

Exploring Perspectives and Reform Dynamics: English Language Instruction in Tunisian Elementary Schools

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Abstract: In this study, the objective was to delve into the perspectives of Tunisian public elementary school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers regarding the merits of introducing English at a younger age. The study sought to test the hypothesis that an early start in English language instruction, following the "the younger the better" notion (Lenneberg, 1967; Penfield, 1959), would yield positive outcomes. To accomplish this, data was collected through a quantitative approach, involving a sample of 30 teachers representing different regions of Tunis.

The analysis of the data revealed that a significant number of teachers in the observed Tunisian elementary schools acknowledged the importance of initiating English education at an earlier stage, recognizing the pivotal role English plays in the curriculum, and acknowledging children's remarkable enthusiasm for foreign language learning. However, despite this recognition, the Ministry of Education has not taken substantial steps towards implementing changes in the educational system.

The findings of this study underscore the significance of English language instruction in Tunisian schools, and both educators and policymakers concur that lowering the age at which English is introduced offers distinct advantages to young second language learners by increasing their exposure to the language. The growing prominence of English education in public schools indicates its potential influence on future educational enhancements in Tunisian public schools.

Keywords: ELT reform, Language planning, Motivation, SLA

1. Introduction

The recognition of the value of language learning beyond one's mother tongue has long been acknowledged in educational philosophy. In the context of modern educational theory, the ability to communicate in multiple languages has become a fundamental aspect. The superiority of children over adults in acquiring a second language is well-established, with children often attaining native-like fluency while adults struggle to reach the same level. However, the notion of "the younger the better" is supported by both naturalistic and instructional evidence, suggesting that early exposure to a second language yields long-term benefits (Cenoz, 2003; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2001; Patkowski, 1990; Asher, 1969; Singleton, 1995).

The age at which English should be introduced in Tunisian public elementary schools remains a subject of debate among Tunisian researchers. The inclusion of a foreign language as a compulsory subject in the primary school curriculum raises questions about the optimal age for introducing

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English. The lowering of the age for English language instruction has been discussed, highlighting the potential advantages of early language learning (Melliti, 2012; Daoud, 2011, 1996; Derbel, 2001). Formal instructional settings provide an opportunity to explore the impact of early language exposure on language learning outcomes, prompting considerations for curriculum design and implementation.

The advantage of children in second language acquisition can be attributed to various factors. Young children effortlessly pick up second languages, while adults tend to impose the structures of their first language on the new language being learned (Scovel, 1969; MacNamara, 1973). Neurologically, the brain of a twelve-year-old is primed for rapid vocabulary expansion and language switching, enabling efficient language learning (Penfield, 1965; MacNamara, 1973). These findings underscore the importance of introducing children to the target language at a younger age, as even limited exposure in the first decade can provide them with a highly effective linguistic foundation (Penfield, 1965).

Research by Long (1990) suggests that younger starters outperform older ones, and native-like attainment in a second language is most likely when exposure to the target language occurs before age six for phonology and before age 15 for morphology and syntax. The critical period for language learning is believed to extend until age 12 or 13, after which language development ceases (Lenneberg, 1967). However, the concept of a critical period has faced scrutiny, with researchers like Knudsen (2004) arguing that critical and sensitive periods are distinct concepts. Nevertheless, the influence of age on language acquisition remains a subject of ongoing investigation and debate (Johnson & Newport, 1989; DeKeyser & Larson-Hall, 2005).

Two hypotheses, the exercise hypothesis and the maturational state hypothesis, have been proposed to explain the critical period phenomenon (Johnson & Newport, 1989). The exercise hypothesis suggests that language acquisition capacity is superior early in life, and if not exercised during this period, it may decline with maturation. In contrast, the maturational state hypothesis proposes that language acquisition capacity diminishes with maturation. These hypotheses offer different predictions for second language acquisition, with the exercise hypothesis suggesting that adults are superior language learners and the maturational state hypothesis favoring children as better second language learners (Johnson & Newport, 1989).

The influence of brain plasticity on language learning has also been a topic of interest. Penfield (1965) argues that young children have a greater capacity for recovery from brain damage in the speech area compared to adults. However, MacNamara (1976) challenges this view, highlighting that the learning of a second language is distinct from recovery from brain injury and that both children and adults exhibit language functions in the same brain areas.

Critics of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) have questioned its validity and impact on language learning. Diller (1981) argues that the development of pyramidal cells in the brain supports better cognitive aspects of language learning in relatively mature individuals, suggesting that adults can be more efficient language learners compared to children. The ability to achieve a native-like accent, however, is believed to depend on early exposure to a second language (Long, 1990). Moreover, motivation and attitude play significant roles in language learning, with learners' initial motives influencing their language learning outcomes (Matsumoto & Obana, 2001; Gardner & Lambert, 1959; MacNamara, 1973).

English's global spread as an international language has had far-reaching implications. Tunisia, categorized within Kachru's expanding circle, recognizes the importance of English in various domains such as science, technology, trade, and international communication (Nayar, 1997; Kachru,

1985; Melliti, 2012). The increasing demand for English proficiency in tourism, media, education, and research underscores its necessity in today's interconnected world (Melliti, 2012; Labassi, 2009).

In Tunisia, educational reforms have been implemented to incorporate English at an earlier stage of schooling. The Ministry of Education has recognized the significance of teaching English as a subject, shifting away from the previous emphasis on exam-oriented learning (Daoud, 1996). Recent policies, such as teaching English from the fourth grade of primary school, signify a shift in attitudes and beliefs towards English education, prioritizing language mastery over mere exam performance (Daoud, 1996). These reforms reflect the changing priorities and aspirations of Tunisian education, aligning with the global significance of English as a means of communication and access to opportunities.

