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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## English Language Education at the Elementary School Level in Saudi Arabia: A Parents' Perspective

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**| ABSTRACT**

In Saudi Arabia, there are several school types where children go and learn both English and Arabic: (i) Public (government) and Quranic schools; (ii) private schools where Arabic is the medium of instruction with an intensive English course; (iii) international schools where English is the medium of instruction, and one course is allocated to Arabic and Islamic Studies. This study surveyed a sample of parents to find out the number of hours allocated to English; kinds of textbooks used and whether parents consider them sufficient; parents' views of their children's proficiency level in the different English language skills; which language is stronger in children: English or Arabic; which language children use in communicating with their siblings, parents and relatives; the effects of learning English (L2) on Arabic (L1); and the optimal age for starting to learn English. Results showed that at government and Quranic schools, students take 1-2 hours of English a week which parents think are insufficient. At private schools, hours allocated to English vary (between 5-10). At international schools, English is the medium of instruction in all courses. Most parents prefer that children start learning English in kindergarten or first grade. English is the stronger and preferred language for international school students. Private School students have a good command of English and Arabic. Arabic is the stronger and preferred language for Government and Quranic School children. Some parents think that the textbook used at Government School are good, but some teachers are incompetent in their instructional techniques. Some Public Schools (in remote areas or small towns) are understaffed which results in reducing the teaching hours from 2 to 1 hour per week. Parents' views on the status and quality of foreign/second language education in each type of elementary school in Saudi Arabia are reported in detail.

**| KEYWORDS**

English education, English language learning, elementary schools, National Public Schools, Private Schools, International Schools, parents' views, English textbooks.

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### 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that English is the most dominant language in all walks of life. It is the official language of major political and economic alliances, the language of 85% of international organizations, the language of business, technology, tourism, airlines, multi-national companies, world-famous newspapers, T.V. stations, movies, international conferences, most research, technical terms, references, electronic databases, and 90% of the material on the Internet. It is taught as a foreign/second language at schools and universities in almost every country in the world. To ensure that English is effectively taught to students in the public schools, the development of effective English textbooks, enhancing the teaching performance of English teachers, and integrating technology into English language teaching have become a priority (Al-Jarf, 2008a).

Being a global language, more and more students are learning English as a second/foreign language English at almost every school in every country around the world. In many countries, children start learning English in the elementary school. A variety of English language programs, curricula, resources, technologies, and instructional strategies are utilized to develop the students' proficiency

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level in English. Since some children go to Public Elementary Schools and others go Private Elementary Schools where students are exposed to English language programs, curricula, resources and technologies and instructional strategies, a review of the literature has shown numerous studies that investigated the status of English language instruction in numerous countries. For example, A national survey of 5,000 U.S. Public and Private Elementary and Secondary Schools in the USA was conducted to identify the current patterns and shifts over time in the amount of language instruction, languages and program types offered, curriculum and instruction, teacher certification, professional development, teacher shortages, and the effects of education reform. The results showed that foreign language instruction, in general, has decreased over the past decade and the achievement gap has widened (Pufahl & Rhodes (2011). Another national survey of principals and foreign language teachers at 1,416 elementary schools and 1,349 secondary schools was conducted to explore the status of foreign language education in the USA in terms of amount of foreign language instruction, foreign language offerings, foreign language curriculum, teacher qualifications and training, and major problems. The Results revealed that more than 22% of the responding elementary schools taught foreign languages in the 1986–87 school year (Rhodes & Oxford, 1988).

Moreover, a study by Aslan (2016) compared the primary school foreign language curricula of Turkey, Germany and the Netherlands in terms of objectives, content, teaching processes and evaluation systems. The researcher found that the Turkish Primary School English program is more comprehensive and elaborate whereas the program in Germany and the Netherlands is quite flexible. The program in Germany and the Netherlands provides more freedom for teachers in planning lessons and meeting the needs and interests of the students. The programs in the three countries vary in how they present the content. In Turkey, the English curriculum has a detailed content, and teachers must follow the curriculum closely, whereas in the Netherlands teachers are able to choose the content.

In Pakistan, Shabbir, Wei, Fu, Chong, Marwat, Nabi & Ahmed (2014) compared the performance, achievements, and effectiveness of government (public) versus private primary schools in rural areas of Azad Jammu & Kashmir. The stakeholders, principals, teachers, parents, and students surveyed reported that Private Schools perform better than Public Schools in performance. But both Public and Private Schools still lack quality of human and material resources for providing standard education.

Another study in Pakistan, compared self-efficacy of public and private school teachers at the elementary level. The teacher Self-Efficacy Scale revealed that private school male teachers have higher level of self-efficacy than public school male teachers. Private school female teachers have a higher level of self-efficacy in comparison with public school female teachers. Female teachers at both private and public elementary schools showed a higher level of self-efficacy than male teachers at both private and public elementary schools. The researchers concluded that elementary private school teachers teaching have a higher self-efficacy than public school teachers (Zamir, Arshad & Nazir, 2017).

