



Reflecting on the English as Additional Language (EAL) Learning Process of Two Refugee Pupils in the Context of the UK and Turkey: Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Competence in English language literacy can be assumed to be an essential factor for the competitive market in the context of the 21st Century globalization. However, in some cases, pupils learning English as an additional language in same classroom are not homogenous due to their diverse background experiences (Conteh, 2015). For instance, in the UK, there are over 1.5 million EAL learners (Bell, 2019) whereas, Cinkara (2017) in Turkey's context, Turkey welcomed around 2.523.554 Syrian refugees. This study reports the processes of reading English by two Arabic native speaker pupils. Salah (pseudonym) 9-year-old, without prior formal and informal education who was admitted to Year 4 in West of England primary school, UK. Ahmed (pseudonym), 8 years old in Year 3 in a South Turkey school learning English as a subject, possible as his third language, in addition to Arabic and Turkish. The study aims to understand the ways to improve these pupils' English language reading skills. Action research and structured interviews were used to collect the participants' data. Thematic analysis was used to identify the themes of the structured interview. It was found that the whole-word approach when reading a word, is the preference for both participants rather than the phonic approach. Further research with larger sample and encouragement of cross-border professional co-operation to improve refugees' Basic English reading skills is recommended.

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1. Introduction

The importance of learning English for an academic purpose is recognised globally and it has been more so since the term globalization has been advanced. Within the context of globalization, more people are connected across large distances of world continents. Similarly, in the context of migration, due to various reasons, people transcend their borders and settle in other countries.

This paper, which is from two teachers' perspectives, considers the cases of two refugees of Arab backgrounds in UK and Turkey when involved in learning to read English. This is because in the UK, there are over 1.5 million EAL learners in English state funded schools (Bell, 2019) whereas in Turkey it welcomed around 2.523.554 Syrian refugees (Cinkara, 2017) who are potentially learning English. The participant in UK was studied by the author¹ while directly working with the participant in the UK whereas the participant in Turkey was studied by the author² through the participant's class-teacher teacher.

The aim of this article was therefore to understand how the two participants in the study learn reading English basic words/sentences in formal settings and whether, considering their language background, there was a trajectory they follow during their learning processes. It was hoped that by understanding their pattern of learning the reading, a strategy could be devised later on that would improve the life chance of Arab native refugee pupils learning English as an additional language (EAL). The study was also an opportunity for the authors to reflect on or learn from their own practices directly/indirectly and explore the opportunity for cross-border cooperation for the benefit of the refugee pupils in the UK and Turkey when learning how to read English textbooks.

Learning is defined by Kolb as ‘the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). According to McLeod (2010) Kolb’s learning process can be divided into four categories. 1) Concrete Experience – where a new experience of situation is encountered, or a modifications is made through reinterpretation of the existing experience; 2. Reflective Observation- reflecting on the new experience to detect whether there are any inconsistencies between what is experienced and how that experience is perceived; 3. Abstract- it is the conceptualization process as what is reflected on gives rise to a new perception, or a modification is made to the existing concept. 4. Experimenting process- where the learner tends to apply the new concept to the world around him to explore the results.

For this paper, the words native language, Arabic language and L1 are synonymously used. This is because there is no one accepted definition for these terms. Thus, for these terms they mean the language of the two participants in the study and their parents have a historical and personal connection’ (Kwon, 2017). Furthermore, the acquiring language, English and L2 will also be used interchangeably.

2. Literature Review

Children from emigrant families are often expected to learn the language of the host society and/or English language in most cases for social and/or academic purpose. What perhaps is helpful is if there is a similarity between the native language and the new language that the emigrant children are learning (Ringbom, 2007). Learning another language can be termed as bilingualism, a concept of functioning in two languages (Baker, 2011). However, Baker’s (ibid) conceptualisation may be problematic as functioning in two languages might not be helpful to explain the degree of the ability or fluency in either or both native and the acquiring languages. Perhaps Hall, Griffiths, Haslam, and Wilkin (2001) conceptualisation of bilingualism which they adopted from the working definition of bilingualism in England by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets is helpful:

...pupils who live in two languages, who have access to, or need to use, two or more languages at home and at school. It does not mean that they have fluency on both languages or that they are competent and literate in both languages.

