

OPEN SESAME: A CASE STUDY OF THE ROLE OF MOTHERS' FOR THEIR CHILDREN AS REGARDS EARLY YEARS ENGLISH EDUCATION IN AL-MADINAH

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Abstract :

This study explores the parental choices of introducing children to English in the pre-primary stage. The study took place in a private kindergarten in Al-Madinah, KSA. The study looks at mothers as an active agent; their strategical choices were investigated through a qualitative approach. In which the researcher, observed several English as a foreign language [EFL] classes in the kindergarten, interviewed mothers in two phases and initiated a blog in which mothers were invited to take part.

Pre-primary education is a non-compulsory stage in KSA. Hence, the decision made to enrol children in this type of education is a parental choice. Moreover, the number of enrolment in pre-primary schools in KSA is lower comparing to its neighbour countries. Therefore, parents who decide to introduce their children to this type of education are a minority. Having said that, there is a governmental movement toward encouraging children to enrol in this stage.

Three mothers who were involved during the whole period of the study were presented as case studies. Their decisions for introducing their children to English at an early stage were highly linked to their cultural and social capital, their educational experiences and social interaction.

Key Words: English, EFL, Parental Choice, Cultural Capital, Social capital, Kindergartens, Pre-school, Strategical Choices. KSA, Saudi Arabia, Al-Madinah.

Open Sesame: A case study of the role of mothers' aspirations for their children as regards early years English Education in Al-Madinah

Introduction

English is widely taught as an additional or foreign language in both private and government schools around the world. In Saudi Arabia, it is introduced in Year Five (age10) in the national curriculum, having said that, in the private sector learners are introduced to it as early as in pre-primary school.

The rationale for conducting this study is linked to the on-going debate in Saudi Arabia regarding the early introduction of EFL in the national curriculum. While there is plenty of research looking at the early vs. late introduction of foreign languages from a wider perspective, in the context of Saudi Arabia, this area has not yet been well researched. Even though there are several articles that discuss the matter from the professionals' point of view (Al-Jarf, 2004, Al-Jazirah, 2007 & Al-Karon, 2009), the parents' point of view is not well revealed. This paper brings the parents voice regarding the early introduction of English to their young children to light.

The study took place in the city of Al-Madinah, which is located in the western province of Saudi Arabia. Since the fifth century after the Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) immigrated to Al-Madinah, the city has been welcoming Muslims from all over the world, some of whom have inhabited there (Mustafa, 2005). In addition, it is important to note that the attitude toward learning foreign languages is not new to the educational features of the city, as there used to be places (Katateeb) for teaching Persian and Turkish (Al-Ansari, 1993). The current views about teaching English as a foreign language is hugely influenced by the decision makers and by the global trend toward introducing English as an international language.

There is a global interest toward EYL not only among parents but also among educators and organizations which look at young peoples' welfare. In 2008, UNESCO published its report, 'The Role of Early Childhood Education for a Sustainable Society', based on an international workshop which involved thirty-five participants from sixteen countries. UNESCO believes in the long-term positive effects of early childhood learning and the aims of the workshop was a) to provide new types of education that coexist with the demands of achieving world peace; b) to make the new types of education available to all and not just specific people; c) to begin that education in early childhood (Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008: 27).

A Bourdieusian perspective on power and identity in relation to parental choices: Mothers who took part in this study belong to a minority group, where the type of education they have received alongside other social, cultural and economical elements play crucial roles in their decision making. Therefore, this study was drawn from Bourdieu's work on cultural and social capitals. Cultural capital from Bourdieusian perspective can be defined as high knowledge that ultimately rebounds to the owner's financial and social advantages (Light, 2004:20). Hence, the following point by Lee and Bowen (2006: 197) applies very much to the study's context:

Cultural capital for parents related to educational system exists in three forms: personal dispositions, attitudes and knowledge gained from experiences; connections to education-related objects (e.g., books, computers, academic credentials), and connections to education-related institutions (e.g., schools, universities, libraries).

The social capital is defined by Bourdieu as "... the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition". (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119).

Mothers who took place in this study are a privileged minority in the city of Al-Madinah. Their cultural needs are created by the way they were raised and the type of education they have received alongside other social, cultural and economical elements that play crucial roles in their decision making. Hence, this group of mothers whom their cultural needs according to Bourdieu (1984: 1) are produced as a result of both upbringing and education. Hence, mothers education alongside with their social and cultural backgrounds have a noticeable impact on the way they justify their decisions.

