

**LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS AMONG
EGYPTIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL EFL LEARNERS
IN AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACT-1	An American college admission test
BICS	Basic interpersonal communicative skills
CALP	Cognitive academic language proficiency
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELL	English language learners
ESL	English as a Second Language
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
IBSA	International British School of Alexandria
IGCSE	International General Certificate of Secondary Education
L1	First language
L2	Second language
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SAT-1	An American college admission test
SES	Socioeconomic Status
U.K.	United Kingdom

TAHAP PENCAPAIAN LITERASI DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR MESIR YANG BERSEKOLAH RENDAH (YANG MEMPELAJARI BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA ASING) DI SEBUAH SEKOLAH ANTARABANGSA

ABSTRAK

Matlamat utama kajian ini adalah untuk menganalisis sejauh manakah pelajar Mesir bersekolah rendah yang mempelajari bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing di sebuah sekolah antarabangsa di Alexandria, Mesir berjaya memperoleh literasi dalam bahasa Inggeris. Pertama sekali, tahap pencapaian literasi pelajar ini dikenalpasti. Seterusnya, tahap pencapaian itu dibandingkan dengan tahap pencapaian literasi pelajar sebaya yang bahasa ibundanya adalah bahasa Inggeris di sekolah kerajaan di U.K. Instrumen yang dipilih untuk menjalankan perbandingan ini ialah pakej ujian-ujian yang dihasilkan oleh Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) dari Jabatan Pendidikan U.K. . Pakej ujian-ujian ini dipilih kerana ia bukan sahaja membolehkan tahap pencapaian kanak-kanak dalam literasi diuji malah membolehkan perbandingan tahap itu kepada purata kebangsaan di U.K dilakukan. Kerangka teori yang menjadi panduan kajian ini diperoleh dari hasil kerja pada fungsi aturan kesepadanan fonem-grafem (Lonzon, 2007), kesedaran fonologi (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998), makna (Ehri, 1992) dan pengetahuan bahasa lisan (Palinscar dan Duke, 2004). Kajian oleh Verhoeven dan Vermeer (2006) dan Gundersen (2007) memberikan kerangka teori untuk pemerolehan literasi dalam satu bahasa selain bahasa utama pelajar. Sampel kajian ini terdiri daripada 18 pelajar Mesir yang berbahasa Arab berumur antara 7 tahun dan 8 tahun dari keluarga berpendapatan tinggi di bandar Alexandria. Kanak-kanak ini dari kelas yang sama sejak mereka mula bersekolah. Tahap kanak-kanak ini dalam bacaan, penulisan dan ejaan diuji pada bulan Mei tahun 2011 sebagai

sebahagian daripada peperiksaan biasa di sekolah pada akhir tahun dua. Kemudian, keputusan digred dan dianalisis menggunakan jadual yang disediakan oleh QCA yang mengandungi skor umur-terpiawai; iaitu skor yang mengambil kira umur kanak-kanak justeru menunjukkan prestasi setiap kanak-kanak berbanding dengan kanak-kanak lain yang sebaya. Analisis keputusan yang diperoleh menunjukkan tahap pencapaian literasi yang tinggi. Tahap pencapaian literasi kanak-kanak dalam kajian ini sama ada dalam Bacaan, Penulisan atau Ejaan didapati setara atau lebih tinggi berbanding dengan purata kebangsaan bagi kanak-kanak yang bahasa ibundanya ialah bahasa Inggeris di sekolah kerajaan di U.K. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa kanak-kanak dengan bahasa utamanya selain bahasa Inggeris boleh memperoleh literasi dalam bahasa Inggeris pada tahap penguasaan yang sama dengan penutur asli bahasa Inggeris yang sebaya. Keputusan kajian ini adalah berbeza dengan kajian-kajian lain pada pemerolehan literasi dalam satu bahasa selain bahasa utama pelajar tersebut. Keputusan ini adalah sangat penting kerana ia membolehkan dan sememangnya memerlukan guru-guru di sekolah antarabangsa mengajar pelajar sekolah rendah yang mempelajari bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing sebagaimana mereka akan mengajar kanak-kanak yang bahasa ibundanya ialah bahasa Inggeris.

LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS AMONG EGYPTIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL EFL LEARNERS IN AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

ABSTRACT

The main aim of the present study was to investigate the extent to which Egyptian primary school learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) at an international school in Alexandria, Egypt, can succeed in acquiring literacy in English. First, the level of literacy achievement was determined. Second, it was compared to that of same-age native speakers of English at state schools in the U.K. The instrument chosen to do this was the package of tests developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority of the U.K. Department of Education. The reason this package of tests was chosen is that not only does it offer a means of testing the children's level of achievement in literacy but that it also offers a means of comparing such a level to the national average in the U.K. The theoretical framework guiding this study was derived from work on the role of phoneme-grapheme correspondence rules (Lonzon, 2007), phonological awareness (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998), meaning (Ehri, 1992) and knowledge of oral language (Palinscar and Duke, 2004). Research by Verhoeven and Vermeer (2006) and Gundersen (2007) provided the theoretical framework for the acquisition of literacy in a language other than the learner's primary language. The sample of the study comprised 18 Arabic-speaking Egyptian children between the ages of 7 and 8 from upper-income families in the city of Alexandria that have been in the same class ever since they started school. The children's level in reading, writing and spelling was tested in May 2011 as part of their normal school exams at the end of year two. The results were then graded and analysed using tables provided by the QCA that contain age-standardised scores; that is, scores that take the

children's age into consideration thus giving an indication of how each child is performing relative to other children of the same age. The analysis of the results shows a high level of literacy achievement. Whether in Reading, Writing or Spelling, the level of literacy achievement of the children is shown to be equal to, if not higher than, the national average of same-age native-speaking children in state schools in the U.K. The findings of the study show that children with a primary language other than English can acquire literacy in English to the same degree of mastery as same-age native speakers of English. Unlike other studies on the acquisition of literacy in a language other than the learner's primary language, this study shows that "young" English language learners can acquire literacy in English to the same degree of mastery as native-speaking children. This is a highly important result as it allows, indeed requires, teachers at international schools to treat young EFL learners the same way they would treat native-speaking children of the same age.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter aims at shedding light on the motivation that drove the researcher to do this research in the first place. The first part of the introduction is a review of the literature on the acquisition of literacy among young learners; the core area of research of the present study. This is then followed by a section that discusses the roles that both Arabic (the language of the country) and English play in the life of the Egyptian people. Following this, there is an overview of the school where the research took place: the International British School of Alexandria. The Chapter then states what the problem is, what the research objectives are, and what the research questions are. The significance of the study is then discussed and its limitations outlined. This is followed by a list of the terms that were used in the study. These terms are operationally defined and elaborated to enhance their meaning and to remove any ambiguities that might arise as they are frequently used in both the review of literature and other parts of the study. The Chapter then presents a brief discussion of the ethical considerations that guided the research. Finally, the Chapter ends with a brief summary of the main points that were discussed.

1.1 The Acquisition of Literacy among Young Learners

Literacy can be defined as the ability to turn the writing code of a language into the phonetic code of that language and understand what that phonetic code means (Bormuth, 1973; Roberts, 1973; Stahl & Yaden, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan; 1998). Literacy, thus, subsumes two distinct skills: the ability to turn the writing code of a

language into the phonetic code of that language, and the ability to understand the meaning of that phonetic code. Implicit in this, of course, is the ability to turn the phonetic code of a language into its writing code.

The ability to turn the writing code of a language with an alphabetic writing system into its phonetic code requires knowledge of the link between letters of the alphabet of that language and the sound units they stand for: the so-called phoneme-grapheme correspondence rules. That is, in order to read an unfamiliar word, a child must attribute a phoneme to each letter or letter combination in the word and then merge the phonemes together. The ability to understand the phonetic code itself calls for, on the other hand, another set of requirements including, to name but a few, knowledge of the phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics of that language.

Research has shown, however, that knowledge of the link between letters of the alphabet and the sound units they stand for alone, though necessary, is not enough (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). For a child to read the word /bag/ she, or he, must not only know the phoneme that every letter in that word stands for but they must also know that the spoken word /bag/ is itself formed from three sound units just as much as the written word "bag" is formed from three letters. The ability to read the word "bag", thus, assumes the ability to segment the spoken word /bag/ into its constituent phonemes and assign a letter to each constituent phoneme. This ability is what is often referred to in the literature on literacy as phonemic knowledge or phonological awareness.

Research has actually shown that without this phonemic knowledge a child would not be able to read. It is not enough, that is, for a child to know that the letter /b/ stands for the first sound in the word "bag", and that the letter /a/ stands for the middle sound

while the letter /g/ stands for the final sound for that child to read the word "bag". Before a child can read the word "bag" he must be able to write the word /bag/. He must, that is, be able to segment the word /bag/ into its constituent phonemes and provide a letter for each phoneme. Without this ability the child would only be able to "sound out" each letter in the word "bag" but she, or he, would not be able to merge them into one word. In short, the ability to read an unfamiliar word subsumes two distinct skills: (1) the ability to recognize the sound unit that each letter, or letter combination, stands for, and (2) the ability to recognize the sound units that make up spoken words and provide a letter, or letter combination, for each sound. Without knowledge of both phoneme-grapheme correspondence rules and phonology a child would be able to neither read nor write.