Another factor that is regarded as important when learning a second language is ‘motivation’. Mukherjee (2009) postulated that motivation is an urge that is created ‘...because of the absence of something desirable for organism’. Baker (2011) implied that the motivation for learning a language may be based upon its prestige among a society. This means its acquisition and subsequently its use may facilitate or create opportunities for social or economic benefits. However, whilst acquiring another language in the context of immigration, maintaining the native language is warranted. Baker (2006) emphasised the importance of the native languages to have a supply line, and where families fail to reproduce such native languages in children, other forms of bilingual education should be provided to make up the short fall.

Where bilingualism is referred to learners learning another language, another term for the English learners is EAL- English as an Additional Language. Conteh (2015) classified those learning English as an additional language (EAL) into five categories. Those who are the second or the third generation of established community: advanced bilinguals; those who are new to English speaking countries and had no previous schooling: children new to English; those whose parents temporary work in the country: sojourners; those with less experience as bilingual learners: isolated learners; and those whose schooling was interrupted due to war: asylum-seekers and refugees. In any case, it is evident that, without providing a meaningful intervention, these learners may not cope with the classroom task because they are chasing a moving target (Cruikshank, 2006). Another important factor that may facilitate learning a second language is the environment in which the learner lives.

A foreign or second language is usually learned but to some degree may also be acquired or “picked up” depending on the environmental setting and the input received by the second-language learner (Wang, 2009).

This means that the opportunity of acquiring another language is greater when the learner lives in a society where the acquiring language is the dominant. In this way the learner might be exposed to the acquiring language in different contexts: in school, watching tv at home and playground with friends.

As the learner is engaged in learning another language, it is often the case that there is interacting and mixing the native with the new language. It is thus imperative to understand how the two languages impact upon each other and the consequence that results. In the context of Jordan, Al Fayyumi (2017) study examined the impact of learning English on learning Arabic language from the perspective of teachers and claimed that, from the perspective students’ development and cultural values, the claim that L2 negatively impacts L1 is not valid. Al Fayyumi (2017) conclusion seems to not fully support Cummins’ Threshold Hypothesis. Cummins (1976) hypothesised that, where the learner maintains his first language and adds it to a second language, he may experience an academic advantage; where the learner is proficiency in either first or second language, he may or may not experience an academic advantage; and where the learner lacks proficiency in both first and second language, he may experience an academic disadvantage. Furthermore, bridging the gap between the socio-cultural factors and the actual process of cognitive development, (Cummins, Baker, & Hornberger, 2001) explained two concepts: additive bilingualism and subtractive

bilingualism. According to (Cummins et al., 2001) additive bilingualism refers to where the learner adds the second language to his linguistic repertoire while maintaining first language which is advantage for the learner; and subtractive bilingualism involves where the learner acquires a second language at the expense of his first language which can be a disadvantage for the learner.

In general, learning is affected by the sociocultural status of the learner and learning English is not an exception. As Arabic and English orthograph systems are different, Arab students learning English for the first time often experience challenge in adopting the new orthographic system and how its sentence make sense. For example, El-Nabih (2014) emphasised that one problem relates over-passivization errors in English. El-Nabih seems to refer the word 'over-passivization' to using an English passive sentence excessively. He gave an example of how an Arabic native speaker in Palestine would judge the sentence '*the cup broke...* to be ungrammatical and prefer the passive instead...*the cup was broken...*' (El-Nabih, 2014). According to Na'ama (2011) the difficulty evolves due to the degree the Arab language differs from English.

A native speaker of Arabic learning English, for example, faces many more difficulties in realizing the English consonant clusters because they alternate consonant and vowel sounds and try to force vowels in between the consonants (e.g. desks /desks//desukus /).

Moreover, the difficulty does not only relate the reading but also the writing. The problem with which learners of English for the first-time face is contributed to the fact that the English language' writing system can be defined as an opaque.

When letter or digraph is reused to represent more than one sound...(the) system suffers from both afflictions: multiple spellings for the same phoneme, and multiple ways to decode letters and letter sequences (McGuinness, 2004).

Hussein and Elttayef (2017) elaborated the dilemma of teaching English '...to Arab students in general, and Iraqi students in particular. Hussein and Elttayef (2017) provided many reasons for this: Firstly, that, despite teaching English in schools, Arab students appeared to have no basic knowledge of English. Secondly, there could be a mismatch between the students and teachers' expectations thereby creating students' impression that the teachers were the knowledge-owners and the main drive that could enable them to learn English fast. Hussein and Elttayef (2017) concluded that, this frustrates the teachers and causes them to quit their jobs.