The starting point of this study is the parental practice of enrolling their young children in private pre-schools where they are introduced to English as a part of their early years learning programme. This group of mothers have shared the same ‘illusion, according to Bourdieu (1990:66), people who get involved in the same game – practice, they obtain a ‘feel for the game’ where a non-written commitment builds up.

Parental choice and education: When it comes to their children’s education, some parents become more involved than others in this regard depending on their social, cultural and economic backgrounds. According to Ball (1997), families’ social and economical capitals play a major role in choosing the best available and affordable type of education for their children.

Every family chooses schools inside the idiosyncratic framework of a local education market and within the limits and possibilities of their own specific spatial, time, social and financial horizons and family household arrangements. (ibid:2)

The decision concerning school choice, as Ball (1997) points out, is a family matter where one or both parents decide on the best choice, involving their children in the process in some cases. Ball et al. (1996:93-95) point out that once they make their choice for their children, parents can be seen through three types; firstly, the skilled choosers or privileged parents for whom their social and cultural capital have played an important role in their choice and who tend to make their choice with confidence. Secondly, semi-skilled parents for whom social and cultural capital are imbalanced, who are less confident in their choices and depend on what others tell them. The third type is the disconnected whose social and cultural capital are limited and whose choice is mainly linked to materials and locations. Having said that, it is essential to clarify that all parents are looking for the best for their children but some of them happen to have more knowledge in this matter than others: ... choosing a school often emerges as a complex and confusing business. In some ways, the more skilled you are the more difficult it is. A good deal of this stress arises from the significance privileged/skilled choosers, especially, invest in the need to choose the ‘right’ school (Ball and Vincent,1998:246).

While referring to Ball et al.’s (1996) typology of parental choices for their children’s education, the mothers mentioned in the stories can be viewed as “privileged choosers”.

Parental choice and private education: Education is a sector that attracts the attention of public and private interests in most contemporary states. The parents’ reason for choosing private education for their children is varied. A study from Singapore by Hoon (1994) points that the parents’ rationale for choosing between what in Singaporean context are known as private run kindergartens and government aided kindergartens differs, with 62% parents who chose private kindergartens considering staff qualification as important and only 39% parents who chose government aided kindergartens seeing it as important (ibid: 6).

A topical perspective is provided by Al-Ansari (2004), who studied the reasons for parents to choose private secondary schools for their children. The study took place in Dammam in the Eastern Province of KSA, 214 parents took part in the study’s questionnaire. Al-Ansari (2004) found that the class size plays a main role in enhancing the enrolment in private schools where

learners are in a classroom that has no more than 25 students in a class, this aspect seems to boost the collaborative learning and motivate students to engage in group learning processes. In addition the extra curriculum activities private schools provide for their learners are seemingly important; in Al-Ansari's study (2004) 74% of the parents agree that computer education and English - a common language in higher education institutions - play a crucial role in the preference of private schools. In his study, Al-Ansari (2004) indicates that English and other extra curriculum activities are being used as tools to attract parents by some private schools where they failed to provide a high standard outcome in teaching English. (Al-Ansari, 2004: 10-12).

Another study from Saudi Arabia reveals a contradictory finding, Abu-Ghararah, (1998:69) in his study, points out that parents who have their children introduced early to EFL were satisfied with the outcome. A parent said that after noticing his/her son progressing in English she/he made the decision to put the other son in the same school to get the benefit of learning English at an early stage.

Problem and the Question of the study

This study delves into the rationale behind the parental choice of introducing young children to EFL. The study focuses on highlighting the mothers' point of view in order to fulfil the gap in the on-going debate regarding early introduction of English in Saudi Arabia by highlighting the role of parental choices and in particular having the mothers' voice brought to the surface. Stories of three mothers and their rationale for introducing their children to English at an early stage are the main core of data analysis in this study, which was conducted under the umbrella of the qualitative approach. The study was conducted from an educational perspective, but it borrows some sociological concepts to provide a holistic explanation.

As this paper focuses on the justifications for introducing their children to English at an early stage, it is important to explore the parental choices and their decision in light of their own cultural and social capital.

This paper attempts to find the answers to the following question:

1. Why do mothers want their children to be introduced to English at an early age? How does their cultural capital influence their decisions?

Objective of the study:

Two main objectives were identified in order to achieve the purpose of this study;

1. Explore the mothers' rationale in introducing their children to English in an early stage. The way in which they justify their choices.
2. Identify the impact of mothers' social and cultural capitals on their choices.

