



Teaching English to Young Learners in Tunisian Primary Schools: Aspirations vs. Pedagogical preoccupations

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide, English is being recognized as a world language. Thus, the need for learning this language keeps being one of the major requirements expected from learners at all levels of study. Many people believe that the earlier children start learning it, the better they will perform. As such, there has been a growing push to introduce this language to children in primary school classrooms. The underlying assumption, held by many, is that learners will be more successful if they begin studying English at an early age. As it is the case in many countries where early start to English language teaching and learning has become a phenomenon over the past decades with a high enthusiasm for ‘the younger the better’, Tunisia is no exception in this regard. In fact, the process of promoting English has always been undeniable, resulting in its introduction as a second, additional or sometimes distinctively foreign language with an ultimate goal of gaining wider access to science, technology and global trade. The present paper sets out to clarify the situation of teaching English to young learners in Tunisian primary schools as one manifestation of a whole strategy of reform and innovation targeting the educational system in Tunisia, and to explore some pedagogical concerns associated with this experience in terms of teachers’ professional qualifications necessary to meet the requirements of the reforms.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Age Debate

Since it has become the dominant common language of the world, English has also become one of the components of secondary, primary and even pre-school education in the EFL teaching context. In a world, where political, social and trading barriers are dwindling, English is increasingly turning out to be the most important language of the universe. Graddol (2006) observes:

“Despite the extraordinary of the last few years, one thing appears to remain the same. More people than ever want to learn English... English learners are increasing in number and decreasing in age... we have become used to the idea of English growing in popularity across the world. Far from being news, it has become one of the few enduring facts of global life”.

Worldwide, English is being recognized as a world language, and many people believe that the earlier children start learning it, the better they will perform. As such, there has been a growing push to introduce this language to children in primary school classrooms. The underlying assumption is that learners will be more successful if they begin studying English at an early age.

In recent year, there has been a growing trend throughout the world to lower the age of foreign language instruction in schools. In many countries, early start to English language teaching and learning has become a phenomenon. Language instruction may begin in these countries at the onset of primary education or even earlier. This is due to the changing social and linguistic reality of Europe which, because of

globalization and mobility, is becoming increasingly multilingual and multicultural;

It is commonly believed that English would be taught best at the early stage. Most people think that the earlier children start learning English, and the more exposure to the language they have, the better it will be. Yet, this can never mean that success in learning English is merely determined by two single factors, namely, age and exposure to language.

1.2. ELT Orientations in Tunisia

Tunisia has recently oriented the English language teaching (ELT) program for primary schools. These new orientations required not only examining, but also reconsidering and revisiting a set of variables strongly connecting to the successful implementation of this newly adopted policy. Hence, a set of issues are to be taken seriously in this regard, principal among these are: English teachers’ qualities; professional profiles; interaction skills and techniques; instructional activities; teaching materials; learning styles; perceptions of young learners’ characteristics; professional qualifications and needs; and the learning and teaching process...

These changes also suggested not only understanding the reasons for and the advantages of an early introduction of English language instruction, but also attributing further serious attention to appropriate methodologies to teach young learners in accordance with their physical; cognitive and emotional development.

Moreover, these changes required careful examination and selection of the textbook used in young learners’ classes in order to attain an effective language learning and teaching.

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More importantly, it should be obvious that TEYL dictates readiness and preparation on the part of the involved teachers at diverse levels: linguistic; methodological; and educational.

Considering all these issues indicates a sort of concern with a set of pedagogical preoccupations that might put in question the aspirations and the goals behind adopting this new policy. Being aware of these preoccupations is a crucial step in the process of enriching; refining and developing this new experience with regard to teachers' performance, teachers' education and professional development, and the effectiveness of teaching materials.

As it is the case in many countries where early start to English language teaching and learning has become a phenomenon over the past decades, Tunisia was no exception. In fact, the process of promoting English has always been undeniable, resulting in its introduction as a second, additional or sometimes distinctively foreign language with an ultimate goal of gaining wider access to science, technology and global trade.

According to Daoud (1996), an essential component of the language policy and planning in Tunisia was the integration of English to have more accessibility to the world of science and technology: *"the growing demand for English as the means of access to modern science and technology and to economic development has led to interesting changes in the linguistic orientation of many developing countries, particularly those that inherited a language other than English from their former colonial power,"*

He contends that Tunisia as a former French colony is *the case in point* "where such changes concern both English language policy decisions and implementation strategies mainly in the educational system" (Daoud, 1996, p. 598).

1.3. English in Primary Schools: An ambitious project

Since 2004, it has been government policy in Tunisia to introduce English in Grade 5 of primary schooling where learners are generally at the age of 11. The Tunisian Ministry of Education has decided to embark on English instruction in the primary grades. The beginning of English education took the form of clubs before developing into a compulsory subject. The Ministry has considered many different issues and has created a program focused on English clubs.

Following Krashen (1981), learners can have a "mental block" towards a language caused by affective factors. The Tunisian program has strived to help learners avoid the mental block by engaging in fun club-style activities in English.

