Towards Unified or Semi-Unifiled Arab ELT Standards

Prof. Fatin Khairi Al-Rifai, Ph. D.in ELT, University of Baghdad, college of Education/ Ibn Rushd
Asst. Instructor Mohammed Ridha Abbas AlMousawi, M. A. in ELT

Introduction

ELT systems have witnessed great changes in the last few decades all over the world. The look towards learning and teaching a second or foreign language has also changed. The technological development which made the world a small village had its own taxes, one of these taxes is the urgent needs to learn English as being one of the most important internationally used languages. In addition to what proceeded, the need for a special quality of English speakers, a faster way to learn, and the need to ensure learning that fits the needs of the market became a must.

Arab countries, just like any other countries face the same problems and try to solve them as possible as it can be. Yet, the Arab countries have their own situation. A situation that puts them backwards sometimes and in other times it puts them in a more advanced position. The political instability, the educational systems which need great reform actions and the unconvincing outcomes of education specially in the subject of our concern; are points which can be considered serious problems which can put the Arab countries backward concerning education in general and ELT in specific. On the other hand, what puts the Arabs in an advanced position is that they have many educators who worked in isolation from the others, reaching different conclusions, having different experiences, and many points of view, but in the same time they were working on the same or very similar samples i.e. the target Arab learners who have the same mother tongue, the same or very similar backgrounds, and similar needs.

The United states of America, was the first country that noticed the problem, but in their own country. In the spring of 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued "A Nation at Risk", the report which illustrated the great danger the American nation was facing at that time. This report resulted in the appearance of the Standards-Based Reform movement, a movement that aimed at reforming the educational system according to previously put standards. Those standards represented what they need their students to get, to learn and to be. A movement which put them just in the right directions. A movement which has been adopted by many other countries such as Japan and France, then was widely adopted world wide.

The Arab countries were not so far away from this movement. Qatar, for example put its own ELT standards, Saudi Arabia tries to be the next country, and I'm sure that many other Arab countries are now planning to make their own standards.

The question is not how to make the country's own standards, the real question to be answered by Arab educators is whether we can build our own Arab ELT standards, a type of standards that doesn't exist any where else. The standards that we are talking about are Unified or at least Semi Unified ones.

Standards based education

Many educators consider the publication of A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) as the initiating event of the modern standards movement. With the passage of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1994, U.S. lawmakers acknowledged the importance of high standards in improving education. Since that time, the call for higher standards has come from all areas: administrators, teachers, teachers unions, state-level and national-level educational organizations, business and community leaders, parents, and students.

The standards movement has made change efforts at all levels of education and has brought about positive results. "The standards-based movement in America is on solid footing and is slowly but surely changing the way we think of teaching and learning in America's classrooms," notes the American Federation of Teachers (1999). "Nearly three-fourths of the teachers who have worked with standards for at least six years say the standards have had a positive impact on their schools." (p. 12). Ravitch (1995: 25) adds, "Standards can improve achievement by clearly defining what is to be taught and what kind of performance is expected". Many efforts to improve education begin with the process of integrating standards into the curriculum.

Integrating standards into the curriculum is a complex endeavor that brings added dimensions to the curriculum-development process. Traditionally, the school curriculum provides a plan of instruction that indicates structured learning experiences and outcomes for students. It specifies the details of student learning, instructional strategies, the teachers' roles, and the context in which teaching and learning take place. More recently, however, the standards movement, research on teaching and learning, and research on the characteristics of successful schools have broadened the scope of curriculum to include everything that affects what happens in the classroom and consequently affects student learning. The process of integrating standards into the curriculum emphasizes learning and growth for all as the natural and desired outcome of reform in the schools. From that perspective, a standards-based curriculum includes not only goals, objectives, and standards, but everything that is done to enable attainment of those outcomes and, at the

same time, foster reflection and revision of the curriculum to ensure students' continued growth. Curriculum development is most successful when educators collaborate with parents, community members, and students.

"The idea behind standards-based reform is to set clear standards for what we want students to learn and to use those academic standards to drive other changes in the system," notes the American Federation of Teachers (1999). In effect, development of a standards-based curriculum must be considered in the context of school reform, which includes not only curriculum, instruction, and assessment but also professional development, parent and community involvement, instructional leadership, and the use of technology and other resources. What goals or standards will the curriculum address? How will students demonstrate an understanding of these concepts or goals? How will technology be integrated into the curriculum to aid instruction? How will teachers be prepared and supported as they implement changes? These questions will be addressed as the curriculum is developed.

What is meant by standards

Standards types

Content Standards

Content standards are " a complete set of outcomes for students; they do not prescribe a curriculum. These standards were designed and developed as one component of the comprehensive vision of science education presented in the National Science Education Standards" (National research council, 1996: 100)

Marzano and Kendall (1996) have identified three categories of content standards: procedural, declarative, and contextual. Using these categories clearly demonstrates that those standards often labeled as process standards in many of the disciplines are in fact a legitimate portion of the content in a specific discipline and help define those content standards that are contextual in nature.

