

Developing the English Language Teaching Skills of Saudi Teachers of Young Learners

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the impact of a program on developing the English language teaching skills of pre-service English for Young Learners (EYL) Teachers. The sample of the study consisted of 70 English language major students in Qassim University. The researchers made use of the quasi-experimental pre-test post-test control group design and data were collected quantitatively by means of questionnaires and observation checklists used for pre- post testing. Results revealed the effectiveness of the program on developing the necessary English language teaching skills for pre-service EYL teachers. The study recommended introducing appropriate teaching practices in the EFL context in general and in elementary school settings in particular.

Keywords: teaching skills, young learners, pre-service EYL teachers

1. Introduction

Current world is described as a fast changing world. The social, economical and cultural events of the recent past have shown that there is no guarantee that the future will bear any similarity to the present. Since the future is not predictable, there is a tendency to control factors that have shown to influence events. In the education field, the most influential element has been its teachers. Meanwhile, as the world increasingly becomes a global society, teaching English as a foreign language during childhood becomes a requisite, Chong (2018). It is empirically established that the earlier the foreign language is taught, the greater is the degree of acquisition of that language. This is strongly highlighted by Yildirim & Orsdemir (2019) who indicate that introducing English to young learners has many benefits. These benefits are not confined to a certain skill, but they are extended to involve all language arts. This movement has urged many foreign language educators to raise questions of how best to prepare teachers to teach EFL to young learners, and also how to design materials to be used in EFL classes for young learners (Ashraf, 2018; Achkasova, 2013). In addition, teaching young learners is a relatively easy job and is completely different from teaching adults. They tend to change their mode continuously and find it extremely difficult to sit still (Juhana, 2014). According to Ashraf (2018) teaching young learners is very challenging and managing learning at that level is very difficult. However, teaching those young learners English is also not difficult, if teachers already know how to do it (Hashemi & Azizinezhad 2011). Thus, the demand for qualified, competent and well-trained teachers of English to young learners becomes urgent. This can be achieved through carefully planned teacher education programs.

1.1 Context of the Problem

In Saudi Arabia there has been a growing need to develop elementary school education to prepare young learners for learning English at an early stage in this rapidly globalizing world. English knowledge will help to open many opportunities for young learners in the future and it will be invaluable in their future careers, Ashraf (2018). However, teaching English to young learners is not given due attention since EFL teacher preparation programs are targeted to middle and secondary school students, Al-Nasser (2015). A considerable amount of research has been carried out in EFL teacher education in different parts of the world including Saudi Arabia

(Yildirim& Orsdemir 2019; Chong 2018; Ashraf, 2018; Al-Nasser, 2015; Rahman, 2013; Achkasova, 2013). However, preparing student teachers to teach young learners English has not been given much attention. Teachers need to learn how to use appropriate techniques and teaching methods to be able to teach English to young learners, Juhana (2014). Hence, the purpose of this study is to develop the English language teaching skills of pre-service Saudi EFL teachers to be able to teach English to young learners at the elementary stage.

1.2 Problem of the Study

English language departments in Saudi Arabia prepare graduates to teach English to adolescents, but those graduates find themselves teaching young learners with no special training on how to teach them.

1.3 Research Questions

The present study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the English language teaching skills pre-service EFL teachers need to be able to teach English to young learners?
2. What are the features of a program to be developed to qualify those teachers to be able to teach young learners English?
3. What is the effectiveness of this program on developing the English language teaching skills of pre-service EFL teachers?

1.4 Hypotheses of the Study

The study included two main hypotheses which are listed below:

1. There are significant statistical differences between the mean scores of the experimental group in pre and post application of the observation checklist in favor of post-application due to the effectiveness of the proposed program on developing the English language teaching skills of pre-service EFL teachers.
2. There are significant statistical differences between the mean scores of the experimental group students and the control group students in the post application of the observation checklist in favor of the experimental group due to the effectiveness of the proposed program on developing the English language teaching skills of pre-service EFL teachers.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This study aimed at:

1. Developing the English language teaching skills of pre-service EFL teachers to be able to provide young learners in elementary stage with a basic knowledge of English.
2. Training pre-service EFL teachers to help young learners acquire, say, and understand basic English vocabulary, letters of the alphabet as well as a number of useful expressions. This should be based around songs, games, role-play, story telling, shared reading and activity-based communicative language learning.
3. Training pre-service EFL teachers to develop teaching materials that are suitable for use with large or small classes. These materials should match the interests of young learners to increase their motivation.