Research has also shown that knowledge of meaning is as much a requirement for learning to read as knowledge of phonology (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Bishop & Adams, 1990; Butler, Marsh, Sheppard & Sheppard, 1985; Pikulski & Tobin, 1989; Scarborough, 1989; Share, Jorm, MacLean, & Mathews, 1984). . In the initial stages of learning to read a learner often relies on contextual cues. Without knowledge of meaning these cues would not be available to the learner and "reading" would be that much more difficult.

Literacy, thus, is a skill that subsumes three different, but related, skills. These are: (1) knowledge of the phoneme-grapheme correspondence rules of the writing system of the language, (2) the ability to segment spoken words of the language into their constituent phonemes and provide a letter, or combination of letters, for each phoneme, and (3) knowledge of the language itself.

Research on early and emergent literacy has, indeed, demonstrated that knowledge of the language is critically important in the development of early and emergent literacy skills (Ford, 2010; Braunger, Lewis, Hagans, 1997; Lonigan et al., 1999; Snow et al., 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). A strong foundation in oral language skills develops as children gain an understanding of the structures and meaning of language. In this way, language competent children are able to grasp the processes of reading and writing in a timely manner (Katims & Pierce, 1995). Clearly, a strong connection exists between language and literacy development (Braunger et al., 1997), particularly during the early childhood years of birth through age 8 (Schickedanz, 1999). There is a reported association between children's language development and literacy acquisition (Bishop, 1997; Goodyer, 2000; Hay, Elias, Fielding-Barnsley, Homel, & Frieberg, 2007; Senechal, 2006). The evidence is that children's oral language competencies underpin children's transition into literacy (Barrett & Hammond, 2008; Catts & Kamhi, 2005).

Research has, indeed, shown that young children who experience difficulty acquiring language tend to have a much greater chance of also experiencing similar difficulties learning literacy skills. Catts, Fey, Zhang, and Tomblin (2001) investigated kindergarten predictors of 2nd-grade reading outcomes and identified five key variables in their longitudinal study. They concluded that children in 2nd grade who were struggling with reading had difficulty with letter identification, sentence structure, phonological awareness, and word recall when they were in kindergarten. Each of these skills related directly to oral language. Adams (1990) has also pointed out that children who exhibit difficulty learning oral language are at significant risk for having problems learning to read (Adams, 1990),

Taking into consideration the fact that, unlike native speakers, learners of a foreign language have, at best, only a limited knowledge of the phonology and lexicon of the language they are learning, one would expect them to face difficulty learning to read in that language. The difficulties children face when learning to read and write in a language other than their primary language are, indeed, well documented in several studies. In a study of the variations in literacy achievement among native and non-native primary school children (grades three to six) in the Netherlands, Verhoeven and Vermeer (2006) collected various measures of word decoding, reading literacy and writing skill from native Dutch children, children with a former Dutch colonial background and children with a Mediterranean background. The results showed the non-native children to lag behind their native peers on all of the tasks.

Research has shown that children faced with the task of learning to read and write in a language other than their own often have only a limited oral mastery of the second language which means that their use of oral cues from the second language in order to read and write may be limited as well. That is, limited oral proficiency in second language may interfere with various reading sub-processes (see Koda, 1996; Geva & Verhoeven, 2000). With respect to word decoding, for example, limited auditory discrimination of phonemes may lead to slow acquisition of phoneme-grapheme correspondence rules. (Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2006)

Recent investigations, however, suggest that young ESL children are capable of making sense of written input while they are working on becoming fluent speakers of English (Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999; Weber, 1996). This research orientation maintains that just as speaking, reading, and writing are interrelated in the emerging literacy of native speakers they are equally related in the emerging literacy of second language children. Araujo (2002) has, indeed, suggested that ESL children armed

with letter-name knowledge, phonological awareness, and basic letter-sound relationships can teach themselves how to read, provided they are immersed in a print-rich environment (Torgesen & Hecht, 1996).

1.2 Sociolinguistic Profile of Egypt

Language use in Egypt is considered a classic example of diglossia, that is, a situation in which one dialect or language is used in formal or written realms and a second dialect or language is used largely in informal or spoken realms (Ferguson, 1972, p. 244). Diglossia can refer either to the use of two different languages (for example, English and Tagalog in the Philippines) or to the use of two different varieties or dialects of the same language (for example, Standard German and Swiss German in parts of Switzerland).

