strategies are well delineated and meet the curriculum objectives.

In addition to the survey questionnaire, 20 Semi-structured interviews are conducted with participants from each category, i.e. 4 educational consultants, 3 curriculum designers, 7 coordinators, and 6 teachers.

Creswell (2014) argues that qualitative research is a form of interpretive and phenomenological inquiry that researchers follow to study the different views of the participants and the stakeholders in order to solve a problem from a holistic perspective. In this paper, the researcher develops a kaleidoscopic picture of the problem of updating and benchmarking curricula through reporting multiple views from among teachers, coordinators, educational consultants, and curriculum designers.

Conducting interviews is a tool for collecting qualitative data. The interviews are very useful to the researcher because they enable her to gain insights into the interviewees' perspectives, experiences and proposed solutions regarding the particular topic (Ellis, 2016). The theme of the interviews are the following: philosophy of the curriculum, theoretical perspectives, schools of thought, scientific elements of the curriculum, objectives, teaching methods, materials design and instructional practices, choice of texts, lexical range and design of the curriculum. As Brinkmann and Kyale (2015) reported, an advantage of the interview is that it gives life and interactivity to the questions. To ensure the validity of the instruments, the researcher consulted a panel of seven experts in curriculum design from three private universities about the content and the wording of the interview questions and the survey questionnaires. Thus, face validity and construct validity are secured.

The researcher conducted one-on-one, audio-recorded interviews with twenty participants. The interviews were held via Skype and a professional audio-recording machine was used to facilitate the transcription and analysis of interviews later. The researcher transcribed all her audio-recorded interviews which were all documented on an Excel work/spreadsheet to ease the comparison of the answers to each question separately. The content of the answers was then analyzed and categorized under the corresponding themes.

Results of the study:

Answers to the survey questionnaire:

The answers to the questionnaire came as follows:

- 83% of the participants strongly disagree that the curriculum ensures a high linguistic proficiency level because the majority of students who graduate from the high school do not possess the minimum proficiency level that allows them to pursue their university education in English medium universities without the intensive English language program of the faculty they join.
- 89% of the respondents agree that their EFL curriculum is well structured. However, it is not efficient, not because of its philosophy and content but because of its ineffective implementation that is mainly due to the lack of teacher preparation and class size.
- Only 31% of the participants agree that their EFL curriculum is restructured and updated on a regular basis. The infrequency of the update is due to a budget deficit.
- 79% of the participants agree that their EFL curriculum is aligned with international standards.
- 47% of the participants strongly agree that the instructional materials and textbooks do not meet students' requirements and needs.
- 85% of the respondents agree that the language skills are presented in equal distribution.
- 36% of the participants agree that the EFL curriculum designers do not take into account the peculiarity of their culture and that the dominant culture of the textbook is that of the target language.
- 43% of the participants agree that the EFL curriculum outlines the assessment criteria that are appropriate to the content and that meet the objectives of the curriculum.
- 91 % of the participants agree that the teaching methods and strategies are well delineated and meet the curriculum goals but they are not well applicable by non-trained teachers.

As is revealed by the findings of the questionnaire, it seems that the main problem of EFL curricula in the Arab world are not due to the plan or structure itself but rather to the selection of textbooks, to the preparation of teachers, and to the inability of teachers to implement these curricula in large classes and within time constraints, and to align the assessment criteria to the curriculum objectives and philosophy. This explains the low proficiency level of high school students after the k-12 classes.

The data in this study is gleaned from the analysis of the perception of participants from different public and private institutions. The researcher believes that based on the answers of the questionnaire, it is essential to call upon English language educators and educational decision makers to readjust their language policies and curricula. The English language education program should clarify guidelines for the design of a holistic language approach that fosters the skills and competencies of learners and prepares them to excel in university courses whose.

The interview answers:

In an attempt to answer the seven research questions, the issues raised at the beginning of the research were extensively discussed with the participants during interviews as follows:

Philosophy of the curriculum:

The underlying philosophy of a curriculum lies in its ability to equip learners with the 21st century skills. Curriculum contents are usually threaded and fit into the educational philosophy that embraces global education changes.

The interviewees believe that if the curriculum is to be designed on a sound basis, then it should integrate language and content with meaningful interactive tasks. Teachers who ensure a good implementation of the curriculum should not rush among the themes and give all students immediate attention. Thus, it is important to afford students the opportunity to learn through differentiated instructional methods. Dictating and drilling should be discarded and there should be focus on communication. Teachers and coordinators requested that ministries of education engage them in planning and developing the curriculum and make sure that the scope and sequence are standardized across all levels; in other words, there should be a vertical alignment of the language skill standards and objectives to be achieved. Student autonomy should be given attention as there should be a very low dependency on the teacher.

According to one of the curriculum designers, the curriculum is to reflect a broader political and social agreement of the Arab community. It is

expected to be a global language product that exposes the learner to other English-speaking cultures, attitudes, and situations.

