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## THE NEED FOR AN INTEGRATED PRESCHOOL EFL CURRICULUM IN LEBANON

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### **Abstract**

An Integrated Curriculum for Preschool enriches the children's linguistic environment that leads to better, more natural learning of the target language and concepts of different fields. This paper starts by reviewing available literature about child development, foreign language learning, EFL in this context, and the integrated curriculum. The development of a holistic curriculum for preschoolers in Lebanon is given taking into consideration the healthy cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor development of preschoolers.

### **Keywords**

Child Education, Preschool Development, Integrated Curriculum, Language Skills, Second Language Learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The context of the study, Lebanon, is an “unofficially multilingual” country (Kennison, 2013). Arabic is the official language used by the government for all its legal correspondence. Since English is one of the leading languages worldwide, the Lebanese educational system as well as the parents aim for their children to learn it at early ages and become native-like users. In public schools, the native language or L1, Arabic, remains the medium of instruction. In private schools, either English, L2 or FL as used in this article, or French is the medium of instruction as early as the kindergarten level which begins at the age of three. Thus, besides the foreign language, Mathematics, all sciences- biology, physics and chemistry at higher grade levels- and extra-curricular classes like arts, music, and sports, are conducted in the foreign language. The only subjects taught using the native language are Arabic itself, history, and geography.

Moreover, the native language, Arabic, and English are part of two different language families, Semitic and Indo-European respectively. Since L1 and L2 in this study differ greatly in their linguistic rules, and children make errors, the aim is to set a curriculum with more natural linguistic input in the classroom for less transfer and more efficient learning of L2.

Though English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) may be used interchangeably, yet in this paper, EFL will be used to highlight the formal setting of teaching the language.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem: Challenges for a New Approach

To teach the foreign language, a lot of schools in Lebanon, largely the private sector, usually opted for ‘imported’ books with either American or British background. Other schools, chiefly the public ones that are financed by the government, used locally published books prepared by the local Center of Educational Research and Development (CERD).

A significant issue to consider in choosing the EFL textbooks is their cultural aspect. As foreign books are used, the culture is ‘imported’ with them, and thus children are exposed to the ‘western’ way of living and thinking. That is not only related to the choice of human names, but other examples include types of food and transportation, religious occasions and festivities, house equipment, and school life. This is to hint at only very few, maybe trivial, points that may affect the ‘local’ culture and its traditions, while more important agendas are hidden.

A recent issue has risen with the current worldwide economic situation that has specifically hit Lebanon severely. The price of imported books may not have changed in the currency of the publishing country, whether US dollar, UK sterling, or Euro, yet the exchange rate in Lebanon has become almost seventeen-fold more. The Lebanese pound lost 92% of its value last year (Hubbard, 2021), which went up to 96% in January 2022. To comfort the parents financially, it was suggested that the school where the study takes place creates its own material for the preschool section which includes KGI, KGII, and KGIII, and that is for ages 3 to 6.

### 1.2 Purpose of the Article

This study aims at explaining the procedure for building an EFL preschool curriculum with some reference to materials. It will first review the related literature on the development of children’s linguistic skills, and the elements of a preschool curriculum with focus on the integrated one as a basis to set the learning outcomes of second or foreign language learning. Second, it will identify the linguistic, scientific, psychomotor and artistic objectives of the kindergarten (KG) stage. Third, it will describe the construction of a new curriculum, illustrated with few examples of materials, integrating all subject areas based on language development that meet the needs of the learners in the EFL context of a private school in a suburb of Beirut, Lebanon.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1 The Development of The Children's Linguistic Skills

The main aim of children foreign language teaching remains to do a lot of talking with the growing child to expose them to rich vocabulary and to the same words under different contexts. This entails "treating the child as a talker" (PreSchoolers Development, 2020), basing discussions on their own interests. Children learn to understand many more words than they can actually produce, yet this is the basis for their linguistic development and movement into production (Oswalt, 2020). Reading books is another important strategy to develop children's language. Besides learning new vocabulary, youngsters start getting exposed to the link between oral and written language. As stories are read to children, words are pointed out to help the child make the association between written and spoken language.

The age of children this paper is specifically dealing with is between 3 and 6, the age when "children experience a language explosion" (Oswalt, 2020). As children grow in understanding, processing, and producing language, their vocabulary in this time period increases from about 90 to anything between 8,000 and 14,000 words. Thus, their productive potential catches up with their receptive ability.

