

The Implementation of English for Primary School First Graders in the Saudi Education System: Practice and Challenges

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Abstract—The study aimed to investigate the condition of implementing the English language for primary school first graders in Saudi school. In 2021, the Saudi Ministry of Education introduced English language teaching in the first grade of primary schools, and there is a research gap in this area. In order to do so, this study used a mixed-method approach, with questionnaire as the main instrument to reflect the perspectives of 224 teachers, including 112 Arabic and 112 English teachers, as well as an approximate total of 5600 pupils in two cities in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire garnered quantitative data through close-ended questions, whereas qualitative data were collected using open-ended questions. The study found that both English and Arabic language teachers highly value the implementation of English language teaching in primary schools in Saudi Arabia. Students exhibited a preference for English classes over Arabic classes. The study reported no negative effects of learning English on Arabic language skills. However, challenges faced by English teachers in implementing English language education included a shortage of English language teachers and limited time allocated to teaching English. To overcome these challenges, the study recommended the use of technology-enhanced language learning and out-of-class activities and mobile apps to supplement the limited in-class English language teaching time.

Index Terms—primary school teacher, EFL, Saudi education system, early language exposure, language acquisition

I. INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of one's native language is a complex and lengthy process that typically occurs in distinct stages. It is a gradual process that unfolds over time. It commences with early vocalizations, such as babbling and uttering their initial words, which are then synthesized into coherent sentences. This initial phase typically takes place between the ages of 0 and 3, marked by vocalizations such as cooing, gurgling, and crying. Subsequently, between the ages of 1 and 5, children enter a language development stage characterized by cognitive and morphological advancements. It is during this period, particularly around the ages of 4 and 5, that children begin to grasp grammatical structures and acquire more sophisticated language skills (Loviyani et al., 2022). Immediately beyond this age, children start having formal education at schools – e.g. Saudi educational system admits children to primary schools between the age of 5 and 6 – including language education.

In today's globalized society, the Saudi educational system gives prime importance to English language education, with English being a key to advancement. As such, proficiency in foreign languages has become increasingly important as a single language is no longer sufficient (Murphy et al., 2020). The rapid advancement of information technology has broken down geographical barriers, enabling individuals to communicate and conduct transactions with ease across international borders (Crystal, 2003). However, effective communication in such contexts necessitates a shared language. Given that English is the primary language of the internet and technology-based applications, it has become the de facto lingua franca for global communication (Al-Jarf, 2008).

The introduction of English in the early classes in Saudi primary schools is a significant step in this direction. Early exposure to a second language, such as English, can provide numerous benefits for primary school students. According to Pan (2023), early exposure to the English language can be particularly advantageous for students. For example, the receptive abilities of two cohorts of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Germany in Years 5, 7, and 9 were examined in a study by Jaekel et al. (2022). The cohorts' ages at the start of EFL in elementary school and the amount of exposure they had before secondary school differed. Earlier starters outperformed late starters in Years 5 and 9, indicating potential long-term advantages of early exposure. Furthermore, the impact of learner's characteristics on English proficiency was gender-neutral.

Research on the effects of age and language proficiency on language learning outcomes as well as the connection between early foreign language acquisition and native language skills has produced a variety of results (Uslu & Ersan, 2020). While some studies suggest that early exposure to English results in superior language abilities and greater confidence (Domínguez & Pessoa, 2005), other studies indicate that late learners outperform early learners in certain areas (Burstall, 1974; Goikoetxea, 2007). However, some studies have found no significant differences in foreign

language learning performance between early and late learners, particularly in terms of speaking and writing abilities (Dwaik & Shehadeh, 2015).

The demand for English language proficiency has increased significantly in various contexts, including real-life and social media discourse. Among the demands of Saudi researchers, the implementation of English in primary schools has been highlighted in previous studies (Alotaibi, 2014). While numerous studies have explored the English-Arabic conflict in Saudi Arabia, the specific issue of implementing English in the first grade of primary schools has not been investigated (Hammad & Shah, 2018; Wedell & Alshumaimeri, 2014; Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Thus, this research aims to examine the implementation of English in the first grade of primary schools in Saudi Arabia, focusing on the associated practice and challenges.

