

## Early Literacy Model in a Saudi Arabian Preschool: Implementation in a Different Cultural Context

Hanadi AL-Othman<sup>1,2</sup>, Eve Gregory<sup>2</sup>, John Jessel<sup>2</sup>, Azza Khalil<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>King Saud University, Saudi Arabia

<sup>2</sup>Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

### Abstract

*In Saudi Arabia, as in many other Asian and Middle Eastern countries where early childhood education is still expanding, the notion of importing educational programmes has become a pressing issue. A number of Western early childhood curricula have been introduced to preschool education to address the tendency of the policy makers towards providing global educational standard curricula. The current study seeks to understand how literacy practices that are implemented in a different context linguistically and culturally can contribute to early literacy acquisition in Arabic. The study took place in a preschool in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Since the current work is following an ethnographic approach, data have been collected through participant observation, interviews and gathering relevant documents and artifacts. The participants of the study are 18 children and 2 teachers, where the children are aged between 4 and 5 years. The study revealed a number of preliminary findings; a variety of literacy activities are integrated throughout the daily schedule, and the majority of children demonstrated a tendency to write their names in Arabic rather than in English. The results also showed that there seems to be an absence of children's motivation in literacy activities particularly in the interest areas. The initial findings also demonstrated that teachers vary in their interpretation of literacy practices. In brief, these preliminary findings raise the need for further in-depth investigation.*

### 1. Introduction

Early childhood centres have become a key partner with families in providing child care services; thus, it is crucial to consider the significant role that early childhood programmes play in promoting early literacy skills. Girard [1] underscored the preschool setting as a fundamental environment for developing

Emergent literacy skills as children have the opportunities to practise many literacy experiences throughout the daily activities they undertake in the classroom.

In the global era the transition of educational ideas has become a noticeable phenomenon; however, it is crucial to deal with this phenomenon with caution as teaching and learning vary across sociocultural contexts [2].

In Saudi Arabia, as in many other Asian and Middle Eastern countries where early childhood education is still expanding and developing, the notion of importing educational programmes has become a pressing issue. A number of Western early childhood curricula, such as the *High Scope* and the *Creative Curriculum*, have been introduced to preschool education in order to address the tendency of the policy makers towards providing global educational standard curricula. Supporters of this notion argue that importing Western ideas is an advantage, in terms of sharing different experiences with the international community. Nevertheless, we should not ignore the fact that successful early childhood pedagogy should be socially, culturally and linguistically appropriate [3].

### 2. Research Rationale

As a new curriculum is implemented for the first time in a different context linguistically and culturally, in Saudi Arabia, it is paramount to add to the knowledge of the educational community on how the literacy practices within this imported curriculum can contribute to Arabic literacy development in preschool education. In addition, it is essential to understand how teachers in Saudi Arabia will implement these literacy practices within a different context of language and culture.

Existing literature shows that despite the large amount of research that has been conducted in literacy acquisition in different languages such as English, Dutch, Greek and Hebrew, early literacy development among Arabic native speakers has

rarely been investigated [4]. Moreover, literature indicates that although a number of researchers in the Middle East have investigated early literacy development only a few have investigated early literacy practices from a sociocultural perspective.

In Saudi Arabia, where the current study is conducted, there are very limited studies on how literacy is promoted and practised in preschool education [5] [6].

### 3. Research Questions

The current study seeks to address the following main research question:

How can literacy practices that are implemented in a different context linguistically and culturally contribute to early literacy acquisition in Arabic?

### 4. Contextual Framework

#### 4.1. An Overview of Saudi Society

Saudi Arabia is the largest Arab country in terms of geographical area in the west of Asia. It has a unique position and a high reputation in the world owing to the presence of the two Islamic holiest places in Makkah and Madinah.

Before discovering oil in Saudi Arabia, the country was extremely poor. After having found oil in 1925, radical shifts have occurred in all sectors of the state. Indeed, the evolution of the petroleum industry has led to a significant development in different aspects of society. To keep pace with domestic and global socioeconomic and technology changes, the government of Saudi Arabia views human development as a crucial element in developing its society. [7].

It is undeniable that culture frames people's principles, thoughts and attitudes. Generally, Saudi society has been known as a conservative and a religious society. Another feature of Saudi society is the importance of the concept of family, which is considered as a fundamental entity in Saudi society. Although the existence of the extended family has decreased gradually, a nuclear family not only still relates to the extended family, but also receives social and economic support [7].