Significance of the study:

In order to have an inclusive understanding of the parental choice, the study focuses on mothers as an active agent. This decision is completely made due to the context of the study where the educational system is segregated, and pre-primary education is linked to girls' schools, where children from both genders were taught by female staff. Moreover, men are not allowed to be on the premises during the schooldays.

By the same token, the number of children who are enrolled in pre-primary school is far lower than the children who are enrolled in formal education starting at Year One (age 6). According to the Al-Madinah Directorate of Education official website the number of primary schools is 367 while the number of pre-schools is 55 (MDE, 2015). In order to understand the parental choice of introducing young learners to EFL at an early stage, it is important to understand that mothers who decided to

enrol their children into pre-primary stage are a minority in Al-Madinah. As going to be explored clearly in this paper, the cultural capital and social capital play a crucial role in such decision. Mothers in this research, being part of a social milieu, share the same habitus and have similar dispositions. Having said that, it is important to note that despite the fact that this minority group of mothers have similar socio-cultural backgrounds, they are not identical because their experiences are different, as

... it is impossible for all (or even two) members of the same class to have had the same experiences, in the same order, it is certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class...(Bourdieu, 1990:59-60)

Limitation of the study:

This study focuses on understanding the parental choice of introducing children to English in an early stage. The participants were only mothers and their children were attending the same kindergarten.

Methodology

This study adopts a socio-cultural perspective to look at the way mothers justify their reasons for introducing their children to English at an early stage. In order to conduct the study, permission was required from the private pre-school and the Al-Madinah Directorate of Education (MDE), which I managed to obtain before starting the fieldwork. The latter permission was crucial as MDE is the representative power of the Saudi Ministry of Education in the region of Al-Madinah. By the same token, all private schools and pre-schools are under their supervision and are required to follow the regulations issued to private education institutions.

Before going further in exploring the methods are used in collecting the data, it is essential to note that the use of qualitative research is not common in the Saudi context. Al-Nassar (1999), who applies a qualitative approach in order to investigate the way of presenting EFL to pupils in Saudi from the stakeholders' point of view, points to reasons why qualitative research is used so rarely in Saudi educational research:

This, in my view, is because of statistical manipulation imposed by researchers and based on hypotheses derived from theories coming from research conducted in the context of second language teaching or in irrelevant contexts. (Al-Nassar, 1999:77)

The research was undertaken through three main stages. The rationale for conducting the research in this way includes two reasons. The first one is to generate a process by which the data collected from one stage leads to the following stage. The second reason is to develop a relationship with the participants that assures them of confidentiality and encourages them to take part in the following stages.

This research went through three phases, where nineteen mothers were interviewed, this paper focuses on four of them as they actively engaged through the three phases. In the first phase the four mothers were interviewed in Rowad pre-school, where EFL classes were observed, the second phase (29.01.2011-14.01.2012) started with the activation of a blog (not related to this paper) and e-mail exchanging with mothers. The final stage (22.07.2011- 15.09.2012) was by the end of the academic year and the mothers had the chance to reflect on the choice they made in the beginning of the year.

Applying a case study approach allowed to discover the mothers' views and expectations with regard to the introduction of English to their children. Al-Motairi's (2005) research, looking at

teaching EFL as social behaviour through adopting a case study of five boys' secondary schools in Riyadh, presented a rationale for using this particular methodology which seemed to be particularly relevant to the present study: "Case study facilitates deep understanding of the phenomenon under study and can empower participants and giving a voice to those who might otherwise go unheard" (Al-Motairi, 2005:121).

Study Tools: The main aim of using a variety of tools was to increase the potential to gather relevant data from the prospective participants. In this regard, Atkinson (2005) suggests that having several methods to find data rather than being limited to one method is important in analyzing data that reflect the social and cultural aspects of the research context.

Direct observation: The main aim of applying direct observation in this research was to help explore the status of the EFL classroom at the pre-school and to look at the social interactions between young learners among themselves and with their teachers. The data gathered through the six forty-five minute observations helped in building a comprehensive image of the mothers dialogues

Interviews: Interviews were implemented as the primary instrument for this qualitative research. According to Lofstedt (1990: 76), in qualitative research the meaning of what the people say, their social interaction, the way they behave and their thoughts are vital in obtaining a comprehensive picture of the context of the study. In order to obtain more in-depth information, several semi-structured interviews were carried out with mothers. Adopting such interviews gave the participants the freedom to ask me questions. Also, it allowed me as a researcher to find a balance between having a flexible interview and bringing the discussion back when it diverged to far from the topic. In order to get the most from applying this tool, writing questions in advance was avoided whereas identifying topics on which participants were to express their views were written. The venue of the interviews varied according to the study stages. While in the first stage interviews took place inside the kindergartens, in the third stage that was not the case as two mothers chose to have online interviews and the other two chose the location of their interviews. Applying online interviews can be convenient as enquiries are easier than in face-to-face interviews, although the social cues are diminished and the researcher's questions can be ignored (James & Busher, 2006).