Furthermore, the incorporation of English into the educational system in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has been a source of controversy due to cultural and social concerns as well as fears that it may negatively affect the Arabic language (Alzahrani, 2023; Alqahtani, 2015; Al-Samadani & Ibnian, 2015). However, resistance to English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching has diminished over time, primarily due to the strong desire of the Saudi government and Saudi people to keep pace with global advancements and needs. The government has made significant efforts to improve English education in the country.

It is important to note that while there have been various studies on children's foreign language education in different countries, including China, Germany, Indonesia, Morocco, Spain, and Ethiopia, the information presented thus far on foreign language education in primary schools is primarily based on foreign research conducted outside of Saudi Arabia. While there have been some studies on EFL education in Saudi Arabia (Elyas & Picard, 2010; AdDamigh, 2011; Al-Seghayer, 2013; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014), most of these studies focused on the parents' and teachers' opinions and viewpoints regarding EFL education before the implementation of English instruction from first grade onwards. Additionally, this research includes two recent studies on parents' attitudes towards their children learning English in primary schools following the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030 (Al-Qahtani & Al Zumor, 2016; Alshuaifan, 2022). These studies indicate that parents hold positive views on foreign language instruction during early childhood. Given that the implementation of English instruction in first grade is a recent development in Saudi Arabia, the efficacy of this approach remains unclear without empirical research in this specific context. Notably, despite extensive research on the effects of foreign language instruction in elementary schools, this remains an underexplored research area in the Saudi Arabian educational context.

The structure of the Saudi Arabian school system has been outlined by Mirghani (2020), who identifies three main types of schools: private international schools, private Saudi schools, and state (public) schools. International schools, which primarily serve expatriate communities, implement curricula from various countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and India, and use English as the primary medium of instruction. In contrast, state schools are publicly funded and mainly cater to students from middle- and working-class backgrounds, whereas families from more affluent segments of society tend to enroll their children in private Saudi schools. Notably, both private Saudi schools and state schools follow the same national curriculum. According to Masmali (2020), education in Saudi Arabia is free and compulsory for children between the ages of 6 and 15, and the system is divided into three stages: primary, middle, and secondary. Primary education spans six grades and includes core academic subjects such as mathematics, science, and English, alongside Islamic studies and cultural education. The Ministry of Education maintains strict oversight of curricula and pedagogy in both private and public schools, ensuring consistency in instructional approaches, textbooks, assessment methods, and overall educational policy. Alzahrani (2021) notes that the academic year extends from September to June, with classes conducted from Sunday to Thursday. A typical school day consists of seven 45-minute lessons, interspersed with a 30-minute break after the third lesson and a prayer break after the sixth. Gender-segregated teaching is enforced in both public and private institutions, with female teachers instructing girls and male teachers teaching boys (Alharbi, 2022).

A. Background of the Changing Status of English in Saudi Arabia

KSA has witnessed a significant change in the status of the English language over the past several decades. In 1937, English was initially introduced into the Saudi Arabian educational system through the primary school curriculum, with instruction occurring four times per week. This early implementation was discontinued in 1942, though English was later reintroduced at the intermediate and secondary levels. In 1974, instructional time increased to six 45-minute sessions per week; however, by 1980, it was reduced back to four sessions weekly. While no official explanation was provided for this reduction, it may have been influenced by prevailing societal attitudes and a general reluctance to embrace foreign languages, particularly English (Alkhannani, 2021).

In 2003, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the teaching of English language at the primary level, specifically in the sixth grade (Khawaji, 2022). Subsequently, in 2010, MOE made English language a mandatory subject for fourth-grade students (Alqarni, 2021), and in 2005, the King Abdullah Overseas Scholarship Program was launched, which enabled Saudis to pursue their degrees in western countries (Khawaji, 2022). The King Abdullah Overseas Scholarship Program has played a crucial role in changing the status of English in Saudi Arabia. A study (AlShurfa et al., 2022) stated that the program has not only allowed thousands of Saudis and their families to pursue their degrees overseas but also rendered English an essential economic, cultural, and social capital in the country (Barnawi, 2022). As a result, learning English has become a sign of social prestige, motivating families with strong

socio-economic backgrounds to send their children to international schools where English is taught as a second language (AlShurfa et al., 2022). The Saudi government has responded to the increasing demand for English proficiency by increasing the number of English institutions and providing online English courses (ibid).

In 2021-2022, MOE introduced the teaching of English from the first grade of primary school. This move aims to improve students' language skills, prepare them for the future and respond to the goals of Saudi Vision 2030, as stated by the Ministry of Education (2021).

