

The World of Letters

World of Letters – School Piloting and Concept Testing

Hp

2018

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This research effort is a dipstick study that aims to understand perceptions, attitudes and implementations of the World of Letters Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum been piloted in two public schools in Jordan. Also, study aims at using the experiences of local Jordanian experts in education to test the ECE system that the curriculum offers

Research Objective

1. Understanding and highlighting the difficulties in early learning (current) curricula that deter the ease of learning the Arabic language at an early age
2. Highlight the perceived strengths and weaknesses of WoL proposed curriculum
3. Recap teachers user experience and the behavioral implication of proposed curriculum on kids
4. Concept test the curriculum of teachers to understand if proposed curriculum helps in solving current problems in teaching the Arabic language

Research Methodology

Qualitative Methodology is used for this dipstick to explore the perceptions of teachers towards this modern curriculum. This methodology is used because qualitative methods break through emotional and rational barriers to aid in-depth understanding of gears behind opinions, mindsets and motivations.

This research effort was conducted through performing in-depth interviews with 6 Key Informant Interview with experienced personnel from the education field in Jordan



Section 1- World of Letters curriculum pilot in schools

The WoL curriculum has been tested under the Jordan Education Initiative (JCI) in one school over the span of 4 months. The pilot took place in two first grade classes with 24 students each. Both classes were held in a public school assigned by the ministry of education. Two homeroom teachers were trained on how to use the curriculum material to implement the curriculum with the use of teacher guides. The following section of the study revolves around understanding the strengths and weaknesses of this curriculum highlighted by the teachers through their hands down experience in school using this curriculum. Also to delve into the students experience while using this curriculum, in terms of its appeal, ease of learning, difficulties and impact.

The teachers, who piloted the WoL curriculum, expressed their overall appeal towards the curriculum. The curriculum pilot in schools impacted both the teacher and the student; it had pulled both teachers and students out of the monotony of the everyday classroom routine and has subjected them to a fun, interactive experience. This appeal is mostly driven by the fact that this teaching experience (for the teachers) is the first where they feel that they are in par with educational systems of the world due to the use of technology in class. This curriculum is perceived to be current and highly interactive, which are two major elements causing its success.

The educational experience starts with the students when they are lined up to leave the classroom to go and attend a class in the “world of knowledge” classroom. This classroom may have a different name in different schools, yet it is the room where various learning activities take place, such as the use of technology, or the puppet show. Students reveal very high levels of excitement and enthusiasm to interact due to the distribution of tablet devices to the students to use. It is evident from the way students interact with tablets, that there is high level of awareness and familiarity with such technology. Among the students are those who vocally expressed that the use of the tablet is similar to their parent’s smart phones at home. This is a very important observation to draw the attention to the fact that children today from various backgrounds and income levels are all subjected and surrounded by technology. This technology is mostly used to entertain children through songs, videos and animations that could be solely for entertainment or also for educational purposes. It was mentioned among the children that the Arabic language app is similar to ones available on their parent’s phone.

Public school students and teacher are both acquainted to the scarce resources (due to lack of school resources and the lower income levels). This pilot experience had exceeded expectations due to the fact that every student had independently used a tablet device and had to interact and augment the contents of the world of letters curriculum on their own. This exposure had caused increased enthusiasm and classroom interactivity to increase from both, the teacher and the students.



Learning outcomes

Across the board teachers have expressed the noticeable change in the student's language proficiency after the use of the WoL curriculum. Students with the use of the interactive content to repeat words, and sounds upon the command of the child, had increased the students realization of the world around them through the extended vocabulary learned in each lesson. Students could relate and understand language better by connecting letter sounds in the vocabulary derived out of the stories that accompany the letters and characters along the curriculum book. Teachers expressed how the child's comprehension of the scenarios, sounds and letter shapes had increased with the use of the curriculum. This is due to the better understanding of language with the use of sounds, words, characters and interactive stories. The student's mindset and excitement to use the interactive curriculum is perceived to be a major reason behind the high impact of this curriculum.

The use of technology in class has allowed the child to acquire skills that are advanced and related to critical thinking such as the use of the tablet, to maneuver its content, skeptically looking at it and trying to understand what is on the screen, although at this age students cannot read and yet maneuvering the device to try to get to the interactive applications.

It was noticed among the Teachers who have tested the curriculum, that there is a higher preference to introducing letters in the ordinary classroom with the use of ordinary learning materials and that is attributed to their prior experience and ability to convey the learning goal coupled with the ability to control and manage the class. We can deduce that the use of the modern tool had made them less confident in their ability to control the students attention. Although teachers who underwent this experience had high appeal and interest in adopting this modern curriculum in class the teachers still expressed their preference to still confine with ordinary techniques in some cases due to their practicality.

