Is "The Earlier, The Better" for EFL in Saudi Arabia? Insights from Early Grades EFL Teachers at Saudi Primary Schools

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Abstract. In 2021, Saudi state schools introduced mandatory English language instruction starting in the first grade, marking a significant shift in early education. This study explores the perspectives of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers on the effectiveness of this policy, focusing on students' overall English proficiency, language acquisition, and cultural skills. It also addresses key challenges teachers face, including the synchronization of learning Standard Arabic with English and adapting curricula for young learners. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing questionnaires from 86 EFL teachers and follow-up interviews with 14 participants. Through thematic analysis, the study reveals that while teachers generally view early English instruction as beneficial for language development and cultural awareness, challenges such as language interference and age-related learning limitations persist. Teachers emphasized the need for curriculum adjustments, engaging teaching strategies, and enhanced teacher preparation. The findings underscore the need for targeted teacher training and English proficiency reforms to align with broader educational goals.

Keywords: educational reforms; early language exposure; Saudi Vision 2030; young English learners

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1. Introduction

In 2021, English language teaching was introduced as a mandatory subject, beginning in the first grade of Saudi state schools (Ministry of Education, 2021). This marks a significant shift in the country's educational landscape, despite earlier public reservations regarding the impact of early foreign language instruction on local culture and Arabic language acquisition (Abou-El-Kheir & MacLeod, 2019; Elyas & Picard, 2018). Historically, teaching English as a foreign language in the Saudi educational system was limited to intermediate and secondary schools (starting from seventh grade) (Al-Seghayer, 2014a). Currently, English is taught in Saudi Arabia for k-12 years across the primary, intermediate, and secondary stages, following a legal mandate for children to commence primary education by age six (Ministry of Education, 2005). Some Saudi experts have praised this move and anticipated positive outcomes for students' overall English language proficiency (Alshammari, 2020). This policy aligns with the objectives of Saudi Vision, the 2030s Human Capability Development Program, aimed at empowering citizens and enhancing global competitiveness (Alshammari, 2020; Saudi 2030 Vision, 2024). Furthermore, it aligns with the broader goals of the Vision, which aim to diversify the country's economy by developing an educated citizenry equipped with the necessary skills for transitioning toward a knowledge-based economy (Allmnakrah & Evers, 2019).

Extensive research on English language teaching initiatives has demonstrated their role in driving complex educational transformations (Fullan, 1992). Assessing the impact of such educational change necessitates a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perspectives (Ham & Dekkers, 2019). Moreover, examining these perspectives can provide valuable insights into effective educational policies and practices for future consideration. Indeed, widespread controversy surrounds the assumption that "the earlier, the better" regarding foreign language learning (Tuyet, 2020). Early language exposure is crucial to children's linguistic and cognitive development. Research shows that multilingual exposure enhances perspective-taking skills essential for effective communication, even in children who are not bilingual (Fan et al., 2015).

Consequently, this study investigates the perspectives of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers who have taught young learners in the first, second, and third grades of primary state schools in Saudi Arabia over the past three years. While directly affected by this recent transition, teachers do not always have the opportunity to express their views or be involved in educational reform policy (Alsuhaibani et al., 2021). Additionally, early grades hold significant importance as they represent the earliest stages of compulsory education in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, students in these grades are in the initial phases of Standard Arabic literacy development and familiarization with school routines (Alnomasy, 2023). Research on early exposure to second language learning supports the idea of a "sensitive period" for language acquisition, with studies showing that learners who begin before age 10 are more likely to achieve native-like proficiency, especially in grammar and pronunciation (Hartshorne et al., 2018; Ghasemi et al., 2011). However, there is debate, as some research suggests native-like proficiency is still possible after age 12, though less likely (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003; White & Genesee, 1996). Additionally, factors beyond age, such as school

resources and teacher training, play a critical role in language learning success (Enever, 2018; Singleton, 2014). This study investigates how EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia perceive the effectiveness of early English instruction in improving young learners' language proficiency and cultural skills while also addressing the challenges of teaching this age group.

The study addresses the research gap by examining how EFL teachers perceive the effectiveness of early English language instruction on young learners' overall language proficiency and cultural skills in Saudi primary schools. It also explores the challenges associated with teaching English to this age group and offers recommendations to mitigate them.

1.1 Objective of the Study
The primary objective of this study was to investigate the perspectives of experienced EFL teachers currently teaching early grades in Saudi Arabia regarding the effectiveness of introducing English language teaching to young learners enrolled in early grades at Saudi state schools. Specifically, the study intended to analyze teachers' insights into the effect of such changes on overall language proficiency. The expected impact of this change on students' cultural awareness and Arabic literacy was also explored. This study sheds light on the perceived challenges and obstacles faced by experienced practitioners during their experience teaching young learners in Saudi Arabia, as well as their recommendations to overcome such challenges.

1.2 Research Questions
This study intended to answer the following research questions.
RQ1: How do EFL teachers perceive the impact of starting English language instruction in first grade on students' overall English proficiency, including pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar acquisition?
RQ2: In what ways do EFL teachers perceive that early English language instruction influences students' development of Arabic literacy and cultural identity?
RQ3: What specific challenges do EFL teachers encounter in teaching English to early-grade students in Saudi Arabia, and what strategies do they recommend to enhance teaching effectiveness?

2. Review of Literature
2.1 Early Language Learning
Early language learning experiences significantly shape teachers' beliefs and instructional practices (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2016). Although the teaching method has a limited effect on students' linguistic progress, factors such as teacher proficiency and the amount of instructional time are crucial (Graham et al., 2017). Teachers often prioritize inspiration and early childhood pedagogy over specific language skills for effective early language teaching (Hahl & Pietarila, 2021). However, many educators feel uncertain about how best to support children's language development, relying primarily on holistic, experience-based approaches (Alstad, 2020). Professional development can enhance teaching practices and, in turn, positively influence children's language acquisition

(Alstad, 2020). Despite the critical role of teacher preparation in early language education, the requirements for teachers' language-related knowledge, especially for younger learners, remain unclear (Alstad, 2020). These findings underscore the need for further research on teacher education and the knowledge base necessary for effective early language instruction.

2.2 Early Language Learning in Saudi Arabia
Since its introduction in the 1920s and subsequent formal incorporation into the national curriculum in the 1950s, English language instruction in Saudi Arabia has been predominantly confined to intermediate (grades 7–9; ages 13–15) and secondary (grades 10–12; ages 16–18) educational tiers. English was not taught in primary schools due to concerns over its potential interference with Arabic language acquisition (Alshahrani, 2016). It has been taught starting in grade 7 for over 50 years. Discussions regarding the earlier introduction of English Language Teaching (ELT) into the state school curriculum have ignited heated societal debates. Saudis have voiced apprehensions regarding the impact of English on their children's cultural identity, sense of belonging, and religious beliefs (Elyas, 2008; Elyas & Picard, 2018). This belief is further reflected in the negative attitudes of some Saudi parents and students toward the language (Abou-El-Kheir & MacLeod, 2019).

