

The Value of Songs and Rhymes in Teaching English to Young Learners in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The study aimed to show the impact of using songs and rhymes in teaching English to young female learners in Saudi Arabia. It involved 20 Saudi teachers who were randomly selected from public and private schools in Riyadh city. The age of the female students ranged from 6 to 10 years. Forty parents volunteered to participate. Parents were asked to answer an online survey comprising ten different questions. Interview questionnaire and online survey were the tools used for data collection. About 9 of all teachers don't use songs and rhymes activities in teaching English. 15 of teachers out of 20 said that it is not a mandatory part of the curriculum. 13 of the teachers believe that it is very important and 2 teachers believed in using songs and rhymes to facilitate remembering. 16 of teachers out of 20 noticed that their students are actually using the songs or their vocabularies outside the classroom and 17 of all teachers stated that songs and rhymes helped their young learners' English language development. 82.50% of parents in Saudi Arabia support teaching English to their children, 47.50% of parents stated that their child is using English only in the classroom. Only 7.50% of the parents were not aware of this classroom activity while 92.50% of them are aware. 2.50% of parents expressed their disagreement. The study found out that songs and rhymes are rarely used in teaching English to young learners in the Saudi Arabia and curriculum was not rich enough with activities like songs and rhymes.

Keywords: English, Saudi Arabia, rhymes, songs, teaching, value, young learner

1. Introduction

English has now become a global language, and the one non-native speakers most wish to learn. Linguists and language researchers have recently expressed interest in the use of songs and rhymes as valuable educational tools to aid the process of language acquisition and development. However, evidence regarding the value of these is still lacking and they are not currently widely applied widespread, due to the differences between the educational context and learners' backgrounds in each country. Investigating the value of this technique in teaching English to young learners in Saudi Arabia raises a number of issues. The findings of this study suggest a new means of implementing this technique in teaching English in Saudi Arabia. Both parents and teachers believe that these changes can ensure this technique becomes more socially acceptable and subsequently increasingly valued as a means to achieve educational goals in teaching English as a second language.

Crystal states that: "English is now the dominant or official language in over 60 countries and is represented in every continent". (Crystal, 2004)

English is currently the most popular language amongst learners, being described as a global language, and generally considered as the key to following Britain in the transition from an agricultural to industrial society and of the movement from a rural to an urban way of life. However, there are many different reasons for seeking to learn English, including financial, cultural and social. English is seen as a means to effective participation the world's development.

Parents around the world perceive the importance of their children learning English as a second language, and Saudi parents are no exception. Governments, too, view the teaching of English as vital to being a well-organised region of the world.

Pennycook (2014) concluded that British and American government policy since the mid-1950s focused on establishing English as a universal "second language", so as to protect and promote capitalist interest.

There is a long history of teaching methods and they are constantly changing and developing. Theories concerning language and teaching have developed rapidly over the past twenty years. This increasing change corresponds with the revolution of technology and its application to every field of human life, including teaching.

Richard & Rodgers (2014) argue that approaches and methods in language teaching should be able to respond to two questions: (a) What are the psycholinguistic and cognitive processes involved in language learning? (b) What are the conditions that need to be met in order for these learning processes to be activated?

Studying language and understanding its effect have always been the most controversial topics among linguists and teachers. Where language comes from, and how it works, have been a subject of intense debate. Therefore, research needs to inform practitioners of the best techniques for dealing with a particular issue. For example, the British Educational Research Association state that: *The broad aim of the Association is to encourage the pursuit of educational research and its implication for both, the improvement of educational practice and for the general benefit of the community* (Higgins, 2003).

Leah (2012) said that: *The 20th and the beginning of the 21st century was marked by some crises, conflicts and multiple changes, scientific discoveries and a huge technological progress. All these problems of the contemporary world with its speed, conflicts between generations and often the inadequate educational system imposed a transformation in our way of thinking, in the field of teaching and education.*

Therefore, there is a need to answer all questions that relate to the methods of teaching English. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each method? How can the advantages be exploited and the disadvantages avoided? Can teachers depend on a specific method or do they need to be selective according to their teaching contexts?

A number of factors affect learning English as a second or foreign language. Some of these are related to the learners themselves and their motivation, background, cultural values, social class and age.

Others are related to the teacher and the method of teaching and learning. Although all these factors are equally important, this paper will focus on the teachers' choice to use songs and rhymes in teaching English to young learners in Saudi Arabia.

When it comes to English, it is the teacher who generally chooses the method of teaching and the ways of implementing this in class. But in order to choose a single method effectively, a teacher requires a deep understanding of the different methods available and recent techniques.

