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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Kindergarten teachers' challenges in teaching English as a foreign language to children

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English as a foreign language in early years has become prevalent in response to contemporary trends of English as a global language. However, early childhood teachers may face challenges that would prevent children from achieving success in learning English in different educational contexts. This study explored the challenges that kindergarten teachers face when teaching English as a foreign language at kindergarten schools in Kuwait. There is high demand for teaching English as a second language in most countries in the world at early stages, and stakeholders could take responsibility for overcoming these challenges that are related to many aspects of this field. The researchers interviewed 16 kindergarten teachers and then conducted classroom observations. Lack of teacher preparation and training, English curriculum deficiencies, and teachers' English proficiency level emerged as key challenges faced by kindergarten teachers. Other localized challenges were also identified. This paper concludes by highlighting several implications for decision makers to further enhance teaching English as a foreign language in kindergarten schools.

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Teaching; English language; challenges; foreign language kindergarten children

Introduction

Kuwait is a small country located in the north-western corner of the Arabian Gulf. Its population is approaching 4 million, of which 30.5% are Kuwaitis and 69.5% are non-Kuwaitis (Public Authority for Civil Information 2019). In 1961, Kuwait gained independence from the British protectorate. The education system in Kuwait consists of four stages: two years of kindergarten, five years of primary school, three years of intermediate school, and three years of high school. Education is provided free to Kuwaiti citizens (UNESCO IBE 2011).

In recent years, Kuwait has witnessed very rapid economic and demographic growth. In light of the changes in Kuwait's society and students' needs, the Ministry of Education assigned a team of national and international experts to develop a new national

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curriculum for all stages of education (Murphy and Evangelou 2016). English as a foreign language was one of the main subjects included in this new national curriculum.

Considering the benefits of learning a foreign language, the implementation of teaching English as a foreign language in Kuwaiti public kindergarten schools began in the academic year 2009/2010. Since 2009, 30 kindergartens in Kuwaiti school districts have used the English curriculum. This implementation was expected to cover all kindergartens across the country in the coming years (Habeeb 2013); however, introducing English as a compulsory subject for kindergarten children has faced many challenges due to a lack of field research supporting the implementation of the curriculum (Al-Darwish 2013). In fact, in 2014, the English language supervisors' recommendation was to stop teaching English in Kuwaiti kindergartens because of the shortage of qualified teachers (Al-Fadli 2014). Currently, not all public kindergartens in Kuwait teach English; the Supervisors Department Head left it to the kindergartens' administrators to decide whether to offer English language to children or not based on teachers' efficiency in teaching English.

Literature review

Learning a foreign language (FL) at an early age is becoming common all over the world (Kearney and Barbour 2015). Acquiring an FL is as important as acquiring the first language and should begin in the early childhood years, which can be deemed vital for language learning (Kalaycioglu 2011). An FL is any language that is not the official language of a particular country or person and that is taught as an additional language in a formal school setting. In this study, we focus on teaching FL at the pre-primary level (Timpe-Laughlin and Cho 2021).

As in all areas of development, children vary in their abilities to acquire languages. With the exception of some types of cognitive and language disability, typically, children acquire their first language through the interaction with their environment. In his social development theory, Vygotsky emphasised the vital role of social interaction and one's culture in language development. Similarly, Piaget indicated that children construct their knowledge of language when they actively engage with the environment, which helps children to acquire more vocabulary knowledge and build meaningful grammar (Gass and Selinker 2001). By the age of 4, children have typically developed into skilled communicators in their native language; they learn to use the language appropriately in different situations through their home environment (Winskel et al. 2015).

According to research on early language learning, there was a critical or sensitive phase during the preschool stage in which children might develop their second language (Oyama 1976). The importance of starting language learning in pre-primary school cannot be overstated. Language exposure, for example, improves pronunciation and fluency, encourages empathy, increases global awareness and intercultural competency, and improves children's capacity to understand and imitate what they hear (Shin and Crandall 2014).