Data analysis

Story one

The school buildings were big and each classroom had its en-suite toilet, Sammar was reluctant to take her daughter out of the international school. The child's English has immensely improved, however, her attitude toward the school was negative. Even though the school had English native speakers as teachers; Sammar doubted that they were qualified for early years teaching. They often shouted and once a teacher threatened an overactive child to lock him in a dark room, her daughter was frightened.

The first half of the academic year was finished, and on the first day of the second term here she was entering Rowad with her daughter. Bayan, her friend since they were schoolchildren themselves, never stopped praising Rowad whenever they met. When she registered her daughter, Sammar asked the head teacher to put he daughter in the same class as Bayan's child.

As the child went to the classroom, the head teacher knew through her conversation with Sammer that the latter is a qualified EFL teacher and she asked her if she was willing to apply to teach in the school.

Sammer's child started her new term in Rowad as a pupil and her mother started as an EFL assistant teacher who worked closely with the EFL supervisor. Sammer without planning was joining the school as a mother and a member of staff which position allow her to see the process of teaching English at Rowad from two completely different perspectives.

Story Two

Hanen moved recently with her husband and two children to Al- Madinah, she was happy until her daughter was aged four when she started to look for an excellent pre-school. Her standards were influenced by her previous life in her hometown, Jeddah, where there are a number of remarkable private schools where learners are introduced to high-quality English programmes.

All her nieces and nephews speak fluent English with their housemaids as well as in restaurants and indoor playgrounds. Her daughter had not yet achieved such fluency. Moreover, Hanen found it arduous to speak English in public places in Al-Madinah. On the few occasions that she did so, she felt as if people were watching and criticising her.

It was a challenging task because the choice of pre-schools very limited, some pre-schools had an ideal building and motivated learning environment, but they didn't put English as a core subject in their early learning programme. While the international kindergarten did have a very strong English programme, but their school buildings were not up to Hanen's standard. Therefore, when she visited Rowad which has high standard material facilities and where English played a key role in the learning programme, Hanen was encouraged to register her child as a student there.

However, by the end of the year, Hanen was not satisfied with the outcome especially in English, in which her daughter's progress was not remarkable. Hanen blamed the school and Hanen decided to take her daughter out and put her in an international pre-school as her top priority was improving her daughter's English language abilities.

Story Three

Samah is a teacher in a public school many of her colleagues leave their children at home with house maids. Having a reliable home maid does not prevent Samah from searching for the best available pre-primary school for her child. Wanting her child to learn English, Samah went to the International pre-primary where the medium of communication is English and most of the staff are native English speakers. However, before the week was over; Samah was convinced that native English speakers with no teaching qualifications do not necessarily teach English as excellently as qualified English teachers – whose first language may not be English – can. Hence, she decides not to send her child to the international kindergarten and continues searching for an alternative till she finds Rowad. From the first moment she enters Rowad Samah knows that this is her choice. However, she investigates further about the way the teachers deal with the children; she is happy with what she sees. Even though in the beginning she was eager to find a good quality international school, a year later Samah stops thinking about taking her daughter out of Rowad. With her efforts at home and her careful choices of English Learning Apps, Samah is happy with her daughter's English progress.

The three cases typifies the decision-making process while Sammar in the first case the mother's personal network plays a massive role in identifying places and getting informed reassurance on their standards. Such way of gathering information is described by Ball and Vincent (1998: 240) as 'grapevine knowledge'. 'Grapevine' knowledge is 'hot' knowledge, based on affective responses or direct experiences. For some parents, personal recommendation is perceived to be far more

trustworthy than apparently 'objective' data (ibid: 240). The impact of grapevine knowledge is of particular importance in the context of non-compulsory education in Al Madinah where 'cold' information on institutions (inspectorate's reports etc.) is not widely available.

