

Teachers' Challenges in Using Inquiry-based Strategy in Teaching English in Jordan

Hamza AlMaharma¹ and RamiAbusa'aleek²

Language Center, The World Islamic Sciences and Education University, Amman, Jordan

E-mail: ¹<Hamza_maharma@yahoo.com>, ²<ramiabusaaaleek87@yahoo.com>

KEYWORDS Teachers. Inquiry-Based Strategy. Jordan. Descriptive Research. Teaching English

ABSTRACT This study presents the findings of challenges that face teachers of English as a Foreign Language from using inquiry-based strategy in Jordan. The quantitative study is undertaken using a survey methodology where teachers in private education institutions in Amman are sampled. The sample consisted of a sample of 50 teachers. Findings indicated that the teachers are aware of the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning as a tool for enhancing the outcomes of the students. The strategy is cited as being effective in promoting critical thinking, pragmatics, and general acquisition of English language competence. Availability of appropriate reading texts and development of the relevant materials are significant challenges identified in this study.

INTRODUCTION

The English language is significant as a means of communication in many countries around the world, especially in the Middle East. More than 300 million people are learning English language writing and speaking around the world. The teaching of English and other European languages in the Arab world dates back to the 1920s when different countries were under British and French rule. English is cited as the language of globalization according to scholars such as Zughoul (2003) mainly because of its application by international organizations and conferences. It is also the main language used in science and technology as well as most of the internet. This presents a significant need for the education system to respond by developing effective teaching programs for English. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is a significant aspect of the Jordanian education system (Alhabahba et al. 2016). The teaching methods adopted have to be aligned with the needs of the students. This research study highlights the strategies adopted for teaching EFL in Jordan using inquiry-based strategies.

Reforms in the education sector in Jordan have been promoted and supported by the international community. They are cited as being

highly significant to the growing demands for teaching and learning in the country. According to the World Bank (2009), 22 percent of the students in grades one, two, and three could not read English and Arabic. Data from international organizations shows that English language proficiency in Jordan is deteriorating. For example, a report by Education First on the English Proficiency Index indicated that the countries in the Middle East and North Africa have consistently performed poorly in English proficiency (Hamdan and Hatab 2009). Between 2007 and 2014, MENA's average English proficiency level dropped 2.66 points. Jordan and Saudi Arabia scored significantly lower than the global average on the EPI.

These findings indicate the relative ineffectiveness of the education system and strategies in Jordan in developing independent learners. In response, different approaches have been adopted in learning institutions to enhance the capabilities of the students. These include the adoption of inquiry-based strategies, which have been cited as having the potential to enhance the competencies of the students (Frehat and Al-Faoury 2015). Inquiry-based learning has been cited as offering the potential for students to research and investigate issues by formulating questions. The students can build new understanding and become lifelong learners (Gormally et al. 2009). This approach makes the students active learners and is appropriately efficient and effective in responding to the needs as well as the capabilities of the students.

Address for correspondence:

Dr. Rami Abusa'aleek

Assistant Professor

E-mail: ramiabusaaaleek87@yahoo.com

In this regard, Abd Mutalib and Harun (2017) explored teachers' attitudes to use inquiry-based strategy in their teaching. The participants were 32 teachers. Findings showed that teachers are not fully aware of using this strategy during their teaching of English.

Beshears (2003) explored teachers' perceptions about using inquiry-based strategies while they teach social studies. This study was conducted in the USA. Results showed that many teachers are aware of using this strategy during their implementation of the lessons.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to investigate the application of inquiry-based learning strategies as they are applied in the EFL classroom in Jordan. The focus is to assess the challenges that the teachers face when implementing this method in their teaching of English. The specific purposes of the study are:

1. Assess the perceived effectiveness of inquiry-based learning in the EFL classroom in Jordan.
2. Identify the key challenges facing the English teachers in Jordan in using the inquiry-based learning methods.
3. Identify potential interventions that may be adopted to improve student outcomes in the Jordanian EFL classrooms using inquiry-based learning.

Statement of the Problem

Inquiry-based learning strategies have been applied in different settings and evaluated to determine their significance. The critical issue for Jordan is that the use of inquiry-based learning presents significant opportunities for improving learning outcomes for EFL students. However, it is not clear how the methods have contributed to improving the students' outcomes. This can be addressed by identifying the specific challenges facing the teachers in applying this method for the ESL students in Jordan.