In Korea, observations and interviews with Korean-American students, parents and teachers in a newly instituted 50/50 Korean-English dual language immersion program identified the benefits and challenges of participating in a dual language immersion program. Parents and children emphasized the potential of the program to develop bilingualism and biculturalism and foster a stronger ethnic identity. They also perceived inequities in the ways in which the program was organised, and instruction was delivered. The program created tensions in parents and teachers in terms of the expectations for language development in English vs. Korean, academic outcomes of bilingual vs. English-only education, instructional needs of Korean vs. non-Korean students and parental involvement among Korean vs. non-Korean parents (Lee & Jeong, 2013).

In Mexican public primary schools, the recent national English language program was the result of an explicit educational policy intended to prepare Mexican students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century by emphasising linguistic and digital abilities. This required a massive increase of English and computer skills in the public schools. The program mandated a major reform of basic education and the extension of compulsory education of 9-to-13-year-old children. Implementing the English program posed considerable challenges for the public educational system that is already under-resourced (Sayer, 2015).

In Nigeria, Okebukola (2012) examined teachers' attitudes towards literacy teaching practices in public and private primary schools as informed by the National Policy on Education, Primary English Language Curriculum and the teaching–learning environment. Results of a survey highlighted the need to train Nigerian teachers to adopt a much wider perspective on literacy that provides opportunities for developing interrelated strands of literacy. Governments should also consider practising teachers' professional identities and growth in decision-making and curriculum development.

In Japan, Butler (2007) indicated that in introducing English at elementary schools (EES), micro-language policies have been actively enacted at the local level along with slow but somewhat tactical top-down policies. The driving force behind the implementation of English in Japanese elementary schools is not simply a desire to prepare students for a global economy, but it is also a result of

multiple social and political factors. The most fundamental challenges that teaching English at elementary schools in Japan currently faces are related to issues of equity and growing diversity.

Further studies in the literature focused on primary school students' beliefs, experiences, motivation and attitudes towards learning and teaching English. Results of the Academic Motivation Scale-AMS applied to Turkish students in 5th, 6th, 7th and 8<sup>th</sup> grade from a Private and a State Elementary School showed that the students' motivation level towards the English course differed according to the students' gender and school type (Idikut, Kutlu & Akman (2021). In Thailand, surveys with grade 4-6 students indicated that the levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn English at public and private schools was high. There were significant differences in the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation levels between Public and Private Schools (Inngam & Eamoraphan, 2014). Students aged 9-10 in Sweden exhibited a strong consensus about the importance of both the teacher's extensive target language input and the learners' oral engagement. High anxiety learners had problems with incomprehensible teacher talk, social fear of making mistakes and classroom organization. They were hesitant to ask questions or volunteer to speak, and their sense of agency was lowered. The target language-only approach had a negative impact on the emotional, instructional and organizational dimensions of foreign language instruction for many young learners (Nilsson, 2020).

Regarding studies that focused on English language programs for students with special needs, Roberts, Brunner and Bills (2006) compared ESL programs at public and private schools along the Wasatch front in the USA in meeting the needs of Limited English Proficient students. Survey of administrators from 42 public schools and 58 private schools demonstrated that public schools are equally equipped or are better equipped to help Limited English Proficient students and that ESL coordinators were well qualified to help Limited English Proficient students. In South Africa, isiXhosa-speaking Foundation Phase learners growing up in historically disadvantaged areas, who experience barriers to learning in an English-medium disadvantaged Western Cape schools, experience several barriers to learning such as exposure to isiXhosa as a primary language, English as language barrier to teaching and learning, psychological-social barriers, and a lack of parental involvement and support (Salie, Moletsane and Mukuna (2020).

The literature review showed lack of studies that describe the status of English language education at the elementary school level in Saudi Arabia since 2003 when the Saudi Ministry of Education issued a directive for teaching English at the Saudi Public Schools starting from sixth grade. In 2004, the teaching of English started from fifth grade. On May 2, 2011, it started from fourth grade, and in 2022 it started from first grade. There is a need for exploring how English is taught to elementary children, their achievement and motivational levels, the quality of instruction, amount of language instruction, curriculum, textbooks and technologies used, English teacher qualification, professional development, teacher shortages, students, parents, school principals and teachers' attitudes towards teaching and learning English at an early age (first grade), and the effects on learning outcomes and learning goals, and language learning weakness in the different types of elementary schools in Saudi Arabia.

To fill up this gap in research, this study aims to explore the following (i) the types of elementary schools in Saudi Arabia; (ii) the number of hours allocated to English in each school type; (iii) the kinds of textbooks used and whether parents consider them effective; (iv) parents' views of their children's proficiency level in the different English language skills; which language is stronger in children: English or Arabic; (v) which language children use in communicating with their siblings, parents and relatives; Which language they use in communication on social media such as WhatsApp; (vi) the negative effects of learning English (L2) on Arabic (L1); (vii) the optimal age for starting to learn English; and (viii) the challenges faced in teaching English in the different types of elementary schools. To explore the above issues, this study will survey parents of children who study in different elementary grades and different school types. Principals, teachers, and students will not be surveyed. No English or Arabic tests will be given to the students in the sample to assess their proficiency level as the children go to different types of schools and it is not possible to test the children individually using a variety of tests for the different grade levels and because the parents and children participating in the current study live in different cities and regions.

