

Kids Engaged in Learning: Curricular Trends

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Abstract

As younger learners are being introduced to English in the Middle East, the curriculum must support teachers as they face the daily challenge of engaging, then re-engaging students during English class. This paper looks at trends in the English curriculum for young learners in a number of countries worldwide. It reviews developmental theories then examines the content of curriculum for young learners of English while looking at the variety of ways that standards, functions and grammar are expressed in curriculum. Some common vocabulary and themes are identified. Recognition of these commonalities can guide curriculum evolution so that developmentally appropriate English instruction ensures that young learners will thrive in English classes.

Introduction

Across the Gulf region there have been growing calls for English to be taught as a foreign language at an earlier age. Each country has responded with different actions. In July 2003, Bahrain's Khaleej Times reported that English language learning would be made compulsory in government primary schools from the first grade as opposed to the second grade. It quoted the Minister for Education Dr. Majid Al Nuaimi as saying it was "part of a comprehensive plan for educational development." In addition, Egypt's Minister of Education announced in October 2002 that English as a foreign language should be introduced at Grades 1-3 as opposed to Grade 4 when it was then taught. The United Arab Emirates is improving English language teaching at all levels with a shift in curriculum for young learners to include growth and development alongside academic study. Syria, too, is lowering the age at which English is taught by "moving it down a grade each year until pupils will be required to start English in the first grade," that's according to a Daily Star online report in 2003. In Kuwait, English instruction in Grade 1 began in 1993, now a locally developed textbook is being written for lower primary grades.

There are a number of reasons why communities and Ministries of Education in the Middle East support an earlier introduction of English. These communities believe that:

- new experiences and learning techniques will benefit young learners in their future schooling,
- it gives pupils more time to become fully proficient,
- it gives exposure to other cultures and traditions and helps to view one's own culture from a different perspective, and
- it lays the foundations for adult English language competence that many parents equate with adult economic success.

Teaching parameters

Teaching English as a foreign language to young learners can be a sensitive issue due to its implied link with western societies and their behaviours. Therefore, it tends to be the broader community that sets the parameters under which schools provide English instruction. In order to establish parameters for English instruction community stakeholders and parents take into account a number of factors. They

- consider the values of the local community and culture as a whole,
- focus on the 'perceived' status of English within the community, (an example of this is in the United States of America where, for many years, parents believed that European languages, particularly French, had higher status than other world languages.)
- consider how the language will be used, (for example, many young learners will only use English within their own country on a functional basis.)
- determine whether quality English teachers are actually available, (this could have an impact on a school's decision to offer an English language program)
- consider how Head teachers can best balance the school timetable to ensure that all core subjects receive sufficient instructional time, and
- consider the level of influence of the Ministry of Education and other Government officials which can sometimes override the wishes of one community for the perceived good of the whole country.

In addition to the above factors, there is a constant process of negotiation between the community, Ministry/Government and professional educators as they seek to develop the best

possible English language programs for young learners. Once a decision has been made to offer English for young learners a suitable curriculum must be developed.

Guidance from Psychology

English language curriculum development and instruction should be guided by research based principles of child development and learning cultivated by psychologists such as Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget.

When developing an English language curriculum for younger learners it is useful to bear in mind the theories of Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1986) :

- Children construct knowledge as a result of dynamic interactions between themselves and the physical / social environment they are in. That means young learners focus on the ‘here and now’ activities that are interesting, lively and fun. Their attention span may be short especially when there are no visual stimuli present.
- Children are motivated to learn by their interests and a ‘need to know’.
 - Instruction helps them make sense of their experiences.
 - Instruction helps to develop their sense of curiosity, attention and self-direction.
- Successful instruction follows lesson patterns where children are involved in active learning followed by periods of quiet restful activity.

Jean Piaget (1972) sets forth four *Stages of Cognitive Development* – they delineate the way individuals adapt to their environment. According to Piaget’s theory, young learners between the ages of 6 and 11 are beginning to use logic for the first time to understand things that they have seen and heard. However, they are not able to understand things that they have not yet experienced. This third stage is called “concrete operations,” it describes common behaviours of early adolescents and, therefore is most relevant to this study.

