



## Iraqi EFL Students' Problems in Secondary Schools

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to highlight the challenges faced by Iraqi EFL students in secondary schools, in Annasiriyah province. This action research was conducted by an English language teacher who has been teaching this cohort for two academic years. This researcher collected his data via survey, interviews and observations. He also used his own experiences teaching these students to elaborate the data. The analysis of the collected data showed that these students encountered some ongoing problems in their journey of studying English. Problems such as: the structural syllabus which is often used interchangeably with the grammatical one, the activities available in the structural textbooks, the English language used in the said textbook is not an action one, and the gradation of the items and structures does not depend on complexity vs. easiness.

**Keywords:** Iraqi EFL students, secondary school, English textbooks

### **INTRODUCTION**

The problem of the study lies in the problems which faced Iraqi tenth graders in speaking English as a foreign language in the class that I taught and that contains thirty students who have learnt English for six years. The lesson duration is forty minutes, and the students have six lessons a week. In such lessons, they do some oral activities inside the classroom versus not doing any speaking outside the classrooms. In addition, sometimes there is an Arabic translation inside the classroom. Furthermore, there are no native speakers in the area where my students had been learning the English language. The students have to pass oral test in English, otherwise, they will not be permitted to obtain further grade and this problem is chosen because it is relevant to the previous acquaintance of the researcher who was a teacher of the tenth grade of secondary schools in Iraq. He learned English in Iraq for the secondary school and the university level in Iraq as well.

In this report, I will refer to the statement of the problem and a set of questions, the case study approach, the factors relevant to the research process, the findings of the study and a list of a bibliography. This problem can be illuminated by asking the following questions:

1. What are the types of textbooks which are used to teach English as a foreign language in the tenth grade/secondary schools in Anassiriya Iraq?
2. What are the techniques used to teach English as a foreign language in the tenth grade/secondary schools in Anassiriyah Iraq?
3. What are the aims of teaching English as a foreign language in the tenth grade/secondary schools in Anassiriyah Iraq?
4. What are the measurement techniques which are used to assess the performance of Iraqi tenth grade/secondary school students?
5. What pre-service and post-service training do the teachers teaching English as a foreign language in the tenth grade/secondary schools in Anassiriyah Iraq pass through?

I will choose question 1 which asks about the types of textbooks which are used as materials for teaching English as a foreign language in the tenth grade/secondary schools in Anassiriyah Iraq. These questions and the whole problem itself are related to my previous tenth grade /secondary teaching in Nassiriya Iraq since I had the experience of teaching the tenth grade secondary school and I was taught there as well for the secondary and the university level.

Question one is chosen because I think, as other people may think, that the development of or failure to developing a certain skill generally depends on the type of textbook that the teacher deals with in his class and the emphasis of that type of textbook. Some textbooks, like the communicative ones, emphasize the oral skills (speaking and listening) to a higher degree and the written ones (reading and writing) to a lesser degree but the structural ones emphasize the written ones more than the oral ones. Everything then depends on the type of textbook that the teacher deals with, amongst other factors.

### **THE CASE STUDY APPROACH**

The type of qualitative research approach that suits the problem of the report is the case study approach since the case study approach involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (a setting or a context).

Some specialists believe that the case study is not a methodology but a choice of what is studied (a case within a bounded system (Stake, 2005; Cited from Creswell, 2007: 73), while some others present it as a strategy of inquiry, a methodology, or a comprehensive research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003; Qtd from Creswell, 2007: 73). A case study approach is a qualitative research in which the investigator explores a case or a multiple cases over time, through detailed in-depth collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, reports, documents, surveys, participant and nonparticipant observation, and physical artifacts) (See Yin, 2003; qtd from Creswell, 2007: 75). Several programs or a single program might be investigated according to this approach. A case is, then, the object of study about which we collect information.

In this regard, cases can be holistic (a school for example includes teaching staff, administrative staff, staff at different levels of seniority, and experience, students, students at different years, parents and government and community members) and

embedded (if we want a fuller picture of the school in all its complexity) (De Vaus, 2001: 220).

In addition, the case study develops an in-depth description, analysis and understanding of a case or cases, draws upon literature taken from psychology, law, political science, education, medicine, and analyzes through description of the cases and themes of cases. In addition, case study is a good approach when there (is) are (a) certain individual(s), a program, an event, an activity (Ibid: 74).

