

A Reading in the History of English Language Education in Iraq

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Abstract:

English language education (ELE) in Iraq has always been in a state of confusion and unsatisfactory outcomes; the curricula and methods have continually been subject to criticism and revisions since its commencement. To explore the intricacies of ELE in Iraq, this paper maps out its history to identify the key historical periods in its development and bring into focus the major challenges that were encountered. A historical approach was adopted, including examining historical documents, educational policies, curriculum materials, previous studies, personal communication, and other relevant archival sources. The findings indicate that ELE in Iraq dates back to the nineteenth century, primarily within missionary schools under Ottoman rule, albeit on a limited scale. More specifically, nationwide ELE in Iraq can be categorized into four distinct phases named for the prevailing teaching methodologies: Grammar-Translation (1921-1938), Direct Method (1940-1970), Audio-Lingual Method (1970-2001), and Communicative Approach (2002 – present). Throughout these phases, it becomes evident that instructional methods in Iraq often lagged behind global trends. Furthermore, persistent challenges in ELE development, notably the lack of effective training and teaching resources, have impeded progress. By contextualizing these historical challenges, this study aims to inform current and future decisions regarding curriculum development, ultimately striving to improve the efficiency of ELE in Iraq.

Keywords: History of ELT; Iraq; teaching methods; education; ELT curricula; EFL textbooks update.

1 Introduction

The English language holds a predominant position in Iraq as the sole foreign language taught across kindergarten, primary, and secondary education levels throughout the country, with only a select few privileged secondary schools offering French in addition to English (Munir et al, 2021). Moreover, English serves as the medium of instruction in elite secondary schools (Gifted Students Schools and Distinguished Students Schools) and university programmes particularly in fields such as medical sciences, engineering, and the hard sciences. It is also offered as a foreign language component across various other academic disciplines (both undergraduate and postgraduate). Beyond its academic necessity, English proficiency is increasingly sought after for socio-economic purposes, especially in the wake of the socio-political shifts following 2003, marked by the presence of foreign embassies, military forces, organizations, and corporations, leading to heightened demand within the job market.

Despite governmental efforts to promote English language learning within the education system and the recognized socio-economic imperative, Iraq consistently ranks among the lowest-performing countries in the Middle East in official English proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL (Pearson, 2021; TOEFL ETS, 2021). Moreover, Iraq is categorized among the least proficient English-speaking nations, as evidenced by the EF English Proficiency Index of 2023, where it ranked 103 out of 111 countries surveyed. Extensive research has been conducted to identify the myriad factors contributing to this subpar performance, with scholarly investigations by Rashid (2016), Alttayef and Hussein (2017), Mohammed (2018), and Abid (2020), shedding light on various aspects of the issue. Many factors have been proposed to account for this ongoing struggle, including misguided approaches to ELT, uncritical adoption of Western methods and materials, and pressure from political or educational authorities to implement sweeping administrative reforms. Additionally, Iraqis may not exhibit a high level of motivation to learn English, as they perceive limited necessity for English communication outside certain restricted realms such as academia or passing examinations.

One contentious issue that has garnered considerable attention among policymakers, professionals, practitioners, and parents alike is the selection of English language learning materials, often referred to locally as series, curricula, or textbooks. Given the interchangeable use of terms such as curriculum, textbook, and

series in the local context, it is imperative to establish clear definitions to avoid confusion. Here, *curriculum* pertains to the overarching educational strategy or learning objectives for a specific educational stage or school year, while *series* refers to the adopted course framework, such as *The New English Course* or *Rafidain Course*. The term *textbook* denotes the core instructional material comprising the series, often supplemented by additional resources such as activity books and teacher guides.

In this paper, the historical roots of English language education (ELE) in Iraq are explored within their cultural and political contexts, with a specific focus on tracing the development of curricula and the challenges encountered over time. Previous research into the history of ELE in Iraq have been limited, with existing studies predominantly revolving around Abdul-Kareem's seminal work (2009). The precise inception of English instruction in Iraqi schools remains uncertain, and there exists a notable dearth of research examining the specific courses offered during the initial stages of ELE in the country. Abdul-Kareem (2009) asserts that English was introduced into Iraqi schools in 1873, a date consistently referenced in subsequent studies by researchers such as Amin (2017), Altae (2020), Sallo (1994), and Younus (2020).