Arabic is the formal language of Saudi Arabia. Although all Saudi citizens speak Arabic, there is a variety of dialects in different regions of the country. Arabic is highly valued by the Saudi society as it is the language of the Qur'an; the holy book of Islam. Despite the significant position of Arabic, there is a remarkable tendency towards learning foreign languages such as English at an early age.

Undoubtedly, this tendency is a response to the globalisation and the evolution of information technology.

As the first verse of the Holy Qur'an is the word "read", reading and writing are highly valued by Saudi society. A good example of this was the emergence of the Saudi education system, which was in the form of the Qur'an memorising circles where teachers focus on memorising the Qur'an and the basic skills of reading and writing. Recently, and with the explosion of knowledge and information technology, the perspective of a literate person has changed. In other words, literacy is no longer limited to the ability to read and write, but an educated person is the one who has a high academic qualification, and is qualified for the labour market with personal, linguistic and technical skills.

As a result of these changes in Saudi society, the Saudi family has been influenced by these shifts. Considerable attention has been given to education and parents' expectations have increased towards the role of school in developing literacy skills not only in Arabic but also in English. As a result of the dominance of cultural perspective that sees literacy practices are one of the school's duties rather than family's duties, literacy practices at home are still limited.

#### 4.2. Saudi Arabian Preschool Education

There is a remarkable growth all over the world in early childhood care. Saudi Arabia has considered early childhood care as one of its development priorities. In Saudi Arabia, early childhood education is represented in preschool education (kindergarten) that receives children aged three to six. In spite of significant achievements that have been attained by the Ministry of Education in developing and expanding this stage, it is still not compulsory and outside the formal educational ladder.

Table 1. Development of preschool centres from 1984- 2012

	1984-1985	1994-1995	2004-2005	2011-2012
Preschool centres	543	794	1320	2323
Classrooms	2589	3928	5704	9089
Children	79608	83649	100032	141422
Teachers	4630	7007	9744	12705

In 1965, the first preschool centre was established in Jeddah by the private sector. Indeed, the private sector was solely responsible for the preschool stage until 1966 when the first public preschool was established by the Ministry of Education. After that, several preschool centres were established all over the country. The following table illustrates the

development of preschool education in Saudi Arabia from 1984 to 2011 [8].

Indeed, there are several factors that contribute to an increase in the importance and need for expanding preschool coverage in Saudi society; an example of which is the gradual disappearance of the extended family that used to play a vital role in childcare leading to the search for an alternative to providing childcare services. Another factor necessitating an expansion in the number of preschool institutions is the increase in Saudi women's contribution to the labour market.

In Saudi Arabia, all preschool centres are under the administration and supervision of the Ministry of Education. In addition, despite the acceptance of both genders in preschool education, this stage is solely supervised by females, and is considered under girls' education. Moreover, admission priority in public preschools is for working women's children; especially teachers who are working under the Ministry of Education.

The policy of early childhood education in Saudi Arabia underpins the following foundations; care, play and education. The Saudi Arabian preschool education relies on a selective mix of Western ideologies that are compatible with Islamic principles.

**4.2.1. The Self- Learning Curriculum.** During the period from 1965 to 1991, there was no official curriculum for preschool education in Saudi Arabia. In 1991, a national curriculum for preschool education was developed through a partnership between The General Presidency for Girls' Education, The Arab Gulf Programme for the United Nations Development Organization (AGFUND), and The United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO). The Saudi Arabian preschool curriculum is called The Self-Learning Curriculum.

In particular, this curriculum was based on a number of educational theories that had been developed in Western countries. The Self-Learning Curriculum is a child-centred program, which emphasises an interactive self-learning approach that focuses on children's choices. In addition, it is underpinned by the following criteria: flexibility, play, freedom, interaction, respect, child identity and culture, knowledge, skills and relationship with parents. In this curriculum, the classroom is divided into a variety of interest areas; these areas are prepared with several activities that aim to develop children's skills and support the themed educational units.

The Self-Learning Curriculum not only considers the teacher's role as preparation for the classroom

environment that meets children's interests and needs, but also enables the teacher to be guided with appropriate discipline strategies. Teachers graduate with a bachelor's degree in preschool education through specific preschool departments at some Saudi universities.

In the Self-Learning Curriculum, reading and writing are viewed as skills that require training children for several reading and writing readiness skills. Hence, it can be said that the literacy component in this curriculum introduces language and literacy from a 'maturationist view' that relies on the reading-readiness approach. Some of these skills that are emphasised in the curriculum are; auditory and visual discrimination, fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination and the ability to observe.

Although it is undeniable that the Self-Learning Curriculum has achieved a significant turning point in preschool history in Saudi Arabia, the last modification that was in 2005 has not caused any major shifts. However, a number of studies have revealed that some aspects of the curriculum need to be modified and developed.