Application of the theories

When young learners first attend school they establish relationships. They also gain a sense of individuality and of belonging to a community. They learn how that community functions and their responsibility to and within the group. The studies of Vygotsky and Piaget, among

others, can guide the development of an effective English curriculum for young learners, by applying these principles in curriculum development:

- The curriculum must build upon a young learner's knowledge base in their home language in order to make sense of the new language.
- The teacher and curriculum must be able to engage the interests of the young learner.
- Developmentally and culturally appropriate play included in the curriculum can provide opportunities for exploration, experimentation and manipulation.
- A child's abilities should be challenged by teachers and the curriculum but not overfaced.
- The curriculum should offer young learners a wide variety of palpable experiences (field trips, group working etc), for this is the way they learn best.
- Given the relatively short attention span of pupils at this age, the English curriculum should be full of activities targeted at meeting the instructional goal or standard, so that each lesson moves quickly to hold pupil attention.
- The curriculum focus must be on educating the whole child and not just on teaching English.

Curriculum Guidance

Importance of Curriculum

In simple terms, the curriculum is a guide for learning. It helps teachers to plan and target instructional goals. The curriculum governs instruction in the classroom, including learning, play and creative expression along with opportunities for individual and group interactions. So the focus of the curriculum should be to engage young learners and then expand their experiences. The historic role of the teacher was to deliver the curriculum through instruction, but today, most teachers are full participants in the curriculum process. During instruction, they evaluate and revise curriculum as they teach. The challenge for these English teachers is how to balance the characteristics of the young learner with curricular demands that guide the expectations for learning as set by the broader community.

Curriculum around the world

The curriculum reflects a country's or a school's belief about how pupils learn and, therefore, tends to be goal oriented based on the community's values. For young learners it should foster both education and development in a stimulating and fun environment. In 2003, I

carried out an in-depth study of curricula for English language teaching in eight different countries around the world and analysed their content. By looking at curricula presently used in different countries, clear trends emerge. From these trends it is possible to identify similarities in language content and applications of language learning and development theory. These trends may sound familiar as they are valued and recognized in young learner English classes in many locations. The findings, I believe, can provide guidance for teaching English to younger learners in the Middle East.

Analysis of Common Elements in English Language Curriculum in Selected Countries

Background

The purpose of the study was to examine trends in English as a foreign language curriculum for young learners between the ages of 7 and 12. The study looked at curriculum from Brazil, China, France, Germany, Japan, Korea, Mexico and Taiwan. Two comprehensive sources that guide English language instruction in many different countries around the world were also included. These were the:

- *Common European Framework (CEF)*, developed by the Council of Europe to guide European countries in foreign language instruction, including the development of textbooks and assessment instruments. Levels A1 and A2 (the basic user language descriptors) were used in the study. A1 being the level that primary students would be expected to attain with some students above that level at A2. Its focus is on measuring communicative competence using the language with other speakers of that same language.
- *Cambridge Young Learners English (YLE) Tests* are aligned with the CEF and are offered throughout the world, generally at British Council offices. The tests are designed to assess the English of primary school learners between the ages of 7 and 12 and have three levels – Starters, Movers and Flyers – all of which were included in the study. Each level of the test has three components: Reading, Writing and Listening–Speaking. The aim of YLE is to sample relevant and meaningful language use, to measure ability accurately and fairly while encouraging effective learning and teaching. Tests such as this one are often used to benchmark pupil progress in the curriculum. Consequently, it reflects the content of curriculum.

Instructional elements from all of the aforementioned sources were included in the study.

They were grouped into:

- Standards
- Grammar
- Functions
- Vocabulary and themes

Methodology

The study collected publicly accessible curriculum documents from the sources directly, the internet or from colleagues in these countries. First, basic information about the educational structure of each included country was collated to form a basis for understanding the curricular context in these diverse countries. That information was then organised into a spreadsheet to provide a frame of reference across national education systems.