At this age, children learn grammar, such as longer and more complex sentences, simple plurals, possessive forms of nouns, prepositions, and articles (PreSchoolers Development, 2020; Oswalt, 2020). This growth is not only the result of exposure to adults' language, but also related to the cognitive growth of attention and memory at this age.

Patricia Kuhl (2011), in her presentation "The Linguistic Genius of Babies", summarizes the research results that babies learn language through an adult talking to them, while neither listening to audios nor watching videos teach babies language. Moreover, Kuhl (2011) emphasizes the productivity of language learning during the "critical period", between birth and 7 years of age! At puberty, language learning falls off.

### 2.2 The Integrated Curriculum

To foster the learning of FL in authentic contexts, an integrated curriculum bridges the varied subject-matter areas and unifies concepts (Integrated Curriculum: Definition, Benefits & Examples, 2015). It allows children to engage in learning holistically (Integrated Curriculum in the Primary Program, 2017). All subject areas, language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, health -social, emotional, and physical, besides art, music and sports, are interconnected.

Children build relationships between the different concepts and thus learn to synthesize them for more meaningful learning. Consequently, the reinforcement of concepts across subject areas promotes transfer of knowledge to other/new settings. The interrelatedness of subjects in an integrated curriculum enables children to acquire skills in all content areas in a meaningful way. Moreover, according to Jensen (1996), the brain learns best in authentic contexts fully embraced in the language in different subject matters to create multi-path learning and maintain the love of learning. This approach to learning is "brain compatible"; by working on the interconnections, there is an increased opportunity for higher level inferences (Integrated Curriculum in the Primary Program, 2017). The more connections the brain builds, the better the learning.

The integrated curriculum in preschool is built around themes, topics, or projects that are age-appropriate, purposeful, and worthwhile. Learning experiences are based on topics the children relate to and/or they choose based on relevance and interest. Thus, motivation supports children's making representations of concepts and reflecting upon them. As the planned activities cater primarily for "opportunities to experience learning as a meaningful whole" (Integrated Curriculum in the Primary Program, 2017), they vary between individual, small group, and whole group experiences, creating opportunities for creative and critical thinking.

After introducing the development of the children's linguistic skills and the presentation of the need for an integrated curriculum, the following section sets the basis for developing the integrated curriculum and authentic materials for the kindergarten in the specific context of the private Catholic school in the northern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon.

### **3. DEVELOPING an EFL PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM and TEACHING MATERIAL**

There were 220 students in the preschool section, the three kindergarten levels. They learn English and French besides Arabic with an average of ten hours of English including mathematics and science, five of the native Arabic, and five of French (second foreign language) per week.

As the English preschool section coordinator with Applied Linguistics and Child Education background, the researcher's concern is to provide our children with the best basis for their education, in schools and later in universities. It was essential to develop a curriculum that best suits their background: social and linguistic. Knowing these Preschoolers come mostly from Lebanese parents, both or at least one parent from Arabic speaking homes, and with only little exposure to the foreign language before joining preschool, it was sensible to build a customized curriculum that best suits their situation. The procedure for preparing the material for the three Kindergarten levels began by setting up a plan- having the theoretical background on child development and foreign language learning as the basis to set the curriculum. A second key factor was the teachers' experience in those classes. The objectives were laid by the researcher in cooperation with the class teachers.

For the theoretical educational basis of the novel planned curriculum, the official Lebanese curriculum was consulted, against which the current objectives were checked. According to the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) (1997), the educational principles of Kindergarten (KG) Curriculum state that the three-year KG stage, age 3-6 years, sets the significant foundation of the child's subsequent educational stages and has its relevant programs, methodologies, and evaluation methods. Its curricula are based on educational principles and research related to the human and educational development.

The following are the basic principles of KG stage. All children are to get equal opportunities by starting from the child's environment with its physical and cultural components. Each child is the focus of the educational process with a comprehensive development of their physical, emotional, social and intellectual domains. Competencies and learning objectives are the same throughout the three years except for the degree of complexity. The child is to learn through the direct sensory interaction with the surrounding environment with emphasis on play and reliance on the interrelationship of the various fields to develop language. Evaluation is a continuous process to measure the attained competencies (the Centre for Educational Research and Development, 1997).