1.6 Review of Literature

In this digest, relevant theory and research are presented to provide a conceptual framework for the suggested program for developing the English language teaching skills of pre-service elementary teachers.

1.6.1 Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Young Learners in the Saudi Context

English is the main worldwide foreign language taught not only in Saudi Arabia, but also all over the world. It is now introduced to young learners in elementary school settings. The overall aim of teaching English in the elementary stage in Saudi Arabia is to "Familiarize pupils with the language, orally and in writing, in a stress-free and fun-loaded atmosphere to prepare them for demanding tasks in the subsequent stages" (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2015, p.190). To fulfill this aim, adequate instruction becomes inevitable. Therefore, teachers of English to young learners in the Saudi context are encouraged to use the communicative approach and the activity based approach. The integration between these two approaches lays the foundation for the activity based communicative language teaching. The adoption of the communicative language teaching in the Saudi context is regarded as "a radical development if not a major turning point in the history of TEFL in Saudi Arabia" (Badawood, 2016).

1.6.2 Benefits and Principles of Young Learners' Early Language Learning

Nikolov & Djigunovic (2011) believe that “better language skills” and “favorable attitudes to other languages, people and cultures” are benefits of early language learning, if conditions such as trained teachers and small classes are in place. EFL learning at an early childhood is also perceived as an asset for the young learner who has innate ability to pick up the language in the same way as native language is acquired, (Pinter, 2017). Rahman (2013) points out, what matters more than the optimal age is the conditions under which young learner programs are offered. These include conditions outside the classroom (for example, the social, cultural, and economic value of the language) and inside the classroom. Read (2003) suggests that the teaching of English to young learners is undoubtedly meaningful if it is natural, contextualized, part of a real event, interesting and enjoyable, memorable and offered in a relaxed and warm learning atmosphere. Moreover, the teaching of English to young learners will be successful if the teacher of English has an adequate knowledge of the target language, aware of the relevant methodology of teaching English at this stage of education and enthusiastic about teaching young learners (Cao, 2019; Bui & Nguyen, 2016).

Recent research has identified a number of principles which best help in language learning and teaching. Foremost among these principles is that young learners learn through hands-on experiences and learn by doing (Achkasova, 2013, Brown, 2007). If this principle is extended to EFL settings, it would mean that young learners in language classes need to be active rather than passive. They also need to do meaningful learner-centered tasks in which they are engaged in language activities that can be practiced. Another principle about young learners learning is that young learners learn in social contexts. They need not only hands-on or direct experiences but also experiences on interacting with others, both peers and adults. They need to use the language with each other and with the teacher, (Gautam, 2015). Further, significant principle would be that the teacher should interact with young learners in English making use of what Krashen (1982) has termed *comprehension input*, that is using English which is related directly to activities in which young learners are engaged. A recent principle which is highlighted by modern cognitive psychologists is the utilization of cognitive and metacognitive strategies and automatic processing of cognitive tasks in learning the language. In short, effective learning situation should involve all these principles (Hashemi & Azizinezhad, 2011).

1.6.3 Methods of Teaching EFL to Young Learners

There has been, and continues to be, much debate over the best way to teach EFL to young learners. The advocated methods are not always different from each other to yield results that clearly reveal the superiority of one method over another. This is simply because any given method is likely to work with some young learners than with others. Therefore, there is a consensus among educators that the most effective way of teaching language is the one which is based on young learners' needs and interests Juhana (2014). Foremost among the methods that the teacher can use to teach EFL to young learners is the following:

1- Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

This approach views teaching language as a means of communication using authentic and natural input (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). This approach includes *Suggestedopedia* (One of the notable contributions of this method is the use of posters) and *Total Physical Response* (TPR) (Using orders and actions to learn the language in a stress-free atmosphere), (Cameron, 2014).