Content standards that are described in general terms require more specific statements at each developmental level to facilitate integration into the curriculum. These statements that provide a more specific and a developmental look at each of the standards are often referred to as benchmarks or indicators. A benchmark (or an indicator) is a "detailed description of a specific level of student performance expected of students at particular ages, grades, or developmental levels," notes the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (1999). "Benchmarks," add Marzano and Kendall (1996: 15), "describe the specific developmental components of the general domain identified by a standard."

Performance Standards

Student performance standards are "explicit definitions of what students must do to demonstrate proficiency at a specific level on the content standards," states the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (1999).

Marzano and Kendall (1996: 13) state that a performance standard "describes a specific use of knowledge and skills; it is not a description of knowledge, but a description of some application of it". They give the following example of a performance standard used in conjunction with a content standard:

"A content standard in science might specify that students should understand the characteristics of ecosystems on the Earth's surface. The performance standard for that piece of declarative knowledge would specify the level of accuracy and the facts, concepts, and generalizations about ecosystems on the Earth's surface that a student must understand to be judged as having obtained a suitable level of achievement. It also would put that knowledge in some type of performance environment by stating that the information must be presented, for example, in the form of an essay, a simulation, or an oral report with accompanying graphics." (pp. 13–14)

According to (Hill, 1998: 3) "The Performance Standards are designed to identify such cases and provide recommendations on how to conduct appropriately confined laboratory experiments or outdoor experiments."

Marzano and Kendall (1996: 14) agree that "performance standards are a critical component of a comprehensive, standards-based approach to schooling," and they point out that "performance standards identify the environments in which that knowledge and skill should be demonstrated". They recommend that schools and districts begin by developing content standards and then define a "complementary set of performance standards" or performance tasks (p. 14). These tasks will grow and evolve as students and teachers learn more about the knowledge and skills needed to complete the task or attain the standard.

In addition to specifying the necessary tasks inherent in content standards, performance standards may be used for other purposes, including educator accountability and certification of individual achievement (McLaughlin & Shepard, 1995). These divergent purposes could call for entirely different types of performance standards. Performance standards for accountability and certification "must be articulated in the form of rules for translating assessment results into student-achievement categories," note McLaughlin and Shepard (1995: 36). They also suggest that performance standards should first be used to clarify students' application of the content standards and later can be used for educator accountability and certification purposes.

A historical background

As we said before, many educators believe that the report of "A Nation at Risk" by (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) is the "initiating event of the modern standards movement." Then in 1989 "President Bush and the Mate governors called an Education Summit in Charlottesville. That summit established six broad educational goals to be reached by the year 2000". (Hofstadter & Christopher, 1989: 79) The Goals 2000: Educate America Act according to (Rushefsky, 2007: 161) "was passed in 1994 under the Clinton administration. It basically reiterated the six goals of America 2000 issued three years earlier and added the goals of better teacher preparation programs and more parental involvement in education … The act called for a change in the way children are educated.

The act started with the preschool child because Goal 1 stressed a belief in the importance of early childhood education". U.S. policymakers acknowledged the importance of high standards in improving education. Since that time, the call for higher standards has come from all areas: administrators, teachers, teachers unions, state-level and national-level educational organizations, business and community leaders, parents, and students.

The idea behind the use of standards-based reform is to build up clear standards for what we want students to learn and to use those academic standards to lead other changes in the system"

Why do we need educational standards?

(The US Congriss, 2007: 471) believes that " We need standards to ensure that all students, no matter where they live, are prepared for success in postsecondary education and the workforce. Common standards will help ensure that students are receiving a high quality education consistently, from school to school and state to state.".

It is clear that the standards we are talking about do not tell the teachers how to teach, but they help them to succeed in the process of teaching. Standards also make it clear to the students and parents what are exactly the intended goals behind the process of education. The state also makes use of the standards but in two ways; the first the standards represent the level at which the state aims to make its students- who will be the work force- to be. The second way is that which is related to reform. The state can make use of the standards in evaluating its programs, teachers, learners and the educational system as a whole. After the process of evaluation there comes the process of reform which can be illustrated by supporting teachers levels, starting a curriculum reform, or may be starting a whole educational system reform. Concerning the Arab countries, all what proceeded can be true.

Why to unify Arab ELT standards

The answer of such a question has two answers to be dealt with, the first answer is related to the continuous Arab calling for unifying the Arab countries through social, educational, economical and for sure political integrated projects. Arabs tried in many situations to build their own projects which unify them or be a first step towards their own unity.