The aforementioned initiatives are indicative of the concerted efforts made by the Saudi Arabian government to augment the English language proficiency of its student populace and conform to the global education paradigm that underscores the pivotal role of English as a lingua franca across diverse fields. Alkhannani (2021) notes that the Saudi Arabian government continues to invest substantially in the acquisition of English as a foreign language within the country, as evidenced by its efforts to recruit English language teachers, establish language laboratories, continually refine and improve the English language curriculum, and provide formalized training programs for teachers.

B. Arabic and English in the Saudi Context

As stated in the basic law of governance, Arabic is the official language of Saudi Arabia (The Saudi Basic Law of Governance, 1992). However, in actuality, Arabic exists in various forms in Saudi Arabia. The high varieties of Arabic include Classical Arabic, which is used for prestigious and religious purposes, and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is used for official purposes such as education, media, law, and administration. The low variety of Arabic, also known as dialectal Arabic or colloquial Arabic, is a simplified, Saudi version of Standard Arabic and is used in informal situations in the daily life of Saudi people (Alnosairee & Sartini, 2021; Harbi, 2022).

Almahmoud (2012) contends that the word "Arabic" has three meanings: Classical Arabic or "EL Fusha," which is the language of the Quran and is characterized by a complex grammatical structure; MSA, which is derived from Classical Arabic and is the language of media, education, and administration in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries; and Saudi Arabic, a language or variety of the Arabic language that is typically Saudi and is colloquial variety that is a simplified version of Classical Arabic. Saudi Arabic is adopted as the first language by Saudis due to its simple structure at various levels, particularly the phonological and syntactic levels.

On the other side, as of 2022, English language was the only foreign language offered in Saudi Arabia's schools (Alnasser, 2022). The demand for English has led to a severe shortage of human resources able to meet the novel and English-based needs of the market during the current revolutionary age in Saudi Arabia, given the standing of English as a channel to cope with the new demands. English is regarded as an invaluable tool for dealing with global development in various sectors, particularly education and technology (Khawaji, 2022).

The Saudi government has faced significant difficulties as a result of these issues. In the beginning, Saudi factories were entirely dependent on foreign labor. Saudi society has been significantly impacted by this period of high dependence on many different levels. One of the major contributing elements is that the English language, in general, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as a profession among Saudi nationals, obtained a prestigious position due to its function as a means of facilitating and guiding the industrial revolution in the country. Being highly proficient in English is regarded as a chance to change one's life and as a necessary talent to have in order to succeed (Khawaji, 2022).

It has become almost a tradition in all companies to require their (prospective) workers to know English. Even those businesses that do not conduct much of their business in English increasingly need candidates to have proficiency in the English language as one of their major requirements for employment, as English proficiency serves as a symbolic qualification whether these candidates actually need it or not. The usage of English in Saudi culture outside of professions is scarce and English was looked upon earlier with reluctance. However, there has been a transition from viewing English language instruction with mistrust to acknowledging its importance in the labor market (Alharbi, 2022).

Saudi Vision 2030 (SV2030) was introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2016 to reform the Saudi economy by moving away from its reliance on oil towards public service sectors. To achieve this goal, the plan focuses on economic diversification and long-term investments, with human resource development playing a crucial role. It is decided that, in order for Saudi markets to expand internationally (Saudi Vision 2030), the strategy aims to build and diversify the economy while also increasing jobs. Therefore, English language proficiency (EFL) is a crucial strategic catalyst since it helps prepare Saudi students for the global economy and workforce. The objectives of economic diversification and social development establish the inextricable connection between EFL instruction and SV2030. Without qualitative education, the achievement of SV2030 reforms would be impossible. Therefore, reform can be achieved efficiently only through education, and education, training and high-quality services are seen by SV2030 visionaries as the key to increase employment rate, build a thriving country, and create a prosperous nation. The plan encourages foreign investors and companies to open up offices in Saudi Arabia, which requires EFL competency. To achieve the goal of establishing the country's place in the international market, the government has also started investing more on English education. To achieve the goals of SV2030, the plan emphasizes the importance of EFL learning, which is essential for developing human capital with global competency and expanding Saudi markets globally (Al-Mwzaiji & Muhammad, 2023). Following its launch, SV2030, according to Almegren (2022), has become a major incentive for Saudis to learn English. He emphasizes that SV2030 has played a role as a substantial political intervention in EFL learning as it creates an instrumental drive for the participants.

