

**The Age Factor in EFL Learning: Insights from the Palestinian  
Early Start English Program**

أثر عمر المتعلم على تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: استنتاجات حول البرنامج المبكر  
لتدريس اللغة الانجليزية في السياق الفلسطيني

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**Abstract**

The World has recently witnessed a growing interest in young learner EFL programs. Research results regarding the value of such programs are not conclusive. This brings to the foreground the importance of conducting research studies that evaluate the practical achievements of such early start programs in various contexts. This paper attempts to shed some light on the controversial issues related to the influence of early start English programs on children's achievement of English as a foreign language. Two age groups were compared: Eleven year olds who have started learning English from the First Grade and thirteen year olds who have started learning English from the fifth grade. A comprehensive test was designed to compare the two age groups in terms of their achievement in reading comprehension, vocabulary and structure. Results show that fifth grade starters achieved better results in reading comprehension and vocabulary; however, there were no statistically significant differences between the two age groups in terms of structure.

**ملخص**

يشهد العالم مؤخرًا اهتمامًا متزايدًا ببرامج تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في مرحلة مبكرة علمًا بأن نتائج الأبحاث السابقة حول القيمة الفعلية لمثل هذه البرامج ليست مؤكدة. ولا شك أن عدم وضوح نتائج الأبحاث السابقة حول هذه البرامج يستدعي القيام بأبحاث جديدة تسعى لتقييم الفائدة العملية من تطبيق هذه البرامج في سياقات مختلفة. سعت الدراسة الحالية إلى إلقاء الضوء على القضايا الخلافية المتعلقة بأثر البداية المبكرة لبرامج تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية على تحصيل الطلبة خلال تعلم هذه اللغة. حيث قارن الباحثان طلبة ينتمون إلى فئتين عمريتين: الأولى تضم طلبة في الحادية عشرة من العمر وهي الفئة التي بدأت بتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية منذ الصف الأول الابتدائي أما الثانية فتضم طلبة في الثالثة عشرة من العمر وهم أولئك الطلبة الذين بدأوا بتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية منذ الصف الخامس الابتدائي. حيث صمم الباحثان امتحانًا للطلبة كافة يشمل مهارة قراءة الاستيعاب إضافة إلى عنصري المفردات وقواعد اللغة. أشارت النتائج إلى أن الطلبة الذين بدأوا بتعلم اللغة من الصف الخامس أحرزوا نتائج أفضل في مهارة قراءة الاستيعاب وفي تذكر المفردات بينما لم تظهر فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين الفئتين في مجال تطبيق قواعد اللغة.

**I. Introduction and theoretical background****The Age factor in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)**

Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) has recently gained a lot of popularity in many parts of the World including Palestine. However, there is not enough empirical research to support this enthusiasm (Ellis, 1994; Nunan, 1999; Scovel, 1988).

The theoretical foundations of early start English programs lie partly in research into the Critical Period Hypothesis and its implications for second language acquisition. The Critical Period Hypothesis states that there is a period when language acquisition takes place naturally and effortlessly. However, after a certain age the brain is no longer able to process language input in this way (Ellis, 1986; 1994). Scovel (1988) defines this period in concrete terms:

In brief, the critical period hypothesis is the notion that language is best learned during the early years of childhood, and that after about the first dozen years of life, everyone faces certain constraints in the ability to pick up a new language. (p.2)

The existence of a critical period as well as its possible effects on learning has been subject to great controversy. This controversy is represented by three different views. According to the first view, only children can attain native-like pronunciation in Second Language Acquisition (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982; Scovel, 1988; Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991; Johnson, 1992). The second view claims that there is no critical period for language learning and that the learning situation as well as certain affective and cognitive factors, e.g., memory and adaptation to new settings, explain the variation in success between older and younger learners (Stern, 1983; Harley and Wang, 1997). The third view argues that the data is too ambiguous to allow for clear decision making. In Singleton's words: "There is some good supportive evidence and [...] there is no actual counterevidence" (1989, p.137).

The strong version of the critical period hypothesis is traditionally represented by "the younger the better" argument which hypothesizes that younger learners are more efficient and successful than older learners. Usually the age of puberty is identified as the point marking the start of the deterioration in SLA ability.

