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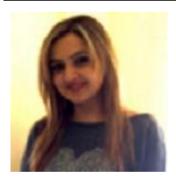
ENGLISH LANGUAGE GAP IN SKILL ACQUISITION BETWEEN SIX AND SEVEN GRADERS IN LEBANESE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Several researchers have investigated the causes of learners' low proficiency level in English language acquisition. In Lebanese public schools, learners struggle to acquire the basic English language skills. This study examines the reasons of the lack of language skill acquisition in grades six and seven in three Lebanese public schools. Three instruments were used to collect data: classroom observations in three public schools, in-depth interviews with three English language teachers in the three schools, and focus group interviews with the students in grade six and seven. Findings showed that learners lack the basic language skills. There are in fact several factors that hinder learners' acquisition of the English language. Insufficiency of teachers' professional development and teaching methods, and lack of use of all the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and their integration tremendously collaborated in the deterioration of the teaching-learning process and consequently in the students' language skill acquisition in Lebanese public schools. The pedagogical implications of the findings are stated. Recommendations for improvements are suggested.

Key Terms: Curriculum, Objectives, Teaching Methods, Language skills, Integration

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The education system in Lebanon has been revised many times in the past century, yet even with all the changes there are still a lot of differences in the quality of teaching between the public schools (labeled 'schools of the poor') and the private schools (see Bahous, Bacha, & Nabhani, 2011; Bahous & Nabhani, 2008;

Bahous, Nabhani & Cochran, 2011). This study focuses on the public schools and the gap in the English language skills between the elementary and intermediate cycles.

Students in Lebanese elementary public schools have been suffering from low quality performance and low acquisition of the basic English language skills. A deficiency in language acquisition resides primarily in elementary public schools, and such deficiency widens the gap between the elementary and the intermediate levels particularly grades six and seven respectively. The purpose of this research is to examine the teaching-learning process followed by public school teachers in Beirut.

Lebanese Public Schools' Current Situation

The Lebanese curriculum, revised in 1997, has been designed "to teach .. students how to describe actions or how to reveal future plans" (Eid, 2001, p. 13). It constructs integrated general characteristics, highlights the Lebanese homeland characters, and stresses a considerable set of scientific, societal and technological values (The Lebanese National Curriculum, 1997).

In English language education, the Lebanese Curriculum emphasizes the development of language proficiency, cultural understanding, and learners' cognitive and social abilities to work together (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1997) by teaching the main language skills through particular themes. The latter are chosen according to the learners' needs, and their importance in the learners' daily social lives (Eid, 2001).

Although the language curriculum is partly responsible for the progression of language skills through content construction (Reyes & Vallone, 2008), Lebanese public school students suffer from inadequate acquisition of the English language skills where their language problems become very apparent in grade seven, i.e. when they move from the elementary cycle to the intermediate one. Shaaban and Ghaith (2000) state that students' proficiency level in Lebanese English-medium schools is mainly low and explain that students' low proficiency level is due to the "lower-middle-class families where parents don't speak any foreign languages fluently" (p. 634) and to the schools' emphasis on sciences rather than languages.

In fact, the Lebanese Curriculum is set, and all teachers have to implement it in the classroom. Yet, the main issue is the method of teaching used by the teachers in various classes and the application of the curriculum since "language learning is about curriculum … it is the curriculum that drives second language acquisition" (Reyes & Vallone, 2008, p. 8) by involving learners in significant and collaborative performance tasks to help them acquire language practices, formation, and purposes needed for their success (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1997).

The way the information is constructed by the learners and how these learners react to it stands as the major issue in the teaching-learning process. English language learners need to think deeply to develop adequate knowledge and cultural awareness (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003).

Research Questions

The study addressed the following questions:

1.   What are the language gaps of grade seven students in the Lebanese public schools?
2.   How do the prevailing teaching methods affect students' language skills?

Research Context

The research study focuses on two elementary public schools and one intermediate-secondary school located in the Beirut area with approximately the same number of enrolled students. The three schools implement the Lebanese national curriculum and its objectives as the basic educational standard, they also use the national English textbooks designed by the National Center for Educational Research Development (NCERD). Not all teachers are tenured. Some are part- timers and are paid per hour. Thus, teachers may not show the same sense of care and responsibility towards their students.

