

## Teacher's Perception Towards Introducing English Language from First Grade

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### ARTICLE

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### Abstract

*The importance of English language education as a foreign language (FL) is growing significantly in today's globalized technological world, preparing young children to achieve a high level of social integration and language proficiency. Since English has spread widely internationally, many countries teach English at the elementary level to remain competitive in a global economy and to advance individual and national development. This study examines teachers' perceptions of teaching English to first-grade students. It will be evaluating the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program for first-grade students in Saudi Arabian schools. It will also identify differences between teachers' perceptions of teaching needs. The study relies on the questionnaire as the primary quantitative instrument to gather the data. Results confirm that teachers were outstandingly supportive and agreed with teaching a foreign language in first grade. Regarding the second theme of opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the EFL program for first graders in Saudi Arabia, many teachers expected opportunities and improvement for the EFL students in the future. The participants showed an urgent need for either educational courses or the appointment of specialized teachers to teach first-grade*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized technological world, English language education as a foreign language (FL) is growing significantly to prepare young children to achieve a high level of social integration and language proficiency. The English language remains the most taught foreign language across the world. Although language teaching is controversial among educators, within countries, and with linguists about whether earlier exposure is better, teaching a foreign language to young children is an international phenomenon (Rizzuto, 2017). Many countries have introduced English at the elementary level to be competitive within a global economy for national and individual development and to address the international spread of this language.

Many educators contend that children's academic futures are improved in the developmental years of preschool, first, second, and third grades. This period marks a significant developmental transition for children and is crucial for developing their culture, language, and practice (Rizzuto, 2017). Early teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) aims to achieve physiological benefits and increase immersion time. Nevertheless, this general implementation of English language education into the curriculum of primary schools worldwide must be shown scientifically to be effective in its long-term impact on all dimensions, mainly since most studies still take place in EFL settings (İnci & Yıldız, 2019) rather than in normal classroom settings. This study explores teachers' perceptions of teaching

English to first-grade students. In addition, the exploration helps identify their perceptions toward first graders learning a foreign language. It highlights the understanding of the educational process and teachers' needs to achieve the goal of teaching.

### **1.1. Research Problem**

Many researchers have long reported a dearth of studies on teachers' perceptions of teaching English in schools (Agu, 2015; Yurdakul, 2018). Moreover, there have been various calls for in-depth studies to unearth the views about perceived deficiencies, potential challenges, problems, and the needs of teachers while teaching English in classrooms (Ünal et al., 2016; Pan and Akay, 2015).

### **1.2. The purpose of the study**

This study examines teachers' perceptions of teaching English to first-grade students. Hence, evaluating the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the EFL program for first graders constitutes an essential aspect of discussing these programs and their implementation in the schools of Saudi Arabia. In addition, it will identify differences in perceptions among teachers regarding their needs to teach English to the first graders.

### **1.3. Research Significance**

Little research has been undertaken to investigate teachers' perceptions and beliefs in Saudi Arabia toward teaching English as a foreign language in elementary schools. Examining Saudi teachers' perceptions could help offer a better understanding of the educational process and the teachers' needs regarding the issues associated with teaching EFL at the first-grade level.

### **1.4. Research Objectives**

The current study aims to identify EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching the English language to first graders in Saudi Arabia. The following sub-objectives support the primary objective:

1. Identify teachers' perceptions of students learning a foreign language in first grade.
2. Evaluate the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the EFL program for first graders in Saudi Arabia.
3. Explore differences in teachers' perceptions of their needs to achieve the goal of teaching English to the first grade.

### **1.5. Research Questions**

The main research question is:

- 1- What are teachers' perceptions of teaching the English language to first-grade students in Saudi Arabia?

The sub-questions are:

- 1.1 What are the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs for first-grade students?
- 1.2 Is there any significant difference among teachers' perceptions of their needs to achieve the goal of teaching English to the first grade?

### **1.6. Definitions and Operational Terms**

These terms are defined to facilitate the understanding of this research:

1. *Attitudes*. Evaluating a person, object, or event positively or negatively (Mueller, 1986) and (Ajzen, 1988).
2. *English as a Foreign Language*. "Learning of non-native language in the environment of one's native language" (Gass & Selinker, 2008).
3. *Perceptions*. "Views or opinions held by an individual resulting from experience and external factors acting on the individual" (Susuwele-Banda, 2005).

4. *Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)*. Teaching English to students whose first language is not English.
5. *Teacher needs*. Refers to the conditions that the policy environment can create, including administrative structures or teacher training to foster better classroom outcomes or a more positive classroom experience for each instructor.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Teachers' Perceptions

Perceptions are the opinions or views a person holds resulting from external factors and experiences acting on the person (Susuwele-Banda, 2005). This concept of perception is identified by how individuals organize and interpret sensations to generate a meaningful experience around them. In addition, perceptions pertain to teachers' values and goals and how they perceive their teaching procedures, students, and content (Babich, 2010; Mahmoud et al 2024). They can influence students' opinions towards the educational process, particularly as students' views are usually shaped early in their lives (Qbeita, 2011). Many learners are likely to mirror their teachers' perceptions and beliefs, especially during elementary grade levels (Habeeb, 2013).