A significant point of contention lies in the identification of distinct phases within the evolution of ELE in Iraq. Two primary classification schemes have emerged. The first categorizes ELE based on the origin of the teaching materials, distinguishing between imported and locally produced courses (Abdul-Kareem, 2009; Munim, 2017). Meanwhile, the second classification approach organizes these phases based on the adopted curriculum, irrespective of its place of origin (Altae, 2020). However, both classification approaches exhibit shortcomings, failing to account for certain nuances, and occasionally misrepresenting historical dates, as will be demonstrated in subsequent sections.

Recognizing the intrinsic value of historical inquiry within the realm of education, as it elucidates past events and their relevance to contemporary circumstances while serving to prevent or mitigate the recurrence of undesirable outcomes, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What were the origins and underlying motivations behind the introduction of ELE in Iraq?
- What were the pivotal historical phases in the evolution of ELE in Iraq, and how were language policies and reforms implicated during these periods?
- What were the primary challenges encountered in the realm of ELE throughout various historical junctures in Iraq?

2 Methodology

This research adopts a historical research design to explore the trajectory of ELE in Iraq. Given the task of systematically and objectively discerning, evaluating, and synthesizing evidence to draw conclusions regarding past experiences, phenomena, or events, researchers often grapple with limited information; this means that "reconstructions tend to be sketches rather than portraits" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 191). This challenge is particularly pertinent to the current study, where data availability is notably scarce, and numerous details regarding the history of ELE in Iraq have unfortunately gone undocumented. In this type of research, data are usually collected from two main sources: primary sources and secondary sources (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Primary sources encompass material that is original to the problem and have direct relationship with the events being reconstructed. These include written and oral comments by the actual participants or witnesses (e.g., official documents, research reports, media interviews, newspapers and magazines, curriculum material and textbooks, and personal communication). Secondary sources do not bear direct relationship with the events and involve people who were not actually present in the events but rather are describing them from another sources (e.g., publications, research reports, and quoted material).

It is imperative to recognize that this narrative is interpretive in nature; it transcends a mere recounting of past events and facts. Rather, it seeks to reconstruct and present historical facts in a manner that conveys their nuanced complexity (Berg, 1998). Researchers often employ an inductive approach, constructing interpretations and explanations opportunistically based on available data (Rury, 2006). Consequently, this research is not simply an objective chronicle of the past; it involves a degree of interpretation, with researchers inevitably infusing their own experiences and values into their analysis (Henry, 2006). Given the scarcity of data and the researcher's firsthand involvement in the subject matter since their time as a student and as a teacher, commentary and interpretation on various aspects will be offered throughout this paper.

3 Once Upon a Time in Iraq: The Advent of English Education

Between Abbasid rule and the contemporary formation of present-day Iraq, the region witnessed a succession of occupations. This began with the Mongol invasion in 1258, followed by the Ottoman Empire's dominion from 1534 until the outbreak of the First World War, and ultimately culminating in the establishment of the British Mandate on Iraq in 1920 (Abdullah, 2011). Despite the Ottoman Empire's prolonged occupation of old Iraq, encompassing Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, education received minimal attention, with instruction primarily limited to basic literacy skills and religious teachings for privileged children (Al-Humeiri, 2019).

However, towards the end of Ottoman rule, hints of educational reforms emerged during the reign of Midhat Pasha (1869-1872), who initiated the establishment of several schools. While primary schools were established initially, adult schools (akin to present-day intermediate schools) followed suit. Notably, English was not among the languages taught in these schools; instead, Turkish served as the language of instruction, sidelining Arabic, the native language of Iraqis. The imposition of the Ottoman language (Turkish) in schools across their occupied territories limited educational access to the children of affluent families. Consequently, the vast majority of Iraqis remained mired in ignorance, poverty, and dire living conditions, reflected in Iraq's staggering illiteracy rate, which soared to 99 percent around the turn of the twentieth century (Jawda, 2012).