### **1.1 Elementary Education in Saudi Arabia**

As of 2022, Saudi Arabia has a total of 721.843 in National Public Schools (elementary, Middle and High School); 16,187,776 student in Private Schools; and 345998 in International Schools. In addition, there 26934 kindergarten, elementary, junior high and secondary schools. At the elementary school level, as of 2022, Saudi Arabia has 1460 elementary and kindergarten schools, and 94 Quranic Schools with a total number or 80.675 elementary students and 82.825 kindergarten students.

There are 4 type of elementary schools in Saudi Arabia: (i) National Public Schools in which the students study all the subjects in Arabic, i.e., Arabic is the medium of instruction with only one English subject, 1 to 2 hours a week in each grade level; (ii) Quranic Schools where the students study all the subjects in Arabic and one English subject, 1 hour a week, similar to the National Public

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.almuheet.net/post/138503>

Schools but Quranic Schools allocate more hours a week to Quran learning and fewer hours to the rest of the subjects; (iii) Private Schools where Arabic is the medium of instruction in all the subjects except English. They study intensive English between 5 and 10 hours a week in each grade level starting from kindergarten, depending on the school's facilities, budget, and staffing status; (iv) International Schools where English is the medium of instruction, and 1 hour a day is allocated to Arabic and Islamic studies. The total number of students studying in

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Sample of Parents**

A total of 82 parents participated in the current study. 95% of the sample were mothers and 5% were fathers. Demographic data of the sample of parents showed that 7% have a Ph.D., 31% have an M.A. and 62% have a B.A. degree. The parents are specialized in English literature, linguistics, translation, Islamic studies, education, social work, business, library science, home economics, IT, biology, law, pharmacy and physical therapy. 77% of the mothers are working and 23% are not. Participating parents live in different cities and regions in Saudi Arabia such as Riyadh, Tabuk, Dammam, Khobar, Jeddah, Mecca, Diba and some remote areas.

All the parents in the sample are native speakers of Arabic with a proficiency level in English between elementary and advanced. 12% of the mothers have a low proficiency level in English and those specialized in English, linguistics, translation, business, physical therapy, and pharmacy have a high proficiency level.

Parents in the sample have a total of 132 children. 34% of the parents have one child, 53% have two children and 13% have three children with a median of two children in grades 1 to 6. 44% of the children are girls and 56% are boys. Children in the sample go to 4 types of elementary schools as follows: 39% go to National Public (Government) Schools; 18% go to Quranic Schools; 29% go to a Private School; (iv) 14% go to International Schools.

### **2.2 Data Collection and Analysis**

Participating parents answered a survey with open-ended questions. The survey contained questions that asked for demographic information such as degree (educational level), major (area of specialty), employment status, proficiency level in English, number of children in the elementary grades, children's gender, grade levels, whether the children go to a National Public School, Quranic School, Private School or International school. In addition, the survey asked the parents the following questions:

- 1) How many hours are allocated to English?
- 2) What kinds of English textbooks are used?
- 3) What is your opinion of the English textbooks and hours allocated to English. Do consider them sufficient and beneficial?
- 4) How do you evaluate your child/children's proficiency level in the different English language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, handwriting)?
- 5) Which language is stronger in your children: English or Arabic?
- 6) What is the preferred language by your child (Arabic or English)?
- 7) Which language does your child use in communicating with his/her siblings, parents and relatives in daily conversation?
- 8) Which language does your child use in communicating with others on social media such as WhatsApp (Arabic only, English only, or Latinized Arabic, i.e., Arabic written in foreign letters)?
- 9) Are there any negative effects of learning English (L2) on Arabic (L1)? What are they?
- 10) Does your child insert English words when he/she speaks Arabic?
- 11) Does your child insert Arabic words when he/she speaks English?
- 12) In your opinion, what is the best age for children to start learning English? Why?

Participating parents' responses were compiled and categorized according to the questions asked and the demographic variables collected. Responses were also classified according to the school type where the children study. Percentages of parents giving the same responses were computed according to each demographic variable and each question. Participants' opinions are reported qualitatively as well.

To assess the reliability of the responses, the author tallied, classified, and quantified participants' responses twice with a 2-week interval between them. Variations in both analyses and quantification were corrected.

3. Results

3.1 Textbooks Used by School Type

Children who go to National Public Schools and Quranic Schools study one of 3 English book series<sup>2</sup>: (i) *Get Ready* from Macmillan; (ii) *We Can*, an MM Publication; (iii) *Smart Class*, an MM Publication. These textbooks are assigned by the Saudi Ministry of Education. Elementary schools in different school district use one of these series. Each series consists of 6 graded textbooks for grades 1 to 6 (See Image 1).