#### **The Study**

Based on research, also on professional experiences of the teachers, the integrated curriculum yielded to 'more learning'; "when I taught through an integrated curriculum, my students showed higher signs of retention at an increased rate than when an integrated curriculum was not implemented. The reason for this is because they were able to more closely relate to content and make real-world connections in integrated curriculum approaches." (Integrated Curriculum: Definition, Benefits & Examples, 2015). Therefore, the new curriculum was designed based on this model. The key factor that helped achieve integration is the fact that the whole curriculum was designed and activities set by a group of teachers rather than buying different books from different publishers and then try to wrap things as one entity.

For themes in an integrated curriculum to be effective, the following considerations have to be observed. First, the theme is developmentally appropriate for the age group as per studies on child development and reflects real world experiences. Second, the theme should be broad enough to parallel the officially set standards. A very important factor to consider while choosing the themes is to make sure they connect many curriculum areas in a meaningful rather than an artificial way. The themes should also be free of any prejudices of gender, race, culture, or others. They are to be engaging to both, teacher and children. Moreover, quality resources are to be secured to support the theme. The theme promotes the use of multiple intelligences (Integrated Curriculum in the Primary Program, 2017).

## Description of the material:

Based on the literature on Preschool curricula and the examination of the Lebanese official curriculum more specifically, the new curriculum was set in cooperation of the English section preschool coordinator and the teachers. Based on practical experience with preschool children learning English as a second language, the objectives of the new material-to-be-developed were set including intellectual, emotional and physical domains.

The main objective is to expose the children as much as possible to the English language; for the majority, these kids come from homes where parents communicate with them using the mother language, Arabic, except maybe for a few expressions. The rationale behind ‘bombarding’ the children or ‘immersing’ them in the FL is based on studies such as that of Sharon Unsworth (in Grüter & Paradis, 2014); the more time children are exposed to the FL, the better their linguistic development is in different domains, mainly vocabulary building and different syntactic aspects.

Moreover, the set curriculum is built around integrating the subjects: English, mathematics, science, social/emotional development, art, music, theater, and sports. Themes are planned around which the anticipated skills are set. These basic themes are established by the collaborative work of teachers rather than stem from negotiation with the children. Besides profiting from exchanging ideas, collaborating teachers become a model to children (Integrated Curriculum in the Primary Program, 2017).

Themes are age-appropriate mentally and psychologically. They are of short duration, one or two weeks. Related concepts are integrated and worked on through a lot of oral discussions and then manual and written worksheets.

Oral input is extremely essential for the kids to build appropriate vocabulary, expression, and sentence structure (Thordardottir, 2014, in Grüter & Paradis, 2014). Teacher speech in such classes is even more important where children come from homes with very little English use. Moreover, as they are preschoolers, those children need to acquire learning skills, such as independent future studies, as well as social skills like working cooperatively that leads to higher and more successful learning.

Through this guided learning, “children gain confidence in learning new skills... and it may give teachers confidence in allowing children more opportunities to make decisions and inferences (Integrated Curriculum in the Primary Program, 2017).

As the need to prepare our own booklets arose, the coordinator set the following headlines of the content for the teachers to follow in preparing the material. The subjects for the Preschool section include: language arts, Sciences, arts, nutrition, and with equal importance social, physical, and emotional development. It should be accentuated that all the planned discussion, activities, and worksheets rotate around promoting critical thinking skills.

As mentioned in *Critical Thinking: Building a Key Foundation for Language and Literacy Success* (n.d.), teaching the basic skills of language, mathematics, and sciences is not enough anymore for the kids to cope in the future with the fast changing circumstances. Information is not stagnant; pupils need to build strategies to make use of what exists in their knowledge repertoire and create “new information”. Working with existing basics comes through comparing and contrasting concepts, giving explanations to why things happen, evaluating ideas and forming opinions, understanding the perspectives of others, predicting what will happen in the future, and thinking of creative solutions (Critical Thinking, n.d.). The need to memorize information diminishes as technology advances providing ample and rich means of research (Greenberg, 2016).