One argument against the early introduction of English is its possible negative interference with learning Standard Arabic (Addamigh, 2011). Standard Arabic differs significantly from local spoken varieties of Arabic across all linguistic levels to the extent that it can be considered an independent language (Alresaini, 2017; Khamis-Dakwar, 2011; Maamouri, 1998). In this diglossic situation, students are first exposed to Standard Arabic in first grade and continue to learn and master reading and writing in this variety of Arabic. The Arabic writing system also possesses characteristics that directly contrast with English writing conventions, such as writing direction. Consequently, confusion between the two languages is anticipated among young learners. Wedell and Shumaimeri (2014) investigated EFL supervisors' perspectives regarding introducing EFL to higher grades in Saudi primary schools. Through analyses of supervisors' interviews, the researchers confirmed the widespread inconsistency among them during the first phase of implementation. They also highlighted a few attempts to address the issues before launching the second phase.

In 2005, there was a significant transformation in English language education in Saudi Arabia, with a pivotal policy introducing English into sixth-grade. In 2010, English was introduced to the fourth grade. However, there was some resistance from conservative parties who feared that English education might erode traditional culture and religion (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). The decision to integrate English from the fourth grade into the primary school curriculum in 2010 further solidified this shift (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). Qualified secondary-level English teachers without experience working with young learners were recruited to work at the primary level (Wedell & Shumaimeri, 2014). In areas with a shortage of English language teachers around the kingdom,

English teaching was assigned to primary school non-specialized general teachers whose English level was below the average (Alsuhaibani et al., 2023).

The Saudi Ministry of Education has collaborated with various international publishers, such as McGraw Hill, Oxford, MacMillan, and Pearson Education, to create English syllabi and curricula that adhere to a communicative approach to language teaching and learning (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). Despite these efforts, many teachers have expressed concerns that the targeted levels in textbooks are excessively challenging for students (Aljouei & Alsuhaibani, 2018). Furthermore, Alrabai (2016) discovered a discrepancy between curriculum content and students' practical language needs, highlighting a misalignment that may hinder effective language acquisition.

The decision to expand English language instruction further from the first grade (comprising three 45-minute classes per week) in 2021 in primary schools amplified reform efforts. This gradual change toward the earlier integration of EFL in the primary school curriculum is motivated by the unsatisfactory level of Saudi students' proficiency in English (Wedell & Shumaimeri, 2014). Many studies, such as Al-Johani (2009), Grami (2010), Alnasser (2013), and Al-Tamimi (2019), have suggested that the English proficiency level of Saudi students graduating from secondary school is, unfortunately, below expectations. Studies such as those by AlRashidi (2024) and Alrabai (2016) have analyzed various factors contributing to underperformance, including inadequate teaching methodologies, insufficient training for English teachers, and lack of exposure to language outside the classroom. Some researchers have suggested that English be introduced in the first grade of primary school (Al-Rasheed, 1998; Mandoura, 1994). Their views are based on a belief broadly connected to the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) that language is acquired faster and more easily at an early age.

2.3 Earlier Studies on the Effects of Early Exposure to Second Language

Several studies (e.g., Hartshorne et al., 2018; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018) support the existence of a "sensitive" period for language learning. In a large-scale study of over 600,000 English speakers, Hartshorne et al. (2018) found that those who begin learning a language before the age of 10 have the highest likelihood of achieving native-like proficiency in terms of grammar. Additionally, Ghasemi et al. (2011) argued that learning a foreign language before age 10 enhances students' pronunciation, accelerates learning, and improves retention. This finding aligns with earlier work by Singleton and Pfenninger (2018), who suggested that, while earlier exposure generally leads to better outcomes, individual differences and learning contexts also play pivotal roles. Similarly, some studies suggest a negative correlation between age and language attainment, with a critical period ending at puberty (e.g., Johnson & Newport, 1989; Johnson, 1992). Others propose that native-like competency can be achieved if learning begins before specific age thresholds within the critical period (Meisel, 2008; Selinger et al., 1975; Shim, 1993). Hartshorne et al. (2018) found that starting L2 learning before age 12 can lead to native-like proficiency.

Nevertheless, research on the impact of early exposure to a second language (L2) has produced mixed results. Other research results also suggest that native-like proficiency is attainable even after age 12 (e.g., Cranshaw, 1997; White & Genesee, 1996), though this view is contested (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003). Interestingly, some studies have found that older learners can be more efficient in language acquisition (Cadierno et al., 2020; Mu˜noz, 2011). Despite these conflicting findings, early language exposure is generally seen as beneficial for fostering positive attitudes toward language learning (Alsuhaibani et al., 2021). Researchers emphasize that successful early language learning depends on various factors beyond age, including school resources, teacher training, cultural context, and parental support (Bland, 2015; Butler, 2015; Enever, 2018; Singleton, 2014).

Accordingly, previous research on early language learning suggests that the assumption underpinning decisions about teaching English in Saudi Arabia — that starting younger is inherently better — warrants critical evaluation. The notion of age as the primary determinant of the effectiveness in instructed second language learning contexts thus requires further validation. While it is still too early to empirically assess the effect of that move on learners' language proficiency, this study aimed to contribute to this ongoing discourse by examining EFL teachers' views and perspectives of that change after experiencing teaching English to early grades within the Saudi context.

2. Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. It involved collecting qualitative data through semi-structured interviews following the analysis of quantitative data obtained through a questionnaire. This approach helps explain and contextualize the quantitative findings (Creswell, 2015). A mixed-method design enables a more comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation and combines the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Bryman, 2016). The study was conducted during the academic year 2023/2024.

2.1 Participants

The participants were EFL teachers actively teaching early grades during the study. Two English supervisors at the Ministry of Education facilitated access to this group of teachers, who distributed the questionnaire link via specialized telegram groups. In total, 86 EFL teachers, comprising 14 males and 72 females with varying levels of teaching experience, completed a questionnaire (Table 1). After questionnaire administration, participants were emailed an invitation to participate in a semi-structured interview and were requested to provide their consent. Ultimately, 14 teachers, comprising three males and 11 females, participated in the interview phase of the study.

The study utilized only teachers because they serve as the primary mediators between ELT policies and classroom implementation, uniquely positioning them to provide insights into the practical challenges and successes of cultural integration in language instruction. Their daily interactions with students and

firsthand experiences in navigating cultural sensitivities offer a rich data source that policymakers and textbook designers often lack. Moreover, teachers' perspectives are crucial for understanding the gap between intended curriculum reforms and actual classroom practices, making their input invaluable for developing more effective and culturally responsive ELT strategies in Saudi Arabia.

The sampling criteria for this study focused on EFL teachers actively engaged in teaching early grades, ensuring participants had relevant and current experience with the research topic. This purposive sampling approach allowed for collecting data from individuals directly involved in implementing EFL instruction at the crucial early stages of education. The sample size for the questionnaire (n=86) was determined to be adequate for providing a broad overview of teacher perspectives, while the smaller interview sample (n=14) allowed for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and opinions. The gender imbalance in the sample, with a higher number of female participants, reflects the general demographics of early-grade teachers in Saudi Arabia. While this imbalance is a limitation, it accurately represents the current teaching population in this context. The varying levels of teaching experience among participants provided a range of perspectives, from novice to veteran teachers, enriching the data with diverse insights based on years of classroom practice.

Table 1. Statistical description of demographic data

Variable	Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	14	16.3
	Female	72	83.7
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	19	22.1
	5 to 10 years	13	15.1
	11 to 15 years	26	30.2
	16 to 20 years	11	12.8
	More than 20 years	17	19.8
Total		86	100

A notable observation was the significant predominance of female teachers, who comprised 83.7% of the sample. The predominance of female teachers in primary education in Saudi Arabia is evident across some studies. For example, Aljaghthami and Ishak (2016) stated that women teachers work primarily in segregated schools for female students. This gender distribution reflects a broader trend in the field of education, especially at the primary level, where female educators often dominate (Skelton, 2012). Furthermore, this also reflects Saudi schools' recent change to allow female teachers to teach early-grade boys at girls' schools (Alnomasy, 2023).