The ongoing debate surrounding the age at which English should be introduced in Tunisian primary schools reflects the evolving perspectives on language learning. The focus has shifted from exam-oriented approaches to language mastery and the recognition of the benefits of early language exposure (Derbel, 2001; Melliti, 2012). While learners' attitudes towards English have historically been influenced by the goal of passing the Baccalaureate, the new policy emphasizes the importance of English across various domains and aims to foster enthusiasm among learners (Daoud, 1996). The engagement of ELT professionals highlights their support for these educational reforms and their commitment to maximizing the potential of early language learning.

Teaching English in non-English Speaking Countries

In an ever-globalizing world, where English has become the dominant lingua franca, its importance in scientific, technical, and commercial domains cannot be underestimated. This has led to the emergence of various terminology and acronyms in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), which describe the theory and process of instructing nonnative English speakers. As a result, English has been categorized into four major groups based on its status: English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as an Additional Language (EAL), and English as a Language of Wider Communication (ELWC). These categories acknowledge that the socio-political context in which English is used shapes the approach to English language instruction (Judd, 1981).

In an ESL context, nonnative English speakers primarily use English for communication, employing the language to express ideas, emotions, and all four language skills in a wide range of contexts, from informal to highly formal settings (Judd, 1981). On the other hand, an EAL situation refers to individuals who learn English after acquiring another primary language and use it for communication with others who speak different primary languages. In such cases, English is used in more limited and formal ways, mainly in areas like national governance, domestic commerce, and mass media (Judd, 1981). ELWC situations involve the use of English exclusively for international communication, where its usage is often confined to formal and specific domains. In EFL situations, English is studied as one of many foreign languages, with limited communicative functions outside the classroom, potentially focusing on literature and high culture (Judd, 1981).

The linguistic landscape of Tunisia is described as complex and dynamic, with various experiences of languages in social, work, educational, governmental, and media environments (Daoud, 2001). With globalization and the influx of science and technology, the linguistic situation in Tunisia has become diverse, with several foreign languages, including English, gaining prominence (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017). Tunisia has evolved into a multilingual country, characterized by the maintenance of

Arabic and functional competition between French and English. English is particularly promoted as the global language for science, technology, international relations, trade, and electronic communication (Daoud, 2011).

In recent years, English, traditionally considered a foreign language, has gradually encroached upon Arabic (L1) and French (L2) in Tunisian schools, driven by globalization and technological advancements (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017). This shift began after Tunisia gained independence from French rule in 1956 (Abdeljaouedi & Labassi, 2020). While some argue for the continued preference of French due to resource availability and perceived time and cost-saving benefits, others advocate for replacing French with English (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017).

The growing demand for English as a gateway to modern science and technology has led to significant changes in the linguistic orientation of many developing countries, including Tunisia, which inherited a language other than English from its former colonial power (Daoud, 1996). However, the competition between French and English remains evident within Tunisia's educational institutions and programs (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017).

Tunisia's linguistic history is shaped by intricate language shifts. Arabic holds official status as the language of Tunisia, as stated in the constitution, but the status or role of French or English is not explicitly defined (Battenburg, 1996). Tunisians consider themselves native speakers of Arabic. However, with the establishment of the French protectorate regime in 1881, French became the official language for administration and public schools, solidifying its position as the second language after Tunisia's independence in 1956. French has since exerted significant influence on education in Tunisia (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017).

Arabic and French have distinct roles in Tunisia, with Arabic reflecting religion and tradition, while French is perceived as a gateway to Western science and technology. The Minister of Culture emphasizes that Arabic and French serve different functions and there is no competition between them. However, French is widely used in Tunisia, not only in education and the economy but also in everyday oral interactions alongside Arabic. Attempts to promote Arabization and remove colonial traces have faced challenges and been seen as a threat to the position of French, resulting in the emergence of English in sectors such as education and business (Daoud, 2011; Boukadi & Troudi, 2017).

The emergence of English in Tunisia began in 1956, following independence, initially finding a place in traditional contexts and later becoming a compulsory subject at all educational levels (Daoud, 2011). While proficiency in French was previously considered essential for sectors like politics, economics, and social mobility, there is now a growing demand for better English language skills. Debates are ongoing at the government level regarding the possibility of adopting English as the medium of instruction, replacing French. However, this goal has yet to be realized, partly due to power dynamics within the country and the influence of global forces, particularly from France (Abdeljaouedi & Labassi, 2020).

English is increasingly recognized as vital for staying abreast of developments in various fields and for publishing research. Research that remains unpublished in English is often regarded as "lost science." This trend has led to a growing number of scholars being encouraged to write in English as more research is published in the language. However, critics argue that this "Englishization" of research publications has created pressure on scholars to publish in English, contributing to a competitive environment between native and non-native English speakers (Abdeljaouadi & Labassi, 2020).

The perspectives of Tunisian presidents, such as Bourguiba and Ben Ali, have shaped language policies in Tunisia. French was seen as a means to achieve independence and establish ties with Francophone Europe and Africa, while Ben Ali focused on improving foreign language proficiency, particularly in French and English. The inadequacy of English skills during a visit to South Africa in 1995 served as a catalyst for intensified efforts in English language teaching at all educational levels. The debate on language policy continued during the transitional period, with the rejection of a single-foreign-language system in favor of teaching different foreign languages to different groups of people (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017).

Significant events, such as the French bombing of Sakiyet in 1958 and the battle over the naval base in Bizerte in 1961, have played a role in marginalizing French in Tunisia. While these events did not directly cause linguistic change, they contributed to the growing importance of English in specific sectors of Tunisian society. There is considerable support for the increasing global interdependence on English and the gradual decline of French as a language of communication and trade, even though the rivalry between English and French remains apparent in Tunisia. Acknowledging this rivalry openly can be a sensitive matter for Tunisian officials and representatives from Britain, America, and France (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017).

In the early 1980s, language debates emerged in Tunisia, with advocates calling for the adoption of English, particularly in science, technology, and government. Government officials, however, expressed concerns about jeopardizing French ties. The transfer of the presidency from Bourguiba to Ben Ali in 1987 was a significant event that influenced language policy in Tunisia. Ben Ali envisioned a future where Tunisians from all walks of life, including street fruit sellers, would communicate in English. This push for English is part of a broader policy aimed at transforming the education system (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017).