2-The Activity-Based Approach

According to Bui & Nguyen (2016) and Touba (2002), the activity-based approach gives young learners confidence and motivation. The main objective in the learning situation is the successful completion of the practical tasks in English where young learners are allowed to make mistakes without the fear of punishment or failure.

3- The Whole Language Approach

In recent years there has been much talk about the whole language approach. The whole language approach is a learner-centered approach which stresses the integration of the four language skills to achieve communicative purposes, (Cao, 2019). This approach is suitable for teaching English to young learners, since it encourages co-operative and collaborative instruction, stresses that language learning occurs naturally, and focuses on learners' needs and interests. This approach comprises a number of methods which are suitable for teaching the foreign language to young learners, namely: Shared Reading (Shared Book- Experience), Reading Aloud, Guided Reading, Individualized Reading, and Modeled Writing.

As for the appropriate techniques to be used with young learners within the framework of the whole language approach, Newton & Trang (2017) identify them as follows:

1. Listening to literature: (including stories, rhymes and songs).
2. Dramatization :(Participating in drama based activities).
3. Puppet show: (linking visual arts with dramatization).

Thus, teaching English to young learners by means of one of the above-mentioned approaches and methods depends on how best the EFL teachers are prepared to use them to meet the young learners' needs and interests.

1.6.4 New Trends for EYL Teacher Education

It is widely documented that the most important factor in any young learner's education is the teacher. Effective EYL programs are needed to develop the teaching skills of teachers to help young learners learn English, (Jazuly & Indrayani, 2018; Copland & Garton, 2014). Therefore, educators need to adopt new ways and means to improve the status quo of English language teacher education through introducing EYL programs that are based on the growing body of research in this area (Chong, 2018; Jazuly & Indrayani, 2018; Juhana, 2014; Rogińska, 2013; Read, 2003), the following trends are provided:

1- Knowledge of the nature of language, as well as its linguistics, is a crucial component of the language teacher education. Chong (2018) highlights this issue suggesting a linguistic framework for EYL teachers' education comprising the nature of human language, the components of language, the process of language acquisition, language and culture, TEFL / TESOL methodologies, and language policy and planning in education.

2- Developing professional knowledge is the most recent orientation to supporting a skillful start to a teaching career. This can be achieved following two subsequent models of pedagogical frames and corresponding knowledge development:

- *Pre-Service-Model*: This stresses studying about practice / integrating knowledge, observing and trying out practice under simulated conditions, applying and transforming knowledge, applying and transforming knowledge, and integrating and generating knowledge.
- *In-Service-Model*: This includes observing and trying out practice under actual conditions, applying and transforming knowledge, applying and transforming knowledge, deliberating about practice, and integrating and generating knowledge, (Jazuly, 2018).

3- Knowledge needs to be integrated with practice in EYL teachers' education (Juhana, 2014; Rogińska, 2013).

4- Finally, there is an increasing tendency towards setting standards for EYL teachers' education (El- Naggat et al., 2003).

2. Method

Based on the previous review of literature, the researchers introduced an EYL teacher program to develop the English language teaching skills of per-service EYL teachers. Thus, the present study set an attempt to confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis stating that the suggested program would develop the subjects' English language teaching skills.

2.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is the quasi-experimental pre-test control group design in which two intact groups of subjects are randomly assigned to experimental and control groups.

2.2 Subjects

Subjects of the study were 70 English language major students studying in the English Language and Translation Department in Qassim University. 35 students constituted the experimented group while the other 35 students represented the control group. To assure the equivalence between the two groups concerning the linguistic ability, STEP test was administered on both groups. Subjects were included or excluded in terms of percentage of proficiency at around 65% in that test.

2.3 Instruments

To achieve the objectives of the present study three instruments were developed:

2.3.1 English Language Teaching Knowledge and Skills Questionnaire:

The main aim of the questionnaire is to gather as much information needed for developing an EYL teachers program for improving their teaching skills. The questionnaire is a polytomous scale consisting of eight sections covering most of what pre-service EYL teachers need to be able to teach English to young learners. EFL specialists were invited to give their responses regarding the degree of importance they assign to each item in the

questionnaire in order to identify the most important skills for the target sample. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was used to estimate internal consistency of items. Alpha reliability estimate for the questionnaire was 0.789 which is a reasonably high estimate with such kind of tools.