Questions of the Study

The study questions to be answered in this study are listed below.

1. What is the perceived effectiveness of inquiry-based learning in the EFL classroom in Jordan?
2. What are the key challenges facing the English teachers in Jordan in using the inquiry-based learning methods?
3. Which interventions may be adopted to improve student outcomes in the Jordanian EFL classrooms using inquiry-based learning?

Significance of the Study

This study is meant to address a gap in the knowledge on the teaching strategies adopted for the English language in Jordan. Its findings are beneficial to the education ministry in identifying the strategies that can be adopted to improve the competencies of Jordanian students in English as a foreign language.

Literature Review

This section is a review of the literature on the teaching of English as a foreign language in Jordan. The literature also reviews the application of inquiry-based learning in the Jordanian or middle Eastern setting to highlight the challenges and opportunities for teachers. Education reforms in Jordan have received significant attention from policymakers in efforts to improve educational attainment. A World Bank report on the education reforms in Jordan has indicated the progressiveness of the country in implementing reforms designed to improve the level of educational attainment in the country (World Bank 2009). Besides, According to Ministry of Education in Jordan (2013), one of the key areas of reform for the Education Reform for Knowledge Economy project (ERFKE) 2003–20013 was increased focus on critical thinking, research, and group work. The declining performance of children in Jordan in English and Arabic language have increased the demands on the teachers and the complexity of the tasks they are expected to accomplish. This is associated with limited in-service teacher training and inadequate preparation programs. A major issue cited by Malkawi (2014) is that the training and practices of teachers in Jordan are mostly teacher-centered. This limits the effectiveness of the pro-

grams in addressing the needs of the students and enhancing their performance in the English language.

Linguistic Differences between English and Arabic

One of the key issues that influence the challenge and difficulty of learning a new language is the difference compared to the native language. In the case of teaching English as a foreign language in Jordan, the issue is significantly influenced by its comparison to Arabic. There are considerable differences between the two languages in grammar, alphabetic characters, syntax, and overall linguistic logistics. Studies such as Palmer et al. (2007), have indicated that there are significant negative transfers that may interfere with the acquisition of English for an Arabic speaker. Syntactic and semantic similarities in two languages allow a learner to adopt transliteration as a methodology for moving from L1 to L2. For Arabic and English, the differences in syntax, semantics, and grammar mean that transliteration cannot be used. Some other key differences that produce a challenging learning curve for Arabic-speaking individuals in acquiring English proficiency (Nero 2005; Ko'ar and Bedir 2014). The main differences that reduce reliance on Arabic competence to build English competence for Jordanians include:

- 1) Arabic is written from right to left.
- 2) Arabic orthography is influenced by the placement of the letter in the word. This means letter shapes vary depending on their placement in the word (whether they are at initial, medial, or end). In English, letters change shape only when they are upper case
- 3) Numerous but predictable rules govern the grapho-phonemic treatment of vowels in Arabic, while in English; the grapho-phonemic rules are irregular and unpredictable.
- 4) Arabic allows verb-free sentences, which in English are rare.
- 5) Arabic tenses are indicated by the addition of a suffix to the root (Palmer et al. 2007).

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Jordan

In line with the identified challenges in teaching English to Jordanian students, the strate-

gies adopted by EFL teachers can be evaluated. The main issues facing the EFL teachers in Jordan include the failure to apply effective pedagogical strategies. The EFL students in Jordan focus mostly on getting good grades in their EFL scores as opposed to learning the language. This has been shown to play a role in reducing the motivation and willingness of the students to learn the second language. The perceptions coupled with the approaches adopted by the teachers interfere with the appreciation of the students for the language as well as their concentration and acquisition of the language. A key instructional strategy is the use of the native language to explain confusing and new words. This reduces the opportunities for the students to hear English as well as EFL acquisition and linguistic development.