Private Schools in Saudi Arabia are obliged to teach the Ministry of Education’s English textbook in all grade levels. They use another set of textbooks for the extra hours allocated to English. Different schools select different textbooks from Macmillan, McGraw Hill, Cambridge, or MM Publishers. One of the series that Private Schools use is *Young Star* from MM Publishers, others use *Cambridge Primary English* (See Image 2).

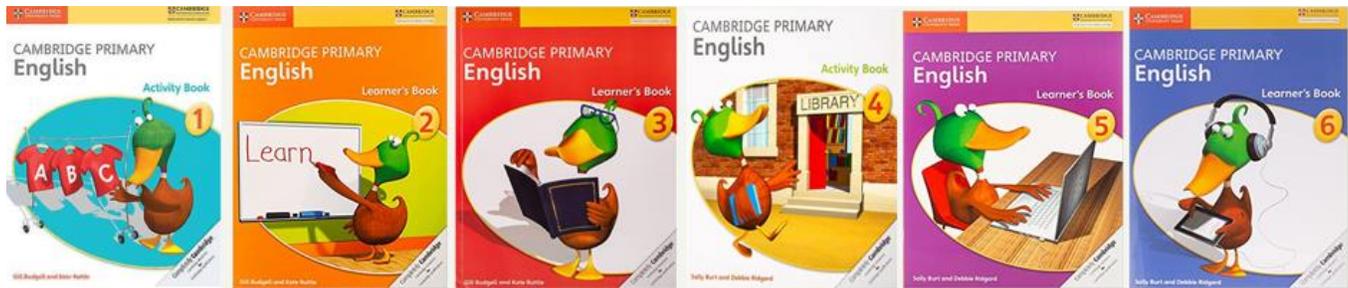
Image 1: The *We Can*, *Smart Class* and *Get Ready* Textbook Series Used at National Public and Quranic Schools



Image 2: The *Young Stars* and *Cambridge Primary English* Textbook Series Used at Some Private Schools



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.almrsal.com/post/921827>



### 3.1 What Parents Think of the Textbooks

Seventy percent (70%) of the parents stated that the textbooks used at National Public and Quranic Schools (*Get Ready, We Can* and *Smart Class*) are good and appropriate for the students in grades 1 to 6 because they are very simple and easy. On the other hand, parents who are English, linguistics and translation major (30%) asserted that the Ministry's English Textbooks are unsuitable for the students, especially for the early grades, because they are not arranged in terms of language basics. The students do not benefit much from the English course because the allocated hours are not enough to finish the textbooks as English is considered a secondary subject, not a requirement. Some added that the textbooks do not contain extra activities for the students to do at home. Many parents prefer that English be taught 1 hour a day.

Further analysis of the parents' responses to the survey questions showed variations in the parents' opinions regarding the English textbooks used at Private Schools. At Private Schools that teach 5 hours per week, some parents believe that the teaching hours are not enough to cover the Ministry's textbooks and the extra textbook assigned by the school. Some parents added that the students do not practice all skills especially reading sufficiently. Some mothers wrote:

*The school uses Cambridge Textbooks. I think the curriculum is very suitable for my son. It focuses on the four skills, which promotes the student's language development. The teachers added dictation lessons but focus on listening and speaking skills is very little compared to reading and writing skills. As for the number of hours, I think it is enough.*

*One hour is allocated to the Ministry's curriculum. The Ministry's textbooks do not need more than 1 hour to complete. The whole book is completed by the end of the semester and the course mark is added in the child's grade report like other mandatory courses.*

All parents of children who go to International Schools declared the textbooks are appropriate for the children's grade level. However, some mentioned that the problem is with the English teachers, not the textbooks. They asserted that some teachers are not qualified and use ineffective teaching techniques. This way both English and Arabic are negatively affected as English is not properly taught and Arabic is not sufficiently taught.

In selecting and/or designing textbooks for teaching English as a foreign/second language, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) criteria can be taken into consideration. The CEFR levels can be aligned with the 6 elementary grades in terms of the skills and content that should be covered (Al-Jarf, 2020a).

### 3.2 Parents' Opinion of Their Children's Proficiency Level

Regarding students who go to National Public and Quranic schools, parents in this category reported that Arabic is stronger and is the preferred language by all children. However, 25% of the parents in this category rated their children's proficiency level as poor, 63% consider it average, 6% rated it as very good and another 6% considered it excellent (See Table 1). Some mothers whose children have low proficiency level in English said:

*My son is in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He is poor in English. He feels nervous and afraid of English classes despite the ease of the curriculum, but unfortunately, he did not benefit at all.*

*My son is in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and my daughter is in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. They are poor in English. There is no progress in their English skills, because teacher pays little attention to them in class and the parents at home focus pay more attention to the other schools subjects than English.*

*My daughter is in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. She goes to a Quranic School. She is poor in English. She did not benefit at all although she started learning English in kindergarten because parts of the curriculum has been deleted, i.e., the students study part of the textbook, thus cover little material and the children take one hour a week only.*

*When my daughter was in kindergarten, she was watching TV and cartoons and learnt many words and could use them in her speech, but when she was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade she became less interested in English and her level was low in reading, writing, handwriting and spelling.*

For students who go Private Schools, Arabic is stronger in 62.5% of the children and English is stronger in 37.5% of the children. 17% of the parents in this category rated their children's proficiency level in English as poor, 49% as average, 17% as very good and another 17% as excellent (See Table 1).