The years of experience refers to the total number of years EFL teachers practicing teaching English to higher grades in Saudi Arabia. The total number of teaching years among the teachers varied, with a substantial section (30.2%) having 11 to 15 years of experience. This indicates that a seasoned workforce is more likely to possess a deeper understanding of pedagogical practices. However, the presence of teachers with less than five years and more than 20 years of experience (22.1%

and 19.8%, respectively) suggests a blend of fresh perspectives and veteran insights within the teaching community, potentially enriching the study's results. Regarding participants' education, all hold a Bachelor of Arts and Education degree specializing in English from Saudi Universities. Their qualifications involve training in the English language, educational courses, and a teaching practicum course. Their teaching training was conducted in intermediate and secondary state schools. The conditions of the state schools where they work are similar in many respects. The total number of students in classes varies between 28 and 38 (average: 34). Most classes are equipped with a projector, yet many are not working, and maintenance is not always timely and active.

2.2 Research Instruments

2.2.1 The questionnaire

The researchers developed an electronic questionnaire featuring both open and closed-ended questions to gather teachers' perceptions of teaching English to young learners in Saudi state schools (see Appendix 1). The items in the questionnaire were based on the existing literature on foreign language learning, in addition to an understanding of pertinent issues within the local Saudi ELT context. To ensure validity, the questionnaire was assessed and validated by the authors of the study as well as two PhD specialists experienced in EFL in Saudi Arabic. It was modified according to their recommendations.

The questionnaire was structured into four sections. The first section collected participants' demographic information (two items). The second elicited teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of introducing English in early grades and its impact on different language skills (nine items). The third section investigated teachers' evaluation of young learners' willingness to participate and communicate in English classes and their parents' degree of support in their learning process (three items). The fourth section focused on the possible challenges and difficulties in teaching English to these early grades (five items). Nineteen multiple-choice questions were designed on a 5-point Likert scale. Additionally, two open-ended questions were added to enable participants to elaborate on their perspectives and offer detailed feedback and suggestions for improving English language teaching for young learners. To ensure the reliability of the collected data, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated. It achieved a value of 0.7 across all items, which is an acceptable reliability score (Kennedy, 2022).

2.2.2 The interview

The semi-structured retrospective interviews consisted of 11 questions to provide participants with ample opportunities to reflect on their experiences of teaching young learners (see Appendix 2). The interviews were conducted using Zoom, audio recorded, and transcribed. Subsequently, the transcripts underwent a thematic coding process involving multiple readings, coding extracts based on their relevance to the research questions, and categorizing these codes under broader themes.

2.2.3 Pilot study

A pilot study with seven volunteering teachers was conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the questionnaire items and the interview questions. Their responses provided feedback on the wording of the questions, the appropriateness of items, and the overall structure of the questionnaire. This feedback highlighted areas of ambiguity and suggested additional questions that could better capture teachers' experiences and perspectives. Based on these insights, modifications were made to enhance the accuracy and effectiveness of both the questionnaire and the interview, ensuring its alliance with the study's objectives and that it was comprehensible to the target respondents. The pilot study also helped refine the data collection process, confirming the feasibility of the instruments for a larger sample.

2.3 Data Analysis

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to analyze the collected data. Qualitative data from the open-ended questionnaire responses and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover key themes. The qualitative analysis focused on understanding the perspectives of EFL teachers regarding the effectiveness of early English language teaching in Saudi Arabian elementary schools. The emerging themes included perceptions of language proficiency development, cultural awareness, challenges in curriculum adaptation, and recommendations for improving educational practices. For the quantitative analysis, SPSS version 24 was employed to process the data gathered from the Likert-scale responses in the questionnaire. Frequencies and percentages were computed to quantify teachers' agreement levels with various statements, providing a quantitative perspective to complement the qualitative findings. This mixed-methods approach thoroughly explored teachers' perceptions and experiences, offering insights into both the qualitative nuances and quantitative trends related to early English language education in Saudi Arabia.
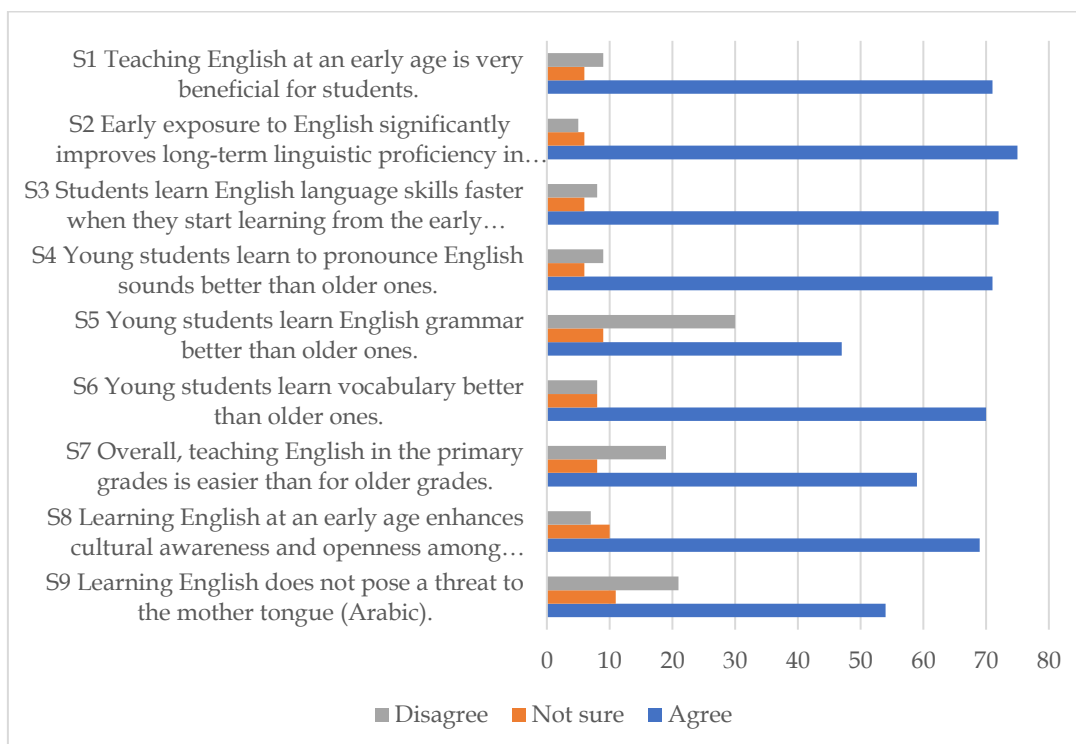
4. Results

4.1 The impact of starting EFL in the first grade on students' English proficiency and cultural awareness

The items in this section analyze teachers' perceptions of the proposed possible benefits of introducing English to early grades in Saudi Arabia on the overall language competency of learners as well as on specific language and cultural skills, as Table 2 shows. Figure 1 summarizes these results into three categories to enhance the visual discernibility of any trends.

