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## **A Comparative Study of First Grade English Curriculum Standards in Iraq and UAE**

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### **Abstract in English**

#### **Abstract**

A global movement toward the Early Start Principle (ESP) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is fundamentally changing the way English Language Teaching (ELT) is implemented across the Middle East. This study conducted a systemic comparative analysis of the Grade 1 English curriculum standards in Iraq and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to investigate the ways in which different socio-political and economic conditions impact early language acquisition. Using George Bereday's four-stage model (description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison) and the Bray and Thomas Cube for multilevel analysis, this study evaluated the "intended curriculum" as defined by each country's Ministry of Education through official educational frameworks. The results indicate an immense "Infrastructure-Standard Gap" between the two countries. The Iraqi model, represented in the "English for Iraq" series, uses a "Social-Affective" approach to prioritize a "weak" version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), focusing on Pre-A1 linguistic scaffolding, social rituals, and phonological awareness to address resource-constrained environments. On the other hand, the UAE's "Bridge to Success" model, a "Functional-Digital" model based upon the CEFR A1.1 (Breakthrough) level, includes 21st century skills, digital literacy, and global citizenship in a highly technology-enabled classroom environment. While Iraq focuses on a culturally contextualized "source-culture" identity, the UAE focuses on

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international competitiveness and inquiry-based learning. The results conclude that English curriculum standards are not only linguistic benchmarks; they represent national visions—post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq and a knowledge-based economy in the UAE. The study recommends that the Iraqi model should incorporate explicit CEFR "Can-Do" milestones into their framework and the UAE should maintain its focus on preserving first language (L1) equilibrium in their internationalized system.

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## 1.1 Background of the Study

There has been a paradigm shift in the way the world teaches school children English. The Early Start Principle (ESP) has become widely adopted globally. The ESP states that students will begin learning the English language as soon as they enter the formal education system.

This adoption of the ESP has been made possible by SLA research on the Critical Period Hypothesis. Research has shown that young children have a unique form of neurological plasticity that allows them to naturally learn phonetic and syntactic forms of language, especially when acquiring a second language (Lenneberg, 1967; MDPI, 2025).

Research has also demonstrated that traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) methodologies are transitioning from traditional grammar translation methods to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and contextually relevant methodologies (Sinergi International Journal, 2025). As well, English is no longer viewed as simply an academic subject, it is now a vital life skill required for social participation, cognitive development, and economic advancement in today's globalized world (Tandfonline, 2025). Due to this new global demand, many countries' governments have implemented changes into their primary curricula to meet international standards such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Since the 2003 reconstruction period, the education system in Iraq has undergone significant transformation. The Iraqi Ministry of Education (MoE) transitioned from using the outdated "Rafidain" series to implementing a modern, contemporary curriculum titled "English for Iraq" (UNESCO, 2021).

Grade 1 in Iraq is based on a weak version of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) model and includes phonemic awareness, oral fluency through singing and performing activities, and incremental letter recognition (Iraqi Academic Scientific Journals, 2025).

However, despite these new developments in the education system in Iraq, research has revealed that there is a continued gap between theoretical principles and actual classroom practices. Such factors as large class sizes, limited technology, and socioeconomic issues may impede educators' ability to fully implement the communicative aspects of the CLT model (Karbala University, 2025).

On the other hand, the UAE has made English a central part of its national vision. The UAE has moved from "Vision 2021" to "We the UAE 2031," an ambitious plan to develop a world-class, knowledge-based economy (UAE Government, 2022).

Grade 1 EFL requirements in the UAE follow an integrated skills approach, combining language acquisition with twenty-first century skills, including digital literacy, critical thinking, and moral education (Dubai Modern Education School, 2024).

The UAE's curriculum aligns closely with international assessments (PISA, TIMSS) and integrates "Ed-tech" into all levels of education, including the primary level, unlike several of its regional competitors (ASCS, 2025).

An examination of the educational systems in both Iraq and the UAE provides a unique cross-cultural comparison. While Iraq is attempting to modernize and standardize its English Language Teaching framework while emerging from years of conflict, the UAE functions as an internationally recognized hub utilizing English Language Teaching to promote globalization and international competition. An analysis of each country's first grade curriculum illustrates how two vastly different socio-political environments interpret and implement the same universal goal: providing proficient, globally prepared English speakers as early as possible in a child's education.

## 1.2 The Statement of the Problem

Despite an emerging global trend that emphasizes early English language acquisition, many regional variations exist in terms of how Curriculum Standards are developed and implemented throughout the Middle East; particularly in terms of how Iraq and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) have each developed a framework based on the Communicative Language Teaching (C.L.T.) Paradigm for their first grade English programs. Both countries' socio-economic frameworks, educational systems, and governmental mandates provide vastly different contexts for implementation of C.L.T. Paradigms in First Grade English Programs.

One of the major problems that currently exists in the field of English as a Foreign Language (E.F.L.) is the need for comparative data that illustrates whether the curriculum standards of the U.A.E. and Iraq align with International Quality Benchmarks (I.Q.B.). More specifically, the following areas of inquiry have remained unaddressed in recent E.F.L. Literature:

- 1. Alignment vs. Adaptation:** Although the U.A.E.'s Grade One Standards have been formally aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and include specific emphasis on Digital Literacy, the "English for Iraq" Series does not address the development of Digital Literacy and instead focuses on developing foundational Phonemic Awareness skills in a more resource-restricted environment. As such, it is unknown whether the differences in priorities between these two curricula create a similar level of "readiness" for students transitioning to Second Grade.
- 2. Global vs. Local Identity:** There appears to be an inherent conflict between developing Global English Standards and maintaining National Identity. The U.A.E. incorporates "Global Citizenship," and "Moral Education" as standard outcomes (U.A.E. Ministry of Education, 2024), while the Iraqi Curriculum places an emphasis on culturally

contextualized content from within Iraq (Iraqi Ministry of Education, 2021). There has yet to be an empirical investigation that compares the effectiveness of either approach to motivate six-year-old learners.