For children who go to International Schools, English is the stronger language. All the parents in this category rated their children's proficiency level in English as excellent (See Table 1). Contrary to English, about half of the students in this category are poor in Standard Arabic but speak Colloquial Arabic as it is the language of the community.

**Table 1: Parents' Views of Their Children's Proficiency Level in English**

School Type	Proficiency Level			
	Poor	Average	Very good	excellent
National & Quranic Schools	25%	63%	6%	6%
Private Schools	17%	49%	17%	17%
International Schools	--	--	--	100%

In study by Al-Jarf (2022b) about how parents promote their elementary school children's proficiency in English and Arabic, the majority of the parents in the study sample mentioned reading online and buying print books and stories that match the students' grade level. Other home-based activities that parents mentioned were watching English and Arabic cartoons and movies, using English educational and entertainment apps/programs, playing English games, and enrolling the children in English courses during holidays or hiring an Arabic language tutor. In some households some mothers speak to their children in Arabic while the father converses with them in English. Some households require their children to talk to the English-speaking housemaid in English (Al-Jarf, 2022i).

In another study, Eccius-Wellmann & Santana (2020) indicated that proficiency in a second language depends on different factors, some of which are individual, others depend more on the social context where the learning takes place. They found some variables that can lead to proficiency in ESL with reading as the number one predictor of proficiency, regardless of the length of instruction, previous language study, or type of school, suggesting that, on average, public school students can reach the same level of proficiency as private school students, if they read. The researchers concluded that extensive reading may be beneficial in improving students' language proficiency.

### **3.3 The Preferred Language by School Type**

Students who go to National Public and Quranic Schools prefer Arabic. Forty percent (40%) of the students who go to Private Schools prefer English, 51% prefer Arabic and 9% have no preference. By contrast, English is the preferred language by all students who go to International Schools.

These findings are consistent with findings of a follow-up study by Al-Jarf (2020c) which she conducted on a sample of 40 male and female students from primary to university who attended International Schools in Saudi Arabia, where they were mainly taught English from kindergarten onwards, and Arabic as one course. The author found that the stronger language is English, and the Arabic is the weak language, especially in reading and writing. As for the preferred language in communicating with others, 35% prefer to use English only, 25% mix Arabic and English while speaking, and 40% speak colloquially and insert English words while speaking. It was noted that only 50% spoke English with an American or British accent. As for the ability to read and write in Arabic, 35% cannot write Arabic at all, and 65% can read and write in Arabic, but they are either slow, or misspell words and find it difficult to express themselves in Standard Arabic. Unlike Arabic, their ability to express themselves in English is excellent. They do not know the meanings of the words they encounter in an Arabic reading text. They tend to read books and stories in English more than in Arabic. It should be noted that 10% of those who joined King Saud University found it very difficult to study the university requirements such as the Arabic Language Skills and Islamic Culture courses. Concerning the language of conversation at home, 10% of the sample converse with their fathers in English and with the mother in Arabic. Some understand the question in Arabic, but they respond in English, and do not use Arabic at all.

### **3.4 The Language of Communication with Siblings, Parents, Relatives and on WhatsApp**

Students who go to National Public Schools communicate with their parents, siblings and relatives in Arabic. They use Arabic for WhatsApp messages. 72% of the students who go to Private Schools communicate in Arabic, whereas 28% use both English or Arabic depending on the messages they received. On the contrary, children who go International Schools communicate with their siblings in English, but speak Colloquial Arabic with their relatives, especially older ones, and people who do not know English. Sometimes children insert English words in Arabic conversations and those who speak English, insert Arabic words in their conversations. On social media like WhatsApp, they use English.

These findings are consistent with findings of Al-Jarf's (2020c) follow-up study of 40 male and female students from primary to university who attended International Schools in Saudi Arabia (See Section 3.4 above).

### **3.5 The Effects of Learning English (L2) on Arabic (L1)**

For children who go to National Public, Quranic and Private Schools, parents in the current study believe that learning English has no negative effect on Arabic. On the other hand, children who go to International Schools speak Colloquial Arabic and are poor in Standard Arabic. Some insert English words in their Arabic speech, i.e., they codeswitch. Some make pronunciation and grammatical mistakes when they speak in Arabic. So, their parents hire an Arabic language tutor to

Many mothers in the current study believe that learning English at an early age has no negative effect on young children's native language (Arabic). This finding is consistent with findings of some prior research that found no negative effect of learning a foreign language on the mother tongue. As an example, Aldosari & Alsultan (2017) investigated the effect of learning English reading and writing in Arabic in the second grade in Saudi Arabia. Results of an Arabic diagnostic tests given to monolingual and bilingual female second grade children at a public school and a private school showed no negative impact on the children's reading and writing skills in Arabic when English is taught starting from first grade. Similar results were obtained by Chen, Zhao, de Rooter, Zhou & Huang (2022), who examined the impact of learning English as a foreign language in early childhood on children's later English and Chinese achievement and attitude toward English learning in China. The researchers found that learning English in early childhood alone positively contributed to later English language and Chinese language achievement and to the children's attitudes toward English learning. This means that limited exposure to English before elementary school does not harm Chinese learning. The researchers recommended that educators continue helping children at a very young age develop an interest in learning English and maintain their high level of motivation.