2.1. Phonics Approach

Learning to read a word requires a method of identifying the letters and combining them to sound out the word. Tassoni (2007) postulated that phonics is a method that children enable to know individual and group of letters represent. Research evidence supports providing direct and systematic teaching of phonics as the child reaches 5 years old would afford them a firm foundation for developing higher-order literacy (Westwood, 2007). Watson and Skinner (2004) underscored that in the phonics approach, student learn to associate speech sounds with letters, grapheme-phoneme.

This approach can be divided into two groups: synthetical and analytical approaches Tassoni (2007). Tassoni continued that synthetical approaches aims building words prior to exposing children to reading; whilst analytical approach aims encouraging the sounds that the children are learning to whole words, for example, '*a is for apple*' (Tassoni, 2007). However, Wyse and Goswami (2008) after reviewing and analysing the recommendations by the Review of the Teaching of Early Reading in England commissioned by the UK Government, concluded that no reliable empirical evidence was offered that shows the superiority of phonics synthetic approach over other phonic instructions. On the other hand, in support of analytic phonics approach, Westwood (2007) argues that it '...teaches children essential letter-sound relationship by analysing words they already recognise.' As an example of the analytic phonics approach advantage can be that

If a child knows the word 'look' and needs to read or spell the word 'book', a straight-forward link can be made (Callander & Nahmad-Williams, 2010).

Johnston, McGeown, and Watson (2012) study made a comparison of 10-year-old-boys and girls who were engaged in learning reading by using analytic and synthetic method as part of their literacy. The study concluded that the group taught by synthetic phonic showed better word reading, spelling, and reading comprehension. However, Callander and Nahmad-Williams (2010) recommended using both the synthetic and analytic approaches as they complement each other.

However, Gooch and Lambirth (2011) warned of exclusively relying on phonics for reading regular words instead of providing opportunities which enable an effective engagement with the reading process of learning to read. According to Kazmierczak (2007) this is because phonics is a system of relating the spelling to the spoken language; thus, it is the relationship between the spoken and written language. Kazmierczak (2007) continued to emphasise that teaching phonics should be contextualised to avoid teaching it as a separate activity.

2.2. Whole-Word Approach

Another approach for reading is the whole-word approach. This means that the reading of a whole word or partially depend on visual. According to Beech (1985) This visual dependency is warranted as the English

spelling system is originally a mixture of Latin, Greek, French and German thereby creating a confusion. Beech (ibid, p.16) offering an example of the irregularity in spelling noted:

... the word “dread” is pronounced “dred” even though the spelling “ea” is normally pronounced as a long-e sound as in “eat”.

Learning vocabulary of the language is also crucial for the learners of a language. This is because as the learner acquires more vocabularies, he would be able to distinguish the meaning of the words in a finely manner, develops a:

...stronger understanding of how words work together, and increase their sensitivity to context and communicative intent’ (Graves, August, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2013).

2.3. Phonics Approach vs Whole-Word Approach

In literature, although there are proponents for either the phonics or whole-word approach when developing the reading, there is also literature which advocates for combining both approaches as no single approach seems to be superior than the other. For instance, Maddox and Feng (2013) study investigated the efficacy of whole language instruction versus phonics instruction for improving reading fluency and spelling accuracy. Participants in the study consisted of thirteen boys and nine girls of first grade class of a school where over 75% of the pupils were white (non-Hispanic), 15% were Hispanic, and 10% were either black (non-Hispanic), Asian, or multi-racial. Participants were divided into two instructional groups. One group was instructed using whole phonics instruction whereas the other group benefitted from an explicit phonics instruction. It was found that in the post test results, there were changes in reading fluency: both groups improved, but the phonics group made greater gains.

Similarly, Glazzard (2017) conducted a narrative literature review and evaluated the effectiveness of synthetic phonics in comparison with analytic phonics. The author emphasised that there was clear evidence that a systematic approach to phonics showed improvement in terms of word reading and spelling. He continued to explain that there was inconclusive evidence to suggest that no one method of teaching children to read is superior to any other method. According to the author, this is because no single instrument can assess all the aspects which need to be examined. Thus, he advised the practitioners and schools to develop an assessment battery which assesses children’s knowledge and skills in reading development.