1.1 Problem Statement

Songs and rhymes have become the most valuable educational tool to aid language learning as well as promoting the learner's physical and mental development. So, even without an academic study, there is awareness that music provides a natural and rhythmic way with which to learn (Green, 2002). The use of songs and rhymes in teaching a second language is of major interest to many researchers such as MacDonald. Techniques vary from country to country, and even from class to class and from teacher to teacher and Saudi Arabia classes are not an exception. Studies concerning these techniques are popular and available to both teachers and learners. The question here is how the results of these studies can be generalised and modified to comply with the unique characteristics and requirements of Saudi educational context.

1.2 Aim of the Study

This study aims to evaluate the impact of using songs and rhymes in teaching English to young learners in Saudi Arabia. It also aims to establish if songs and rhymes are actually implemented by Saudi English teachers, or it is merely a theoretical technique. It seeks to investigate teachers' views concerning the use of songs and rhymes in teaching English and comparing them with parents' attitudes towards this technique. How do teachers and parents perceive the impact of using songs and rhymes on the learners? Do parents believe that songs and rhymes contribute in their children's English language acquisition, or do they perceive it as a waste of time and effort? Do teachers feel that learners were excited and motivated through the implementation of this technique in their class and (most importantly) do they believe that songs and rhymes assisted the development of their students' language skills?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The focus of this paper concerns the value and efficiency of using songs and rhymes in the classroom to teach English in Saudi Arabia. A number of researchers consider songs and rhymes of great value and benefit in EFL classrooms if they are used effectively and become an integral part of teacher training programs (Bingimlas,

2009). Teachers learn to use songs and rhymes to grasp the students' attention and enrich the pedagogic process. The findings and results of this research may be used by teachers and learners in their educational contexts. It may also contribute to the literature covering the issue of English language teaching techniques in general, and in Saudi Arabia in particular.

2. Research Questions

- Do teachers believe that using songs and rhymes is an efficient method in teaching English as a second language to the young learners in Saudi Arabia?
- Do Saudi parents believe that songs and rhymes in teaching English to their children are effective?
- Do Saudi parents and teachers hold the same views concerning the use of this technique?

Limitations

- It would be difficult to undertake interviews with a large number of teachers and parents during this research. The number of participants will therefore be limited. Parents will be asked to answer an online survey to freely express their points of view concerning the subject of this research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

Descriptive study conducted assess the impact of using songs and rhymes in teaching English to young learners in Saudi Arabia.

3.2 Study Population, Sampling and Sitting

Study was involved 20 Saudi teachers with different ages who were randomly selected from public and private schools in Riyadh city—Saudi Arabia. The age of their students ranged from 6 to 10 years. 40 parents volunteered to participate, Parents were asked to answer an online survey comprising ten different questions conduct from March to September 2015.

3.3 Study Tools

A structured interview and online survey were the tools used for data collection.

3.4 Statistics and Data Analysis

SPSS version 18 was used for data entry and analysis.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Teachers and parents who involved in the study signed a consent paper before the interviews, or filling the online survey. The consent form outlines the purpose of the study and states clearly the investigation procedures. It also provides approval for access to any other data I might need for this study. In reality, the teachers were excited about the idea of making a change in the curricula design and improve the pedagogy process in the class in all aspects of literacy. The majority preferred to remain anonymous, but they signed a consent form agreeing to any future publication of the study, and to revealing their names and the results if necessary.

4. Data Interpretation and Results

4.1 Teachers' Interview Data Analysis

Twenty teachers volunteered to participate in this study through answering the interview questions. Sibarah (1999) argues that songs and rhymes are like any other activities in the classroom, and should be included in the teacher's lesson plan only when they promote a defined objective.

The first interview question was to know if the participants use songs and rhymes activities in teaching English to young learners. Nine out of twenty stated that they do not use this method in their classroom. The question itself did not ask for more elaboration. The second question was designed to establish if using songs and rhymes are a part of the educational curriculum. 15 teachers out of 20 said that this technique is not a mandatory part of the curriculum. Hejjawi (2007) argues that some teachers are not aware of how music can enrich the culture of second language learning.

These responses might give a partial explanation concerning the response to the first question. If using songs and rhymes technique is not a part of the curriculum in Saudi, then teachers are not the ones to blame. The educational policy designers are responsible for the absence of this technique in teaching English, especially to younger learners.

The third question seeks to express the point view of the participant teachers to see if they believe in the positive

value of this technique in teaching English. 13 of the teachers believe that it is very important, 4 believe that it is important to some extent, and only one believe that it has a little value. Paradoxically, even the teachers who did not use this method believed that it is valuable. Only two who answered no to questions one and two believe that it is not a valuable technique in teaching English.