Amidst the backdrop of Turkish language imposition in schools and state institutions, English, along with other foreign languages, found its way into Iraq through missionary schools. The precise date of its introduction remains elusive, with scant information available regarding the educational curriculum of the time. Historical records indicate that English teaching, alongside languages such as French, Persian, and Turkish, was offered in missionary schools supported by religious minorities, predominantly the Christian communities. For instance, the Armenian Orthodox School, established in 1790 and regarded as Iraq's oldest Christian school, provided instruction in English, Turkish, Persian, and French. Similarly, the Chaldean Catholic School, founded in 1843 by the Chaldean Catholic community as a primary school, expanded to offer secondary education in 1875, with Turkish, French, and English included in its curriculum. Additionally, the Alliance Primary and Intermediate School for Boys in Baghdad, established by the French Israelite Federation Association in 1864, offered instruction in French, English, Hebrew, Arabic, and Turkish. While English and French were the prominent European languages offered in these institutions, English eventually gained precedence, leading to a decline in French instruction following the British invasion of Iraq after the First World War (Al-Najar, 2002). During this period, educational access remained confined primarily to the children of religious minorities and privileged families rather than being disseminated on a nationwide scale.

4 Historical Development of ELE in Iraq

The evolution of ELE in Iraq has undergone several transformations since its introduction in missionary schools. These developments will be explored in the following sections, examining the textbooks and series adopted, teaching methodologies employed, the motivations driving the adoption of new methods/approaches, and the challenges leading to their abandonment. It should be noted that precise dates for the launch and cessation of specific series/methods may not be entirely accurate due to overlap between series across primary and secondary schools, as well as gaps in available data. It is important to clarify that the period preceding the British Mandate, during which English instruction was primarily confined to missionary schools, will not be treated as a distinct phase in this paper. This decision stems from the limited information available regarding ELE in Iraq during this timeframe. It is known that English was taught alongside other foreign languages in various missionary schools catering to minority religious groups under the guidance of European delegates. Given this context, it is reasonable to surmise that English language teaching during this period likely followed European models, particularly employing the Grammar-Translation Method, which was prevalent during the years 1750-1880 (Howatt & Smith, 2014).

4.1 Phase One: Grammar-Translation (1921 – 1938)

Britain initiated its invasion of Iraqi territory in 1914, ultimately gaining full control by 1918. Two years thereafter, Britain obtained a mandate from the League of Nations to govern Iraq (Tripp, 2000). Throughout the conflict with the Ottomans, education received scant attention. Following the establishment of the Hashemite Monarchy under British protection, efforts were made to modernize various sectors, including healthcare, judiciary, and education. Subsequently, the first national government emerged, laying the groundwork for Iraq's inaugural formal education system. Within a decade of these reforms, the number of primary schools

surged from 160 to 381, accommodating a rise in student enrollment from 6,656 to 43,244. Similarly, the number of secondary schools escalated from 4 to 26, with student enrollment climbing from 118 to 3,444. This educational advancement extended beyond mere numerical expansion to encompass geographical distribution, with schools established in provinces beyond the principal regions of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul (Kadhim & Kadhim, 2020).

English was selected for nationwide teaching in Iraqi schools yet faced an immediate challenge due to a shortage of English teachers. In response, the Iraqi Ministry of Knowledge (now the Ministry of Education), under the guidance of British advisors, recruited English teachers from Egypt and Syria. Egypt, having a longer history of English language teaching and a lengthier period under British colonial rule, was a particularly suitable source for expertise. The teaching series imported from Egypt was rooted in the Grammar-Translation Method (Al-Chalabi, 1976). Initially introduced as a second language in all public schools in 1923, this ambitious initiative was swiftly revised the following year, with English designated as a foreign language. Furthermore, the introduction of English to Iraqi students was postponed from the first to the fifth grade in primary schools, a decision informed by societal realities and the specific capabilities of Iraqi students (Al-Chalabi, 1976).