Henbest and Kenn (2017) reported recent evidence on methods for teaching young and struggling readers to read words. They did this by comparing evidence of synthetic and analytic phonics instruction. The reviewed evidence suggested that instruction in synthetic and analytic phonics were both effective methods for teaching word reading to young and struggling readers. The studies indicate the importance of combining both phonics and whole-word approach when teaching children how to read.

In conclusion, given the vast multitasks required to support EAL learners in classrooms, teachers need to do extra efforts to accommodate the needs of these pupils in classrooms by perhaps reflecting on their practices through understanding of their practices within the situations in which they are carried out (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants of the Study

- 1) A Sudanese boy, Salah (pseudonym) of 9 – year – old, without prior formal and informal education was admitted to a Year 4 class in a UK West of England school in the 2017 - 2018 academic year. Together with his mother and younger sister, he re-united with his father who was established in the UK prior to their coming. Author¹ directly worked with Salah 3times per week for 30 minutes each session. He also provided Salah opportunities for familiarising English orthography system and orientation of reading a textbook 3 times/week for 15 minutes each session. He also had opportunities to English exposure as pupils of a Yr4 classroom.
- 2) A Syrian boy, Ahmed (pseudonym) of 8 years old, was in a Year 3 class in a South Turkey school, learning English as a subject possibly as his third language, in addition to Arabic and Turkish languages. He did not benefit a 1-1 opportunity whereby he was taught reading English rather, as a member of a Yr3 classroom, he participated the activities that the whole class were engaged in.

3.2. Participants’ Data Collection Method

3.2.1. Salah

An action research (AR) qualitative method was used to collect data from Salah. AR is:

...the process of people conducting their real-life enquiries, as they ask, individually and collectively ‘How do I improve what I am doing for our mutual benefit?’ (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003).

Three cycles of AR were completed in the period between May – July 2018. Initial planning of the session activities began by posing the research question *What learning activities would satisfy the following objectives:* 1) that would enable the participant to know the phonic sounding of the letter so that he would be able to read basic English textbooks. 2) that would make sure that the participant would be able to blend the letters to be able to sound out the whole word; and 3) that would enable the participant to acquire basic English

vocabularies. Thus, prior to beginning the sessions, the participant was engaged in prior assessment where he was assessed against of all the letter sounds that would be taught to him. The learning sessions of the three action research cycles were held at outside of the participant's classroom three times per week for 30 minutes each session.

- **1st Cycle:**

Began in May 2018. The initial assessment, before the sessions began, revealed that the participant was unable to recognise any English alphabet letter. The cycle aimed identifying letters (phonics) of set 1 – set 7. This cycle finished in the first week of June. The cycle was about identifying the letters set 1 – 7 and relating them to their sounds. Set 1 consisted letters, *s, a, t*, and *;*; Set 2: *i, n, m*, and *d*; Set 3: *g, o, c* and *k*; Set 4: *ch, e, u*, and *r*; Set 5: *h, b, f, ff, l, ll*, and *ss*; Set 6: *j, v, w*, and *x*; Set 7: *y, z, zz* and *qu*.

- **2nd Cycle**

Began in the first week of June till the first week of July and the focus was on how to blend the Consonant Vowel Consonant words. The *Interactive Bingo* game available at <http://www.letters-and-sounds.com/phase-2-games.html> was used as a teaching resources. This is because '...games are useful tools for the development of children's cognitive skills and problem solving' (Wakil, Omer, & Omer, 2017).

- **3rd Cycle**

During the first two week of July, the focus was about learning basic English vocabularies. *Pick a Picture* an online game, available at <http://www.letters-and-sounds.com/phase-2-games.html>, was used as a teaching resource. In this game, the participant was to choose a picture from four picture available and then simultaneously match to a word which appears next to the pictures. According to Broun and Oelwein (2007) matching is a critical first skill for all learners. The ability to match indicates that children are able to perceive like items in the environment and are beginning to form mental classification.