#### **The Age issue in the Palestinian context**

The Palestinian educational setting includes three types of schools: governmental, UNRWA, and private schools. Prior to the year 2000, all public and UNRWA schools used to teach the English language starting from the fifth grade. Only private schools used to introduce the English language from the first grade. The English curriculum used at governmental and UNRWA schools was the PETRA series which was earlier developed and implemented by the Jordanian Ministry of Education. Private schools enjoyed more freedom in syllabus choice and did not follow uniform guidelines as governmental and UNRWA schools. In the year 2000, the Palestinian Ministry of Education initiated an Early Start English program which introduces English from the first grade at all governmental, UNRWA and private schools in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

## **II. Statement of the Problem**

Folk wisdom has always celebrated young children's wondrous abilities to master two or more languages simultaneously especially in natural settings. Nunan (1999), for example, argues that there is a widespread public faith in the "younger = better" Equation. Yet, information on how and to what extent children develop proficiency in foreign languages as well as data on how realistic the goals of some current early start programs are still inconclusive. This lack of reliable, up-to-date information at the "facts and figures" level is a problem that faces researchers and decision makers at the same time. Many institutions and individuals including parents and the general public would benefit from access to sophisticated, inquiry-based information on the implications of introducing a foreign language to young children.

## **III. Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the influence of the starting age on the students' achievement of some EFL constructs, i.e., reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar. In other words, it attempts to find out which group of learners reaches higher levels of achievement in each of the investigated constructs, first or fifth grade starters.

The study also aims at finding out whether there are any significant differences in the students' performance in both age groups due to gender and question type. These differences are investigated across the three constructs, namely, reading, vocabulary and grammar.

## **IV. Research Questions**

The study attempted to provide answers for the following general research question:

### **A. Which group of learners reaches higher levels of achievement in the investigated constructs, first or fifth grade starters?**

The following subquestions emerged from the previous question:

1. Are there significant differences between early and late starters in terms of their achievement in reading comprehension?
2. Are there significant differences between early and late starters in terms of vocabulary achievement?
3. Are there significant differences between early and later starters in terms of structure achievement?
4. Are there significant differences between the results of early and late starters due to question type?
5. Are there significant differences between the results of early and late starters due to gender?

## V. Definition of terms

**Young learners or early starters:** Language learners who start studying a foreign language (in this case English) as early as the first grade (approximately 6 years old).

**Later starters:** Language learners who start studying a foreign language (English) from the fifth grade. Usually these students are on the verge of adolescence (approximately 11 years).

**Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL):** The practice of introducing English as a foreign or second language to students in the pre-primary and primary stages (Thornbury, 2006: p. 250).

**Language constructs:** The language abilities themselves (e.g. reading comprehension) or sub abilities that underlie them (e.g. vocabulary and grammar). A test is said to have "construct" validity if it tests the skill itself or a subability that underlies it (Hughes, 1989: p. 26).

## VI. Significance of the Study

In a considerable number of countries, issues related to TEYL are gaining wider concern and raising many debatable questions. A simple example of this spreading concern is the increasing number of high officials from various countries who have submitted official requests for

the British Council offices worldwide to get expert advice on the education of young learners. Many of these requests are motivated according to Rixon (2000) by the disillusionment that the general public had experienced upon noticing that the introduction of a TEYL program had not brought about the publicly desired results. Less often similar inquiries came from countries still considering making an early start and wishing to base their decision on a strong theoretical basis.

This issue gains special importance in the Palestinian setting taking into account the dominant diglossic situation where young learners face the challenge of learning a high variety of their own mother tongue as they enter the formal educational setting. Another important consideration is the fact that Palestine is a country with limited human and financial resources, hence, embarking on such an ambitious program of early English teaching might not be cost effective in a country struggling to build itself with meager resources while facing multiple challenges such as the inadequacy of school buildings, large classes and varying levels of English literacy among parents. All these factors call for conducting independent inquiry based studies into the age issue with the aim of informing current and future decisions related to language teaching programs and practices.

It is hoped that results of the present study will shed more light on the challenges involved in implementing an early start English program and will be beneficial for teachers since they are key players in such early programs. Results will also be illuminating for decision makers who are constantly involved in curriculum design and change at the Ministry level.

## **VII. Limitations of the Study**

The study looked at one major language skill, i.e., reading comprehension and two other constructs, namely vocabulary and grammar.