The three public schools develop students' academic skills in three languages: Arabic, English, and French in elementary and intermediate classes. Students learn the English language as the first foreign language and French as the second foreign language.

Students come from low and middle socio-economic status with mainly insufficient family academic support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the prevailing educational practices in past times where teacher-centeredness did not serve learners with adequate skills and strategies to deal with their daily social challenges (Cox, 2002), a Lebanese Curriculum has been introduced to learners as a new educational and communicational system based on a cohesive practice of learning (Saada, 2001). This National Curriculum required English and French as foreign languages to be taught in all Lebanese schools, one as the first foreign language and the other as a second foreign language (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1999). Hence, the teaching-learning process requires learners' motivation through contextualized language practices. Not only the teacher becomes a facilitator of students' performance in class (Serafini, 2008), but also the teacher motivates and encourages students to achieve every time they practice (Stipek, 2002).

Teacher Training

With the new impact of technology and the increasing use of the internet in the field of education, finding up-to-date resources that match this technological influence on education was absolutely compulsory (Aksit & Sands, 2006). Lebanese schools also recognized the need to educate their students in the English language. Actually, when teachers' proficiency in English is underprivileged, students suffer in other subjects being taught in English.. Therefore, these new ideas and resources are first invested in teachers' training centers (Aksit & Sands, 2006). University graduate teachers have to attend plentiful in-service English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) sessions provided by NCERD, some private universities and associations, the Association of English Teachers in Lebanon (ATEL), and international organizations and western publishing companies such as Amideast and the British Council (Shaaban, 2005).

The new reform in the Lebanese curriculum has necessitated the need for more effective training programs. Public school teachers need to be trained in skills to meet the objectives which the Lebanese Curriculum demands. They are frequently trained to view the 'changing views of teaching and learning … both in their subject area knowledge and their pedagogical skills' (Aksit & Sands, 2006, p. 23). However, these changing views are not based on 'an understanding of the contexts and experiences relevant to the career progression of teachers', but they emphasize the 'utilizing pre-existing methods and materials' (Orr, 2011, p. 2).

Besides, teachers' training focuses on educating public school teachers about the methodologies and practices of the new curriculum. However, the various teaching methods of student-centeredness have not been absolutely acquired by teachers 'due to the conflict with their belief systems regarding the acquisition of knowledge, lack of professional preparation, in adequate school resources, …' (Bou Jaoude & Ghaith, 2006, p. 206). Content and methodology are a new perspective which notifies the observable development of teachers (Orr, 2011). Some public school teachers end their teaching periods when their classroom practices sound satisfactory to them (Orr, 2011), but others deduce their classroom practices and build up their own teaching philosophy (Brandl, 2000). Thus, teacher training sessions educate teachers about language learning theory, methodology, and practical classroom activities. Such training sessions include 'lesson planning, classroom management, preparing tests, teaching: listening-speaking-reading-writing-grammar-vocabulary, using computers in class, using the class textbook,… trying out activities with other teachers, producing material for class, …requiring teachers to make presentations'(Orr, 2011, p. 7). In the field of education, these mentioned types of pedagogy are the basics to be a teacher. Throughout the teaching experience and the several training sessions (assigned by the Ministry of Education) teachers have attended, the application sounds poor and vague, and doesn't tackle any of these big titles in education deeply. That's why many public school teachers find these training sessions unuseful since some workshops are based on what trainers of NCERD have attended and some 'workshops are … determined by the available trainers rather than teacher input' (Orr, 2011, p. 8). Hence, the aim of the teachers' training is to reflect on the progression of those teachers (Graves, 2009), their personal goals, and the support they receive to achieve their aims from their school (Mathew, 2006).

However, the working environment in Lebanon neither encourages nor motivates public school teachers to attend training sessions. Those teachers, who are generally underpaid and wok in several workplaces to sustain an appropriate living (El-Basha, 2009), find themselves not distinguished for any training

session they attend or any excellent career performance they pursue. In fact, the poor pay and the demolished working conditions (Schulz, 2000) negatively affect the language teacher education. Therefore, teacher reflection seems quite important to be implemented in teacher training (Berliner, 2001) because teachers reflect on their daily practices and relate their reflection to their professional development (Orr, 2011). Such teacher reflection emphasizes classroom-based action research in teacher education (Richards, 2008) and consequently develops critical language teacher education (Orr, 2011).