The second answer is that there is a great educational chance which can develop the educational systems all over the Arab countries. This chance can be described as follows: the Arab countries have many isolated educational systems and experiences which can suit any one of the Arab countries. This is just like experimenting the same popularity (or very similar popularities) several times and when collecting those experiences all together, a great research experience will be created. This experience will lead to solving great problems that the Arab systems faced when they are isolated.

Some people may say that this is a call for unifying the Arab educational systems which is an impossible process at this time. The answer to their question is that we are not trying to build a unified system. The whole thing is that we are building unified or even semi−unified educational standards. And for the main time we are dealing with the English Language Teaching (ELT) standards.

Others may wander, why to start with English, why not with mathematics (just like the united states) or with Arabic, our own mother tongue. The Answer to this question is clear, because we are now suffering a lot from ELT than any other subject. Our ELT outcomes are at their crucial points. The need for English in our markets is increasing. The quality of our graduates are doubted. We need some standards to check the quality of our education in this field. And of course, we can start with other types of educational standards any time we want.

STEEPLED Analysis

In order to find out the validity of such a project, to see whether it is worthy to deal with or not, we need to make an analysis. The researchers here will analyze the project depending on (STEEPLED) analysis which is a derived type of PEST analysis rather than SWOT analysis because the former analyzes factors that affect ELT programs and curricula very much.

STEEPLED analysis

STEEPLED analysis is a means of conducting a scan of an organisation's external environment, with particular reference to the future and any changes that may come about. The purpose of STEEPLED is to identify factors that may impact on the services, customers (or Patients), products, markets, staff, profitability, etc. of the organisation. STEEPLED is abbreviation for Social, Technological, Education, Ethnic, Political, Legal, Economic and Demographic factors. (http: //EzineArticles.com/5631710)

The researchers chose this type of analysis because it analysis factors which are very important in curricular work. On the other hand, SWOT analysis (an abbreviation of strength, weakness, opportunity and threaten) seems to be insufficient because curricular work has much more to deal with than the four previously mentioned factors

Desired goals

This paper aims at establishing unified or semi-unified ELT standards for the Arab countries.

The STEEPLED Analysis

1- Social analysis

The Arab world (or the Arab homeland) consists of 22 countries. Most of the people of the Arab countries speak Arabic. Most of them are Muslims. Most of the Arab countries became isolated states in the 1st part of the 20th century and some of them tried to be reunified for a good period of time which means that the society is still unified or at least semi-unified.

From this very fast scanning we conclude that we are talking about just one population or at least very similar populations of research. Here we can sea that the Arab peoples can be considered as a single population on which we can apply our standards.

2- Technological analysis

There is no technological threatening as it is related to the project of our concern. Technology may serve in the fulfillment of this project, because it is an educational project and technology supports education.

3- Economic analysis

Concerning the economic analysis we will discuss two dimension; the first is the economic harmony and the second is the economic capability of applying such a project.

Talking about the economic harmony, we can classified Arab countries into three types:

Type one: Oil- producing countries such as the Arab gulf countries, Iraq and Libya. This type can apply such a project easily.

Type two: those are the Arab countries which suffer from economic problems due to political situations the lack of national resources such as Egypt, Syria and Jordan.

Type three: those are Arab countries which suffer from serious economic problems like Somalia.

So there is no real economic harmony.

Concerning the economic capability, the Arab countries are capable of managing such a project if and only if there is a political agreement within the Arab league about this.

It is worthy to say that Arab oil producing countries had always their own effect on the other countries (Toffolo,2008: 83 says " In addition to workers sending back money to their families, oil money also flowed through the region from rich to poor Arab countries in the form of aid."

4- **Environmental analysis**

The Arab countries lie in two main areas these are the middle east and north Africa and most of the Arab area doesn't face sever environmental circumstances like ice, volcanoes, destroying storms and the like.

On the other hand, we find that there are no environmental circumstances which may affect the application of this project.

5- **Political analysis**

The political situation in the Arab countries can be described as being unstable. This is a big problem that faces the project. Many governments fell down and new ones are now under construction, but still we have a great hope because the Arab League is still there and there is no government that intends to leave it away. The old governments and the new ones seem to agree on the continuity of the Arab league.

This is not the end of this story because there are still other countries which suffer from instability. We are not going to mention them because it might be considered a type of bias which we want to avoid.

The political situation is not very much encouraging but as we said before there is still a great hope of the role of the Arab league.

6- **Legal analysis**

All the Arab countries are organized under the league of Arab states (the Arab league), which is the legal representative that deals with the matters of the common concern. The Arab league took upon itself the responsibility of supporting the projects that provoke the Arab countries unity. Projects of such concern are very much welcomed by the Arab states.

7- **Ethical analysis**

The unity in the educational field is something that is Incontrovertible. Arabs dreamt for a long time to be unified under one union, so its sure that they are looking forward to such projects.