Hannen, in the second story brings the impact of the social environment and the social pressure that some parents face as they look for the best available educational opportunity for their children. As a mother, Hanen develops market-led behaviours - typical of "alert clients" - for securing improved learning outcomes for her child, including "signalling (her) dissatisfaction through exit" (Gorard, 1998). Mothers' search for another kindergarten when not fully satisfied with their first choice is, according to Hoxby (2003: 303), not unusual and is often driven by availability as much as by personal interests.

Discussion

The mothers' decision in enrolling their children to pre-school is not a widely taken step in the city of Al-Madinah. This statement is confirmed by enrolment figures, according to the Ministry of Education (MOE) official website, in January 2012 the number of private kindergartens in Al-Madinah was twenty-nine while there were seventeen state kindergartens. In contrast, there were twenty-two private girls' primary schools and fourteen private boys' schools, with 134 state girls' schools and 137 state boys' schools. In this regard, these three mothers belong to a privileged minority group in Al-Madinah and, therefore, it is important to relate their practices to their social and cultural capitals.

Mothers' social and cultural capital and their choices : For the mothers in the previous three stories, enrolling their children in pre-school is not a questionable situation, their aim is to find the best available pre-school that will meet both their demands and expectations. Hence, to find the best for their children mothers draw on their social networks and start to discuss with the people who have a similar attitude toward early years education to find out what and where is the best choice, Sammar states:

Bayan convinced me to put daughter at Rowad; she is always happy with her daughters being there and never stops saying that it is the best. And because I was not happy with the pre-school daughter was in, so I followed her advice.

(Sammar- Story One)

Sammar continues:]

I asked the head teacher to put my daughter in the same class with Bayan's; if they manage to become friends, it will be brilliant.

This case illustrates the role that sociocultural factors and social networks and milieu play in the process of choosing a kindergarten. Sammar has known her friend when they were pupils in the same private primary school; they lost touch for a couple of years then they met again when they both studied English Literature at their local university. This dimension of shared sociocultural values arises several times as they talk about their desire to see their daughters as friends, Sammar goes as far as to ask the head teacher to put her daughter in Bayan's daughter's class at Rowad. Hanen, provides another element to this study as she brings her own social and cultural capital, unlike the other three mothers, she draws on her experiences from her own life in her hometown, and also refers to the experiences of her relatives who remain in Jeddah:

In Jeddah, you will not have a problem to find good schools where English is taught with high standards. You might find it difficult to pick one school as there are so many remarkable ones.

(Hanan- Story Two)

In supporting the view regarding the quality of schools in Al-Madinah compared to Jeddah, Hanan claims that private schools in Jeddah are much better than in Al-Madinah as, in order to choose a kindergarten for her daughter, she visited several of them. She was not happy with the buildings and the facilities provided:

In Jeddah, this is not the situation; I would not have to suffer that much looking for a good kindergarten. There are plenty of good kindergartens and schools, private schools there are competitive and plentiful.

(Hanan- Story Two)

Even though Hanan has been living in Al-Madinah for a couple of years, her expectation is influenced by her social capital. Being able to draw direct comparison between her own child and her cousins has a huge impact on the type of education she wants her daughter to undertake:

Al-Madinah lacks good kindergartens providing good quality English programmes, unlike Jeddah where my nephews and nieces are attending very good kindergartens and schools.

(Hanan- Story Two)

Hanan is not the only one who compares the status of English in Al-Madinah to another major city, Sammar who has lived all her life in Al-Madinah is originally from Riyadh. Sammar agrees that the level of English at private schools in Al-Madinah does not meet her expectation as she also advocates early introduction to English.

God protect Al-Madinah, the status of English in the city is very poor; in Riyadh you can hear some people use English in their daily life.

(Sammar- Story One)

Sammar's experiences and her social interaction allow her to draw comparisons between the level of English in Al-Madinah and Riyadh. Having lived her all life in Al-Madinah Sammar comparison is different from Hanan's.

There [in Riyadh] my daughter saw people communicating in English in the malls and restaurants; she turned to me and asked: 'Are we in Saudi?' I said: 'Yes, but not in Al-Madinah'.

(Sammar- Story One)

Through their experience mothers draw comparisons which occur through mothers' social interaction in two different contexts where they manage to observe the status of English through their communication. Even though Al-Madinah is no less important than Riyadh or Jeddah, the fact that Riyadh is the capital of KSA and Jeddah is the main port in the western coast does give the two cities an advantage in terms of job opportunities. As Mustafa (2005) explains that many people from Al-Madinah move to other cities for better careers and Riyadh and Jeddah are the main destinations they emigrate to. Such social movement between the Saudi cities allows the participants to draw comparisons between the facilities in Al-Madinah for their young children and those in other cities, resulting in considering life in Al-Madinah limited in comparison to the life their relatives and acquaintances lead in other cities.