Table 2. Teachers' perceptions of early introduction of English on language and cultural skills

#	Statement		Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
S1	Teaching English at an early age is very beneficial for students.	N	52	19	6	6	3
		%	60.5%	22.1%	7%	7%	3.5%
S2	I expect that early exposure to English significantly improves	N	52	23	6	4	1
		%	60.5%	26.7%	7%	4.7%	1.2%

S3	Students acquire English language skills more quickly when they begin learning in the early primary years.	N	47	25	6	6	2
		%	54.7%	29.1%	7%	7%	2.3%
S4	Young students learn to pronounce English sounds better than older ones.	N	45	26	6	6	3
		%	52.3%	30.2%	7%	7%	3.5%
S5	Young students learn English grammar better than older ones.	N	26	21	9	20	10
		%	30.2%	24.4%	10.5%	23.3%	11.6%
S6	Young students learn vocabulary better than older ones.	N	39	31	8	6	2
		%	45.3%	36%	9.3%	7%	2.3%
S7	Overall, teaching English to early grades is easier than older grades.	N	33	26	8	12	7
		%	38.4%	30.2%	9.3%	14%	8.1%
S8	Learning English at an early age enhances cultural awareness and openness among students.	N	38	31	10	6	1
		%	44.2%	36%	11.6%	7%	1.2%
S9	Learning English does not pose a threat to the mother tongue (Arabic).	N	30	24	11	13	8
		%	34.9%	27.9%	12.8%	15.1%	9.3%

long-term linguistic proficiency in English.

Figure 1. Effect of early introduction of english on language and cultural skills

The results presented in Table 2 overwhelmingly support the notion that early exposure to English benefits students' long-term language proficiency and development. A clear majority of respondents (82.6%) either strongly agreed or agreed that teaching English at an early age was advantageous for students (S1). This sentiment was further reinforced by 87.2% of those who strongly agreed or agreed that early exposure to English significantly improved their long-term linguistic proficiency (S2). Moreover, 83.8% of the teachers believed that students learned English language skills faster when they started learning from the early primary grades (S3). Interestingly, the teachers' opinions were divided on the acquisition of specific language components. While 82.5% strongly agreed or agreed that young students learn to pronounce English sounds better than older ones (S4), only 54.6% held the same view of grammar (S5). However, 81.3% strongly agreed or agreed that young students learned vocabulary better than older students (S6). The perceived ease of teaching English in primary grades compared to older grades (S7) was less conclusive, with 68.6% of the respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing with this statement.

Nonetheless, 80.2% of the teachers strongly agreed or agreed that learning English at an early age enhanced cultural awareness and openness among students (S8). Regarding the potential impact of learning English on students' native language (Arabic), opinions were somewhat mixed. While 62.8% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that learning English did not pose a threat to Arabic (S9), 24.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The results in Table 2 support the benefits of early exposure to English for students' long-term language proficiency. Most respondents believed in the

advantages of teaching English at an early age and noted improvements in linguistic proficiency, alongside faster skill acquisition in the early primary grades. Despite mixed views on specific language components, such as grammar, consensus was strong on pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition, highlighting the distinct advantages for young learners. These findings underscore the perceived educational and cultural benefits of early English education despite some concerns regarding its impact on students' native language acquisition (Arabic).

Table 3. Young learners' willingness to participate and communicate in English classes

#	Statement		Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
S10	Young students are active and welling to participate in English classes.	N	47	26	6	6	1
		%	54.7%	30.2%	7%	7%	1.2%
S11	Young students are willing to communicate during English classes.	N	28	31	14	10	3
		%	32.6%	36%	16.3%	11.6%	3.5%
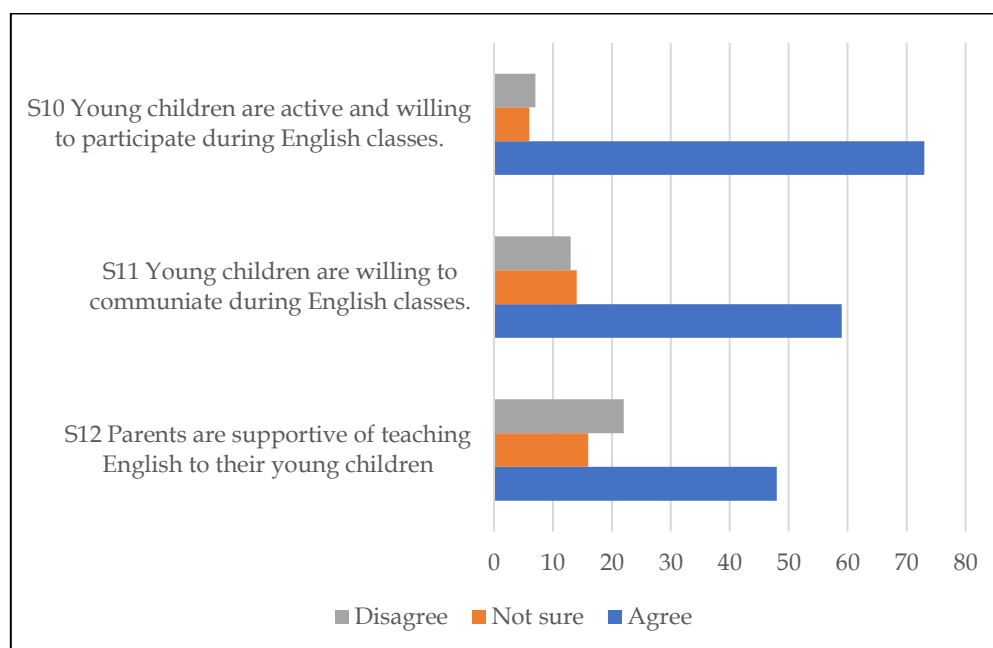
Figure 2. Young learners' willingness to participate and communicate in English classes

The data presented in Table 3 and figure 2 suggest that the young learners were generally active in English classes, whereas their levels of parental support varied. A significant majority of the respondents (84.9%) either strongly agreed or agreed that young students were willing to participate in English classes (S10). This

observation is reinforced by 68.6%, who strongly agree or agree that young children are willing to communicate during English classes (S11).

The findings in Table 3 provide evidence of the active engagement of young learners in English classes, supported by varying levels of parental involvement. Most respondents affirmed that young students demonstrate a high willingness to participate actively in English classes, indicating a positive attitude toward language learning. This opinion was further corroborated by many respondents agreeing that young children are enthusiastic about communicating in English during class, highlighting their engagement and motivation. These results underscore the importance of fostering an encouraging classroom environment that supports and enhances young learners' active participation and communication skills in English.

Table 4. Young learners' parents' support level

#	Statement		Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
S12	Parents are supportive of teaching English to their young children.	N	25	23	16	14	8
		%	29.1%	26.7%	18.6%	16.3%	9.3%

The data presented in Table 4 revealed a spectrum of opinions. While 55.8% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that parents were supportive of teaching English to their young children (S12), 25.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. These results illustrated a range of perspectives regarding parental support for teaching English to young children, with a notable majority expressing agreement on parental support. However, a significant minority held contrary views, indicating diverse attitudes among respondents regarding this aspect of early language education.

