

School Failure at Primary Stage with Reference to Basrah City

ABSTRACT

Failure and low learning achievement are critical problems facing school systems all over the world, particularly in low-income countries. In Iraq, there is a growing concern at the seriousness of school failure at primary stage during the recent years. This research endeavours to study this issue depending on an analysis of the teaching programme followed, and the findings of a questionnaire carried out to (100) primary school teachers in Basrah City.

الرسوب في المرحلة الابتدائية مع الإشارة الى مدينة البصرة

المخلص :

يعد الرسوب وضعف مستوى التعلم من المشاكل الكبيرة التي تواجه النظام التربوي في العالم بشكل عام، وفي البلدان ذات الدخل المنخفض بشكل خاص، وفي العراق ، ازداد الاهتمام خلال السنوات الاخيرة بمسألة الرسوب وتدني مستوى التعليم ، وظهرت دراسات ومحاولات لاصلاح القطاع التربوي والنهوض به ، وهذا البحث محاولة لدراسة ظاهرة الرسوب في المرحلة الابتدائية في المدارس العراقية بالاعتماد على تحليل للمناهج التعليمية المتبعة في المدارس الابتدائية بالاضافة الى استبيان استطلع اراء (١٠٠) معلم في مدينة البصرة التي اختيرت انموذجاً للدراسة.

I. Introduction

Making basic education available to all, that is, meeting the basic learning needs of all children, youth and adults is the main objective of international organizations in the educational sector. The convention on the rights of the child, ratified by 160 states, has helped to establish education not only as a necessity but also as a fundamental right.

The main difficulty in trying to make primary education universally available may reside either in capacity limitation, or cultural factors, especially for the poorest social sectors. Population growth represents a serious challenge in terms of the additional resources required to continue expanding educational services.

United Nations reports show that almost a quarter of all pupils failed to complete primary school. It is estimated that out of the 95 million children enrolled in the first grade in the world in 1988, 25 million did not complete the fourth grade (Brunswic, 1994:12). Repetition in primary school and its connection with learning and school failures, have been the subject of much research in recent decades, looking into both the size of the phenomenon and its causes, as well as trying to identify better ways of gradually reducing its frequency.

This study endeavours to evaluate primary school failure and its relation with repetition and dropout in Iraq. Basrah city is chosen as a model. The study is carried out during academic the year 2007-2008.

1.1 Problem

According to the Iraqi educational system, primary stage covers six years beginning at the age of six. School failure is quite common in this stage, particularly at the fifth grade and to some extent the fourth. This, in the researcher's view, is due to many factors which, if not well-treated, can lead to serious consequences.

1.2 Hypothesis

Pupils at the fourth grade are faced with two types of difficulty; the subject matter and the writing skill since written examination begins at this grade. As a result, a high degree of school failure rates are observed among pupils of this grade and a higher degree among the next grade (the fifth) when English language teaching begins adding another difficulty. The highest degree of school failure and drop out

are observed among pupils aged 9-12 years when the pupil can be a source of additional income to family.

1.3 Procedure

The researcher carried out a questionnaire to (100) primary school teachers in different primary schools in the center of Basrah.

The questionnaire aims at investigating teachers' opinions regarding repetition, drop out and other teaching difficulties. An analysis of the teaching programme is also presented.

2. Failure and Repetition in Early Education

There are various definitions and methods of calculating repetition, which are closely linked to the structure of an education system, the way it is organized, and the administrative procedures used to regulate the progress of students through grades and levels. Available information appears to confirm that the highest repetition rates occur in the first grade of primary school (UNESCO 1972, UNESCO 1980, UNESCO 1988, UNESCO 1992). Learning success at this grade is closely related to the acquisition of basic reading and writing skills, which also determine the pupils' chances of future progress.

The teaching method used, the teacher's ability to master those methods and the pupils' aptitude to learning, all appear as crucial factors for the development of the learner's ability to understand and to reproduce written and verbal messages.

The association between socio-economic causes and final school failure and drop out is a well documented fact (Colclough & Lewin, 1993:93), especially in the case of children over 10 years old, who can begin to be a source of additional income or to lend a hand in domestic or farming work. The highest repetition and (more generally) school failure rates are observed among students of certain social sectors, and geographic areas. There are two different ways of explaining this correlation; one possibility is that high repetition rate is an indicator of poor school performance and second learner's insufficient aptitude to learn is due to social conditions of poverty.

Alternatively, it may be argued that repetition is an indicator of the low quality of the education services supplied to this type of students, characterized by a poor supply of material, sources, an inadequate

level of preparation on the part of teachers and ineffective teaching methods. Lavy (1994:12) states that the traditional way of teaching reading and writing tends to be very mechanical and encourages memorization rather than the significant use of language to communicate. Schools continue to consider the learning of writing more as the acquisition of technique than the appropriations of a new object of knowledge, that is to say, a system for representing language.

Emotional disturbance is also considered as a cause of school failure, (Brunswic, op.cit) explains this factor as a “lack of fit” between the personality characteristics of the student and the expectations of teachers and, on occasion, parents. In this situation, the child loses self-confidence, becomes discouraged and loses motivation.

2. Attitudes Towards Failure and Repetition

In general, the culture of failure and repetition or “pedagogy of repetition” as defined by some authors such as Costa Riperio (1990), is accepted as a normal fact of primary education system to offset a lack of learning, for reasons either internal or external to the school system. Views tend to differ regarding the causes of poor learning standards according to the positions of those involved in the system. Teachers, school principals and educational authorities alike tend to relate the learning difficulties and low academic performance of pupils chiefly to factors external to system. These factors include low family income, and poor living conditions, which give rise to low learning aptitudes and little interest in schooling and inadequate support which children receive from their families.