In Egypt, the two varieties used are both varieties of Arabic rather than different languages. The two varieties used in Egypt are referred to as Classical Arabic and Egyptian Arabic (Haeri, 1997). Actual usage of Classical or Egyptian Arabic in Egypt falls along a continuum, rather than in complete bipolar opposition (Bentahila, 1991; Parkinson, 1992), but since most uses tend toward one pole or the other these two are considered the main Arabic dialects of Egypt. Classical Arabic is the literary dialect which is used in the Qu'ran; in most print publications including books, magazines, and newspapers; and in formal spoken discourse, including prayer, television news broadcasts, and formal prepared speeches. It is used with relatively little variation throughout the Arab world; Moroccans, Egyptians, Iraqis, and Saudis who know Classical Arabic will be mutually comprehensible in writing or speech.

Egyptian Arabic, also referred to as Egyptian colloquial Arabic (see, for example, Al-Tonsi, 1980), is the spoken dialect of the Egyptian people and is used in conversation,

songs, films, and television soap operas. As for written forms, it is used in comic strips and, occasionally, in novels and short stories (similarly to how non-standard English dialects might be occasionally used either as a literary device or specifically for the reporting of dialogue and conversation). Both Classical Arabic and Egyptian Arabic use the same Arabic script. Egyptian Arabic is spoken only in Egypt (or by Egyptians elsewhere), but it is understood widely in the Arab world due to the popularity of Egyptian films and songs.

Both Classical Arabic and Egyptian Arabic have their own powerful symbolism for Egyptians. Classical Arabic, as the language of the Qu'ran and the common language of the Arab nation, is central to their identity as members of that nation and of the broader Islamic community. Egyptian Arabic, as the language of daily communication, jokes, song, and cinema, is central to their identity as Egyptians. While virtually all Egyptians are competent speakers of Egyptian, only about half of adults in the country can read and write Classical Arabic (Fandy, 2000). The country's low rate of adult literacy— 52.7% according to the United Nations Development Programme (2000)—stems in part from the difficulty that Egyptian children have in mastering a written language that is at large variance from their spoken variety. Beyond this diglossia of Classical and Egyptian Arabic, many other languages are used in Egypt, including the ancient Coptic language that is sometimes used in Coptic Christian church services (Takla, 2002) as well as African languages used by refugees and European languages used in business and tourism.

The use of European languages in Egypt has a long history dating back to periods of French and British colonialism, and the Egyptian elite often preferred to be educated in French or English rather than Arabic (Haeri, 1997). Most recently, though, the use of English has far surpassed that of French and other foreign languages within Egypt.

According to a recent study by Schaub (2000), English plays a dual role in Egypt. On the one hand it is the principal foreign language of the general population. English is the first and only mandatory foreign language taught in schools, with obligatory English language instruction starting in fourth grade. Hotel workers, shopkeepers, and street salespeople use English to communicate with foreign visitors and residents, especially in major cities and tourist destinations (Schaub, 2000; Stevens, 1994).

Beyond that, though, English serves as an additional language of communication for a large swath of Egypt's elite. The majority of private schools are English language schools, which means that English language instruction begins in kindergarten and that English is a medium of instruction of other specified subjects (i.e., mathematics and science). In 2000, the Ministry of Education also launched experimental language schools within the public school system, and 79 of the 80 launched were English medium, with one being French medium. The elite usually continue their post-secondary education in English, studying either abroad (e.g., in the United States or England), at an English-medium university in Egypt (the most established being the American University in Cairo), or in an English-medium department of an Egyptian state university. Medicine, dentistry, veterinary studies, engineering, the natural sciences, and computer sciences all use English as a main medium of instruction, and other disciplines, such as commerce and law, have special English-medium sections which are considered more prestigious and difficult to enter. Graduates from these universities and programs often enter careers in which English continues to be used as a daily medium of communication, such as international business or computer science. Professionals in other elite fields, such as medicine, continue to use English as an additional language through frequent contact with foreigners and through professional activities; for example, the conferences of

doctors, dentists, and nurses in Egypt are conducted in English, even without foreigners present, and professional publications of these groups are published in English (see discussion of English as a second language of the Egyptian elite in Haeri, 1997, and in Schaub, 2000). For all its importance, however, the fact still remains that in Egypt English is a foreign language. An important language in the life of the Egyptians it certainly is, but still a foreign language.