Teachers' perceptions of linguistic and cultural competency related to assisting children to achieve social and academic potential play a fundamental role in the types of pedagogical content offered. Several studies have established the importance of teachers' beliefs in elementary schools and their impact on English language learners' (ELL) learning ability (Garcia, 2015). In this light, this study reveals opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses in the EFL program for first graders in Saudi Arabia based on teachers' perceptions as workers only. Furthermore, how teachers perceive their needs to achieve the goal of teaching English to first graders differs.

### 2.2. Foreign language at an early age

A foreign language education, also known as a language exposure program, is intended to prepare and assist children in learning a new language. (European Commission, 2011). Almost all studies that show 'younger is better' have been conducted on immigrant populations, in which a large percentage of the child's waking hours was spent in a foreign language environment (Oyama, 1976; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Flege et al., 1999; DeKeyser, 2000). Under these circumstances, Baker (2011) has described English as a drip-feed language program, effectively turning it into a subject that is hardly comparable to bilingual or immersion education. Considering the long-term consequences of minimal input before drawing any conclusions about the 'younger is better' phenomenon is essential. Research has shown that age effects should not be seen in minimal input situations since critical period effects are only apparent in naturalistic or immersion environments (Patkowski, 1994; DeKeyser, 2000).

Based on previous studies and theories, there are no advantages and possible disadvantages to teaching a foreign language (FL) in the classroom. Moreover, limited exposure to the FL often takes 40 minutes per week. There is little or no access to this language outside the classroom, and the students have little opportunity to interact with peers who speak the FL. According to García Mayo and García Lecumberri (2003), younger students have no linguistic advantages in a foreign-language environment compared to older students in later years. One of the oldest studies on French classroom learning was conducted by Burstall (1977), who found that students who began learning French at age eight did not show an advantage over those who started at age eleven.

In comparison, another study discovered that learning a foreign language from early childhood is immensely valuable. It has been shown that age can have perceptible effects on linguistic measures in situations of minimal exposure to a foreign language. Still, these effects might not emerge until a considerable amount of input has been acquired (Larson-Hall, 2008). Finally, foreign language education has no clear history of implementation. Hence, this study reflects teachers' perceptions of EFL classes for first-grader students regarding their strengths and weaknesses.

### **2.3.2.3 Teaching English to Young Learners**

The English language is used as a common language of communication daily; this important demand prompted many countries to begin teaching EFL to children from an early age. Some countries, such as Indonesia, consider the period between birth and six years to be the best time for children to learn English. This stage of human development is fundamental in determining the child's future (Küçüktepe et al., 2014). Many scholars believe that the starting age of learning EFL has increased from four to five years old in many countries since the world has become a smaller environment and the interaction among individuals has increased (Khalifa, 2011).

Regarding the attempt to determine an age range for teaching, Pinter (2006) argues that the characteristics of two children at the same chronological age can be markedly different, and each child is unique. While some developmental differences between young language learners have been identified, little empirical support is available. A significant trend is to introduce teaching English to young learners at an increasingly younger age (Cameron 2001, 2003), which aims to enhance motivation, expand the intercultural experience, and prepare children for the future. Recently, countries that understood the importance of English language education followed policy-making methods to conduct teaching foreign language education as a suitable approach. Starting EFL education at an early age has become one of the primary policies in the educational system (Küçüktepe et al., 2014). This study explores teachers' perceptions of whether students aged from six to eight years old are suitable for Saudi EFL programs and whether they can show more academic progress in the future.

### **2.4. Teacher needs**

Children's education content is determined by their teachers. Teachers may have previously taught adolescents or adults, but they do not necessarily have any special training in how to teach children (Kirköz, 2009). Teaching children is quite different from teaching older learners for many reasons. According to Cameron (2001), they lose interest more quickly and can be less motivated on challenging tasks. Holešinská's study (2006) has found that teaching young learners can be particularly challenging because of factors, such as the appearance of the classroom, that affect students' motivation. Furthermore, teachers should be able to support their communication with students through gestures, facial expressions, and actions since these clues provide students with information about what they are reading and hearing (Tough, 1984). Musthafa (2003) asserts that primary students need adequate exposure, support, engagement, and teachers' confidence and capability to succeed in school.

Chodijah (2008) states that a widely reported problem is the gap between the supply of qualified teachers and the requirements as programs expand. Some countries are forced to rely on teachers who are not trained as young learner teachers. Javid, Farooq, and Gulzar (2012) conducted a study among Saudi English major undergraduates and English-teaching faculty at Taif University. The findings showed that having future teachers as students emphasizes the importance of providing professional EFL teacher training.