Secondly, a database was built. This database contained the standards, grammar, language functions and vocabulary put forward by the Ministries of Education in the selected countries to guide teachers as they instruct 7 to 12 year olds in English. Not all countries included all four instructional elements in their curriculum.

Design differences

What became immediately apparent while examining the curricula is that there is a disparity between the presentations of the curriculum in different countries, namely:

- The presentation styles were vastly different. Some countries presented the curriculum in chart format while others use an extended text format with bullets.
- Some countries use standards to guide the curriculum and instruction while others focus on the functions for which language is used.
- Some curriculum sources provide specific vocabulary to be taught while others provide themes to be studied.

As a consequence, a coding system was developed to more easily group data for identification of curricular trends.

Key findings

a) Standards

Standards “define the language competencies students need to become fully proficient in English.” (TESOL, 1997) A China, Korea and Egypt use the term ‘standards’ to express the achievement of students after instruction, although their expression of “the standards” is not standard across countries. The curriculum in some countries state standards in functional terms i.e. *Students decline offers or invitations*. Others state standards in grammatical terms, i.e. *Students write sentences using the S+V+O (Subject+Verb+Object) pattern*. The CEF does not use the term standards but clearly defines what ‘proficiency levels’ learners will move through as they reach more effective foreign language communication. The German ‘Compulsory Curriculum/Exercises,’ described experiences that students should have in the English language classroom. Given that the language used varies so widely broad descriptors were developed to group the ‘standards’. The general trends in standards based on curriculum documents from Korea, Germany, China, Egypt and the Common European Framework, indicate that the following five types of standards were most common in young learner English language curriculum:

- 1) Information exchange
- 2) Describing experience
- 3) Vocabulary
- 4) Text comprehension
- 5) Conversation

Curriculum writers and other participating stakeholders have a strong influence on the way standards are stated and interpreted to teachers and the public. Expectedly, the wording of standards will vary from country to country depending on the area’s culture, values and home language. Following are a few examples of standards that focus on information exchange:

- Pupils can ask and answer questions about themselves and other people, where they live, things they have.
- Pupils demonstrate their ability to introduce themselves and others.
- Pupils can deal with practical every day demands such as finding out and passing on straight forward factual information.
- Pupils can have a simple conversation appropriate to the situation.

b) Grammar

Of the eight countries reviewed only Brazil, China, Germany and Mexico provided grammar specifications in their curriculum. The Cambridge Young Learners Tests assures that appropriate grammar elements are being assessed by clearly delineating them. Grammar details varied in depth between the different curricula. For instance, some provide samples of a sentence where a point of grammar is clearly identified while others did not. Among the curricula, it is the interrogative sentences beginning with WH words that are most prominent within the grammar curriculum with prepositions following. The study shows that prepositions are repeatedly the focus of lessons in the texts for young learners. Although the authors of textbooks seem to believe that prepositions taught repeatedly at an early stage will produce appropriate usage, research shows (McLaughlin, 1978) that they are not being mastered until later on. This begs the question, is it really effective to continually teach prepositions if pupils are not ready to learn them?

Analysis of grammar specifications throughout the curricula studied showed that the following were the most common areas of grammar taught:

- 1) Interrogative sentences (who, what, when, where, why, and how.)
- 2) Prepositions
- 3) Adjectives
- 4) Conjunctions
- 5) Tense – present

c) Functions

The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language defines language functions as “The role language plays in communication (e.g. to express ideas, attitudes) or in particular social situations (e.g. religious, legal).” The teaching of those functions is, therefore, heavily influenced by the purpose for learning English and opportunities for use. In other words, what people want to do with language? Given that curriculum for young learners mainly focuses on learning to communicate, many countries use functions to organise curriculum. Jan Van Ek’s handbook, *The Threshold Level* (1975) defined the foundation for developing more sophisticated speech capacities as the learner progressed. Van Ek saw six different key functions: imparting and seeking factual information, expressing and discovering intellectual attitudes, expressing and finding out emotional attitudes, expressing and finding out moral

attitudes, getting things done and socialising. Van Ek's work for the Council of Europe in the early 1980's laid a functional foundation for the later development of the CEF.