- 3. The Infrastructure-Standard Gap:** Research currently being conducted often fails to recognize how “standards” are articulated versus how they can potentially be realized. The standards articulated for Grade One in Iraq are ambitious but often subject to institutional limitations (e.g., large class sizes and limited access to audio-visual resources). The standards articulated for Grade One in the U.A.E. are based on a model of a highly technologically enabled classroom. As such, a comparative analysis is required to assess whether the standards developed in both countries are grounded in reality or mere aspirations for Grade One learners.

Absent of a comparative study of the first-grade English program standards in both countries, educators and curriculum developers in Iraq will lack a regional “high-performance” standard to compare themselves to, and vice versa; educators in the U.A.E. will lack insight into how phonics-based approaches in Iraq could represent alternative strengths in developing foundational literacy skills in young Arab learners in the 21st century. Therefore, this study aims to fill this void by providing a comprehensive and systematic comparison of the first-grade English program standards of both countries to identify the most effective pedagogical model(s) for addressing the linguistic needs of young Arab learners in the 21st Century.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

The purpose of this study is to create a comparative review of the standards of the English language for Grade 1 students in Iraq and the UAE. More specifically, the study will attempt to:

1. To identify and record the key pedagogical standards and learning expectations for Grade 1 English in both of the “English for Iraq” and Ministry of Education frameworks of the UAE.
2. To assess how similar/different each framework is when compared to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) benchmarks for young learner levels (Pre-A1/A1).
3. To evaluate the weighting that each framework places on the four major skill areas (speaking, listening, reading and writing), as well as the sub-skills (phonemic awareness and vocabulary) in both countries.
4. To investigate how cultural identity, moral values and 21st century skills (such as digital literacy) are incorporated in both countries' English language learning standards.
5. To provide recommendations for enhancing the quality of early English language instruction based on the results of the study for curriculum developers in Iraq and the UAE.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

In order to accomplish the aforementioned goals, the study will focus on addressing the following central study questions:

1. What are the major similarities and differences between the stated English language learning expectations for Grade 1 students in Iraq and the UAE?
2. How closely do the Grade 1 English Language Learning Standards of Iraq and the UAE follow the internationally recognized benchmarks set out by the CEFR?
3. How different in terms of methodology are the two curricula in teaching phonics and early literacy?
4. How do the standards of Iraq and the UAE include cultural and 21st century skills within the language learning process?
5. What comparisons can be made between the UAE and Iraq's current curricula and how can they be used to inform the educational reform processes in each country?

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The value of the present work is due to its ability to establish a cross-educational context for English Language teaching at an early stage in the Middle East. Both Iraq and the United Arab Emirates are working toward developing the alignment between their education results and the requirements of a globalized economy during the 21st century. The comparison of their respective first-grade ELT curriculum standards may help clarify how different political and socio-economic conditions view common objectives for language instruction.

The outcome of this study will provide the Ministry of Education in Iraq with a comparative model of how EFL reform should occur at the primary level by using one of the highest performing nations in the region (UAE) as a benchmark. In addition, this study will identify areas of improvement in terms of digital incorporation and international standardization (using CEFR), which can guide the revision of textbooks in the future.

This study will help teachers in both countries understand the differences in the standards of phonemic awareness and communicative competence for six-year old; therefore, they will have a better understanding of what is required of students in order to meet national requirements. Additionally, this study will provide teachers in both countries with tools to develop effective teaching practices that are aligned with national goals.

This study will contribute to the growing body of literature in the area of comparative education in the Arab world. This study will fill a specific gap of data related to the Grade 1 transition-which is an important time in the language learning process, but there is limited comparative data available between Iraq and the UAE.

## **2.Literature Review**

### **2.1 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**

In the 21st century, ELT moved from the structured, rule-based models of the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), to the highly flexible, student-focused, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) model. At the core of the CLT paradigm is "Communicative Competence" which was introduced by Hymes (1972) to extend upon Chomsky's definition of linguistic competence. According to Hymes, learners are not simply competent linguistically if they cannot use the rules

of their second language appropriately, to communicate with others who share the same social and cultural background. In accordance with Richards (2024), contemporary versions of CLT, do not treat English simply as a series of signs to be deciphered, but rather as an effective tool to accomplish social interaction, to negotiate meanings, and to express pragmatically.

### **2.1.1 CLT in the Primary EFL Context: Grade 1 Dynamics**

At the Grade 1 level, implementing CLT necessitates the utilization of a very unique pedagogical perspective due to the fact that six-year-olds are developing cognitively and physically during a developmental period of high sensitivity and rapid growth. As such, TBLT and TPR are commonly used as a vehicle for teaching CLT at this age level since they capitalize upon children's natural propensity to engage in movement and playful activities. However, Al-Saadi (2024) notes that the implementation of CLT within Middle East educational systems is often "context-dependent," and therefore, represents a challenge for educators who must balance the existing traditional emphasis placed upon reading and writing with the contemporary need for students to develop proficiency in speaking and listening.