The complex historical and linguistic factors that have shaped Tunisia's language landscape have contributed to the current dynamics surrounding the use and status of English in the country. The ongoing debates, power dynamics, and influences from global forces, particularly from France, make language policy and decisions regarding the medium of instruction complex and challenging to navigate.

The increasing recognition of English as a vital language for various disciplines and the pressure on scholars to publish in English highlight the need for Tunisia to navigate its linguistic choices carefully. The country must balance the preservation of its native languages, such as Arabic, with the demand for English proficiency to stay connected to the globalized world and advancements in science and technology.

The evolving role of English in Tunisia reflects the country's aspirations for progress and its response to the demands of a globalized world. It is important to ensure that language policies and educational reforms address the linguistic needs of Tunisian society, promote inclusivity, and provide opportunities for individuals of all linguistic backgrounds to thrive. This requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the strengths and contributions of Arabic, French, and English within Tunisia's multilingual context.

ELT reforms in Tunisia

Educational reforms in English language teaching have been a significant focus in Tunisia since 1994, with a strong emphasis on the global importance of English (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017). The evolution of English language instruction in the country has undergone several stages, starting with its introduction as a foreign language (FL) in secondary education. However, in 1994, the teaching

of English as a foreign language (TEFL) was moved to earlier grades, specifically the fifth or sixth grade of elementary school, and continued into higher education (Daoud, 1991; Boukadi & Troudi, 2017; Battenburg, 1996). Despite the proposal of national projects to enhance English language development, financial constraints have presented challenges, including the government's decision to implement English in elementary schools. Interestingly, France's investment in promoting French in Tunisia surpasses the budget allocated by the UK and the US to improve English in the country (Battenburg, 1997). Nevertheless, following the 2011 revolution, Tunisians have actively sought changes and reforms in various sectors, particularly in education (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017).

The examination of the successes and failures of English language programs in Tunisia provides valuable insights into language policy and planning, shedding light on the evolving role of English (Battenburg, 1996). While there are acknowledged shortcomings in curriculum design and implementation, the importance of English is indisputable (Daoud, 2011). However, the issue of language policy has surpassed linguistic dualism and has become a multifaceted debate encompassing Arabic, French, and English. Achieving a balance among these three languages necessitates consideration of social norms, political frameworks, and future aspirations (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017).

English language instruction at the elementary school level is a relatively recent development in Tunisia. Previously, students primarily learned and used Modern Standard Arabic and French in their classes (Battenburg, 1996). The Ministry of Education initiated a pilot program to teach English to fifth-grade students, recognizing the sudden transition to English encountered by students at the secondary level and the need for English language skills (Battenburg, 1996; Daoud, 1996). However, this program was discontinued after one year due to issues related to language policy and planning, insufficient time for developing English classes, and a lack of necessary materials (Daoud, 1996).

ELT professionals expressed concerns about the policy, citing not only the lack of time and suitable materials but also the absence of a strategy to align with the existing secondary school program (Daoud, 1996). Despite these challenges, the Ministry remained committed to introducing English at the elementary school level. In 1996-1997, English language teaching was initiated for all eighth-grade students, with the expectation that English instruction would continue into secondary education. The belief was that early exposure to the language would facilitate English proficiency (Battenburg, 1996). Initially, English was introduced as an extracurricular club without assessments or exams. Subsequently, it became a mandatory subject with a defined curriculum and assessments. To support the implementation of the communicative approach at the elementary level, in-service training, including workshops and summer programs, was provided to elementary school teachers (Boukadi & Troudi, 2017). However, Hermessi (2016) reported that in 2014, the Tunisian government decided to lower the age at which English is introduced to 9 years old.

The reforms in English language teaching in Tunisia reflect the country's recognition of the importance of English in a globalized world and the aspirations to equip students with necessary language skills. However, challenges such as resource allocation, curriculum design, teacher training, and alignment with existing educational structures and policies need to be addressed to ensure the effectiveness of English language programs at all levels of education. Additionally, the ongoing debate on language policy highlights the need for careful consideration of the balance between Arabic, French, and English to meet the linguistic and educational needs of Tunisian students.

2. Methodology

The primary focus of this research is to examine the impact of age on language learning in the Tunisian public education system and explore the potential implications for educational reforms. To gain valuable insights into this topic, a combination of questionnaire surveys and interviews were utilized to gather perspectives from elementary school teachers and English language inspectors, respectively.

The study specifically targeted a group of 30 English teachers in public elementary schools located in the Tunis region, along with 5 English language inspectors. The decision to focus on elementary school teachers was driven by their role in teaching fourth and sixth grades, making their experiences highly relevant to assessing the importance of lowering the age at which English is introduced in public elementary schools and understanding attitudes towards educational reforms. Additionally, the inclusion of English language inspectors from public elementary schools was crucial, as their insights provide valuable information on children's potential to learn English starting from the fourth grade and their influence on language learning and teaching practices.

Two research methods were employed to collect data for this study. The first method involved distributing a questionnaire to the participating teachers, while the second method consisted of conducting interviews with English language inspectors. The interview protocol was specifically designed for English language inspectors in public elementary schools and included 12 questions.

The questionnaire was carefully prepared and translated into Arabic to ensure clarity and comprehension among the participating elementary school teachers, who may not possess specialized knowledge of English. A total of 30 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the participants between November 15, 2020, and December 15, 2020, across 14 elementary schools within the Tunis region.

In addition to the questionnaire, qualitative data was gathered through interviews conducted with English language inspectors at the regional center of education and continuous training in Tunis. Although the participating inspectors declined to be recorded despite being informed that the recordings were solely for academic purposes, they willingly shared their insights during the interviews.

The researcher manually handled and analyzed the collected data. The responses obtained from teachers were carefully tabulated, cross-checked, and transformed into graphs using Microsoft Excel. The subsequent section will provide a detailed discussion of the obtained results, shedding light on the influence of age on language learning and its potential implications for educational reforms in Tunisia.