In the case of learning an FL, however, children's exposure to the new language is much more limited than for the first language (Copland, Garton, and Burns 2014). Consequently, learning an FL may not involve the same process as learning the first language. Researchers have identified a consistent developmental sequence for young children acquiring a foreign language. It begins with a silent stage when the child listens to the

new language while continuing to use their first language. Next, the early production stage begins when the child starts using short words from the new language; the child can communicate using simple phrases and sentences. Recognising these stages while teaching an FL is helpful for teachers to enrich their classroom environments through various activities and stimulating elements; this should give the child the opportunity to acquire the language and learn in their own way successfully.

Recently, FLs have been included in the early childhood education curriculum. For example, Gilzow and Rhodes (2000) indicated that designating the study of FL as one of the core subjects, such as reading, maths and science, is essential for a successful programme for children. Although educators support the idea of providing opportunities for children to learn a new language at an early age (Caccavale 2007), several studies documented challenges that have an inevitable impact on English curriculum implementation and the classroom practices of young children. For example, in a survey, Copland, Garton, and Burns (2014) asked teachers of young learners in 142 countries about the challenges they face when teaching English as a foreign language; the teachers reported concerns about gaining skills to teach speaking, motivating children to learn English, maintaining discipline in their classrooms, focusing on different individual needs, and teaching large classes. Mustafa (2018) identified several challenges faced by Malaysian early childhood teachers while teaching young children English; these challenges include teachers' lack of English proficiency, lack of interest in teaching English, lack of children's comprehension, and lack of confidence. In a study conducted by Nafissi and Shafiee (2020) in Iran, kindergarten English language teachers' beliefs about their role in teaching English as a foreign language were explored. The findings indicated that teachers believed in the importance of their efforts to develop children's language skills. However, teachers identified some factors that affect their pedagogies, such as social acceptance, parents' expectations, kindergartens' administrations, learners' parents, and the materials.

Studies conducted in the Arab context addressed several challenges and issues of teaching English. For example, a study conducted by Fareh (2010) indicated that the major challenges of teaching English as a foreign language in Arabian countries include lack of teachers' training, focus on a teacher-centred approach, low proficiency and motivation, inappropriate curriculum, and insufficient assessment methods. Additionally, Tekin (2015) explored parents' perceptions of the benefits, challenges and solutions of early instruction in English as a foreign language in Oman. The findings revealed some benefits that included children's ability to speak a universal language and helping children with their future educational lives and careers; however, the challenges included difficulty with pronunciation, writing problems, and gaining vocabulary words. The solutions included the use of technological means, practising English both at school and at home, providing meaningful homework, and training teachers in teaching English. Consistent with this, Alrashidi and Phan (2015) summarised challenges of implementing English in Saudi Arabian schools, such as students' low level of achievement in English, English teaching is teacher-centred rather than student-centred, using traditional methods to teach English, lack of motivation and encouragement, and lack of the social target environment to practise English.

In Kuwait, Al-Darwish (2013) investigated teachers' and parents' perceptions of implementing the English language curriculum in kindergarten. The findings of the study showed that participants were dissatisfied with the curriculum, teachers need to promote communication and innovation skills in the classroom, and they should be

experienced in teaching English language. To investigate kindergarten teachers' perceptions of implementing English as a foreign language at the kindergarten level, Habeeb (2013) collected 631 completed surveys from 30 kindergartens. The findings showed teachers' agreement on starting teaching English at an earlier age, moderate agreement on the comprehensiveness and quality of the English curriculum, and fair agreement on a set of challenges such as lacking training opportunities and limited academic preparation.

It has been noted that there are several challenges in teaching English as a foreign language to children, such as lack of training and lack of interest and motivation (Copland, Garton, and Burns 2014; Mustafa 2018). However, there are some different challenges related to the curriculum implemented and the skills required by children at different ages (Alrashidi and Phan 2015; Al-Darwish 2013).

The study context

Until 1993, teaching English language in public schools used to start at grade 5; the Ministry of Education then started to introduce English as a compulsory subject from the first grade. Since one of the goals of the kindergarten programme in Kuwait is to prepare children for mandatory education (Ministry of Education 2011), the Ministry of Education included an English programme in the public kindergarten school curriculum in the academic year 2009/2010. The English programme was introduced in 12 kindergartens, 2 in each of the 6 school districts in Kuwait. In the academic year 2012/2013, the English programme was introduced in 30 kindergartens in different school districts.

