

# The English Language Curriculum at Palestine's Schools: An Analysis of the Sixth Grade English Curriculum and the Inclusion of a Cultural Spot

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## Abstract

This paper surveys the development of the Palestinian educational system in general and the English general and the English curriculum in specific. That is, it illustrates the developmental stages of the educational system across various periods of time and the Palestinian curriculum guidelines together with the achievements. It also addresses the English curriculum of the sixth grade, and analyzes Unit 7 of the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade textbook. Consequently, some modifications were suggested regarding various skills, and the need of including cultural spots in each unit was highlighted. The researcher suggested some ideas related to the use of role-cards in teaching speaking and cultural spots to teacher reading. For speaking, the researcher planned some role cards, in which each student has a role to play, i.e offering help for the grandparents in collecting olives. For reading, a cultural paragraph about the plant of mango in India was suggested. These sample activities make connections with students experience and the culture of others.

**Keywords:** Palestinian educational system, English Curriculum, textbook.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education in Palestine is like the "Phoenix", which regenerates or is born again and rises again from among the ashes. It was characterized as being governed by the foreign rule. More specifically, the Ottoman empire imposed the Turkish language on Palestine; the British controlled the textbooks, curricula, the language and even funding; the Israelis demolished to the ground the educational infrastructure or any initiative to develop it. Nowadays and despite the Israeli interference and occupation, the Palestinian Authority is building a new infrastructure based on the national and native brains and efficiencies and funded both locally and internationally. The Palestinians are now able to design their own curricula, use international English curricula and textbooks in terms of international standards like (CEFR) and receive funding for scholarships based on the excellence in TOEFL and IELTS.

## 2. The educational system in Palestine background

The educational system in Palestine, whose capital is Jerusalem, has gone through unprecedented and unique experience. Specifically, up to 1948, Palestine was under the British occupation, where the total educational system and curriculum was under the

hegemony of the colonial Britain. That is, the Palestinians had never been given the chance to decide on or design their educational system or even their curriculum; therefore, the curricula and consequently the textbooks were British with British culture, traditions and principles, which promoted the culture of occupation. In 1948, Palestine was handed over by the British to the Israeli occupation. Consequently, the educational system was also put under the dominance of the Israeli occupation. More specifically, the Palestinians in the province of West Bank were obliged to use the Jordanian curriculum (since Jordan is adjacent to West Bank), the Palestinians in the province of Gaza Strip had to use the Egyptian curriculum (since Egypt is closely attached to Gaza Strip). Again, the Palestinians had no choice but to accept this new system since they were powerless. As a result, the Palestinians were not able to build their educational policy in general and their national curriculum in specific.

Since 1994, when the peace agreement (Oslo Accords) was signed, things have changed. That is, in 1994 the Palestinian Authority was established under the leadership of the icon of Palestine Yasser Arafat, Abu Ammar. According to this authority, the Palestinians

have had the power to build up their independent educational system and design the Palestinian national curricula. Consequently and in 1994, the first Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) was established. Since its inception, MOEHE lobbied the support of all the Palestinian brains and capacities in order to come up with the first Palestinian curriculum, which came to surface and light in 2000. This new curriculum is the first ever curriculum with pure Palestinian touches, essence, content, and brains.

### 3. The basic guidelines of the Palestinian curriculum:

- Palestine is a democratic state, ruled by a democratic parliamentary system.
- Palestine is a peace-loving state, working towards international understanding and cooperation based on equality, liberty, dignity, peace and human rights.
- Palestinian national and cultural identity must be fostered and developed.
- The Palestinian people are an integral part of the Arab nation, working toward unity, liberty, development and prosperity of the nation.
- Social justice, equality and the provision of equal learning opportunities for all Palestinians, to the limits of their individual must be ensured without discrimination on grounds of race, religion, color, or sex.
- Opportunities must be provided to develop all Palestinians intellectually, socially, physically, spiritually and emotionally, to become responsible citizens, able to participate in solving the problems of their community, their country and the world.
- Education plays a vital role in social and economic development within the context of the Arab world in particular and the world in general (MOEHE, 1998).

### 4. Achievements of the Palestinian English curriculum

As per these basic guidelines, the Palestinian English curriculum came out to attain the following successes:

- The Palestinian identity is established; the Palestinian English curriculum is now called, "English for Palestine". Previously, it was called "Petra" – a city in Jordan.
- New teaching approaches like the communicative approach are introduced to replace the old fashioned grammar translation method and audio-lingual method, which regarded the learner as tool to implement rules, parrot or repeat certain expressions.
- Communicative language teaching has qualified the Palestinian students to excel in the international standardized tests like TOEFL and IELTS, and so win scholarships in various areas of knowledge.

- English learning is now started from the kindergarten grade. Previously, children used to start English learning from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. This completely upgraded the students' English competence.
- Cooperative learning and inductive learning replaced the traditional and deductive learning. In the classroom, the students work and write together, guess, infer, dramatize and contest.
- Outside the classroom, the students can now visit other countries in terms of exchange programs, where they can practice their English.