The English clubs have been designed to provide primary school learners with a positive initial exposure to the English language before they begin formal academic study of the language in middle school. According to Ben Afia (2003, pp 24-25. Cited in Boukadi 2013), An English club is a group experience that occurs three times a week for eleven-year-old children. It is less formal than a regular course at the primary school level. The emphasis of the English club is on exposure to the English language rather than the development of a strict set of English language skills.

During English club time, children are engaged in hands-on fun activities in keeping with the overall spirit and aim of the Club. Children do word snake puzzles, linking words together. Learners also make things, such as puppets or pictures, related to the topics they are learning about in English.

Children also are encouraged to having fun singing songs during English club time. English club teachers are trained to lead singing activities that encourage children to be actively involved by clapping hands to the rhythm of the song, using body actions, or singing in rounds.

The types of activities found in an English club are more like the types of hands-on activities found in a Girl Guide or Boy Scout meeting than the teacher-centered activities found in a regular fifth or sixth grade class. Inside English club, learners make things, sing songs, and do other enjoyable activities in English.

According to Bousabah Barkia (2007, p 20 cited in Abdelmajid Abid 2012), English was first introduced in primary education in 2001 as a club to 5th grade pupils; then, it was extended to the 6th grade from 2002 to 2006 when English became a compulsory subject for 6th grade primary school pupils.

According to a report issued in 2002 by the Direction of Academic Programs and Manuals of the Ministry of Education and Training, (cited in Abdelmajid Abid 2012), the objectives of teaching English to primary school children include developing the pupils' oral and aural skills in a relaxing and motivating atmosphere and sensitizing students about the English-speaking countries' cultures (cited in Bousabah Barkia, 2007, 23).

Those objectives are to be achieved through involving pupils in motivating communicative activities, learner-centered lessons and pair work or group work activities. The motivating atmosphere is to be created by teaching songs, rhymes, interactive games, stories, dialogues, role plays etc, which help promote oral skills (Ben Afia, 2006).

Another aim of the program was to help children develop pronunciation in English. As mentioned above, one of the real advantages to having children start learning English at an early age is that they are better equipped to develop English language pronunciation.

In addition, the English clubs were designed to help learners become accustomed to the language so that when they begin formal instruction in middle school, they are ready. Through English clubs, learners develop awareness of the English language sound system, classroom instructions, and basic vocabulary. This awareness is designed to facilitate the acquisition of English language skills when learners begin formal instruction.

500 Teachers were selected in the year 2001-2002. Those teachers had to undergo a special training course which aimed at providing them with the basic English language skills necessary to conduct the English clubs. The course was called "The Anglophone Village".

That setting where only English had to be spoken was meant to offer an innovative way to expose primary school teachers to English. Everything including food services, music, evening activities was conducted in English. Teachers involved in that training received improvement courses as well as methodology workshops as part of that training.

2. Pedagogical Preoccupations

Yet, over the time, these great expectations which marked the start of this project seem to encounter a number of difficulties and challenges relating to teachers' qualities, the teaching and learning process and to the textbook adopted in 6th grade classes.

2.1. Teachers' qualities

Primary school teachers display remarkably big differences at various levels regarding their educational

background, professional experience, diplomas and qualifications, degree of commitment and motivation, expectations and aspirations behind involvement in this experience of teaching English to young learners...

Yet, at an administrative level, these teachers involved in this experience by and large abide by the regulations which state that only established primary school teachers who should never be majors coming from departments of English would be assigned this mission after receiving language training.

These teachers have a good pedagogy but have forgotten their English, having never used it since the baccalaureate. They majored in the subjects related to primary schools: French, Arabic, mathematics, biology, music, etc., but not English

Many primary school English teachers join the professional life for the first time which means that they have never been involved in teaching. Even more, they have never used English since their secondary education. They have never received any training specific to teaching school subjects in general let about teaching a foreign language to a specific age group.

A good number of teachers did not choose to teach English to 6th grade pupils but the choice was imposed on them by school directors for the so-called pedagogical reasons (in relation to timetables).

Until recently, teachers involved in teaching English to 6th graders had not received any training for the last six years (from 2013 to 2018) as the Ministry of Education suddenly decided in 2013 to push out the trainers who used to follow up with primary school English teachers.

Thus, no trainers to guide teachers give them a feedback on their achievement, help them improve their teaching and add a value to their performance through workshops and training sessions. This situation would give rise to the question of motivation and commitment on the part of a large number of teachers who still conceive of English classes as mere clubs where children play and enjoy themselves.

The qualities and qualifications of a good number of primary school English teachers are to be reconsidered in this context. Indeed, many of them highlight that they lack the qualifications specific to teaching school subjects in general, let about teaching English as a foreign language to a particular age group (young learners).

Many primary school English teachers join the professional life for the first time which means that they have never been involved in teaching. Even more, they have never used English since their secondary education. They have never received any training specific to teaching school children at all.