Theoretical perspectives, schools of thought, and scientific elements of curricula:

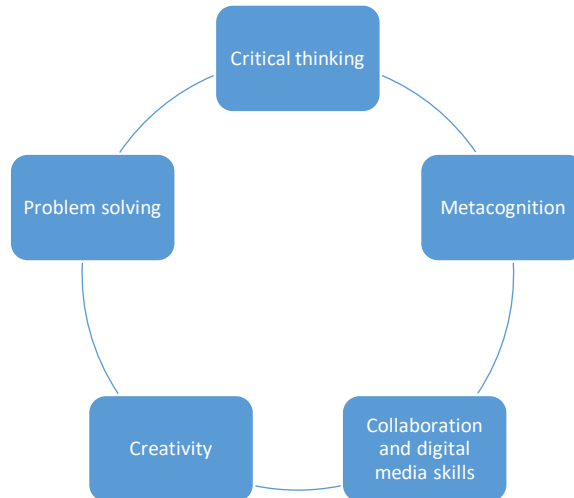
According to the teachers and coordinators interviewed, students should be able to communicate freely and efficiently in subject-matter areas. Their skills to think critically should be developed to help them succeed in their careers. A good curriculum usually offers students and teachers with measurable skills and competencies to reflect on through the process of skill outcome assessment.

One of the roles of teachers is to strive to enhance students' language and to fluently communicate with the foreign language and practice it holistically. Curriculum designers should align the EFL program with that of international language learning standards that develop students' learning skills and attitude and help them practice the language in realistic settings.

The curriculum's intent should be to develop students' language and cultural understanding of English-speaking nations and to successfully interpret and respond in context meaningfully. The curriculum content needs to be relatable to the EFL learner and delivered in a differentiated context in flexible time. The themes should meet the interest or motivational value of the learner who relates to them.

The implementation of the curriculum should also coincide with the language knowledge, needs and skills of the students. Teachers should be given full control over how and what to teach their students and the independence to design lesson plans and instructional material that address the need and language level of their students.

Teachers should have a say in the making of the curriculum and a broader autonomous involvement in its initial development. Furthermore, teachers should be autonomous in curriculum matters which means that they are involved in becoming professionals of the program, with a role in making informed choices on the planning and developing of resources that students will be assessed on (Kelly, 2009). They should equip students with the following global skills:



Curriculum objectives: The participants reported that a curriculum should be designed in a way as to meet specific curricular objectives. These are gathered from the different responses of the participants as follows:

- To create profiles that enable learners to become independent and to make their way into academic and professional success in their future career and in social settings.
- To equip students with the knowledge and skills needed through the content of the language courses in order to enhance their linguistic skills.
- To enable learners to reach a standardized proficiency level and to conduct research and understand the foreign language when they collect information, read articles, and write their own texts.
- To foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills and to promote cultural awareness in a globalized world.
- To enhance the oral and written discourse of learners and to engage them meaningfully in communications and interactions instead of focusing on the ineffective rote memorization of Grammar rules.
- To prepare learners to become global citizens with language skills, and to ensure the best career options for them.
- To provide teachers with the opportunity to accommodate the EFL disciplinary teaching framework to student's needs because usually the framework of the curriculum reflects the instructor's pedagogical experiences and meets students' differentiated learning.

Teaching methods, materials design and instructional practices

The participants suggested that global education and innovation should be synergized in curriculum design and curricula should expose modern theories of SLA and recent trends in EFL. On the other hand, English teachers should opt for realistic performance tasks. Also, in designing English curricula, the scope and sequence should occupy a vital role.

According to the curriculum designers interviewed, the latest teaching methods emerge from the most modern theories of language learning and psychology. Some of these are the task-based approach (learning by doing), the project-based approach, and the lexical syllabus that address the needs of students in 2020 onwards and that can be used in web-based collaborative environments (Google Docs, Wikis). The communicative teaching approach of the nineties, which still has a say in modern teaching methodologies, should be integrated with the above three methodologies because the pace of students' changes of interest and cognitive and affective needs highly exceeds the pace of emergent teaching ideologies and paradigms. For instance, the task-based approach focuses on the skills and practices rather than the content. In the project-based approach, the project can range from a simple speech delivery to the design of an exhibition. The lexical syllabus approach provides students with the core vocabulary and language they need to satisfy their learning needs. The curriculum should not be an A to Z guide but rather a vehicle for teachers to transcend traditional teaching methods and utilize ones that typically fit into students' level and aspirations.

The participants reported that in their countries, the criteria for the choice of books are their availability, good price for students especially in public schools, and the communication with public houses regardless of students' daily needs and interests and regardless of the linguistic complexity of the texts. Administrators and educational consultants suggested that the materials should be designed by teachers and coordinators after the needs assessment and analysis are conducted especially that online EFL materials are available and meet students' needs if they are carefully selected, adopted, and adapted.

Recommended mainstream academic topics: Choice of texts

Any choice of texts should be determined by the role foreign languages occupy. Language learning is best achieved when the communication between teachers and students is centered on common day-to-day topics that are of interest to students and that are relatable to them.