The Lebanese Curriculum

Aims of the Curriculum

The curriculum aims at improving three levels of English language proficiency: English for social interaction, English for academic purposes, and English for socio-cultural development. Thus, it attempts to develop thinking skills, native-like proficiency in English by stressing on fluency and accuracy, cross-cultural openness, tolerance and understanding, study skills, and communicative language skills by stressing on the Cooperative Learning model of classroom interaction. The curriculum follows a thematic study in all levels; the same skills, strategies, and concepts are learned through all grade levels with advancement in difficulty as the grade levels increase. According to the curriculum, the students acquire the English Language through listening, speaking, reading, and writing in their levels with the integration of grammar. In all grade levels, teaching focuses on developing intellectual and social skills, building students' self-esteem and reality (NCERD, 1997).

The teachers help students to develop their own multiple skills by relating what is taught in the classroom to real life experiences, and encourage students to sometimes work in small groups to develop proper social skills and other times work in class discussion to communicate and interact with others, and learn from each other (NCERD, 1997).

Consistency of the Specific Objectives to General Objectives

The hierarchical presentation of the objectives clearly translates intended learning outcomes of different levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This specification permits teachers to interpret the objectives in the same way. Even the last level of the hierarchy provides teachers with suggestions for some class practices.

Moreover, these objectives are separated into grade level objectives and suitable to the students' age. Elementary students are expected to achieve the same objectives; intermediate students have their own objectives which they have to achieve as well. The curriculum emphasizes the need of a variety of teaching methods and authentic materials to supplement the textbook being used (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1997).

However, the Lebanese curriculum has been based on 'current international standards and some widely accepted theoretical orientation to the teaching/learning process' (Boujaoude & Ghaith, 2006, p. 206). In fact, no assessment of the Lebanese students' learning needs has been done to recognize the readiness of this population to the curriculum standards.

Teachers' Role

Many teachers do not teach in a conventional method because they consider that every student has his/ her own learning style. Scott (2002) asserts that it is not enough for teachers to link pieces of information as evidence from students' experiences, but teachers must encourage students to be reflective learners since reflection helps students become developed practitioners with professional practice.

Teachers must recognize their students' best learning styles, so teachers can carry out observations, students' conferences, tests, or questionnaires. Honigsfeld and Dunn (2003) emphasize that teachers need to develop students' educational experiences and culturally academic achievement through 'identifying, understanding, and responding to the unique learning styles of students' (p. 204). In addition, teachers should realize the motivation factors which affect their students' learning (Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2003). Hence, when students experience instruction which fails to match their learning styles, they might face unproductive conception of learning or feel demotivated (Wilss, Boulton-Lewis, Marton, & Lewis, 2000). Therefore, since teachers must help students to acquire the subsequent skills students need to enhance learning, Ariza (2004)

believes that the more knowledge, adaptation, and learning opportunities the teacher offers, the more engaged in the learning tasks students become.

Teaching Methods

The curriculum highlights the integration of content and second language instruction (Reyes & Vallone, 2008). The Lebanese curriculum enhances the learners' cognitive understanding and critical thinking through many applicable themes about learners' environment at lower grade levels to extend further into more communicative themes that evolve around the human discoveries, communication, and rights (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1997).

Shaaban and Ghaith (1997) believe that all cooperative learning structures embedded in the Lebanese curriculum target academic accomplishment, linguistic progression, and cognitive and social development. Curtin (2009) asserts that interactive teaching strategies permit language learners to work securely in small groups in a free-stress environment since learners can use, experiment, and attain self-confidence while communicating with other learners. Grant and Sleeter (2007) endorse the idea of the development of learners' social and cultural skills in an interactive classroom. In addition, cooperative teaching strategies promote teachers to prepare exciting lesson plans and activities that enhance interest and motivation (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

Thus, integrated instruction endorses the discovery of skills, where students practice learning instead of memorizing obsolete information (Dodge & Kendall, 2004).