There are two institutes for training kindergarten teachers in Kuwait that offer a 4-year programme leading to a bachelor's degree (UNESCO 2006). The kindergarten programme in both institutes offers academic, cultural and pedagogical training and provides required courses, such as educational citizenship, Arabic language, English language, kindergarten school maths and science, child nutrition, child literature in Arabic, psychology, and kindergarten workshop (Al-Al-Darwish 2013; Kuwait University 2011). In addition, the two institutes offer a full-time internship, usually in the last semester, which gives pre-service teachers opportunities to work with children in a kindergarten setting to refine the knowledge and skills they gained during their study at the institutes. After teachers have graduated, the Ministry of Education continues providing mandatory teacher training programmes that align with kindergartens' goals.

The supervision system within the kindergartens is considered a key element in the educational system because of its crucial role in improving the teaching and learning process. According to the instructions of the Ministry of Education, at least two supervisors are assigned to each kindergarten. Each resident educational supervisor is responsible for a group of teachers (four–five teachers), providing them with appropriate supervisory services and supporting them in teaching English as a foreign language. In addition, an external educational supervisor from the school district supervises the resident supervisors in the kindergarten and the teachers.

The current study explored the challenges that kindergarten teachers face when teaching English as a foreign language at kindergarten schools in Kuwait. The study is significant, as it will provide research-based evidence of the challenges kindergarten teachers face when teaching English as a foreign language at kindergarten schools in Kuwait. The study is also timely, as there is high demand for teaching English as a second language in most countries

in the world at early stages, including Kuwait. It could encourage stakeholders to take an interest in improving teaching English as a foreign language at kindergarten schools and to take responsibility for overcoming the challenges related to many aspects of this field. Consequently, a more in-depth investigation into teaching English as a foreign language in early years is a top priority, which is one reason for the present study being designed and conducted.

Methods

Participants

The study participants were Kuwaiti kindergarten teachers who teach English as a foreign language. Sixteen kindergarten teachers were selected from five kindergarten schools within one school district, Al-Asimah, located in Kuwait City. Al-Asimah district contains 32 kindergarten schools (Central Statistical Bureau 2018). The first researcher obtained written permission from Al-Asimah school district to conduct the study and was provided with a list of phone numbers for the 30 kindergarten schools in the district.

Kindergarten schools were contacted to ascertain whether they apply the English curriculum since, as mentioned earlier, not all the public kindergarten schools teach English. Subsequently, five kindergarten schools were selected. When the data collection started, the participants had teaching experience ranging from 2 years to 26 years and had experience in teaching English ranging from 2 years to 9 years. All the participants teach at full-day kindergarten, their first language is Arabic, and they are female. To protect confidentiality, the participants are identified using pseudonyms; a brief description of each participant teacher is presented in Table 1.

Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews and classrooms observation were adopted in this study. Both methods were used to obtain comprehensive explanations of the challenges experienced by kindergarten teachers when teaching English as a foreign language.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Work place	Teachers	Academic degree	Work experience	experience in teaching E	Grade of teaching	Interview duration	Observation duration
Kindergarten A	Afrah*	Bachelor	8 years	8 years	KG 2	35	-
	Mona	Bachelor	20 years	9 years	KG 2	40	40
	Kholoud	Bachelor	7 years	7 years	KG 1	45	-
Kindergarten B	Seham	Bachelor	15 years	7 years	KG1	35	-
	Mariam	Bachelor	8 years	8 years	KG2	30	35
	Bedor	Bachelor	15 years	9 years	KG2	40	40
Kindergarten C	Alia	Doctorate	26 years	4 years	KG1	30	-
	Shayma	Bachelor	13 years	5 years	KG2	40	40
	Maha	Bachelor	6 years	5 years	KG2	35	-
Kindergarten D	Sara	Bachelor	10 years	5 years	KG2	50	-
	Reem	Bachelor	9 years	6 years	KG1	40	-
	Nada	Bachelor	3 years	3 years	KG2	45	-
Kindergarten E	Amna	Master	8 years	6 years	KG1	35	30
	Hessa	Bachelor	7 years	7 years	KG2	30	25
	Amal	Bachelor	5 years	5 years	KG2	30	-
	Rwan	Bachelor	2 years	2 years	KG1	45	-

*All names above are pseudonymous.