1. A more comprehensive investigation of other language skills needs to be conducted in the future.

2. The study was conducted in Hebron; hence, results may be only generalized to similar students in similar contexts.

### **VIII. Literature Review**

Singleton (1989) provides a comprehensive review of 15 different studies which support "the younger the better" position. Only three of these studies were based on research into instructed foreign language learning while the rest were based on immigrant SLA in the natural setting. Children involved in these natural setting studies started school in the target language and studied that language all day, thus developing native-like proficiency. The foreign language experiments on the other hand tackled many variables but their results did not report outstanding success for an early start (Singleton, 1989).

The "earlier the better" argument can be contrasted with an opposing viewpoint which is "the older the better". The latter argument claims that the older language learners are the more efficient and successful they will be. This argument is supported by two studies carried out in Swedish and British schools. The first study investigated the English acquisition experience at Swedish primary schools. Ekstrand (1982) describes the experiment in which over 1000 pupils between the age of 8 and 11 were exposed to 18 weeks of English instruction. When the listening comprehension and the pronunciation ability of different students was tested, it was found that the results of the students improved linearly with age. The second study investigated the acquisition of French in primary British schools. The research was conducted comparatively and longitudinally on a group of 17000 students. According to Burstall (1975) results of the study showed clear superiority for older learners.

Another source of support for the "older the better" argument comes from immersion programs. These programs use the target language which is usually the language of the minority as a medium of instruction for most of the curriculum. Harley (1986) presents the results of various research projects investigating the effects of different immersion programs in Canada. According to the results of these studies, older learners manifested a clearly faster acquisition rate than younger learners.

From the previously presented research results, one may clearly notice the opposing viewpoints regarding the theoretical basis of young learner superiority. In fact, research results seem to favour older learners, a view that stands in sharp contrast with the folk wisdom as well as with some practitioners beliefs, which tend to derive conclusions about the age issue from immigrant experiences in the natural settings (Munoz, 2006: p.1).

The discussion of the theoretical foundations of the age issue, the cornerstone of early start English programs, should be complemented by a close look at recent research studies and early start programs in various parts of the world.

A recent study by Miralpeix (2006) compared vocabulary learning by two age groups with a different starting age in Spain. After 726 hours of instruction in English as a foreign language, older learners starting at the age of 11 showed better production of free and controlled vocabulary than younger learners starting at the age of 8.

Another study was also conducted in Spain by Munoz (2006) who investigated the acquisition of morphological functors by two groups of children and adults. Results showed that children were surpassed by adults in terms of the rate of acquisition.

Investigation of actual early start programs shows the practical assets and limitations of current programs. Rixon (1992) and Kubanek-German (1998) provide two survey articles on the current state of the art of teaching foreign languages to young learners. Rixon's article focuses on the teaching of English, but it also draws insights from projects in which other languages were taught. Kubanek-German's article investigated foreign language teaching in Europe at the primary school level. Rixon (2000) conducted a quantitative study aiming at investigating the state of teaching English to young learners in various countries. Her aim was to benefit from the various experiences and analyze some of the challenges. Some of the problems experienced by educators and pupils in these countries included the limited amount of time devoted to TEYL, for it was reported to be limited to 2-3 hours per week, an amount of time that



is hardly sufficient for developing the students' proficiency beyond some memorized words and structures. Another reported problem was the abrupt incorporation of the new TEYL curriculum, a phenomenon that resulted in a great shortage of well trained teachers.

Another reported problem was the lack of trust on the part of parents in teaching English at the public or state school system and their common perception that English is taught better either in the private school system or by a tutor. This short literature review underscores the role of empirical research in verifying the soundness of political decisions related to early start English program in a particular context.

## **IX. Methodology**

### **a. Sample of the Study**

To achieve the purpose of the study, two age groups were compared; fifth grade students who have started learning English from the first grade and seventh grade students who have started learning English from the fifth grade. The main question that the study attempted to answer is: which group of learners reaches higher levels of achievement in the investigated constructs, first or fifth grade starters? Participants consisted of 958 students, 424 among them have started learning English from the first grade while 534 have started from the fifth grade. The first grade starters included 221 males and 203 females. The fifth grade starters included 236 males and 298 females. Students were selected from three social settings, the city namely Hebron, as well as some surrounding villages and refugee camps. Table 1 below shows distribution of the sample by gender and place of living.