If one considers the gender variable, the few studies available tend to show that there are no significant differences between boys and girls. A study on Arab states, for instance, suggests the apparent similarities of failure and repetition (Lavy, op.cit)

Davico (1990:46) points out that “the highest failure rates were related to first grade teachers lacking in enthusiasm, dedication and suitable training”. While the socio-economic level of pupils obviously affects their academic performance and the qualifications they obtain. It also influences the expectation teachers have regarding their learning capacity. A survey carried out in some primary school in Namibia showed that teacher’s attitudes and opinions concerning

aspects of their students not directly related to education, considerably influenced the decision whether to promote a pupil or not (Fair, 1994).

Parents, on the other hand, tend to attribute low learning performance to their children's own limitations without querying the efficiency or quality of schooling provided. Tedesco (1983:20) states that

the low expectation in terms of learning for students from the poor families may originate on either the demand side (parents) or the supply side (teachers) of education, each serving to reinforce each other.

But why repetition should even be considered a problem? Some consider repetition to be a solution to the learning problems experienced by some students "who are thus offered the opportunities of extra tuition in order to reach the level of academic performance required to complete their grade. In countries where admission to secondary school depends on highly selective tests, repetition of the final grade of primary school may be seen as a means of improving a student's preparation and qualification for the examination (UNESCO 1992). Such type of repetition is common in other countries where admission to university stage depends on special examinations. In Iraq, for instance, repetition of sixth secondary grade may be considered positive since it allows better learning and improved performance.

3. Early Education in Iraq

Schools enrollment in Iraq begins at the age of six, and extends over twelve years including six years for primary stage, three years for intermediate stage and another three for the secondary stage with whose certificate student can join the university stage. One should not expect the best of the educational situation in a state that witnessed three bloody wars followed by bitter consequences within three decades. Education in general, in Iraq, has reached a regrettable level characterized by a high number of inefficient students and high percentage of failure and dropout.

The economic and security difficulties experienced during the 1980s and 1990s of the last century have negatively contributed to the backward educational scene in Iraq. After the dramatic change of 2003, lack of security and stability forced many students to leave

schools, either because of displacements, or in search of additional income for the family. Human rights report for 2007 shows that only 50% of school age children are enrolled in schools. And according to the Annual Report of Arab League (2008:292), children of 5-14 years constitute 11% of manpower in Iraq. This percentage clearly reflects the high dropout rate among pupils. Reports of (USAID, 2008:30) show that in (2007) there are (868) primary schools in Basrah, and the number of pupils is (377,952). While registers of the Directorate of Education in Basrah shows that there are (4574) male teachers, and (12875) female teachers in the governorate.

3.1 The Teaching Programme

The program followed in the primary stage covers (206) hours distributed throughout six grades. First, second and third grade take (28) hours per week each. New lessons are introduced at the fourth grade which take (31) hours per week. More new lessons are added at the fifth grade, including English, and it takes (31) hours, and (31) hours for the sixth grade. Table (1) shows first, second, and third grades program in terms of contents and credits.

Table (1)

الدرس	Lesson	Hours per week
القراءة	Reading	11
الرياضيات	Mathematics	6
التربية الاسلامية	Islamic Education	4
العلوم	Sciences	4
التربية الفنية	Fine Arts Education	1
التربية الاخلاقية	Moral Education	1
الرياضة	Sports	1
المجموع	Total	28

New lessons are introduced at the fourth grade. The programme covers (31) hours per week. Table (2) shows fourth grade programme.

Table (2)

الدرس	Lesson	Hours per week
اللغة العربية	Arabic Language	11
الرياضيات	Mathematics	6
التربية الاسلامية	Islamic Education	4
العلوم	Sciences	3
التربية الوطنية	National Education	3
مبادئ الزراعة	Principles of Agriculture	1
التربية الاخلاقية	Moral Education	1
التربية الفنية	Fine Arts Education	1
الرياضة	Sports	1
المجموع	Total	31

Fifth and sixth grades cover (31) hours each. New lessons are introduced. Table (3) shows the programme in terms of content and credits.

Table (3)

الدرس	Lesson	Hours per week
اللغة العربية	Arabic Language	7
اللغة الانكليزية	English Language	4
الرياضيات	Mathematics	5
التربية الاسلامية	Islamic Education	4
العلوم	Sciences	3
التاريخ	History	2
الجغرافية	Geography	2
التربية الوطنية	National Education	1
مبادئ الزراعة	Principles of Agriculture	1
التربية الفنية	Fine Arts Education	1
الرياضة	Sports	1
المجموع	Total	31

It is obvious that the programme heavily emphasizes reading and writing skills at the first, second, and third grades. The text used is called (القراءة) / /, which can be translated as 'Reading'. This lesson aims at teaching pupils the skills of reading and writing, and developing these skills throughout these three years of study. This lesson is given eleven hours per week including spelling and memorization of some selected easy poems called (محفوظات) / / . In addition to the teaching of the Rudiments of Mathematics, Sciences, Islamic and Moral Education are also emphasized as they cover five hours of the programme.

Teaching at the three grades is oral, except for writing in / / where pupils are asked to write the lesson in their notebooks. In Mathematics, pupils are also asked to copy the figures and numbers in their notebooks. Examinations are oral too. In / / and Mathematics, pupils are asked to write some words on the blackboard, or to solve simple problems in Mathematics. The score is out of ten at the three grades.

