English as a Transformative Power: The Impact of English Learning on the Life of Iraqis

Fatimah Al-Asadi[1] & Abulqasim Al-Asadi[2]

[1] University of Wyoming, College of Education, USA
[2] University of Mustansiriya, College of Sciences, Iraq
Correspondence: Fatimah Al-Asadi, University of Wyoming, College of Education, USA. Email: alassadyf@yahoo.com

Abstract: The main concern of Iraqi educators and curriculum designers is the failure of Iraqi secondary school students to use English communicatively. This concern led the Iraqi Ministry of Education to change the English curriculum in secondary schools from a traditional curriculum to one which is entirely communicative. The failure to use English continued due to the haste in this change without considering all the poles of the teaching/learning process. This study explores the effectiveness of the new English curriculum in Iraqi secondary schools in developing students' language skills from the perspective of a secondary school teacher.

Keywords: Transformative Learning, EFL, Language Skills

1. Introduction

In an attempt to address the problem of underestimating the importance of English language learning among Iraqis, the researchers highlighted the issue of self-evaluation to such learning by helping individuals think about the benefit of English in their life using a descriptive survey. This evaluation should be discussed in English classrooms in order to attract the attention of students to the necessity of learning a language that might help students communicate with other people from other countries in addition to understanding their culture. Highlighting this importance needs to understand students' needs and guiding them to their planning for their future ambitions as well as including their backgrounds and interests in the curriculum as well. The purpose of this descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of Iraqis with regard to the importance of learning English in their lives. This study has significant implications for English teachers, students' councillors, English students, and practicing teachers. Those stakeholders will gain important insight on the importance of learning English and directing students to value this importance from the present study.

This study tries to answer the following question:
- How does English language learning affect the life of Iraqis?

2. Importance of English in Iraq

Most of the companies, institutions, organizations consider English ability as one of the primary qualities when they choose their employees. For Job applying, English plays a very important part in job analysis and job promoting. It is no exaggeration to say that to learn English well is the key to getting close to a bright future for a college student. Social environment greatly influence the learners' motivation. Since 2003, the social environment in Iraq is encountering a radical change in coping with the movement of globalization and valuing English in all sides of life. According to Hann, Timmis, Alkhaldi, Davies, Troncoso, and Yi (2014), recent literature has shown the relationship between the ability to use English (communicative competence) and access to economic and social benefit.

3. English Communicative Competence in Iraq
3.1 What is Communicative Competence?

Communicative competence is the ability to encode and decode messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally (Feng, 2013). According to Savignon (2002), communicative competence depends on the cooperation of all the participants. This cooperation is the key for a successful learning. Canale and Swain (1980) and Hymes (1972) give a more comprehensive definition of communicative competence, which states that it consists of grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. On the other hand, Richards (2006) provides a more recent explanation for the concept of communicative competence saying that it includes 4 aspects of language knowledge:
A learner knows the ways of using language for different purposes and functions.

A learner has the ability to vary the ways of using language based on the setting and the participants. For example, the learner is familiar with when to use formal speech and when not to. He also understands the subtle differences in the use of written and spoken language.
1- A learner knows the ways of producing and understanding various types of texts. For example, the learner has a good knowledge of how to produce the texts of narratives, reports, interviews and conversations.
2- A learner knows how to keep communication going in spite of having limitations in his language knowledge. For example, the learner has the ability to employ various communication strategies when he has difficulty in expressing his ideas.

In Iraq, this competence is absent concerning English. The classroom environment depends on the teacher as the center of the teaching/learning process ad students think of English as no more than a required lesson that should be passed in order to graduate from primary school or secondary school. Most of English teachers think of it in this way too; which is why the circle of low proficiency in English goes on and on. Teachers need to think of learning English as a way of changing the life of students in order to help them understand the opportunities they'll have when mastering another language.