**Table (1):** Distribution of sample by gender and place of residence.

Gender		Frequency	Percent
Male	city	141	30.9
	village	203	44.4
	camp	113	24.7
Total		457	100.0
Female	city	145	28.9
	village	228	45.5
	camp	128	25.5
Total		501	100.0

The study was conducted in the second half of the academic year 2006-2007. All students were selected from 28 governmental and UNRWA schools. They are all taught by non-native speakers of English who hold BA in English from local Palestinian or Arab universities.

#### **b. Instrumentation**

The constructs investigated in this study include reading comprehension, structure and vocabulary. These constructs were chosen because they are the ones which receive the highest focus in traditional achievement tests including the high school exit exam and the university entrance exams. The researchers also believe that reading comprehension constitutes the pivotal core of foreign language English syllabi and they are usually taught with a high level of uniformity among English teachers. As for vocabulary and grammar, they constitute the major underlying constructs of all language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing (Hughes, 1989: p.150).

The students' achievement of the various constructs was measured by means of a test that consisted of three components, vocabulary, structure and reading comprehension. The reading section of the test consisted of two expository passages unseen for both groups. Each passage was followed by three types of questions: true/false, multiple choice, and short answer (see appendix, p. 28). As for vocabulary, the researchers prepared an inventory of all the common vocabulary items in the

textbooks of both groups. Then the researchers asked four teachers to select the vocabulary items they would include in a vocabulary test. Each teacher worked independently and the researchers included in the test the vocabulary items that were selected by at least three teachers. Five types of questions were used to test vocabulary: matching with pictures, circling the odd one out, multiple choice, and filling in the blanks. As for structure, the researchers followed a similar procedure. They prepared an inventory of common structural items from the textbooks of both groups. The exam included 25 items which were tested through a multiple choice format. All sections of the exam were validated by means of judgement by a panel of teachers as well as by a pilot study. A number of question distractors were judged too difficult by some teachers and were hence paraphrased to suit the level of the students. The time of the test was also extended by five minutes for each session to accommodate the needs of slower students.

Students sat for the achievement test in two separate sessions in their regular classrooms. In the first session, students were asked to answer the reading questions while in the second one they answered structure and vocabulary questions.

#### **X. Results and Discussion**

This section contains the results and discussion related to each of the research questions mentioned earlier.

##### **Which group of learners reaches higher levels of achievement in the investigated constructs, first or fifth grade starters?**

The overall results of the exam show significant advantage for the late starters (fifth grade) especially in reading comprehension and vocabulary achievement. In the case of grammar, however, no significant differences were detected between the two age groups

**a. Are there significant differences between the early and late starters in terms of achievement in reading comprehension?**

Results of the reading comprehension section show that the late starters (fifth grade) achieved better results in both passages across all question types ( $M=14.59$ ) as compared with the early starters ( $M=13.08$ ), see table 2 below. These results are congruent with those of Burstall (1975) which clearly showed that older learners surpassed the younger ones across all language skills (cited in Ellis, 1994: p. 489). Another study by Cummins and Nakajima (1987) which was conducted on Japanese immigrant children in Toronto showed clear advantage for older learners in literacy skills particularly in reading (cited in Ellis, 1994: p. 490). These results are complemented by the results of another small scale study which was conducted by Hulstijn (1987) who found a clear advantage for older immigrant learners of Japanese on academic types of second language tasks (cited in Cummins et al., 1993). These results are not surprising taking into account that the late starters have access to more knowledge in L1. The importance of L1 literacy is stressed by Cummins et al. (1993) who argue that children who are literate in their L1 have access to cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), a factor which facilitates developing literacy skills in L2. Segalowitz (1986) similarly argues that the age of the learner as well as his/her proficiency in L1 determine the level he/she will be able to achieve in L2 reading. This factor is especially important in the case of Arabic native speakers taking into account the diglossic situation of this language which entails having to learn a different variety of the language (Standard Arabic) as those children enter school. Older and L1- literate students usually enjoy higher cognitive development which generally aids top-down processing techniques especially in L2. These top down techniques (e.g. inference and synthesis) may help the students make up for weaknesses they are likely to face in the bottom up skills, e.g., phoneme-grapheme matching (Stanovich, 1980). Snow and Hoefnagel- Hohle (1982) have clearly shown that when compared to adults and children, adolescents seem to be the most efficient group in learning a foreign

language. According to these researchers, language related performance reaches its peak during teen years then it starts to deteriorate afterwards.