Language skills

The Lebanese Curriculum determines the stages of instruction and ways of performances based on pedagogical associations and theoretical conceptions. Language learning emphasizes the acquisition of the following four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1997).

Listening

Listening is prior to all other skills (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1997). The listening ability in the second language is a task of the transfer of the first language. Learners do not learn a new skill in the second language, but rather the skill is obtainable in another language context (Vandergrift, 2006). Mecartty (2000) asserts that second language listening ability contributes to second language comprehension ability. Jones and Plass (2002) argue that listening comprehension in the second language is a process of receiving and bringing meaning to the auditory text. They approve that listening includes the listener, linguistic knowledge, and cognitive process to the listening task. Hence, by listening, the student acquires new skills, metacognition, and cultural interaction. Vandergrift (2006) asserts that students get benefit from strategy instruction since it reduces the gap in the transfer of first language inferential skills to second language inferential tasks.

Speaking

Speaking is the second language skill which language learners need to acquire (Shaaban &Ghaith, 1997). Speaking remains a challenging and an undeveloped skill for learners (Mauranen, 2006) due to its complexity and heterogeneity. For instance, learners' inacquisition can be coined with the lack the language background, their hesitation and anxiety in unpredictable situations, the deficiencies in classroom instruction, and the formal teaching rather than communicative teaching (Sakale, 2012). Therefore, teaching speaking in a classroom setting necessitates the use of consistent teaching methods (Sakale, 2012). Swain (2008) supports the application of collaborative dialogues where speakers are involved in knowledge building and problem solving. Such teaching practices provide learners with 'proactive strategies' to avoid misunderstanding and 'retroactive repair ones' to recognize a certain problem (Mauranen, 2006, p. 146) and with abundant and adequate tools and materials to 'contextualize and enhance their interactivity and learning ability when dealing with spoken discourse' (Sakale, 2012, p. 1101).

Reading

Learners can be capable of reading after they acquire the two prior language skills, listening and speaking (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1997). Reading skills are attributed to the learners' ability to identify,

comprehend, 'and attribute meaning to a text's literacy elements' (Urlaub, 2011, p. 98). Since the amount of language proficiency varies from one learner to another, the teacher measures the learners' proficiency level in order to provide learners with appropriate instruction (Bolos, 2012). So, teachers can achieve primary reading instruction either 'from parts to whole, from whole to parts and interactive approach' (Akyol, 2005, p. 9). Primary reading instruction leads to positive enhancement in the learners' 'intellectual, affective, and social skills…, improves students' life-long intellectual skills such as comprehending, ordering, questioning, relating and guessing' (Kayiran & Karabay, 2012, p. 2854). Therefore, Bolos (2012) asserts the learners' acquisition of the reading skill through 'interactive read-alouds, comprehension strategies, and vocabulary enrichment' (p. 15).

Writing

Writing is the fourth acquired language skill and involves the acquisition of the former skills: listening, speaking, and reading (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1997). Learners need to acquire writing skills since the primary grade levels because writing instruction pilots the learners' 'intellectual, affective, and social skills' (Kayiran & Karabay, 2012, p. 2854). Mauranen (2006) emphasizes that, in writing, meaning is established through accurate manageable words chosen by the writers to match their purpose and audience. Also, since 'writers have enough time to decide what to write and what to omit' (p. 146), learners need to develop certain strategies and techniques which enable them to react critically while developing their own written discourse (Urlaub, 2011). In addition, Kayiran and Karabay (2012) assert learners' acquisition of further complementary skills to communicate properly, solve problems, and make decisions. Hence, Urlaub (2011) asserts that writing skill acquisition promotes the learners to develop both linguistic skills and intercultural awareness and become analytical, critical readers as well.

Integration of Language Skills

Different factors complicate the language comprehension process. Mecartty (2000) states that vocabulary development is quite important to second language proficiency since vocabulary development engages the understanding of the entire oral and written language. 'The students' ability to read and understand was… with their ability to listen and understand' (Vandergrift, 2006, p.13).