2.3.2 The Pre-Post Observation Checklist

The purpose of the pre-post observation checklist is to measure to what extent the subjects master the required skills to teach English to young learners. The target language use (TLU) domain is defined as the required skills to teach English to young learners as identified by specialized panel. This checklist consisted of seven sections, each of which addressed a certain category of skills in a continuum of a Linker Scale (very well – satisfactory – not very well – badly - not applicable). These sections were:

- Lesson preparation.
- Presentation.
- Practice techniques.
- Use of teaching aids.
- Questioning techniques.
- Classroom management.
- Assessment

This observation checklist was used as:

- The pre- post assessment tool.
- The self-assessment tool.

Also, this tool was used by another rater in assessing performance through video recordings. Then inter-rater reliability was obtained by two raters working independently. Inter-rater reliability exceeded 89% on all measures.

2.3.3 The EYL Program

1- Aim:

The primary aim of the program is to develop prospective EYL teachers' knowledge of methods and techniques of teaching English to young learners. It also aims to provide them with opportunities to practice teaching English to young learners either in small groups or in micro teaching sessions before being officially involved in teaching. Also, it aims to train the EYL teachers to choose, adapt and develop teaching materials.

2- Methods:

The teaching strategies used in this program are based on the communicative approach to language teaching which focuses on involving pairs, and small groups of learners in authentic teaching situations and in problem solving activities. Video-based instruction and co-operative learning techniques were also used through out the program where students worked together in developing audio-visual materials specially the big books used for shared reading. Dramatizations, role-play, peer and group coaching were also practiced.

3- Content:

The program consists of ten units derived and adapted from different sources (Cao, 2019; Habibi & Sofwan 2015; Achkasova, 2013; Ara, 2009; Wahdan, 2003; Daif-Allah, 2002). Each unit deals with a specific aspect of teaching methodology and classroom practice. A theme based approach is used for the task content of each unit. The units included stories, rhymes, songs, and practical tasks. The units also provide participants with a wide variety of activity based approaches to teaching English to young learners as authentic practice to these activities. These activities include: choral drills, role play TPR (Total Physical Response), mime and gestures, storytelling, listen and draw, shared reading, chants and rhymes.

The program units covered a variety of areas related to the teaching of English to young learners as well as adapting and developing audio visual materials and other teaching aids. The titles of the units are:

Unit 1: Needs of young learners in a learning situation.

Unit 2: Approaches to the teaching of English to young learners.

Unit 3: Integrating EFL methodology to the teaching of English to young learners.

Unit 4: Preparing and writing lesson plans.

Unit 5: Classroom management.

Unit 6: Ways to keep young learners interested.

Unit 7: Games, songs, storytelling and games for young learners.

Unit 8: Audio-visual and other teaching aids.

Unit 9: Shared reading activities.

Unit 10: Questioning and assessment of young learners.

3. The Treatment

In the present study, the researchers made use of the quasi-experimental research design. The observation checklist was used as the pre-and post assessment tool. Then, the suggested program was used to develop the EYL teachers' teaching skills. The researchers taught the program collaboratively in 10 sessions, two hours each. After the administration of the EYL program, the observation checklist was used in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the program on developing the English language teaching skills for the target subjects during their micro-teaching and teaching-practice sessions.

4. Results and Discussion

The data obtained from the research instruments were processed and summarized using descriptive and inferential statistics.

The data gathered were tabulated and analyzed statistically using frequency of responses, percentage and weighted percentage. The following table (1) shows the weighted percentage for each skill.