According to the interviewees, curriculum designers need to brush off the interest and profile of students and study the topics that might be of value and interest to them. They should espouse the most modern theories and trends in second language acquisition. Topical themes should be of high value to EFL

learners and should be put into use in the other courses that they study. Multi-modal themes should be about modern global education, social events, and current affairs and other interdisciplinary topics that motivate students to learn.

On the other hand, and according to the same participants, students should not be reliant on the teacher to lead towards optimal learning outcomes. Themes should be relevant to the educational and social needs of the learner and the thematic goals need to be of universal nature and closely related to the professional future of students. There should also be consistency between the reading objectives, skill outcomes and assessments from one grade level and unit to the other as language has to be learnt cumulatively and multi-dimensionally. Goals, content, structure, methods and assessment should all be integrated. The stated objectives have to be achievable with the planned framework and the content should contribute to the development of the student's language competency. The lessons should be accompanied by additional teaching material that meets differentiated learners' needs and supports teachers in the delivery of their lessons. One of the educational consultants proposed that there should be purposeful, active learning that is of significance to students to identify with and connect to, and there should be relevant content that can be applied in new situations.

The language framework needs to provide a variety of themes that are of societal concern and permanence of the current learning experience that is significant to the EFL student.

According to Ashburn (2006), students will reflect on and connect the language-subject matter to other situations they are experiencing or experienced in their daily lives. Exercises and activities should foster critical thinking and reasoning. Hence, the scope of the subject matter in the English language should be aligned with the development of critical thinking that will enable the learner to become an emotionally intelligent critical thinker in a progressive society.

The following topics and themes are proposed by the participants in the update of English language curricula: Global news, social media, blogs, intercultural communication, global and religious tourism, international networking, global market, smart phones, cultural awareness and tolerance, religious tolerance, civil service, protection against current viruses, natural disasters, environmental changes, Arab spring, revolutions, demonstrations against oppression, political systems, Democracy, advances in science, Robotics and Medicine, etc.

Type of lexis and Lexical range

Research findings reveal that a learner needs to be familiar with 3000 English word families (base morphemes + inflections+ derivations) to

understand conversational exchanges, 5000 to understand difficult texts with the help of a dictionary or a teacher, and 8000 words for extensive reading without support.

The participants claim that teachers should draw students' attention to the importance of widening their lexical range as much as possible and producing grammatically correct sentences without explicitly studying grammar rules. When teaching vocabulary, the stress should be on incidental, productive, and contextual vocabulary acquisition.

Design of curricula: Strategies and approaches

As reported by the participants, the design of English curricula is usually informed by the language policy of an academic institution that is called upon to respect international educational trends and practices. The basis of quality language education is a well-structured curriculum that nurtures the exigencies of lifelong learning. The curriculum that is proposed by participants is based on the most modern theories in 2nd language acquisition and on the most recent trends in the teaching strategies and approaches. The interviewees believe that any design of English curricula should take into account the linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competencies.

In fact, when evaluating EFL curricula, it is agreed upon by all stakeholders that they need major amendments to cope up with the emerging needs of the 2020 generation. There is increasing need and solicitude to develop correlating international standards and English Language learning programs in a well-knit tenacious consequential framework from the beginner's level to the advanced one. All institutions should be teaching the same scope and sequence and skills standards through all levels.

In this respect, the researcher can claim that much needs to be done to enact an innovative English Curriculum and tailor its content in order to adapt it to the societal changes that the world undergoes and this should be a continuous process. To follow up on the success of the curriculum, a specialized committee should monitor its correct implementation.

Conclusion

The overview of EFL curricula in the seven countries under investigation, the survey questionnaire, and the interviews reveal clearly that the main challenges that the participants reported were not mainly and directly due to the curricula themselves but rather to students' lack of motivation, large classes, insufficiency of materials, inappropriate teacher training in addition to their non-native accents, low language proficiency level, the confinement of English in language classes and its limited context of practice, the overdependence on Grammar, memorization and drilling, and the cultural mismatches. To face these challenges, participants proposed communicative

teaching approaches, the focus on problem-solving activities, collaborative learning, and project-based learning. This means that EFL curricula need to be adjusted to face all of the above challenges.

To put it differently, the update of EFL curricula should be based on the results of the study of the main obstacles that Arab EFL teachers and students encounter. The re-planning and restructuring processes should be done continuously so as to conform to a standardized language proficiency level. To solve the problems of textbooks and materials, it is time for teachers to be pedagogically prepared to design their own authentic materials and to avoid an over-reliance on ready-made materials and textbooks that are decontextualized.

To conclude on the basis of the findings of the study, and to make a sound re-planning, restructuring, and benchmarking of EFL curricula, there should be an extensive needs analysis and a sound, delicate and thorough choice of current, up-to-date themes and global issues that students of the Arab world can relate to and that teachers can professionally and successfully integrate into their day-to-day teaching practices.

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