With the change of the curriculum in Iraq to be based on the Communicative Language Teaching approach, it is supposed that students need to learn how to use English communicatively. This change of curriculum is not accurately studied. Curriculum designers should pay attention that in Iraq English acts

as a foreign language; which means that there are no (or very rare) opportunities to use language outside the classroom. They left teachers with even more puzzlement because now they do not explain grammatical rules and language elements in an organized order and they are not trained for such a kind of teaching. More importantly is the big obstacle of large classes (one of the basic requirements for a communicative class is a restricted number of students that do not exceed 15 student per class). In addition to all of that, the first component of communicative learning is that students have to have all the basic knowledge of the language in question.

If we accept that communicative teaching is suitable for Iraqi educational environment then students have to learn English in five dimensions: linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, discourse, and strategic competences. The linguistic competence represents knowledge of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, and sentence structure. The pragmatic competence consists of two competences: illocutionary competence (how to use language when achieving specific goals in communication) and sociolinguistic competence (deciding what language to use in certain settings or with specific groups of people). The intercultural competence is the knowledge of intercultural conditions of language use such as expressing courtesies. The strategic competence means the ability to express oneself in spite of the lack of the resources (Klimova, 2014). Other competences are social competence, which means the willingness to engage in interaction, and emotional competence, which helps the individual to express himself or herself in the target language without mimicking other cultures. Is it possible to develop all these competences in Iraqi English classrooms?!

3.2 Communicative Language Teaching

Iraqi students are unable to express their point of view in English because they do not have the specific lexis that can help them participate in professional communications. This indicates that they do not possess the most important skills of communicative competence. Consequently, the development of communicative competence skills is needs a considerable pedagogical effort (Bissenbayeva, et al., 2013). In this regard, teachers need to teach and measure the five dimensions mentioned above, putting in mind that students in the basic level need only the strategic competence. Following the development of strategic competence, the other competences are taught when students become more advanced. After considering those competences, teachers can start thinking of utilizing them in teaching language skills. I believe that all these facts should be presented to all Iraqi teachers before taking a radical step of changing the curriculum then train teachers on teaching English communicatively. But first, all educational districts should look at the cases of schools and find a solution to the large number of students, consider the school year dates and the lesson time duration, and reduce the huge number of activities provided by the new curriculum because it is impossible to cover all the material in a communicative way which involve all students in collaborations an discussions.

4. Methods
4.1 Participant

The participants in this study included 45 individuals from Al-Huseiniya region in Baghdad. The sample participants ranged in age from 27 to 47 years (Figure 1).
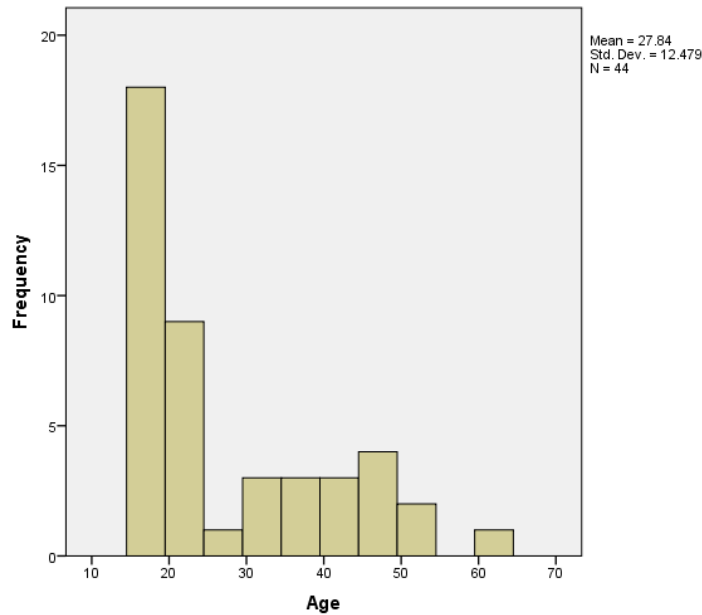
Figure 1: The Participants' ages

4.5 percent of the participants were graduated from schools in Al-Karkh District in Baghdad, 4.5 percent from other provinces, and 90.9 of them graduated from schools in AL-Risafa District in Baghdad as was explained in (Table 1).