In Samah's case, she has not registered her daughter in the international pre-school as it turns up to be her first choice, rather she went with her daughter every day in the first week to discover that what is provided is not what she wants for her daughter. As a result, she goes with her second choice, Rowad where some of her friends place their children.

All my friends who put their children here [at Rowad] are very happy with the kindergarten, and later their daughters moved to the school. They praised it to me.

(Samah- Story Three)

When they decide to choose a pre-school for their children, mothers rely on their social networks and interaction to make their decisions. Among their friends as relatives, mothers discuss the potential pre-schools they consider sending their children to. Drawing on their own experiences and information, they started to share their knowledge. Moreover, it is during the interactions that take place within these networks that they discuss their preferences, views, experiences, and expectations. Through such interactions with other mothers, they start to have a clear picture of the facilities provided in different pre-schools. If mothers are not satisfied with the outcome, they can immediately take their children out and move them to another school

Middle-class parents, like all parents, can only do their best, deploy their capitals as strategically as they are able ... some families are able to use economic, social, cultural and emotional capitals at the moments of crises or key moments of transition to ensure access to privileged trajectories or to avert calamity (Ball, 2003: 265 ,269)

Mothers' views on early or late exposure to English: Hanen points out that some parents are not aware of the importance of English for their children, and therefore, the English programme does not play a vital role in improving their children's learning skills. She claims that:

When young children are introduced to English early, they have the ability to store the knowledge in their sub-conscious and, even if they do not use it immediately, one day they will.

(Hanan- Story Two)

The power of social capital is so vivid in this study, and in Hanen's case it shows that Hanen discriminate herself from the other mothers by her frequent comparison to her family ties in Jeddah. Mothers who participated in this study share such similar social attributes that this allows them to constitute a "socio-cultural milieu", where each discourse gathered somehow echoes the rationalisation behind decisions made by parents, 'like them', who value the importance of early years learning, including learning English at an early stage. Thus, they reflect what Sullivan (2001) describes as "dominant habitus" of their milieu:

(...) a set of attitudes and values held by the dominant class. A major component of the dominant habitus is a positive attitude toward education. (Sullivan, 2001:149)

Mothers and the use of English at home: When it comes to the use of English at home and beyond the taught subject in pre-school, mothers social and cultural capitals become vital. For instance being an EFL teacher herself, Sammar indicates that even though she does not speak to her daughter in English very often at home, she does read a story in English to her every other day at bedtime.

Frankly I do not speak to her a lot in English at home, it is around 3 to 10% of our daily speech, but I read stories in English to her at bedtime, one day in English and the following in Arabic and so on.

(Sammar-Story one)

Sammar's daughter has got another advantage in experiencing English at home as she imitates her mother who uses English with the Filipino maid.

She also interacts in English with our housemaid who does not speak Arabic, which in my opinion is a good supportive way to enhance learning English.

(Sammar- Story One)

Thirdly, Samah provides another view of the variety of languages used in the family. Where family members sometimes search for a commonly spoken language to make their communication easier. As was the case with Samah and her father-in-law who use English to communicate. Samah is not

the only case; there are many people in Al-Madinah who are in a similar position and this racial variety in the population is one of Al-Madinah's attributes.

My father-in-law was brought up in the UK... I have always spoken to him in English; he speaks British English and in the beginning I found it weird as I am used to the American accent.

(Samah- Story Three)

Apart from speaking English with someone in the home, the power of technology in today's world makes it common for children to be exposed to English at an early age. Such early exposure might affect mothers' decisions to introduce their children to English in an appropriate way through early learning programmes. Besides, in some cases mothers look at the use of technology as a support to enhance their children's English learning:

With all this technology, it is rare to find a child who has never been exposed to English ... There are several educational applications and I tend to encourage them to play these games; there are applications for them to learn English, and also for Arabic and Maths.

(Samah-Story Three)

While they are at home, children are encouraged to do some of their activities in English. While some of them read stories with their mothers in English, others watch cartoons or children's programmes in English.