By contrast, a number of prior studies in the literature have found that children who have difficulties in the mother tongue or reading in the mother tongue face difficulties in learning the foreign language. Sparks and Ganschow (1991) reviewed the literature to identify the relationship between the mother tongue and the difficulties faced by students in learning a foreign language. They proposed a linguistic coding hypothesis which states that students with foreign language learning difficulties may lack of linguistic coding that interferes with their ability to learn a foreign language. Results of another study by Dufva and Voeten (1999) with Finnish students in the first grade (aged 7 years) showed that diagnosing the students' reading skills in their mother tongue would improve their ability to learn the foreign language. Training students on the phonetics of a foreign language would develop their competence in the foreign language.

### **3.6 The Optimal Age for Learning English as Perceived by Parents**

Analysis of the parents' responses to the survey showed that 37% of the parents believe that the best age for children to start learning English Kindergarten. Forty five percent (45%) prefer that children start learning English in first grade, and 18% prefer that children start learning English in grade 2, 3, 4, 5 & 7 (a small percentage each). The parents gave several reasons for starting to learn English in kindergarten and first grade. They believe it is easier and faster to learn a foreign language at an early age. Young children are enthusiastic and love to learn English. The children will be able to master the English language early and will have no difficulty with English when they grow up. Children have a better mental ability to store information. Learning English at a young age will improve their vocabulary knowledge and help them acquire native-like pronunciation.

The above findings show that many parents in the current study believe that age is the main factor in learning a foreign language. They believe that children have a super ability to acquire English quickly with little effort, while many older children and adults find this difficult. They believe that the difficulties experienced by intermediate and secondary school students is due to the fact that these students did not start learning English at an early age and that teaching English to students at an early age will solve the problem.

These findings are similar to findings of a study by Al-Jarf (2020c) about whether English should be taught to Saudi children before the age of 6, i.e., in kindergarten. Seventy percent (70%) of the mothers surveyed believe that English instruction should start in kindergarten. Seventy percent (70%) prefer to enrol their children in a kindergarten that teaches both English and Arabic. Fifty

percent (50%) prefer to speak English with their children at home. Seventy percent (70%) believe that teaching English to young children has no negative effect on L1 acquisition and has a positive effect on their scholastic achievement in later years. As in the current study, Al-Jarf (2020c) also revealed many stereotypes and misconceptions among mothers about the optimal age for teaching English (L2), the effect of L2 acquisition on Arabic (L1) acquisition and on scholastic achievement, attribution of failure to learn English by middle and secondary school students to learning English at an older age rather than any other factors. They also asserted that children can learn both English and Arabic easily and effortlessly and can learn to speak English with a native-like accent.

In addition, Ladevie (1990) and Petrovic (1997) asserted that the optimal age for learning foreign languages is a subject of debate among linguists and educators for a long time. The idea that young children learn a foreign language effortlessly and with a high degree of fluency when exposed to it in a natural environment has had an impact on the view that beginning foreign language instruction in the classroom at an early age may be beneficial. With the developments that have taken place in psychology and educational psychology, many studies have been conducted in many parts of the world based on the assumption that young children are able to learn foreign languages than adults and older children. The fifties and sixties of the twentieth century witnessed a debate about teaching foreign languages to children in kindergarten and primary school versus older children. As an example, Stern and Weinrib (1978) examined the results of research and educational programs in the United States, Britain, France and Canada and found that these programs did not succeed in dispelling doubts about the effectiveness of foreign language education at an early age. A foreign language can be taught at any age. Choosing the age at which a student begins learning a foreign language depends on the length of time the student is required to reach a certain level of proficiency, the amount of importance given to studying a foreign language in the school curriculum, and the availability of educational and human resources.

The misconceptions about foreign language learning found by Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) are due to misinterpreting facts about language acquisition speed, errors in linking differences in language abilities at different ages, neurobiological factors, the misbelief that the ability of adult learners to learn a foreign language is weak, and the insufficient emphasis on the ability of adults to master a second language as native speakers. Differences among different ages in foreign language learning reflect differences in educational attitudes more than differences in ability or willingness to learn a foreign language.

One of theories that adopt the view that younger students are more able to learn a foreign language than older students is the theory of the critical period or Critical Period of Lenneberg (1964), which states that there is a decline in the ability to learn a foreign language related to the observed age and that the ideal age for learning foreign languages is between two and puberty. The neurophysiological theory of Penfield and Roberts (1959) states that the best age for learning foreign languages is the first decade of life. That is, in order for foreign language learning to be successful, it should take place before the age of ten, in order to meet the requirements of brain physiology. Andersson (1973) quoted Montessori that a child under the age of three is able to form language mechanisms and can speak any number of languages if they are used in his/her environment at birth. Andersson (1973) quotes Harvard Kindergarten Project Director White and other observers and students that the first three years of a child's life are the best period for learning.