Semi-structured interviews

This method was utilised, as it enables the researchers to probe and expand the interviewee's answers. The instrument used in this method was the interview questions to gain a more in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by the teachers when teaching English as a second language. The interview questions addressed three domains: English teaching methods in kindergartens, with 6 questions; challenges facing kindergarten teachers when teaching English, with 11 questions; and solutions for developing teaching English as a second language in kindergarten, with 8 questions.

Three sources influenced the choice of the interview questions: a review of the literature relevant to challenges in teaching English as a second language to children (Fareh 2010; Nafissi and Shafiee 2020; Tekin 2015); the researchers' own experience in working closely with English teachers in supervision and training; and the documentary analysis of teaching English as a foreign language in the Kuwaiti kindergarten curriculum that had already been carried out (Ministry of Education 2011).

Before conducting the face-to-face interviews and to ensure content validity, the interview questions were reviewed by two experts in the field of English education, two educational supervisors, and two kindergarten teachers. The researchers modified the interview questions in light of the feedback from the reviewers.

Classroom observation

This method was utilized, as it provides the researcher with an opportunity to collect live data directly from a live situation (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000). The classroom observations were used in this study to support findings that emerged from the interviews to provide a comprehensive overview of the context in which English sessions occur in kindergarten classrooms. The classroom observation can answer the 'what' questions, illuminate the 'how' questions, and provide insights into the 'why' questions (O'Sullivan 2006, 253–254). In this study, the researchers developed an observation protocol, which enabled them to identify the challenges teachers face when teaching English as a second language.

The observation used in this study is unstructured and descriptive, as the researchers took field notes and recorded the classroom events without preparing a checklist or a classroom schedule in advance. Simpson and Tuson (1995, p. 46) suggested that observing without a schedule is an important research tool, as the observation process is addressed with an open mind regarding what is happening.

Ethical consideration

Consent was sought from the official authority to conduct this study. Moreover, verbal consent was sought from kindergarten teachers prior to interviews and classroom observations. Each teacher participated in this study on a strictly voluntary basis. Participants were also given the right, throughout the study, to withdraw at any time and be free to decline to answer a particular interview question. The participants' confidentiality and anonymity were ensured.

Data collection

All the kindergarten teachers were interviewed in the kindergartens where they work. Before conducting the interviews, the researchers explained the objectives of the study to the participants and encouraged them to participate in the study. During the interview, the participants were encouraged to give examples to clarify their answers. All the interviews were conducted in private. At the end of the interviews, the participants were free to add any new comments. The duration of the interviews varied from 30 min to 50 min, with an average of 40 min.

Following the interviews, six classroom observations were conducted. The selection of teachers observed was based on random sampling. The aim of the classroom observations was discussed with each teacher selected for observation. Moreover, some issues related to the date, time and place of the observation were discussed. All the English sessions were audio-recorded and observed. During the observation, teachers were asked to follow their daily routine without making significant changes. This was important to avoid disrupting the routines during the observation.

Data analysis

All the interviews and classroom observations were audio-recorded and later transcribed in full. Video recording was not appropriate due to cultural issues, as all the kindergarten teachers who participated in this study were female. Transcripts of the interviews and the observations were stored electronically and organised. Before the researchers analysed the data, the participant teachers reviewed the transcripts to validate the accuracy of their responses and practices. Two participants made minor changes to their answers. To streamline the overall analysis process, manual coding was used in the data analysis. The transcripts were read line by line to obtain a sense of the general response. After reading the responses, keywords related to the research question were colour-coded and underlined.

The coded responses and keywords that emerged from both interviews and observations were assigned to the developed themes. These themes include teacher preparation, supervisors' pedagogical role, curriculum, and use of English language. Then the interview and observation data were classified under each particular theme. These steps helped to calculate the frequency per theme across respondents to report the essential findings that reflect teachers' responses to the challenges that they experience when teaching English as a foreign language in kindergarten.

Findings

The data that emerged from the interviews, observations and field notes related to the four specific themes regarding the challenges of teaching English as a foreign language in kindergarten schools: teacher preparation, curriculum, use of English language, and issues related to kindergarten children.