3.2.2. Ahmed

As Author² was not directly involved in teaching the participant, Ahmed's class-teacher, a friend of the author, was requested to collect the data. Prior to beginning the process, Ahmed's parents, the headteacher and Ahmed himself were asked for their consent for participation. Structure interview was employed where the author asked the teacher structured questions for 10 weeks (after 2 four weeks and after 2 weeks) during October 2018 – December 2018. The preference of structured interview was based upon the facts that it is more objectively verifiable, the author did not need training to administer them and whilst interviewing, the author's bias from emotional involvement was less likely (Jamison, 2006). The teacher covered Unit 1 through to Unit 3: *greetings, family members* and *physical appearance* respectively of the Book: *ILKOKUL İNGLİZCE 3* which the class was studying. Thematic analysis (TA) is used to analyse the structured interview. Advantage of using TA include that it allows meaningful themes to be identified, it is compatible with any research question, sample and data collection method (Clarke & Braun, 2017). To conduct thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) six steps were followed, which are familiarizing with the data, generating the initial code, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes. To analyse the interview, two columns were produced wherein the first column, the teacher's observations were entered. The second column was reserved for the themes that emerged from the data of the first column.

4. General Findings and Discussion

As both Salah and Ahmed were learning English as additional language they can be termed as bilingual learners (Baker, 2011) and more precisely they fit (Hall et al., 2001) definition of bilinguals since they live both in Arabic and English languages, had access to and needed to use both languages at home and school despite not being fluent, competent or literate in both languages. They can also be classified as isolated bilingual learners since their schooling was interrupted due to war which compelled their parents to seek asylum at outside of the borders they were born (Conteh, 2015).

In terms of second language (L2) interfering the first language (L1), it was found that Salah's Arabic proficiency seemed to be weakening as he was acquiring English vocabularies and phrases. Also, Ahmed's Arabic proficiency seemed to be diminishing and Turkish was replacing it. The reason could be that both participants might be motivated for learning English and Turkish because they regarded them as prestigious languages (Baker, 2011). They watched TV using these languages, played with peers who use these languages and the teacher used these languages. This is in contrast to Al Fayyumi (2017) conclusion of no evidence of L2 negatively impacts L1. In this study, due to acquiring English as L2, both Saleh and Ahmed's Arabic, L1 proficiency weakened. This supports Cummins et al. (2001) concept of subtractive bilingualism as both Saleh and Ahmed's native language, L1 was diminishing at the expense of the English (for Saleh) and Turkish and English (for Ahmed). Another factor that contributed the diminishment of their L1 could be due to the fact that parents are refugees and tend to meet familial basic requirements, there were the possibly that no L1 supply line and no other forms of bilingual education was provided to make up the short fall (Baker, 2006).

As both participants were newly arrived, they tended to wait for the teachers' instructions and not taking the initiatives. Although not at same age, this is in line with the Hussein and Elttayef (2017) arguments that Arab students appeared to have no basic knowledge of English and that students regarded teachers the main drive that could enable the English learning to happen fast. Another possibility could be the confusion of the orthography due the degree difference between the Arabic and English languages (Na'ama, 2011). The difference between the Arabic and English languages. However, verbal prompts of a native word when learning L2 is found to be helpful. For example, when teaching the Saleh set 1, as the author has working Arabic language knowledge, a prompt of 'turab- Arabic for ground or soil' is used for letter 't'. This proved helpful as the phonic 't' became the easiest to letter to remember throughout the 1st cycle.

Similarity between the participants was that they both found to use whole-word approach easier than either synthetic or analytical approach when reading a word. This could be because, due to unfamiliarity to English orthography system they experienced the irregularity of its spelling (Beech, 1985).

Although Ahmed acquired English vocabulary and basic greetings verbal interactions, Saleh, at the end of the AR cycles, was able to read and understand a Level 3 PM reading book 'Little Teddy and Monkey' and verbally interact with peer group using phrases and three words. This matches with (Wang, 2009) argument that the rapidity with which a learner acquires another language depends on the environmental setting and the input received by the second-language learner. Salah lived in an environment where the dominant language is English whereas Ahmed lived in an environment where the Turkish language is the dominant. Thus, for this small study, we can claim that pupils of Arabic native origins relatively found a whole - word approach less challenging than the phonic approach when they are in the process of learning how to read basic English words. We recommend that:

- Further research with a larger sample size of Arabic pupils learning English should be conducted to explore whether the preference of the whole word approach, when reading English, is specific to Arabic speaking pupils.
- Future research to develop the phonics approach for refugee pupils of Arabic native language backgrounds to develop their reading skills in English.
- Encouraging cross – border professional co – operations to improve refugees' English proficiency to improve the life chance of refugee pupils.

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