3. Analysis of results

3.1. Background of the teachers

This section focuses on two main aspects: teachers' personal information and their involvement in English language teaching (ELT). Analyzing the obtained results reveals that 96.7% of the participating teachers are female, indicating a significant presence of females in ELT. This finding suggests that more than half of the teachers in public elementary schools are female, while males represent only 3.3% of the participants. This indicates a low representation of males in public schools.

Examining the teachers' age distribution, the data shows that 11 teachers fall into the '41-50' age group, while nine teachers belong to the '36-40' age group. This suggests that the majority of teachers are older, indicating potentially greater experience among these educators. Additionally, three teachers each selected the age groups of '26-30' and '31-35,' indicating a lower number of young teachers in public elementary schools. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that only two teachers are between the ages of '20-25.' Therefore, older teachers constitute the majority, while only two teachers are 'more than 51' years old.

Analyzing the reported data on teaching experience reveals that 15 teachers have between '6-10' years of experience, indicating that half of the participating teachers have a similar level of teaching experience. Additionally, eight teachers reported having '0-5' years of experience, suggesting a significant number of new teachers in the field of ELT within public elementary schools. Only one teacher among the participants has 'more than 21' years of experience, highlighting the prevalence of young teachers in the position of EFL instructors.

Examining the data related to the grade levels taught by the participating teachers in public elementary schools, eight teachers mentioned teaching only the fourth grade, two teachers indicated teaching the fifth grade, and six teachers stated teaching the sixth grade. This suggests that in some public schools, teachers who exclusively teach English at one level may also teach other subjects to different grade levels. This implies that more than half of the participating teachers may have graduated in different fields such as Arabic or French, and have attended ELT workshops organized by the Ministry of Education to teach English to children in public schools. Consequently, highly qualified teachers are required in public schools. However, only one teacher among the participants mentioned teaching all three grade levels simultaneously. This suggests that this particular teacher may possess more teaching experience. Consequently, teachers who instruct all three levels in Tunisian public schools might be highly qualified or have more teaching experience compared to other teachers. Additionally, some teachers indicated teaching two grade levels concurrently. For instance, five teachers mentioned teaching both the fourth and sixth grades. This implies that these teachers may have limited teaching experience and could potentially be teaching French or Arabic to other grade levels.

3.2. Engagement of Teachers in ELT

Upon examining the outcomes pertaining to the participation of teachers in training courses or workshops related to English Language Teaching (ELT), it becomes evident that seven teachers affirmed attending such courses '5-10 times', while ten teachers attended twice, and five teachers claimed attending four times. This information leads to the conclusion that more than half of the teachers actively engage in ELT. Thus, it can be inferred that a significant number of teachers in public elementary schools are fully committed to ELT. However, it should be noted that only two teachers stated that they have never attended a workshop related to ELT. This fact suggests that these teachers might either be more than 51 years old or have more than 21 years of experience.

The year when the last workshop was attended could be categorized as 'recent', as indicated by 13 teachers who claimed attending in '2019', and another 13 teachers in '2020' (bearing in mind that the current study was conducted between... and ...). This observation implies that these teachers stay up-to-date with teaching methods and strategies, and furthermore underscores their active involvement in ELT.

In terms of the organization responsible for organizing the workshops attended by teachers, 39.3% of the surveyed teachers mentioned that the 'ministry' organized their last workshop. This finding

suggests that the ministry is interested in providing training opportunities for teachers and is eager to enhance the qualifications of English teachers. However, 57.1% of the teachers reported that 'international organizations' were responsible for organizing the last workshop they attended. This information implies that major efforts are being made by international organizations to improve the quality of teaching, rather than relying solely on the ministry. Consequently, the ministry of education needs to intensify its efforts and strive to create well-qualified teachers.

3.3. Initial Exposure to English

Examining the results regarding the stage at which teachers were first introduced to English reveals that the majority of teachers (18 teachers) claim to have been initially exposed to English during 'secondary school'. This finding suggests that these teachers studied under the old system where English was first introduced in secondary schools. On the other hand, four teachers mentioned that they were first introduced to English during 'elementary school'. This indicates that these teachers are younger and studied in the new system where English is taught in elementary schools. None of the teachers stated that they were introduced to English in 'kindergarten'. This can be interpreted as a reflection of the increasing importance of English in the curriculum, indicating its crucial role in the educational system.

3.4. Motivation of Students

Analyzing the gathered data regarding student motivation reveals that children are consistently 'always' motivated to learn English. A majority of teachers (57.6%) claimed that their students are 'always' motivated to learn English.