Teacher preparation

The results showed that one of the major challenges facing teaching English to kindergarteners is the lack of teacher training. All the participant teachers reported that they

were not adequately prepared or trained to teach English to children in both pre- and in-service teacher preparation programmes. They also said that the role of educational supervisors was not effective. Therefore, the kindergarten teachers' responses were classified into three categories: pre-service preparation, in-service preparation, and educational supervisors' pedagogical support.

Pre-service teacher preparation

All the participant teachers reported that they did not receive any material related to teaching English to kindergarten children during their academic study at the teacher preparation college. Almost all the participants confirmed that they received only two or three courses in learning English at the college level; they elaborated, saying that those courses were not intended to prepare them to teach English language in early childhood settings. For example, Bedor, one of the teachers, said, 'I studied English courses when I was in college but focused on grammar and writing but not on how to teach English to the child'. Furthermore, Kholoud said, 'I studied three subjects about English at the university, but that does not qualify the teacher to teach English to kindergarten children'. In more detail, Reem explained:

During my first year of college, I took two courses in English; the first one was about grammar and how to build the right sentences, and the second one was about writing, and I remember that I got an 'A' on these courses... These courses improved my English, but they did not prepare me directly to teach English language to kindergarten children.

In-service teacher preparation

In the case of in-service teacher preparation, the findings showed that there is a lack of teacher training that would help in-service teachers to teach English to kindergartners. Three of the sixteen interviewed kindergarten teachers indicated that they did not attend any in-service programmes pertinent to teaching English language in the early childhood stage. Alia, who has 25 years of teaching experience, stated:

'I completed my postgraduate studies in the UK, and when I came back, I studied English for four years, and I did not receive any training course on how to teach English, but I was satisfied with the instructions and advice of the educational supervisor'.

Amna, who had taught English for about 6 years, was very keen to talk about this topic. She said, 'I have only received a few courses, but none of them have been about teaching English to kindergarten children'. Amal further noted:

'I did not get training, but I attended classes for teachers studying English during visits; the exchange of visits between kindergartens teaching English has helped me a lot in providing English lessons for children'.

It was noted that the development of teaching English was not institutionally programmed. For example, Alia, who completed her postgraduate studies in the UK, said: 'The completion of my postgraduate studies in the UK developed a lot of my English, which gave me self-confidence to use English with children'. Amna, who completed

her master's degree at Kuwait University, said, 'I have trained a lot in English because one of the requirements for admission to the master's program is to have a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score'. Another teacher, Bedor, explained how her English developed:

I learned English through travel and movies, and they do not teach the correct grammar, but I improved a lot when I started teaching my children English at home when they were in primary school.

Educational supervisors' pedagogical support

Of the 16 participant teachers, 3 explained that one of the obstacles in the process of teaching English language is the lack of adequate preparation for the educational supervisors, which affects the necessary support they should give to teachers. Hessa said:

There should be a focus on preparing the educational supervisors so that they are well prepared to supervise the teachers in the English sessions because they are the ones who supervise and correct the mistakes of the teachers. If the supervisor is ill-equipped, I think the teachers will repeat the error, which negatively affects their performance.

In the same context, Alia explained: 'When the educational supervisor is competent, the teachers she supervises are competent. I believe in this rule because of my long experience in teaching'. Furthermore, Amal said: 'Technical guidance restricts my freedom when delivering lessons in English. I have to follow the steps mentioned by the supervisor in order, which reduces my creativity as a teacher'.

Curriculum

One of the challenges that emerged from the participants' responses was the curriculum. Ten of the sixteen teachers believe that the curriculum is deficient and certain issues should be resolved.

Curriculum content and teaching methods

Six of the sixteen participant teachers stated that the curriculum provided is developmentally appropriate for children. However, ten participants highlighted the importance of making some modifications and additions. For example, Maha described the curriculum as

below the level required because it seems time has stopped for those who developed the curriculum. If they evaluated children in our time, they would have found that the child lives in a rich English environment of videos, games and the internet.

Bedor confirmed the above stance, saying:

Children can understand English because in their environment there are English-speaking parents and they also watch videos on YouTube in English. There are children who have entered a bilingual nursery before the kindergarten, so the curriculum needs to be expanded further ... Children now know a lot of English words like body parts, colours, numbers, and our role is to promote this learning academically and in an orderly way.