4.2 Rationale Behind Introducing English in Early Grades in Saudi Arabia
Teachers' replies to this question were based on the cognitive advantages unique to young learners and the global importance of English. Two main cognitive advantages were highlighted: the ease and speed of acquisition. Participant 9 stated that young learners "*can acquire the language very easily and fast.*" Furthermore, Participant 10 explained that such a move is "*[t]o make English language acquisition easier,*" reinforcing the belief in the natural proficiency of young learners in language acquisition. Participant 12 provided an explanation for that belief since "*small children learn the second language quickly and are not afraid of making mistakes.*"

Based on the teachers' views, the strategic significance of English in global communication is another critical factor leading to the introduction of English in early grades. Participant 2 mentioned the objective to be "*[t]o enhance English as a means of communication from an early age,*" which aligns with the increasing need for English proficiency in international contexts. Participant 8's statement, "*[t]o*

improve student ability to communicate effectively with foreigners who visit Saudi Arabia," further underscored the intention to enhance learners' communicative abilities. Participant 14 offered a similar explanation: "*Saudi Arabia nowadays is investing in creating globally competent citizens empowered with skills to participate in all international avenues. English is around us everywhere in Saudi Arabia now.*"

Participant 11 pointed to the problem of the general unsatisfactory level of Saudi students in English as one of the reasons for teaching English to early grades: "*in order to solve the problem of Saudi students' low level in English in general.*" Similar views were highlighted by Participant 14: "*Because the level of Saudi students in English was below the required level … Also, teaching at the college level is in English in many specializations. We need to prepare students to succeed in their future studies.*"

4.3 Impact of Early English Language Learning on Final Language Attainment
The Ministry of Education's decision to introduce English language education in early grades was met with broad approval among teachers (12 out of 14 interviewed teachers). They almost uniformly believe that an early introduction to English will significantly benefit students' future language attainment. However, this optimism was tempered by two participants' caution regarding the execution of this initiative. Participant 3 asserted that age is not the sole factor guaranteeing success in EFL teaching, as he stated, "*It's not enough to make the difference without applying an attractive curriculum and* offer [sic] *well-trained teachers who are prepared for this stage.*" These insights underscored the interconnectedness of early language introduction with the need for high-quality educational materials and well-prepared teachers to achieve desired outcomes in language proficiency. Similarly, Participant 7's cautionary note highlighted the importance of the curriculum's quality and teacher preparedness besides the early introduction, a sentiment echoed by Participant 6, who stressed the need for the interplay of several factors besides an early introduction to make an actual difference such as "*qualified teachers, sufficient time, engaging textbooks, positive attitudes towards learning English, etc.*"

4.4 Specific Language Skills Affected by Early English Introduction
Two participants (Participants 4 & 6) believed that listening comprehension and speaking abilities would have a direct positive effect. Others, like Participant 11, commented that the "*acquisition of the second language, like vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar practice,*" is significantly enhanced through early introduction. This suggests that teachers believe that early exposure not only facilitates the acquisition of basic language skills but also sets the stage for more advanced linguistic abilities, including grammar and syntax, as students advance in their learning.

4.5 EFL Teacher Preparedness
The readiness of EFL teachers to effectively instruct young learners is a topic of considerable debate. While a few interviewees reported confidence in their teachers' abilities, most (10) indicated a pressing need for enhanced training and support. Participant 1 articulated the necessity for improvement, stating, "*Teachers need more preparation and must improve their English,*" which suggested that a benchmark for language proficiency should be met to ensure effective teaching.

This is supported by Participant 12's skepticism regarding teachers' overall preparedness for this crucial educational task.

Participant 6's observation that "*some teachers are not qualified and their major isn't even English*" pointed to the problem of assigning English teaching to non-specialists when there is a shortage of teachers. Some difficulties in teaching early grades were articulated by other interviewees, as in Participant 7's comment:

> [t]he majority of our teachers have the basics to reach English teaching objectives but lack the knowledge of teaching this early stage. This hinders their efforts to reach the target level of English. The lack of using Communicative Language Teaching and some strategies also makes it difficult to achieve the target level.

Two participants (11 and 14) contended that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia were trained to teach only intermediate and secondary school students during their education. This diversity in teacher readiness underscores the need for comprehensive professional development programs (as stated by Participants 1 and 9) that can elevate all teachers to a standard level of competence and confidence when teaching English to young learners.

Additionally, the teachers highlighted the need for professional development and support to implement the suggested changes effectively. The call for "*adequate training and resources for teachers to adapt to curriculum changes*" (Participant 42) underlined the critical role of teachers' preparedness in the successful overhaul of language teaching methodologies.

4.6 The Effect of Early EFL Instruction on Learning Standard Arabic
The concern over whether teaching English at an early age might disrupt Arabic literacy learning has elicited mixed responses. Most participants (9) were optimistic that bilingual education could be effectively managed. Participant 3 reassured by stating, "*No, never because the age is above 5,*" implying that children at this age are capable of distinguishing between languages, which minimizes the risk of confusion. Similarly, many other interviewees stated, "*No,*" further dispelling concerns about the negative impacts on Arabic literacy.

While acknowledging possible interference, some participants (2, 8, and 9) stressed that learners could easily overcome it with specific adjustments to the curriculum. Others thought the only negative effect might be a slight delay in the initial acquisition of both languages. As Participant 14 put it, "*this move might result in a delay in learning both languages, but reaching proficiency in both languages is also possible with time.*"

However, the caution raised by Participants 10, 14, and 8 regarding the possibility of students confusing the directionality of writing in English and Arabic highlights a specific area requiring attention in curriculum design. Participant 14 also observed that some students "*open the books the opposite way.*" This suggests the need for strategies that clearly differentiate between the two languages within the educational environment, ensuring that students can navigate both linguistic systems without detriment to their literacy in either language. In contrast to most

teachers' perspectives, some suggested delaying the introduction of English language instruction to the third grade to focus on the mother tongue in the early years of schooling.

The teachers' perspectives on balancing English and Arabic literacy development revealed a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in bilingual education. Several participants emphasized the importance of maintaining a strong foundation in Arabic while introducing English. Participant 5 noted, "*We need to ensure that students have a solid grasp of Arabic grammar and vocabulary before intensifying English instruction.*" This sentiment was echoed by Participant 11, who suggested, "*Integrating Arabic cultural elements into English lessons can help reinforce both languages simultaneously.*" Some teachers proposed innovative approaches, such as thematic units that explore topics in both languages, to foster connections between Arabic and English literacy skills. However, concerns were raised about the current curriculum's ability to support this balanced approach effectively. Participant 7 observed, "*Our textbooks don't always provide enough opportunities for cross-linguistic comparisons, which could greatly benefit students' overall language awareness.*" These insights underscore the need for carefully designed curricula and teaching strategies that complement, rather than compete with, Arabic proficiency while introducing English at an early age.

**4.7 Challenges and Recommendations for Teaching English to Early-Grade Students**
As shown in Table 5 and figure 3, most respondents (87.2%) either strongly agreed or agreed that there were significant challenges in teaching English to this age group (S13). The lack of appropriate educational materials and resources is a notable concern, with 77.9% of the respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that it hinders effective English teaching for this group (S14). Remarkably, an overwhelming majority of respondents (95.3%) strongly agreed or agreed that this age group required teaching methods in English classes that differed from other age groups (S15). Opinions regarding the preference for communicating with learners only in English in early-grade English classes (S16) were divided, with 50% of the respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing, while 30.2% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Classroom management emerged as another challenge, with 61.6% of the respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that it is more difficult for young children when learning English (S17).