4.2 Phase Two: The Direct Method (1940 – 1970)

In the early 1940s, the Ministry of Education (formerly known as the Ministry of Knowledge) made the decision to discontinue the use of the Egyptian series and instead import a new curriculum from the United Kingdom, owing to its global reputation in language education. The pioneering series chosen was Lawrence Faucett's *The Oxford English Course* (1933), which was distributed to schools across Iraq. However, due to its detachment from the Iraqi context and culture, the Ministry opted for an adapted version, namely *The Oxford English Course for the Middle East* by Lawrence Faucett, which remained in use in Iraqi schools until the 1950s. Seeking a curriculum more attuned to the cultural and social fabric of Iraqi society, the Ministry commissioned a new series specifically tailored for Iraq: *The Oxford English Course for the Republic of Iraq*, authored by Albert Hornby, Donald Miller, and Iraqi language teaching expert Selim Hakim.

Faucett's series attained global recognition as an exemplar of excellence within the domain of English education and it was "no exaggeration that Faucett's course was the foundation of what is now OUP's most profitable publishing arm in all parts of the world" (Smith, 2003, p. xix). The Oxford English Course was "the first large-scale Direct Method for English as a foreign language" (Howat, 1984, p. 215). Faucett's course consisted of reading books, language books, supplementary readers, teachers' handbook, picture dictionary and reading cards. The Oxford English Course for the Republic of Iraq was first published in 1954 and consisted of a package including tape recordings. Despite its success in aligning with Iraqi cultural and social realities and its development by esteemed experts in the field, the implementation of the new series encountered significant contextual challenges. Policymakers overlooked the need for proper training and qualification of Iraqi English language teachers to effectively deliver the curriculum. Additionally, infrastructural constraints such as electricity shortages hindered teachers' ability to utilize the full array of teaching materials, while insufficient resources in poorly equipped schools further hampered implementation efforts.

4.3 Phase Three: The Audio-Lingual Method (1970 – 2001)

Instead of addressing the issues and obstacles hindering the effective implementation of *The Oxford English Course for the Republic of Iraq*, the Ministry of Education opted for another change in curriculum. Allegedly, the Ministry cited the series' failure to accurately represent the social and religious realities of Iraqi society and its failure to cater to the specific needs of Iraqi students. This decision might have been influenced by the political climate of the time, particularly with the ascension of the Arab Bath Socialist Party to power. Following the coup, the new regime extended its propaganda efforts to include educational curriculum.

Lacking the authority to modify or adapt *The Oxford English Course for the Republic of Iraq*, the Ministry chose to abandon it and develop a new series. In 1970, the Iraqi Ministry of Education convened a committee composed entirely of Iraqi members, including some who had graduated from universities in the United Kingdom, to establish the objectives and features of the new series. Subsequently, another committee was formed in the same year to reassess the proposed curriculum, submitting recommendations to the Education Board, which endorsed the new series before 1972 (Al-Hamash, 1980). The resulting *New English Course for Iraq* was designed based on the structural approach, with the Audiolingual Method recommended for its implementation (Al-Jumaily, 2002). This new English course was distributed to all primary and secondary schools in Iraq, comprising student textbooks, teacher guides, handwriting books for grades 5, 6, and 7, as well

as literature reading materials including *Kipps* for fourth preparatory grade, *Oliver Twist* for fifth preparatory grade, and *The Merchant of Venice* for sixth preparatory grade.

A closer examination of the content of the new series reveals its reflection of the ideological and political aspirations of the ruling regime at that time. In contrast to its predecessor, the new course failed to address the specific needs of students and lacked relevance to everyday language usage. Instead, much of the material focused on historical figures and political achievements of the regime. Dialogues were contrived, and the vocabulary selected often failed to meet the students' practical needs. Furthermore, the curriculum emphasized rote memorization of grammar points, reading passages, literary texts, and phonetic transcriptions, rather than fostering linguistic and cultural competencies among students.

Similar to its predecessor *The Oxford English Course for the Republic of Iraq*, the same challenges persisted with the new curriculum. Issues such as the lack of electricity and technological resources prevented teachers from utilizing tape recordings, while the sheer volume of material presented difficulties in covering the curriculum within the academic year. Moreover, the examination system did not encourage practical language use, relying instead on rote memorization. Many teachers lacked proper training to effectively deliver the new course.