A study that was done by Abdulkarim [5] has shown that the mathematical and literacy skills in the applied curriculum have not been given sufficient attention. Moreover, the study reported that there is no fixed period for reading aloud and there is a lack of developmentally appropriate literature. The study recommended that the 'reading readiness approach' can be replaced by a more realistic and natural way of developing children's literacy, such as the Emergent Literacy Approach.

### **4.3. The Comprehensive Project to Develop Preschool Education**

As part of King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz's Public Education Development Project, a comprehensive project to develop preschool education emerged. The project aims to adapt child-centred curricula, which view children as active learners who initiate and direct their learning, to early childhood education. The project also aims to build the capacity of teachers, supervisors and directors in the field of early education throughout an effective partnership with the private sector. In response to this, Tatweer, a Saudi strategic investment company, built a partnership with educational companies that not only provides a global educational standard curriculum in preschool education, but also has the ability to implement these curricula and provide training and quality services. Hence, in January 2013, a pilot implementation of three suggested preschool programmes was applied in some preschools in different regions of the

country. These programmes are Bawakeer, the Creative Curriculum and Montessori.

#### 4.4. The Special Characteristics of Arabic Language

Since early literacy development in Arabic is the main focus of the current research, this section discusses the main features of Arabic language. Arabic has been valued widely as it is the language of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. It is considered the fifth language globally, based on the number of speakers who are estimated at over two Billion. Despite the importance of the Arabic language, it has not been given sufficient attention from researchers particularly in the area of Arabic literacy development [9].

Arabic is based on the alphabetic principle (abjads), it has 28 letters and 34 phonemes. Another unique character of Arabic letters is that each letter has more than one form according where it is placed in the word. To illustrate that, the letter (س) appears (س) individually, (سـ) at the beginning, (سـ) in the middle and (س) at the end of a word. The variation of the letter shapes is considered as one of the difficulties in acquiring Arabic literacy skills. Arabic letters also have similarities in shape and the number of dots; for example /b/ ب , /t/ ت , /n/ ن.[4]. Accordingly, these fine differences between letters lead to some difficulties in acquiring literacy skills.

Another major aspect of the Arabic language is its attribution as a case of diglossia. In particular, and as Taibah and Haynes [6] reported there are two forms of the Arabic language, the first form is the literary formal language (Modern standard Arabic) which is used in education, books, stories and media; while, the second form is called (Vernacular) which is the informal form of language that is used in everyday communication with different dialects. Given this, although children are exposed to the formal form of Arabic through several sources such as, media and stories; indeed, they deal with this form as a second language when they start their school life.

## 5. Literature Review

### 5.1. Literacy in Early Childhood: Reconceptualising the Definition

Since literacy practices are driven by our perspectives about what literacy means and how it evolves, it is crucial to highlight the development of the term "literacy" in general and how this term has been defined in early childhood education in particular.

The term "literacy" first appeared in the late nineteenth century. Prior to that, the term "reading and writing" was widely used by researchers instead of literacy [10]. Indeed, the term "reading and writing" is still largely used in other languages such as Arabic where there is no alternative existing term.

The definition of literacy has been reconceptualised over the years and has been formulated by the evolution of theoretical frameworks [11]. For a long period of time, being literate has meant the ability to read and write; however, this concept of literacy has begun to be challenged with the spread of digital technology. Perceptions of literacy have moved from a narrow view to a much broader definition. In particular, the concept of literacy is no longer limited to print-based texts, and has shifted to include several aspects of a more complex communication system that includes language(s), pictures, drawings and electronic texts [12].

This recent view has also broadened the scope of literacy from focusing solely on language to viewing literacy as a meaning-making activity, that cannot be isolated from its sociocultural context, which we argue is convenient within contemporary societies where children are influenced by complex literacy practices. Indeed, this view has emerged as a result of sociocultural and multimodal studies that emphasise literacy as a social process and extend the literacy resources beyond print-based texts to a wide range of literacy forms [10]. This broad definition that views literacy as a social practice rather than an array of skills has been adopted by a large body of recent literacy research [13].

In the area of early childhood education, the concept of literacy has not only become a controversial matter, but also has become a dynamic and inconstant concept [10]. In particular, research in early childhood literacy has been influenced by the sociocultural perspective that views literacy beyond a set of cognitive skills that is acquired individually to a broader view that considers children as active meaning-makers of literacy practices in a variety of social cultural contexts [13]. Furthermore, from this perspective, written language is viewed more than an array of alphabets as literacy is not limited to just reading and writing a set of alphabets. Indeed, this view underscores the crucial role of other factors in early literacy development such as children's agency, identity, motivation, engagement and self-efficiency [12].

