

(English Language Teaching Methods and Reforms in English Curriculum in Iraq; an Overview)

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Abstract

Language teaching curriculum and teaching methods is a complex process. This process needs the utility of a number of linguistic, psychological, sociological, pedagogical, and political disciplines. Also, a curriculum-designer has to answer the need of the theory. It also needs cooperative efforts in which experienced English language teachers move together with specialists in the subject-matter. (Corder, 1973:13)

This paper aims to shed light on the history of English curriculum in Iraq and on the phases of reform it has witnessed. English language teaching methods (traditional and recent) in this country will be discussed as well.

Index Terms— English Curriculum, Methodology, Curriculum Reform, Iraq

I. INTRODUCTION

The curriculum of English used in Iraqi schools passed through three historical phases:

1. The first phase (1873-1970s)

In fact, the old curriculum in Iraq has become out of date, However, it is helpful to understand how the curriculum of English in Iraq was and how modifications started.

In Iraq, English was taught for the first time in the state schools in 1873, in a few Iraqi schools in major cities. When Iraq was mandated by Britain after the First World War, a decision was taken to expand the primary education and teaching of English to the towns. English was taught as a second language starting from the first primary year during the first year of the British colonialization, but later, it was decided to teach it from the fifth primary year and its status modified from English as second language (ESL) into a English as foreign language (EFL) (Al- Chalabi, 1976:41).

The textbooks were imported from Egypt and they were based on the Grammar–Translation Method.

As far as this phase is concerned, there is an interesting document which belongs to the ministerial examinations of English for the primary stage in 1938 (see the Appendix).

A first glance at this document reveals the emphasis is on written form. As Rivers (1980:17) claims, learners are often trained in artificial forms of language, the vocabulary was detailed and sometimes esoteric, communicative skills were neglected and little stress was laid on accurate pronunciation. The pupils were supplied with ready-made compositions, a pattern (s) of a letter, examples of using certain words in useful sentences, and they were obliged to memorize them for examinations, i.e. the teacher's role was to cram his/her students for examinations. It is also obvious that the primary skills to be developed were reading and writing. Little attention was given to speaking and listening skills and almost none to pronunciation. These are the main features of the Grammar–Translation Method (Larsen-Freeman, 1986:10).

Abdul-Kareem (2009:6) adds that the earliest ELT course was followed by three series of courses which had been composed in Britain. The first series bore the name of “*The Oxford English Course*” by Lancelot Oliphant; the second one bore the name “*The Oxford English Course for the Middle East*” by Lawrence Faucett; while the third one was titled “*The Oxford English Course for Iraq*” by Albert Sydney Hornby; Donald Clifford Miller and an Iraqi expert Selim Hakim. The first two series had been used until the middle of the 1950s, while the third one had been used until the early of the 1970s (Ramadhan, 2001:12).

The books were divided into “reading texts”. This means that reading was the chief activity in those books. It is obvious from the titles stated before that the first two series were not appropriate for the Iraqi learners. They were for all learners who want to learn English as an EFL programme. It is worth mentioning here that most textbooks before the 1960s and 1970s depended on the teachers' experience. They had enough of “what to teach?”, but most of them took it for granted that the teachers know how to teach. This means that a “Teacher's Guide” was not existent or available.

Moreover, Abdul-Kareem (2009:8) declines that the Ministry of Al-Maarif (Knowledge) had no right to revise and modify those syllabuses because they were the property

of the authors, not of the Ministry. As a matter of course, the authority which was in charge of education had to look into these aspects thoughtfully and deeply in order to improve that situation. Hence, the establishment of the Foreign Languages Department at the Higher Teachers Training College in Baghdad (early of 20th century) marked a new era in English language teaching in Iraq on the way of improving the aforesaid situation. Concerning the teaching of the literary reader, it began at the intermediate stage, not at the preparatory stage, as it is now (Abdul-Kareem, 2009:11).

2. The Second Phase (1970s)

Abdul-Kareem (2009:6) argues that “*The Oxford English Course for Iraq*” was used until the early 1970s, when book -1- of the New English Course for Iraq was first put in use at that time to be taught to the students of the Primary Fifth Grade, and every year a new book of the NECI series began to replace its counterpart of the old series regularly. In fact, a new era in the history of the Iraqi educational sector in authorship began which can be called “The Era of Nationalizing the Syllabuses of English in Iraq”, because all the authors of this series and the advisory board were Iraqis. In May 1970, the Ministry of Education formed a committee to draw up the objectives of a new English programme in Iraq.