Table 5. Challenges in teaching English to young learners

#	Statement		Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
S13	There are significant challenges in teaching English to this age group.	N	45	30	6	3	2
		%	52.3%	34.9%	7%	3.5%	2.3%
S14	The lack of educational materials/resources hinders effective	N	36	31	12	5	2
		%	41.9%	36%	14%	5.8%	2.3%

	English teaching for this group.					
S15	This age group requires teaching methods in English classes that differ from other age groups.	N	59	23	2	2	0
		%	68.6%	26.7%	2.3%	2.3%	0%
S16	Communicating with learners exclusively in English in early-grade English classes poses a challenge to both teachers and students.	N	22	21	17	18	8
		%	25.6%	24.4%	19.8%	20.9%	9.3%
S17	Classroom management is more difficult when teaching English to young children.	N	30	23	14	13	6
		%	34.9%	26.7%	16.3%	15.1%	7%
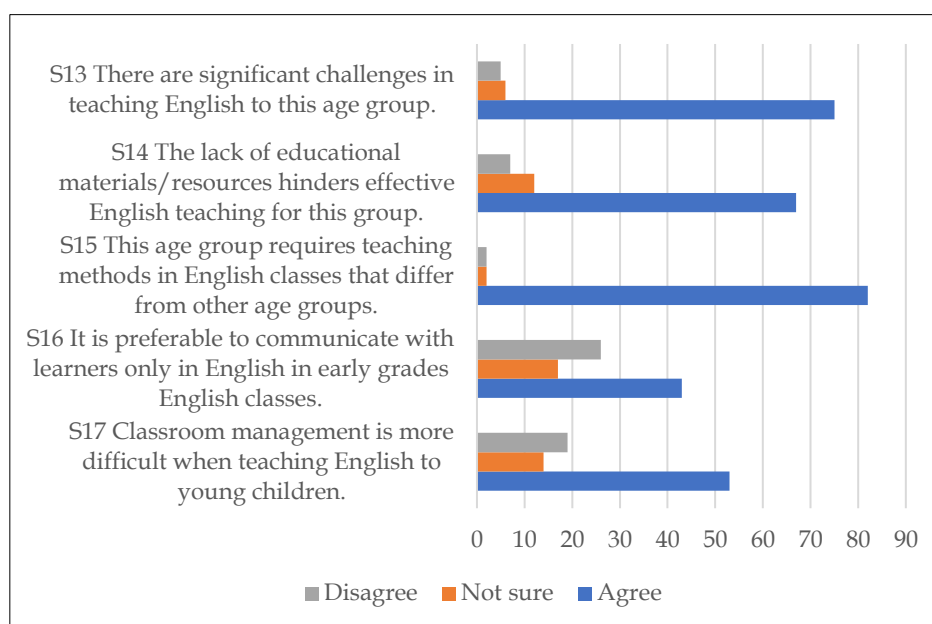
Figure 3. Challenges in teaching English to young learners

Regarding teaching early-grade students, the interview results revealed several challenges, ranging from classroom management because of the young learners' age to meeting the diverse educational needs of young learners who are "*super active.*" Crowded classes were recurrently mentioned by participants. Participant 6 added, "*Not enough hours, some teachers aren't qualified, teachers of early ages must have no more than 20 h weekly,*" emphasizing the logistical and qualitative challenges in delivering effective English language education. Additionally, Participant 8 highlighted teachers' "*lack of knowledge about early-stage learners' traits*" as one of the challenges observed after the introduction of English to the

early-grade curriculum. Many other challenges were related to teachers' preparedness and qualification, as in Participant 11's argument that:

> *Their inadequate training in English, to be honest. Most English teachers are not proficient in English. To improve students' levels, teachers' levels in English need to be improved. This can be done by testing teachers' proficiency regularly and enrolling them in advanced English language teaching courses that may help them do their jobs well.*

Several participants expressed this challenge. Some participants also considered unsuitable textbooks as one of the factors complicating the process of teaching English to young learners, in addition to the lack of the required technological equipment in most schools.

4.8 Curriculum and Textbook Suitability
The suitability of the current curriculum and textbooks for early graders is another area that has divergent views. While the three interviewees found the materials somewhat appropriate, many advocated for significant improvements to better engage young learners and meet their developmental needs. The mild endorsement of Participants 2 and 3, "*Somehow*," suggests that while the existing materials may offer some value, there is substantial room for enhancement. As Participant 8 put it, "*I think this series should be replaced by one which considers early-stage needs*," which represented the need for a developmentally appropriate curriculum that considers young learners' cognitive abilities.

Participant 7's critique, "*No. We need an attractive syllabus starting from kindergarten which concentrates on speaking and listening*," called for a more dynamic and interactive approach to English language education from the earliest stages. This point was also stressed by Participant 1, "*Books should include a greater variety of activities that promote active language practice*" like '*plays*' and '*oral presentations*' to encourage active use of the English language. This perspective was reinforced by Participant 11's suggestion to integrate "*educational YouTube channels*" and "*live conversations with native speakers through platforms like Cambly*," which advocated for using modern, technology-driven resources to create a more immersive and effective language learning experience.

Suggestions in the replies to the questionnaire ranged from simplifying the curriculum for first and second-graders to focusing primarily on basic vocabulary and phrases before introducing the alphabet. One teacher proposed that there was a need for "*Simplifying the curriculum to focus on simple words and terms, then gradually introduce the alphabet from the third grade*" (Participant 7), echoing a widespread sentiment for a less dense curriculum that aligns more closely with the cognitive and linguistic development stages of young children.

Another recurring theme is the importance of foundational language skills. The teachers advocated focusing on phonics, simple vocabulary, and basic linguistic structures before delving into more complex grammar and syntax. This approach aims to solidify the basics of language and to provide a strong foundation for further learning. For example, "*Foundational language skills such as phonics and basic vocabulary should be emphasized before introducing complex grammatical structures*"

(Participant 15), which suggests a step-wise learning trajectory that builds competence and confidence among young learners.

4.9 Teaching Hours Sufficiency

The debate over whether the allocated teaching hours are sufficient to ensure significant progress in English language proficiency among young learners highlights the differing perspectives among educators. Participant 4 believed that "*3 per week, yes, enough,*" suggesting optimism that the current allocation can yield positive outcomes if utilized effectively. However, this perspective is not universally valid. Participant 11 articulated the need for a more robust schedule: "*Not at all. Any less than two classes a day won't make the required progress,*" suggesting that the current allocation falls short of what is needed for substantive language acquisition.

Participant 9 provided a middle ground, asserting that "*It might be achieved but not in these current textbooks, which are not made for the target age,*" suggesting that the effectiveness of teaching hours depends on the suitability of materials and methods employed.

5.10 Teaching Strategies and Teachers' Enjoyment

The teachers voiced a strong preference for pedagogical innovations that cater to the needs of young learners. Their replies emphasized the necessity of diversifying teaching methods and materials to make learning more "*appealing and conductive to learning.*" This includes, for example, the use of "*storybook-like textbooks*" and the "*circle learning practice*" (Participant 13), highlighting the potential of narrative and imagery to enhance engagement and the need for an untraditional class setting.

The emphasis on gamification (by nine participants in the interview) and interactive learning methods, such as role-play, which are crucial for engaging young learners, was widely shared among participants. Participant 3 reinforced the value of fun in learning: "*For this age, teachers must consider learning by games,*" highlighting the importance of playful, engaging strategies in the educational process. Participant 5 added, "*running dictation and role play,*" offering specific examples of interactive strategies that can make learning more enjoyable and effective for young students. Participant 14 summed it up: "*Gaming, singing, puzzles, in other words, learning through play.*" Participant 1 recommended that "*teachers should consider that children learn through fun activities. They do not fit in traditional lectures.*"

Beyond these themes, some teachers emphasized the potential benefits of integrating cultural and educational trips to enhance language learning. Participant 22 stated, "*I hope to intensify trips and external visits to cultural, educational places, and educational exhibitions to reinforce students' performance,*" suggesting that real-world experiences can significantly enrich the language-learning process.