The fourth question is also designed to establish the participant teachers' attitudes toward teaching English to young learners through songs and rhymes. The second part of the question was to enable more elaboration. Six of the teachers answered with "no" and two provided simple explanations. The first said that as English teacher and MA Linguistics student, she views songs as coming under a behavioural approach, as the students are given stimuli and expect the answer while they repeat the song. She believes that the student learns more through communication and explaining themselves, rather than repetition of the song. For her, it is only used by second language teaching (SLT) in order to reduce the students' anxiety. The second teacher stated simply that she believes it to be a waste of her time in the class.

The majority of the teachers' responses was affirmative, and also provided explanations and suggestions for their answers. Two believe that using songs and rhymes can facilitate remembering when it is used with young learners and help to improve understanding of the meaning, and finally add the element of fun to the lesson. A number of the teachers remarked that they use it to save time and effort in teaching and make their classroom feel renewed, refreshed and special.

Teachers provided many important suggestions. The majority hoped that schools take an increased role in providing teachers with books of rhymes and songs. Many of them also provided criteria for choosing the songs and rhymes in their classrooms. They expressed that it is very important that songs and rhymes should be without music and suitable to the Islamic and Saudi culture, they should support lesson's objectives and be presented with body gestures, facial expressions, pictures or real visual aids to be more effective.

The fifth question of the interview is important as it provides information concerning students' use of songs and their vocabularies outside the classroom. 16 teachers out of 20 noticed that their students are actually using the songs or their vocabularies outside the classroom in another context, hence demonstrating that this technique was successful in extending the use of English and developed the language in a way that helped children to use English outside the classroom and in other contexts. There is some uncertainty surrounding the remaining four teachers participating, as the children might use songs or songs' vocabularies in other contexts where teachers are not able to observe or notice. One of the parents' survey questions was designed specially to cover this area and see if parents were able to notice if their child is singing or using songs' vocabularies with her friends or family members or in any other context.

Question Six requires teachers to clearly express whether they think that the use of songs and rhymes are an effective technique in teaching English. The second part of the question provides an opportunity for more elaboration. 12 of the teachers responded "yes" it is important and provided explanations for their point of view. Many believe that it is an effective way to present lexical, practice structuring sentence patterns, teaching many skills such as listening, stimulate young students, facilitate teaching English, adding fun and unconsciously building learners' confidence in English.

Teachers who responded that this technique is important to some extent only, believe that it contributes in memorising words only if the students apply it in a real communication context. They believe that there are other important methods in teaching English and each one differs from the other because this technique is not suitable for teaching all the skills required in learning a second language. One of the two teachers who answered that this technique is not important at all claimed that there are other important techniques in teaching English to young learners.

Laroy (1993) has cautioned that not all songs are suitable for listening comprehension exercises and it is vital to be selective. Question Seven invites teachers to express clearly their opinion if songs and rhymes should be used more in teaching English and to explain their answer. 13 of the teachers answered "yes very important", 4 agreed that it is important to some extent and 3 out of 20 answered "no it is not important". In elaborating this result, teachers provided explanations for their answers. Teachers who answered "no" claimed that they like to use different methods and techniques in teaching, such as the communicative approach, in order to give the students a chance to think and be creative. One explained her answer as being due to the fact that the Islamic religion prohibits songs and music.

Teachers with positive answers for Question Seven explained their choice. One claimed that teachers are supposed to be creative in teaching young learners, and the use of songs and rhymes is a creative technique and attracts their attention. A number of others agreed that Teaching EFL for children requires amusing and

interesting techniques, and songs are the best method to achieve this. Others claim that young learners are special and teachers must be innovative and creative at the same time. Young learners need to change the atmosphere of the classroom; they need a fun aspect to learning and repeating new words and sentences through repeating it in a song or rhyme improves their speed of learning.

Murphy (1990) identified the value of songs and rhymes in teaching as a “songs stuck-in-my head phenomenon” whereby the words, context and language are registered deeply in the brain and easier to recall. A number of teachers provide recommendations regarding using this technique through their experience in teaching young learners. They claim that this technique must be used in certain situations, as timing and subject are important. They would like to see this technique as a part of the curriculum, so they can have time to practice it with their children and also help them in providing songs and rhymes suitable to the subject of learning and the traditions of Saudi Arabia as an Islamic country, i.e., a curriculum rich with rhymes to fulfil the young learners’ needs.

Question Eight is intended to establish if the teachers participating hold the same attitudes towards Arabic and English songs and rhymes. Most of the teachers who answered this question provided reasons for their choice. 11 stated that they hold the same attitude, while 9 said that they do not. We need to provide each group with explanations to see why almost half of the teachers think differently about English songs and rhymes. One of the responses claims that teachers can use rhymes with topics like “country-honesty-garden”.