Listening tasks enhance proper speaking skill acquisition, yet 'knowledge and skill-building' are still inevitable since speaking demands the knowledge of speaking situations as well as the social and cultural backgrounds and differences. Also, listening intake depends absolutely on the transmission of the spoken discourse (Sakale, 2012). Since the purpose of teaching listening is to improve students' reading (Mills, 2010), teaching listening supports students' way of thinking, and depicts appropriate language resources.

In addition, a connection is established between reading and writing skills since readers ought to understand the message conveyed by the writer (Kayiran & Karabay, 2012) and the writer's purpose of writing (Mauranen, 2006). Also, Urlaub (2011) asserts that guided creative writing that is designed for literacy texts can foster both writing and critical reading skill acquisition since learners engage with literature and 'apply background knowledge to the reading process' (p. 100).

Purpose of Teaching Integrated Skills

Due to the fact that skill acquisition is attained through cognitive and constructivist perception, teaching language skills is no more drill-and-practice strategies (Grant & Sleeter, 2007), but rather through students' interaction, attentiveness, and interest to promote comprehension (Curtin, 2009). Jones and Plass (2002) emphasize an active construction of meaning based on linguistic knowledge and interaction. Besides, with respect to the current Lebanese curriculum NCERD (1997), students shouldn't study anything that won't benefit them in their future. Therefore, Mills (2010) assures that the purpose of teaching integrated skills is to present a practical approach related to the students' culture and future needs. In order to be well-equipped students with cultural significances,' they contribute to a classroom culture in … collaboration and meaningful social interactions' (Mills, 2010, p. 328).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

An exploratory research design was used to conduct this study as it practically and accurately frames problems through using plentiful instruments (Mooi & Sarstedt, 2011).

We obtained the official permission of the Ministry of Education to collect data from the three public schools in the Beirut region. Furthermore, we secured written and verbal consent forms from the three school principals.

In each of the two elementary public schools, we observed a grade six class. Grade six (A) included 34 students, 18 males and 16 females. Grade six (B) included 33 students, 19 males and 14 females. In the third intermediate and secondary public female school, we observed a grade seven class which had 26 female students.

The three observed English teachers had a good teaching experience of the English language. However, students of the same section shared different levels of language proficiency. The sample is purposive and appropriate since it is chosen for a particular purpose which is to study the learners' inacquisition of language skills due to the fact that a suitable sample can be selected as a sampling strategy for the research study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The names of the public schools, teachers, and students remained anonymous in the current study since anonymity and confidentiality are significant proportions in a research study (Bell, 2005).

Instrumentation

Three instruments were used in this study: non-participant observation, in-depth interviews with teachers, and focus group interviews with students.

Non-Participant Observation

We observed the three classes (two sections of grade six and one section of grade seven) 3 teaching periods a week for a duration of two months. Each teaching period was exactly 50 minutes. Observation mainly focused on the teaching-learning process including teaching methods used, the integration between the curriculum objectives and the daily teaching practices, and the acquisition of the four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing (see appendix I, observation checklist).

In-depth Interviews

The two grade six teachers and one grade seven teacher were involved in the interview (see appendix II). A set of pre-prepared questions was planned. We explained to the teachers the purpose of the interview. The three teachers were asked about their teaching methods, training programs, students' pre-acquired language skills, and the curriculum.

Focus Group Interviews

A group of six and seven graders (see appendix III) were investigated about their English language difficulties, level of achievement, teacher's teaching method, skill acquisition, their preferable learning style, and classroom language activities used in the classes.

FINDINGS

Observation Results

Students encountered difficulties in speaking, reading, and writing. Academically, the three teachers used English language as the medium of instruction with some clarifications in the native language, Arabic. Little communication took place in grade six classes, but much communication in grade seven class. Teachers related new information to students' previous knowledge with absolute absence of critical thinking strategies especially in grade six classes. Listening and speaking skills were ignored in grade six classes, and listening was neglected in grade seven. Teachers didn't vary their teaching methods and showed inconsiderate practices of their students' different learning styles. Grade six classroom activities didn't reinforce critical thinking, but grade seven activities did. The textbook activities did not require proper application of the curriculum objectives and weren't adjustable to the students' different interests, needs, and abilities. Moreover, the absence of Cooperative Learning was quite apparent in the three classes. Grade six classes were structured classes with active teachers and passive students; students answered questions and copied information from the chalkboard. However, in grade seven class, students were more active and expressed confidence in performing their learning tasks.