The new series which consisted of eight books was named “The New English Course for Iraq”. It was designed on the structural approach and a new method of teaching “The Audio-lingual Method” was recommended for teaching this programme. Teaching this syllabus starts in the Primary Fifth Grade in all schools.

As a result, the NECI was adopted after being proved efficient in comparison to the old textbooks. Starting with the year 1973, the books had been introduced to schools at the rate of one book per year. The last of the books (Book 8) was intended to be in the hands of the teachers and the students at the beginning of the academic year 1980-1981. This series included a total of (22) books for both students and teachers, as follows: 8 language books for students, 8 teacher’s guides, 3 handwriting manuals for the fifth and sixth primary grades and the first intermediate grade, and 3 literary readers for the three grades of the preparatory stage (high stage).

The authors of this series and the advisory board were Iraqis. They were:

1. Khalil I. Al-Hamash, College of Arts
2. Abdul-Kader Al-Bettar, Ed. D
3. Latif Hassan Ali, Ph.D.
4. Adnan J. Radhi, M. A
5. Ra’adAhmed, M. A
6. Aziz Yousif, M. A
7. Samir Abdul-Rahim, M. Ed
8. Khudheyer S. Ali, Ministry of Education
9. Badeel Hammo, B.A.

Locally-produced textbooks were the property of the Iraqi Ministry of Education and this characteristic gave the curriculum authorities in Iraq the right and the freedom to revise and modify the books whenever they found it appropriate to do so (Abdul-Kareem, 2009:7).

In late 1970, “The Institute for the Development of English Language Learning in Iraq” (henceforth IDELTI) was established by the Ministry of Education. One of the main functions was to assist in improving the textbooks of English in Iraq. This institute also issued the IDELTI Journal in 1973. This journal, which focused on English language teaching in Iraq, came out quarterly. All the editorial board members were Iraqi except Mr. R. E. Underwood. During the first half of the year 1980, the Directorate of Curricula and Textbooks opened wider debates on school curriculums in all courses including English (Abdul-Kareem, 2009).

In late March 1990, the decision to adopt the syllabus and to start the process was taken in a conference held in Kuwait, chaired by Dr. Abdullatif Al-Jumaily, and attended by Khudhair S. Al-Khazraji. The conference also appointed Al-Jumaily General Consultant for the course. (Al-Jumaily: Personal Communication). But this effort ended in vain due to the political and military situation in the region arising from the Kuwaiti – Iraqi conflict (Abdul-Kareem, 2009:9).

Although there were some attempts to change the (New English Curriculum) in Iraq, it is still the medium of instruction in all Iraqi primary and secondary schools.

3. The Phase Three in the KRG (since 2007)

Nowadays, English language has become a worldwide language used by millions of people as a means of communication all over the world. Asian countries generally and Middle East especially have responded to the improving the necessity of communicative movements in a faster way in English language as a foreign language (Zughoul, 2003: 111); so, students in Kurdistan Region of Iraq still have serious problems in using English language communicatively at secondary and high schools. Also, it has been found students in Kurdistan Region should learn English language especially speaking skills because they need speaking to communicate, interact and give and receive data. In this context, Kurdistan Regional Government KRG in (2007) decided to develop a new curriculum of English language which is called (Sunrise) for secondary and high schools with focus on the four essential skills: writing, reading, listening and speaking.

Since 2007, the Kurdistan Regional Government KRG has taken significant steps to improve education standards. Accordingly, English language was introduced to early classes in schools, and promoting creative thinking in classrooms was incorporated into school curricula.

The official website of (*Sunrise for Kurdistan*) defines the new curriculum as a complete English course written especially for primary and secondary school students.

“The course has a communicative approach, integrating listening, speaking, reading and writing, with a clear focus on grammar structures. It achieves development of English through an interesting approach to learning, using motivational topic-based units, adventure stories that introduce new language, and a variety of activities including role plays and guided writing tasks”. (*Sunrise for Kurdistan*)

1. Discussions

1. Background of Methods for teaching English in Iraq

As mentioned in the first section of this paper, since 1970s the English curriculum in Iraq consisted of English for Iraq books 6, 7, and 8 the content of which focused on dialogues, grammar, sounds, and exercises. Also for reading skills, three novels were studied: *Kipps* in class 10, *Oliver Twist* in class 11, and *Merchant of Venice* in class 12. At that time, teaching English in Iraq started from class 5 (primary level), till class 12 (high school) where book 8 was taught. But because the curriculum was tough and teachers couldn't teach it well, they prepared handouts, and each teacher followed his/her handout or his/her friend's one. These handouts were available in markets and students had to buy them for all of the courses, not only English.