In this respect, a recent Australian study conducted by Scull and his colleagues [11] revealed that preschool teachers vary in their conceptions of early literacy, which affects their literacy practices in preschool settings. Moreover, although there is a

growing body of research in early childhood literacy, it has been argued that what is considered literacy in early childhood education is not only a debatable concept but also has not been appropriately defined in a considerable body of research in early childhood literacy [12]. Moreover, some have argued that the outcomes of the early childhood literacy research had a limited influence on both policymakers and literacy pedagogies [10], which appears to be also overlooked in early childhood curricula in Saudi Arabia, the context of the current study.

Hence, and inspired by the above broad view of literacy, the current study defines literacy within the sociocultural perspective which not only views literacy as a social practice rather than an array of skills, but also views the child as a meaning-maker by using several communication system tools that are beyond reading and writing in a variety of social cultural contexts.

## 5.2. Early Literacy Acquisition: Theoretical Perspectives

Given that theories have been described as provisional, the area of early literacy development has undergone three key theoretical shifts from the behaviourist perspective (Skinner, 1957), to the cognitive view (Piaget, 1951), to sociocultural perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978) [10].

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory continues to have a significant impact on research in child development and more recently, on early literacy research. In other words, a number of Vygotskian concepts have laid down the foundation of the sociocultural perspectives to literacy development [10] [12]. Some of which are, the importance of culture, signs and play in children's learning and development. Another crucial tenet of Vygotsky's theory is the concept of mediation where children construct meaning through several tools and mediations. Moreover, the term *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), explains what children can do independently and what they can do with assistance from others (*scaffolding*), is an essential notion of many early literacy researchers who are working from a sociocultural perspective [12].

In the light of Vygotsky's theory, a number of literacy acquisition approaches have generated; one of which is the emergent literacy approach. Indeed, the notion of emergent literacy brought about a remarkable shift in the way that literacy development of young children was viewed previously from the reading-readiness perspective, which believes that literacy growth starts with formal schooling and that there are several prerequisite skills that children need to acquire before they can learn reading and writing.

On the contrary, from the emergent literacy view, literacy is defined as a sociocultural process that is developed earlier than had been originally thought, and children are viewed as active constructors of early literacy skills throughout their daily lives and before they start school [14].

This theoretical movement has also influenced how literacy has been researched in early childhood settings. For example, researchers turned their attention to the significant role of the sociocultural context, which includes social, cultural, historical, and institutional settings, in researching early literacy growth [12]. Therefore, a number of recent studies were conducted in naturalistic settings such as homes, kindergartens and schools using qualitative, quantitative or mixed method research.

The sociocultural perspective views learning as a social process that is mediated by a variety of signs such as languages, numbers, drawings and recent technology tools. Within this perspective, language is a symbolic mediation that plays a pivotal role in the structure of social identity [15]. Indeed, the sociocultural perspective has created links between individual cognition and social / cultural aspects of the literacy practices context; thus, culture is considered one of the core principles of sociocultural studies [12].

From this theoretical lens, play is a crucial context that provides children with multiple social and cultural tools that they then use in their interaction with adults and peers as their literacy grows [12].

Hence, and inspired by the above theoretical framework, the present study sits within the sociocultural perspective of early literacy development. In other words, the sociocultural perspective is relevant to the main purpose of this research, which aims to understand how literacy practices that are implemented in a different context linguistically and culturally, in a Saudi Arabian preschool, contribute to early literacy acquisition in Arabic.

## 5.3. Literacy in Early Childhood Settings

There is a growing body of literature that supports the notion that a preschool classroom is a valuable environment for literacy development, and that the literacy practices that are implemented are the result of an array of factors such as social context, educational policy and teachers' beliefs.

Despite the above, the previous studies indicate that there is an ongoing debate not only about what the right age is for acquiring early literacy skills, but also about the most appropriate way for developing literacy [12]. Existing literature also indicates that little attention has been given to how early literacy

practices are actually implemented in early childhood settings and the impact of the context where the literacy practices are taking place [1]. In addition, it can be deduced from the present literature that only a limited number of studies have focused on the influence of particular preschool curricula on early literacy development such as the *High Scope* and the *Creative Curriculum*, the most popular curricula in the US [16].

In the light of the spread of the sociocultural perspective on literacy, there is a considerable amount of literature that emphasises social and cultural aspects as major components of early childhood curricula [3]. The proponents of this perspective argue that early literacy practices are beyond reading and writing, and children rely on a wide range of semiotic systems in their literacy learning [13].