English songs cover almost every teaching subject and assist in teaching activities, safety instructions, adjectives, grammar, numbers, letters and many more. Others believe that there are some similarities in teaching Arabic and English, and attitudes towards songs and rhymes should not be different. For many of the teachers, in teaching any second language (and also the native one), children like to chant and use this language in a simple interesting way. Chien (2015), was emphasized that by using songs and chants in an imaginative way, learners’ speaking skills are undoubtedly enhanced. Children’s songs can be easily translated and modified according to the educational goal, and at the same time keep their value in language development. To summarise: teachers who held the same attitude towards songs and rhymes in both languages agreed that songs in any language are fun and helpful to support learning and learners’ understanding. Therefore, methods of teaching both languages are similar, so long as it serves the target language development.

Teachers who held different attitudes towards Arabic and English songs and rhymes believe that Saudi cultural and religion does not favour using this technique with young learners. They claim that the cultural and religious differences between Saudi and Western civilisation are crucial and each society has its unique differences, which cannot be ignored. To summarise, they claim the existence of many other methods in teaching English to young learners as effective as using songs and rhymes.

Chien (2015) argue that there are many more interesting ways to teach young students vocabulary, including using pictures, song lyrics, chants, miming, actions, gestures and stories. Question Nine is designed to see if the teachers think that there are alternative and more effective ways in teaching English than using songs and rhymes [18 of them were completely convinced of this. One replied “no” and one that she does not know. To summarise, through their experience, teachers were familiar with other methods and techniques in teaching and they believed that these are as important and effective as using songs and rhymes in English language teaching to young learners.

The final question of the interview is intended to examine the experience of the participant teachers and help the research comprehend if songs and rhymes actually helped learners’ English language development. 17 of the teachers stated that songs and rhymes helped their young learners’ English language development. 2 teachers answered with “no” and “not really”. The last one states that she doesn’t know. The results of the final question can summarise this paper’s data investigation. Teachers’ experience with their young learners is important and cannot be ignored, since the main purpose of the paper is to investigate the value of using songs and rhymes in teaching English to young learners in Saudi Arabia.

4.2 Parents’ Survey Data Analysis

The second set of data is collected through an online survey for the parents. Figure 1, shows 40 parent participants in the survey. All are parents of young learners and their children are learning English as a part of their curriculum requirements. The first question illustrates that 82.50% of parents in Saudi Arabia support teaching English to their children, however 5% of them do not.

The remainder support teaching their children this way to some extent only. Figure 2 shows the percentage results for Question One.

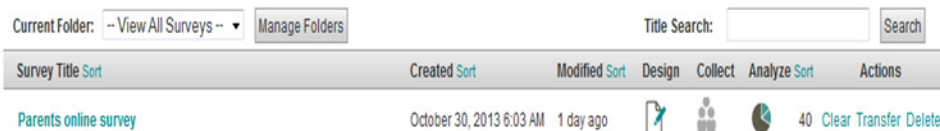


Figure 1. Screenshot of parents online survey

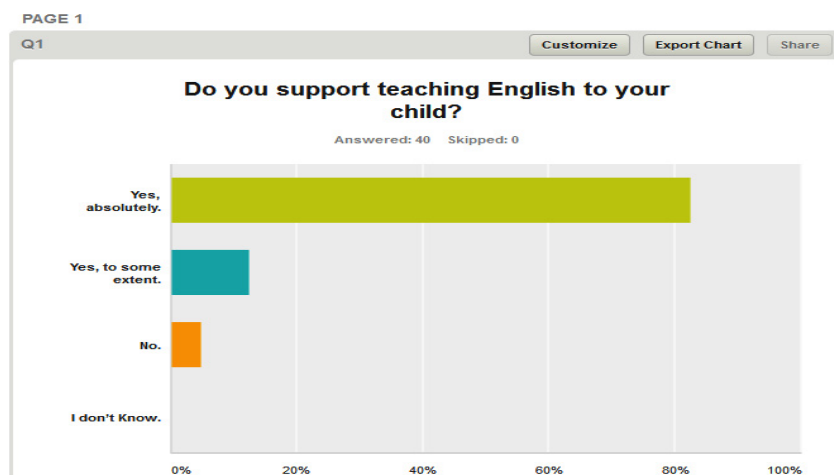


Figure 2. Percentage results for question one

The second question seeks to provide information concerning the contexts in which the young learners are using English, i.e., how much each student is able to use what she had mastered in class and use it in real situation of interaction with the other people around her. 47.50% of parents stated that their child is using English only in the classroom, while the remainder expressed different social situations where their children use English as a mean of communication, i.e., with friends, family members and other different social contexts. Figure 3 shows parents' responses to Question Two.