With the evident lack of teaching resources, teachers who piloted the curriculum felt this curriculum is fit to accompany the Ministry of Educations curriculum as an educational activity. Both paired together are perceived to create a very strong educational curriculum that is a mixture of traditional and contemporary learning that will allow students to graduate to higher classes with high proficiency in



language. The Ministry of Education's (MoE) first grade Arabic book is considered as a strong educational tool due to the student's ability to read and write at the end of the school year. The MoE curriculum is dignified due to its ability to achieve its educational purpose at the end of the school year. The MoE curriculum is expressed to lack interactive content, extra educational tools and activities, colorful images and room for imagination; these elements are provided by the world of letters curriculum and thus the teachers see them go hand in hand.

Teachers will need tools to make sure that students are capable to distinguish the shape of the letters , such as the exercise in the government book t" place a circle around the word that starts with the letter sound da" . To distinguish the letter among letters that looks similar then among words. Although teachers seem lean towards the WoL curriculum its is evident that they are highly reliant on the traditional way of teaching, always going back to discuss how the traditional curriculum teaches the language.

The following is the teaching sequence used by traditional curriculum:

- Teach the letter sound
- Teach letter sound with short vowels
- Introduce word segments
- Compiling the words together

Strengths and weaknesses WoL

Strengths:

- Teachers who implemented the curriculum felt it was easy to learn how to use and teach the curriculum, yet they feel that there should have been more support on how much time each activity requires to achieve the goal.
- The songs and poems are nice and informative.
- The curriculum uses the 3 Arabic vowels accompanied by letters without the introducing vowels as vowel letters lesson and how they affect the pronunciation of letters. Also letters should be introduced to students with the use of short vowels
- The curriculum major strength is its ability of to teach the child how to correctly pronounce the letters correctly
- Pictures are precisely explain the letter, the colorfulness is highly attractive and appealing to children
- The availability of worlds that have the letters in different positions. In the beginning of the word and middle and end of the word



- Visually aids the child to learn (the different color of the letter in the word), different colorfully illustrated vocabulary
- The availability of music with the poems is very attractive and fun.
- Highly interactive content.
- Many students memorized the songs
- Evident increase love for the Arabic language
- The music and songs are perceived to be aligned with our culture,
- teachers perceive it as scalable and needs to be in the class schedule

Weaknesses:

- The letter sequence in the World of Letters book is not similar to the one in the government books sequence. Hence, teachers found the students to get confused among what they are learning in class and what they are learning in the World of Letters classroom.
- It's difficult to control the student's behavior and usage habits that are caused by smart phone usage at home. (Playing with their parent's phones and tablets)

The piloting of this curriculum reflected positively on the students. Students appeared to enjoy the language and grow interest in it. There was an evident increase in the student's self-confidence and language proficiency. Official test results showed performance progress especially among the weak and average students. The curriculum is considered a huge success especially that students that were in the test class showed more capability to understand commands and respond.



Section 2 – Getting to Know the Respondents (Original Curriculum)

Objective- to understand the nature of the teachers work in terms of setting, children/class, curriculums, problems faced while teaching, level of monotony in early learning.

Overall the respondents interviewed for this research are from the education sector, a variety that ranges from homeroom teachers in public schools, a private school kindergarten curriculum supervisor and a kindergarten owner. Across the board the respondents had a vast experience in hands on teaching in the classroom and formulating educational tools to enhance learning in class.

Among the homeroom teachers, there were responsible for their class all day long, teaching students all subject matters except the English language. The English language is usually assigned to a teacher that is specialized in teaching solely English. Other education experts had their experience revolved around formulating early childhood curricula and tools for classrooms to increase the impact of education. Across the board, respondents expressed how important it is to have extra educational tools to aid curricula in teaching children especially at a young age. All respondents have brainstormed and implemented tools manually in class and on their own expense.

It was noted that the Jordanian school system does not have compulsory early childhood education in the form of participation in kindergarten.

Public school teachers feel that children at the age of six or seven will not have a difficulty in the class due to their mental capacity at this age that goes hand in hand with the language curricula in schools. Teachers face a difficulty when students come into first grade from kindergarten due to wrong introduction to language; there is a high probability that students have learned the pronunciation of letters from previous teachers and parents in an incorrect manner. Having mentioned that kindergartens are not compulsory and thus do not have a formal structured curriculum that complements the first grade MoE curriculum in many cases kindergarten owners and teachers have formulated their own curricula to teach the Arabic because of the lack of government curriculum. Also the new education curricula have adopted a phonetic based learning that older people were not subjected to when learning language. Thus when parents teach the children to pronounce the complex sounds of the Arabic language are handed down to the children will not coincide with the curriculum given in class. Previously books and teachers used to link and connect letters with the use of a vowel sound in between letters, this makes it very difficult for students at an early age to distinguish and link letter sounds together to formulate words.



Class size in Jordanian public schools sums up to 24 students per class, it was conveyed by homeroom teachers in public schools that a couple of years ago there was an issue of overcrowding in classrooms due to the Syrian refugee influx bringing up student count to 55 students per class. That has caused the Jordanian government to segregate school to enroll only Jordanians and other schools to enroll other nationalities.