A comparative examination of the Iraqi and United Arab Emirates (UAE) models illustrates two vastly different ways in which the communicative mandate of CLT has been interpreted:

The Iraqi Model (Focus on Social/Affective): The "English for Iraq" series promotes a low-stress communicative environment where students learn English through the use of songs, rhymes, and repetitive dialogues designed to promote confidence and decrease anxiety (UNESCO-Iraq, 2023). Here, communication is seen as a social ritual that creates a positive attitude towards the foreign language.

The UAE Model (Functional-Digital): The UAE's Grade 1 standards demonstrate an integrated "Strong CLT" approach that views language acquisition as being integral to 21st century skills. These standards require students to utilize English to solve basic problems and access digital technology (UAE Ministry of Education, 2024). Thus, in the UAE model, communicative competence is deeply connected to digital literacy and global citizenship; preparing students to effectively operate in a high-technology world as citizens of a global society.

## **2.2 The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)**

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is being used globally as a common framework for describing learner's proficiency in languages and also for defining standards in education, was developed by the Council of Europe. The purpose of this framework is to be used as an objective measure in developing syllabus for languages, curriculum guidelines and assessment measures (Council of Europe, 2020). The CEFR provides a meta-language for describing what learners can do when they acquire a language at different stages of learning and it removes the ambiguity of traditional descriptors of language level such as "beginner" and "advanced". For example, in the area of primary education, the CEFR is broken down into "Pre-A1" and "A1" (Breakthrough) levels for primary school aged children. The CEFR levels are specifically designed to match the developmental psychology of young children;

therefore, the linguistic expectations placed on six-year-old children will be appropriate to their cognitive abilities (Smith & Al-Otaibi, 2023).

### **2.2.1 CEFR Alignment in Regional Curricula: A Comparative Perspective**

The Arab world's embrace of CEFR is often used as an approach to create a path toward internationalization and to ensure systemic quality assurance in education. Nonetheless, the degree of this implementation differs greatly between both nations studied here.

**UAE Standards (Mapped):** The UAE was one of the first countries in the region to officially embed CEFR into its national "Emirates Schools Establishment" (ESE) standards. For example, according to the most recent ESE framework (2025), UAE students at the end of Grade 1 will be expected to reach the A1.1 (Breakthrough) level. While the standards were focused on developing "Can-Do" statements in regards to listening and speaking at an introductory level, including being able to recognize common classroom expressions and respond to basic questions about oneself, they provide a way for the UAE to measure the performance of its students against international measures (e.g., PISA, TIMSS), such as those found through the UAE Ministry of Education (2024).

**Iraq Standards (Implicit):** On the other hand, although the "English for Iraq" series represents a modern, communicative approach to language learning, there is limited documentation regarding how these materials are explicitly linked to specific CEFR sub-levels. In their research study, Ahmed & Mahmoud (2024) found that the Iraqi Grade 1 curriculum places an emphasis on developing foundational skills in Pre-A1 (phonological awareness and letter-sound correspondence). Instead of emphasizing early functional fluency (as is the case with UAE), the Iraqi model of teaching English focuses on creating a "linguistic scaffold," which will eventually support a CEFR aligned model for teaching and assessing English in later years of school. These differences in approach to using CEFR represent fundamentally different philosophies of education; the UAE views CEFR as a current performance standard, while Iraq views CEFR as a long-term structural guide to follow during the ongoing process of rebuilding its educational system (Iraqi Academic Scientific Journals, 2025).

### **2.2.2 The "Can Do" Philosophy**

The Can-Do philosophy is an ontologically significant transformation for EFL education, shifting from the "Deficiency Model" of language teaching where the emphasis was placed on the student's ability to conjugate verbs and/or memorize individual vocabulary items, to a focus on the observable function of language through action. According to Smith and Al-Otaibi (2023) the CEFR creates a transparent and coherent paradigm for educators to assess the performance of EFL learners, and can provide a common ground upon which to compare different educational systems around the world, such as Iraq and the UAE.

When applied to Grade 1 students, the "Can-Do" philosophy can be realized through assessment standards which are based on performance and function (i.e., practical/functional). Instead of assessing whether a six-year-old knows their pronouns, a CEFR aligned assessment

would determine if the child "can introduce himself/herself and utilize a few greetings," or "can follow simple verbal instructions provided with hand/gesture support."

The UAE's curriculum has been developed exclusively using these functional milestones to promote international compatibility; whereas Iraq is now at a transitional point in developing the "Can-Do" objectives within a system that continues to have considerable importance for establishing a foundation of linguistic accuracy. Thus, the "Can-Do" descriptors serve as the tertium comparationis (common basis for comparison) in this research enabling a factual examination of how well each country prepares its youngest learners for the everyday communication needs they will encounter throughout life.

## **2.3 Theoretical Models of Comparative Education**

### **2.3.1 Bereday's Four-Step Model**

Bereday's (1964) framework has been regarded as one of the foundational models for cross-nationally comparative educational research. He emphasizes that comparisons are multi-faceted and that each requires progression from four sequential phases in order to guarantee that the academic comparison is valid:

- **Description:** During the first phase of comparison, the researcher systematically collects and documents the raw data on which the comparison will be based. Within this study, the descriptive phase included documenting the content of the specific learning expectations and pedagogical standards represented by the "English for Iraq" series and those of the UAE's Ministry of Education framework.
- **Interpretation:** During the second phase of comparison, the researcher interprets the educational data collected in the previous phases within its appropriate historical, social-political, and geographical contexts. Therefore, for the case of Iraq, the researcher interpreted standards that were developed post-2003 in the context of reconstruction efforts; for the UAE, the researcher interpreted standards in relation to national visions such as "We the UAE 2031."
- **Juxtaposition:** The third and most critical phase of comparison involves placing the educational data side-by-side to identify the tertium comparationis i.e., the commonality or criteria that enables a valid comparison. Within this study, the CEFR "Can-Do" descriptors were used as the primary basis for identifying and establishing the tertium comparationis.
- **Comparison:** The fourth and final phase of comparison is simultaneous and involves an examination of both systems as a whole in order to answer the research questions posed. As a result, the researcher is able to determine how different socio-political environments achieve the common goal of developing proficient, globally competent English speakers.