**b. Are there significant differences between early and late starters in terms of vocabulary achievement?**

Similarly, results of the vocabulary section of the achievement test show significant advantage in favour of the late starters ( $M=10.34$ ) as compared with the early starters ( $M=9.46$ ). One may argue that since older students have greater access to top down processing, they use these skills to guess the meaning from context more efficiently (Stanovich, 1980). Additionally, these students who have had longer exposure to the standard form of their L1 may have enriched their attainment of concepts directly transferable to L2. These students have greater ability in cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), which entails greater proficiency in higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and prediction (Cummins, 1993). In his interdependence hypothesis, Cummins has observed that immigrant children possessing literacy skills in L1 faced less difficulty in acquiring L2 literacy skills. One may safely assume that fifth grade starters have a much higher proficiency in standard Arabic literacy skills than first grade starters who had shorter exposure to this variety of their native language.

**c. Are there significant differences between early and later starters in terms of structure knowledge?**

Results of the structure section show no statistically significant differences between the two age groups. Table 2 shows a mean of (12.57) for first grade starters as compared with a mean of (12.43) for 5<sup>th</sup> grade starters. Despite this slight difference in the mean of both groups, results of both groups are not statistically significant, a fact that undermines the value of the detected difference. The structure section tackled the students' knowledge of discrete point elements in the language system. In other words, the test did not probe higher order cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, and prediction. The question types used in the structure section as well as in all the other sections mirrored the types of questions typically used by teachers of both groups, i.e., multiple choice.

The researchers adopted this approach in order to minimize the intimidating effect that a different format of questions would impose. Based on an informal discussion with the English supervisors in the Hebron area, the researchers believe that the younger learners resorted to their memorized knowledge of grammatical rules (rote knowledge), which entailed committing less mistakes. Older learners, on the other hand, might have tried to generalize rules, thus, achieving a lower overall mean. The lack of significant differences may be due to the fact that both age groups are exposed to the same methods and techniques in learning grammar. In other words, lack of differences between the two groups is due to the fact that both groups resort to the rules of the learned system in a formal situation such as an exam (Krashen and Terrel, 1983). None of the two groups resorted to grammatical rules as an acquired system that emerges after an extensive period of exposure.

**Table (2):** t-test results of the achievement of both groups in reading, vocabulary and structure.

Test	Class	Frequency	Mean	Standard deviation	Df	t-value	Sig.
Reading	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	13.0849	4.13968	956	-5.65	0.000
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	14.5918	4.05890	956		
Structure	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	12.5755	4.36014	956	0.51	0.609
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	12.4345	4.13950	956		
Vocabulary	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	18.3986	9.46533	956	-5.58	0.000
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	22.0150	10.34289	956		
Total score	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	44.0590	15.93363	956	-4.71	0.000
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	49.0412	16.46174	956		

**d. Are there significant differences between the results of early and late starters due to question type?**

In addition to the age issue, the study has also shed some light on the influence of two other independent variables namely, question type and gender. Previous research has showed that different question types tend to tap different skills (Hughes, 1989: p.62). The researchers in this study believe that mastery of such skills may vary among the various age groups, an issue ignored in previous research studies about age.

With regard to question type, study results have showed significant advantage for older learners in all types of questions used across the various test sections, i.e., reading, vocabulary and structure (see table 3) below. These results clearly show that older learners seem to have benefited from the longer period of time they have spent in the formal educational system. This extended period has provided them with more opportunities to experiment with different types of questions and exam taking strategies across all school subjects. The fact that they have a more advanced cognitive development may have also contributed to these results. A higher cognitive development involves important constructs such as analysis, synthesis and prediction, usually outcomes of being involved in various types of learning tasks in an academic setting, a concept generally referred to by Cummins et al. (1993) as CALP. It is also argued that older learners have a higher level of the analytical language aptitude as compared to younger learners who usually resort to the memory oriented aptitude (Harley and Hart, 1997)

**Table (3):** t-test results of the effect of age on performance in various question types: Multiple choices (MC), True/false (T.F), Wh. Questions, Fill in the Blanks (Fill), Matching, Choosing the correct answer, and circling the odd word out.