At the fourth grade, new lessons are introduced, “National Education” taking three hours per week, and “Rudiments of Agriculture” taking one hour of the programme. “Arabic Language” takes eleven hours including grammar composition, spelling and memorization of selected poems. Beside “Islamic Education” and “Moral Education”, “National Education” is introduced in this year taking three hours of the programme. “Rudiments of Agriculture” is also introduced in this year taking one hour. It aims at involving pupils into a practical experience in dealing with plants, caring of the garden and enforcing, as it were, “their love of the land” (Teacher’s guide:4).

Scoring at the fourth grade is out of ten. Examinations are now written (no longer oral) in Arabic Language and Mathematics. That represents a major difficulty facing pupils who lack efficiency in writing skills. A high percentage of pupils can hardly copy the lessons they have in / / in their notebooks, and having to answer in the examinations is so difficult for them. Therefore, pupils fail because of their inefficiency in the writing skills, not because of subject matter, and they would succeed if they are orally examined.

The same problem extends to the fifth grade with more difficulty as pupils have to answer all lessons by written language in the examinations. Three new lessons are introduced; “History”, “Geography” and “English”. English takes four hours of the programme, and it is taught through writing and orally. The text book followed is (AlRafidain English Course for Iraq) which is based on the principles of the Communicative Approach. This book is introduced instead of the old textbook “NECI” which is structurally based and which is found to be, by many researchers, as a main reason of the inefficiency of English in Iraq in general. Teachers also complain of difficulties in teaching the textbook in spite of the intensive sessions designed by the Ministry of Education. The

introduction of English in this grade is due to the assumption that the pupil at the age of eleven is supposed to have mastered the linguistic system of his native language, and it is time to expose him to a foreign language. The Ministry of Education decided to initiate the teaching of English at the third grade for the coming year 2008-2009. English is supposed to be orally taught at the third grade and fourth grade. The Ministry has planned workshops and different sessions to some teachers to be leaders and to train teachers of English to handle the task. The experience was successfully applied in Alsamawa Governorate this year 2007-2008, and the results are found encouraging. This procedure, if adopted, will help, in the researcher's point of view, pupils to learn English gradually.

The sixth grade programme is the same as that followed by the fifth grade. But pupils during this year are trained to pass the ministerial examinations. It is noticed in most schools that attention is given to memorization. In English, for intense, emphasis is being put on what is expected in the examinations. Teachers are not after the teaching of the language itself, but, rather, how to make their pupils pass the examinations. "Dialogue" which is one of the many activities included in each unit is neglected because it is oral and there is no chance to be included in the exam.

4. Questionnaire

The researcher carried out a questionnaire to (100) primary school teachers investigating their views regarding the issue under study. Subjects were chosen from English language teachers because the researcher assumes that the English lesson is a main cause of failure and repetition. Some of the subjects are graduates of the Department of English in teacher-training institutes. Others have been subjected to sessions in teaching English. All of them have at least five years of experience in teaching English. 6 of them happened to be graduates of College of Education, and the others happened to be teacher training institutes graduates. They were chosen from the city center to exclude the geographical variable where sex of pupils can make a difference. It is expected to have more rates of repetition and dropout in the villages due to social and practical reasons like sex and economic conditions. The questionnaire comprises eight items. Appendix (1) shows the questionnaire.

4.1

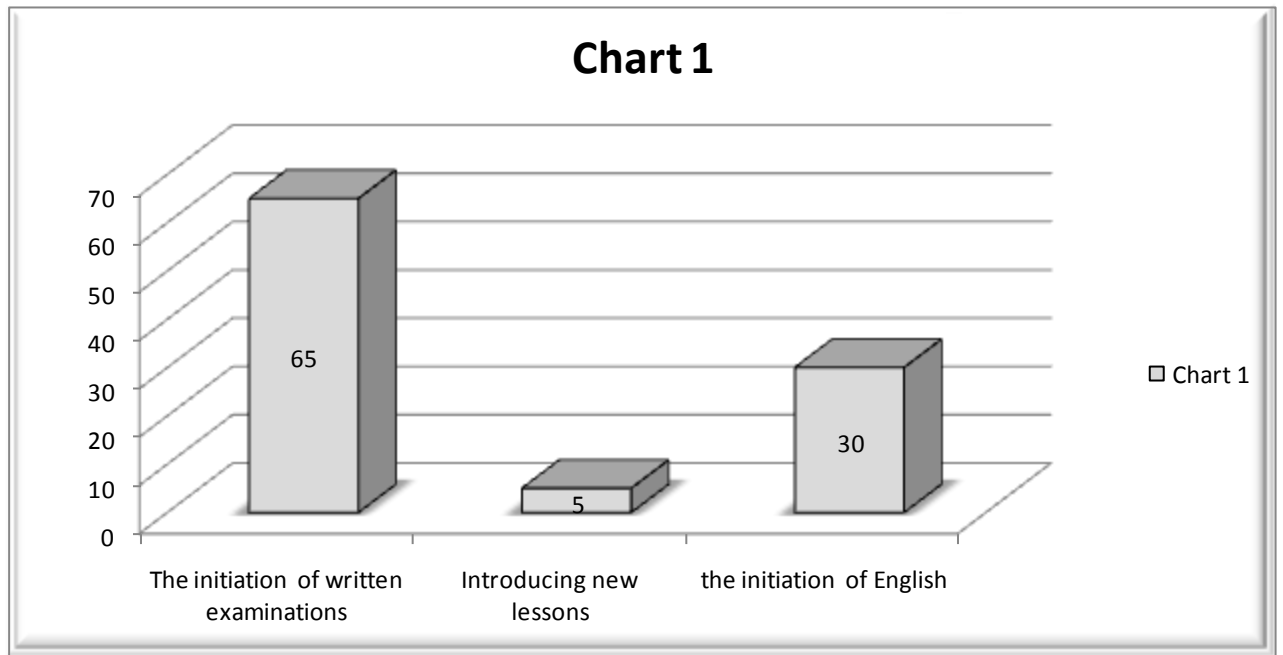
Here is the analysis of each item.
Please tick the appropriate answer