The fact is, before Saudi Arabia introduced English at early primary stages, there had been calls by some scholars to that effect. Abdan (1991), for example, compared students who began English early in private schools with students who started later in public schools and found an advantage for early exposure. He suggested that introducing English in Saudi public elementary schools could be beneficial if focused on consistent exposure and capitalizing on young children's language learning strengths, while ensuring high-quality instruction. Alotaibi (2014), also, is one such study. He considers questions and concerns commonly raised by this idea, including the plan's linguistic and cultural ramifications as well as the age element, and recommends a sensible implementation of a plan that would ensure effective introduction of English for early graders. Also, Aljohani (2016) discusses the debate over requiring English language instruction in elementary schools. By contrasting the exam results of students in Arabic grammar, reading, and writing before and after the introduction of English language education, the author explores this matter. According to the study, learning English has no detrimental effects on students' performance in Arabic classes. On the other hand, compared to pupils who started studying English later, first-year private school students did better in Arabic topics. Al-Jarf (2022) explored the satisfaction of parents with English language education in Saudi primary schools and found that parental satisfaction is influenced by school type, variations in instruction hours, language proficiency, and preferred beginning age. The study also found that international students do exceptionally well in English; however, issues with hours worked and the caliber of teachers in public schools are raised. Khawaji (2022) makes the case that domestic economics and sociopolitical variables have a significant impact on English language instruction in Saudi Arabia. The research conducted a rigorous examination and discovered that Vision 2030 is helping English become more and more important.

Despite the fact that English language has been introduced in first grade classrooms by the Saudi Ministry of Education in 2021, little research has been conducted on the circumstances and obstacles of implementation. This study fills this vacuum by examining the state of English language instruction for Saudi Arabian first-graders in primary schools at the moment. The present study provides important insights to the practice and challenges to English language teachers in the implementation of English language teaching in primary schools in Saudi Arabia. This information can be used to inform the effective English language teaching in primary schools and highlight as well as address challenges faced by English language teachers at primary schools in Saudi Arabia. As English is used on a global scale, the study's findings can inform policymakers and educators on how to promote the development of language skills among first-grade primary school children in Saudi Arabia. The study highlights the necessary balance between the need for English language education and the preservation of Arabic language and culture. This study is intended to contribute to the required research in the field of language education in Saudi Arabia and provides practical recommendations for improving the implementation of English language teaching in primary schools. Overall, the study's findings have important implications for the educational system in Saudi Arabia and can help to promote the development of language skills among first-grade primary school children.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Study Questions

The study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What is the attitude of teachers to the implementation of English language teaching in first-grade primary schools?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of the potential negative effects, if any, of learning English on Arabic language skills for first-grade primary learners?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of the positive effects of learning English on Arabic language skills for first-grade primary learners?
4. What are the challenges reported by English teachers in implementing English language education for children in public primary schools in Saudi Arabia?

B. Research Methods

This research uses questionnaire as its primary data collection tool. The instrument contains both close-ended and open-ended questions. The former are designed to collect quantitative data whereas the latter aimed to elicit qualitative responses from the informants.

C. Participants

A total of 224 teachers were included in the study, with an equal distribution of 50% Arabic and 50% English teachers. As a matter of convenience, the questionnaire was distributed in two cities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Najran and Riyadh, as the former is the place where the researcher works and the latter is the capital city of KSA and is presumed to have the greatest number of schools in KSA. Besides, the research involved an approximate total of 5,600 learners to gauge their preferences regarding the learning of English language at early grades of primary school.

D. Instruments

A questionnaire was specifically designed for this study. It included three parts: 1) English teachers, 2) Arabic teachers, and 3) learners. It consisted of six sections that addressed the research aims and questions in various formats, including yes-no, multiple-choice, and open-ended. Before distribution, a preliminary sample was tested to ensure ease of understanding, validity and reliability. After that, the questionnaire was administered in a soft-copy format with the assistance of two teachers from each school. Later, the completed responses were collected.

E. Data Analysis

Upon receiving completed questionnaires, the responses were counted, categorized, and quantified twice by the researcher, with a two-week gap between the analyses, in order to ensure the validity of the responses. Discrepancies in the analyses and quantification were corrected. Quantitative data were analysed using simple statistical methods while qualitative data were analysed and summarized into practical insights. While yes-no questions as a corollary entail two options, the multiple-choice questions included either two or three options, depending on the nature of question.