Table 1: School Location

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Karkh	2	4.5	4.5	4.5
	Other Province	2	4.5	4.5	9.1
	Rusafa	40	90.9	90.9	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

Out of the 45 participants, 95.5 percent were male while 4.5 percent were female. Results of the educational background of the participants' fathers showed that 15.9 percent of the respondents stated that their fathers have a Bachelor's Degree, 13.6 percent with fathers who have Diplomate Degree, 15.9 percent with fathers who graduated from high school, 18.2 percent with fathers who graduated from middle school, 20.5 percent with fathers who graduated from primary school, 2.3 percent with fathers graduated from trading high schools, and 9.1 with fathers with no educational degree (See Table 2 and Figure 2).

Table 2: Father's degree

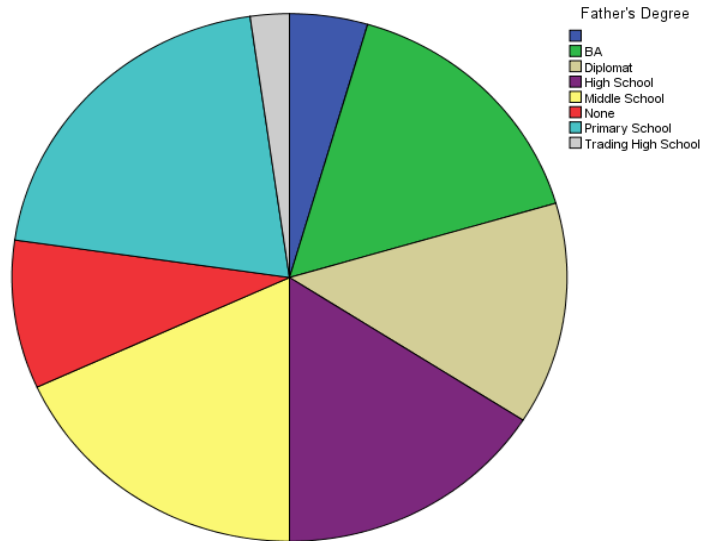|		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		2	4.5	4.5	4.5
	BA	7	15.9	15.9	20.5
	Diplomat	6	13.6	13.6	34.1
	High School	7	15.9	15.9	50.0
	Middle School	8	18.2	18.2	68.2
	None	4	9.1	9.1	77.3
	Primary School	9	20.5	20.5	97.7
	Trading High School	1	2.3	2.3	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

Figure 2: Father's Degree

On the other hand, Results of the educational background of the participants' mothers showed that 4.5 percent of the respondents stated that their mothers have a Bachelor's Degree, 4.5 percent with mothers who have Diplomate Degree, 11.4 percent with mothers who graduated from high school, 18.2 percent with mothers who graduated from middle school, 29.5 percent with mothers who graduated from primary school, 6.8 percent with mothers graduated from trading high schools, and 20.5 with mothers with no educational degree (See Table 3 and Figure 3).