### **2.3.2 The Bray and Thomas Cube**

In order to address the multi-faceted nature of education systems, Mark Bray and R. Murray Thomas (1995) developed the "Bray & Thomas Cube" which is a three-dimensional

paradigm for analyzing educational phenomenon in multiple dimensions. The Bray & Thomas Cube allows researchers to examine educational phenomenon in all three interrelated dimensions simultaneously.

The first dimension of the Bray & Thomas Cube represents Geographical/ Locational Levels. These levels represent an entire spectrum of possible geographical/ locational levels that can be examined from the individual through to world regions.

The second dimension represents Non-locational Demographic Groups and identify specific groups of people by their demographic characteristics, i.e., gender, ethnicity, etc. For this research, the focus is specifically on learners in Grade 1.

The third dimension of the Bray & Thomas Cube, Aspects of Education and Society, represents the variables of finance, management and teaching methodology; however, for this study, it is the curriculum standards and pedagogy (CLT and Phonics) that are the two primary dimensions of analysis.

## **2.4 Constructivism and Early Childhood SLA**

Six-year-old student's pedagogy is grounded in constructivism, an educational theory stating that children will develop their own knowledge about how language works, through direct involvement and interactive experience, as opposed to passive reception.

### **2.4.1 Piaget & Vygotsky: The Grade 1 Learner**

Language teaching to six-year-old requires consideration of the learner's cognitive growth.

- Piaget's Cognitive Constructivism: Children at six years old are typically in the "preoperational" stage, but may also be moving into "concrete operational". The use of concrete, sensory based learning is reflected within both the Iraqi and UAE curricula, using realia, songs and action/physical movement to create meaning.
- Vygotsky's Social Constructivism: Vygotsky's theory states that language learning is a social activity; central to this concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), or the gap between what a child can accomplish on his/her own, and what he/she can accomplish when provided with some form of support/guidance. The two curricula address the ZPD from different perspectives: the Iraqi curriculum uses social dialogue (songs, repetitive phrases) to reduce anxiety and provide access to the ZPD; the UAE curriculum uses functional/inquiry-based activities to encourage students toward 21st century skills through cooperative problem solving.

### **2.4.2 Scaffolding and "Learning Through Play**

Scaffolding in the first grade has to do with the temporary teaching supports provided by teachers to assist students develop their ability to use and apply new linguistic concepts that they are still developing. In the case of the Iraqi curriculum, the "linguistic scaffold" focuses primarily on building phonological awareness and basic letter-sound association to lay the groundwork for

future academic success. In contrast, the UAE curriculum provides an "integrated skills scaffold", integrating the development of language skills with developing digital literacy skills and critical thinking skills. Both curricula also utilize children's natural inclination to learn through play via using Total Physical Response (TPR) and Task-Based Learning (TBLT). At this age, both physical and cognitive abilities are growing rapidly and are highly sensitive to learning new concepts, therefore providing the optimal time to build long-term retention of language concepts.

## **2.5 Early Literacy and Phonics Development**

Learning to read in an English First Language (EFL) first grade is a complex mental activity that involves both the phonologic and orthographic aspects of literacy. Given that the first grade is generally considered to be the introductory year of formal reading instruction, the pedagogical decision to use either Synthetic Phonics or Analytic (Eclectic) Phonics constitutes an important point of curriculum divergence.

### **2.5.1 Phonemic Awareness and Synthetic Phonics**

Phonemic awareness-the ability to recognize and manipulate the individual sounds within words is a significant indicator of future reading achievement. Many contemporary EFL curricula-including those of the UAE often employ a Synthetic Phonics methodology. This methodology teaches students to relate letters to their corresponding phonemes; once students have established these relationships, they then synthesize (combine) the phonemes to create words from the beginning of their learning experience. This methodology is also supported through Ed-tech and interactive technologies throughout the UAE to provide rapid feedback regarding student's phonetics.

### **2.5.2 The "Eclectic" Methodology in Low-Tech Environments**

In environments with minimal access to audio-visual technology and other forms of support (i.e., most Iraqi classrooms), literacy instruction is often implemented using an "Eclectic" or "Mixed-Methods" approach. As the "English for Iraq" series places a strong emphasis on phonemic awareness and the relationship between sounds and letters , due to the absence of supplemental digital support, teachers are forced to rely more heavily on "Look-and-Say" (Whole-Words) and Choral Repetition in order to enhance students' oral fluency. This methodological choice will provide a "Linguistic Scaffold" for instructional purposes, as it will prioritize students' ability to accurately decode scripts and rote memorize them prior to developing their own functional and independent decoding abilities; a skillset typically developed using high-tech methodologies.