Test	Class	Frequency	Mean	Standard deviation	Df	t-value	Sig.
MC	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	68.1604	23.74195	956	-6.02	0.000
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	76.7998	20.60435	956		
T.F	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	53.2804	19.25071	956	-3.07	0.002
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	57.1672	19.56843	956		
WH	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	18.1604	21.44924	956	-3.65	0.000
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	23.1898	20.93798	956		
Fill.	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	34.7170	30.58786	956	-3.73	0.000
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	42.4906	33.13477	956		
Match	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	54.0738	35.10852	956	-5.26	0.000
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	65.3047	30.83510	956		
Choose the correct	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	53.9570	29.82708	956	-3.13	0.002
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	60.3829	32.82994	956		
Circle the odd	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	424	41.2264	22.81399	956	-6.52	0.000
	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	534	51.4794	25.14988	956		



**e. Are there significant differences between the results of early and late starters due to gender?**

With regard to the influence of learners' gender on the test results, it has been found that female students outperformed male students in all test sections. Table 4 below shows a total mean of (48.34) for female students in all test sections as compared with a total mean of (45.18) for male students. This phenomenon has been noticed by many Palestinian educators and researchers across various school subjects and skills (Adra, 2005; Sabatin, 2001; Seyam, 2006). Palestinian English teachers have reported higher levels of language learning motivation among female students as compared to males who have higher motivation in other school subjects such as maths, technology, and science. Speaking foreign languages is seen as a sign of higher social status among Palestinian females. Female students, their teachers observe, spend longer time at home doing homework than male students who are engaged in social, political and sport activities outside. More research is needed to find out the real reasons behind female superiority in all types of school exams.

**Table (4):** t-test results of the effect of gender on performance in all test sections.

Test	Class	Frequency	Mean	Standard deviation	Df	t-value	Sig.
reading	Male	457	13.2888	4.18536	956	-4.56	0.000
	Female	501	14.5050	4.05592	956		
structure	Male	457	12.0044	4.32709	956	-3.45	0.000
	Female	501	12.9461	4.10598	956		
Vocabulary	Male	457	19.8884	10.62636	956	-1.53	0.124
	Female	501	20.8942	9.62012	956		
Total score	Male	457	45.1816	16.89155	956	-2.99	0.000
	Female	501	48.3453	15.82373	956		

**Conclusion and Recommendations:**

In certain countries decisions as to when to start teaching English are often based on political considerations without resort to research based knowledge on age related issues (Munoz, 2006; Nikolov, 2000). Furthermore, little or no follow up research is conducted to ensure that the program has achieved its stated goals.

As stated earlier, investigating early start English programs is a multifaceted phenomenon. It requires careful scrutiny of age related issues in addition to meticulous examination of the conditions in which young learners receive their instruction. Factors such as the amount of exposure to the target language as well as the teachers' competence in the language and its methodology in addition to their attitude towards an early start all need to be fully investigated (Nikolov, 2000).

This study has clearly shown that when looking at previous research, one has to deal with opposing viewpoints and unclear findings which cast great doubt on any hasty decisions not preceded or followed up by solid research.

This may mean that the educational system will have to deal with many challenges as this generation of early English learners reaches advanced high school and college levels. These students will show larger variation in terms of language proficiency and cultural awareness. It may therefore be difficult to maintain an optimal level of motivation to keep these students' level of interest in English classes for lengthy periods of time (12+ years). Universities will also have to face the challenge of creating pre-service programs that meet the needs of future teachers who will be involved in teaching young starters.

In the Palestinian context, a comprehensive study of the status quo regarding the implementation of the early start English program is called for to verify the soundness of the Ministry's decision to start teaching English in the first grade instead of the fifth, and to verify the effectiveness of that decision. This issue has recently been subject of heated debate all over the world and local research in various contexts is

called for to reach clear-cut conclusions regarding the proposed questions.

The issue should also be addressed from a more global perspective taking into account similar contexts and learning conditions in other Arab countries. Cooperative research projects should be carried out in order to verify the soundness of the policies regarding early start programs.