Item (1)

Failure rate increases in the fourth and fifth grades mainly because of:

- a. the initiation of written examinations
- b. introducing new lessons
- c. the initiation of English

Answers to item (1) show that 65% of the subjects choose (a) the initiation of written examinations, 30% choose (c) initiation of English and only 5% choose (b) introducing new lessons. Chart (1) shows answers to item (1)



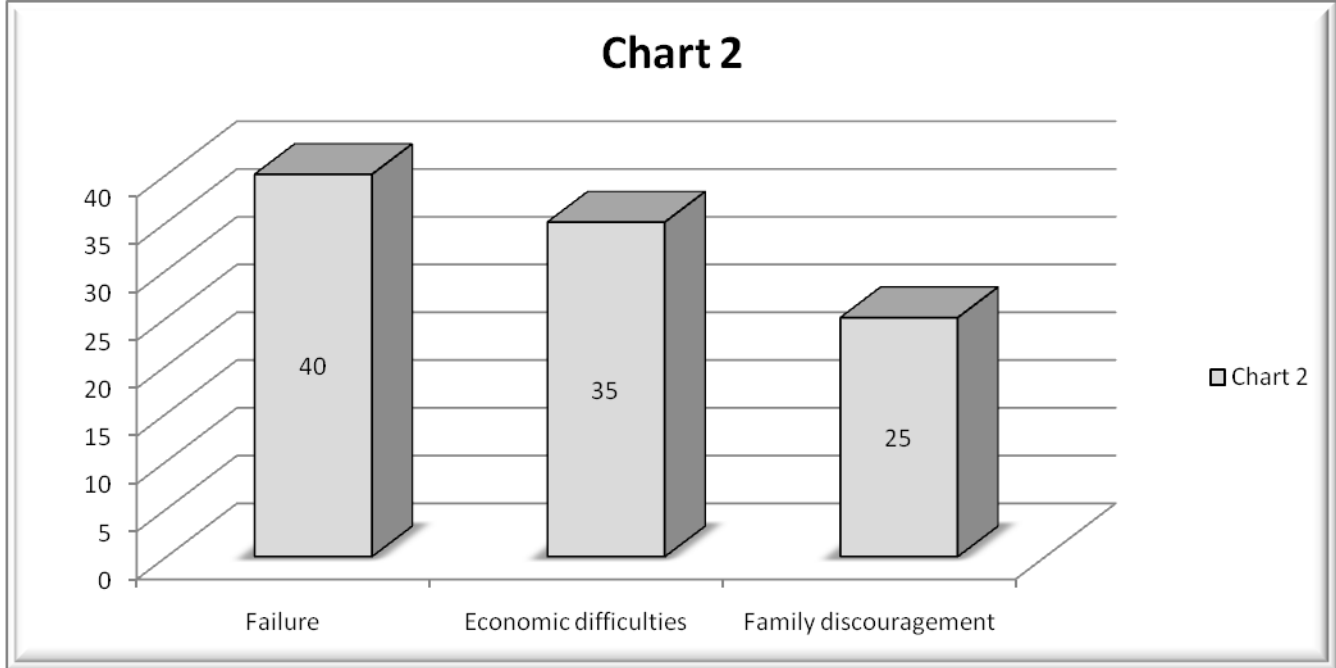
Item (2)

Drop out has become a common phenomenon during the last decade because of:

- a. failure
- b. economic difficulties
- c. family discouragement

40% of the subjects think that the reason behind dropout is failure, while 35% consider the economic difficulties is the reason of it, and

25% think that it is family discouragement that leads to dropout. Chart (2) shows the answers of item (2).