Inquiry-based Strategies

Empirical studies on inquiry-based teaching strategies for the EFL classroom have been undertaken in different settings. It has been lauded due to its effectiveness in improving the critical thinking skills of students by engaging the mental activities of the students. Ahmad et al (2014) concluded that inquiry-based learning develops critical thinking skills and undertaking investigations. In a review by Escalante (2013), it was found that students who used inquiry-based learning achieved higher in their language learning because they have an active role in choosing their topics as well as undertaking investigations. It improves their acquisition of L2 and allows them to develop other capabilities for understanding the constantly changing world. Confirmation level inquiry is the most effective because the students learn independently while at the same time having the necessary conditions for learning. A critical issue for EFL teaching in Jordan is that teachers apply traditional strategies despite the proven effectiveness of inquiry-based strategies (Mutali and Harun 2017). It would be beneficial to research in order to identify the challenges limiting the application of these methods in teaching EFL classrooms in Jordan.

METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

This study is undertaken using a positivist research approach where the researchers evalu-

ate the ideas of teachers regarding their application of inquiry-based teaching in EFL classes. The study is undertaken using a quantitative methodology based on a survey of EFL teachers in Jordan. The focus of the research was to gather representative data from Jordanian teachers of EFL in order to develop appropriate information about their perceptions and practices in their classrooms (Divan et al. 2017).

Participants of the Study

The participants in the study are English teachers working in Jordan and teaching students English as a foreign language. The study participants were in-service teachers registered in Jordan under the ministry of education. The teachers were sought from private schools in the city of Amman where the records from all private schools in the city were used to identify the teachers that could be sampled. This was done with permission from the administrators in the schools who got information about the study and the value it would add to improving the state of EFL teaching in the country. A sample of 50 teachers was selected randomly where the lists of teachers were randomized.

The selected sample was relatively small and consisted of 50 teachers from private schools in Amman. The sample consisted of 54 percent female teachers while 46 percent were male. In terms of their level of experience, 40 percent had between 2 and 5 years of experience while 32 percent of the sampled teachers had more than 5 years of professional experience. In the same vein, over 50 percent of the teachers in the sample had at least a bachelor's degree in education. Only 18 percent of the respondents were certificate holders meaning that the teaching staff in most of the institutions were university educated. This was especially true for the younger teachers where the relatively low experience was complemented by training.

Half of the respondents communicated that their skills in the English language are high while 44 percent considered themselves to be very highly skilled in the language. 6 percent of the teachers considered their English competency to be medium. What follows is the interpretation of data on the specific competencies of inquiry-based learning. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1: Perceptions about the skill level in English

<i>Level</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Medium	6
High	50
Very high	44

Instrument of the Study

The study was undertaken as a survey where the teachers were provided with a structured questionnaire that they could fill. The questionnaire consisted of structured questions consisting of multiple-choice and Likert scale questions for the teachers to highlight their use of inquiry-based teaching including the apparent challenges they faced. The questionnaire was analyzed statistically using the Statistics Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. It was interpreted using descriptive as well as inferential statistics (Queirós et al. 2017). All research participants received and filled out an informed consent form before participating and the data was collected confidentially.

RESULTS

Use of Inquiry-Based Strategies

The respondents were asked how knowledgeable they were about the practice of using inquiry-based learning strategies. 17 percent of the respondents considered their knowledge to be very high while 38 percent reported it to be high. Overall, a third of the sample considered their knowledge to be average while 55 percent considered themselves to have above-average knowledge. Only 12 percent of the respondents reported their knowledge of IBL to be below average. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2: Knowledge of practicing teachers for inquiry-based strategies

<i>Level</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Low	12
Medium	33
High	38
Very high	17

The teachers also indicated different views about the areas of EFL they considered to be

the most challenging. The issue reported by most of the teachers as being challenging was pragmatics (92%) followed by vocabulary development by 80 percent. Linguistics was also cited as being highly challenging for Jordanian English students by two-thirds of the teachers.

Perceptions about the Strategies

The perceptions of the teachers about the effectiveness of the strategies in promoting the necessary learning outcomes among the students were highly positive as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Effectiveness of inquiry-based strategies

<i>Level</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Medium	26
High	38
Very high	36

The responses indicated that only 26 percent considered it to have an average effect on student learning. 74 percent of the respondents considered the approach to have an above-average effect with 36 percent reporting that it had a very high impact on learning outcomes for students.

A further question in this respect was to assess the perceptions of the teachers about IBL in addressing some key aspects of EFL teaching. 90 percent cited critical thinking as the main skill that IBL inculcated in the students. Pragmatics was another highly rated area that 82 percent of the respondents reported their students learned from engaging in inquiry-based learning. The third most popular area of EFL was interpretation, which 72 percent considered to be the most important issue the students could learn from IBL.