John Dewey (1938, in Cohen & Waite-Stupiansky, 2013) believed that when children learn in a natural way, they unconsciously integrate subject areas into a complex whole based on their interests. Education is dynamic and ongoing with direct teaching of integrated content knowledge. Critical thinking nurtures and is nurtured by language. As children ask inquisitive questions and try answer using ‘if’ and ‘because’, their sentence structure and vocabulary develop and their problem-solving, predicting, and explaining skills grow. Providing an atmosphere where children are intrigued to explain, evaluate, predict, project, and problem-solve will secure healthy critical thinkers in the future. A few basic practical examples include asking the children to plan what they would pack for a picnic trip, what they consider a challenging activity and why, what they expect the next part of the story will reveal, and what other ending they would suggest.

The following section presents the various subject areas and their subsections to learn in preschool with supportive illustrations.

I. The language arts areas were divided into the four basic skills- listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with their subdivisions. The following is the general outline of the skills and two subskills, phonics and vocabulary.

a. Listening

Since listening is an extremely important initial step into language comprehension and use, then it has taken a primary role in the new curriculum. The focus is chiefly on listening for acquiring L2 through listening to stories read by teachers and/or through online story telling. Another objective is for children to learn to pay attention to details and consequently acquire more knowledge.

b. Oral Expression

A preschool curriculum develops basic daily expressions, correct sentence structure, pronunciation, and narration using appropriate time connectors.

c. Reading

The basic aim is to develop life-long interest in reading through teachers modeling reading stories with enjoyment. Specific areas emphasized in reading instruction start with practicing sight words and age-appropriate high frequency words. The first step is established by labeling class objects such as desk and table. More personal labels relate to each child's name, along their photo, on their cubbies and coat hangers.

More advanced levels include words incorporated in the children's story books. They begin with words like 'I', we, can, see, and so on. Other lists relate to the themes handled such as names of pets, plants, and school items. Eventually, kids are exposed to short sentences with simple high frequency words and cvc words. In KG III, children start reading simple short sentences, then proceed into simple short stories.

d. Writing

1. Pre-writing skills

A productive preschool curriculum provides children with opportunities to hold the pencil appropriately, trace different types of lines, cut, prick, and coordinate general body movements.

2. Written Expression

Since writing is an important form of self-expression that humans use especially in cases where they want to vent out without exposing themselves to others, writing is started as of KG I class. 'Writing' at this level is expressed through drawings that are labelled by the teachers upon the child's description. Writing of lower case and upper letters is then introduced with high emphasis on proper right formation.

Eventually, children start writing simple words using print script. Later, a lot of fun guided activities take place. The children have to cut words and paste them in the correct order to form a meaningful sentence. Eventually, children are ready to write elaborate sentences by adding adjectives and adverbs to enrich expression. The new curriculum directly introduces material to illustrate for children.

There are two other subskills that help the development of all the basic skills: phonics and vocabulary.

e. Phonics

As a start to reading, children in this Lebanese context need to be introduced to phonics. Identifying letter/sound relations support the child's word-attack skills where their active vocabulary in L2 is still limited. Letter/sound correspondence is first introduced with alphabets, and then words with short vowels, cvc words, are introduced

through word families. The aim is that children reach automatic processing of such words for fast reading skills in the future.

f. Vocabulary

Research provides different results about the vocabulary size of monolingual and bilingual children, which is larger for the former. Rescorla and Achenbach (2002, in Kennison, 2013) raise the issue of the methodology bilingual children learn their vocabulary.

To enrich the children's language in this new curriculum, especially as they are learning English as a second language, abundant vocabulary is provided through different contexts. This is planned to consolidate research that with more exposure to vocabulary, children acquire a bigger number of words, especially when home language is basically non-English.

Consequently, the newly designed curriculum ties as closely as possible the other content areas to the language arts program. The following are the aims set for Sciences, including mathematics, natural science, and nutrition.

II. Mathematics

In "Five Easy Ways to Integrate Math" (2020), it is recommended that math concepts, including counting, quantifying, and geometry, be integrated with all subject areas and activities. Teachers need to develop a "math language", talk about shapes and patterns for example in the natural environment. An example is to encourage kids find patterns on their clothes.

Other ways to bring mathematics to life is by mixing it with songs, chants, and poetry reading. YouTube sources are rich with such material that were included in the new curriculum.