F. Ethical Considerations

The research process ensured strict adherence to the ethics of scientific research applicable in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. Respondents were requested to indicate their acceptance and approval before answering the questionnaire items.

III. RESULTS

This part presents the results extracted from the analysis of the responses to the questionnaire. The presentation below is designed on basis of the research questions, not on the division of the questionnaire itself.

1. Assessment of Primary School Teachers' Attitudes to the Status and Significance of the English Language in Primary Schools

Assessing the attitudes of teachers to the status and significance of English in the Saudi Arabian educational system, the views of primary school teachers, both Arabic and English teachers, were examined. Among the Arabic teachers, only a small proportion of 2% considered English to be not at all important, while 4% perceived it to be slightly important. On the other hand, 16% of the Arabic teachers rated English as important, while the majority (78%) considered it very important. With regards to English teachers, all respondents in this category unanimously rated the language as very important, according to the findings presented in Table 1. This reflects teachers' awareness of the importance English in the modern world, with English being a key element of the national tendency to modernize Saudi economy in line with Saudi Vision 2030.

TABLE 1
TEACHERS' VIEW OF THE STATUS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ENGLISH IN THE SAUDI EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

		Level of Importance			
		Not at all important	Slightly important	Important	Very important
Teachers' specialization	English teacher	--	--	--	100%
	Arabic teacher	2%	4%	16%	78%

Again, the teachers' attitudes towards the implementation of English at the early primary stage was examined. Both English and Arabic teachers were in favour of the implementation of English language learning in primary schools with a complete unanimity. The study found that all English teachers (100%) support the implementation of English language teaching from the 1st year in primary schools (See Table 2). Additionally, English teachers believe that children can learn a foreign language more easily and quickly at an early age. This view is supported by the belief that early exposure to English language instruction leads to improved vocabulary and pronunciation skills, and that early mastery of the English language will benefit students in the future. The results are compatible with the propositions of other studies (Wilde & Goriot, 2022; Chapman, 2011; Gordon, 2007).

However, Arabic teachers exhibited varying opinions as to when English language instruction should be implemented, with 52% suggesting the sixth year and 22% suggesting the fifth year. Only a small percentage of Arabic teachers suggested the first, second, third, and fourth year (2%, 6%, 7%, and 11%, respectively) for implementation (See Table 2). Some Arabic teachers believe that children should first master Arabic literacy skills before starting to learn English. This is due to their concern over possible negative impact on their traditional and cultural values, with childhood viewed as a vulnerable stage in which children can be easily manipulated. Teachers emphasized the importance of prioritizing Islamic and Arabic cultures at this level of education and expressed concerns about the potential negative impact of American English culture on young children. Arabic teachers suggest that children at this age should focus solely on mastering their mother tongue and should not be exposed to foreign cultures until later stages of education.

TABLE 2
IMPLEMENTATION OF ENGLISH IN THE 1ST GRADE IN SAUDI PRIMARY SCHOOLS

		Yes	No		
Teacher's Specialization	English teacher	100%	--		
	Arabic teacher	2%	98%		
* If 'No'. Please specify the year:					
	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year	5 th year	6 th year
Frequency	7	8	12	25	58
Percentage	6%	7%	11%	22%	52%

2. What Are Teachers' Perceptions of the Potential Negative Effects, If Any, of Learning English on Arabic Language Skills for First-Grade Primary Learners?

An open-ended question was given to both Arabic and English language teachers to examine their perceptions of any potential negative effects of learning English on Arabic language skills for first-grade primary learners. The survey revealed that English teachers believed that children could learn both English and Arabic with ease, and develop native-like accents in English. By comparison, Arabic teachers did not report any negative effects of learning English on children's Arabic language skills, although they emphasized the importance of prioritizing Islamic and Arabic cultures at this level of education and expressed concerns about the potential negative impact of American English culture on young children. However, both groups of teachers noted that children who experience difficulties with their mother tongue or dyslexia may face similar challenges in learning English. Additionally, both English and Arabic teachers identified reading and writing skills as areas where children in the first grade may face difficulties.

These slightly varying attitudes between the English and Arabic teachers may stem from their educational background vis-à-vis their social responsibility. While English teachers tend to see English as a key to the exploration of modern world, Arabic teachers tend to be more tenacious of their traditional values and tend to view other "foreign" cultures with apprehension.