Based on a study conducted at the Universidad de Antioquia to evaluate the professional needs of EFL teachers, González et al. (2001) concluded that teacher education would benefit from promoting more instances of mutual recognition and sharing between teachers. Kusumoto (2008) conducted a needs analysis for Japanese elementary school teachers to develop a teacher training program. Language proficiency was again an essential need for most teachers, and the findings offered practical implications for curriculum developers and developing teacher training programs. This research will therefore incorporate these findings to explore the difference in teachers' perceptions of their needs to achieve the goal of teaching English to the first grade.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

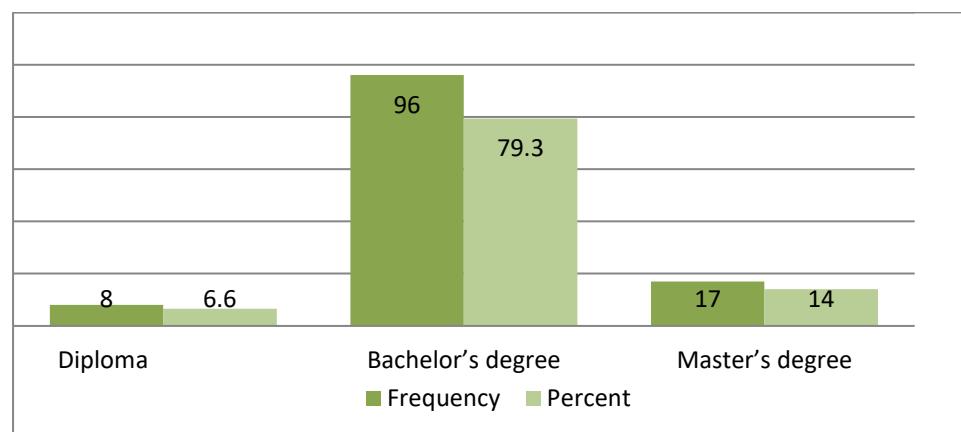
#### 3.1. Research Design

This cross-sectional study aims to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions when teaching the English language to first-grade students. The study will administer a questionnaire as the primary quantitative instrument to gather the data.

#### 3.2. Research Participants

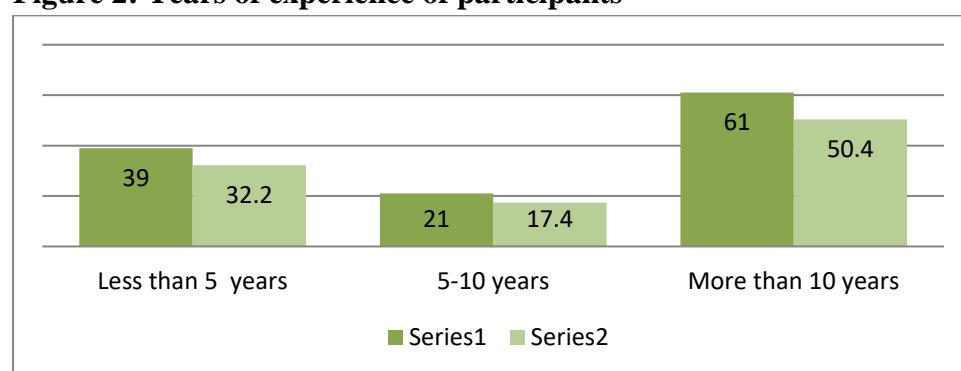
This study's participants are EFL teachers who teach at elementary schools, particularly first-grade students. Male and female teachers working in different elementary schools in the Makkah Region participated in the research. One hundred twenty-one teachers participated in the research. All participants were given a Google Forms questionnaire to complete, and each was required to sign a consent form.

**Figure 1: Academic qualifications of participants**



Most participants (79%) had a bachelor's degrees, 14% had master's degrees, while 7% had a diploma.

**Figure 2: Years of experience of participants**



Half of the teachers (50%) surveyed had a teaching experience of more than 10 years, 32% had a teaching experience of less than 5 years, while 17% had a teaching experience of 5 to 10 years.

### **3.3.Data Collection Methods and Procedures**

The questionnaire comprised two main segments. The first segment includes the participants' demographic information, including their years of experience, educational qualifications, and in-service and pre-service training in teaching EFL (See [Appendix 1](#)). The second segment addresses three aspects: teachers' perceptions toward learning a foreign language in early childhood and teachers' needs to accomplish the goals of the teaching process (See [Appendix 2](#)). According to Losby Wetmore (2012), Likert scales may meet your requirements if you have items dealing with attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. Respondents may indicate their perceptions by ticking the appropriate box relating to their degree of agreement or disagreement with particular statements. Scores have been given as follows. A (Strongly Disagree) selection obtains one score, the (Disagree) selection obtains two scores, whereas the (Agree) selection obtains three, and the (Strongly Agree) selection obtains four scores, respectively. This study adapts the questionnaire of Habeeb's study (2013), with modifications made to ensure the questionnaire met the study aims. Participants received the questionnaire privately via their e-mail addresses once their consent had been obtained to participate in this study (See [Appendix 3](#)).