The cases of the three mothers reveal a decision-making process involving checks and balance, as well as a measured loyalty towards institutions informed by child development and learning expectations. Ball et al. (1996) suggest that privileged/skilled choosers are engaged in a process of child-matching. That is, they are looking to find a school which will suit particular proclivities, interests, aspirations and/or personality of their child (Ball et al., 1996: 94). Hanen, for instance, is not happy with the outcome of English learning for her daughter at Rowad; she believes that in an international kindergarten this outcome would match what she wants for her daughter.

Mothers' reflect on their choices: During the first stage, when the research objectives were explained to Hanen she was surprised about the fact that the study was in Al-Madinah. She claimed that compared to Jeddah the level of English in Al-Madinah schools and pre-schools was poor. Hanan, who is originally from Jeddah, proved during the interview to be a good source of information about the status of English in the two different cities. The strength of her views deriving from the fact that she lived in Jeddah and made frequent visits to that city

If I were you I would have conducted my study in Jeddah, you know the number of private schools there are higher and also the quality of the provided EFL programmes. But here in Al-Madinah, I am not quite sure you will find the answer you are looking for.

(Hanan- Story Two)

The fact that Hanen questioned the location of the study and suggested that if the study had been done in a different context that it might provide different results. This indicates the nature of interviews with the mothers, in that they were welcome to ask questions about and comment on the research and its motivations

Building up a relationship with mothers where they were encouraged to ask any questions related to the study was significant. As it helps when the time comes to have their reflections on the decisions they made earlier at the beginning of the academic year.

To be honest as parents there are a few choices for us in Al-Madinah to pick for our daughters. The convenient schools where the teachers are well qualified, and they

know how to deal with the children tend to have a modest EFL curriculum. While in the international schools where the level of English is very high, the physical materials are really modest and some of the teachers are not qualified.

(Sammar- Story One)

Having her daughter experienced the international pre-school, Sammar is able to draw a comparison between her daughter's level of English when she was in the international school with her level at Rowad the comparison favoured the international school.

Her English has improved in the international kindergarten ... but I was not satisfied with the way teachers dealt with the children... here [Rowad] teachers pay a lot of attention to the children.

(Sammar- Story One)

The way mothers viewed the level of EFL programme in Rowad varied. On the one hand, Sammar was able to observe her daughter's progress in learning English when she was taught by native English teachers for one term in an international pre-school and when she was taught English by locally qualified EFL teachers. The different outcomes from the two kindergartens make Sammar determined to look for a better international school for her daughter.

On the other hand, Samah's experience is the opposite in that her daughter only spent one week in the international kindergarten where the English teachers were native speakers but, according to Samah, did not give the children the necessary individual care. Therefore, her comparison between the two kindergartens was more focused on her observations of her daughter's overall care rather than her progress in English. Samah's view is supported by her cousin who has lived in the US and who noticed that the child's English is good. The view of a person who lives in the US is taken as authoritative, as she lives in an English-speaking environment and her children are learning the language from one of its main sources.

That situation illustrates that family members share some cultural capital, and one of the cultural attributes is practicing an FL in their social milieu. This also indicates that when a mother assesses her children's learning development her assessment is influenced by individuals who share similar educational values and social dispositions.

I was really thrilled when my daughter was communicating with her cousins in English. They have been in the US for a few years and they are exposed to English in its original land whereas my daughter is learning it at Rowad and yet she is doing really well.

(Samah- Story Three)

In the third stage of data collection, mothers were discussing the outcome of the EFL programme their children were introduced to through the year. Hanen shares with Sammer her disapproval of the level of English at Rowad. Her opinion differed from the one she had in the first stage.

Here [Rowad] they have a good English programme and the school buildings and facilities provided are suitable for the children... I visited an international kindergarten, but the buildings were dull and not designed for young children. Hence, I put her here.

(Hanen- Story Two)

At that stage, Hanen's daughter had only spent three-quarters of the first term at Rowad, and Hanen does not appear to regret her choice. However, during the third stage, in an online interview, Hanen claims that the English outcome from Rowad is far behind her expectations and, even though her daughter is doing well in all the subjects including English, as a mother she is disappointed by the pre-school.

I am just so disappointed with her level of English; I expected her to improve her English more than she did. For a whole year, she only learnt songs and a few sentences... This is not the level of language I expect.

(Hanan- Story Two)

As a result, by the end of the year, Hanan decides to put her daughter in an international kindergarten.

The fees in the international kindergarten are far higher than in Rowad, so I thought deeply and I prefer to put my daughter in a school where she gets a good foundation, despite the poor physical facilities compared to Rowad.