The problem of my report, which emphasizes that there are certain problems facing Iraqis in speaking English foreign language in the tenth grade secondary schools in Nassiriya Iraq, is a case study which involves an issue or case explored within the educational program in the secondary education in Nassiriya Iraq. Likewise, it gathers data from interviews with teachers, educational faculties and experts, and students, from a survey of the current textbooks used in Iraqi secondary schools, and from the observations of the researcher's attending classrooms of secondary schools as non-participant observer.

The interviews with teachers are made to survey their attitudes regarding the type of textbook that they deal with and the type of skill(s) that they develop in their students depending on the type of activity they deal with. The interviews with the educational leaders and experts of the directorate of education in Nassiriya Iraq are interviewed to see their points of view regarding the points of view of teachers and regarding the skills they think will be developed through the activities of tenth grade textbooks.

The survey is made to make a content analysis of the tenth grade textbooks regarding the activities and the whether the speaking skill will be developed or not. The researcher chooses the collective multi-sited case study because it concentrates on a program (including individuals and materials. The structure of the report of the case study is as follows (Stake, 1995; Qtd from Creswell, 2007: 80):

1. It has an entry vignette.
2. It has an introduction in which the problem of the study, its questions, case study, data collection and analysis and outcomes.
3. A description of the case or cases and its or their context(s).
4. Development of issues
5. Details about selected issues
6. Assertions
7. Closing vignette

## **THE FACTORS RELEVANT TO RESEARCH**

The factors that should be taken into consideration when conducting this research include taking permission from the ministry of education, from the directorate of education in Nassiriya, from the teachers and educationalists concerned and from the students to make interviews with them and for attending some lectures in their classes (for the participant and nonparticipant classroom observations). Taking permission is an

acceptable legitimate way to attend lectures as some teachers might be embarrassed because of others' attending lectures and inspecting of their behaviors in their classes.

Generally, there should be some tradition and standards in speaking about certain issues related to teachers or the educational process as a whole. Of the things which we should be cautious of is the way we describe what we see in our colleagues' classes. Researchers ought to use a very mild type of language whether in describing the classroom techniques adopted by the teacher or in referring to the interviews being made with the specialists. Referring to some techniques as being old or out of date or even classifying some teachers' behavior as uneducational or terrifying for the students is something that we should be cautious of because these issues are very critical and embarrassing to teachers and to the educational process as a whole.

The ministry of education in Iraq is the side which gets benefited from conducting this research. Likewise, the problem discussed is taken from the teaching-learning process in the tenth grade class/secondary school in Anassiriyah Iraq and the conclusions and/or the recommendations arrived at are addressed to this ministry and the directorate of education in Nassiriya Iraq. Definitely, he dedicates his research to all teachers and educationalists of English as a foreign language in Iraq. Of particular concern to him are the tenth grade class secondary school teachers in Nassiriya Iraq.

The researcher definitely should not be subjective in his research in that all the ideas expressed should be clarified and addressed academically (through following the scientific procedures leading to conclusions) and not uttering some subjective impressionistic statements leading the research to personal attack or subjective attitudes.

## **THE DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

The data collection procedures adopted in this study include the survey, the interviews and the classroom observations. The survey includes collecting some information about the type of textbooks used by the Iraqi ministry of education for the tenth grade class/secondary school in Anassiriyah Iraq.

The interviews with teachers, educational experts and students will clarify both the aims of teaching to the tenth grade class/ secondary school and the types of techniques which are used by teachers in teaching English as a foreign language. Interviews are generally supported by the use of participant and nonparticipant classroom observations. Through such a procedure, the researcher will attend a number of lectures to observe the type of techniques, tasks and activities employed by the teachers of English as a foreign language for the tenth grade.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings of the report are as follows:

1. The survey brings the finding that the type of textbooks used by the Iraqi ministry of education for the tenth grade is the structural one. The structural syllabus which is often used interchangeably with the grammatical one is used to refer to a syllabus type

associated with methods like audiolingualism. Structural syllabuses often refer to the sentence pattern as the unit of analysis and may be said to adhere to the principle of structuralism particularly to the notion of minimally contrasting units (Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens, 1964; qtd from Johnson and Johnson, eds, 1999: 306). These textbooks are dedicated to make the students memorize or parrot the structure of the English language in phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics (but never in pragmatics). That is why, the activities available are dedicated for this end.