However, the students are still distracted between the process and the product model of the English curriculum. That is, the curriculum is designed as a product curriculum; the behavioral objectives are set beforehand and measure what should the students achieve. In addition, the textbooks are designed from the point of view of the higher administration. In conclusion, qualitative leaps have been achieved and new horizons have been opened with the new Palestinian English curriculum. However, this curriculum can be modified to include the element of culture teaching through adding cultural topics to each grade of English curriculum and using an eclectic curriculum, which involves both process and product, not to mention the need to organize training programs for the English teachers.

### 5. Analysis of the sixth grade English curriculum

The syllabus of English for the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade in Palestine is mainly based on the basic guiding Principles of the First Palestinian Curriculum. Specifically speaking, the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade syllabus aims to promote the Palestinian identity and practically keep abreast with the updated trends and theories of English language learning and teaching.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Grade syllabus is distinctive in objectives, components and structure and learning styles. With respect to the objectives, the following were set:

- The introduction of high-frequency English words.
- To introduce simple and increasingly more complex key grammatical structures
- To provide opportunities for children to engage in meaningful and authentic activities in English.
- To practice and extend children's abilities in the key skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing (Teacher's Bok 6, 2018, p.4).

Regarding the components and structure, the syllabus is comprised of 18 units evenly distributed to two semesters. Each unit is built on a theme to be used to teach the other skills in context. For example, there are the themes of "The Olives Tree in Palestine" and "A visit to the Dead Sea in Palestine". Each unit consists of eight

periods of 40 minutes each. The four skills ( Speaking, listening, reading ,and writing) are taught in an integrative way. In addition, the syllabus suits the different learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (see the attached file).

The syllabus of English for the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade is an eclectic one; it includes both the elements of process and product syllabus. In terms of the general objectives of teaching English in Palestine as set by MOEHE, the syllabus is process. The reader will see the following statements:

- Language learning is an active process.
- Language learning is a developmental process.
- Language learning is a decision- making process.
- Testing is an aid to learning (Ministry of Education, 2015).

This means that this syllabus is more interactive, learner – centered, assessment is not the main objective; on the contrary, it aims to promote learning. However, if the reader reads the syllabus and follows up the actual implementation on the ground, the result will support the product syllabus. First of all, this syllabus is solely prepared by specialists (teachers, researchers, supervisors) with no cooperation with the learners, who are the axis of the teaching and learning process. The syllabus explicitly includes the language part which mainly deals with grammar like the tenses, conjunctions ...etc. This directly informs the teachers to teach grammar in the traditional deductive way with less students' interaction and more teacher superiority. Assessment is also regarded as the optimum goal; there are four assessment units in the Pupil's Book to revise what the student have already learnt in the previous units.

"Palestine is the capital of Jerusalem".

"India is in Africa;.

"I am in the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade last year.

"I need to go to the doctor to give him medicine".

Correction: Jerusalem is the capital of Palestine.

Correction: India is in Asia.

Correction: I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade last year.

Correction; I will go to the doctor to take medicine.

## 6. A critique of a unit from 6<sup>th</sup> Grade & two skills

The 6<sup>th</sup> Grade textbook is a combination of a Pupil's Book and a Workbook. It is comprised of 18 units, four of which are revision units. As stated in the syllabus, each unit should be taught in eight periods of 40 minutes each. Each unit addresses the four English skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing together with their respective sub- skills.

In this analysis, I will address Unit Seven from the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade English Textbook. To begin with, the unit is headed with the main theme of the unit, which is "The Olive Trees Of Palestine". This theme controls all the subsequent tasks; it is the context, in which all skills and sub-kills are learned. For example, the vocabulary of the reading text about the olive tree keeps recurring all through the unit; some expressions are quoted like " May I help you" to teach polite requests, past verb to be (was,

Some teachers use these units as exams instead of using them for the purpose of developing learning. In addition, this syllabus could not change the mentality of the students that the proficiency is not measures by mark number. There are still great numbers of students who pay money for the special tutors to help the students pass the exams.

To tell the truth, this syllabus and its organization motivates the learners to get interested in the learning since this syllabus is both subject and task based. Each unit has a theme (subject), which is explicitly written as the title of the unit. Then the related tasks are done to interpret the theme (subject) in context. Each of the four English skills is taught through a number of tasks.

There is an ongoing argument whether this syllabus aims to enhance the communicative competence or supports accuracy. As stated in the Teacher's Book, this syllabus aims to reinforce the communicative competence, i.e. it aims to build up the ability of the learner to communicate effectively in various social situations. Therefore, the main purpose is more fluency than accuracy. To achieve this, you will see in the syllabus certain tasks which motivate the learners to talk in pairs and groups, make projects and portfolios, dramatize make- decisions, negotiate meanings, and sometimes talk to native speakers. As for accuracy, it is still present, but it is not concerned with the number of mistakes the students make. On the contrary, accuracy is used when the skill and the message is distorted. Thus, the learners can speak, read, and write freely and their mistakes are dealt with where the communication process halts. For example, the following will definitely be dealt with accurately:

were) are quoted to teach events that happened in the past, numbers like 100 and 1000 were practiced, and even the crossword activity is reflecting the expressions and the vocabulary of the reading comprehension about the olive tree.