(Hanan-Story Two)

For Hanan, although the facilities are important in enhancing an educational environment, her priority is to improve her daughter's English. Hence, an international kindergarten is a better place for her as all communication is in English, and Arabic is introduced as a subject. According to Reay and Ball (1998:582) contexts differ and so do the options provided in each context, which sometimes means that a particular context may not comply with a mother's demands. In her analysis, Reay and Ball investigated mothers' choices from a range of options using the concept of habitus.

Unlike Hanan, Sammar does not take her daughter out of Rowad , regardless of her disappointment with the EFL programme:

I really regret taking her out of the International Kindergarten... English was much better in the International Kindergarten, maybe because the teachers there are native [English] speakers. While here, four of us are Saudis and the supervisor is Syrian.

(Sammar- Story One)

When I meet Sammar in the third stage, I had no idea that she has started to teach EFL in Rowad. Hence, when she expresses her dissatisfaction with the EFL programme in Rowad, she speaks as a mother and as an EFL teacher.

These mother's expectations of the level of English they want their children to achieve through formal learning are influenced by several cultural aspects. One of these aspects is the mothers' own level of English, which in turn directly links to another aspect - the international dimension. The extent to which English or other FLs are used in their social milieu, or the frequency with which they use other languages when travelling abroad, are also contributing aspects in this regard. They are aware of the dominance of English as an international language, and also argue that learning English need not be centered on acquiring a native-like accent.

Conclusion

This paper explores the rationale of mothers to have their young children introduced to English in an early stage; the study concludes that mothers' social and cultural capitals play significant roles in their decision. In addition, being women in a minority in a city where few children go to pre-schools, mothers argue that their decision is made for the children's benefit and it is a choice they view as a moral imperative, especially with the policy makers recent move towards implementing English earlier in the national curriculum. Hence, the major findings are:

1. The choices' mothers made is influenced by the informed choices mothers accumulate through their own educational trajectories alongside with their social and cultural positions.

The mothers' decision in having their children introduced to English is hugely influenced by their informed choices that are shaped by their cultural and social capitalise and their social interaction among those who are like them.

The three mothers who took part in this study belong to the same sociocultural milieu, and often the same networks and as shown in this study, share common values on the importance of EYL and introducing English at this stage. Being part of a social network helps them gather information about kindergarten options, as Goldring and Philips (2008:214) say, "from people they know from their neighbourhood and other social groups such as friends, families and co-workers". Hence, this sample of women does provide a clear image of a social group's desires and attitudes as well as empirical evidence of the social and cultural attributes driving them.

2. The way in which mothers justify their choices drew on their personal experiences and their level of education besides their social and cultural elements.

Understanding the parental choice in light of cultural capital is vital to follow the mothers' journey and their strategical choices we had been through. As stemmed from their discussions the mothers have gone through remarkably similar processes; the education market and the educational policy, their own level of education, the status of early years learning in Al-Madinah, their own status as Saudi women facing educational choices for their children and the acquisition of English .

Those factors and attributes have been discussed in this paper through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital. According to Swartz (2002: 62)

Bourdieu's concept of habitus builds on the idea that actors act strategically and practically rather than as conformists to external sets of formal rules... Actors are not usually simple conformists to cultural norms or external constraints ... they are strategic improvisers who respond in terms of deeply ingrained past experience to the opportunities and constraints offered by the present situation.

3. The mothers' who decide to have their children introduced to English are a minority group and their attitude can't be generalize.

Being a minority in the city of Al-Madinah, mothers' cultural capital played a major role in the way they made their decision as well as justifying their choices. Relatively Reay (1996:581) utters: Educational choices take place in specific socially and economically structured contexts... parental choices cannot be adequately conceptualised in isolation from localised issues of history and geography, understandings of psychological impact of social class, and the influences of differential access to social power and material sources.

To conclude, in this study, it was shown how the level of education of mothers plays an important role in their decision to enrol their children in pre-primary and introduce them to English at that stage. But the level of education and other personal dispositions are not the only determining factor; social capital within the mother's networks also have an impact on her choice. Hanen's decision to take her daughter to an international pre-school is closely linked to Hanen's perception of the type of pre-schools her sisters send their children to. Also, Sammar points out that her choice of Rowad was mainly driven by her friend's advice. So, on the one hand, the mothers' social interactions within their social circle have a huge impact on their choice of school; on the other hand, the high level of education mothers have also played a noticeable role in the way mothers justified their choices.

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