III. Natural Science

Preschool children need to get awareness about natural science such as the human body, plants, trees, and weather. This is best achieved in different integrated forms; the concept of 'animals', for example, includes concepts in language, habitat, colors, nutrition, and arts through motor skills by using scissors to build crafts.

IV. Nutrition

On daily basis, discussions in the morning routines highlight ways to maintain self-cleanliness. Alongside, children learn the hygiene vocabulary and the action verbs that go along like 'wash' and 'shower'. Furthermore, children are introduced to healthy food and nutritious snacks they can bring to school.

V. Science

Science areas and topics are very naturally dealt with through the children's surroundings, building the relevant vocabulary and appropriate sentence structure. Even topics beyond the immediate environment are introduced and models are assembled to illustrate the concepts.

To have a well-rounded sound development, children need to grow cognitively, through the skills elaborated in the previous section including speech and general language skills, socially, emotionally, and physically. The following section presents the 'non-academic', yet essential, areas of child development highlighted in the new curriculum.

VI. Social and Emotional Development

It is part of healthy child development to be able to deal with their own feelings and with others. They need a supportive environment. Parents and kindergarten teachers modeling the appropriate behaviors teach children appropriate social relations (Cherry, 2019).

Consequently, the currently planned curriculum takes into serious consideration the social/emotional growth of children and develops integrated activities that promote a healthy advancement in a protected environment. For example, stories are read and discussed about

different situations children need to cope with such as a new baby at home. Children are encouraged and supported to explain their feelings.

#### VII. Physical Development

Children go through physical developmental stages referred to as “developmental milestone” (What is child development and what skills do children develop at different ages, 2008). A few examples are sitting, walking, talking, skipping, and tying shoes. Children learn to walk between the ages of 9 and 15 months, before entering Preschool.

These sports classes naturally integrate language skills where children learn the vocabulary actively using structures of the action verbs with their teacher and their classmates. Children are encouraged to transfer this vocabulary to their playing during break time with their classmates.

Sports and fine arts are integrated as well. Children learn rhythmic patterns that go along with music to perform during preschool assemblies, or even school shows.

#### VIII. Arts and Crafts

Art is an important element in child development; it is a nonverbal language where children get the chance to creatively express their emotions with freedom. “Art is a powerful tool that gives children the ability to express their thoughts and emotions long before they can fully express themselves with words.” (Reyner, 2006).

In the newly constructed catered curriculum, arts is part of every lesson, whether through animation of songs, expression of feelings through drawing, or manipulative activities like cutting, pricking, and painting.

In brief, art classes are to support the child’s emotional and linguistic development through encouragement of self-expression. Even collage, print-making, and puppet shows are manifestations of individualism, “hiding behind” them to freely express their inner self.

### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Upon reviewing available literature on essential language development in preschoolers at critical ages, and examining the national curriculum goals for kindergarten classes, the need to develop a customized curriculum for EFL children in Lebanon was imperative. Thus, more research will be done on the current availability of literature and of any preschool material in Lebanon as per national curriculum. Moreover, a sample unit that integrates all the above developed competencies will be shared in the near future to prove the possibility and efficiency of building children units that authentically integrate subject areas revolving around the same theme.

### 5. CONCLUSION

Education is a crucial element we owe our children. The ‘best’ education is what parents and educators target. Bilingual education requires even more specific consideration as the children have to cope with learning two different language, simultaneously- at least in the school setting.

For bilingual education to be more efficient, a special curriculum should be implemented creating for young learners as many opportunities for language exposure as possible. The integrated curriculum is expedient since it exposes the children to the same intended skills several times and in multiple disciplines. The same theme and its related vocabulary and expressions, for example the plant cycle, are experienced in different classes, such as language arts, natural science, and creative arts. This overlap deepens the understanding and increases retention and future use of the concepts (Integrated Curriculum: Definition, Benefits & Examples, 2015).

Having the chance to cater for a specific group of children by setting the objectives that are most suitable to their background and furnishing their basic education with pleasurable learning experiences is exceptional. Taking the Lebanese preschoolers in a private school learning English as a second language as ‘beneficiaries’ of this academic work and applying highly professional skills should lead to a comprehensive, highly practical and enjoyable curriculum.

Certainly, the research-based literature was necessary to document every step of this work. It not only furnished the scientific basis of this new curriculum, but also enriched it by the diverse studies previously carried.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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