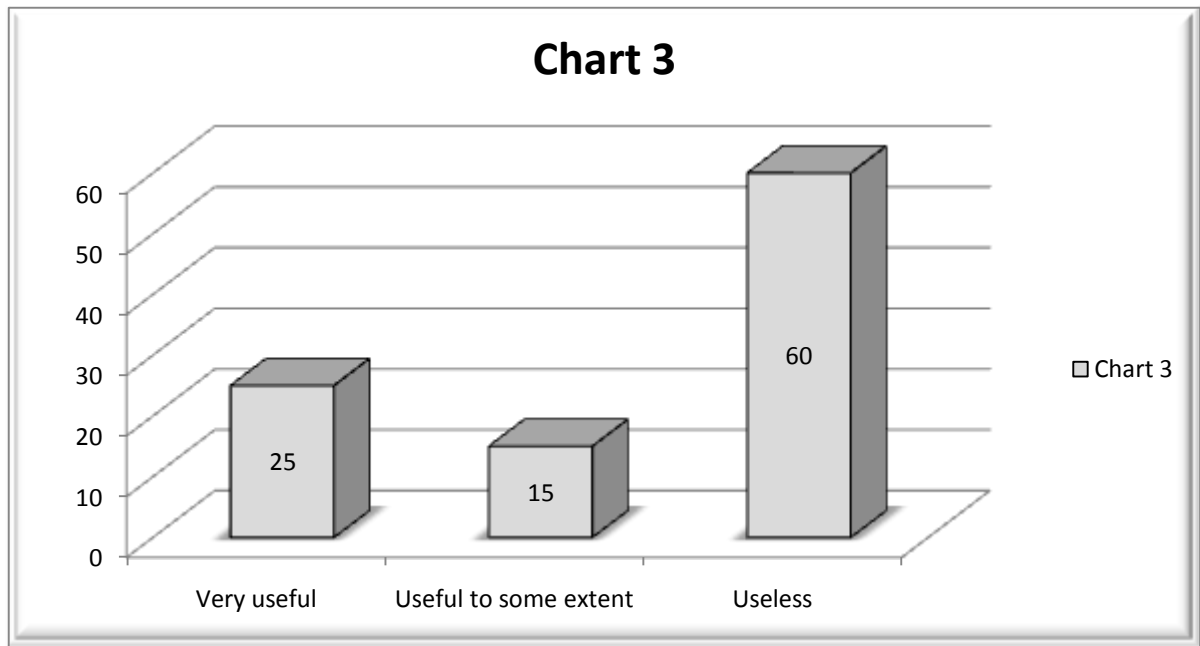


Item (3)

Teaching English at the third grade is:

- a. very useful
- b. useful to some extent
- c. useless

10% only give their voices to “very useful”, and 40% to “useful to some extent”, while 50% give their voices to “useless”. Chart (3) shows the answers to item (3).

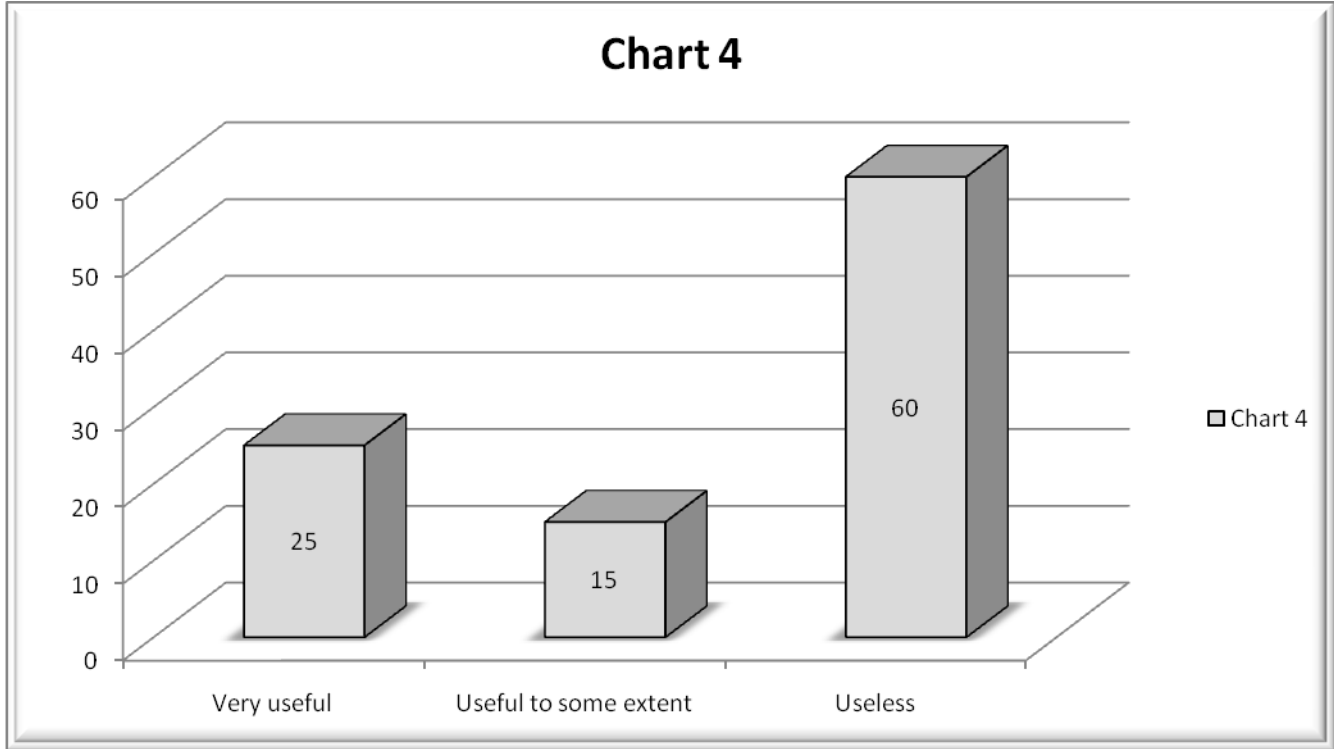


Item (4)

Initiation of written examinations at the third grade is:

- a. very useful
- b. useful to some extent
- c. useless

Having analyzed this item, it is found that 25% with the initiation of written examinations as they choose “very useful”, 15% choose useful to some extent, and 60% are against this suggestion choosing “useless”. Chart (4) shows answers to item (4).