Most teachers reported enjoying teaching this age group, but not all did so. Participant 7 stated: "*Some teachers are more proficient in teaching this special stage.*

It's easy to find them through their supervisors or school principals." Participant 11 explained: "*It depends on the teachers' preferences. Some like young children, and this preference needs to be taken into consideration.*"

4.11 Recommendations for Improvement
To address these challenges, participants offered a range of recommendations to enhance English teaching and learning among young learners. Interestingly, most participants agreed with almost all recommendations. Many (11 interviewees out of 14) focused on teachers' preparation linguistically and proficiently; as Participant 1 put it: "*teachers should undergo high-standard preparation programs and utilize the latest strategies, such as gamification. Ongoing professional development is essential to stay up-to-date.*" Several participants highlighted the need to focus on teachers' English language proficiency levels, suggesting the need to teach shadowing with native English speakers (Participants 5, 11, and 13).

Additionally, the five participants stressed the need to equip teachers with the required educational knowledge of EFL learners' psychological and cognitive needs. They highlighted the need for special training of teachers in teaching methods and strategies appropriate for students of this particular age. Participant 8 discussed a crucial concern about teacher preparation in Saudi Primary schools: As he commented, most early-grade primary EFL teachers were nonspecialized. They were required to teach English in their schools, with a diploma certificate, for a few months. According to him, this limited background knowledge of English severely affects students' English levels. Participant 13 concluded the interview with the following remarks:

> *If we need to take big steps forward for English teaching in Saudi Arabia, we need to start with teachers. Teachers need training before they teach early grades. I recommend having regular evaluations of English language skills and, based on the results, offer remedy programs for those below the accepted level. Programs like Khebrat, which involves shadowing with native speakers, are very helpful, too. Reducing the hour-load will help teachers focus more on their students.*

Participant 12 suggested, "*Gamification is the best strategy to teach this stage,*" reinforcing the consensus on the importance of engaging and interactive teaching methods. Moreover, Participant 6's recommendation for "*qualified teachers, enough hours, gamification, better curriculum*" encapsulated the multifaceted approach needed to elevate English language education for young learners. Indeed, the factor of limited hours was raised by other participants who recommended adding at least two extra online hours, as well as the involvement of students in extracurricular activities in English.

Many participants articulated the need for equipped language laboratories. Participant 9's advice of "*offering English labs and adding two remote learning lectures per week*" suggested the need for leveraging technology and increasing instructional time could significantly impact learners' English proficiency. Creating an enriched classroom environment with visual and auditory learning aids is crucial for language acquisition. For instance, "*providing a classroom environment with static educational resources to facilitate learning*" (Participant 18) pointed toward tangible learning aids in fostering an immersive language

learning experience. Finally, Participant 3 summarized their recommendations with "*practice, practice, practice. This is the only way we can improve their language.*" Figure 4 summarizes the factors that teachers believed were necessary to assist the success of EFL instruction in the early grades in Saudi Arabia.
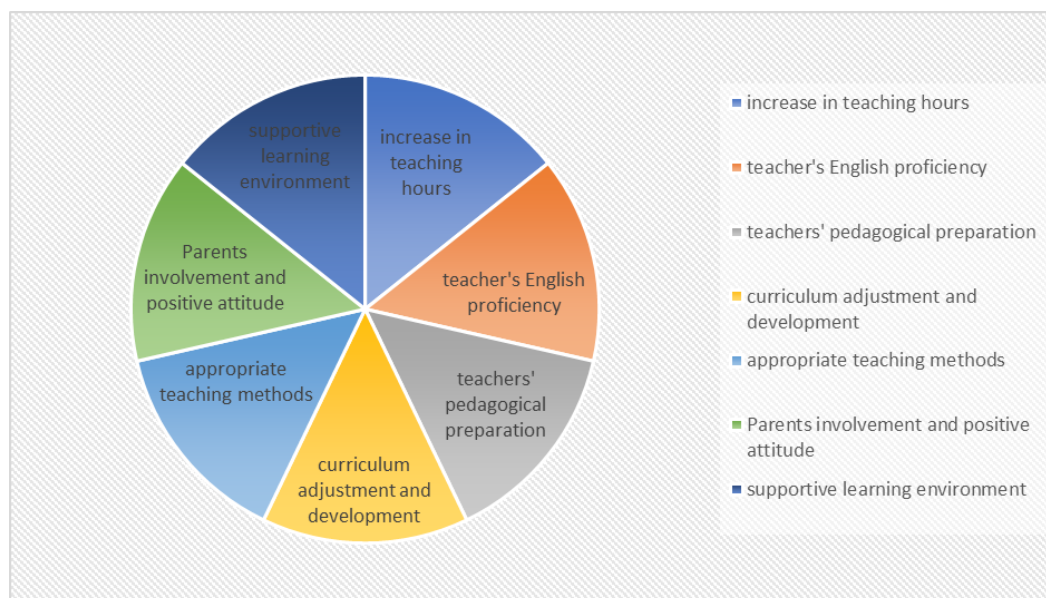
Figure 4. Factors expected to contribute to success in teaching English to young learners

5. Discussion

5.1 Teacher Perspectives on Early English Instruction

Our results indicate that teachers hold primarily positive views on introducing English in early grades, consistent with earlier studies by Alsuhaibani et al. (2023) and Wedell and Alshumaimri (2014). Teachers in our study emphasized quicker language acquisition and improved communication abilities among young learners, supporting findings by Zhengwe and Kerong (2019) on phonological attainment and Sun et al. (2022) on oral proficiency development through task-based learning. The optimism regarding grammar proficiency aligns with Hartshorne et al. (2018), who found higher chances of native-like proficiency when language learning begins before age 10. However, our study also revealed that teachers view age as just one factor in successful EFL learning, suggesting a more complex interplay of variables.

5.2 Impact on Arabic Literacy

The mixed opinions on the impact of early English instruction on Arabic literacy contribute to the ongoing debate in bilingual education research. While most teachers in our study reported no negative interaction, some concerns about interference echo findings in other bilingual contexts. This highlights the need for further research on the specific dynamics of Arabic-English bilingual development in Saudi Arabia, an area that remains understudied compared to other language pairs.

5.3 Challenges in EFL Teaching

The challenges reported by teachers in our study, including limited resources, curriculum issues, and insufficient teaching hours, corroborate the findings by AlRashidi (2024) and Alrabai (2016). The emphasis on teacher preparation aligns with Zhengwe and Kerong's (2019) results in the Chinese EFL context, underscoring a global concern in EFL education. Our findings extend this discussion by highlighting the specific issue of non-specialist teachers being assigned to English classes in Saudi Arabia, a factor not prominently discussed in previous literature in this context. A robust, long-term plan for enhancing teacher training, particularly focusing on non-specialist teachers is necessary. Exploring partnerships with international education bodies or leveraging technology for remote teacher training could be viable options.

To address the diverse opinions regarding parental support, mechanisms for greater parent engagement need to be included within the plan of EFL introduction to early grades in Saudi Arabia. Workshops, regular communication, and collaborative learning activities involving parents could improve buy-in and address concerns about early English learning.