TABLE 3
PREFERRED LANGUAGE

Category	Preferred Language		
	Arabic	English	Both
Classes	--	100%	--
Communication	91%	--	6%
* If you have 'other answer'. Please specify it below:			

Seen from another angle, i.e. students' angle, data showed that more students preferred to learn English at an early stage. The questionnaire consisted of a single question that was orally presented to students to vote on, i.e. whether or not they wanted to learn English at an early age. The votes were then calculated. Regarding the preferred language in communication, data was collected through teachers' observations of student interactions. The finding revealed that students preferred English classes to Arabic ones. The learners' preference for English classes can be attributed to the abundance of attractive content and educational aids available for children, which can make the learning process more engaging and interactive for young learners. However, when it comes to communication, the majority of students (91%) preferred to use Arabic only, while a small percentage (6%) mix Arabic and English, and even fewer (3%) insert English words while speaking colloquially (See Table 3). Arabic teachers noted that most students struggle with Standard Arabic but are proficient in Colloquial Arabic, which is the language of the community. This diglossic situation has already been discussed extensively by Albirini (2015). Students can read and write in Standard Arabic but may be slow or misspell words and struggle with vocabulary. For them, the Standard Arabic language is extremely different from the first language of the child (Saudi Arabic) since this language had nowhere to be used, but classrooms. Furthermore, English teachers also highlighted that students find it challenging to express themselves in English, while their ability to express themselves in Arabic is excellent. English teachers may use their mother tongue to explain complex concepts and difficult vocabulary, which can lead to dependence on Arabic by their students. These issues are, in fact, rampant in any second language learning class, and are known to decrease through increased proficiency in the second language. Besides, age also plays an important role here. Children may normally find it difficult to handle complex notions, vocabulary and grammatical structures at an early age.

3. What Are Teachers' Perceptions of the Positive Effects of Learning English on Arabic Language Skills for First-Grade Primary Learners?

Both English and Arabic teachers approved the introduction of English for first-graders, albeit with mixed attitudes. Both agreed that English is a key element of student's future, and that it would help them increase their knowledge about the world and open practical vistas for them in their future. Both also agreed that learning English at an early stage contributes to the national plans, particularly as epitomised by Saudi Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program 2020. However, 63% of the Arabic teachers showed conservation that teaching English to first-graders might cause code-switching, imbibing foreign values, and disregard for mother tongue. Basically, as indicated above, the teachers' perceptions depended heavily on their educational background and sense of social responsibility, which shaped their sense of the common good.

4. What Are the Challenges Reported by English Teachers in Implementing English Language Education for Children in Public Primary Schools in Saudi Arabia?

Through this open-ended question, English language teachers were invited to identify the challenges they encounter in implementing English language instruction for children in public primary schools in Saudi Arabia. The participants reported several significant obstacles, most notably insufficient exposure to the language and a shortage of qualified teachers. The current allocation of only 135 minutes per week, distributed across three classes, was widely viewed as inadequate to support meaningful language acquisition and effective learning outcomes. In addition, the shortage of English teachers has led to some instructors being assigned to multiple schools, which adversely affects the quality and consistency of instruction. As a result, teachers often cover only selected portions of the textbook. Moreover, some educators continue to rely heavily on outdated teaching methods and demonstrate limited awareness of contemporary, child-centered pedagogical approaches. Large class sizes in many public schools were also cited as a hindrance, as they restrict opportunities for student participation, limit individual language practice, and reduce the likelihood of personalized feedback and support.

Respondent teachers provided recommendations for the successful implementation of English language education for primary school children in Saudi Arabia., most notably the increase of 2nd language exposure, continuous training of teachers on child-friendly teaching techniques and methods, incorporation of technology-enhanced language learning to improve students' language skills, the use of out-of-class activities and mobile apps to supplement the limited in-class English language teaching time, and the use of the official 'Madrasati' platform to provide supplementary reading activities and out-of-class language learning opportunities. Teachers suggested that this platform, designed and maintained by the Ministry of Education, can be used to engage students in additional reading activities and encourage their participation in online English activities for credit. Additionally, parents' involvement was deemed essential in promoting their children's English and Standard Arabic proficiency through the use of language learning apps, watching English and Standard Arabic cartoons and movies, and playing English games (cf. Al-Jarf, 2022). These procedures were suggested to be effective in achieving successful implementation of English language education for first-grade primary school children in Saudi Arabia.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the status and significance of English in the Saudi Arabian educational system, as well as the response of teachers to the implementation of English language teaching in primary schools, potential negative effects of learning English on Arabic language skills, the preferred medium of instruction for primary school learners, challenges faced by English teachers in implementing English language education, and recommendations for successful implementation of English language education in first-grade primary schools in Saudi Arabia.