### **2.5.3 Orthographic Transfer from Arabic L1 to English L2**

Both Iraqi and Emirati students experience the difference in the two writing systems when transferring from Arabic to English. Arabic is written in a phonetic system from right to left, while English is written in an opaque left to right system. Both countries will need to develop their first-grade standards to address the directional change of writing in their curricula. While the UAE's curriculum has incorporated the development of these skills into the framework of digital literacy skills of the 21st century , the Iraqi curriculum has used transitional teaching methods including increasing student exposure to the individual letters of the English alphabet through increased student involvement in performing activities and rituals so as to reduce the amount of cognitive and affective stress associated with learning to read a second language.

### **3. Methodology**

The intent of this section is to discuss the research methodology that is used for a comparative analysis of Grade 1 English Curriculum Standards of Iraq and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) using the systematic process of Bereday's Four-Step Model of Comparative Education and Bray & Thomas' Cube.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study uses a qualitative comparative research design. The qualitative comparative research design is chosen as it provides a way to systematically and thoroughly review curriculum documents to determine how the same or similar goals of global English Language Proficiency are interpreted by different socio-politically based environments. Additionally, the focus of the study is on the intended curriculum as defined in official ministry documents to address the existing gap in comparative data on grade one transitions throughout the Middle East.

#### **3.2 Methodological Framework: Bereday's Four-Step Model**

In order to make an accurate comparison, the study follows the four steps outlined by George Bereday to provide a full picture of how these standards are used:

- **First Step: Description:** the researcher will outline in detail the exact standards of pedagogy and student learning goals that appear in both the "English for Iraq" series and the UAE Ministry of Education (MoE) frameworks for Grade 1 English.
- **Second Step: Interpretation:** each framework will be evaluated separately based on their individual contexts. For example, for Iraq, the evaluation would need to take into account the post-2003 reconstruction of Iraq and the limitations of resources available. For the UAE, the evaluation would need to consider the "We the UAE 2031" vision and the adoption of highly technologically enabled models.
- **Third Step: Juxtaposition:** the two sets of standards will be compared side by side to create the tertium comparationis (the third thing). The primary unit of comparison will be the CEFR "Can-Do" descriptors, which can be used to analyze functional performance in terms of a common standard.
- **Fourth Step: Comparison:** at the same time, a comparative analysis will be conducted to determine what similarities and/or differences exist between the methodologies employed, the relative importance of the various language skills, and whether or not 21st century skills were included in each set of standards.

#### **3.3 Data Sources and Materials**

The data collection corpus for this study includes all primary documents produced by the relevant Ministries of Education:

- **Iraq:** The "English for Iraq" Teachers Guide and official Grade 1 Curriculum Standards (2021), issued by the Iraqi Ministry of Education.

- UAE: The "Emirates Schools Establishment" (ESE) Cycle 1 standards and the "Bridge to Success" framework (2024-2025) issued by the UAE Ministry of Education.

### **3.4 Levels of Comparison (Bray and Thomas Cube)**

A multi-layered comparison is further refined through application of the Bray and Thomas Cube to provide multiple levels of depth:

- Geographic Dimension: Cross national comparison between Iraq and the UAE.
- Demographic Dimension: All students are restricted to being in grade one (ages six-seven).
- Aspectual Dimension: Specific curriculum dimensions such as phonemic awareness, communicative competence, digital literacy, and cultural identity.

### **3.5 Data Analysis Procedures**

This research will use qualitative content analysis for data analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a systematic method to analyze qualitative content from documents to categorize and identify patterns. There are three phases to this process: coding, mapping, thematic comparison.

- Coding: This phase involves identifying categories for the skills that students develop in each subject area such as: Speaking Listening Reading Writing and further breaking down these categories into phonemic awareness and vocabulary.
- Mapping: This phase involves examining how the various subjects included in the curriculum align to international benchmarks, specifically those outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), at the Pre-A1/A1 level.
- Thematic Comparison: This phase involves comparing how "global citizenship," "moral education," and "culturally contextualized content" were realized in each country's curriculum.

### **3.6 Ethical Consideration**

This research does not involve human participants; therefore, it is not necessary to obtain informed consent. Nonetheless, the researcher maintains academic integrity through accurately citing all sources and providing an honest representation of the philosophical perspectives of both countries' educational systems.

## **4. Data Analysis**

The present section introduces an analytical approach to the First Grade English Curriculum Standards of Iraq and the UAE. This section will follow Bereday's Four-Step Model, starting from the broad description of each country's curriculum, then interpretation, juxtaposition, and finally simultaneous comparison. The evaluation of these frameworks relative to international benchmarks and political-social context will help identify how each nation defines Early English Language Acquisition for six-year-old students.

#### **4.1 Step One: Description.**

The descriptive stage of the process consists of documenting the "intended curriculum" as defined by the national curriculum documents and teaching frameworks of both countries.

##### **4.1.1 The Iraqi Framework: "English for Iraq"**

The "English for Iraq" program was created in response to the need to modernize English instruction in Iraq post 2003. The program represents a "weak" version of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) model.

- **Content Distribution:** Listening accounts for 35 percent and Speaking accounts for 30 percent of the total time spent on oral-aural skills in the English for Iraq Program. The reading and writing components account for 20 percent and 15 percent respectively, and provide the foundation upon which other elements of the program are built.
- **Thematic Development:** Instruction is divided into eight units that introduce letters (a-z), numbers (1-10) and lexical topics including colors, classroom objects, animals, and family members in a systematic progression.
- **Pedagogical Focus:** The primary pedagogical focus is on the development of basic oral communication skills through imitation, singing, and social rituals to reduce the learner's anxiety and increase their self-confidence.
- **Literacy Development:** Literacy skills are taught using a combination of phonemic awareness (initial sound identification) and whole-word recognition. Learners are also introduced to the concept of left to right orientation of English and are encouraged to practice basic letter tracing.