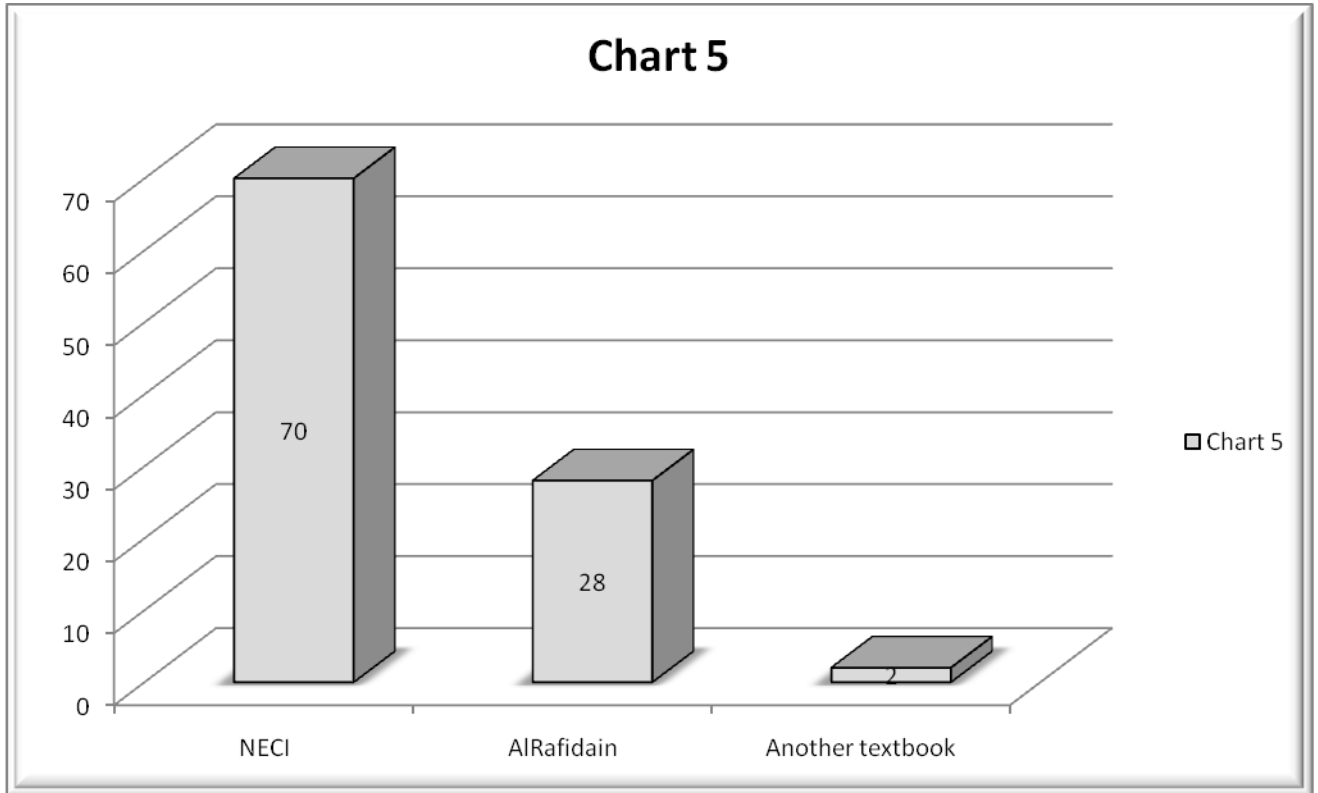


Item (5)

Which textbook do you think is better to teach English at primary school?

- a. NECI
- b. AlRafidain
- c. Another textbook (which?)

Responses to item (5) show that 70% of the subjects are with the NECI, while 28% prefer AlRafidain, and 2% suggest another textbook; the textbook followed in Gulf states. Chart (5) shows answers to item (5).