The study revealed that both English and Arabic teachers in Saudi Arabia consider English language education to be highly important for primary school learners, although there were differing opinions on when it should be introduced. While English teachers unanimously supported its implementation from the first year, Arabic teachers suggested later years, with a majority recommending the sixth year. English teachers believed that early exposure to a foreign language leads to improved vocabulary and pronunciation skills, and ultimately, mastery of the second language, which is considered beneficial for students' future prospects. This view is supported by recent research, which shows that early L2 exposure enhances the likelihood of obtaining high proficiency levels in a foreign language (Jaekel et al., 2022). Benattabou et al. (2022) in Morocco, Fitriah and Amrullah (2022) in Indonesia, and Jin (2023) in China are but a few examples of earlier research that demonstrated that younger children are better able to acquire a foreign language than older students. Additionally, bilingualism acquired at an early age has been shown to have a positive impact on the brain, with bilingual students demonstrating improved focus, better academic development, and greater social understanding (Pan, 2023).

Interestingly, the study revealed that students prefer English classes to Arabic ones, although they prefer to communicate in Arabic only. This result comes in line with the studies of Kashmiri (2020) and AlTale (2023), which found that most Saudis converse with their family, peers, friends, and classmates in Arabic, while English is limited only to its position as an academic subject. The fact that Arabic is the official language of Saudi Arabia explains why Arabic is used in communication. In addition, as Arabic is highly valued by parents due to its role as the official language and national tongue, as well as the language of Quran and prayers, they are more inclined to speak with their kids exclusively in Arabic, leaving English language learners with little opportunities to utilize the English language outside of the classroom. Furthermore, the reason why students depend on the Arabic language for communication may be the teachers' dependence on conventional methods of instruction, such teaching English through Arabic. A lack of exposure to English in daily interactions can hinder students' ability to achieve a high level of English fluency and competence, and as a result, the learning objectives are not sufficiently met when classes are conducted primarily in Arabic. Additionally, when Arabic is used as the primary language of teaching, pupils have no opportunity to practice or interact in English during lessons. Teachers' use of Arabic may reflect their ignorance and lack of comfort with the English language, or it may just be a decision to make their job simpler. Sadly, translating from English to Arabic hinders pupils' development growth and in communication skills.

Regarding the potential negative effects of learning English on Arabic language skills, the study found that Arabic teachers did not report any negative effects on Arabic language skills of children. This result supports earlier studies that demonstrated learning a second language had no detrimental effects on one's native language. As an example, Thieme et al. (2022) investigated the impact of a foreign language program on young learners' acquisition of other languages, such as their mother tongue. Results showed no negative impact on the children's first language; on the contrary, it is plausible that learning a foreign language may lead to an enhancement of one's native language skills, as similar outcomes were found by Chen et al. (2022), who investigated the influence of early exposure to English on children's subsequent English and Chinese achievement as well as attitude toward English learning in China. The results of the study showed that exposure to English in early childhood alone had a favourable impact on the children's attitudes toward learning English as well as their later proficiency in Chinese and English.

Although Arabic teachers did not report any negative effects, they emphasized the importance of prioritizing Islamic and Arabic cultures at this level of education, and expressed concern about the potential negative impact of English American culture on young children. This view is consistent with that of some members of Saudi society who believe that learning English may negatively affect the learning of Arabic, especially at a young age, or lead to changes in Saudi culture and customs (Elyas & Picard, 2010; AdDamigh, 2011; Al-Seghayer, 2013; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Conversely, this outcome contradicts the findings of previous research studies, which have demonstrated a favourable disposition among parents of primary school children in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia towards the acquisition of the English language (Al-Qahtani & Al Zumor, 2016; Alshuaifan, 2022). However, from an Islamic perspective, individuals are encouraged to learn foreign languages, including English, to promote ethical and social values. Additionally, Saudi-educated English speakers who have learned the language locally are less susceptible to being influenced by foreign cultures in their own homes based solely on their level of education. Furthermore, Guo and Gao (2023) have highlighted the crucial role of the English language in facilitating China's global engagement, but this promotion of English has led to identity anxiety and cultural uncertainty among language learners. Therefore, the authors conducted a study to investigate the impact of English language learning on the identity aspirations of Chinese preschoolers. The study involved analysing data from a favourite-character-presentation task and an oral survey administered to 82 preschool children in Shanghai. The results indicate that despite the growing importance of English, Chinese remains the language of choice for the participants in expressing their transcultural identity aspirations. This underscores the significance of the Chinese language in shaping the identities of young children in China, even in the face of increasing globalization and the prevalence of English in international settings.