Regarding the modifications needed, Reem provided a few examples of the changes that should be made in the English curriculum. She said:

We teach the children numbers from 1 to 20 only, although kindergarten children can learn the numbers up to 100, and this is what we see in private kindergartens ... Also, children are not taught lower- and upper-case letters, which are important and are not in the curriculum.

Time devoted to English in the kindergarten schedule

Regarding the number of English sessions in the weekly schedule, 14 teachers believe that the inclusion of English as one weekly 40-minute session is insufficient. Some teachers would prefer to see two English sessions per week, while others believe there should be three or even four sessions per week. For example, Sara suggested that ‘the number of sessions should be increased to two sessions per week, one for extracurricular activities and one for circle time, so that there is one session to teach letters and words and the other for numbers’. In addition, Maryam said, ‘the number of sessions at the moment is very small, and I suggest four sessions per unit divided in this way: letter-word-number-free sessions, such as reading a story or learning behaviours’. Moreover, Afrah explained in detail how the current distribution of English sessions negatively affects the way she teaches English:

‘Because of the few sessions of English, I do not teach the numerical content because the teaching of the numbers needs a follow-up; for example, in the computer unit, I have to teach the number 11, and in the following unit, I have to teach the number 12, but sometimes I do not teach the English sessions in the unit that follows, and therefore I do not teach the number 12, and when the unit ends and the following unit begins, I must follow the curriculum and teach the number 13. I believe that it is unfair to teach children the number 13 if I did not teach them the number 12. Therefore, I decided to teach only words and letters’.

Another participant, Shayma, expressed her opinion:

‘To compensate children for the few sessions in the schedule imposed by the technical guidance, our kindergarten principal developed English Club, a free session where we gather kindergarten children in a large lounge and teach them English language for fun through games and competitions’.

Use of English language

English proficiency varies from one teacher to another; therefore, there will be individual differences between teachers. The findings of the study showed that some teachers are facing challenges when using English. The most prominent challenges are pronunciation, sentence composition, and use of the first language.

Pronunciation

Although all the participant teachers agreed on the importance of using the correct pronunciation of words, they reported mixed responses when asked directly if they faced any problem in pronouncing words. Three participant teachers indicated that they face a problem in word pronunciation. Reem said: ‘Sometimes I have a problem in pronouncing words correctly’.

Maryam provided an example of a teacher's incorrect pronunciations:

In a classroom that I visited, I noticed that the teacher pronounced the number 11 in the wrong way and said ALEVEN instead of the correct ELEVEN ... I believe that teachers should be tested in the English language. If this teacher is not competent, she should not be teaching English or should be properly prepared and trained, as pronouncing words correctly and presenting them in a child-friendly manner is the responsibility of everyone who works in kindergarten.

Additionally, Maha noted:

Children understand American pronunciation more than British pronunciation because most of the videos they watch are American, such as Sesame Street. For example, when I explained the number 20, I was initially pronouncing it 'twenty', but after a while, I pronounced it 'twenny' as Americans do. I noticed that children pronounced it 'twenny' and found it easier.

In addition, the findings of the observations showed that the participant teachers are keen to ensure that the children are given the correct pronunciation of English words. In all the observed lessons, teachers asked the children to repeat the words or numbers aloud together, and then each child repeated them independently. Moreover, most of the observed teachers try to benefit from technology to facilitate learning pronunciation. Five of the six observed teachers used the audio CD file provided by the technical support team; the intention was for the children to listen multiple times to the correct pronunciation of the words. Four of the observed teachers used software programs containing interactive word games that allow children to listen to the correct pronunciation of the word. Two teachers used the tape recorder to record children's voices; the teacher asked the children to listen to their words on the recorder to ensure they pronounced them correctly. It was noticed that three of the observed classrooms have iTouches available for children to use during the centre time, particularly in the educational games centre. iTouches are loaded with word and number games that allow children to play and at the same time hear the correct pronunciation of the word.

Sentence composition

The data analysis showed that some participant teachers face problems with sentence composition. Three of the sixteen teachers stated that they have some difficulties in building sentences, especially if they 'go on' in the lesson. Rawan said:

Sometimes I have difficulty composing sentences, but I prepare myself well before the start of the session and choose the appropriate sentences for the child, as the teacher guide provides us with simple sentences we use during the explanation. I do not do this preparation when providing sessions in the Arabic language.