### **3.4.Method Data Analysis**

After reviewing and coding the collected data, the data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 24), using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage for qualitative variables and mean and standard deviation (SD) for quantitative variables. Advanced analyses, such as Chi-square and One Way ANOVA, were used to compare dependent and independent variables.

### **3.5.Variables of the Study**

#### **Independent Variables**

- Years of experience in the field of primary school teaching: this has three levels: (less than 5) years, (5-10) years, and (more than 10) years.
- Academic qualification has three categories: diploma, bachelor's degree, or master's degree.
- In-service and pre-service training and preparation in teaching EFL.

#### **Dependent Variables**

Teachers' perceptions of teaching English as a foreign language to first-grade students.

### **3.6.Validity**

There are two types of content-related validity measures that are particularly relevant to this study. Both have been used as sources of evidence for content validity: the link to research evidence in literature and expert judgment.

#### **Link to Literature**

The first source pertains to teachers' beliefs about teaching English as a foreign language, especially at an early age, and about EFL teachers' needs from reviewing literature related to this field of study of EFL. In addition, data from the 26 survey items were collected to capture as accurately as possible all those aspects that make up teachers' perceptions. **Expert judgments**

Four experts from Taif University in Saudi Arabia with 25 or more years of experience and others with five or more experience in the field of EFL validated the questionnaire.

### 3.7.Reliability

To test for internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alphas were used for the overall instrument across the pilot study. The results showed that the alpha coefficient for the 26 items is 0.668, which is within an acceptable level of 0.7. Thus, the questionnaire variables have relatively high internal consistency (See Appendix 8).

### 3.8. Ethical Considerations

All participants in this study were aware of the objectives and questions and participated voluntarily, were first-grade teachers, and were over (25) years old. The study procedure was reviewed with each participant before obtaining consent. Participants were reassured that their names and responses would be kept confidential. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### 4.1.Data Analysis and Results

The collected data was analysed using SPSS version 24, where frequencies and percentages were calculated for qualitative variables. At the same time, the chi-square test, independent t-test, and One Way ANOVA were used to correlate dependent and independent variables.

Table 1: Shows Pre-service and in-service teachers' preparation and professional development.

Variable	Values	Frequency	Percent
Studying foreign language acquisition theories in the pre-service educational preparation	Yes	74	61.2
	No	47	38.8
Studying methods of teaching foreign language in the pre-service educational preparation	Yes	69	57.0
	No	52	43.0
Studying methods of foreign language assessments in the pre-service educational preparation	Yes	56	46.3
	No	65	53.7
The Ministry of Education offers enough training courses to prepare first-grade teachers to teach the English language.	Yes	58	47.9
	No	63	52.1

Only 61% of teachers studied foreign language acquisition theories in the pre-service educational preparation, 57% studied methods of teaching foreign language in the pre-service educational preparation, and 46% studied methods of foreign language assessments in the pre-service educational practice. At the same time, 48% of teachers mentioned that the Ministry of Education offers enough training courses to prepare first-grade teachers for teaching the English language.

Table 2: Shows teachers' perceptions toward teaching a foreign language in first grade.

	Strongly disagree		disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
	Fr.	%	Fr.	%	Fr.	%	Fr.	%
1. First-grade age (6 to 8) is appropriate for teaching English as a foreign language.	7	5.8	7	5.8	49	40.5	58	47.9
2. Teaching English at an early age is becoming a contemporary necessity required in the globalized world.	2	1.7	10	8.3	47	38.8	62	51.2

3. Younger children are more efficient at foreign language learning than older children.	3	2.5	11	9.1	53	43.8	54	44.6
4. Teaching English in first-grade increases the workload of teachers.	18	14.9	52	43.0	30	24.8	21	17.4
5. Introduction: teaching English in the first grade is an excellent decision	9	7.4	9	7.4	47	38.8	56	46.3
6. Some children do not appear interested in English.	12	9.9	34	28.1	62	51.2	13	10.7

About 40% agree, and 48% strongly agree that first-grade age (6 to 8) is appropriate for teaching English as a foreign language. About 39% agree, and 50% strongly agree that teaching English at an early age is becoming a contemporary necessity in the globalized world. About 44% agree, and 45% strongly agree that younger children are more efficient at foreign language learning than older children. About 25% agree, and 17% strongly agree that teaching English in first-grade increases teachers' workload. About 39% agree, and 46% strongly agree that introducing teaching English in the first grade is an excellent decision. About 51% agree, and 11% strongly agree that some children do not appear interested in English.

Table 3: Shows teachers' perceptions of the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the EFL program for first graders in Saudi Arabia.

