

Gaps in the Literature on the Arab World's EFL Environment

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Abstract: This investigative literature-based paper attempts to identify gaps that it presumes exist in the literature on the Arab world's EFL environment. The study is prompted by and sets out from two main assumptions. The first assumption is that, the linguistic commonality that the Arabic speaking population of 400 million share, necessarily involves particular English language acquisition, and therefore characterizes the EFL learning and teaching. The second assumption is that, a collective rather individual approach is viable in addressing the Arab world's EFL environment of multi-country population and variant EFL learning systems, levels and curricula. So, based on these two assumptions the study conducts extensive review of the relevant literature ensuring it includes studies from as many Arab countries, as broad pre-2005 to post-2015 periods of time and as variant EFL subjects as possible. The study concludes with uncovering the gaps that it found to exist in the literature that led to shortcomings in co-addressing some changes in the pan-Arab multi-nation EFL environment in the past 40 years. Since these changes direct the deficiency on either of the three legs of the triangle –the students, the teacher, the curricula; overlooking them led to the mischaracterization Arab world's EFL learning and teaching issues.

Keywords: The Arab World, Arab speakers, EFL environment, ESL.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Arabic speaking religion of the world, is an EFL learning environment by itself. More than half of the Arab nations – which are 22, were former British colonies and later in this post-colonial era are classified as Anglophones. However, one common characteristic that these 22 countries share is that, English language has not elevated yet to the level of the “second language” so far, even though it is the official claim of each of them. The root of the problem for the speakers of Arabic language with English is a mix of cultural and religious according many researchers such as Jdetawy; 2011. From the linguistic view though, Arabic and English are “rival” languages ranking the fourth and the first respectively. No wonder therefore, this EFL religion of the world of a population of about 400 million EFL learners has its own EFL characteristics and own teaching and learning issues.

The choice of the subject for this study is not only a matter of interest for the researcher, but it is also a firsthand experience that Tamador Abdulrahman finds worthy of sharing with the EFL teaching community of the Arab world. Currently a faculty member from the University of Jazan, Saudi Arabia, teaching preparatory year (PYP) English program, the researcher helped several co-teachers in proofreading multiple papers they authored and published on the Arab world's EFL environment. It also happened that, the researcher's co-teachers are a conglomerate staff form several different Arab nationalities; Egyptian, Sudanese, Jordanian, Tunisian, Saudis, etc. Indeed this position gives the researcher an overview of the research subject as well as the insight necessary for evaluating it.

Problem statement

Despite it is a multi-nation religion with a 400 million population, the Arabic language speaking region of the world can be characterized as a standalone EFL environment. Besides it is a region that is an “embattled” EFL religion striving to adopt as well as promote English language among its populations, the multi-nation region share other EFL commonalities that entitle it to be addressed collectively as one pan-Arab unit. If fact, it is addressed collectively and there is a whole literature dedicated to this subject; many of which near the phrase, “English Language in the Arab World”. There are abundant published studies and scholarly articles dedicated to the Arab World's EFL environment. The question however, is whether or not the studies account for the variance among the multi populations of the region; whether they emanate and set out from a standard criteria as of the target level of EFL proficiency; whether they co-address the changes in the EFL environment including the technological, the individual educational systems as well as the learners themselves are undergoing.

Hypothesis of the study

This study assumes that, the abundant literature on EFL learning and teaching by the Arabic speaking researchers and teachers, has left out a few gaps that this study deems to rather constitute the root problems to address. Consequently this study assumes the gaps to be traceable and can be determined by taking three factors into consideration. The first factor, is the variance among the different 22 Arabic speaking populations as of the level EFL statuses; the absence of which would invalidate the generalization of the findings. The second factor is the necessary thoroughness of the studies through the different periods of time; since the EFL learning and teaching trends have undergone a huge change. The third factor yields from the two ones which is setting a

common or standard for the EFL level the studies is setting from; otherwise, their findings would be baseless.

METHOD

This is a research gap study that conducts extensive review of the published studies on the literature of EFL learning and teaching in the Arabic speaking EFL environment. The research gap method of research is defined by Paré; 2017, as the one that targets identifying missing or insufficient information in the published studies on a specific topic, and it can be either four types: classic literature gap, disagreement gap, contextual gap, and methodological gap. The study mainly targets the studies that were published during three time periods; pre-2005, post-2010, and post-2015; and this is for the purpose of accommodating all the changes in the EFL environment that might have occurred. Along with this direct relevance of these time periods, the reviewed studies are examined for specific subjects; namely, 1) the students' levels and progress, 2) the efficiency of the curricula and teaching, 3) and the overall Arabic speaking EFL environment.