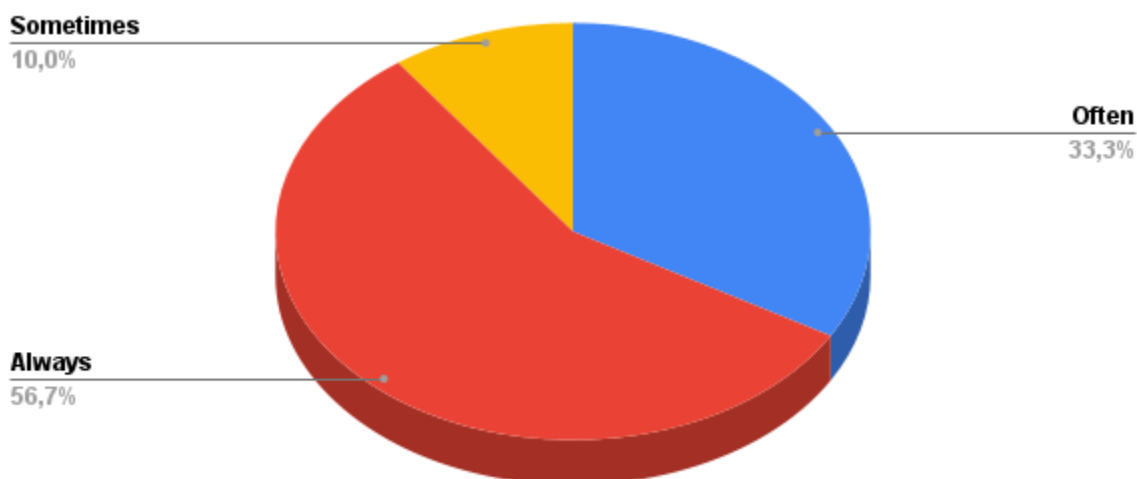


Figure 1. Students' motivation to learn English

This finding suggests that these children possess a strong desire to learn English, and they might even prefer it over French, considering they have already been introduced to French in the second grade. Furthermore, 33.3% of the surveyed teachers stated that their students are 'often' motivated. This conclusion suggests that students are actively engaged in learning English and are aware of its global significance, perhaps due to their parents' recognition of the value of English.

3.5. Teaching Methods and Hours

In general, teachers tend to prefer employing the 'oral approach and situational language teaching' as well as the 'audio-lingual' methods. These methods were selected by 25 teachers. This preference can be attributed to the fact that these two methods are commonly used in elementary school classrooms and have proven to be effective in facilitating language acquisition for children.

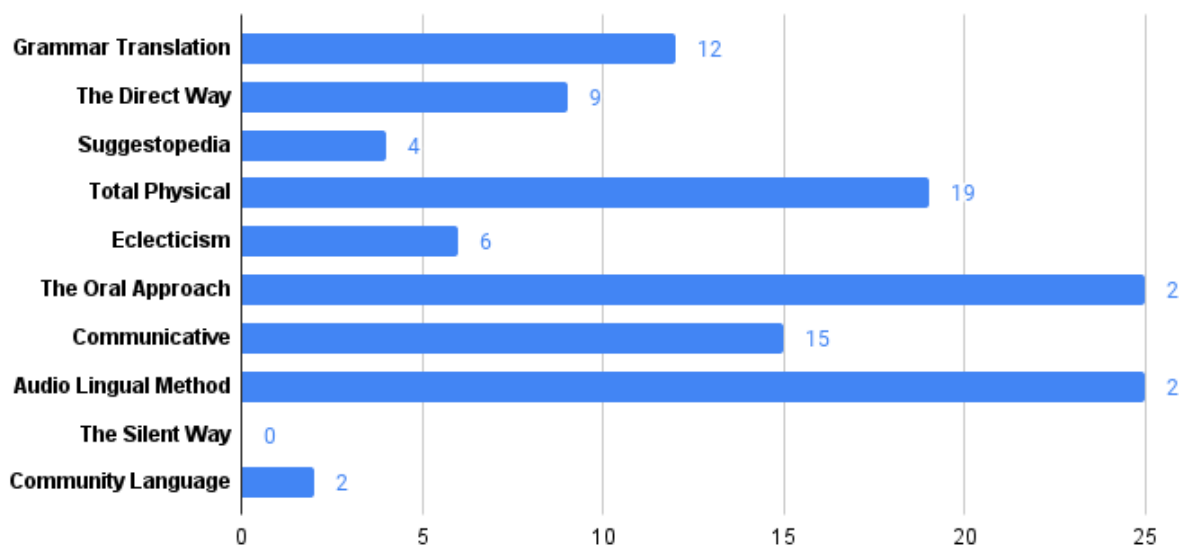


Figure 2. The teaching method used in class

The second most favored method, according to the surveyed teachers, is the 'total physical response' method, with 19 teachers indicating its usage in their classes. Additionally, 15 teachers reported implementing the 'communicative language teaching' method, while 12 teachers utilize the 'grammar translation' method. This observation implies that teachers employ multiple methods in their classrooms. Hence, teachers should be knowledgeable about various teaching approaches and prepared to utilize multiple methods in their instruction.

The allocated teaching hours for English in elementary schools are insufficient to achieve at least an A1 level within a year, as affirmed by 60% of the surveyed teachers. This finding leads to the conclusion that the current teaching hours in elementary schools are inadequate and should be increased. However, 20% of the teachers expressed that the teaching hours are 'good'. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), students can expect to reach A1 proficiency in English with 60 to 80 hours of instruction. Yet, in one academic year, public schools only provide 36 hours of English instruction. Consequently, the current teaching hours for English in elementary schools do not provide sufficient time to attain an A1 level within a year.

The effectiveness of incorporating multimedia tools in English teaching and learning is acknowledged by 50% of the surveyed teachers based on the analysis of the questionnaire data. Half of them agreed with this notion. This suggests that teachers utilize multimedia tools in the English teaching process, which has yielded successful and fruitful results. Moreover, 46.7% of the teachers strongly agreed with this statement. Thus, it can be concluded that more than half of the surveyed teachers, and therefore the majority of teachers in elementary schools, agree that multimedia tools have no limitations when it comes to teaching and learning English. None of the teachers expressed disagreement with this statement, further emphasizing the positive impact of multimedia tools in English instruction.

3.6. Strategies for Motivating Students in Learning

Within the questionnaire, teachers were given a section to rank 12 strategies aimed at motivating children to learn English. Interestingly, the results shed light on the diverse perspectives among teachers regarding these strategies.

'Develop an atmosphere of reading,' received mixed rankings. While seven teachers ranked it third, indicating that some teachers may not prioritize it due to perceived time constraints, five teachers ranked it as the most important strategy, emphasizing the value of reading in the classroom.

'put your students in the driver's seat as much as possible,' ranked second for eight teachers. This highlights the teachers' desire to empower students and encourage them to take control of their own learning rather than relying solely on the teacher's authority.

'encourage open and sincere communication,' ranked fourth for six teachers. This suggests that some teachers do not consider it directly related to children's motivation or as sufficient to engage them in the language learning process. However, three teachers ranked it as the most important strategy, emphasizing their belief in its significance for motivating children.