Conversely, two teachers reported that although they do not have a problem with composing sentences, they do have some issues when choosing the correct sentence structure for kindergarteners.

The rest of the teachers (11 of 16) said that they do not have difficulties in composing sentences. Maryam said:

I do not find it difficult to form sentences because the sentences are simple, and if the child builds a sentence, I correct it for them if it is wrong, and if it is correct, I translate it for the

rest of the children. For example, when I teach children the word 'Kuwait', I ask one of the children to give me a sentence. If one child says, 'I love Kuwait', I translate it for the rest of the children.

The findings from the observations revealed that teachers did make some errors in composing sentences even though they reported in the interview that they do not have any problem. Two of the six observed teachers made mistakes; for example, one of the teachers pointed to a word and said, 'this word ...', whereas it should be this is the word'. Another mistake noticed was when the teacher said, 'How many balls in the basket are?', whereas she should have said, 'How many balls are in the basket?'. Conversely, four of the six observed teachers did not make mistakes during the lesson. One of these teachers indicated that she assigns one day a week to speak simple English sentences with children all day, not just during the class; she clarified how her children improved in English.

Using the first language

According to the results, all the participant teachers confirmed that they use the Arabic language during the English session. While 12 of the teachers indicated that they use English more than Arabic when giving an explanation in a lesson, 4 teachers indicated that they use Arabic more than English. This might be due to the differences between the children, which was explained by Shayma:

It is unfair to teach the whole session in English. As a teacher, I must take into account the individual differences between children ... As a teacher, I must translate sentences into standard Arabic. For example, when I ask, 'What do you see?', I repeat the question in Arabic. This way, I make sure the information is communicated to all the children ... There are some words that do not need translation because they are used frequently, such as stand up, walk, colour, match.

Some teachers confirmed that they use the Arabic language during the English sessions; they justified this by saying that it happens only at the beginning of the year but gradually decreases. Maryam explained this:

At the beginning of the year, I repeat some words with the translation, such as the word match. After a while, I say the word without the translation, so if I get some response from the children, this tells me that they understood it.

The analysis of the classroom observations revealed that all the teachers used the Arabic language during the observed English lessons; however, this varied from one teacher to another. Two of the six observed teachers used the Arabic language more than English. Three teachers used English more, and only one teacher used two or three Arabic words during the lesson. The primary justification for using Arabic was teachers' concern about making sure that all the children understand what the teacher says. It should be mentioned that some researchers (i.e. Horst, White, and Bell 2010; Nation 1997) did not view using the first language as an issue, as teachers need to use the first language to encourage children to learn the second language.

Discussion

This study yielded several findings based on the collected data; the most interesting are the challenges that early years teachers encounter when teaching English as a foreign

language in Kuwait. Lack of teacher preparation and training, English curriculum deficiencies, and teachers' English proficiency level were the main challenges faced by teachers. Other localized challenges such as the use of English were also identified.

It was found that the challenge cited the most was the lack of teacher preparation. This finding corresponds to the finding of earlier quantitative research conducted by Habeeb (2013) that the preparation of kindergarten teachers in Kuwait to teach English is inadequate. A recent study showed a lack of teacher preparation programmes in Kuwait for the pre-service teachers and the in-service teachers (Alhouti 2018; NIE 2013). According to Fareh (2010), one of the challenges of teaching English as a foreign language in Arab countries is improperly trained teachers.

It is also important to note that participant teachers shared similar perspectives on the professional learning experience; all the participants who had undertaken training programmes described these programmes as ineffective, especially in terms of the skills teachers need the most to teach the English language. According to Gates and Gates (2014), some of the barriers to effective professional development are insufficient time, lack of financial resources, and irrelevant content. To improve teachers' professional development, Calvert (2016) advised policymakers and educators to consult teachers and principals, encourage collaboration with colleagues to enhance teaching and learning, establish learning communities where educators share responsibility for student success, and identify teaching and learning challenges.