Recently, early childhood education has been influenced by globalisation, a main feature of the current era. In particular, early childhood educators all over the world have shared a number of educational principles such as developmentally appropriate practices, child-centred curriculum, and a play-based pedagogy [3]. Indeed, early literacy pedagogy has been influenced by the joint position statement, that was published by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education for Young Children (NAEYC), which emphasised that early literacy practices should be appropriate to children's development, language and culture.

Although there is a large volume of published research emphasising the vital role of play in early literacy development, existing literature shows that research on literacy-related play has declined since 2000; therefore, in response to this, there have been calls in the field that researchers in play-literacy pedagogy need to drive this line of research along a new, more effective path. Consequently, a number of studies have been published in response to this call by researchers who are working from sociocultural and multimodal perspectives that view play as a multimodal literacy [12].

In the global era, there is a marked trend to apply quality standards, which are originally Western, to early childhood settings [17]. Although the transition of educational ideas has become a noticeable phenomenon, it is crucial to deal with this phenomenon with caution as teaching and learning vary across sociocultural contexts [2].

Research in early childhood education illustrates that there are a small number of studies that have focused on the issue of importing educational ideas. However, the majority of these studies have been conducted in China. Results of this line of research

revealed that imported Western pedagogies should be *adapted* rather than *adopted* and several considerations should be taken into account in terms of culture, language, educational system and parental expectations [17].

In the light of the sociocultural perspective of early literacy development, relevant literature underscores the notion of mediation and its crucial role in early literacy growth. The first mediator that was emphasised by a large body of research is the teacher. Although the curriculum can provide a guided framework for the teacher in planning literacy activities, it is undeniable that the teacher is a valuable mediator in early literacy growth, and that modelling literacy activities is crucial for early literacy development [11].

Another vital social mediator in early literacy learning in early childhood settings is the peer group. Results from this line of research have documented the crucial role that peer interactions play in children's learning and literacy development [15].

In the respect of the notion of mediation, a considerable number of qualitative studies have raised the important role of parents, grandparents and siblings as social mediators in children's literacy development. In addition, the existing literature demonstrated that researching early literacy development for Arabic-speaking pre-schoolers in the family context has been given little attention [4].

Based on the above, it can be deduced that a large body of existing studies about literacy in early childhood settings has conducted in the US and Europe. Furthermore, the literature indicates that although a number of researchers in the Middle East have investigated early literacy development, only a few have researched early literacy practices from a sociocultural perspective. In Saudi Arabia, where the current study is conducted, there are only few studies on how literacy is promoted and practised in preschool education [5] [6].

#### **5.4. Culture, Identity and Literacy in Early Childhood Settings**

A long history of early literacy research has increased our knowledge about the relationship between children's culture, identity and literacy development [3]. In addition, it has been argued that early childhood settings and cultural resources are valuable factors in children's learning.

In a recent study, Kim [13] argues that early childhood teachers should create literacy activities that are culturally relevant. In addition, Gillen and Hall [10] reported that dramatic play is a crucial opportunity for children to express different aspects of their culture.

On the other hand, a number of authors have documented the relationship between literacy practices and personal identity [12]. Despite this, existing literature indicated that a small number of these studies has been explored this matter in early childhood education.

In summary, although the previous studies have laid some groundwork in this area, the literature still lacks work that focuses on early childhood education and Arabic-speaking children. Thus, the current research is an attempt to fill this gap, particularly in view of the increasing global spread of importing educational pedagogies.

### **5.5. Early Literacy Acquisition in a Bilingual Context**

The era of globalisation and digital technology has expanded the spread of cultural and linguistic diversity all over the world [15]. Existing literature indicates that the proportion of children who are educated bilingually outweighs the proportion of children who are educated monolingually.

In most Arab countries, English is considered the second language, as it is the dominant world language. Although Saudi society, the context of the current research, is a monolingual culture, English has been used widely in several sectors of the country.

In this respect, the current literature shows that a limited number of studies on bilingualism have focused on researching Arabic language compared to the large body of research that has taken place in literacy acquisition and bilingualism in different languages such as English [4].

## **6. Fieldwork**

### **6.1. Choosing and Accessing the Setting as an Ethnographic Researcher**

Choosing a setting for conducting the research is one of the critical steps in qualitative research. The research setting plays a vital role in qualitative inquiry in framing the research questions and determining the research problem accurately as the research questions emerge from the observed situation, unlike the case in quantitative research where questions are framed by specified variables [18]. Thus, the current research setting was chosen because it represents the implementation of an early literacy model that this study aims to investigate and explore.