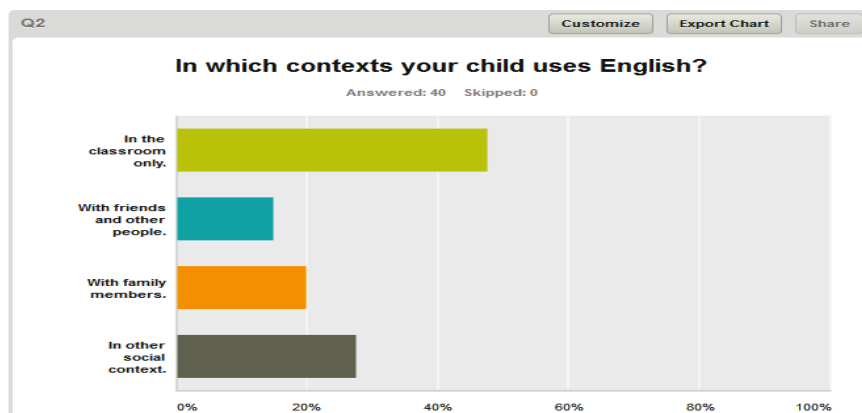


Figure 3. Percentage results for question two

Question Three in the survey is intended to investigate if the parents of the young learners in Saudi are aware that songs and rhymes are part of classroom activity. Responses showed that only 7.50% of the parents were not aware of this classroom activity while 92.50% of them are aware. Figure 4 shows parents' responses to Question Three. Question Four was designed to understand parents' attitudes towards the technique of using songs and rhymes in teaching English to their young children. Although 82.50% of the parents' responses were positive, 17.50% did not support this technique.

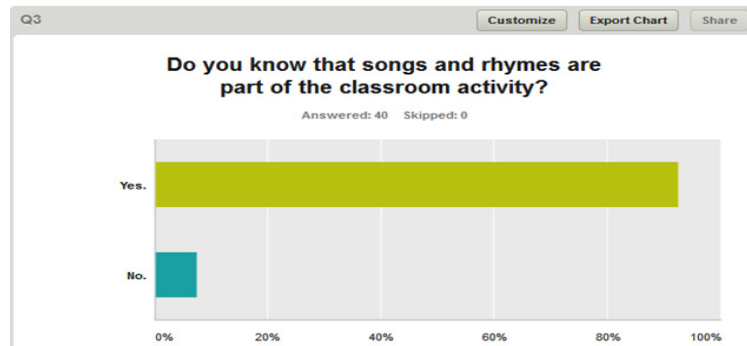


Figure 4. Percentage results for question three.

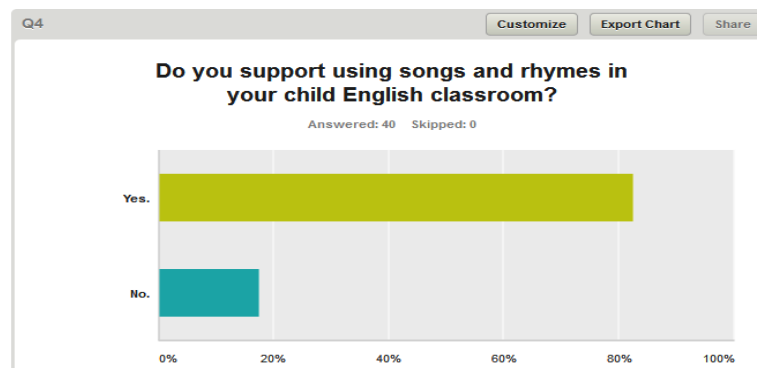


Figure 5. Parents' responses to question four

Question Five is important for this study as it reflects the impact of using songs and rhymes on the English language development of the children. The question provides information about whether parents have noticed if their child is singing or using the song vocabulary outside the classroom. Teachers cannot answer this question, as only the parents who are living and communicating with the child can provide such information. 87.50% of parents stated that they did notice this occurring, while 12.50% did not. Figure 6 shows parents' responses to Question Five.