	Strongly disagree		disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
	Fr.	%	Fr.	%	Fr.	%	Fr.	%
1. Learning English in first grade will not negatively affect students' Arabic language development.	11	9.1	19	15.7	50	41.3	41	33.9
2. Learning English at an early age will positively impact students' educational achievement later.	9	7.4	27	22.3	41	33.9	44	36.4
3. Teaching children English in first grade will increase their self-confidence.	4	3.3	14	11.6	55	45.5	48	39.7
4. Learning a foreign language in first-grade increases the child's ability to develop social relationships with others.	7	5.8	16	13.2	57	47.1	41	33.9
5. Teaching children English increases their motivation levels for learning languages in later stages of education.	1	.8	10	8.3	62	51.2	48	39.7
6. Teaching children a foreign language in first grade improves their understanding of other cultures.	2	1.7	11	9.1	60	49.6	48	39.7
7. I do not know enough about cultures in English-speaking countries.	24	19.8	49	40.5	39	32.2	9	7.4

About 41% agree, and 34% strongly agree that learning English in first grade will not negatively affect students' Arabic language development. About 34% agree, and 37% strongly

agree that learning English at an early age will positively impact students' educational achievement later. About 46% agree, and 40% strongly agree that teaching children English in first grade will increase their self-confidence. About 47% agree, and 34% strongly agree that learning a foreign language in first-grade increases the child's ability to develop social relationships with others. About 51% agree, and 40% strongly agree that teaching children English increases their motivation levels for learning languages in later stages of education. About 50% agree, and 40% strongly agree that teaching children a foreign language in first grade improves their understanding of other cultures. About 32% agree, and 7% strongly agree that they do not know enough about cultures in English-speaking countries.

Table 4: This Shows teachers' perceptions of their ability and needs in developing the child's English language skills.

		Strongly disagree		disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
		Fr.	%	Fr.	%	Fr.	%	Fr.	%
1.	Allocate English language specialist in the classroom	4	3.3	7	5.8	27	22.3	83	68.6
2.	From my academic preparation, I cannot develop the child's English language listening skill.	26	21.5	70	57.9	15	12.4	10	8.3
3.	From my academic preparation, I cannot develop the child's English language writing skill.	22	18.2	58	47.9	29	24.0	12	9.9
4.	From my academic preparation, I cannot develop the child's English language reading skill.	24	19.8	61	50.4	24	19.8	12	9.9
5.	From my academic preparation, I cannot develop the child's English language speaking skill.	28	23.1	64	52.9	21	17.4	8	6.6
6.	I could benefit from additional specialized training sessions to develop my capacity to teach English.	3	2.5	4	3.3	55	45.5	59	48.8

About agree 22% and 69% strongly agree that allocate English language specialists in the classroom; About agree 12% and 8% strongly agree that from their academic preparation, they cannot develop the child's English language listening skills. About agree 24% and 10% strongly agree that from their academic preparation, they cannot develop the child's English language writing skills. Also about agree 20% and 10% strongly agree that from their academic preparation, they cannot develop the child's English language reading skills. About agree 17% and 7% strongly agree that from their academic preparation, they cannot develop the child's English language speaking skills. Furthermore, about agree 46% and 49% strongly agree that they could benefit from additional specialized training sessions.

**Teacher's Perception towards Introducing English Language from First Grade**

Table 5: Chi-square test compares years of experience, and the Ministry of Education offers enough training courses to prepare first grade teachers for teaching the English language.

The Ministry of Education offers enough training courses to prepare first-grade teachers for teaching the English language.

				Total	P-Value
		Yes	No		
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	Count	12	27	39
		% within Years of Experience	30.8%	69.2%	100.0%
		% of Total	9.9%	22.3%	32.2%
	5-10 years	Count	11	10	21
		% within Years of Experience	52.4%	47.6%	100.0%
		% of Total	9.1%	8.3%	17.4%
	More than 10 years	Count	35	26	61
		% within Years of Experience	57.4%	42.6%	100.0%
		% of Total	28.9%	21.5%	50.4%
Total		Count	58	63	121
		% within Years of Experience	47.9%	52.1%	100.0%
		% of Total	47.9%	52.1%	100.0%

A statistically significant association has been found between years of experience and the availability of courses to prepare first-grade teachers to teach English, p-value < 0.05.

Table 6: Chi-square test to compare between years of experience and studying methods of teaching foreign language in the pre-service educational preparation  
Did you study methods of teaching foreign languages in the pre-service educational preparation?

				Total	P-Value
		Yes	No		
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	Count	20	19	39
		% within Years of Experience	51.3%	48.7%	100.0%
		% of Total	16.5%	15.7%	32.2%
	5-10 years	Count	15	6	21
		% within Years of Experience	71.4%	28.6%	100.0%
		% of Total	12.4%	5.0%	17.4%
	More than 10 years	Count	34	27	61
		% within Years of Experience	55.7%	44.3%	100.0%
		% of Total	28.1%	22.3%	50.4%
Total		Count	69	52	121
		% within Years of Experience	57.0%	43.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	57.0%	43.0%	100.0%

There has been no statistically significant association between years of experience and studying methods of teaching foreign language in the pre-service educational preparation, p-value > 0.05

Table 7: Chi-square test to compare between years of experience and studying foreign language acquisition theories in the pre-service educational preparation

Did you study foreign language acquisition theories in the pre-service educational preparation?				Total	P-Value
				Yes	No
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	Count	32	7	39
		% within Years of Experience	82.1%	17.9%	100.0%
		% of Total	26.4%	5.8%	32.2%
	5-10 years	Count	13	8	21
		% within Years of Experience	61.9%	38.1%	100.0%
		% of Total	10.7%	6.6%	17.4%
	More than 10 years	Count	29	32	61
		% within Years of Experience	47.5%	52.5%	100.0%
		% of Total	24.0%	26.4%	50.4%
Total		Count	74	47	121
		% within Years of Experience	61.2%	38.8%	100.0%
		% of Total	61.2%	38.8%	100.0%

There has been a statistically significant association between years of experience and studying foreign language acquisition theories in the pre-service educational preparation, p-value < 0.05.