5.4 Curriculum and Cultural Considerations

Teachers' advocacy for curriculum adjustments supports observations by Elyas and Picard (2018) on the evolving nature of ELT in Saudi Arabia. The need for culturally appropriate content aligns with Al-Shehri's (2020) call for better reflection of local values in ELT materials. Our findings provide current insights into this ongoing challenge, complementing earlier work by Aljouei and Alsuhaibani (2018) on textbook appropriateness. The suggestion to implement an English as an International Language framework, as proposed by Tryzna (2023), is supported by our teachers' emphasis on cultural awareness and acceptance.

5.5 Pedagogical Reforms

The recommendations for interactive content, technology integration, and increased exposure to English through additional classes align with global trends in early language education, as Enever (2018) and Assulaimani (2019) discussed. Our study extends these findings by providing specific suggestions tailored to the Saudi context, such as applications for live conversations with native speakers and regular educational site visits. Given the identified need for an attractive curriculum, the study recommends allocating more resources to develop age-appropriate, engaging, and culturally relevant English curricula. The curriculum should also be supported by modern teaching aids that encourage communicative competence from a young age.

5.6 Teacher Training and Support

The strong emphasis on enhanced teacher training and support in our findings reinforces a consistent theme in EFL research, echoing recommendations by Al-Seghayer (2014b) and findings from other contexts (Enever, 2018; Garton, 2014). Our study contributes to this literature by highlighting the specific needs of

teachers in early-grade EFL instruction in Saudi Arabia, an area that has received limited attention in previous research.

Based on our findings and broader literature, we propose several practical recommendations for improving teacher training in Saudi Arabia. These include establishing government-funded professional development programs designed explicitly for early-grade EFL teachers, developing university collaborations for specialized certification programs, implementing mentorship systems, utilizing technology-enhanced training platforms, facilitating international exchange programs, and creating a mandatory certification process for early-grade English teachers. These initiatives aim to enhance language proficiency and pedagogical skills tailored to young learners, ensuring teachers are adequately prepared for the unique challenges of early-grade instruction.

6. Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, the study has significant implications for educational policy in Saudi Arabia. We recommend revising the early-grade English curriculum to better align with young learners' cognitive development and the Saudi cultural context. Increasing investment in tailored educational resources, implementing supportive policies and professional training for EFL teachers are steps of paramount importance to promote success for EFL teaching to young learners in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, it is vital to encourage parental engagement by involving parents more directly through engagement programs, workshops and other communication channels that explain the long-term benefits of early EFL instruction for their children. Promoting cross-ministerial collaboration, and allocating funding for longitudinal research on the impacts of early English instruction are recommended to support EFL teaching to early grade learners. These policy changes and teacher training recommendations provide a framework for enhancing early-grade EFL instruction that aligns with national educational goals and the evolving needs of Saudi students in a globalized world.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the perspectives of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia after introducing English as a mandatory subject starting in the first grade of primary school. Teachers expressed positive and negative views on whether early English instruction is beneficial. While they agreed that early exposure to English enhances language skills, pronunciation, and cultural awareness, they also identified challenges, such as the need for curriculum adjustments and engaging teaching methods tailored to young learners. Teachers emphasized that age alone does not determine language proficiency, highlighting the importance of holistic educational reforms, including better teacher preparation, increased contact hours, and innovative strategies. Furthermore, the study underscored the role of a supportive learning environment, parental involvement, and student enthusiasm in optimizing language learning outcomes. The study also called for further research on balancing early English instruction with preserving native language development. The limitations included the study's focus on teacher perspectives without input from students or parents, the small sample size for

interviews, and the reliance on subjective judgments. To provide a more comprehensive assessment, future research should incorporate standardized measures of learning outcomes, classroom observations, and triangulate findings from multiple data sources to evaluate the long-term impact of early English education in Saudi Arabia.

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Ethical approval: Based on the Saudi Ministry of Education research review board rules and regulations, the instruments used in this research were reviewed and approved. Permission to conduct the study was thus granted.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

Authors' Contribution: The authors have all contributed equally to different sections of this study. The research instruments were designed, reviewed, and validated by all authors. The first author wrote the introduction, collected the study's data, and completed the methodology section. The second author compiled the background of the study, the sections of earlier studies, and the conclusions. The third author analyzed the data and stated the results and the discussion section. All authors reviewed the whole manuscript and approved it.

Appendix (1)
The Effectiveness of Teaching English to early grades in Saudi State schools: a questionnaire

Dear English Teacher,

This questionnaire measures your experience teaching English to primary grades after the Ministry's decision to include the English curriculum in early primary schools in 2021.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. The information you will provide will be used for research purposes only.

Please choose below if you are willing or not to participate in this study:
1. I am willing to participate in the study
2. I am not willing to participate in the study

Part One: Basic Information about the Teacher

Gender:
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

Years of Teaching Experience
- ☐ Less than 5 years
- ☐ 5 to 10 years
- ☐ 11 to 15 years
- ☐ 16 to 20 years
- ☐ More than 20 years

Part Two: Your opinion on the effectiveness of teaching English to young children in early grades at Saudi state schools.

First: Linguistic and Cultural Skills
Teaching English at an early age is very beneficial for students.
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

I expect that early exposure to English significantly improves long-term proficiency in English.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Students learn English skills faster when they start learning from early grades at primary school.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Young students learn to pronounce sounds in English better than older ones.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Young students learn English grammar better than older ones.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Young students learn vocabulary better than older ones.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Overall, teaching English in early grades is easier than teaching older students.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Learning English at an early age enhances cultural awareness and openness among students.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Learning English does not pose a threat to the mother tongue (Arabic).

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Third: Young learners' willingness to participate and communicate in English classes and their parents' level of support

Young students are active and willing to participate in English classes.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Young children are willing to communicate during English classes.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral

- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

English Parents are supportive of teaching English to their young children.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Fourth: Challenges and difficulties in teaching English to young children
There are significant challenges in teaching English to this age group.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

The lack of educational materials/resources hinders effective English teaching to this group.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

This age group requires teaching methods in English classes that differ from other age groups.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

It's preferable to communicate with learners only in English during early-grade English classes.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree

- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Classroom management is more difficult when teaching English to young children.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree Somewhat
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Agree Somewhat
- ☐ Strongly Agree

Part Four: Feedback and Suggestions
1. Do you have any suggestions for improving the teaching of English to young children, such as changes in the curriculum or suggestions for teaching methods suitable for them?
2. Additional comments on teaching English to young children enrolled at early grades in Saudi state schools:

Appendix (2)
Interview questions
1. Why do you think the Ministry of Education decided to introduce English to early grades (1st-2nd-3rd) in Saudi Arabian public schools?
2. Do you think this decision will make a difference in final English language attainment of students?
3. Can you elaborate on the specific language skills, if any, you expect to be affected by this decision?
4. Do you think EFL teachers are prepared enough to teach this age group?
5. Do you think teaching English at this stage might interfere with learning Arabic reading and writing?
6. Do you think the curriculum and textbooks are suitable for learners in these grades?
7. Do you think the teaching hours (3 classes per week) are sufficient to change the English language proficiency level of Saudi Arabian students?
8. Are there specific teaching strategies that you specifically used with this age group?
9. Do you think teachers enjoy teaching these grades?
10. What challenges did you face when teaching these grades?
11. What would you recommend to improve the status of teaching English to young learners in Saudi Arabia?