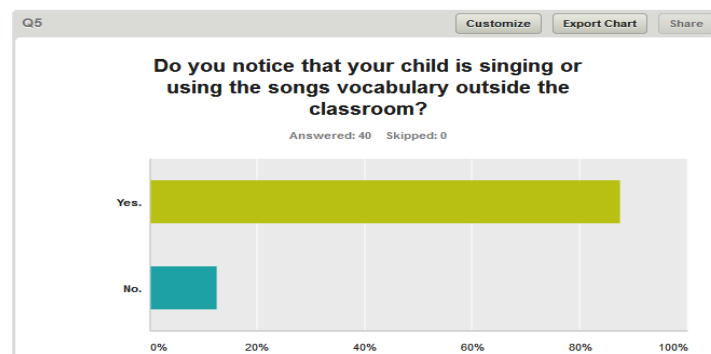


Figure 6. Percentage results for question five

Question Six is designed to establish the parents' point of view concerning the technique of using songs and rhymes in teaching English to their children. 46.15% believe that it is to some extent an effective technique. The same percentage responded that it is very important technique. 5.13% believe that it is only slightly effective, while the same percentage believe that it is not an effective technique in teaching English to their young children. Figure 7 shows parents' responses to Question Six.

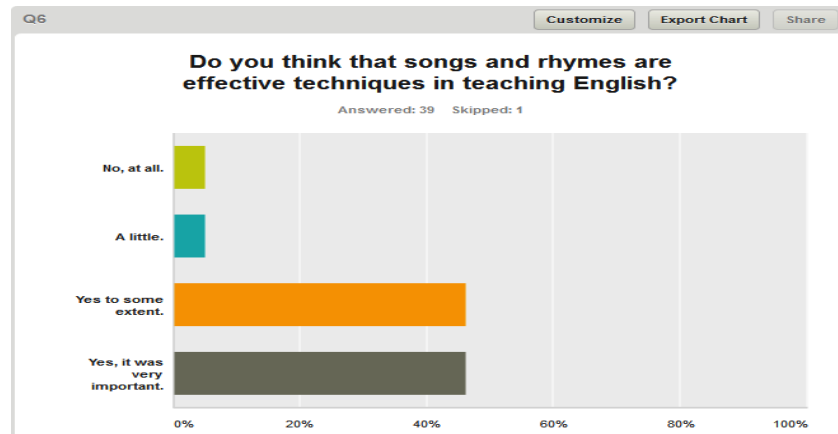


Figure 7. Percentage results for question six

Question Seven is also intended to establish the parents’ opinions about whether songs and rhymes should be used more in teaching English to their young children. Responses were very similar to the way of supporting this technique, with only 2.50% of parents expressed their disagreement. Figure 8 shows parents’ responses to Question Seven.

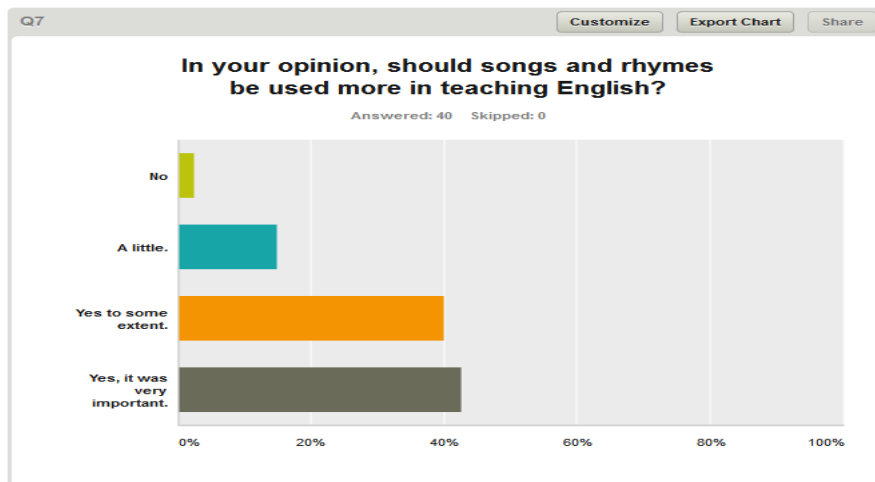


Figure 8. Percentage results for question seven

Question Eight is intended to see if the parents’ attitudes towards English songs and rhymes are the same as their attitudes towards Arabic songs and rhymes. 55.00% of parents responded that they do not, while 47.50% of them expressed identical attitudes to Arabic and English songs and rhymes.