1.3 Profile of the International British School of Alexandria, IBSA

1.3.1 The Curriculum

The International British School of Alexandria was founded to provide British-style education for the children of Alexandria. It offers a curriculum based upon the framework provided by the National Curriculum for England and Wales and modified so as to accommodate the cultural experiences available in Egypt whilst maintaining the discipline and high standards of achievement synonymous with the British Curriculum. The pupils come from both the Egyptian and expatriate communities of Alexandria.

The term "National Curriculum" is a term that refers, within the British context, to a nationwide curriculum for primary and secondary state schools that was introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland following the Education Reform Act 1988. Notwithstanding its name, the National Curriculum does not apply to independent schools, which may set their own curricula, but it ensures that all state schools have a common curriculum. The Education Reform Act 1988 requires that all state students be taught a Basic Curriculum of Religious Education and the National Curriculum.

The purpose of the National Curriculum is to standardise the content taught across schools in order to enable assessment, which in turn enabled the compilation of league

tables detailing the assessment statistics for each school. These league tables, together with the provision to parents of some degree of choice in the assignment of the school for their child (also legislated in the same act) were intended to encourage a 'free market' by allowing parents to choose schools based on their measured ability to teach the National Curriculum. Whilst only certain subjects were included at first, in subsequent years the curriculum grew to fill the entire teaching time of most state schools.

The aims of the National Curriculum are to prescribe a number of school subjects and specify in relation to each:

*The knowledge, skills, and understanding which pupils of different abilities and maturities are expected to have;

*The matters, skills, and processes which are required to be taught to pupils of different abilities and maturities;

* The arrangements for assessing pupils.

The National Curriculum is organised on the basis of four key stages:

	Pupil's ages	Year groups
Key Stage 1	5-7	1-2
Key Stage 2	7-11	3-6
Key Stage 3	11-14	7-9
Key Stage 4	14-16	10-11

The National Curriculum comprises ten subjects. Three of these are defined as "core foundation" subjects whilst seven are defined as "foundation" subjects. The core foundation subjects are English, mathematics and science. The seven foundation subjects are art, geography, history, modern languages, music, physical education and technology.

The curriculum the school offers is thus based on the National Curriculum of England and Wales which is supported by the National Literacy Strategy, the National Numeracy Strategy and the QCA Schemes of Work and the National Curriculum assessment that goes with them. The curriculum has been adapted, however, so that it meets the needs of the students

The British National Curriculum covers English, Maths, Science, Information Communication Technology, French, History, Geography, Music, Art, Physical Education and Personal Social and Health Education. In addition, and of equal importance to all of these, our students study Arabic and Religion (Muslim or Christian).

At the heart of the British National Curriculum there is an emphasis on skills and understanding. How to access information, how to analyse it and how to use it are all skills that the curriculum encourages and assesses. Study skills and how to learn are taught to students through the daily practice of skills and by encouraging students to reflect upon their learning. Learning by heart and being able to write down learnt facts and figures are useful skills but only in the context of understanding and being able to use this knowledge.

The British National Curriculum assesses progress in skills and understanding against set criteria – levels - and teachers use these levels to guide the next teaching objective, to support children who are struggling and to report to parents. There is a very clear structure, a ladder, of skills in each subject and children are encouraged to make their individual progress up that ladder. The levels achieved are reported in the twice yearly written report to parents. All areas of the curriculum have their own unique character and value. All students are encouraged to experience all areas of the curriculum and develop a balanced approach to learning and study.

Arabic is an integral part of the curriculum and here, too, the school has levels of assessment derived from the British National Curriculum, against which student progress is measured. Students are taught the skills of language and they learn to be proficient in their mother tongue, an essential requirement for those who are going to be using another language as their major vehicle of learning. The final assessments for students are through GCSE and IGCSE exams (at the end of Year 11) and A levels or International Baccalaureate Diploma (at the end of Year 13). These equip students to enter universities in Egypt and around the world.

1.3.2 Admission Policy

Students are admitted to IBSA into the age appropriate year group. The following table makes this clear.

Table: 1.1 Admission according to Age

<i>Stage</i>	AGE ON 30TH		END OF STAGE
	SEPT	CLASS	EXAM
VI Form College		Twelve *	
	16	Thirteen	AS level
	17	**	A level
Foundation (Pre-prep)	3	Nursery	
	4	Reception	None
Key Stage 1 (Prep-Prep)	5	One	
	6	Two	KS1 SAT
Key Stage 2 (Preparatory school)	7	Three	
	8	Four	
	9	Five	
	10	Six	KS2 SAT

<i>Stage</i>	AGE ON 30TH		END OF STAGE
	SEPT	CLASS	EXAM
	11	Seven	
Key Stage 3	12	Eight	
(lower senior school)	13	Nine	KS3 SAT
Key Stage 4	14	Ten	
(Upper Senior School)	15	Eleven	IGCSE

*S2 Egyptian System

**S3 Egyptian System

The figure includes a comparison with the Egyptian system to make this even clearer. In only very exceptional cases are children admitted into a different year group, and this is entirely at the discretion of the Headteacher. Admission is based upon the school's ability to provide a quality education for the student. This is assessed through interview and, for the older children, through testing.