Examples of prior studies that showed that younger students are more capable of learning a foreign language than older students include Magiste (1988) in Sweden, Vilke (1976) in Croatia and Ferrari (2002) in Brazil. A recent study by de Wolf, Smit & Lowie (2017) explored the influences of early English language teaching on oral fluency in 10-12 years old students at a Dutch elementary school. Results of a picture description task and a questionnaire revealed a marginal advantage for early starters in terms of oral fluency. Moreover, exposure to the language outside school has a greater impact on oral fluency than early language teaching alone.

On the other hand, examples of prior studies that found that older children are better able to learn a foreign language than younger children are Cenoz (2002) on Basque or Spanish and Basque; Chang (1986) on learning English, Malay, Tamil, and Chinese in Singapore and Singleton (2003); Stockmal, and Others (1994).

Singleton (1995) indicated that evidence from research suggests that early L2 exposure to the foreign language increases the chances of ultimately achieving a high proficiency level in the foreign language. However, in formal educational situations, any long-term advantage will be slow to manifest itself and may not do so at all unless articulation between primary and secondary programs is properly managed. Some L2 learners may achieve native-like proficiency in the foreign language without an early start.

### **3.7 Challenges of Teaching English at Saudi Elementary Schools**

Parents in the current study indicated that at National Public Schools, the hours allocated to English have been reduced from 2 hours per week in the upper elementary grade to 1 hour per week due to shortage of English teachers. As a result of this shortage, a teacher would hop from one school to another, teaching one hour here and another there. at several schools.

Due to the inadequate time allocated to English, some English teachers teach part of the textbooks especially at some Private Schools where teachers teach 2 textbooks.

A second problem is that some English teachers at National Public Schools are unqualified. They lack professional competence. They have linguistic weaknesses such as making grammatical and pronunciation mistakes. The use ineffective teaching methods and are not familiar with modern teaching strategies that are suitable for children and do not know how to integrate technology into English language teaching.

A third problem is the large number of students in some Public-School classrooms which affects students' participation in the class activities and the few opportunities available for them to practice the language and receive attention and feedback from the teacher.

Other problems mentioned by the parents were placing more focus on reading and writing and little focus on listening and speaking. Some young children in first grade cannot hold the pen.

For effective and successful teaching and learning of English several factors need to be taken into consideration such as intelligence, mental readiness, mental maturity, ability to use linguistic coding, the role of parents and teachers, need for using English for communication in and outside the classroom, intended in-class education, use of effective programs, the teacher's personality and attitude, teaching strategies used, children's positive attitudes towards English, playing motoric games, motivating the child, time allocated to teaching and learning the foreign language, students' grouping, the English curriculum design, the hierarchical grouping of language teaching experiences, the emotional aspect of the learning process, and the learning materials, resources and technologies used (Al-Jarf, 2020c). In addition, large student enrolments in English classes in elementary public schools has several negative effects on Instruction and class management, academic achievement in English, attitude, and on school staffing (Al-Jarf, 2006a).

Furthermore, Porter (2020) found that students aged 9-11 years learned spoken and written English through an integrated approach which combined receptive vocabulary and elicited imitation for general proficiency and reading aloud and reading comprehension to develop literacy. All the children made slow but statistically significant and long-term progress in general English proficiency and English literacy skills. They enjoyed the different aspects of literacy instruction and opportunities provided to them to experiment with foreign language use.

To enhance students' motivation, interest and enjoyment in learning English, teachers should be trained to use the principles of positive psychology in the elementary school English classroom to help the students become happy and relaxed learners, overcome stress and anxiety, develop positive attitudes, positive affirmations, emotional resilience, positive thinking and make more achievements and improvements. They should be trained to provide psychological help, student-instructor communication, giving moral support, feedback, improving students' academic skills by using out of class extension language activities, and encouraging the students to talk about their English language problems, fears and frustrations (Al-Jarf, 2022e).

### **4. Recommendations and Conclusion**

Parents in the current study revealed some problems in teaching English at National Public School and Quranic Schools and some Private Schools in Saudi Arabia, specifically the allocation of one hour per week to the teaching of English. Teaching English for 1 hour a week is not beneficial at all. It is a waste of money, time and effort with little fruitful outcomes. Another problem is reducing the allocated time from 2 hours to 1 hour due to shortage in English language teachers. To raise the number of hours allocated to English and avoid English teachers' shortage, children in National Public Schools can start learning English in 4<sup>th</sup> grade after mastering the literacy skills in Arabic.