2. Methodology

In this section, our focus is on Kurdistan Region of Iraq, because I by myself have studied my high school classes (10, 11, and 12) from the year of 2000 till 2003 in this region, and apart from teachers' interviews in this paper, I will share my individual experience as an EFL learner.

Three teachers with different backgrounds and experiences of teaching English were interviewed to discuss the methods of teaching English in Kurdistan region of Iraq and to evaluate the status of English language teaching and learning in the region.

Teacher 1, 35 years old, with 15 years teaching experience and taught both old and new English curriculums points out that *"There are marvellous differences between the old and the new English curricula; the old one was only for teaching students theoretically and was not practical for learning; but there were a lot of writing practices, that was just a waste of time. But the new curriculum is really designed for learning English; it has a lot of interactive spots and activities which are appropriate with the wants of students. Above all, students are the centre of learning, not the teacher, as teachers cannot do everything by themselves in the class"*.

Teacher 2, thirty eight years old, who has already taught English in secondary school for 14 years and experienced teaching both old and new English curricula in Iraq, is another participant of this paper. He states that *"The previous curriculum of English is different from the new one in some aspects, such as: the old one has a lot of subjects about Ba'ath and Saddam's regime and the contents and reading texts are difficult and there were no attention to new technology in the world. I personally agree that the new one is completely better than the old one because it stands on the four skills of learning English which are writing, reading, listening and speaking skills."*

Regarding the methods of teaching English in primary and secondary levels in Iraq, most of the teachers use the Grammar-Translations Method (GTM). English teachers use their handouts which were explained in Kurdish language and they focused on grammar rules, lots of examples, and question of previous years.

Teacher 3, forty years old, who is a lawyer now, remembers very well how his English teachers taught him. He reports that *"when we were studying English in secondary school, nothing encouraged us to try the best to*

understand and learn English completely; the teachers did not play a major role in this process due to several factors: Firstly, the teachers had limited knowledge about English language because they were not well-prepared. Secondly, they used classical materials during teaching; they were just using chalk and blackboard, with no conversation, no sound system or whiteboard, and no electronic and progressive methods were available. Thirdly, the majority of them were teaching us depending on handouts; they summarized the content of the textbook into some dead papers just to help us pass the exams. Fourth, the classes were filled up by many students or learners; no one was able to learn something in such an educational environment. Finally, most of the teachers even themselves were not able to speak English fluently, so, how they could teach pupils".

Another problematic issue in Iraq, especially in the Kurdistan Region, is the decision of the Ministry of Education concerning testing language and other courses. As the recent official statement of Ministry of Education of Kurdistan Regional Government KRG (2015), requires that *"All the questions for classes 9 and 12 must be multiple choice questions, and for other classes 50 percent of the questions should be multiple choice questions and the other 50 percent should be easy questions"* (see the appendix).

Furthermore Teacher 1, claims that he was obliged to use GTM in teaching the old curriculum but now he is free to teach the new one. He also adds *"Now I personally use communicative approach as students' engagement and participation are the key points of learning. Older methods were boring to students, and teachers were bound to teach the rules of grammar and push students memorize everything. That does not support the philosophy of learning when students do not participant in the class. The school environment should be well-prepared for learning, in terms of availability of technology and teaching sources"*.

Conclusion

In this paper, the three phases of reform on English curriculum in Iraq were discussed, and the major differences between teaching methods of English, were highlighted.

One of the problematic issues of English language teaching in Iraq, especially in Kurdistan Region is the lack of training courses for EFL teachers, and those courses which were provided by the Ministry of Education were not fruitful and could not encourage teachers for better teaching. M. Amin (2014) states that the training courses for English teachers in Iraqi Kurdistan were not successful, the study elicited that the courses were not good in terms of linguistic skills and linguistic knowledge (M. Amin, 2014). Also, regarding other types of problems which EFL teachers faced in their career, M. Amin (2015) argues that EFL teachers in Iraqi Kurdistan have adaptation difficulties, lesson observations of other colleagues, video recording of their own teaching, conducting action research, keeping learning logs; reflective writing could be beneficial to decrease particular challenges and ensure professional development. Besides learning from self-study, new teachers will benefit from a broader network of contacts with their peers.

Finally, it is significant to be mentioned that, the recent English curriculum in Iraq, especially in Kurdistan Region of Iraq is well-produced to fulfil the demands of students in learning English language, but systemized efforts are required in terms of training courses teachers, workshops, conferences, to cope with the diffusion of English language as a global language.