Upon submission of an application form, children and their parents are invited for an interview. For the younger children this is simply a chance for the class teacher to meet the child, have a simple conversation and assess their basic skills. The school is aware that many children of Reception to Year 2 age do not have competency in English – this is not an obstacle to admission but the assessing teacher will want to be sure the child has normal learning skills and that there is a willingness, on the part of the whole family, to commit to the child learning English.

Older children (Year 3 and above) are asked to undertake a Maths test (at a level appropriate to their age), read an appropriate level of English text and talk with the interviewer about what they have read. Again, the interview is about potential as much as it is about current achievement and students may be accepted on the basis

that they undergo intensive English as a Second Language lessons. After the interview, within a few days, candidates will be told whether or not they have been accepted by the school. The place will be confirmed on the payment of fees.

1.3.3 A House Divided

At our school we have a divided house. There is a group of teachers that regard the school as "a piece of England in the heart of Alex." This group believes that the school should operate the same way any school in England does. English should not only be the language of instruction and administration but also the only language allowed on school grounds. Children coming to school for the first time will have to adapt to the situation the same way they would if they went to school in England. No school in England, they point out, treats three-year-olds with a different primary language any differently from three-year-old native speakers of English. Children might have a hard time at the beginning, they admit, but it takes no more than a few months, if not weeks, for them to pick up all the English they need in order to interact with the teachers and the children around them. Unless you create the absolute need to use English, they insist, it will not be used.

Other teachers, on the other hand, have a different view. This group believes that this idea of "a piece of England in the heart of Alex" ignores the fact that children with a different primary language who go to school in England are surrounded at all hours by English-speaking people. They point out that it is this kind of exposure to the language which facilitates the process of acquiring it. In the case of our school, by contrast, the only English-speaking person in the classroom is usually the teacher. Under such circumstances, they argue, it would be unreasonable to expect our children to acquire the language the same way they would if they were in England.

Children should be given more time to adjust. During that time, the school should devote all its resources to helping the children acquire the English they need. This would be done through shared reading of stories, songs, drawing and other classroom activities. More importantly, from the perspective of this study, no attempt should be made, they insist, to teach literacy before the children have acquired a reasonable degree of fluency in English.

This group cites both personal experience as well as established authority in support of their stance. They point out that the schools they taught at in Australia and the U.S. did not ban children with a different primary language from using that language on school grounds. Furthermore, no attempt was made to teach literacy to children below the age of five. They cite research studies that indicate that children with a different primary language can be considered children at risk for developing problems in the acquisition of literacy. The school should take this into consideration and offer an English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) component. The "adopted" British curriculum, that is, should be "adapted".

The "piece of England" group has no shortage of personal experience or research studies to support their point of view either. Irish teachers point out that Irish-medium schools in Ireland ban their students from using any language other than Irish on school grounds. These teachers also highlight the fact that ALL research studies on the acquisition of literacy in a language other than the child's primary language involve the children of minority groups. The problems these children have, they argue, are better accounted for in terms of socioeconomic factors rather than language factors. They cite, in support of their point of view, the results of experiments that offered such children daily training in literacy over a period of years. Enrollees in such programmes outperformed not only their counterparts who did not attend similar

programmes but also native speakers their age. Just as importantly, they point out that, from their experience, teaching literacy to young learners of English is one well-tried way of teaching language. Lastly, they go on to say that the argument that children are not as exposed to English to the same degree as children in England no longer holds true. In the age of satellite television and the internet people can "live England" in the heart of Antarctica, let alone Alex. According to this group, then, the British curriculum should be "adopted" but not "adapted".

1.4 Statement of the Problem

According to Carroll (1976), the acquisition of literacy among children is a simple thing. All children need to learn in order to be successful readers and writers is to understand the language in which they will be reading and decode the written word automatically so that they can comprehend the written text. Research studies conducted among preschool and primary school children, however, indicate that becoming literate is much more complicated than this "simple view" suggests. According to Stahl and Yaden (2004, p.144), "understanding written language involves knowledge of vocabulary, text structure, comprehension strategies, decoding knowledge, automatic recognition of sight words, fluency and so on".