On the issue of the challenges that the teachers faced in implementing inquiry-based learning in their classrooms, the following 4 issues were identified in Table 4.

Table 4: Challenges of implementing inquiry-based strategies

<i>Challenge</i>	<i>No.</i>
Reading texts available to the students	45
Knowledge of developing the relevant materials	40
Organization of the inquiry	41
The capacity of the students to explain their discoveries in English	34

These responses indicate that the implementation of IBL in the EFL classroom is hampered by a wide range of issues. Most of the challenges are associated with the learning materials available to the students and the capacity of the teacher in applying the tools and organizing the inquiries in order to make the most effective. This indicates a need for raining as well as availing the necessary teaching materials for the teachers to improve their capacity to teach.

DISCUSSION

The results from the collected data indicate that the teaching of EFL in Jordan is an area that is addressed by greatly educated teachers who are also highly experienced. Most of the teachers have more than 2 years of experience and at least a bachelor's degree in education. As a result, these individuals are adequately trained on the content of English language teaching as well as the pedagogy. The teachers in Jordan report being knowledgeable about inquiry-based learning strategies that they apply in their EFL classes.

Perceived Effectiveness

With the high knowledge of IBL strategies in the EFL classroom, it is clear that most of the teachers are aware of these interventions and how they can improve the outcomes for the students. The interventions were well known to most of the respondents who also perceived them to have an above-average level of effectiveness. The teachers in Jordan acknowledge the strategies as having significant potential to enhance the outcomes for the students. Most of the teachers indicated that the measures have above-average effectiveness. On the areas that can be addressed most effectively using IBL interventions, the teachers considered critical thinking, pragmatics, and interpretation as the main areas that could benefit. These findings are in line with those of Ghaemi and Mirsaed (2017) who report that inquiry-based learning has a positive and significant effect on critical thinking. They also talk about having different types of inquiry that are designed to enhance student outcomes. For EFL, the most effective approach cited in the literature is that it improves idea generation through investigation. Students

learn more robustly (Mutali and Harun 2017). This result does not agree with the findings of the study Abd Mutalib and Harun (2017) who stated in their result that teachers did not know how they use the inquiry-based strategies during their teaching. Also, this result agrees with the finding of the study Beshears (2003) who showed that teachers who use this strategy are more aware of it during their teaching through the use of the inquiry-based strategies.

Challenges

Regarding the challenges that EFL teachers in Jordan face when interacting with their students, pragmatics, vocabulary, and linguistics were identified. As indicated in studies such as Yen (2014), inquiry-based learning has a positive impact on the acquisition of new information, learning through curiosity, and investigating problems. The identified challenges such as pragmatics and acquisition of overall competence in the language can be achieved most effectively through this strategy.

The critical challenges that Jordanian EFL teachers faced in applying the inquiry-based learning strategies were found to be mostly associated with the lack of adequate facilitation. The teachers reported that the reading texts available to them were not adequately suited to the needs of the students and application in inquiry-based learning (Sever and Guven 2014). Teachers also reported lacking knowledge on the most effective ways of organizing the inquiry to ensure the students get the most from them. Knowledge on the development of the relevant materials is also presented as a key challenge that the policymakers and teacher trainers should consider. In order to improve the effectiveness of teachers in applying IBL, they should be trained on how to develop the interventions and materials most effectively (Valizadeh 2021). They also need training on how to identify the skills level of the students and ensure that the inquiry is effectively organized to promote investigation by the students and acquisition of new knowledge. These skills in the teachers can improve their capacity to inculcate the relevant skills in Jordanian students learning. This result goes with the findings of the study of Malkawi (2014) who claimed that teachers in Jordan are not giv-

en the needed training in order to be well-qualified to use the inquiry-based strategies in their teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to detect the challenges that Jordanian English teachers face while they teach the English language. Based on the findings proposed from this study, it can be seen that teachers face challenges in applying the inquiry-based learning strategies associated with the lack of adequate facilitation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conducting other studies on teaching specific English skills using the inquiry-based learning strategy.
2. Holding up courses for English teachers about the importance of utilizing inquiry-based strategies in their teaching.

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Paper received for publication in December, 2021
Paper accepted for publication in February, 2022