4.4 Phase Four: The Communicative Approach (2002 – present)

Recognizing the lagging status of ELE in Iraq compared to its regional counterparts and acknowledging the inefficiency of existing curricula in producing proficient English learners, the Ministry of Education took proactive steps to address these challenges. In 2001, an advisory committee comprising local ELT specialists was assembled to design a new English series. This culminated in the introduction of the *Rafidain English Course for Iraq* in 2002, targeting grade 5 and 6 students in primary schools. Adopting the principles of communicative language teaching, this marked Iraq's initial foray into this pedagogical approach. The series package included a pupil's book, a teachers' guide, a workbook, a manual, and audio files. However, amidst political tension and impending conflict, plans to train teachers in implementing the new methodology were not prioritized.

The landscape of ELE in Iraq underwent significant transformation following the US-led invasion in 2003, which facilitated increased access to the internet, mobile phones, and international media channels. Additionally, the influx of international organizations and military forces led to a heightened demand for English-speaking Iraqis. Concurrently, the government-initiated plans to encourage students to pursue education abroad. These factors underscored the urgent need for improved ELE, prompting policymakers to initiate reforms within the Ministry of Education.

In the school year 2007-2008, the Ministry introduced the *Iraq Opportunities* series, developed by McMillan specifically for Iraq, starting with the third-grade students in primary schools instead of the fifth grade. Departing from previous curricula, this series emphasized oral exercises, conversations, and communicative grammar points. However, teachers, unaccustomed to this approach, struggled to effectively implement the new series due to a lack of training and contextual considerations. This discrepancy persisted as primary and intermediate schools transitioned to communicative language teaching while preparatory schools (the fifth and the sixth grades) remained rooted in the Audio-Lingual Method.

In 2013, efforts to continue communicative teaching to the fifth and sixth grades in preparatory schools led to the development of a new series, *Learn for Iraq*, designed by a board of experts from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and the Ministry of Education. However, this initiative proved unsuccessful, marred by numerous language errors and structural deficiencies, prompting its withdrawal the following year. Subsequently, the *English for Iraq* series was introduced in the 2013-2014 school year, replacing all previous courses. Developed by experts from Garnett Education and a consultation board from the Ministry of Education in alignment with contemporary language teaching approaches, this series encompassed students' books, activity books, teachers' guides, and audio files.

In order to prepare teachers for the new series, the Ministry of Education implemented a comprehensive training programme for primary and secondary school teachers across the country. The training courses were delivered by international trainers from Garnett Education and the workshops were held in Beirut and Erbil in 2013 and 2014. The teachers who were trained in these workshops were supposed to train their peers in their local areas. Despite ambitious plans, many teachers remained untrained, exacerbating challenges such as misalignment between course objectives, examination systems, and student expectations, as well as the dearth of teaching aids and technology facilities.

Gazi Mutlig, Director General of Curricula at the Iraqi Ministry of Education, elucidated that the revision of the English language curricula stemmed from “identified deficiencies in the scientific content”. This decision was informed by assessments conducted by the relevant committee within the Ministry, in collaboration with the British Council, and took into consideration contractual obligations with Dar Net Press. Mutlig further stated that the newly devised curriculum has garnered approval from specialists, and its implementation will be executed gradually as part of a structured plan. Moreover, Mutlig emphasized that alongside the introduction of the new curriculum, comprehensive training programs for teachers and trainers will be initiated. These training sessions were scheduled to commence during the summer break for teachers through a series of workshops hosted in Erbil Governorate. Additionally, educational aids such as flashcards and wall posters tailored for the first grade would be disseminated to the Directorates General of Education in Baghdad and across various governorates. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education would establish educational convoys dedicated to the English language subject, ensuring sustained professional development through ongoing training initiatives conducted within the Directorates of Education (Ali, 2013, December 27).

Regarding the incorporation of Iraqi translated literature into the curriculum, a departure from the usual content found in English as a Foreign Language materials, Adil Ali Musa, a member of the consultation board, justified this decision by asserting that EFL students should be acquainted with the rich tapestry of Iraqi literature and its renowned literary figures. He elaborated that exposing students to such literature presents a valuable opportunity for them to forge connections with these influential figures, thereby fostering a deeper appreciation for their studies. Musa emphasized that literature serves as a vehicle for expressing the depths of the human soul in a refined and eloquent manner. Hence, the inclusion of literature in the curriculum is deemed essential, not only as a means of enhancing linguistic proficiency but also as a profound exploration of human expression. Consequently, Iraqi literature rightfully earned, he claimed, its place within the curriculum (Almada paper, 2016, May 7).