The question of motivation and commitment is of a paramount significance in measuring teachers' performance and achievement with this specific group age that are exposed to the foreign language for the first time in their life. In line with this, a considerable majority of teachers did not choose to teach English to 6th grade pupils but the choice was imposed on them by school directors for the so-called pedagogical reasons (in relation to timetables). Thus, you either accept to teach English to 6th graders or you will not be able to have a full timetable which may be problematic administratively speaking.

2.2. The teaching and learning process

By and large, there is much evidence of English classes with a remarkable tendency to teacher-centered classroom

organization. Thus, the greatest amount of time in 6th grade English classes was predominantly spent on teacher-led whole class activities at the time when student-to-student or student-to-teacher interaction was of less significance and emphasis.

Almost all classes were not very communicative; rather, they were teacher-centered with teachers talking at length and learners responding minimally. In a considerable majority of the classes, little emphasis was put on pair or group work activities. Most of the involved teachers did not adhere to the SLA findings which articulate that pair and group work activities are facilitative of language acquisition as they help create a relaxed learning and teaching atmosphere.

Because Most of the classroom interaction was tightly controlled by the teachers, the English teachers tend to play a very important role in the classroom life to the extent that learners seem to be very passive and deprived of real opportunities to take part in classroom interaction and to use the language they are learning communicatively and productively through involvement in sustained exchanges with one another or with their teachers.

Therefore, in the absence of a clear communicative orientation primary school English teachers tend to adopt a teaching and learning process markedly characterized by an exclusive focus on form and in particular vocabulary and grammatical structures at a time when no single instance of teachers spending some time on functions, discourse or sociolinguistics was recorded.

The observed lessons also revealed an unbalanced distribution among the four language skills that marks student modality. As a result, both teachers and learners put much effort and spent a great amount of their teaching actual time dealing with two main skills, namely speaking and listening excluding writing and reading. There was no reading or writing at all in the observed lessons. If learners had some chance to read or write, it would be reading some sentences already there in their books and writing down some notes or answers. Reading and writing did not seem to be the primary focus of the observed teachers.

Not only teachers but also learners in the 6th grade classes put much effort to use the target language to a markedly high degree and to a large extent despite some apparent difficulties in terms of the level of their proficiency, their limited linguistic knowledge and especially the quality of their accent.

As most of the classroom interaction is monopolized by the teacher, the classroom teachers talk more than their learners and spend most of their teaching time asking questions with pseudo questions as the predominant type used by an overwhelming majority of teachers compared to genuine questions.

2.3. The Textbook defects

Prime English, the official document used in primary English classes is obviously so dense that it may not be possible to cover most of its content when we know that the whole time allocated to teach English to 6th form pupils is 2 hours per week. A number of activities, lessons and even units appear to be irrelevant, artificial and meaningless.

Besides, no clear balance is observed in terms of the focus on the different language skills. While listening is overemphasized, less focus is put on speaking. Grammar and pronunciation receive least attention. The need to think about creating a balance between the four skills, teaching them in integration and minimizing isolation of a number of skills and

exercises is more than urgent (the teaching of pronunciation is a clear example of isolated and de-contextualized teaching).

Additionally, the textbook reveals a clear lack of communicative tasks (storytelling and retelling, group work, class discussions, for example) which expose the learners to more opportunities to use the language to develop their personal and interpersonal communicative skills. Thus, more meaningful and interesting topics and activities need to be included in the textbook.

On the other side, while the topics are generally appropriate and familiar to the learners in both linguistic level and cognitive abilities, some of them are either misplaced or irrelevant (lesson 6: What is your phone number is an example).

More importantly, a clear tendency to highlight memorization and mechanical drilling is very apparent in all types of activities and in all lessons. The need to refine and diversify instructions which involve learners in communicative use of the language is an urgent necessity (too much use of listen, complete, circle...). Hence, traces of audio lingual practices are more apparent than communicative ones.

Lastly, recycling and revising different items is totally ignored when moving from one unit to the other. The only way of recycling is limited to the so-called home fun activities which appear at the end of most lessons. Teaching materials are supposed to complement and support the textbook and needed to help teachers cycle and recycle the language with much ease. Yet, in many primary schools that (especially in rural areas), these teaching materials don't exist at all, no tape recorder or cassette.

Conclusion

Despite the big challenges and all sorts of weaknesses it faces at many levels, it would be unfair to disregard the

qualities of the TEYL program in Tunisia. This program started with great expectations and high ambitions to catch up with the rapidly growing world of science and technology. Teachers in charge of carrying out the project seem to display high degrees of motivation and commitment despite some pedagogical worries.

It would also be unfair to disregard or deemphasize some recurrent practices and behaviors on the part of many teachers of English: an endless effort to commit to the principle of teaching English in English, serious attempts to supply a rich learning environment through the diversification of teaching techniques (miming, demonstration, role-play, paraphrasing and clarification, using handouts, posters and visuals, bringing real objects into the class...),

Therefore, many issues relating to this ambitious program are worth further serious attention and reconsideration in order to secure a rich, constructive and impactful teaching and learning experience.

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