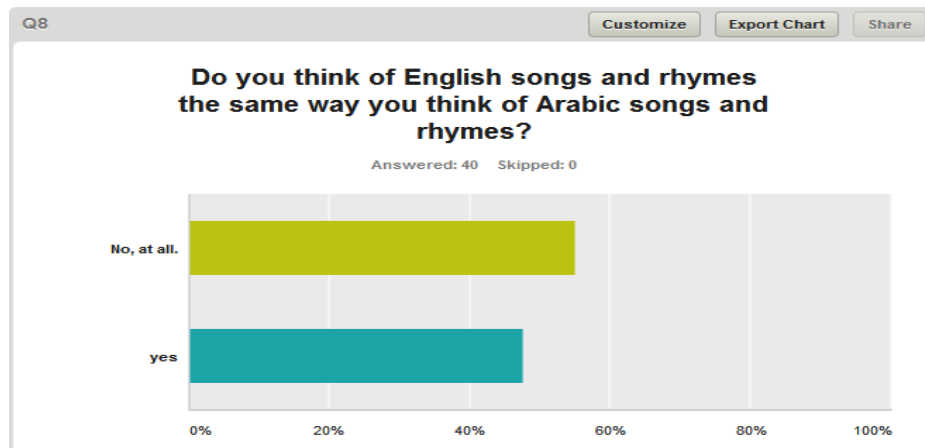


Figure 9. Percentage results for question eight

Question Nine is intended to establish if parents think that there are alternative and more effective ways to teach English than using songs and rhymes. 72.50% of parents believe that there are some good alternatives to teaching English other than this technique. 20% expressed their ignorance, while 7.50% stated that there is no better alternative than using songs and rhymes in teaching English to young learners. Figure10 shows parents’ responses to Question Nine.

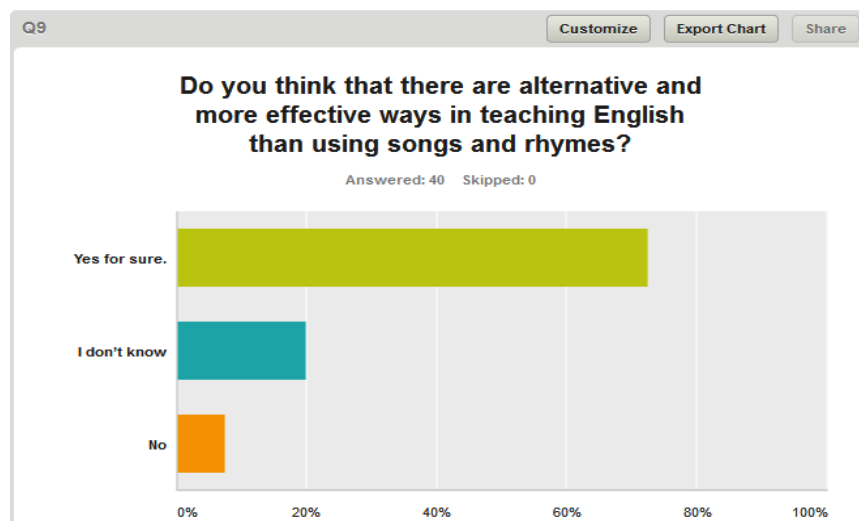


Figure 10. Percentage results for question nine

Question Ten is intended to obtain a final opinion through parents’ experience to see if this technique of teaching English has actually participated effectively in their young children language development. No one chose “no” as a response to this question. Responses were 77.50% “yes”, 15% “don’t know” and 7.50% chose “not really”. Figure 11 shows parents’ responses to Question Ten.

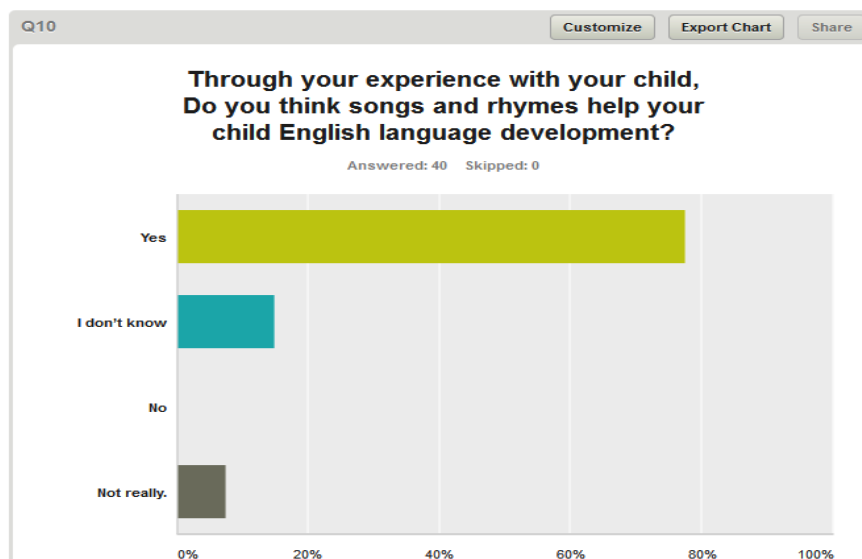


Figure 11. Percentage results for question ten

4.3 Data Comparison Analysis

Data comparison will clarify the results of the shared questions between parents and teachers. Results will be examined side by side in order to support or weaken the findings through data analysis.