Socially, grade six students were not able to express their view points or relate acquired knowledge to their social practices, but grade seven learners could develop their self-esteem, express their view points, and relate knowledge to their social practices. Besides, learners of the three classes performed their learning tasks either individually or in pairs. Teachers could maintain an adequate social behavior with their students, but didn't emphasize any social or cultural awareness to reflect on their learners' behavior.

In-depth Interviews' Results

The students' delivery of content, much memorization, and the lack of analytical skills didn't satisfy the three teachers.

Grade six teacher (A) applied whole-class discussion to engage students to answer questions, but avoided pair and group work. Grade six teacher (B) and grade seven teacher (C) varied their teaching methods and activities to match the students' learning styles.

The teaching programs sounded impractical to teacher (B), but teachers (A) and (C) could apply some teaching techniques with their students due to students' different learning background.

Teachers (A) and (B) explained that they did not implement cooperative learning in their classes due to the huge number of students, the limited number of teaching periods per week, and the students' low proficiency level. Moreover, teacher (A) showed neither any availability of a teacher's guide, nor her knowledge of skill integration terminology, or guidance on curriculum aims and objectives. Teachers (B) and (C) declared that the teachers' guide did not include kill integration, had brief lesson plans and insufficient writing and listening practices.

Teacher (A) set her own objectives for her students, but teachers (B) and (C) solely needed the teachers' book to set the curriculum objectives. In addition, teacher (A) only chose supplementary grammar exercises and authentic non-thematic reading topics. Teacher (B) chose grammar and writing exercises, and, teacher (C) stressed on different classroom activities such as projects and oral explanation.

Focus Group Interviews' Results

Grade six students in schools (A) and (B) misunderstood the spoken language and were unable to speak it as well. They couldn't read difficult words, answer questions, or understand long sentences. School (C)'s seven graders encountered difficulties in vocabulary, spelling, writing, reading, grammar rules, sentence skills, and answering comprehension questions.

Schools (A), (B), and (C) learners carried out their classroom activities either in pairs or individually, but schools (A) and (C) learners never worked in groups; school (B) learners once worked as group work. Both six and seven graders showed interest when the teacher spoke English and Arabic in class, explained slowly, and gave examples and more exercises to practice. Consequently, six graders claimed their preference about working in groups, reading difficult words, initiating whole-class discussions, learning new strategies to answer comprehension questions, and writing about many topics. Seven graders preferred their teacher's varied teaching styles clarifying some issues in Arabic language.

Regarding language skills, schools (A) and (C) learners did no listening activities, reading activities 3 times a week, and writing activities once a week; school (C) learners did speaking activities twice a month which school (A) learners did not. Nevertheless, school (B) learners did no speaking activities, listening activities once a month, reading activities twice a week, and writing once a week.

School (A) six graders' supplementary material was in grammar. School (B) six graders' supplementary material was in writing, grammar, and listening, but school (C) learners' additional activities were in reading and grammar.

DISCUSSION

1.   What are the language gaps of grade seven students in the Lebanese public schools?

The results showed the learners' unsatisfactory achievement level in language acquisition: the unapplication of the prerequisite basic skills, and the disintegration of the major English language skills. According to Scott (2002), the students' low proficiency level in skill acquisition is due to the teachers' disencouragement of developing reflective learners, but should offer more knowledge, adaptation, and learning opportunities (Ariza, 2004). Thus, Mecartty (2000) affirms the contribution of second language