Participants

There are both direct and indirect participants in this study which involves the literature dedicated to the whole population of about 400 million EFL learners throughout a region of 22 countries. The direct participants therefore are represented in the selected set of published studies by researchers including whole literature review based studies. Whereas, the indirect participants is the cited literature review based studies on specific subject matters relevant to the Arab world's EFL environment. The reviewed studies include both quantitative and qualitative methods which together constitute as sample of over 20 selected studies.

Analysis

The method of analysis adopted in the study involves tracking and co-examining the conclusions, findings and recommendations of the selected reviewed studies against the benchmarks of changes in the Arab World's EFL Environment, given in Table (1) below in the discussion section of the paper. Then based on this pre-set criterion, the literature is examined for its sufficiency and comprehensiveness as of:

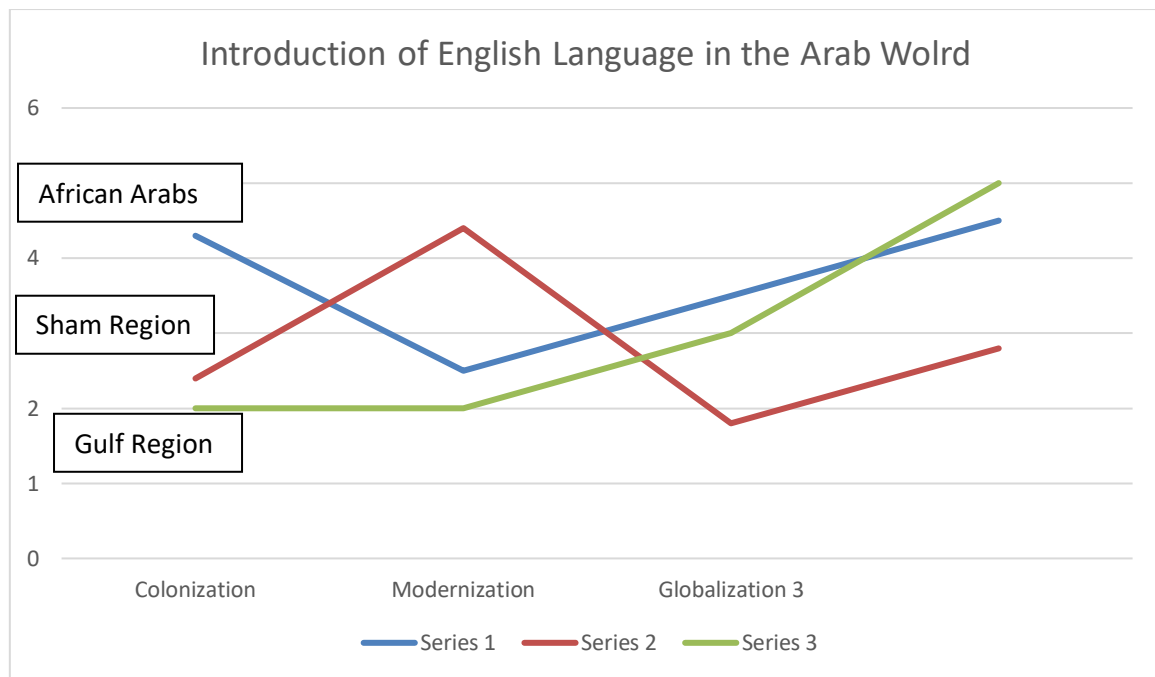
- 1) Whether or not the studies co-addressed changes that took place to the Arab World's EFL Environment
- 2) Whether or not the studies took the individual differences among the variant Arab EFL populations into consideration?
- 3) How thoroughly is the school leaver's English foundation is addressed, and based on what standard/target criteria!
- 4) How thoroughly is the school-college English curricula's relevance is addressed and based on what standard/target criteria!
- 5) How thoroughly is the particular Arabic speakers' EFL environment is addressed; namely, limited exposure and room for practice for the school leavers.

Questions of the study

- What are the common characteristics that the Arab world's multi-nation EFL learning and teaching environment share?
- Does the existing literature include holistic studies that address the pan-Arab EFL learning environment as a whole?
- What are the variables and factors of variance that such holistic pan-Arab EFL learning environment studies should account for?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The British colonial era of 1800-1900 AD marked the introduction and spread of English throughout 18 of the Arab world's 22 countries, while the rest; the North African nations went French (Atwell, Al-Sulaiti & Sharoff, 2009). That early 19th colonial era of English introduction though was of a variant influence on the native Arab populations throughout the countries, and the local culture was a decisive factor. For being the birth land of Arabic language, the Arabian Peninsula which is presently divided into Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Yemen and the others, showed slower embrace of the foreign language. This explains for example, in Saudi Arabia, English was officially introduced into the educational system in 1928 and even limitedly at the primary level (Al-Nasser., 2015). Then, French continued being from international communication and business throughout the post-colonial era of 1955-1970 AD, especially in the context of rapid economic growth and globalization.