'focus on your students' interests,' ranked second for six teachers. This indicates that this strategy effectively motivates children to learn English, and these teachers may incorporate it into their teaching practices. However, only three teachers ranked it as the most important strategy, implying that it may not be the primary motivator for all children.

'introduce and encourage different types of learning styles,' received varying rankings. While six teachers ranked it eighth, five teachers ranked it fifth, and no teacher ranked it as the most important strategy. This suggests that some teachers may not prioritize the introduction of learning styles for young children, perhaps due to limited understanding of different learning styles.

'share your enthusiasm for learning,' received diverse rankings. It was ranked first by four teachers and third by six teachers. This indicates that these teachers recognize the importance of sharing their enthusiasm for learning, believing that children will mirror their attitudes and become eager learners themselves.

'make learning fun through game-based learning,' ranked first for ten teachers. This suggests that it is the most widely used strategy among the surveyed teachers in Tunisian elementary schools. However, some teachers ranked it lower, indicating that they may not fully endorse teaching through games or prioritize other strategies to engage and motivate students in the English classroom.

'focus on what he is learning, not on his performance,' received low rankings. Seven teachers ranked it twelfth, and five teachers ranked it eleventh. This indicates that the surveyed teachers do not

consider this strategy important, as they may place more emphasis on students' output and performance rather than their learning process.

'help your students stay organized,' received similarly low rankings. Seven teachers ranked it twelfth, and eight teachers ranked it eleventh. This suggests that teachers may perceive themselves as the central authority in teaching and not feel the need to assist students in staying organized, as they control the classroom environment and tasks.

'recognize and celebrate achievements,' was ranked twelfth by six teachers, and none of the teachers ranked it as the most important strategy. This indicates that these teachers may not implement this strategy in their classrooms, which is unfortunate as students, especially children, should be rewarded and celebrated for their achievements. However, five teachers ranked it as the fifth most important strategy, suggesting that they recognize the significance of celebrating achievements, albeit a relatively low number of teachers.

'Focus on strengths,' ranked second for only two teachers, and none of the teachers ranked it as the most important strategy. This suggests that teachers may not consider this strategy highly significant when dealing with the whole class, as certain strengths may be perceived as weaknesses by other students and vice versa.

'Make everyday a learning day,' ranked first for only one teacher and tenth for five teachers. This indicates that teachers may lack enthusiasm for incorporating this strategy, as other strategies may be perceived as more efficient and effective in their classrooms.

Regarding the factors contributing to children's improvement in learning foreign languages, both 'teachers' and 'parents' were identified as the most important factors. Eighteen teachers highlighted the role of 'parents' in playing a vital role in children's language learning. This suggests that parents' background and intellectual level can be influential, as their belief in the importance of languages in their children's lives can instill enthusiasm and eagerness to learn the language. Additionally, 20 teachers acknowledged the significant impact of 'teachers' on children's language learning. This emphasizes the responsibility of teachers in shaping children's attitudes towards the language and underscores the importance of employing effective teaching methods to engage students. Furthermore, 16 teachers recognized the 'environment' as a crucial factor in children's language learning, emphasizing the need for a conducive learning environment that fosters concentration and minimizes distractions.

3.7. Validity of educational reforms and the role of English

This section focuses on the significance of English and the impact of educational reforms. Analysis of the reported results reveals that 17 teachers 'strongly agree' that 'English plays a crucial role in the curriculum.' This indicates that more than half of the surveyed teachers believe that English holds a prominent place in the curriculum, highlighting the priority given to teaching English in Tunisian elementary schools. However, seven teachers 'strongly disagree,' suggesting that they consider scientific subjects to be essential and view English as an optional subject.

Analyzing the questionnaire data further reveals that 14 teachers believe that educational reforms 'require teacher engagement,' while 10 teachers assert that they 'need revision.' This highlights the importance of involving teachers in educational reforms, as they possess valuable insights into the limitations of the reforms and can contribute to their improvement. Conversely, eight teachers perceive educational reforms as 'successful and promising,' and four teachers describe them as 'applicable.' This suggests that some teachers are satisfied with the reforms and find them suitable

for implementation in their classrooms. Additionally, seven teachers point out that reforms 'lack official follow-up,' and an equal number of teachers state that they 'lack needed logistics.' This underscores the limited and unclear implementation of educational reforms. Moreover, four teachers consider educational reforms 'useless,' and one teacher describes them as 'vague.'

Regarding strategies for improving the teaching of English in elementary schools, teachers were asked to rank them according to their perceived effectiveness.

'Introducing the use of multimedia means,' ranked third for seven teachers and fourth for six teachers. This suggests that the use of multimedia means may not significantly enhance the teaching of English according to the surveyed teachers. Only two teachers ranked it as the most effective strategy, and two others ranked it as the second most effective, indicating that the use of multimedia means may be seen as an optional approach.

'Offering training to teachers,' received high rankings. Six teachers ranked it as the most effective, six teachers ranked it as the second most effective, and four teachers ranked it as the third most effective. This indicates that more than half of the surveyed teachers recognize the importance of training courses in enhancing the quality of teaching. Therefore, teachers in elementary schools value opportunities for professional development.

'Lowering the age of teaching English,' ranked first for eight teachers and second for seven teachers. This suggests that the majority of the surveyed teachers support the idea of introducing English at a younger age, believing that children learn better when exposed to the language earlier. Thus, more than half of the teachers advocate for reducing the age of English instruction, implying that fourth graders may learn more effectively than sixth graders.

'Designing up-to-date course books,' it ranked first for eight teachers, second for seven teachers, and third for five teachers. This highlights the limitations of the current course books used by teachers, which may not adequately meet the needs of students. Therefore, the Ministry of Education should prioritize updating course books in elementary and secondary schools.

'Less testing, more teaching,' received lower rankings. Ten teachers ranked it ninth, and eight teachers ranked it tenth. This suggests that this strategy may not significantly improve the teaching of English in elementary schools, as teachers consider assessment necessary, especially in this age group, to measure students' progress.