listening ability to second language comprehension ability, and Sakale (2012) believes that learners, whose teachers fail to integrate speaking and listening skills, need to develop communicative sociolinguistic awareness when they speak. Besides, the results showed the learners' incapability of acquiring reading and writing skills is due to the absolute absence of listening and speaking skills because reading skills, according to Urlaub (2011), are attributed to the learners' ability to identify and comprehend written discourse. Also, such result denies the fact that not only learners can read and write after they acquire listening and speaking (Shaaban & Ghaith, 1997), but also through the acquisition of various interactive read-aloud methods, comprehension approaches, and vocabulary enhancement (Bolos, 2012). The results showed the learners' writing skill inacquisition because of the textbooks' lack of skill reinforcement, the unavailability of classroom activities of higher thinking level, and their unadaptability to the learners' different interests, needs, and abilities. Hence, for learners' writing skill acquisition, Urlaub (2011) asserts that learners need to develop analysis, critical thinking, linguistic skills, and cultural awareness. This result concurs neither with Kayiran and Karabay (2012) who assert that learners' writing skill acquisition, since the primary grade levels, guides the learners' logical, emotional, and social skills, nor with the notion that essential elements such as differentiation, integration, compatibility in learning strategies, and mental models should be considered for academic accomplishment (Vermunt & Verloop, 2000). Students' interaction, attentiveness, and interest are extremely needed to promote comprehension (Curtin, 2009), and a variety of skill-acquisition (Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon, 2001).

2.   How do the prevailing teaching methods affect students' language skills?

        The results showed the application of the discussion-based approach but the absolute absence of Cooperative Learning in the classroom. Also, the results showed that teachers are inconsiderate of the integration of content and second language instruction which, according to Reyes and Vallone (2008), are needed to enhance the learners' cognitive understanding and their critical thinking. This finding does not match with Shaaban and Ghaith (1997) who emphasize academic accomplishment, linguistic progression, and cognitive and social development through cooperative learning structures. Using the interactive learning strategies, teachers can prepare exciting lesson plans and activities that enhance interest and motivation (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Hence, when students experience instruction which fails to match their learning styles, they might face unproductive conception of learning or feel demotivated (Wilss et al., 2000). Also, this result does not concur with Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon (2001) who assure students' need to learn in communities to acquire a variety of skills, and engage in more knowledge, adaptation, and learning opportunities the teacher offers (Ariza, 2004). Student-centered learning environments haven't been totally applied due to teachers' conventional beliefs of knowledge acquisition, lack of their professional preparation, and inadequate school resources (Bou Jaoude & Ghaith, 2006).

        The results also showed that the textbooks' activities neither require proper application of the curriculum objectives nor tackle students' learning styles. The results showed that teachers prepare supplementary classroom activities without considering the students' learning styles and critical thinking. These results do not coincide with NCERD (1997) where teachers need to prepare material to match students' requirements and cover the skills needed in social, cultural, and academic situations. Thus, Honigsfeld and Dunn (2003) consent that students' awareness of their own learning preferences, their strengths and needs, and their development of positive study habits and learning strategies influence them beneficially. Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon (2001) also assure students' need to promote a variety of skill-acquisition such as motivation and regulation. Nevertheless, Vermunt and Verloop (2000) believe in low academic accomplishment when differentiation, integration, compatibility in learning strategies, and mental models are excluded. In such a situation, teachers should realize the motivation factors which affect their students' learning (Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2003).

        Moreover, the results showed practical and impractical classroom use of the training programs for teachers' teaching skill development. This reality concurs with Aksit and Sands (2006) who claim that teachers are frequently trained to change the current views of teaching and learning in subject area knowledge and pedagogical skills. Also, Orr (2011) considers some training sessions unuseful as they don't tackle teacher

input, but due to some relevant topics trainers had performed or due to the availability of some trainers.

CONCLUSION

Students' language skill inacquisition in the Lebanese public schools exist in several ways. Based on the interviews' responses, the curriculum objectives are comprehensive but are improperly practiced. English language textbooks include insufficient material and consequently learners cannot acquire the needed language skills. Thus, the lack of support and guidance in the teaching-learning process, curriculum objectives and application, textbook topics' authenticity, students' prerequisite language skills, and students' curiosity and intrinsic motivation are all major factors in educating these young pupils. Therefore, language skill integration, implementation of multiple teaching methods, consideration of students' different learning styles, and the use of authentic and interesting topics contribute to the students' acquisition of the English language skills.

Recommendations

The results shown in this study ought to motivate the Lebanese educators to set an entire change in the Lebanese curriculum and its practices. Teachers too should not just be aware of the tremendous problem that is still invading their classrooms, but also be involved in the improvement process as vital responsible individuals and with potential cooperation among teachers, coordinators, and principals.