Tools and activities available to help implement the curriculum in class

As mentioned above teachers generally feel that tools and activities are of high importance to for conveying lessons in class. Teachers in public schools take it on their behalf to create tools such as the board of pockets, (a board that helps put up different cards and materials in front of the class from each lesson; These cards include the name of the lesson, sentences that the lesson includes...etc) the use of magnets, and cardboard cutouts and play dough modeling. These tools are usually provided by the teachers on their expense, amongst the minority teachers do not engage in creating tools due to the added expense. In some regions schools have scarce resources enough to not have printers and copiers or cannot provide white board markers, and students come from less privileged families thus making these extra tools a burden on teachers and students.

The process of learning language in public schools is derived from teaching the student sentences then is directed towards formulating an understanding of words that make up a sentence then the sounds of letters. Among the teachers interviewed, It is perceived that this type of teaching helps the child feel accomplished because it's easier for the child to process an image then the word that describes the image then the sounds in the word. For example show a card with the image of a "tree" then introduce the word "tree" then teaching the student the sounds in the word.

Among the tools formulated for the use in class is a laminated cardboard where students tend to use like a child has his own whiteboard in class. These are used for spelling and for teaching the children new words.

Traditional curriculum teaching methods- Listening class -

Students are subjected to a listening class where they are given three images that are put up on the board, images are a low resolution and quality images and are accompanied with narrations that teachers reads onto children to derive sentences that will be used in the upcoming classes. These sentences are later divided into words and sounds for students to learn. This learning class is one of the reasons why teachers are not content with the current curriculum today. Students at an early age are continuously subjected to tv and technology that provide high quality images that enthruse the use of imagination.



Across all respondents the current Arabic curriculum is perceived to be primitive due to the lack of external resources that could be used in class. The curriculum without the efforts of the teachers will be very stiff and will cause young students to dislike the subject. Students aim in class will be all about completing the exercises in the book systematically without learning. The students are already feeling that the classes are boring. Here is no exercise book that is complementary to the curriculum and therefore the teachers tend to rely greatly on the few exercises in the book for the student to practice his/her learning. This creates monotony while learning and the students tend to do the exercises with low dedication and interest.

It is not a part of the teacher's job role to create extra tools for class. It is perceived that male teachers and teachers in male schools in general do not create extra tools to help the students learn. This perception is formulated due to the teachers' experience with their children and the rumors that are circulated among the teachers. The perception also that females due to their innate motherly nature they will pay close attention to students and would use things that are available to her to create tools. Things that mothers use to teach her children

Strengths of the current curriculum

- Letters are distributed in a timely manner.
- The curriculum is formulated in a way where students learn the word and then the letters are derived out of words then is helped to connect the letters
- The curriculum is proved to have a high success. If it is implemented well in class at the end of the year the student can read and write and distinguish words.
- The letters that look similar are placed away from each other in the curriculum and thus avoids confusion
- It distinguishes the letter in the beginning and middle and end of the word

Weaknesses of the current curriculum

- Text is weak, and short (text not stories)
- Text is not relevant and up to date with the world advancement
- The pictures are not of high quality.
- The sentences where words and letters are derived are not accompanied with images
- It is not visual.
- Does not have tools
- No music or poetry
- Stiff content



- There are no other development elements for the child besides language (music , art, critical thinking...etc)

Section 2- Awareness and Perceptions towards Arabic language curricula

Objective- to understand if teachers are aware of any alternatives to the current curriculums, what added efforts are put to action to enhance current curriculum, also to understand if there is an underlying resistance to change amongst teachers.

Awareness and perceptions

Generally low awareness levels were observed among public school teachers towards any other Arabic curriculum available in Jordan. The dominant perception is that only in international schools that curricula are interactive and it is permissible to use a curriculum that is different to the government curriculum.

Some schools resolve to using worksheets as an education tool that coincides with the curriculum as a part of their education plan, other schools it is the decision of the teacher, and this may deter teachers from doing them due to added costs and time consumption.



Across the board it was noticed that the concept of poetry and music is highly appealing for students at such an early age. Ideally if participants would adjust anything in the current curriculum, they would add music and poetry that would help the child learn an educational or cultural goal. The current curriculum includes poems but do not have a musical element and rely on the teacher's capability to use the poems as songs or to incorporate music. Although the music and song element is highly appealing, it was evident that it causes an uncertainty; students today come from different backgrounds and income levels, some parents might not be enthusiastic about the use of poetry and song due to religious restrictions. To overcome these obstacles that might rise with parents, songs incorporated in education must be educational about topics such as personal habits such as hygiene, nature, environment and religion.

It is discussed that what is really missing from the current curriculum is interactive component that helps engage the students the process of learning, elements that should be added to the curriculum include new high quality pictures, posters to be placed in class and typed flashcards.

To enhance the curriculum should have stories that include the culture and heritage of the area, such as family values, listening values, not to steal and to take care of the environment; and instilling critical thinking stories and values through stories that encourage the use of the imagination.

What is missing from the current Jordanian curriculum?

- Stories that are interesting for children and relevant to our world today, the use of imagination, the cards and colorful images. Each lesson is for a letter and has a teacher's guide that has clear objectives for each lesson.
- Poems and songs for each letter
- Elements that engage the students to participate in the learning process, such as games, posters, pictures, workbooks and flashcards.



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