'high-quality teachers,' received mixed rankings. It was ranked first for four teachers, second for four teachers, third for four teachers, and fourth for six teachers. This implies that simply being highly qualified through training courses organized by the Ministry of Education may not guarantee improved teaching of English.

'Collaborate, not compete,' ranked tenth for six teachers and ninth for five teachers. This suggests that this strategy may not significantly improve the teaching of English, as competition can foster learning and motivation. Therefore, teachers need to create a suitable atmosphere for students to compete and excel.

'Communication,' received mid-range rankings. Eight teachers ranked it fifth, seven teachers ranked it sixth, and six teachers ranked it seventh. This implies that this strategy may not be as important as the previous ones but can still contribute to improving the teaching of English alongside other methods.

'Encourage critical thinking,' ranked eighth for eight teachers. This suggests that this strategy may not be considered highly effective in improving the teaching of English, as none of the surveyed teachers ranked it as the most effective strategy.

'Creativity,' ranked first for only one teacher, and none of the teachers ranked it as the second most effective. This suggests that this strategy may not significantly contribute to the improvement of English teaching, as teachers may not perceive it as directly relevant to language instruction.

Regarding the most preferable course book according to the surveyed teachers, 40% of them preferred 'global' course books, while 10% preferred 'local' course books. This indicates that global course books better meet the needs of students and are perceived as more effective for teaching and learning.

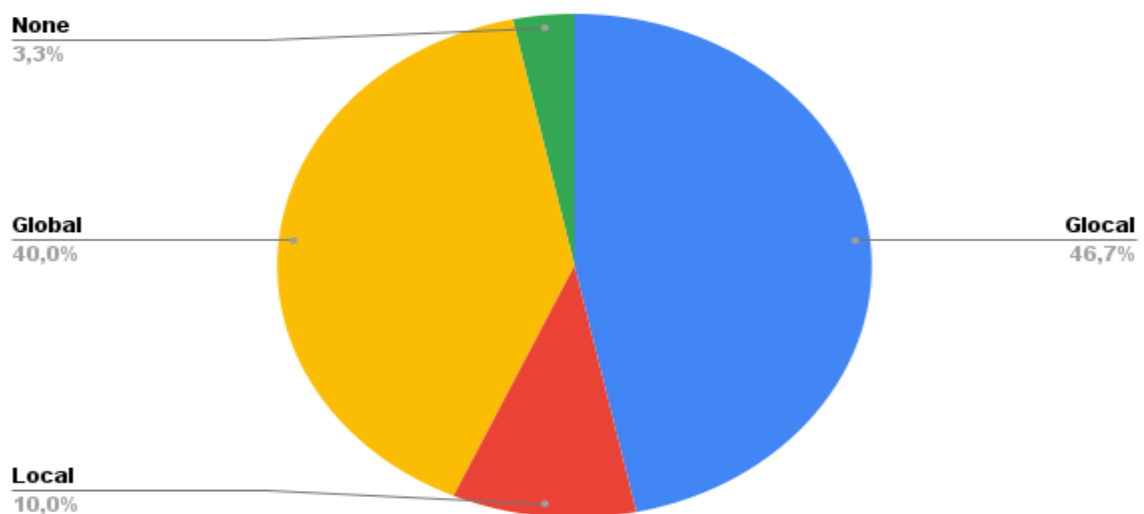


Figure 3. The most preferable course book for teachers

The preference for global course books may be due to the lack of updates in local course books. However, 46.7% of the surveyed teachers preferred 'glocal' course books, suggesting that even global course books have some limitations, and the Ministry of Education should work on improving local course books to better cater to students' needs.

3.8. Progress and Language Proficiency at a Young Age

This section focuses on the progress of fourth-grade students in learning English and their ability to achieve proficiency. Upon analyzing the reported results, it is evident that 20% of the surveyed teachers perceive the fourth graders' attempt to learn English as 'good.' This suggests that children in their first year of formal English instruction, at the fourth-grade level, are performing well and encountering minimal difficulties in grasping the language.

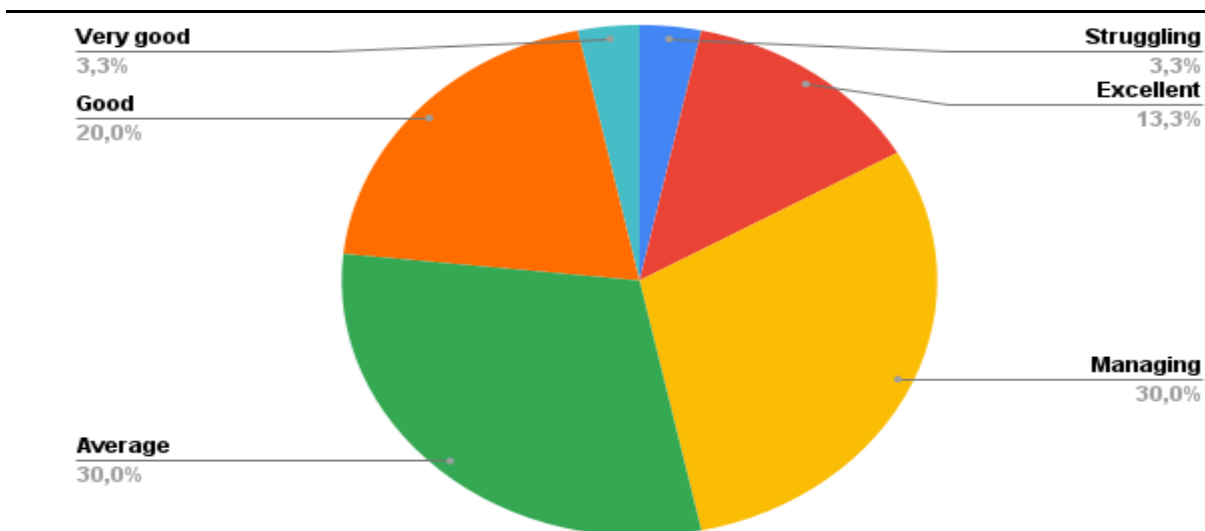


Figure 4. The attempt of fourth graders to learn English

Additionally, 13.3% of teachers consider them 'excellent' learners, which could be attributed to their prior exposure to French since the second grade. This exposure enables them to differentiate between English and French, facilitating their English language learning process.