In my study, functions were identified across the 738 entries from eight (country) curricula. The functions varied in the way they were described in the curriculum documents requiring that standard language be used to aggregate into them into 92 function groups. Some examples of the mostly widely taught functions across the curricula studied were the ability to express

- 1) Facts (For instance: "I'm ten", "I have milk every morning," "Look, it's raining", "She is listening to the radio.")
- 2) Greetings
- 3) Time
- 4) Preference
- 5) Colour

d) Vocabulary

The actual vocabulary for each curriculum in Mexico, Korea, Japan, Germany (Baden-Wuerttemberg), Taiwan and the Cambridge Young Learners English Tests were entered into the database and analysed. Three other curricula – Hesse in Germany, China and Brazil, offered no specific vocabulary but instead suggested themes. Neither France nor the CEF provided vocabulary lists with their curricula or standards. Only two curriculum documents – China and Hesse, Germany, specify the number of words that students should be able to use at a given point in time, for example: Grade 6 (age 12) students in China are expected to be able to "use 600-700 English words and 50 phrases or expressions." Similarly, students in Hesse, Germany in Grades 5 and 6 (age 11 and 12) are expected to have command of "700-750 lexical items." Other curricula stated their vocabulary learning expectations in a variety of ways:

- Pupils should have a sufficient vocabulary for the expression of basic communicative needs.
- They are expected to be able to understand formulaic expressions.
- Pupils are able to control a narrow repertoire dealing with concrete everyday needs.
- Pupils can listen to and recognise the meaning of words.

When looking at frequency of specific words, you see that only 27 words were included in five curricula and the YLE. Apple, bird, book, cold, dog, eye, father, hand, house, hot, monkey, mother, mouth, see, pencil, and many of the colours were among these relatively few words which were all commonly included in English curricula.. When observing the anomalies it is curious to see which words are not taught in which curricula. For instance, across the board the word ‘afternoon’ is in the curricula except, that is, in Mexico. The only country in the study not to include the word ‘blue’ is Japan whereas Baden Wurttemberg in Germany is the only place not to include the word ‘cake’. The word ‘foot’ fails to appear in the Korean curriculum and the Cambridge YLE is the only one to include the word ‘empty’.

Table 1 below shows the percentage of single occurrence word that appears in the curricula studied. The percentage of single occurrence words within a syllabus varies between 5% and 42%. Taiwan appears to have the most comprehensive vocabulary list with 2044 unique words and the largest percentage of words that appear in no other curriculum.

Table 1: Percentage of single occurrence words in curriculum

	Mexico	Korea	Japan	Germany BW*	Taiwan	Cambridge YLE*
Total Words	181	355	365	345	2044	1056
Single Occurrences	28	19	44	63	853	127
% of Single Occurrences	15%	5%	12%	18%	42%	12%

BW: Baden-Wurttemberg

YLE: Young Learners English Tests

Vocabulary introduced in a chapter tends to be associated with a theme that is used to focus the content of the chapter. Across all eight curricula 88 themes are articulated. Each country has selected themes that fit the English language use most common in that country. For example, the animal names listed in the vocabulary for Taiwan are the names of the animals used in the Chinese horoscope; they are the animals the children in Taiwan are most familiar with. The most prevalent themes were:

- 1) School
- 2) Home
- 3) Food
- 4) Sports

- 5) Family
- 6) Clothes
- 7) The body

Conclusion

Curriculum developers want to ensure that learners are motivated to continue learning so the curriculum attempts to create successful learning experience for each pupil. So while it is key to get the correct elements within any curriculum for younger learners, proper development and grasp of the language can only be achieved with the right instruction and encouragement from the teacher.

Many common elements repeatedly appear in English language curriculum for young learners across the globe. These elements comprise policies, community beliefs, resources, language acquisition, learning theory, and graduated instructional goals. Identification of trends in other countries amongst curricular elements can provide guidance to curriculum developers in the Middle East as they write a new curriculum or revise an old one. Armed with this information, curriculum developers and teachers can review a variety of curriculum styles and content, and then select what fits best in the local context to produce quality English language instruction.

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