##### **4.1.2 The UAE Framework: "Bridge to Success"**

The UAE's English curriculum is expressed in the "Bridge to Success" (BTS), an extensively modified form of the Cambridge Global English framework, and is intended to be a framework to prepare students for a developing knowledge-based economy.

- **Content Distribution:** BTS employs an integrated skill approach, that is, language learning is inextricably connected with acquiring twenty-first century skills (e.g., digital literacy and critical thinking).
- **Thematic Development:** The Grade 1 curriculum includes nine thematic topics dispersed over three academic terms. Each of these themes will stimulate the student's curiosity regarding the student's life experiences in the Emirati context, and the broader global community; e.g. "School Life", "Family History", and "Transport Systems".
- **Pedagogical Focus:** The UAE model incorporates a "strong CLT" and inquiry-based approach. The model emphasizes "Functional Communication"; i.e., it is required that students are able to use their knowledge of English to solve problems and communicate effectively in technologically enabled contexts.
- **Literacy Development:** The reading/writing component of the curriculum is clearly articulated to support learners achieving the CEFR A1.1 (Breakthrough) level of proficiency. This component of the curriculum focuses on providing learners with

foundational literacy skills (e.g., phonics, print concepts, initial fluency); and includes "Can Do" statements which have been developed from an international perspective.

## **4.2 Step 2: Interpretation**

The descriptive information about the Iraqi and Emirati grade one English education standards reveal major structural and pedagogical differences in how the standards are used and implemented. These differences are then analyzed by examining the socio-political and economic elements that lead to curriculum development in each country.

### **4.2.1 Context of Iraqi Education: Education for Recovery and Resilience**

Iraq has chosen to adopt a "Social-Affective" model due to the lack of material resources for students to learn English in their schools. The standards suggest that the Iraqi Ministry of Education focuses on developing affective skills (reducing student anxiety, improving confidence) because there is so much inconsistency with regard to developing the physical environments in which students can acquire English.

- Institutional limitations: Due to constraints such as the large number of students in classes and the limited availability of audio visual materials; the curriculum has to rely on low tech methods of social learning, such as singing and Salman Says games, to allow learning to occur regardless of where the student may be located.
- Linguistic scaffolding: The emphasis placed on "Foundational Phonemic Awareness," as opposed to Functional Fluency is a deliberate choice made by the educators. They have established a "linguistic scaffold" that will prepare students for successful futures. They recognize that obtaining fluency immediately is impossible to do without digital exposure.
- Reconstruction vision: The switch from "Rafidain Series" to "English for Iraq" demonstrates a movement towards internationalizing while maintaining a local sense of culture to provide stability for learners who are moving out of a war-torn area.

### **4.4.2 Context of UAE Education: Education for a Knowledge-Based Economy**

Conversely, the UAE's "Functional-Digital" model is interpreted as it relates to the country's commitment to becoming a global leader in innovation.

- National Vision (Vision 2031): The standards are developed to create "globally prepared English speakers" to help facilitate the transition of the UAE into a knowledge-based economy. As such, the standards define English as an essential "life skill" rather than simply another school subject.
- Technological enablement: Since the UAE classrooms are fully equipped with technology, the standards can demand "digital literacy" as an expected outcome for Grade One students. The "Ed-tech" enables the adoption of a "Strong CLT" method that allows students to use language to manage and solve technological issues.
- International benchmarking: The specific alignment of the UAE's standards to the CEFR A1.1 is a mechanism of systemic quality control. It represents the UAE's desire to compete

globally, and to utilize international measures such as PISA and TIMSS as indicators of national success.

There is a stark difference in the way both countries interpret the "same universal goal." Iraq is currently focused on reconstruction and foundational literacy in a human resource led model. On the other hand, the UAE is focused on innovation and international competitiveness in a technology led model.

### 4.3 Juxtaposition

The comparison or juxtaposition stage occurs at the point in time when the preliminary relationship of the analyzed data from both curricula is established as a tertium comparationis the commonality (or basis) for the comparison. The commonality used as the basis for comparison is the CEFR "Can Do" descriptors and the macro-skill weightings; therefore, the comparison will be based on fact, as opposed to opinion or interpretation regarding how each nation has chosen to prepare their earliest students.

#### 4.3.1 Structural Comparison of Skill Emphasis

Table (1) illustrates the differing emphasis and priorities of instruction between the two educational systems. Both educational systems place oral/aural skills at the top of their priorities; however, the UAE uses a holistic/integrated model while Iraq uses a categorical model.

Category	Iraq: "English for Iraq" (EFI)	UAE: "Bridge to Success" (BTS)
<b>Listening</b>	<b>35%:</b> Focus on sounds, rhymes, and one-step commands.	<b>Integrated:</b> Focus on extracting information from recorded texts.
<b>Speaking</b>	<b>30%:</b> Social rituals, greetings, and basic repetition.	<b>Integrated:</b> Functional communication and problem-solving.
<b>Reading</b>	<b>20%:</b> Alphabetic recognition and left-to-right tracking.	<b>Mapped:</b> CEFR A1.1 "Can-Do" statements and decoding.
<b>Writing</b>	<b>15%:</b> Fine motor control, tracing, and copying shapes.	<b>Integrated:</b> Letter formation and production of simple words.