It is highly recommended that conducting research in early childhood settings should be undertaken in a naturalistic context, which provides

the opportunity to observe children as active participants in their daily activities [19]. Thus, and based on the nature of the research questions, the current study follows an ethnographic approach, as ethnography has been used on a wide scale in investigating language and literacy development in early childhood in different sociocultural contexts [19].

Accessing the setting as an ethnographic researcher requires taking into account a number of considerations. Since an ethnographer is the research instrument, researchers should think carefully about their roles, interactions with participants, reactions and biases [18]. Moreover, as the ethnographic researcher aims to understand the studied phenomenon from the participants' perspective (emic) rather than the researcher's point of view (etic), the researcher's ability to observe and to make the familiar strange is highly significant [18].

### **6.2. The Setting**

In 2012, a kindergarten was established at one of the universities in Riyadh under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and the university administration.

In the first term of the school year 2013-2014, the number of children enrolled was 105. Although the majority of them were Saudi Arabians, there were a limited number of children from other Arab and European countries. Since the enrolment in this kindergarten is limited to the University faculty, there seems to be homogeneity in the children's background as the majority of the children are from the middle socio-economic class.

### **6.3. The Implemented Curriculum**

The *Creative Curriculum*, published by Teaching Strategies International in the US, is a comprehensive preschool curriculum that relies on recognised theories and research in the early childhood field, such as the theory of Vygotsky, Dewey, Erikson, Piaget and Bronfenbrenner [20].

In 2010, a strategic partnership was created between Teaching Strategies International in the United States and one of the educational companies in Saudi Arabia to apply the Creative Curriculum in several Middle Eastern countries. After the curriculum had been translated and adapted to the Islamic, Arabian and Saudi culture, the first Arabic version of the Creative Curriculum was published. The curriculum has been put into practice through a pilot implementation in a number of public preschools in some of the Country's provinces. In the chosen preschool, the curriculum has been purchased through a training contract with the owner company.

The *Creative Curriculum* as a preschool programme aims to promote children's social, cognitive, emotional, physical and language development. Therefore, several activities are distributed throughout the different interest areas, and small-group and large-group times [20].

The content of this curriculum is presented in the form of studies, where children carry out an in-depth investigation of a certain topic such as balls, clothes, trees and buildings. Teachers provide hands-on experiences that relate to the investigated study throughout the daily schedule and in all interest areas.

#### 6.4. Methods

Ethnographic researchers often collect their data through observing the targeted participants in their natural setting for an extended period of time, through formal and informal interviews, and from relevant documents and artefacts [19]. The main method that was used in collecting the preliminary data was observation as a key tool in providing "rich description" for ethnographic research.

To document the observations, field notes were taken. The field notes consist of detailed notes made in the situation, and journal notes to document reflections, thoughts, feelings and questions. Besides this, visual data in the form of photos were included to document relevant situations.

In order to make the collected data meaningful, field notes were analysed by labelling the concepts, and looking for regularities and patterns to generate themes. Themes were also developed in the light of relevant literature.

Indeed, the data, which were collected by observations, raised the need to carry out some interviews with the classroom teachers in order to unravel some questions that emerged, and to thus provide more insights into the participants' perspectives. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two teachers, one with an Arabic teacher and the other with an English teacher. Since the interviews were audio-recorded, data were transcribed, summarised, and coded to generate themes that can be linked to the research questions.

In addition, data were gathered by collecting documents and artefacts such as samples of children's work (drawings, writings, artworks). Moreover, in order to interface between the literacy practices that are applied in the classroom and the literacy practices that are stated in the *Creative Curriculum* literacy framework, document analysis was carried out for the *Creative Curriculum Literacy* volume.

**6.4.1. Participants.** Participants in this small-scale study were recruited through obtaining informed consent from the higher authority of the preschool and children's parents.

*Children:* In the chosen classroom there were 18 children aged from four to five years and enrolled for a full day. Of the 18 children, ten were girls and eight were boys. In general, all children were ethnically Arabs and Muslims. In addition, Arabic is the primary language for all the children with English taught as a second language.

*Teachers:* In the chosen classroom there were two teachers, one for Arabic and the other for English. Both teachers were Saudi female teachers who held a university degree. The Arabic teacher specialised in preschool education, while the English teacher specialised in English Literature.