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Appendix 1

Question of primary schools in Iraq – June 1938 (Abdul-Kareem, 2009)

وزارة المعارف
الامتحانات العامة للدراسة الابتدائية
حزيران ١٩٣٨

الزمن - ساعتان

الموضوع - اللغة الانكليزية

- I. Use each of the following words in a sentence:—
king, army, picture, wash, dishes, month, yellow, palm tree, hotel, home,
beautiful, ugly, winter, moon, strong, table, store, radio, long, rabbit.
- II. Write five sentences about your school:—
- III. (a) Name the days of the week.
(b) Name the months of the year.
- IV. Answer the following questions:—
(1) Are you a pupil or a teacher?
(2) With what do you write?
(3) How old are you?
(4) Do schools open on Fridays?
(5) What are the colours of the Iraqi flag?
(6) Should you brush your teeth every day?
(7) How many times do you eat in a day?
(8) How many big rivers does 'Iraq have?'
- V. Write a letter to one of your friends telling him about your English examination.
- VI. Use either (is) or (are) in filling out the blanks:—
(1) Ahmad and Jasim.....coming.
(2) My mother.....sick.
(3) This picture.....beautiful.
(4) Baghdad.....the biggest city in 'Iraq.
(5) The boys.....playing well.
(6) My teeth.....white.

(Question 1: 20 Marks. Question 2: 15 Marks. Question 3: 20 Marks.
Question 4: 16 Marks. Question 5: 15 Marks. Question 6: 14 Marks).

Appendix 2

An official statement of Ministry of Education
of Kurdistan Regional Government KRG,
about the quality of tests in secondary and
high school s(20.Dec.2015)

<p>إقليم كوردستان - العراق مجلس الوزراء وزارة التربية المديرية العامة للامتحانات مديرية الامتحانات</p>	 Kurdistan Regional Government Council of Ministers Ministry of Education	<p>هه‌ریمی کوردستان - عێراق هه‌نجومه‌نی وه‌زیران وه‌زاره‌تی په‌روه‌ده به‌ریوه‌به‌رایه‌تی گه‌شتی نه‌زموونه‌کان به‌ریوه‌به‌رایه‌تی نه‌زموونه‌کان</p>
<p>No: Date: / / 2015</p>		<p>ژماره: 7939 رێکه‌وت: 10/12/2015 19/12/2015</p>

بۆ/ به‌ریوه‌به‌رایه‌تی گه‌شتی په‌روه‌ده‌ی هه‌ولێر - سلێمانی - ده‌یوک - که‌رمیان - هه‌له‌بجە / نه‌زموونه‌کان
ب/ رێنمایه‌ی تابه‌ت به‌ تاقیکردنه‌وه‌کان

دوای به‌ دوای فه‌رمانی وه‌زاره‌ی ژماره 3996 له 2015/9/9 (دووباتی ناوه‌ڕۆکی فه‌رمانی وه‌زاره‌ی ده‌که‌ینه‌وه‌ به‌م جۆره :

1. په‌رسیارده‌کانی تاقیکردنه‌وه‌ی به‌که‌لووریای بۆ (12) ی ئاماده‌ی و تاقیکردنه‌وه‌ی نیشتمانی بۆ (9) ی به‌ره‌تی (100%) به
شێوازی هه‌لبژاردن ده‌جیته .
2. په‌رسیارده‌کانی تاقیکردنه‌وه‌ی وه‌زی و نیوه وه‌زی له پۆله‌کانی (4 - 12) ئاماده‌ی له هه‌ر وه‌رزیکدا (50%) به نووسین و
(50%) ی هه‌لبژاردن ده‌جیته .

... بۆ کاری بێ‌یوست له‌گه‌ڵ رێژدا


بایر بکر بایر
 به‌ریوه‌به‌رایه‌تی گه‌شتی نه‌زموونه‌کان

وێنه‌یه‌ك بۆ /

- نووسینگه‌ی به‌ریز وه‌زیری په‌روه‌ده / بۆ زانیین و کاری بێ‌یوست .
- ده‌سته‌ی راوه‌ژکاران .
- به‌ریوه‌به‌رایه‌تی گه‌شتی به‌کانی سه‌ر به‌ ده‌یوایی وه‌زاره‌ت () بۆ زانیین .
- به‌ریوه‌به‌رایه‌تی گه‌شتی سه‌ر په‌رشته‌یاری و ده‌لیبا‌ی جۆری / بۆ زانیین و کاری بێ‌یوست فه‌رمانی وه‌زاره‌ی سه‌ره‌وه .
- به‌ریوه‌به‌رایه‌تی نه‌زموونه‌کان .
- خۆلو .

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