Table (1) Emphasis and Priorities of Instruction Between the Two Educational Systems

#### 4.3.2 Functional Juxtaposition: "Can-Do" Milestones

The benchmark for assessing students' outcomes and performance is the "Can-Do" philosophy as illustrated in Table (2) below.

<b>Learning Domain</b>	<b>Iraq: Behavioral Expectations</b>	<b>UAE: CEFR A1.1 Milestones</b>
<b>Interpersonal</b>	Respond to "Hello/Goodbye" and name objects.	Introduce oneself and utilize multiple greetings.
<b>Instructional</b>	Carry out spoken commands within the syllabus.	Follow verbal instructions supported by gestures.
<b>Information</b>	Identify pictures in short stories.	Extract specific information from short recorded texts.
<b>Self-Expression</b>	Ask/answer about age and quantity.	Describe pictures, animals, and body parts.

Table (2) Benchmark of Outcomes and Performance

#### 4.3.3 Lexical and Phonetic Sequencing

It's significant to note the difference in approach to recycling Word Knowledge in each country.

- Iraq: Recycles by building on an initial "linguistic scaffold", from sound recognition (a-f) in unit 1, to families and houses vocabulary in unit 7.
- UAE: Recycles using the approach of functional milestones and High Frequency Words (HFW), which are words used both in every day conversations and academic texts.
- Phonology/Alphabet Focus: The Iraqi model emphasizes phonological awareness and letter-sound correspondence as pre-reading skills. The UAE Standards emphasize Ed-tech for assisting students in recognizing common expressions and measuring against international benchmarks such as TIMSS.

#### 4.3.4 Infrastructure and 21st Century Skills

The comparison verifies the "infrastructure-standard gap" previously identified.

- The UAE standards are based upon an extremely technology-enabled classroom that incorporates "digital literacy" and "global citizenship" as expected student outcomes in each of these areas.
- The Iraqi standards have been established to be used within a very limited-resource setting and therefore scaffolded support has been provided by the teacher's instruction, student socialization and actual physical materials such as flashcards.

#### 4.4 Simultaneous Comparison

In the last stage of Bereday's model, the researcher compares both models simultaneously and comes to a conclusion as to how the two countries differ in terms of education philosophy ("how").

##### 4.4.1 Expectations and Alignment Gap

Based on the analyzed data, it appears that there is a significant difference in student learning outcomes. Which answers research questions (1,2).

- UAE: The CEFR A1.1 learning milestone is specifically linked to each standard. The UAE expects students to be able to perform "functional" and "integrated" skills (such as extracting information from recorded texts).
- Iraqi: The standards are loosely based upon a Pre-A1 "Linguistic Scaffold", the affective goals of the curriculum are focused on building confidence via rhythm and sound imitation.

##### 4.4.2 The Phonics and Literacy Methodology

The literacy methods in the UAE and Iraq clearly show that there is an "Infrastructure-Standard Gap". That answers research question (3).

- UAE Literacy: The UAE model utilizes synthetic phonics and supports it with Ed-tech to create global compatibility.
- Iraqi Literacy: The Iraqi model uses an eclectic approach; combining whole-word recognition with phonics. The Iraqi model teaches reading from left-to-right and letter formation to support resource restrictions.

##### 4.4.3 Culture vs. Global Citizenship

When looking at how both models integrate culture (Research Question 4) we see two different identities:

- Iraq: Source Culture: The curriculum has culturally contextualized content from Iraq to help ground the 6-year-old's identity.
- UAE: Global Identity: The curriculum includes Global Citizenship and Moral Education, and prepares students for a multicultural world.

The following table (3) summarizes the findings of the simultaneous comparison:

Feature	Iraqi "English for Iraq"	UAE "Bridge to Success"
Philosophical Base	Social-Affective (Recovery)	Functional-Digital (Innovation)

Feature	Iraqi "English for Iraq"	UAE "Bridge to Success"
CEFR Target	Pre-A1 (Foundational)	A1.1 (Performance-based)
Scaffolding	Teacher-led & Social Rituals	Ed-tech & Problem Solving
Primary Identity	Local/National	Global/International

Table (3) Summary of the Simultaneous Comparison

#### 4.5 Multi-level Analysis (The Bray and Thomas Cube)

In order to have a scientific basis for a comparison between the “English for Iraq” series and the UAE’s “Bridge to Success,” this study applies the Bray and Thomas Cube (1995), to categorize and analyze the curriculum data along three axes of intersection. This model allows us to explain why the “English for Iraq” series and the UAE’s “Bridge to Success” are implemented in such different ways.

##### 4.5.1 Geographic/Locational Axis (The "Where")

As stated above, this research operates at the national level of comparison, examining two separate educational systems in the Middle East.

- Iraq: The data reflect that the nation is undergoing a reconstruction phase from 2003 onward. The standards are viewed as a means to support educational recovery and thus utilize a "Social-Affective" model to restore stability in the classroom.
- UAE: The data reflect an international hub operating under the guidelines of "Vision 2031." Thus, the standards are viewed as instruments to achieve global economic competitiveness and therefore require a "Functional-Digital" model.

##### 4.5.2 Non-locational Demographic Axis (The "Who")

This analysis is strictly limited to first-grade students (ages 6-7).

- Sensitivity to Developmental Needs: Both curricula acknowledge the high developmental sensitivity and rapid growth of first-grade learners.
- Methodological Response: An examination of the activities used in each country (i.e., songs, games and TPR) show that both countries are attempting to utilize the innate tendency of young children for physical activity and play. Additionally, it is expected that the UAE demographic will be able to manage greater cognitive demands through the integration of 21st century skills.