Table 3: Mother's Degree

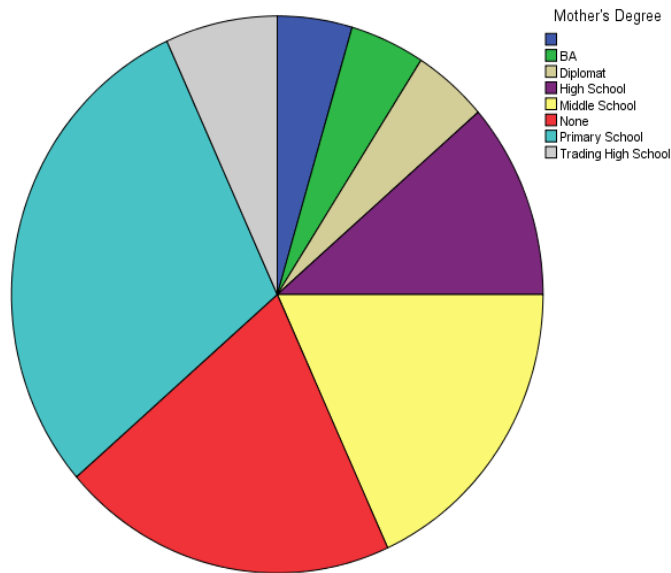|		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		2	4.5	4.5	4.5
	BA	2	4.5	4.5	9.1
	Diplomat	2	4.5	4.5	13.6
	High School	5	11.4	11.4	25.0
	Middle School	8	18.2	18.2	43.2
	None	9	20.5	20.5	63.6
	Primary School	13	29.5	29.5	93.2
	Trading High School	3	6.8	6.8	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

Figure 3: Mother's Degree

4.2 Instrument

A survey was created by the researcher as an instrument for this study in order to investigate the perceptions of Iraqis regarding the importance of learning English in their lives. The survey had 15 items with a 4-point Likert scale for items 1-5, a 3-point Never-sometimes or always scale for items 6 and 7, a 2-point Yes/No scale for items 8 and 9. The final items (10-15) are related to the demographics, which are: age, gender, degree, father's degree, mother's degree, and location of high school. The scales are as follows:

Items 1-5: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree.

Items 6-7: 1 = Never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = always.

4.3 Procedures

The survey was distributed to participants accompanied by a verbal explanation of the research, and an introduction about the survey. After survey completion, surveys were coded and analyzed using the software package SPSS.

5. Results and Discussions

For the question "How often do you use English in your travel?" a calculation of frequencies were reported. Results indicated that 13.6 percent of participants never use English when they travel, 68.2 percent of participants use it sometimes, and 18.2 percent of participants use it always when travelling (See Table 4 and Figure 4).

Table 4: How often English is used during travels

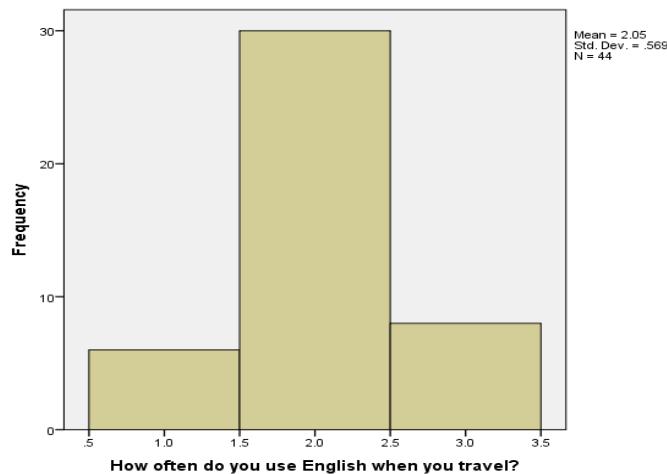|		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	6	13.6	13.6	13.6
	Sometimes	30	68.2	68.2	81.8
	Always	8	18.2	18.2	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

Figure 4: The use of English during travel

Another calculation of frequencies were reported for the question "How often do you use English in your job/class?". Results indicated that 27.3 percent of participants never use English in their job/class, 63.6 percent of them use it sometimes, and 9.1 percent of participants use it always (See Table 5 and Figure 5).