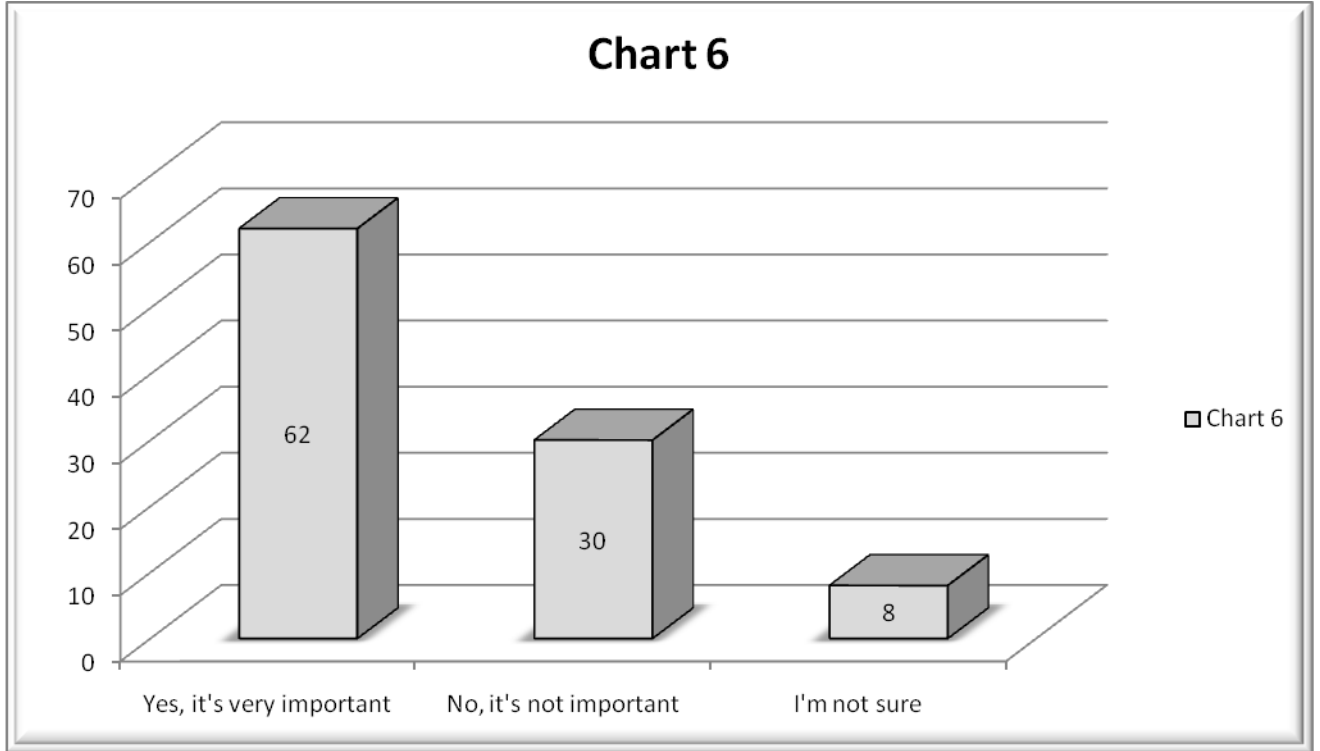


Item (6)

Do you think “sports” are important to pupils?

- a. yes, very important
- b. no, it is not important
- c. I’m not sure

62% of the subjects think that “sports is very important”, against 30% who think that “sports is not important”, and 8% are not sure of its importance. Chart (6) shows answers to item (6).



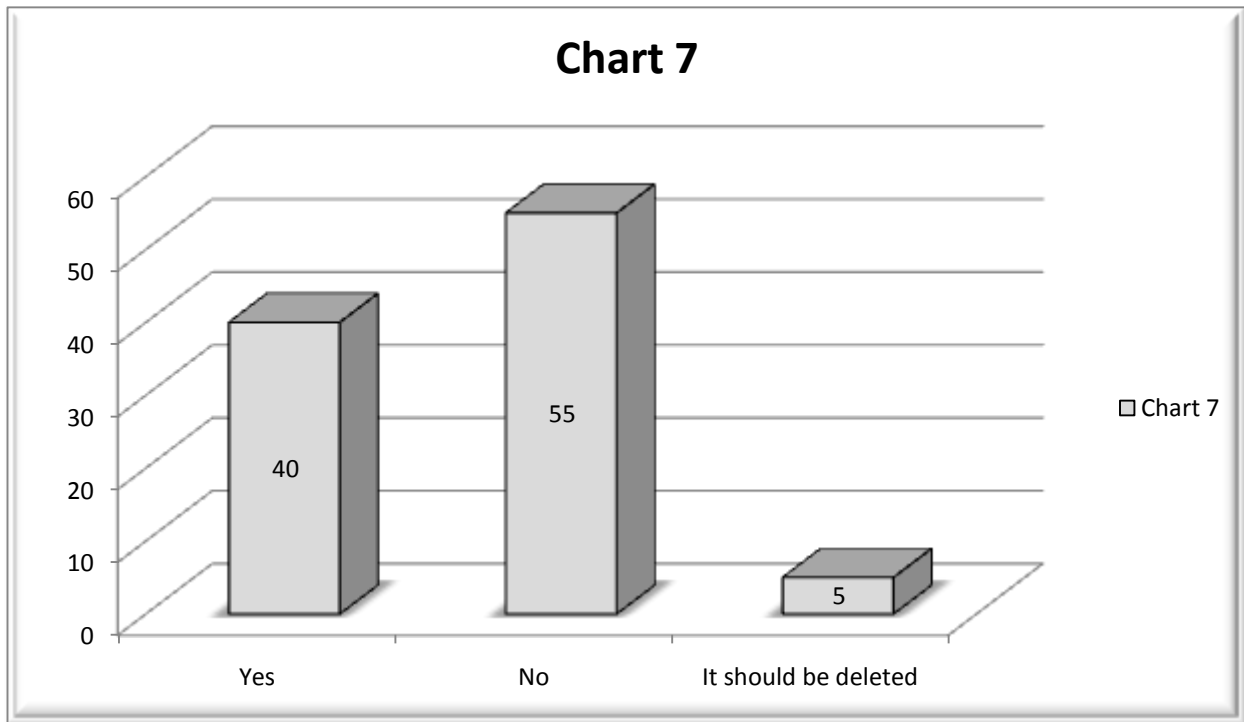
Item (7)

“Sports” is given only one hour per week.

Do you think this is enough?

- a. yes
- b. no
- c. It should be deleted

40% of the subjects consider one hour per week for “Sports” is enough, while 55% say it is not enough, and 5% think that “Sports” should be deleted from the program. Chart (7) shows the answers to item (7).



Item (8)

If your answer to (7) is (No), how many hours do you suggest? Please state that below together with any suggestions or ideas you have regarding failure and dropout at primary stage.

4.2 Discussion

Having analyzed the responses of each item, the researcher found that the initiation of written examinations at fourth grade (for Arabic language and Mathematics), and for all lessons at fifth grade is considered as the main reason behind failure. A high percentage of subjects (65%) agree with this option. About half of that percentage (30%) consider the initiation of English language teaching as the main reason behind failure. The introduction of new lessons at the fifth grade such as (History, geography, English and National Education) is considered as the main reason behind failure, taking into consideration that all lessons this year are to be carried out by writing not just orally.

Regarding dropout, (40%) of the subjects' responses agree with that failure is the main problem that leads to this situation. (30%) of subjects consider family discouragement as the main reason. Family

role is so important in motivating pupils to follow their study even in case of failure. Statistics of the Directorate of Education shows that in popular areas like Hayania, Jumhuria, the percentage of school dropout is rather higher than other areas. Some families encourage their children to work, especially if a market is nearby, to obtain additional income to the family. Economic difficulties constitute (30%) of subjects' answers, regarding the reason behind dropout. This percentage is rather high taking into consideration that education is free in Iraq.