##### 4.5.3 Aspectual Axis (The "What")

This study isolated curriculum standards and pedagogical methodology as the primary aspects of education.

- Linguistic Scaffold (Iraq): The primary focus of the Iraqi aspect was the initial recognition of sounds and left-to-right directionality as foundational literacy skills.
- Global Readiness (UAE): The UAE aspect focused on digital literacy and critical thinking to ensure immediate international alignment with benchmarks such as PISA and TIMMS.

Table (4) below provides a summary of the Cube Dimensions.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Target Level</b>	<b>Specific Finding from Data Analysis</b>
<b>Geographic</b>	National	Iraq focuses on reconstruction; UAE focuses on innovation.
<b>Demographic</b>	Grade 1	Both use TPR/Songs to match 6-year-old development.
<b>Aspectual</b>	Standards	Iraq priorities Social rituals; UAE prioritizes Digital Function.

Table (4) Summary of Comparison Levels (The Cube Dimensions)

## 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

The last section combines the findings from the comparative study on the grade 1 English curriculum standards of Iraq and the UAE. The chapter presents the research-based conclusions and provide evidence-based recommendations to curriculum developers, policy makers and teachers in both countries. This is based upon the analysis of the four steps outlined in section Four.

### 5.1 Summary of the Study

The present research aims to provide an overall comparative analysis of Grade 1 English Standards in order to determine how two very different environments one experiencing post-conflict recovery (Iraq) and the other a global innovation center (UAE) implement early English language learning. The study employed both Bereday's Four-Step Model and the Bray & Thomas Cube to analyze the "intended curriculum" for early English acquisition across four areas: pedagogy (CLT); International Benchmarking (CEFR); Literacy Methodology (Phonics); Cultural/Digital Identity.

### 5.2 Findings and Conclusions

Following the comparisons made in Step 4, the results were as follows:

- Different Understandings of CLT in Iraq and the UAE: The social-affective (or weak) CLT method used in Iraq places an emphasis on social rituals and building confidence to reduce the 'affective filter'. The functional-digital (or strong) CLT approach adopted by the UAE sees English as a tool for solving problems and navigating a technological environment.
- Gap in the CEFR: While the UAE has an explicit connection with the CEFR A1.1 (Breakthrough) level which ensures the international quality benchmark (IQB) is achieved at the start of learning, the CEFR connection of the Iraq's curriculum is implicit and focuses on developing pre-A1 foundational skills such as phonological awareness and letter/sound correspondences that form a 'linguistic scaffold' for future development.
- Infrastructure-Standard Gap: The findings confirm that the standardization process is greatly influenced by the national infrastructure. As a result of its highly technological classroom environment, the UAE standardization is based upon this format; whereas, the Iraqi standardization is designed to be flexible in light of resource-poor classrooms (large student/teacher ratios and limited AV equipment).
- Identity Tensions: Although there are similarities in both countries' curriculum structures, there is a great difference in how they place an emphasis on National Identity and Global Citizenship/Moral Education respectively.

### **5.3 Recommendations for Curriculum Reform**

#### **5.3.1 Action Plan for the Iraqi Ministry of Education (MoE)**

To help bridge the gap between “English for Iraq” series and high performers like UAE, the following can be done:

- CEFR alignment: official mapping of grade 1 outcomes to pre-A1 and A1.1 descriptor to allow teachers to clearly reference "can-do" milestones for student assessment purposes.
- Digital integration: low-tech; to address resource limitations in Iraq, introducing offline digital literacy concepts (i.e., using print-based icons and basic computer vocabulary) to prepare students for future digital learning environments.
- Synthetic phonics enhancement: although the current "mixed" approach provides a foundation for early reading, shifting to a more systematic synthetic phonics approach may improve early decoding abilities for Arab learners.
- Teacher professional development: teachers need active learning training, and training on how to use the teacher's guide as more than just a scripted lesson plan to facilitate teacher-student interaction.

#### **5.3.2 Recommendations for the UAE Ministry of Education**

**Maintaining Native Identity:** As Global English is becoming increasingly important as a 'life skill,' it will be essential for the UAE to recognize that in order to maintain students' Arabic language proficiency (L1), they should avoid over-whelming their students with an emphasis on the global English.

**CEFR Adaptive Leveling:** The research indicates that if the cognitive load of students is reduced through adjusting the level of the CEFR to match where they are entering the program, students will likely have more fun and be more engaged.

#### **5.4 Suggestions for Future Research**

- **Impact on Secondary Readiness:** To determine the impact of the "foundational" focus in Iraq as opposed to the "functional" focus in the UAE on student success in Grade 6 an empirical study needs to be done.
- **The Gap Between Teacher Implementation and Standards:** Classroom observation is a method that future researchers could use to find out how the "intended" standards are translated into the "realized" standards by teachers in both resource-rich and resource-poor schools.

#### **5.5 Concluding Remarks**

While achieving high levels of English proficiency is universally desired, the way to achieve this is clearly very local (as evidenced by the examples of Iraq and the UAE). Iraq's curriculum is an example of how one might build linguistic scaffolding and be resilient; The UAE's is an example of how to innovate and integrate globally. Both countries can improve their ability to support the needs of young Arab learners of languages in the 21st century, by learning from the strengths of the other nation (Iraq's emphasis on phonetics and the UAE's focus on functional readiness).

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