The current study's findings are consistent with those of earlier research (Al-Darwish 2013; Habeeb 2013). Kindergarten teachers in Kuwait are largely left to work based on their skills to teach English autonomously, resulting in varying levels of expertise. To ensure success in implementing any new educational programme, educators suggested that teachers should be trained and prepared long enough before the actual application (Taale 2013).

Participant teachers confirmed that the current English curriculum needs to be improved. A study conducted by Al-Shatti (2011) found that one of the reasons that Kuwaiti parents prefer to enrol their children in private kindergartens is that they provide a well-developed English curriculum to their children. The reason for the dissatisfaction with the English curriculum being provided in public kindergartens may be that the decision to implement the English curriculum at the kindergarten stage was made without careful consideration (Al-Darwish 2013). To ensure a sustainable curriculum, long-range planning should be considered, and teachers should be given an opportunity to refine the curriculum over time (Gilzow and Rhodes 2000). Additionally, the majority of teachers indicated that the number of English sessions needed to be increased. Research indicates that the number of instruction hours to teach children a foreign language is related to children's performance in learning the new language; it is crucial for children to be exposed to the foreign language several hours a week for the successful acquisition of the new language (Myles 2017).

One of the essential findings of this study relates to teachers' proficiency level in English, specifically their pronunciation. Participant teachers identified pronunciation as one of their primary concerns. Research indicates that children would have greater difficulty in correcting their mistakes in pronunciation if they had been exposed to the wrong pronunciation in the first place (Gilbert 2008). To overcome this difficulty, participants in this study reported using technology in the forms of CD files provided by the

school districts; this will give children the opportunity to hear the correct pronunciation of the words. Some teachers were aware of the importance of practising the pronunciation of the target words frequently to say words correctly.

Another challenge cited in this study is using the first language while teaching the foreign language. According to Alrashidi and Phan (2015), using Arabic to teach English might be due to teachers' lack of knowledge and confidence in using English. The kindergarten teachers' manual guides teachers to use simple sentences and daily classroom language available in the manual to avoid making mistakes while using the English language. The teachers' manual instructs teachers to use Arabic when they are not sure about the correct pronunciation and the structure of the word; teachers are advised to do so also when children face difficulty in comprehending a new concept (Ministry of Education 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that all the participant teachers in this study use the first language in the classroom while teaching English. Nevertheless, kindergarten teachers can facilitate using the foreign language without depending on the first language; for example, they can use several aids and visual materials such as pictures, posters, picture books and videos, which makes foreign language instruction more comprehensible to young children, as well as more interesting (Konomi, 2014). Brown (2000) suggested that using the first language at the beginning of the session gives children a sense of security and validates their academic experiences, allowing them to express themselves.

Conclusions and implications

In this study, challenges faced by kindergarten teachers when teaching English as a foreign language in kindergarten schools in Kuwait were examined. The study uncovered several challenges that affect kindergarten teachers. These challenges included lack of teacher preparation and training, curriculum deficiencies, and teachers' English proficiency level. Therefore, policymakers and people in power must look for solutions through collaboration with researchers and stakeholders to overcome these challenges so that English is taught more successfully. In light of the study's findings, several practical recommendations emerged. It is recommended that universities ensure that their teacher preparation programmes are effective and that their faculty members provide pre-service teachers with all the necessary training and knowledge of the best practices in teaching English as a foreign language. The Ministry of Education and the Faculty of Education in Kuwait's universities should work together in training the in-service teachers and supervisors and addressing the potential challenges. This could be achieved by designing professional development programmes. In addition, the Ministry of Education should hire teachers who are professionals in teaching English as a foreign language in early childhood. Redesigning the foreign language curriculum in light of feedback from teachers, experts and stakeholders is also recommended.

Limitations and further research

One limitation of the present study is that the sample selection was limited to only 16 teachers working in 5 kindergarten schools within 1 school district. It would be worth including other districts in future research. The scope of further research should be expanded to include other stakeholders of education such as parents, administrators

and policymakers to obtain their views on teaching English as a foreign language in kindergartens. Conducting quasi-experimental studies to investigate the effect of teaching practices on the development of kindergarten children's English skills in Kuwait is also recommended. Finally, this study may encourage international researchers to conduct comparative studies to identify kindergarten teachers' challenges when teaching English as a foreign language in different contexts.

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