#### 6.5. Findings

**6.5.1. Description of literacy throughout the daily schedule.** The classroom can be described as a print-rich environment; children are exposed constantly to print in both languages Arabic and English. In particular, Arabic is written in a black colour while English is written in a red colour. Examples of the classroom's print resources are attendance cards, calendar and weather charts, daily schedule, classroom rules, furniture's labels, short texts of invocation (Du'aa), interest-area names and samples of children's artwork displayed with explanatory labels.

Another principle that is implemented in the classroom is literacy across the curriculum. In the observed classroom, a variety of literacy activities are integrated throughout the daily schedule and in all interest areas (Figure 1). Despite this, it is apparent that some periods of the daily programme focus more on literacy experiences than other periods do. For instance, large- and small- group times, reading aloud and some interest areas such as library seem to give more attention to literacy skills.



Figure 1. Documenting an experiment's results in the science area

In the chosen classroom, the teacher seeks to be a good literacy model. For instance, in respect to oral language, and due to the diglossic aspect of the Arabic language, the teacher tries to use a mix of formal (Modern standard Arabic) and informal Arabic (Vernacular) or what is referred to as quasi-formal Arabic. The formal Arabic also appears in certain contexts, such as reading a verse of the Qur'an, repeating a Dua'a, reading a story, singing a song or a chant and asking the children questions.

The teacher also models the orthography aspect of the Arabic language, a paper chart is located beside the teacher in all group times; this chart is used by the teacher to write a range of words and statements in formal Arabic, such as the daily question, children's answers and their names, drawings and numbers. In addition, the teacher represents a writing model during the times spent in the interest areas, where several literacy tools such as pencils and paper clip boards are available in all interest areas (Figure2).

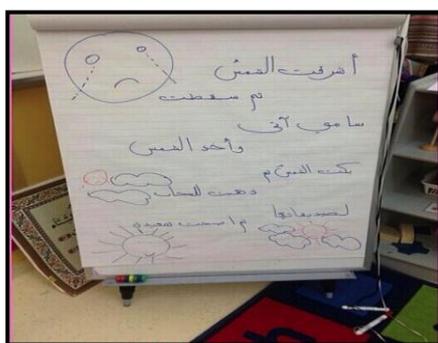


Figure 2. Teacher's shared writing in the large-group time

In this classroom, there is a fixed period for storytelling in the daily schedule. Since there are two languages in the classroom Arabic and English, children's literature is a mix of Arabic, English and some translated books.

Despite the existence of a fixed time for reading aloud in the daily schedule in this preschool, it has been noticed that there seem to be an absence of enjoyment and attention. Why does the reading-aloud period lack the enjoyment that is supposed to be a key feature for this period? Is this situation a result of a lack of pedagogical knowledge, the quality of the selected books or the cultural background of the teachers? With the lack of appropriate children's literature in Arabic, can the translated books play a vital role in Arabic literacy acquisition? How can the reading aloud period become an effective and an interesting pedagogy in Arabic literacy acquisition?

Another significant period that relates to literacy concepts is the small-group time. In this period, the teacher focuses on specific literacy components such as phonological awareness. A variety of activities that aim to promote children's skills in listening, rhyming, alliteration and syllables are presented in a play context such as language games, songs and finger play.

**6.5.2.Children's Early Literacy Development.** The gathered data revealed that children show a sense of early literacy awareness. For instance, the following emergent literacy skills have been appeared throughout the daily observation:

- Conversations with peers and adults in an informal form of Arabic with a little use of some words in formal Arabic.
- Recognising the written form of their own names and their peers' names.
- Controlling fine-motor muscles while drawing, colouring, building with blocks and mark making.
- Attempts to write names and letters.
- Handle books appropriately, pretend to read and retell stories in their own words.
- Identifying some letters.
- Show knowledge of print by distinguishing between drawing and writing, indicating labels and print in the classroom.
- Demonstrate a sense of knowledge about rhyming, alliteration and onset.

**6.5.3. Name Writing: an Indication of Literacy Development.** There is an apparent emphasis on the experience of the child's name in several daily activities starting from the sign-up sheets, the children's names on their individual storage boxes, and name cards that have several uses throughout the day (Figure3). Children are also encouraged to write their names in their daily produced work.



Figure 3. Examples of children's name activities

The data that have been obtained from the signature sheets (Figures 4,5 and 6) demonstrated that some four-year-old children have shown attempts to write their first names. The samples also revealed that there are remarkable differences in children’s ability to write their names. For instance, the chosen signature sheets show that children’s writing varies in terms of knowledge of directionality, sign in two languages or just in one language, focus mainly on the first letter of the name and combine drawing with writing.