The researchers believe that although it may not be realistic to overturn decisions already in place such as starting an English program from the first grade, investigation of the age related issues inherent in an early start program such as the Palestinian one may raise policy makers', teachers', as well as parents' awareness of the difficulties and challenges involved. It may also make their expectations with respect to the level of achievement these students will eventually attain more realistic.

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## Appendix

### English Test

#### Reading

المدرسة :

الصف:

الاسم:

**Read the following passages then answer the questions that follow:**

اقرأ النصين التاليين ثم أجب عن الأسئلة:

#### **Passage A:**

My name is Wendy. My oldest friend is called Amy. We met thirty years ago when we were both five years old. It was my first day at school and I was very unhappy because I wanted my mother. Amy gave me a sweet and we became friends immediately. We were together nearly every day until we left school twelve years later. Then I went to the university, but Amy did not. She married when she was just eighteen and had three children. I studied for eight years because I wanted to be a doctor. I had a lot of new friends, so I did not see Amy very often. Sometimes we did not meet for months, but we often talked on the telephone. Now I am married, too. I live near Amy and we meet every week. She is a student now, and I have a baby so we can give each other a lot of advice.

#### **I Choose the correct answer**

ضع دائرة حول رمز الإجابة الصحيحة

1. Amy is Wendy's
 

a. sister	b. cousin	c. friend
-----------	-----------	-----------
2. Amy has met Wendy for the first time when they were
 

a. 6 years old	b. 5 years old	c. 12 years old
----------------	----------------	-----------------
3. Amy and Wendy met at
 

a. the market	b. street	c. school
---------------	-----------	-----------
4. Amy and Wendy were together at school for
 

a. 5 years	b. 12 years	c. 8 years
------------	-------------	------------

5. After school, Wendy went to  
 a. university                      b. work                      c. Britain
6. Amy married when she was  
 a. 18                      b. 28                      c. 22

**II Mark the following statements as true (T) or false (F).**

ضع إشارة (✓) بجانب العبارة الصحيحة و إشارة (✗) بجانب العبارة الخاطئة:

- 1. Wendy was happy when she went to school.  
 -----2. Wendy became a doctor.  
 -----3. Amy is a student now.  
 -----4. Wendy has only one baby.  
 -----5. Wendy and Amy live in two different cities.

**III Answer the following questions:**

أجب عن الأسئلة التالية:

1. What did Amy give Wendy on the first day of school?  
 -----
2. How many children does Wendy have?  
 -----

**Passage B:**

I live in a house near the sea. It is an old house about 100 years old, and it is very small. There are two bedrooms upstairs but no bathroom. The bathroom is downstairs next to the kitchen and there is a living room where there is a lovely old fireplace. There is a garden in front of the house. The garden goes down to the beach and in spring there are flowers everywhere. I live alone with my dog, Boxer, but we have a lot of visitors. Many of my friends work in the city, so they often stay with me because they want to relax. I love my house for many reasons: the garden, the flowers in summer, the fire in winter, but the best thing is the view from my bedroom window.

**I Choose the correct answer:**

ضع دائرة حول رمز الإجابة الصحيحة :

1. The house is near the  
 a. street                      b. school                      c. sea



2. The house is  
a. new                      b. old                      c. modern
3. He loves the house because  
a. it is small              b. there is a dog in it              c. it has a beautiful garden

**II Mark the following statements as true (T) or false (F).**

ضع إشارة (✓) بجانب العبارة الصحيحة و إشارة (✗) بجانب العبارة الخاطئة:

- 1. He uses a gas heater in winter.  
-----2. The living room is downstairs.  
-----3. The bathroom is upstairs.  
-----4. The house has a big garden.  
-----5. He lives with his wife and children in the house.  
-----6. No one visits him.

**III. Answer the following questions:**

اجب عن الأسئلة التالية:

1. How many bedrooms are there in the house?  
-----
2. What is the name of the dog?  
-----

**End of Reading Section**

**English Test**  
**Structure and Vocabulary**

المدرسة:

الصف:

الاسم:

---

**Question One: Structure**

Complete the following sentences with the correct choice.

ضع دائرة حول الإجابة الصحيحة .