In the North African region on the other hand, nations such as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania were influenced more by the French language and they found the lingua franca for the population's L2. In later reign of the British post-colonial era of 1955-1970 AD, the Anglophone influence started to be driven by the Modernization and Globalization driver as characterized in several studies including that by Baako, Alhassan & Gidisu; 2022. Then, throughout the 1970s and 1980s Arab nations sought modernization and economic development, especially in the oil rich the Arabian Peninsula's Gulf countries where English gained prominence as a language of international communication and commerce.

That early "unsmooth" 19th colonial and post-colonial era introduction of English language to Arab world's populations though, has lasted to the present and as Hasanen, Al-Kandari & Al-Sharoufi; 2014, characterize the situation, "English is the least to call the second language of the region. Despite the official and national declaration of it as the ESL and the Arab societies conceded the important role English has continued to play across many of the nations of the Arab world, it still poses a number of significant challenges. The influence of Arabic- religion and culture is discussed in several studies a great deal of which can be conceived as involving a reconciling stand with English as post-colonial identity that they should revisit (Jdetawy, 2011). Another wider perspective shared in the studies take the position the English languages to continue to play inevitable in the academy for several Arab countries like Egypt, Iraq and Yemen. This confirms that the existence of a common Arabic speaking English learners pose challenges associated with cultural preservation and identity, access to education, employment and social mobility (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2014). Abundant literature published during the 2000s period is dedicated to highlighting the potential of EFL to alienate people from their own cultures and beliefs. Arab EFL learners' issues with English language of the very comprehensibility even if the national educational strategies do not support or help them achieve this improvement, Multiple studies in the literature published during the period post-2015 dedicated to the complicated nature of the effects of English as a global language on learners' sense of cultural identity. Such studies like that by Lataille (2016) proposes several factors contributing to the averagely low Arab EFL learners proficiency from the perspectives of the media, businesses, and, quite often, ministries of Arab countries. The Islam-based Arabic culture and Arabic language. Also, multiple studies in the literature published during the mid-2010 period is dedicated to heightening the efforts that Arab EFL individuals exerted on learning English without access to the English language online resources as they were just becoming popular.

DISCUSSION

In this discussion section of the paper, the findings from the above discussed literature are going to be extracted, then co-analyzed along with the then concurrent Changes in Arab EFL environment through the period from pre-2005 to post-2015 and until the present as recently as the year 2204. The literature in focus included the studies on three components of EFL leaning, i.e., studies addressing the students' levels and progress, studies addressing the efficiency of the curricula and teaching and studies addressing the overall Arabic speaking EFL environment. For this purposes, the changes in the EFL environment are benchmarked as shown in Table (1) below:

Table 1. Benchmarks of Changes in the Arab EFL Environment

1. Pre-2005 EFL Learning & Teaching Trends

1.a. Computer Learning Aids (CLA) use became popular 1.b. Home tuition English language prevalence period 1.c. Private language schools' prevalence period
2. Post-2010 EFL Learning & Teaching Trends 2.a. Wider internet and online learning resources availability 2.b. More introduction of all-English and international schools 2.c. Private language schools' popularity diminishing period
3. Post-2015 EFL Learning & Teaching Trends 3.a. More introduction of local all-English colleges 3.b. Prevalence of TOEFL and IELTS international tests and leveling 3.c. Prevalence of online virtual campuses

Firstly, the premise of the studies addressing the students' levels and progress

Examining the premise of the studies addressing the students' levels and progress for pan-Arab vs. individual Arab, the cited literature showed a few gaps. Now, referring to the pre-2005 benchmark of the EFL learning and teaching trends that time, a great deal of the cited literature missed considering variance among the individual Arab populations. During that pre-2005 period the Computer Learning Aids (CLA) use became popular and this should have directly impacted the students' English levels and progress. This is while concurrent studies such as that by Hasanen, Al-Kandari & Al-Sharoufi; 2014, indicate concurrent changes pertaining to the students such as the then widely popular home tuition English lessons. During that pre-2005 period also a wider prevalence of private language schools were recorded epically in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other populations as noted by studies like that of (Graham, Eslami & Hillman, 2021).