Hence, it can be deduced from these samples that despite the complexity of the Arabic orthography, children tend to write their names in Arabic, their first language rather than in English. Furthermore, although some children demonstrated successful attempts to write their first names, it is apparent that children vary in their ability to write their names. Moreover, the results show that the majority of children demonstrated a tendency to write their names in Arabic rather than in English (Figures 4,5 and 6). Indeed, this result emphasises what the literature indicated that name writing reflects personal and cultural identities [15].

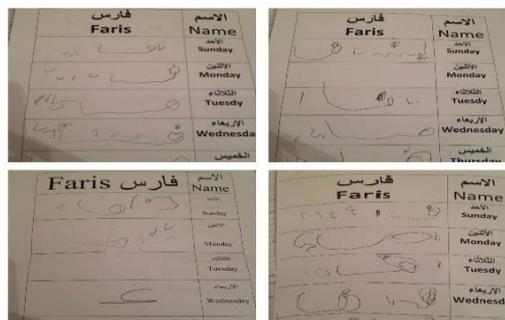


Figure 6. Samples of signature sheets for a boy aged four

In respect to family literacy practices, the interview data revealed that some children are exposed to home literacy practices as some parents have expressed their resistance to the way that literacy has been taught. In particular, parents demand direct /explicit literacy teaching instructions. Nevertheless, teachers indicated that they have felt a sense of change in parents’ views when parents have noticed progress in their children’s literacy skills. Hence, along with the significance of social and cultural context in a child’s learning, the importance of a supportive partnership with family has not only been raised, but also the importance of considering parental expectations when imported teaching pedagogies from a different culture.

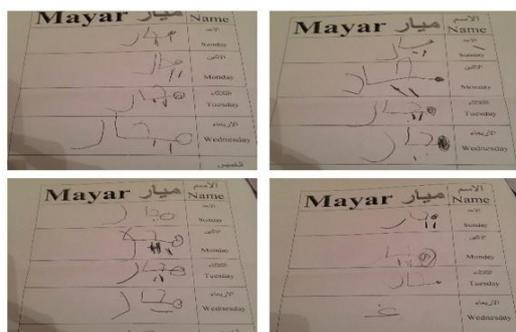


Figure 4. Samples of signature sheets for a girl aged four

**6.5.4. Teachers’ Literacy Practices.** From the observation data, it can be deduced that the observed literacy practices have been applied in the light of the Creative Curriculum literacy framework. This finding was supported by the interview data where teachers indicated that their literacy practices have been shaped by the implemented curriculum. On the other hand, the classroom observation revealed that there are some literacy practices that are implemented by the Arabic teacher which have not been stated in the curriculum’s framework. In addition, both teachers indicated that their beliefs and perspectives about the acquisition of literacy skills in the preschool age have changed when they noticed progress in children’s literacy skills.

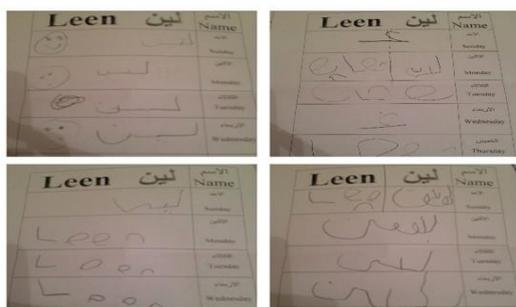


Figure 5. Samples of signature sheets for a girl aged four

Although both interviewed teachers indicated that their literacy practices have been shaped by the applied curriculum; it seems from the observations that teachers vary in their interpretation of the literacy practices. This latter finding has raised the following questions: How do teachers in a Saudi preschool interpret early literacy practices that are adopted from Western pedagogies? Does this interpretation differ between Arabic and English teachers? What are the factors that shaped their real

literacy practices? Can literacy practices move across different languages and cultures?

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted a small ethnographic study, which aimed to investigate early literacy practices that are implemented in a different context linguistically and culturally in a Saudi Arabian preschool. Indeed, this study has not only provided insights on how learning varies across different sociocultural contexts, but also has raised the following questions:

- How do children in a Saudi Arabian preschool acquire Arabic early literacy?
- In what way does Arabic early literacy acquisition link to pre-schoolers' identity and culture?
- How do teachers in a Saudi Arabian preschool interpret early literacy practices that are derived from a Western pedagogy? And how does this interpretation reflect on pre-schoolers' early literacy practices?
- What are the early literacy practices that can be considered important linguistically and culturally for pre-schoolers in Saudi Arabia?

To conclude, these preliminary findings raise the need to continue the study for a longer period. Thus, further fieldwork will be taken with a focus on a few number of children, which help to provide thick description and in-depth investigation.

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