Table 8: One Way ANOVA to compare between overall perception of teachers towards, Years of experience and Academic Qualification

Years of experience		Less than 5 years	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95%	Confidence Interval for Mean	P Value
						Lower Bound		
						Upper Bound		
		8	2.8312	.16677		2.6918	2.9707	
		5 years						0.9
		5-10 years	96	2.8672	.34548	2.7972	2.9372	
		More than 10 years	17	2.8559	.22352	2.7410	2.9708	
		Total	121	2.8632	.32073	2.8055	2.9210	

Academic Qualification	Diploma	39	2.8910	.35686	2.7753	3.0067	
	Bachelor	21	2.8095	.22562	2.7068	2.9122	0.6
	Master	61	2.8639	.32649	2.7803	2.9476	
	Total	121	2.8632	.32073	2.8055	2.9210	

There has been no statistically significant association between overall perception of teachers towards teaching a foreign language in first grade, Years of experience and Academic Qualification,  $p$ -value  $> 0.05$

## **5. DISCUSSION**

### **5.1. Research Question (1)**

Strong results confirm that teachers support and agree to teach a foreign language. In the contemporary modern, globalized, and highly mobile society, first foreign language education is becoming vital in training students to be successful and capable of a high level of social integration. This is especially significant in environments where secondary or alternative languages are widely utilized for commerce, specific professional fields, or by a sizable, non-marginalized populace. Elementary school children are well prepared to develop a global understanding. In other words, the elementary school education period is the optimum time to expand students' intercultural views and enhance cognitive skills (Curtain, 1990). Nearly all nations introduce English from primary school onwards as the most common foreign language (Alqahtani, 2016; Habeeb, 2013). Because of its status as a foreign language, English has become a key focus for many educational institutions, particularly in Arabic countries. The present study is consistent with Habeeb's study (2013), which sought to measure *teachers' perceptions toward implementing English as a foreign language* at an early stage. Habeeb (2013) showed that teachers generally agree with introducing children to English at an early age.

Furthermore, several studies indicated that the competency level of Arabic students in English is significantly lower than that of students from other countries. Various academics have studied the roots of this deteriorating condition. Alqahtani (2016) was concerned with the Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions of the importance of motivational strategies in the classroom, noting that without sufficient motivation, even the brightest learners were unlikely to persist long enough to attain excellent language proficiency. This research concludes that while educators support the idea, they often fail to pay attention to important obstacles, such as teachers' prior language learning experiences, teaching experiences, and professional coursework in pre- and in-service education.

Findings from recent research conducted in Kuwait (Al-Yaseen, 2021) are inconsistent with the current study's results where teachers believed strongly in teaching English to children at the kindergarten stage (Al-Yaseen, 2021). Renny (2012) revealed that educators showed minimal agreement on the significance of teaching English in early childhood. Moreover, data analysis by Tılfarlıoğlu, F., & Öztürk, A. (2007) shows that a substantial number of educators are dissatisfied with teaching English to primary school learners, which is likely to have an impact on the students' progress in ELT.

### **5.2. Research Question (2)**

To address the second research question, "What are the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the EFL program for first graders in Saudi Arabia?" about 43% agree, 33% strongly agree, 17% disagree, and only 8% strongly disagree about the issues related to the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the EFL program for first graders in Saudi Arabia.

The results also show a statistically significant association between pre-service teachers' years of experience studying foreign language acquisition theories and preparing to teach English and the number of training courses offered by the Ministry of Education for preparing teachers to teach first grade. These findings are consistent with a previous study (Elyas, 2014), which found that a scarcity of development programs and in-service training represented the significant obstacles to teaching English in public schools in Saudi Arabia from the teachers' and supervisors' perspectives. These results could illuminate each obstacle and help teachers find effective solutions mostly if novice educators share the difficulties they experience with more experienced teachers. As Arioğul, S. (2007) found such exchanges offer teachers opportunities to discuss how their experiences have shaped their instruction thus allowing them to reflect on and deepen their understanding of their pedagogical practices. Abu Riash (2011) also investigated the challenges associated with teaching English in middle school classrooms and the impact on teaching performance from the perspective of educational supervisors. His results reveal statistically significant differences due to teachers' experience with the differences favoring more experienced teachers. The findings also indicated statistically significant differences in the classroom environment with the differences favoring an excellent environment. The results showed statistically significant differences in teaching aids with differences supporting teachers who use teaching aids (Abu Riash, 2011). According to a monitor study by Tilfarlıoğlu and Öztürk (2007), most teachers believe that their crowded weekly schedule prevents them from effective teaching, highlighting the shortage of teachers. These challenges including lack of training programs, insufficient teaching experience, heavy workload, and shortage of teachers can significantly affect the teachers and the learning outcomes.