Item 3 is based on the decision of the Ministry of Education to initiate the teaching of English at the third grade instead of the fifth. The experiment is found to be successful in Alsamawa Governorate and it is to be publicized next year (2008-2009). Half of subjects' views are with that decision as (10%) consider it "very useful", and (40%) say that it is "useful to some extent". (50%) are against it saying it is useless. Teachers almost seem unsure of its success. Many views are stated by subjects in response to item (8) regarding this point, some subjects think such experience will put another burden on their shoulders, and others think it is too early to eight-year child to start learning another language.

Initiating written examinations at the third grade is welcomed by (25%) of subjects as they consider it "very useful", and other (5%) are less enthusiastic to the suggestion saying that it is "useful to some extent", While (60%) of subjects vote against the idea.

Introducing written examinations at third grade can help lessen the difficulties pupils face at the fifth class; English language teaching and other new lessons. When pupils are subjected to written examinations at this grade, they will develop the written skill and their task at the fifth class will surely be easier. According to some educational supervisors in the Directorate of Education, it is the Ministry's intension to introduce written examination at third the grade in the coming years. Some teachers state their views regarding this point in their response to item (8), saying that failure would shift to the third grade when written examinations are to be initiated at it.

Item (4) uncovers teachers' attitudes to the textbook used currently in the teaching of English; AlRafidain. Only (28%) of the subjects consider it as the best textbook for teaching English, against (70%) who prefer the previous textbook, New English Course for Iraq

(NECI) which is structurally based. The NECI was followed in Iraq since 1970 to 2000 when AlRafidain book is introduced. AlRafidain is based on the principles of the Communicative Approach. Teachers of English were subjected to training courses. Every English teacher is supposed to participate in these courses, but they (teachers) don't seem to like AlRafidain text, and they appear cautious and unsure of its utility. This negative attitude might be due to different factors, most important of which is that the Communicative Approach places too heavy a burden on the teacher both before and during class.

“Sports” is the well-loved lesson by almost all pupils. It is the long waited hour in the week, as it provides enjoyment and brings pleasure. Responses of teachers regarding this point show majority understanding to “sport” significance for pupils. (62%) consider it “very important”, against (30%) who say that it is “not important”, and (8%) vote to the deletion of this lesson. This small percentage of teachers called themselves “practical” as they state in response to item (8), some of them think that this hour should be given to important lessons like English or Mathematics. Others consider sport as a waste of time.

In response to item (7) which asks if the only one “sports” hour is enough, (40%) think it is enough, while (55%) think it is not enough and should be increased. Other (5%) percentage is not sure. Teachers write in response to item (8) that the “sports” lesson should be twice or three times per week due to its role in motivating and orienting pupils towards school loving.

5. Conclusion

Having analyzed the teaching programme followed at Iraqi primary schools, and in the light of teachers' responses obtained through the questionnaire, the researcher concludes that failure at primary stage is the outcome of inefficient learning. Pupils' weak writing skill is found to be the first sign of this inefficiency. Beside the difficulty added by the teaching of English at the fifth grade representing another factor that leads to failure which, in its turn, leads either to repetition or dropout. The following suggestions, the researcher believes, may help improve the situation.

1. As written examinations at the fourth grade (and Mathematics) and for all lessons at the fifth grade, is the main difficulty facing pupils, these examinations would better initiated at

the third grade for / / and Mathematics, as such when pupils come to the fifth grade their writing skill will be better and they can be subjected to written examinations in all lessons.

2. Emphasis should be doubled on writing skills including spelling. Teachers should encourage and train their pupils to like writing through exercises, games, competitions, etc.
3. Initiating the teaching of English at the third grade instead of the fifth. English teaching may begin orally through songs and rhymes to attract pupils to learn gradually.
4. Refreshing courses and training sessions are very important to acquaint teachers with new trends in language teaching and learning.
5. Special sessions in the teaching of English should be organized for teachers of English to train and prepare them to initiate English teaching at the third grade with emphasis on the techniques of the Communicative Approach.
6. Reducing periods given to "National Education" from three hours to two hours per week, and increasing time given to "Sports" to two hours instead of one. "Sports" lesson is important to children. It can be a means through which the boredom and passivity of pupils towards school change to enjoyment and pleasure.
7. Emphasizing the role of family follow-up with school administration through schedule meetings.

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Appendix

A questionnaire for primary school teachers

Please tick (√) the appropriate answer.

Degree/Certificate:

a. University

b. Institute

Sex:

a. Male

b. Female

Item (1)

Failure rate increases in the fourth and fifth grades mainly because of:

a. the initiation of written examinations

b. introducing new lessons

c. the initiation of English

Item (2)

Drop out has become a common phenomenon during the last decade because of:

a. failure

- b. economic difficulties
- c. family discouragement

Item (3)

Teaching English at the third grade is:

- a. very useful
- b. useful to some extent
- c. useless

Item (4)

Initiation of written examinations at the third grade is:

- a. very useful
- b. useful to some extent
- c. useless

Item (5)

Which textbook do you think is better to teach English at primary school?

- a. NECI
- b. AlRafiain
- c. Another textbook (which?)

Item (6)

Do you think “sports” are important to pupils?

- a. yes, very important
- b. no, it is not important
- c. I’m not sure

Item (7)

“Sports” is given only one hour per week.

Do you think this is enough?

- a. yes
- b. no
- c. It should be deleted

Item (8)

If your answer to (7) is (No), how many hours do you suggest?

Please state that below together with any suggestions or ideas you have regarding failure and dropout at primary stage.

Thanks for your cooperation