5 Conclusion

The teaching of English in Iraq, initially introduced in missionary schools, has become a pervasive component of both the school and university educational systems since the twentieth century. This dominance is attributable to various factors, including economic, cultural, political, and academic motivations. However, this dominance is marred by the inadequate quality of education and the insufficient competency level of the learners. Policymakers have long recognized this poor condition and have consistently devised plans to improve it and enhance its educational outcomes. One prominent policy among these initiatives involved launching new curricula and series accompanied by the adoption of new teaching methods. By assessing the teaching methods employed, the history of ELE in Iraq can be divided into four distinct phases: the Grammar-Translation (1921-1938), the Direct Method (1940-1970), the Audio-Lingual Method (1970-2001), and the Communicative Approach (2002-present). Each phase was shaped by specific economic and political circumstances, and the changes introduced were a response to the quest for the most suitable approach that would effectively cater to the needs of Iraqis.

Comparing the development of ELE in Iraq with the historical trajectory of ELE in Europe, as outlined by Howatt and Smith (2014), reveals a significant lag. Initially, with the advent of formal nationwide English education, Iraq embraced the Grammar-Translation Method, a pedagogical approach that Europe had already abandoned due to its ineffectiveness in fostering desired foreign language proficiency. Meanwhile, Europe had progressed towards methodologies such as the Oral Method, the Multiple Line of Approach, the Situational Approach, and the Audiolingual Method. However, during the second phase (1940-1970), Iraq aligned more closely with ELT trends in Europe by importing textbooks from the United Kingdom. Notably, as the concept of communicative teaching gained prominence around 1970, and the primary goal of ELT shifted towards fostering confident language use in real-world contexts, Iraq developed its first textbook series based on the principles of the Structural Method. This method was adhered to until 2002, gradually transitioning out of use by 2014.

Numerous factors influenced the decision to terminate existing educational programs and introduce new ones. However, various constraints inherent in the context severely impeded the realization of planned objectives. A major issue was the lack of teacher training and qualification. In many instances, teachers were left to navigate the implementation of new series and teaching methods without adequate training. This deficiency frequently led to suboptimal educational outcomes as the new programmes were inadequately executed. Another challenge stemmed from the limitations within educational institutions themselves,

compounded by the scarcity of technical resources. Schools in Iraq often lack fundamental teaching aids and resources, exacerbating existing issues such as overcrowded classrooms, high teacher workloads, and an examination-focused system. Even when substantial training programs are offered, as seen in the case of the Garnet Education programme, these obstacles collectively impede the effective implementation of new educational initiatives.

5.1 Research Limitations and Future Studies

Historical research often grapples with the challenges of limited references, information availability, and the reliability of sources. In the context of the current topic, these issues significantly impact the scope and findings of the research for several reasons. Firstly, official documents pertaining to the adoption and discontinuation of textbooks are often not archived or have been lost over time, rendering them inaccessible. Consequently, the information presented in this study relies primarily on previous research, supplemented to a greater extent by documents, personal communication, and the lived experiences of the researcher. Secondly, previously adopted textbooks are not typically archived and may have been lost, leaving only anecdotal information from teachers who used them. This limitation particularly applies to the *New English Course for Iraq* series, while earlier series and textbooks, especially those used at the inception of ELE in Iraq, remain elusive.

Despite these challenges, conducting historical research in education yields significant benefits that contribute to improving educational outcomes and informing policymaking. By delving into the past, researchers gain a deeper understanding of present-day educational challenges and can derive valuable insights to address contemporary issues through historical analogies and parallels (Flippin, 1923). Future studies in this area are greatly warranted. One avenue of research could involve collaborating with the Ministry of Education to explore the possibility of locating and accessing archival materials, including old textbooks, documents, research reports, and field monitoring records related to ELE in Iraq. Additionally, documenting the currently adopted textbook series, including information about authors, commencement dates, accompanying materials, official documents, and reported challenges, could provide valuable historical records for future generations to study and learn from. By avoiding the oversight of previous stages of ELE in Iraq and ensuring comprehensive documentation, future researchers can prevent the loss of crucial information and glean important lessons from the past.

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