The difficulty of becoming literate is best illustrated by the fact that the number of adults who are functionally illiterate in the United States, one of the most technologically advanced societies in the world, hovers around 20% (the U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996). Human beings, that is, do not acquire literacy the way they acquire language.

This difficulty is appreciated even more when one looks at the results of studies launched by the U.S. Department of Education to assess the degree of success of its early literacy education programmes (Zill et al., 2001; 2003). The findings from these studies, in the words of Stahl and Yaden (2004, p143) "present a disturbing picture. Most, if not all, reports cast doubt on the current efficacy of larger-scale programmes to provide the high quality of child care and preschool programmes needed to stimulate the emergent academic abilities upon which future school achievement is based".

This difficulty is compounded even more in the case of children who are trying to acquire literacy in a language other than their own, which is the main focus of the present study. Children in such contexts find themselves faced with the fact that understanding English (if reading is to be done in that language) means not only developing a basic command of the language but also understanding the academic vocabulary used in school texts (Stanovich, 2000). As Washington and Craig (2001) point out, all children must learn the language of school but this is especially difficult for English-language learners and children whose dialect differs significantly from the dominant dialect used in schools.

Children faced with the task of learning to read and write in a second language are confronted by a dual task: mastery of not only the basic written code for the second language but also the grammatical and discourse rules which characterize the second language. In many cases, such children may have only a limited oral mastery of the second language which means that their use of oral cues from the second language in order to read and write may be limited as well. That is, limited oral proficiency in second language may interfere with various reading sub-processes (see Koda, 1996; Geva & Verhoeven, 2000). With respect to word decoding, for example, limited

auditory discrimination of phonemes may lead to slow acquisition of grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules" (Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2006)

Furthermore, in order to learn to associate a spoken word with its counterpart in print, children must have an adequate grasp of the meaning of that word, both in and out of sentence context. Adequate knowledge of the meanings of spoken words is important at the beginning stage of reading because the child relies heavily on likely word meanings in learning to identify words initially encountered (Biemiller, 1970; Weber, 1970; Vellutino, Scanlong, Desotto & Pruzek, 1981; Vellutino, Scanlong & Tanzman, 1990; Ehri, 1992). The difficulties children face when learning to read and write in a language other than their primary language are well documented in several studies (Verhoeven and Vermeer, 2006; Koda, 1996; Geva and Verhoeven, 2000).

The concern expressed by many linguists makes it clear that the acquisition of literacy is thus a difficult undertaking at the best of times which is made even more difficult when attempted in a language other than the child's primary language. Verhoeven and Vermeer (2006, p. 191) sum it all succinctly by stating that "the literacy development of second language learners can be considered at risk since we are teaching them literacy in a language other than their own."

Within this backdrop, the present study aims to investigate the extent to which, if any, Egyptian primary school EFL learners learning literacy in English at an international school in Egypt where the medium of instruction is English can be considered an 'at-risk' group?

1.5 Research Objectives

This is a cross-sectional study of the acquisition of literacy in English by young, Egyptian primary school learners of English as a foreign language at an English-medium international school in Alexandria, Egypt. The research objectives are:

1. To examine the level of literacy achievement among Egyptian primary school learners of English as a foreign language at an international school in Alexandria, Egypt.
2. To compare the results of the level of literacy achievement of these Egyptian primary school learners of English as a foreign language to the literacy level of achievement by same-age (6 – 7 year olds) native speakers of English at state schools in the U.K.
3. To investigate the extent to which the results of the comparison support the view that the literacy development of foreign language learners can be considered at risk.

1.6 Research Questions

This research study seeks to find answers to the following three research questions.

These are:

1. What is the level of literacy achievement among Egyptian primary school learners of English as a foreign language at an international school in Alexandria, Egypt?
2. How does this level compare with the level of literacy achievement of same-age native speakers (6 – 7 year olds) of English at state schools in the U.K.?

3. To what extent do the results of the comparison between the levels of literacy achievement support the view that primary school learners of English as a foreign language can be considered a group 'at risk'?

1.7 Significance of the study

The findings of the present study are significant from several aspects. First, the results of this study will help the research site decide whether to teach the British curriculum it has adopted the same way it is taught in the U.K. or whether it should adapt it to suit the needs of the children. It will also help teachers at other international schools in Egypt who are facing similar issues. The pupils will have a curriculum in place that will suit their needs and the parents could be given information or workshops to help guide them to the needs of their children.

Second, it is anticipated that the findings of this study will contribute to the existing literature on the acquisition of literacy in general. As Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998, p. 854) point out, the "specification of a complete model of how the different components of emergent literacy develop, influence each other, and influence the development of conventional forms of reading and writing in the context of other skills is not yet possible given current research."