To solve the problem of English teacher shortage, the Ministry of Education should have an English teacher recruitment plan to meet the teacher supply needs of English language teaching in Public Schools, to prepare future Saudi English teachers, and to increase the collaboration between the schools and decision makers. To attract college graduates who are English major, the Ministry of Education should improve the pay, benefits, and work conditions for English teaching jobs. They can advertise job vacancies in local newspapers and social media months before the new (Al-Jarf, 2008; Al-Jarf, 2004b).

To develop English teachers' professional competence, they should receive training once they are recruited, i.e., before they start teaching English, and then periodically while teaching. A Teacher Mentoring Program and a Cooperative Training Program for EFL teachers can be created. Training can be online and face to face such as online microteaching, online simulated teaching, and remote hands-on teaching. Special English teachers' professional development pages can be created on social media such as Facebook. English teachers' online discussion forums and blogs can be also created for professional development (Al-Jarf, 2022a; Al-Jarf, 2022g; Al-Jarf, 2021c; Al-Jarf, 2012a; Al-Jarf, 2006b; Al-Jarf, 2006c).

For more effective teaching of English to elementary school children in Saudi Arabic, teachers should take advantage of the variety of technologies available for teaching English. Technology-enhanced language learning has a positive effect on students' learning of a second or foreign language. It generates greater effects than non-technology integrated instruction, instruction being delivered via general-purpose applications on mobile phones (Chang & Hung, 2019). For example, English teachers can use video technology to promote second language acquisition. Use of video as an instructional medium provides unique learning qualities. Recent advancements of digital video (low-cost equipment and editing software) and Web-based video sharing services provide remarkable possibilities for supporting a variety of learning activities in ESL classrooms. Video technology can be used for viewing and listening and improving student pronunciation and presentation skills. Video-based ESL activities contributed to the overall learning motivation and enhanced students' pronunciation accuracy. A variety of YouTube videos that are suitable for children can be used in language learning such as cartoons (McNulty & Lazarevic, 2012; Al-Jarf, 2022j).

English teachers can use collaborative drama-based EFL learning in familiar EFL contexts. The students can use a contextual drama system to prepare, make, and conduct drama with voices, photos, and texts in authentic contexts to improve English learning. Drama-based learning in authentic contexts resulted in better learning achievements than traditional methods. Moreover, drama-based EFL learning can promote peer discussion and help students improve students' storytelling and writing abilities. Students' improved abilities were demonstrated in their sentence complexity and diversity. Students' body language usage and their engagement in drama activities had significant effect on their learning achievement (Zhang, Hwang, Tseng & Chen, 2019).

A variety of English and Arabic mobile apps can be used by elementary school children on their smart phone or iPad at home or at school. They can also use a variety of internet websites especially designed for children for language learning purposes (Al-Jarf, 2021b; Al-Jarf, 2021e; Al-Jarf, 2020b; Al-Jarf, 2004a).

To provide elementary school students with more practice of reading skills in the English classroom and since the elementary grades constitute the stage for developing literacy skills in both English and Arabic, teachers should be introduced to the components of word identification and reading comprehension skills and subskills via training course. They should be trained to use those skills in designing diagnostic and achievement reading, writing, spelling and vocabulary tests (Al-Jarf, 2018; Al-Jarf, 2007; Al-Jarf, 1995; Al-Jarf, 1992; Al-Jarf, 1989).

Since it may not be possible to allocate more teaching hours in school to English per week, this study recommends giving the students out-of-class activities using the Madrasati (My School) Platform, designed and maintained by the Ministry of Education, where teachers and students can work on supplementary reading activities. The teachers can give the students credit for participating in the online English activities. The integration of an online course in English instruction proved to be effective in enhancing EFL students' English language skills and their attitudes towards English compared to students who did not receive online instructions (Al-Jarf, 2021d).

To develop their listening and speaking, listening and reading, and listening and writing skills, teachers and parents can encourage the children to listen to mobile audiobooks (Al-Jarf, 2021f). They can engage in collaborative reading activities in small groups in the classroom where they can read multicultural children's short stories and fiction, and read any material of interest to them on their mobile or iPad, retell the stories or answer questions on their content (Al-Jarf, 2022d; Al-Jarf, 2021a; Al-Jarf, 2021b; Al-Jarf, 2021f; Al-Jarf, 2021e; Al-Jarf, 2015; Al-Jarf, 2012b; Al-Jarf, 2009a; Al-Jarf, 2009a).

To promote children's listening skills, pronunciation accuracy, decoding and comprehension skills, they can be trained to use Text-to-speech software in class under the teacher's supervision or at home under their parents' supervision (Al-Jarf, 2022h).

Furthermore, English teachers can encourage children to use mobile apps to develop their vocabulary repertoire. They can learn names of animals, fruits, vegetables, colours, clothes, body parts, rooms in a house, names of means of transportation and others. They can learn the meaning and pronunciation of the new words from the apps (Al-Jarf, 2022c; Al-Jarf, 2013).

Finally, exploring the status of English language education at Saudi elementary schools from the perspective of principals, teachers and students and the status of English language education at the Middle and Secondary National Public Schools, Quranic Schools, Private and International Schools school in Saudi Arabia are still open for further investigation by researchers in the future.

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