Table 5: How often English is used in job/class

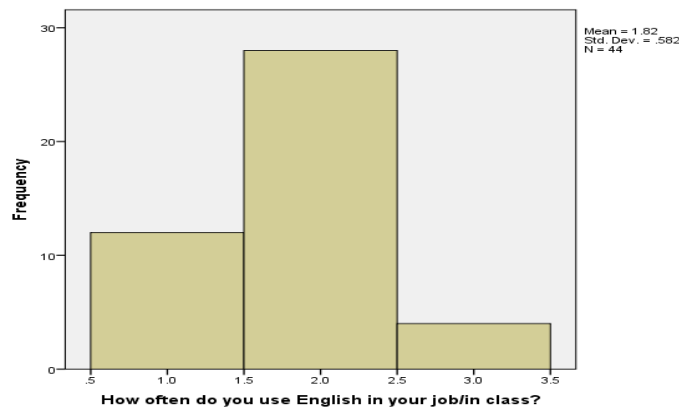|		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	12	27.3	27.3	27.3
	Sometimes	28	63.6	63.6	90.9
	Always	4	9.1	9.1	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

Figure 5: The use of English in class

A calculation of mean scores were reported for items 1-5 and items number 8 and 9. The average survey score on the help using English in communicating with others, represented by item 1, was (2.81) out of 43 with a standard deviation of (.732). The results indicated that participants believe that using English help them communicate with others. Item 2 indicated that participants believe in the effectiveness of English in helping them express themselves. The average score was (2.68) out of 44 with standard deviation of (.674). Item 3 indicated that participants believe in the effectiveness of English in helping them understand other cultures. The average score was (3.11) out of 44 with standard deviation of (.754). The same position was indicated by item 4 regarding the positive impact of English. The average score was (3.32) with a standard deviation of (.674). Item 5 showed that English does not affect participants' choices regarding their jobs and specializations. The average score was (2.30) with a standard deviation of (.851). Item 6 stated a moderate position concerning the formulation of new friendships. The average score was (1.55) out of 44 with a standard deviation of (.504). Whereas the average score for the role of English in helping participants in using electronics was (1.84) out of 44 with a standard deviation of (.370) (see Table 6).

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
English learning helped me Communicate with others	43	1	4	2.81	.732
English learning helped me express myself	44	1	4	2.68	.674
English learning helped me understand other cultures	44	1	4	3.11	.754
English learning has a positive impact	44	1	4	3.32	.674
English learning helped me choose my job/college	44	1	4	2.30	.851
English helped me create new friendships	44	1	4	1.55	.504
English helped me use Electronics	44	1	2	1.84	.370
Valid N (listwise)	43	1	2		

6. Conclusion

The present study investigated the perceptions of 45 Iraqi participants concerning the effect of English language learning on their lives. A survey was developed to involve the following concepts: importance of English in expressing oneself and communicating with others, frequencies of using English in travel and in the workplace or in classroom, and the help of English in explaining other cultures and in the use of technology. Depending on the results gained from this study, it was clear that there is a little impact of learning English on the life of participants. This gap resulted partly from the educational background of the parents of the participants who filled out the survey. On the other hand, Iraqi schools adopt the way of "teaching English for the sake of exams" and do not promote the importance of English in the future life of students.

This study is a great starting point for educators to start promote the role of English in understanding the cultures of other communities and to open the minds of students to the long distant future and its unpredicted opportunities that might need a good mastery of English. It is beneficial for curriculum designers as well, because it draws their attention to the fact that students' needs should be included in the English curriculum to motivate them to learn the target language.

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Appendix 1

The English Version of the Survey/ The Impact of English Learning

Please answer the following items:

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
English learning helped me communicate with others	O	O	O	O
English learning helped me express myself	O	O	O	O
English learning helped me understand other cultures	O	O	O	O
English learning has a positive impact	O	O	O	O
English learning helped me choose my job/college	O	O	O	O

Item	Never	Sometimes	always
How often do you use English when you travel?	O	O	O

Item	Never	Sometimes	always
How often do you use English in your job/in class?	O	O	O

Item		No	Yes
English helped me create new friendships.		O	O
English helped me use electronics.		O	O

Demographics

How old are you? _____ years old.

What is your gender? O Male   O Female

What is your degree? _____

What is your father's degree? _____

What is your mother's degree? _____years.

Where did you attend high school? O Al-Rusafa   O Al-Karkh   O Other Province