Thirdly, the findings of the present study are expected to contribute to the existing literature on the acquisition of literacy in a language other than the learner's primary language. The majority of research on emergent literacy has been conducted with English-speaking children learning an alphabetic writing system. Consequently, the extent to which these concepts of emergent literacy apply to languages other than English is not clear (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 849).

Fourthly, this is the first study, from library research, that investigates the acquisition of literacy in English by young learners of English as a foreign language from upper-income families. Studies of the acquisition of literacy in English by children with a different primary language have ALL been restricted to children from low-income families in an English as a second language (ESL) situation. This study, therefore, allows researchers the opportunity to study the effect of socioeconomic status on the process of acquisition of literacy in English by children with a different primary language.

Lastly, this study is unique in terms of the choice of participants. This is the first study that investigates the acquisition of literacy in English by Arabic-speaking Egyptian primary school children.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

There are obvious limitations to this research. First, this is a study of the acquisition of literacy in English by young, Egyptian primary school EFL learners at a private international school in Alexandria, Egypt. The findings of the study may not, therefore, apply to learners of English of a different age. They may not, either, be generalized to learners of English as a foreign language by young Arabic-speaking children at Arabic-medium schools. Neither can they be generalized to young learners of English as a second language at state or private schools. The findings of the study may not, that is, be generalized to other populations of learners of English as a second/foreign language of a different age, a different socio-economic status, or a different primary language.

1.9 Ethical Considerations

The researcher asked the Headmaster of the school for permission to use the test at the end of Key Stage 2 as data for her research. She also asked whether she could mention the name of the school in her research. The Headmaster said that it was alright to mention the name of the school but that he had to ask the parents of the children for permission. Consent Forms were consequently sent to the parents informing them of the purpose of the research and assuring that no child's name would be mentioned. The parents gave their permission.

1.10 Definitions of Key Terms

There are a few recurring terms used throughout the study. These terms are operationally defined and elaborated to enhance their meaning and to remove any ambiguities as they frequently appear in both the review of literature and other parts of the study. These are:

Literacy - For the purposes of this study, literacy can be defined as that "language process in which an individual constructs meaning through a transaction with written text that has been created by symbols that represent language...or creates meaning by using symbols to construct a written text." (Hudelson, 2004, p. 130)

Decoding skills - These are the skills which enable a reader to "translate units of print into units of sound." (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 851)

Encoding skills – These are the skills which enable a reader to "translate units of sound into units of print." (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 851)

Egyptian primary school EFL learners - refers to children who are aged 6 -7 years old. These are children whose primary language is Arabic and acquire English at school.

1.11 Summary

This Chapter has provided the background necessary to understand the motivation behind it, its objectives and significance as well as its limitations. The Chapter started by shedding light on the motivation that drove the researcher to do this research in the first place. It then presented a review of the literature on the acquisition of literacy among young learners; the core area of research of the present study. This was then followed by a section that discussed the roles that both Arabic (the language of the country) and English play in the life of the Egyptian people. Following this, there was an overview of the school where the research took place: the International British School of Alexandria. The Chapter then stated what the problem was, what the research objectives were, and what the research questions were. The significance of the study was then discussed and its limitations outlined. This was followed by a list of the terms that were used in the study. These terms were operationally defined and elaborated to enhance their meaning and to remove any ambiguities that might arise as they were frequently used in both the review of literature and other parts of the study. The Chapter then presented a brief discussion of the ethical considerations that guided the research. Finally, the Chapter ended with a brief summary of the main points that were discussed.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter focuses on presenting a review of the literature on the acquisition of literacy. The first part of the review discusses the two competing theories on literacy acquisition; the whole-language theory and the code-based theory. It shows how proponents of the whole-language approach believe that literacy is acquired the same way oral language is acquired while proponents of the code-based approach believe that, unlike language, literacy has to be taught to be learnt. Following this, there is an overview of the factors that affect the acquisition of literacy. Of the myriad of factors that affect literacy acquisition only two were selected for discussion. These were (a) social class and (b) home literacy environment. The Chapter then explores the different developmental stages that children go through acquiring literacy. The theoretical framework of the study is then presented and this is followed by related studies where reference is made to early literacy interventions and classroom research on learning written words.

2.1 The Consensus and the Controversy

No review of the literature on literacy acquisition could fail to notice the wide consensus among researchers that literacy consists of a set of skills without which reading and writing would not be possible. These are (a) the ability to understand the language to be read, and (b) the ability to decode the writing system of that language. No review of the literature could either fail to notice the controversy surrounding the way these skills are acquired. There are those, on the one hand, who believe that the