2. The activities available in the structural textbooks include the dialogue, oral practice (for teaching syntax), pronunciation, reading comprehension, written homework and literary reader. Each lesson should consist of a variety of all of these activities to be inclusive and to kill the monotony of the students and bring motivation for them. Even the teacher's manual (guide) emphasizes the students' memorization of these activities.

In the dialogue activity, the textbook gives a dialogue or more for each unit. This activity generally develops the speaking and listening skills. In each dialogue, we have two roles (sometimes more) which often express an Iraqi situation (not the English one). This is often expressed by two interlocutors. The culture expressed in the dialogue is the Arabic culture not the English one and this creates an important gap in the learning process because learners of English as a foreign language, and any other foreign language, must study English, and any other language, along with its culture. We cannot understand any language estranged from its culture. Language is to be taken as one of the manifests of culture or language is taken to be culture.

In spite of the fact that the dialogue is supposed to develop the oral skills, the speaking and listening skills are not developed because the dialogues are not authentic materials carrying real conversation in English and teachers do not develop them adequately.

In the oral practice, the textbook contains certain structures put in the form of prescriptive rules (not descriptive ones), and students have to memorize these rules. These rules are often followed by context-free sentences or examples. These examples are not related to a particular context. Such context-free sentences do not teach students English communicatively. If these structures had been given through real communicative situations, this would help learners communicate with the language since language is traditionally defined as the best means of human communication. What doubles the problem is that such English, any other language, is used for translation and communication purposes with other speakers of English, and learning English through this way will not help in achieving this goal.

This activity is supposed to develop all the activities depending on the type of channel (spoken or written) that one uses. It develops the four skills, but since the emphasis is made by the teacher on the written ones, it develops the writing skills only.

In the pronunciation activity, certain words are given as representing the English sounds (consonants and vowels). These words contain certain assigned sounds and are sometimes put using certain minimal pairs and sets. However, these words are pronounced by the teachers themselves who are foreigners to the language not by native speakers of the language in cassettes or CDs. Had these words been put in long passages

and are transcribed, and are pronounced by native speakers in cassettes or CDs, this would give a good opportunity for the teacher to help him/her make his/her students practice words in company or in discourse.

This activity theoretically develops the oral skills but practically (in the real class) it happens to develop these skills to a lesser extent since there is no listening and production of these words in company.

In the reading comprehension passages, the students are given long passages to read. These passages are accompanied by bilingual lists of English words translated to Arabic. This activity does not depend on the activity of reading with comprehension but on reading then reading then going to understand the passages by the help of the bilingual lists to grasp the meanings of words. It develops the reading and writing skills only.

In the written homework activity, some exercises related to the oral practice introduced in the unit are given but not as homework but as assignments given either after the teacher introduced the oral practice exercise or at the end of the lesson.

The literary reader is a simplified version of the original novel as written by the original author, and this does not help develop the foreign language in the learner. It is often put in a simplified way by Iraqi teachers. This literary reader is taught as reading passages and not as literature and discourse. The literary reader develops the written skills only. The activities of each unit of the tenth grade class are divided to two weeks and in each lesson we have a multiplicity of activities containing all the aforementioned activities.

3. The way English is put in the textbooks designed for the tenth grade class of the secondary school in Nassiriya Iraq does not help teach the language in action, and consequently does not lead to teach language as a means of communication. The world was moving forty years ago to the communicative approach as text and techniques and the way English is taught depends on learners' needs. Learners' needs determine what to teach, in what order and how it is to be taught; it determines the selection, gradation and teaching of materials. Consequently, the activities do not help develop competence and performance in the students to speak and listen to the adequately and perfectly.

4. The selected items in the textbook no. 6 (tenth grade) do not depend on any way of selecting items and structures. The items are not selected depending on value or on importance or even on frequency or range. The gradation of the items and structures does not depend on complexity vs easiness, though it is customarily the case that language teachers have long felt that the grading of material in terms of syntactic complexity is important in achieving maximum effectiveness in language teaching (Ferguson, 1966; qtd from Corder, 1993: 308). Turning to the way English textbooks is taught in our tenth grade secondary school in Nassiriya Iraq is another aspect of how language is supposed to be taught and how it is taught in this part of Iraq.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, there are ongoing problems that seem to cause obstacles for the tenth grade secondary students in Annasiriyah in their learning English language. These problems are existing in the structural syllabus which is often used interchangeably with the

grammatical one, the activities available in the structural textbooks, the English language used in the said textbook is not an action one, and the gradation of the items and structures does not depend on complexity vs. easiness.

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