Table 1. The Weighted percentage for the teaching skills

<i>Items</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>Weighted Percentage</i>
	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	
Section One: Knowledge of the Needs of Young Learners				
1. Develop awareness of the needs of young learners in a foreign language learning situation.	20%	80%	-	2.1
2. Develop awareness of the value of young learners' centered activities.	13%	77%	10%	2.03
3. Develop knowledge of integrating EFL methods to the teaching of young learners.	75%	25%	-	2.57
4. Learn about approaches of teaching English to young learners.	90%	10%	-	2.9
5. Understand ways of keeping young learners interested.	10%	90%	-	2.1
6. Learn how to enliven dull course books.	-	20%	80%	1.2
7. Learn about games, songs, and role-play activities suitable for young learners	95%	5%	-	2.98
8. Learn about how young learners acquire the language.	20%	60%	20%	2.00
Section Two: Lesson Preparation:				
9. Develop the skills of lesson preparation in terms of:				
• Writing clear instructional Objectives.	70%	30%	-	2.7
• Describing activities clearly.	30%	70%	-	2.3
• Choosing appropriate methods and techniques for each activity.	80%	20%	-	2.8
• Choosing suitable teaching aids.	79%	21%	-	2.79
• Describing appropriate ways of assessing young learners.	35%	65%	5%	2.35

• Manipulating time appropriately among the different activities.	70%	30%	-	2.7
Section Three: Presentation				
10. Develop the skills of presenting a lesson in terms of:				
• Using suitable warming up activities.	40%	55%	5%	2.35
• Using various and suitable techniques for presenting new vocabulary.	80%	20%	-	2.8
• Using suitable techniques to tackle the reading text.	50%	50%	-	2.5
• Providing sufficient opportunities for suitable integration of the four language skills.	30%	60%	10%	2.2
• Use mine and gestures for presenting new vocabulary and structure	20%	78%	2%	2.18
• Use TPR as a language presentation technique	35%	65%	-	2.35
Section Four: Practice Techniques:				
11. Use choral drills.	20%	76%	4%	2.16
12. Use “look and say” technique for language consolidation.	-	20%	80%	1.2
13. Use matching games for developing vocabulary acquisition	68%	32%	-	2.68
14. Use role-plays activities.	80%	20%	-	2.8
15. Use matching games for developing vocabulary acquisition.	45%	55%	-	2.45
16. Use mine and gestures for presenting new vocabulary and structure	26%	74%	-	2.26
17. Use picture books, shared reading for enhancing reading abilities.	80%	20%	-	2.8
18. Use story mapping and story mapping and storytelling techniques for enriching young learners’ vocabulary.	20%	78%	2%	2.18
Section Five : Development and Use of Teaching Aids:				
19. Understand the value of using teaching aids	20%	80%	-	2.1
20. Develop awareness of the criteria of good teaching aids.	89%	11%	-	2.89
21. Select and use appropriate aids.	80%	20%	-	2.8
22. Design and develop aids.	30%	61%	9%	2.21
Section six : Techniques of classroom management:				
23. Manage the class effectively in terms of :				
• Establishing a pleasant atmosphere.	88%	12%	-	2.88
• Giving clear instructions.	25%	75%	-	2.25
• Using English most of the time.	20%	60%	20%	2.00
• Using non-verbal cues to maintain discipline.	70%	30%	-	2.7
• Motivating and encouraging young learners to participate in class.	70%	30%	-	2.7
• Reinforcing young learners’ responses.	34%	66%	-	2.38

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|--|-----|-----|---|------|
| • Managing the time. | 58% | 42% | - | 2.58 |
| • Dealing with discipline problems in an appropriate manner. | 95% | 5% | - | 2.95 |
| • Paying attention or considering the balance between teacher- student and student –student interactions patterns. | 40% | 60% | - | 2.4 |

Section Seven: Questioning:

- | | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|----|------|
| 24. Present clear questions. | 77% | 23% | - | 2.77 |
| 25. The questions asked are suitable for the young learners level. | 20% | 80% | - | 2.1 |
| 26. Rephrase his /her questions. | 23% | 77% | - | 2.23 |
| 27. The questions asked are instructional rather than judgmental. | 40% | 60% | - | 2.4 |
| 28. Choose the right child and the right time for asking questions. | 20% | 78% | 2% | 2.18 |

Section Eight: Assessment:

- | | | | | |
|---|-----|-----|---|------|
| 29. Assess how well learning objectives have been achieved through different tasks. | 70% | 30% | - | 2.7 |
| 30. Use formative evaluation techniques. | 35% | 65% | - | 2.35 |
| 31. Use summative evaluation techniques at the end of the class. | 42% | 58% | - | 2.42 |

Accordingly, the cut-score point in the questionnaire was (2.00). Thus, all the skills with weight percentage higher than the criterion were regarded as the greatly required skills for the target group, and consequently became the focus the suggested program.