### 5.3. Research Question (3)

In terms of the third question regarding the ability and needs to develop the child's English language skills, more than 60% strongly agree to allocate a trained teacher for the first grade, more than 40% strongly agree, and 45.5% agree that they could benefit from additional specialized training sessions. The results indicate that teachers in Saudi Arabia asked for more training courses to enhance their lessons and their interactions with elementary students. Teaching this age group is considered a significant challenge for novice teachers. A similar study conducted (Yates, 2007) demonstrated considerable improvements in teacher quality and student learning. These findings have been linked to the findings of several other studies such as Meiers and Ingvarson, 2005, where teacher professional development was identified as the most important means by which the quality of teaching and learning outcomes for students can be enhanced and effective. Moreover, Tilfarlıoğlu and Öztürk (2007) conclude that most teachers found that teaching English in elementary school needs specialized training programs tailored for this age group. However, according to Michel (1967), primary education should be delegated to special education teachers who are proficient in the foreign language as they act as key role models for children. These educators offer young learners with need regular encouragement and motivation, which are vital in creating a positive learning environment.

Professional development activities should encourage teachers to reflect on their instructional practices and to communicate openly with one another about pedagogical issues (Yates, 2007). Al-Hazmi (2003) considered the problems of EFL teacher training programs in Saudi Arabia as non-systematic and inadequate. He highlighted the effects of growing demand and hiring of teachers with insufficient training. Considering the need for change, Al-Hazmi (2003) recommended that current and future training policies take into account the level of

teachers' competence and their beliefs about the education system. He also advocated for EFL teachers to remain involved in the reform process. On the other hand, Tilfarlioğlu and Öztürk (2007) suggested that elementary school English instruction should not be given to non-volunteer teachers. It can prove hard to achieve effective learning if the sole aim is to substitute a lesson without considering the outcomes. Teachers should participate in in-service training that encourages efficient teaching strategies if they are needed to teach English to learners.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

### **6.1. Summary of the Key Elements of the Research**

In today's globalized technological world, the importance of English language education as a (FL) is growing significantly to prepare young children to achieve a high level of social integration and language proficiency. Little research has been conducted on teachers' perceptions and beliefs in Saudi Arabia toward teaching English as a foreign language in elementary schools. Therefore, it is paramount for the Ministry of Education to consider teachers' beliefs of the need to introduce the English language from first grade.

This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted in the Makkah region of Saudi Arabia, where 121 English teachers participated in the research. Data were collected using a well-designed questionnaire. The questionnaire focused on three themes: teachers' perception of teaching a foreign language in first grade; the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the EFL program for first graders; and teachers' ability and needs to develop the child's English language skills.

The study findings confirmed that teachers showed outstanding, support and agreement for teaching English as a foreign language in first grade. Regarding the second theme of opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the EFL program for first graders in Saudi Arabia, many teachers expect significant opportunities and strengths for the EFL students coming out of such a program in the future. The participants showed an urgent need for educational courses or the appointment of specialized teachers to teach first grade EFL.

### **6.2. Limitations**

The scope of the research will be limited to the following aspects:

- All participants in this study were from Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the results may not be able to be generalized to first-grade teachers' perceptions in other countries.
- The research was limited to the first-grade level of education and its teachers. The views, beliefs, and perceptions of intermediate, secondary school, and university teachers were examined.
- The quantitative data were gathered from a small sample of individuals, and the study's findings may not be generalized.
- The data were self-reported in a designed questionnaire, which may be applicable to certain situations and participants' environments.

### **6.3. Suggestions and Recommendations**

It is critical to consider English language instruction for first-grade students as an innovative method for improving learning results. The procedure must be gradual, constant, and efficient. On the one hand, this can be accomplished efficiently by providing exceptional training courses to enable in-service first-grade teachers to acquire the English language. On the other hand, Saudi universities' education colleges must establish English language programs for first-grade teachers to give academically qualified English language teachers to the educational area. Therefore, future studies should utilize a bigger sample to include teachers from other regions. In addition, qualitative studies or mixed-methods studies may allow teachers to express their

perceptions regarding the topic, which the self-report questionnaire might not capture. Investigating the several cognitive aspects of teachers' perceptions and knowledge that represent the primary nature of their teaching process might play an essential role in the practical implementation of this process for young children (Zein, 2016). Hence, evaluating the opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses of the EFL program for first graders constitutes an essential aspect of discussing these programs and their implementation in the schools of Saudi Arabia

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1**

Indicate your opinion after each statement by circle the number that best indicates the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