As for what is related to English language teachers, the study revealed that English teachers believed that children could learn both English and Arabic with ease, and develop native-like accents in English.

However, both groups of teachers noted that children who experience difficulties with their mother tongue or dyslexia may face similar challenges in learning English. Additionally, both English and Arabic teachers identified reading and writing skills as areas where children in the first grade may face difficulties.

The challenges faced by English teachers in implementing English language education in primary schools included a shortage of English language teachers, limited time allocated to teaching English, and linguistic weaknesses among some teachers. The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education has recently introduced English language teaching into the primary school curriculum, but the limited number of qualified teachers has made implementation problematic. There are only about 33,000 language instructors qualified to teach English in middle and high schools. The need for English teachers has risen quickly as a result of the recent inclusion of English in the elementary school curriculum. As a temporary fix to the shortage, many schools have decided to employ non-specialized teachers to teach these topics. However, this measure is insufficient due to the scarcity of non-specialized teachers, low teaching quality since these teachers are non-specialists, and temporary nature of the solution (Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022).

To overcome these challenges, the study recommended the use of positive psychology principles to enhance students' motivation and interest in learning English, the incorporation of technology-enhanced language learning. Sarvinoz (2023), Yang (2023), Yuldashova (2023) support the claim that technology integration in English training has been successful in improving EFL students' attitudes toward and proficiency in the English language. Moreover, the study recommended the use of out-of-class activities and mobile apps to supplement the limited in-class English language teaching time. In this regard, Artieda et al. (2020) explored the influences of age and exposure on EFL achievement. Results revealed that exposure to the language outside school has a greater impact on linguistic and communicative competence than early language teaching alone.

The involvement of parents was also highlighted as essential in promoting their children's English and Standard Arabic proficiency. Pointing out that parents have a significant role in children's foreign language learning, Zhou (2020) underlines the strength of parental influences on the learners' second or foreign language learning. They take an active role in their children's education and can help them retain the information they have learnt after class. Parents should encourage their children to study foreign languages both inside and outside of school since their attitude toward learning a foreign language is crucial. Additionally, in his research, Getie (2020) discovered that one aspect that should be taken into account when determining how kids feel about studying English as a foreign language is the parent Factor. This underscores the fact that language acquisition and learning, as well as cultural identities, are complex and extensive matters that require attention not only at the level of language planning and curriculum design in schools and the

kingdom but also at the family level, where parents have a vital role in controlling and regulating their children's exposure to other cultures and languages. In order to achieve socio-political goals, policymakers should take into account how families, particularly parents, support their children's English language learning and concentrate on increasing the availability of high-quality language education resources for preschoolers. These issues have been examined in recent studies by Pfenninger (2022) and Xia and Gao (2022). Furthermore, Guo and Gao (2023) recommend that policymakers prioritize the allocation of language education resources for young learners when formulating language policies and regulations.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that English language education is highly valued by both English and Arabic teachers in primary schools in Saudi Arabia. The study also revealed that students prefer English classes to Arabic ones. The study also highlights teachers' attitudes towards the necessity to balance the need for English language education with the preservation of Arabic language and culture. While there were no reported negative effects of learning English on Arabic language skills, challenges faced by English teachers in implementing English language education included a shortage of English language teachers and limited time allocated to teaching English.

To overcome these challenges, the study recommends the use of technology-enhanced child-friendly language learning, and out-of-class activities and mobile apps to supplement the limited in-class English language teaching time. The involvement of parents can also contribute to promoting their children's English and Standard Arabic proficiency. It is proposed to ensure the availability of adequate English teachers, trained on child-friendly teaching. It is also important to strike balance between teaching Modern Standard Arabic using methods and materials that appeal to children.

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