Moreover, 30% of the teachers describe fourth graders as 'managing' in learning English. This implies that although they may have faced certain challenges, with the support and guidance of their teachers, they have been able to overcome them. Furthermore, 30% of the teachers perceive the fourth graders' attempt to learn English as 'average,' indicating overall satisfaction with their progress, but acknowledging the need for further efforts to enhance English teaching and learning in Tunisian elementary schools.

With regard to the ability of children to learn multiple foreign languages in elementary school, 53% of the surveyed teachers agree that children are capable of acquiring proficiency in multiple foreign languages. This conclusion suggests that children exhibit a rapid language acquisition ability, as they learn Modern Standard Arabic in the first grade, French in the second grade, and subsequently English in the fourth grade. Additionally, 40% of the teachers strongly agree with the notion that children can learn more than one foreign language, indicating that the majority of teachers believe that children face no significant difficulties in acquiring multiple languages.

When it comes to determining the optimal age for children to start learning English in academic settings, 73.3% of the surveyed teachers assert that the best age range is '7-10 years.' This indicates that more than half of the teachers in Tunisian elementary schools endorse the idea of commencing English instruction at a younger age. Therefore, teaching English should ideally begin in the second grade when children are around seven years old. Additionally, 26.7% of the teachers claim that '0-6 years' is the ideal age, suggesting that these teachers advocate for English instruction to start in kindergarten or even in the first grade. Hence, the principle of 'the younger, the better' is widely supported by English teachers.

Regarding the attainment of proficiency in second languages, 20% of the surveyed teachers agree that children may not easily achieve proficiency in second languages during the second decade of life, after the age of ten.

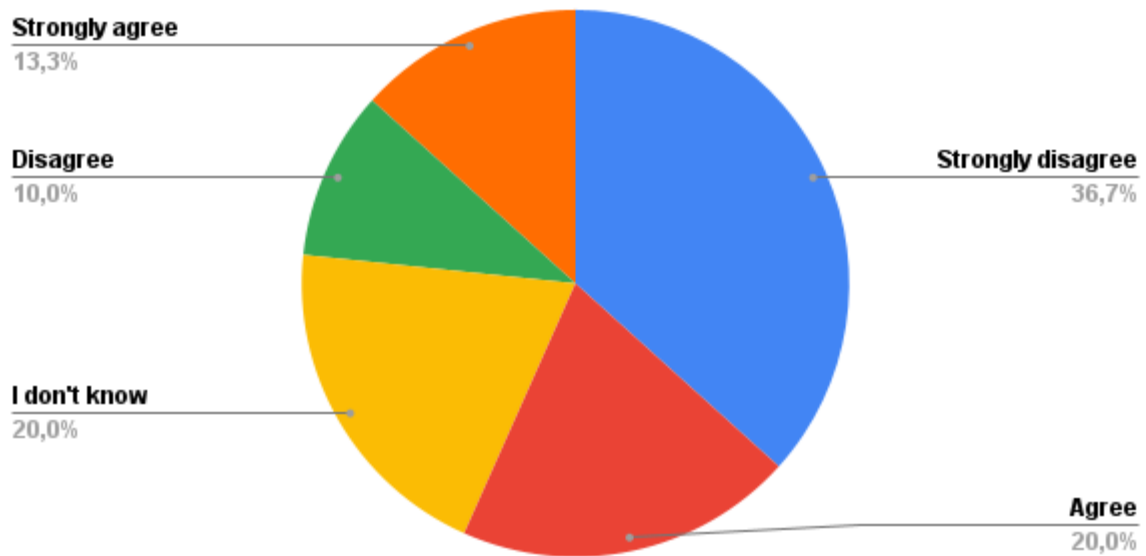


Figure 5. Proficiency in second language in the second decade of life

This observation implies that children should commence learning English at a younger age. Furthermore, 13.3% of the teachers strongly agree with this statement. However, 36.7% of the teachers strongly disagree, suggesting that achieving proficiency in second languages is indeed feasible during the second decade of life.

4. Conclusion:

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the age at which English should be taught in Tunisian public elementary schools, shedding light on the perspectives and attitudes of Tunisian elementary teachers. Notably, the results reveal an intriguing discovery: teachers not only recognize the potential benefits of lowering the age of English instruction but also express agreement with this approach. This finding signifies a positive disposition towards introducing English at an earlier stage in the curriculum, suggesting that teachers see the advantages of starting language learning at a younger age.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that teachers disagree with the notion that achieving proficiency in second languages is challenging during the second decade of life. This recognition among teachers implies that older learners can still attain proficiency in a second language, including English. Consequently, these findings emphasize the need for efforts to enhance the quality of English teaching in Tunisian schools, benefiting learners across different age groups. From younger students starting at an early age to older students embarking on their language learning journey later in life, all learners can benefit from improved English language education.

Through acknowledging the teachers' awareness and agreement with lowering the age of English instruction, as well as challenging the assumption that proficiency is unattainable for older learners, this research highlights the potential advantages of enhancing English language education in Tunisian schools. It emphasizes the importance of creating effective and inclusive language learning environments that cater to the needs of both younger and older learners. Such an approach can ultimately foster greater language proficiency and contribute to a more comprehensive language education system in Tunisia.

These insights provide valuable implications for language learning policies and practices, contributing to the ongoing discourse on educational reforms in Tunisia. The findings underscore the importance of considering the age factor in language instruction and highlight the potential benefits of implementing strategies that accommodate learners of all ages. By addressing the needs and preferences of both younger and older learners, Tunisia can strive towards an inclusive and effective language education system that empowers students to develop strong language skills and thrive in a multilingual world.

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