1. Ali -----ten years old.  
a. is                      b. are                      c. were
2. Samia-----two sisters.  
a. have                      b. can                      c. has
3. My brother -----in Amman now.  
a. live                      b. lives                      c. lived
4. Last year Ahmed-----Egypt.  
a. visit                      b. visits                      c. visited
5. Amy-----Rania to her house yesterday.  
a. invited                      b. invites                      c. invite
6. -----is your name? My name is Ali.  
a. What                      b. When                      c. How
7. -----do you live? - In Hebron  
a. When                      b. Where                      c. How
8. -----books do you have?  
a. How much                      b. How                      c. How many
9. Ahmed is the -----in the class.  
a. tall                      b. tallest                      c. taller
10. Cars are-----than bikes.  
a. expensive                      b. more expensive                      c. most expensive

11. My father has lived in Hebron-----two years.  
a. since                    b. for                    c. from
12. -----you visit your friend yesterday?  
a. Did                    b. Do                    c. Does
13. Ali is the -----football player at school.  
a. better                    b. good                    c. best
14. Have you-----the old city of Hebron.  
a. see                    b. seen                    c. saw
15. Look! Ahmed and Ali are-----to school.  
a. running                    b. run                    c. ran
16. Have you visited Jerusalem-----  
a. (.)                    b. (?)                    c.(!)
17. They like to eat fruits-----  
a. (.)                    b. (?)                    c.(!)
18. Samia gets up-----six o'clock everyday.  
a. for                    b. on                    c. at
19. We do not go to school-----Friday.  
a. in                    b. to                    c. on
20. -----2003 my friend visited America.  
a. In                    b. For                    c. On
21. Ali-----in London for three years.  
a. have live                    b. has lived                    c. have living
22. I -----a bike since last year.  
a. have have                    b. has have                    c. have had
23. Rania always-----her homework.  
a. does                    b. do                    c. did
24. What-----you do on Fridays?  
a. do                    b. does                    c. done

25. He walked home----- It was late.

- a. quick                      b. quickly                      c. quicker

## II Vocabulary

### A. Complete the following sentences with the most suitable word

أكمل الجمل التالية بالكلمة المناسبة .

**brush, doctor, city, clever, hot, cloudy, food, journey, radio, football, buildings.**

1. We should eat-----every day.
2. Ramallah is a big -----.
3. Last night, I took my child to the-----because he was sick.
4. The-----from Hebron to Amman is very long.
5. Ali is a-----student. He always gets 95 in his exams.
6. It is always-----in summer in Jericho.
7. We use a -----to clean our teeth.
8. It is-----this morning. It may rain in the afternoon.
9. There are some high-----in Hebron.
10. Children like to play-----everyday.

### B. Match every word to its picture

صل بين الكلمة وصورتها:

Scissors



Lamp



Home



Car



Eye



Ear



Arm



Leg



Sweater



Shoes



Tree



**C. Circle the odd word**

ضع دائرة حول الكلمة التي لا تنتمي للمجموعة:

1. brother, information, sister, family
2. book, pen, pencil, apple
3. radio, mouth, neck, body
4. hot, cold, yesterday ,sunny
5. eat, drink, hungry, deep
6. brown, glass, black, red
7. cold, behind, next to, under.
8. tall, short, hard, fat
9. visit, listen, talk, speak.

**D. Choose the correct word out of the three given in practice to complete the sentences.**

ضع دائرة حول الإجابة الصحيحة :

1. Ali has eaten a lot of food. It seems-----.  
a. delicious            b. sunny            c. cloudy
2. He lived ten years of his-----in a farm.  
a. book            b. life            c. hand
3. Sami wants to change the colour of his room. He will-----it tomorrow.  
a. cut            b. hurt            c. paint
4. It is-----to swim in the sea.  
a. angry            b. dangerous            c. deep
5. The fish has been out for a week. It -----bad.  
a. smells            b. breaks            c. hopes
6. The teacher was very-----because the students did not answer the questions.  
a. happy            b. angry            c. thirsty
7. There is no-----outside. It is 10 PM.  
a. hand            b. brush            c. light

8. Ali is thirsty, give him a -----of water.  
a. book                    b. life                    c. glass
9. The picture has many colours. It is-----.  
a. colourful                b. red                    c. black.
10. The -----of *shut* is *close*.  
a. playing                b. meaning                c. talking

**End of Structure and Vocabulary Section**