In addition, the curriculum's general concept of learners' skill acquisition contradicts with the autonomous learners' promotion from one grade level to another. Hence, learners get a glimpse or a general idea of almost every skill but do not fully acquire it which results in their low achievement throughout the scholastic years.

Moreover, the development of the curriculum is a collaborative work of educators of all domains and positions. Therefore, as university professors theoretically have a vital role in building up a national curriculum, school teachers have their prudent notion of its practicality or not with our learners.

Finally, the Lebanese curriculum should be amended cyclically abiding by the innovative technologies and students' needs. Therefore, teachers should be trained thoroughly to cope with the new technological advancement. Above all, administrators and governmental institutions should be geared up to spend money on training teachers, equipping schools, and advancing textbooks to put the revised curriculum properly into practice. In fact, the Lebanese culture should be ready for such a change and innovation to produce genuine critical and creative thinker learners.

Recommended Future Research

Future research ought to investigate the factors which hamper learners' acquisition of English language skills between grades six and seven in the Lebanese public schools by piloting an experimental research which entails experimental and control groups. This research design will permit researchers to compare and contrast students' acquisition of language skills while integrating the four language skills through genuine topics using multiple teaching methods.

Eventually, although this study shows the reasons behind learners' inacquisition of language skills, other studies would highlight the prevailing educational gap between public and private schools and ways to narrow it.

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Appendix I:
Observation Checklist

Academically	Yes	No
English is used as a medium of instruction inside the classroom.		
Teacher engages ALL students in whole class discussion.		
Teacher enhances critical thinking in class.		
Teacher relates new pieces of information to students' previous knowledge.		
Teacher implements the practice of four language skills in class.		
Teacher varies teaching instruction in class.		
Teacher's practices concern students' different learning styles.		

Socially	Yes	No
English is used for communication in social settings.		

	Yes	No
Teacher promotes students to develop their self-esteem through variety of class practices.		
Teacher encourages students to express their points of view about a particular topic.		
Teacher helps students to relate their knowledge to their social practices.		
Teacher trains students to collaborate in small groups in class.		
Teacher emphasizes social values through his/her behavior or attitude.		

Culturally	Yes	No
Teacher raises students' cultural awareness toward their surrounding/country in class.		
Teacher relates class practices to students' cultural values.		
Teacher emphasizes cultural values through his/her behavior or attitude.		

Appendix II:
In-depth Interview Questions

1) To what extent are you satisfied with students' delivery of content?
2) What language difficulties do grade 7 students face?
3) What prerequisite skills should students have acquired?
4) Why are grade 7 students incapable of applying the basic skills in English?
5) What teaching method do you apply in your everyday class?
6) How do you help students learn since they have different learning styles?
7) How do your training programs (workshops) sound practical in your classroom with your students?
8) Why isn't Cooperative Learning method used in your class although it is the basic method of the national language textbook?
9) How is the integration of skills set clearly in the teachers' guidebook or curriculum?
10) To what extent does the teachers' guidebook you on aims or objectives?
11) How do you choose outside topics for students?
    (Are you guided to select topics of interest which can be used to integrate various skills? Listening and speech, writing activities, reading and spelling)
12) What classroom activities do you come up with to keep your students engaged in the learning process?

Appendix III:
Focus Group Interview Questions

1) What difficulties do you face in English Language?
2) What skills do you think you should have acquired before you reached this particular grade level?
3) What is your level of achievement in English Language? (Good – Fair – Unsatisfactory)
4) How do you implement/solve classroom activities in an English class?
   (individually / pair work / whole class /small groups)
5) Does your teacher implement frequently new teaching methods which interest you to learn?
6) What teaching methods do you prefer your teacher to apply in class, so that you could comprehend more effectively?
7) A. How often do you solve *listening* activities?
   a. once a week   b. once a month   c. twice a month   d. never
   B. How often do you solve *speaking* activities?
   a. once a week   b. once a month   c. twice a month   d. never
   C. How often do you solve *reading* activities?
   a. 3 times a week   b. twice a week   c. once a week   d. once a month
   D. How often do you solve *writing* activities?
   a. once a week   b. once a month   c. twice a month   d. never
8) How often do you work with supplementary material?
9) Explain which interests you, as learners, prefer more: reading outside material prepared by your teacher or passages provided by your textbook?

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