<b>No.</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Agreement Degree</b>			
		<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>1</b>	Kindergarten age (3 ½ -before 6) is an appropriate stage to start teaching children English.	1	2	3	4
<b>2</b>	Learning English in kindergarten will not negatively affect students' Arabic language development.	1	2	3	4
<b>3</b>	Learning English at an early age will positively impact students' scholastic achievement in later years.	1	2	3	4
<b>4</b>	Teaching English in kindergarten is becoming a contemporary necessity required in the globalized world.	1	2	3	4
<b>5</b>	Younger children are more efficient at second language learning than older children.	1	2	3	4
<b>6</b>	Teaching children English in kindergarten increases their self-confidence.	1	2	3	4
<b>7</b>	Learning a second language in kindergarten increases the child's ability to develop social relationships with others.	1	2	3	4
<b>8</b>	Teaching children English in kindergarten increases their levels of motivation for learning languages in later stages of education.	1	2	3	4
<b>9</b>	Teaching children a second language in kindergarten improves their levels of understanding of other cultures.	1	2	3	4
<b>10</b>	Teaching English in kindergarten increases the workload of teachers.	1	2	3	4
<b>11</b>	Introduction of teaching English in the kindergarten is an excellent decision.	1	2	3	4
<b>12</b>	The current English curriculum is commensurate with the ways children learn at this stage.	1	2	3	4
<b>13</b>	The current English language objectives are linking students' lives with curriculum	1	2	3	4

### **Appendix 2**

#### **Part One: Demographic Information**

Please fill in your personal information. All information here will be kept confidential and used only in the present study.

#### **Academic Qualifications:**

Diploma      Bachelor's degree      Master's degree

#### **Years of Experience:**

Less than 5 years      5-10 years      More than 10 years

## Pre-service and in-service teachers' preparation and professional development:

a. Did you study foreign language acquisition theories in the pre-service educational preparation?

**b.** Did you study methods of teaching foreign language in the pre-service educational preparation?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

c. Did you study methods of foreign language assessments in the pre-service educational preparation?

**d.** The Ministry of Education offers enough training courses to prepare first grade teachers for teaching the English language.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 3

## Part Two: Questionnaire

Indicate your opinion after each statement by clicking the number that best indicates the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

No	Statement	Agreement Degree			
		Strongly disagree	disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	First-grade age (6 to 8) is appropriate for teaching English as a foreign language.	1	2	3	4
2	Learning English in first-grade do not negatively affect students' Arabic language development.	1	2	3	4
3	Learning English at an early age will positively impact students' educational achievement later.	1	2	3	4
4	Teaching English at an early age has become a contemporary necessity required in the globalized world.	1	2	3	4
5	Younger children are more efficient at foreign language learning than older children.	1	2	3	4
6	Teaching children English in first grade will increase their confidence.	1	2	3	4
7	Learning a foreign language in first-grade increases the child's ability to develop social relationships with others.	1	2	3	4

8	Teaching children English increases their motivation levels for learning languages in later stages of education.	1	2	3	4
9	Teaching children a foreign language in first grade improves their understanding of other cultures.	1	2	3	4
10	Teaching English in first-grade increases the workload of teachers.	1	2	3	4
11	Introducing teaching English in the first grade is an excellent decision	1	2	3	4
12	First-grade learners need English language specialist in the classroom.	1	2	3	4
13	From my academic preparation, I cannot develop the child's English language listening skill.	1	2	3	4
14	From my academic preparation, I cannot develop the child's English language writing skill.	1	2	3	4
15	From my academic preparation, I cannot develop the child's English language reading skill.	1	2	3	4
16	From my academic preparation, I cannot develop the child's English language speaking skill.	1	2	3	4
17	I am not aware of the most effective approaches to English teaching.	1	2	3	4
18	Some children do not show interest in English.	1	2	3	4
19	I do not know enough about cultures in English-speaking countries.	1	2	3	4
20	I can benefit from additional specialized training sessions to develop my capacity to teach English.	1	2	3	4

Thank you very much for your participation in this study. Your responses are valuable and essential to me.

#### **Appendix 4**

##### **The Survey**

Dear teacher,

The purpose of the enclosed survey is to provide clear ideas and perceptions toward the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges facing the teaching and learning process by focusing on teachers' perceptions. I invite you to participate in this research study by completing the attached survey; I will use the data for my master's research .

The survey consists of 30 items and will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. There are no risks anticipated with this study. The survey is voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential, and they shall be used only for the purposes of the research. By filling out and returning the survey, you indicate your willingness to participate in this study.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in my educational endeavors. If you have questions or concerns about this study and your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to know the result of the study, please feel free to contact me. I appreciate your cooperation.

Sincerely ,

Wafa Althobaiti, Graduate Student.

Taif University.

**Consent statement:**

I agree to be a participant in this study. I acknowledge that I am aware of what this study involves, that I am an English teacher for the elementary students, and that I have received a copy of this Informed Consent form.

Agree

Disagree