Question One: when it comes to acknowledging that songs and rhymes are part of the curriculum, only 7.50% of the parents were not aware of this classroom activity, while 92.50% were already aware. 15 teachers out of 20 said that this technique is not a mandatory part of the curriculum. Therefore, it is possible to state that the teachers who used songs and rhymes in their classrooms were simply being creative and self-intuitive, and did not take into consideration any approval from parents or educational policy makers.

Question Two: when it comes to the question concerning the support of parents and teachers for the use of songs and rhymes in the English classrooms, 82.50% of the parents' responses were positive and 17.50% negative. 6 out of 20 of the teachers answered with no, with the remainder expressing a strongly supportive attitude towards this method. In comparing the two results, it is noticeable that the majority of parents agree with the majority of teachers in supporting using this technique in teaching English to their children. It is also noteworthy that a number of the teachers suggested that they support this in the absence of music, to ensure that it will not conflict with Saudi culture and religion.

Question Three: this question concerns whether parent or teachers noticed the child singing or using the vocabulary of the songs outside the classroom. Rogoff and Chavajay (1995) argues that children take part in the activities of their community, engaging with other children and with adults in routine and tacit as well as explicit collaboration, and this forms preparation for later participation in related events. 87.50% of the parents stated that they had observed such use, while 12.50% had not. 16 teachers out of 20 noticed that their students are actually using the songs or their vocabularies outside the classroom in other contexts. Through comparing these responses, we can say that both teachers and parents were able to see that this technique for teaching English participated partially in learner English language development.

Question Four: this is the question in which parents and teachers were asked to express clearly if they think that songs and rhymes are effective techniques in teaching English. Karpov (2003), emphasises that children's conceptual development first occurs through social interaction and dialogue. 92.30 % of the parents believe that it is an effective technique, however fewer teachers agreed, with only 12 out of twenty expressing approval of the effectiveness of this technique. In summing up, it can be observed that the opinions of parents and teachers differ concerning the effectiveness of using songs and rhymes in teaching English to young learners.

Question Five: when establishing if parents and teachers share the same opinions and attitudes towards English and Arabic songs and rhymes, 11 out of 20 teachers agreed that they viewed them in the same way. 55.00% of parents responded that they saw them differently while 47.50% agreed with the teachers. In comparing the two results, it can be seen that almost half of the parents and teachers agree that there are good and effective

alternative ways other than using songs and rhymes in teaching English to young learners in Saudi.

Question Six: this question was designed to establish to what extent parents and teachers believe that there are other alternative and more effective ways in teaching English than using songs and rhymes. 18 out of 20 of the teachers stated that through their experience in teaching, they have seen a number of good alternative techniques. 72.50% of the parents agreed, while the rest expressed their ignorance or gave a negative response. In both cases, most teachers and parents agreed on the existence of other effective techniques in teaching English to young Saudi learners.

Question Seven: the final question in this data comparison examines the final question in both the parents' survey and the teachers' interviews, where each group was asked whether, from their experience in teaching or living with a child, they believed that songs and rhymes helped the child's English language development. 77.50% of the parents answered "yes", with the rest either expressing ignorance of the subject or answering "no". 17 teachers were of the opinion that songs and rhymes helped their young learners' English language development. In comparing the data, it can be seen that the majority of teachers and parents agree through their observations and experience that the technique of using songs and rhymes in teaching English to young learners was effective when it came to the children's English language development.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Implications for Curriculum Reform

After comparing the data referred to above, the question arises whether curriculum reform should change its explicit focus and pay more attention to fun activities like songs and rhymes. This investigation demonstrates how the technique of using songs and rhymes in teaching English to young learners has been particularly useful and effective in their language development. It is a bold step even to recommend a new formation of educational songs and rhymes to be organised and written by educationalists and examined by scholars.

5.2 Implications for Cultural Reform

Culture is a further aspect in which changes can be made. In this case, the next step after curriculum reform is to spread an awareness in Saudi society of the value of this technique in teaching English.

6. Conclusion

The technique of using songs and rhymes in teaching English to young learners was limited number of Saudi teachers due to cultural and religious issues. It was not implemented or introduced to Saudi English teachers as a part of the educational curriculum. It can be further concluded that parents and teachers share the same view concerning this subject, with both support using this method in teaching and implementing it as a part of the curriculum with some changes in order to make it suitable for Saudi culture and the Islamic religion.

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