The gaps to point out in the literature of the pre-2005 through post-2015 studies therefore, are mainly in focusing on the individual Arab EFL populations rather than out of a pan-Arab perspective. As a result, the literature gaps reflected in the failure of co-addressing the pre-2005 through post-2015 changes in the EFL environment along with a holistic pan-Arab perspective. The literature gaps otherwise, could have been filled out with more pan-Arab studies EFL environment oriented studies that address:

1. Time allocated for English: Insufficient periods of English subject per week, along with
2. Arabic is the medium in the rest of the subjects in most of the educational systems,
3. Target vocabulary: Limited vocabulary population and diversity; partly for the focus is more on English grammar in most of the educational systems,
4. Low motivation among the school leavers; partly for cultural reasons and disconnection with the English language's culture,
5. Leveling criteria: Either locally designed placement tests or 'alleviated' versions of

Standardized Test of English Proficiency (STEP)

Second, the premise of the studies addressing the efficiency of the curricula and teaching

Examining the premise of the studies addressing the efficiency of the curricula and teaching for pan-Arab vs. individual Arab, the cited literature evidently a left some gaps. Referring to the post-2010 benchmark of the EFL learning and teaching trends that time, most of the cited literature missed considering factors of relativeness among the different Arab populations. Also, a major change happened during that post-2010 period represented in more introduction of all-English and international schools especially in the Gulf region and this would directly impact EFL curricula and teaching (Ismail, 2014). This is contrary to concurrent studies such as that by Al-Sulaiti & Sharoff (2009), did entertain concurrent changes pertaining to the curricula and teaching. In addition, this fact correlates with the decline in the popularity of the private language schools in places like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan.

The literature gaps to point out in the literature of the pre-2005 through post-2015 studies therefore, are mainly in the locality of their perspective and missing the holistic Arab EFL populations. As a result, the literature gaps reflected is found to be in short of co-addressing the pre-2005 through post-2015 changes besides the holistic pan-Arab perspective of the EFL environment. These literature gaps therefore, could have been filled out with more focused pan-Arab studies EFL environment studies that address:

1. Late introduction of English language in schools in some of the educational systems,
2. Inexperienced teachers and in some of the educational systems, the early schools and/or classes are assigned to junior or newly hired teachers.
3. Mixing Arabic and English in the instruction that usually results in interference of Arabic-English languages'

4. Lack of extracurricular English activities adopted by the teachers, frequency of assigning homework and lack of student-teacher after school communication.

Third, the premise of the Studies addressing the overall Arabic speaking EFL environment

Examining the premise of the Studies addressing the overall Arabic speaking EFL environment, the cited literature seems to have left out a few gaps. Referring to the post-2015 benchmark of the EFL learning and teaching trends that time, the cited literature missed considering variance among the different Arab populations. That post-2015 period witnessed wider internet and online learning resources availability and this would directly impact the overall EFL environment. This is while concurrent studies such as that by Hasanen, Al-Kandari & Al-Sharoufi; 2014, did dedicate space for the changes concurrent relating to the overall Arabic speaking EFL environment. In fact even though the study referred to the introduction of local all-English colleges in all Arab countries without exception, it missed the complementary part of TOEFL and IELTS international tests and leveling. That is by the time the prevalence of that leveling instruments was accompanied the cross-border virtual campuses noted in the study by EI-Sayed (2014).

The literature gaps in the literature of the pre-2005 to post-2015 studies the with regard to the overall Arabic speaking EFL environment, naturally follow its precedent premises in lacking the holistic pan-Arab perspective. Consequently, nothing is unexpected for the literature gaps not co-address the changes in the Arab EFL environment besides during the three time periods. The literature gaps finally, could have been filled out by attending to the overall Arab EFL environment studies that address:

1. Lack of or limited the commonality of English language outside classroom; resulting in limited exposure to the language,
2. Lack of unified post-school or college preparatory year target level of proficiency despite the multi-Arab higher education institutions
3. Lack of pan-Arab English language coordinating educational entity

CONCLUSION

A few conclusions can be drawn from examining the literature on the Arab world's EFL environment for possible gaps in the studies conducted through the period from pre-2005 to post-2015 until the present. The axis of the gaps is found to be centering in the lack of comprehensiveness in the studies by which they could address the pan-Arab EFL environment rather than the individual Arab EFL populations. This lack of a pan-Arab approach in the studies, resulted in overlooking the individual differences among the 22 populations; consequently to being based on invalid sample. The rest

of the consequences then followed; of which is the absence of one standard/target school leaving EFL level of proficiency applicable to the 22 populations. Consequently, this foundational gap resulted in a fragmental characterization of the EFL issues of learning and teaching in this region. Furthermore, this lack of standard school leaving EFL proficiency has also resulted in gaps connectively addressing the post-school college PYP the EFL learning issues. The endmost repercussions of these gaps, is they would invalidate the bottom-to-top feedback that would benefit the educational systems of the region and EFL teaching curricula planners and designers.

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