The unit aims to apply Bloom's Taxonomy, which is divided into Low Order Thinking skills (LOTS) like knowledge, comprehension, and application, and High Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In Period 1 of the unit, listening and speaking skills were addressed together with their sub-skills, i.e. saying the words correctly and answering the concept questions. Cognitively, two levels are treated: recall and comprehension. In Period 2, listening, speaking, and reading are included together with their sub-skills, namely, recognizing the new words, repeating the new words, and reading aloud. At the

cognitive level, LOTS are achieved, which are recall and application. In Period 3, listening, reading, and writing skills are tackled with their sub-skills: reading for information, completing sentences, and listening to some native speaker's interjections (Hooray, Boo). It fulfills levels of comprehension and application of Bloom's Taxonomy. In Period 4, reading and speaking skills are practiced through reading aloud in pairs and practicing the new words. Cognitively, this applies to the application level. In Period 5, speaking and writing skills are included together with the respective sub – skills: think and write, think and write the questions, and using polite requests expressions. Application and HOTS are addressed here. In Period 6, listening, reading, and writing skills are integrated with some sub – skills: listening for comprehension, and read and complete The basic Bloom's here is comprehension. In Period 7, the writing skill is mainly addresses with some of its sub-skills, i.e. do a crossword, and practice handwriting. HOTS level is dealt with. In Period 8, writing is practiced through writing new words correctly and a brochure.

It is perceived now that the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Textbook addresses the four skills with their respective sub-skills according to Bloom's Taxonomy. The tasks are closely related to the main subject and theme of the unit. In addition, grammar is not taught directly, and it is not the main purpose of teaching except for task 2 in Period 6 as shown below:

Read. Then listen and circle the correct words.

- 1 1 Grandmother asked Rania 'Would you like to help me make soap?' She said 'Yes, I'd love / loves to.'
- 2 Omar said to his grandfather, 'May / Should I help you?' He said 'Yes, please.'
- 3 Rania loves olives, she said 'May I tries / try one?'
- 4 You harvested / harvest olives, then press them to get olive oil.
- 5 There are / were millions of olive trees in Palestine.

**Role card A**

You are Rania. You ask your grandfather & grandmother separately if they need help in olive collection.

**Role card C**

You are Rania's and Omar's grandfather. You accept their help offer.

This task clearly assesses the students' accuracy and should be replaced with another exercise like the following:

- 1 Grandmother asked Rania 'Would you like to help me make soap?' She said 'Yes, I'd love to / No, I wouldn't love to'
- 2 Omar said to his grandfather, 'May / Might I help you?'
- 3 He said 'Yes, please.'
- 4 Rania loves olives, she said 'May I try / Would I try one?'
- 5 You usually harvested / harvest olives, then press them to get olive oil.
- 6 There are / were millions of olive trees in Palestine.

In addition, the skills and sub-skills are related, but they are not enough and inconsistent with the period's allotted time. There should be more sub-skills, or else the students will keep repeating the same expressions and vocabulary. Besides, the cultural aspect is completely neglected; I suggest adding a task called " Cultural Spot", in which different plants from other cultures can be approached. It is also noticed the absence of role play model; many tasks could have been role – played like same previous task about the grandmother, the grandfather, Omar and Rania.

**7. Material and mehods**

Reading and speaking skills need more relevant activities. This is due to the absence of the cultural spot and role-play model. Therefore, I suggest the following two tasks; one for each skill:

**Speaking skill**

Role – play should be used as follows:

The class is divided into groups of four. Each group is given four cards; each card has a description of a role to be played within the group.

**Role card B**

You are Omar. You ask your grandfather & grandmother separately if they need help in olive collection.

**Role card D**

You are Rania's and Omar's grandmother. You accept their help offer.

The students distribute the roles between them, act the roles in their groups, and they act out.

**Reading skill**

The cultural spot should be established in every unit. For this unit, the following activity will enrich the reading culturally:

Mango is India's most beloved fruit  
It is called the king of fruit. It is summer fruit.  
Indians eat it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.  
More than a thousand kinds of mango are native to India,  
but people love Alphonso mango.

The students are asked to read this piece of reading about another culture. Then they are asked the following:

What is the king of fruit in India? What is the king of plants in Palestine?

If you go to India, would you buy mango or olive?

Would you eat olive in the morning in Palestine?

Would you eat mango in the morning in India?

Do you know any other famous plants in India?

Then the students are divided into groups and asked to compare between olive and mango in terms of size, taste, and advantages.

For homework, the students can gather more information about plants in the two countries.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Palestinian curriculum is still fledgling. It started from scratch, built its body, and

formulated its vision. Personally, I think that the Palestinian curriculum has jumped high strides and it is progressing with steady and confident steps. This appears clearly in MOEHE plans to introduce the tools of the smart age to the Palestinian schools. Nowadays, there are plans to replace the textbooks with tablets. Consequently, the students will learn using smart tablets and get relieved of the heavy school bags.

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