In order to investigate the differences between the scores of the two research groups in the pre-post testing of the observation checklist, the researchers made use of “T Independent Samples Test” to differentiate between the results of the two groups in the pre-post application of the observation checklist. These results are discussed and interpreted in relation to the research hypotheses.

Concerning the first research hypothesis which states: *there are significant statistical differences between the mean scores of the experimental group in pre and post application of the observation checklist in favor of post application*, the following table (2) shows the statistical differences between the mean score of the experimental group in pre and post- application of the observation checklist:

Table 2. Mean and (T) value of the experimental group scores in the pre - post testing

Administration	N	Mean	Paired differences		T	df	Tabulated (t)	Sig. (2-tailed)
			d	$\sum d^2$				
Pre	35	20.2	46.6	4397.2	48.84	34	2.75	0.01
Post		66.8						

As displayed in the table above, there are significant statistical differences between the mean scores of the experimental group in pre and post testing in favor of post-testing. Obviously, calculated ‘t’ (48.84) is bigger than tabulated ‘t’ (2.75)² at the degree of freedom (69) and this is significant at 0.01 level. This proves the validity of the first research hypothesis. These results indicate that the subjects in the experimental group demonstrated improved performances in the English language teaching skills after participating in the proposed program. These results are in line with Cao (2019) and Gautam (2015) who indicated that the most important factor in the pre-service process of teacher education is the pedagogy chosen by teacher educators. In addition, they match with the findings of Juhana’ (2014) and Butler (2007) who concluded that it is not too late to prepare and improve the teaching skills of EYL teachers to teach English to young learners through a carefully planned program.

Regarding the second hypothesis stating: *there are significant statistical differences between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group students in the post application of the observation checklist in favor of post application*, the significance of the differences between the scores was computed as shown in the following table (3):

Table 3. Mean, Std. deviation, and (T) value of the scores of both the experimental group and control group in post testing.

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Tabulated (t)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Experimental	35	66.7	6.59	39.97	68	2.63	0.01
Control	35	22.7	6.37				

The table above shows that there are statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the two research groups in post-testing in favor of the experimental group, and therefore proves the validity of the second research hypothesis.

The Program Effect Size

Effect size is the complementary and supplementary aspect of statistical significance where the latter highlights confidence in the results regardless of the size of differences, whereas the former stresses the size of differences and the credibility of the occurrences. To calculate the effect size (d) for the suggested program, Eta Square (η^2) was computed using 't' value for the differences between the means. The table below shows that the independent variable (*the suggested program*) had a large effect size on developing the English language teaching skills for the target sample. The table below (4) summarizes this statistic:

Table 4. The effect size for the suggested program

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	t	df	η^2	d	Effect Size
The suggested program	EFL Teaching Skills	39.97	34	0.92	6.78	Large

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Notwithstanding the narrow scope of the present study, it has led to important findings regarding strengthening EYL teacher education program. One of the most important findings is the appropriateness of the pedagogy chosen in this study in qualifying prospective teachers to teach English to young learners. Based on the results of the present study, the researchers suggest a number of recommendations. First, English language teaching of young learners should include different motivating techniques such as reading together using big books, using games, using TPR Technique, using TPRS (Total Physical Response Story Telling) technique, using picture puzzles for language consolidation, using role-play for practicing the language and using chants and rhymes for vocabulary consolidation. Second, EYL educators should put young learners' preferences and the integration of the language skills into consideration when designing EFL books or materials. Also, EYL teachers should make use of technology to expand instruction and enhance knowledge of young learners. Finally, the results, conclusions, and implications of the present study would provide platform for future investigations related to the design of similar programs with in-service EYL teachers.

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