8- **Demographic analysis**

"The total Population of Arab Countries 352 ،217 million, about %5.2 from the world. " see (Arab League, 2010).

How to unify Arab ELT standards

There are two logical ways for unifying any standards; the first way is by studying the standards of each country which already exist and then reach to a common model among them. This way cannot be adopted here because most of the Arab countries do not have a previously adopted set of standards.

The second way is to build a new set of standards which suits all the Arab countries. This can be achieved in two ways; the first is by calculating the needs of each country and then build the common set of standards. This will need a big effort and may spend more time. Another problem with this, is that there are Arab countries which already have their own standards. These countries are not ready to leave away their own standards.

The second ways (which seems to be the best) is to let every country survey its own needs and then build up its own set of standards in cooperation with other countries specially those which already have their own standards or those which passed a long way towards making their own standards. The all must try to take into consideration the Arab countries common needs and interests. After having their own local standards, the way will be clear to construct the main or national Arab set of standards.

Experts, researchers and educators who worked on the local standards will gather to build the Arab national standards. In this way we will ensure the respect of the privacy of each country, the benefits of the common work and the ease of the whole process.

The common core Arab standards initiative

The Common Core Arab Standards Initiative is an Arab league–led effort to establish a shared set of clear educational standards for English language teaching in order to be adopted all over the Arab world. The standards have been informed by the best available evidence and the highest Arab countries standards designed by a group of teachers, experts, parents, politicians and the Ministries of Education (and the ministries of the same concern in all the Arab countries, so they reflect both the Arab aspirations for the Arab children and the realities of the classroom. These standards are designed to ensure that students graduating from schools are prepared to go to college or enter the workforce and that parents, teachers, and students have a clear understanding of what is expected of

them. The standards are benchmarked to international standards to guarantee that our students are competitive in the emerging global marketplace.

Why is this important?

We want to be sure that every child across the Arab world is given the tools they need to succeed. The standards that are consistent across the whole Arab homeland provide us with a set of clear expectations that we can work toward together. This will ensure that we will have students who are ready to study at the university level in any university or college in the whole Arab homeland and they are ready to inter the market in any Arab country just because they are proved to be fulfilling the needs of that markets.

These standards are a common sense first step toward ensuring our children are getting the best possible education no matter in which Arab country they live.

Of course, standards cannot single−handedly improve the quality of our nation's education system, but they do give educators shared goals and expectations for their students.

The local standards vs. the whole Arab nation standards

What we mean by Local standards here is the educational standards each Arab country establishes. Those standards represent what are their expectations of what their students should know and be able to do in particular subjects and grade levels.

The Whole Arab nation standards are the standards representing the common Arab expectations of what their students throughout the Arab homeland should know and be able to do in particular subjects and grade levels.

The question which may annoy Arab educators is whether there are any contradictions between the local standards of any Arab country and the main Arab standards?

The answer to this question is surely a big NO because the Arab set of standards is the result of the common interests of all the Arab countries local standards. In addition to that, the unified standards will be a good opportunity for the Arab common market because it will control and try to unify the educational outcomes in a way that ensures a good quality of laborers for this market.

Who leads the initiation?

All the 22 Arab countries are organized under the Arab league. This means that the Arab league is the best to take the initiative. Then the negotiations should be on the level of the Ministries of Education and the ministries of the same concern.

The criteria by which standards are being developed

One of the most important subjects related to the Arab Unified standards is to construct Arab ELT standards. This will control the quality of English that our Arab schools and universities will supply the Arab common market with. The quality of English (as a

global language widely used in the Arab countries) is very important for the Arab common market. So, the control of the quality of English will be of a great influence on the Arab countries and on the Arab common market.

What ELT standards?

The ELT standards discussed here are the content and performance standards of English as an educational discipline whether in the k-12 level or the college level.

The standards are to be divided into the following types:

1- General standards: standards that carry the vision of the whole ELT process all over the Arab Homeland.

2- Curricular standards: " The curriculum is focused on meeting students' needs as determined by assessments of students' language proficiencies, goals, and Interests." (Diane, 1996: 3) in addition to the requirements of the Arabic markets and universities.

3- Instructional standards: " Instructional activities integrate the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) to emphasize the holistic nature of language." (DIANE, 1996: 5)

Conclusion

The establishment of unified or Semi- unified ELT standards proved not only to be possible to fulfill, but also they proved to be very important. They can be considered the first step that will pave the way to other steps such as the implementation of ultimate educational standards for the whole Arab homeland.

The STEEPLED Analysis proved that the project of our concern is valid i.e. there is a possibility that the Arab countries will succeed in fulfilling it, but with some problems which cannot be described as serious especially when compared with the results of the fulfillment of such a program. There is a good opportunity that the Arab countries build a semi- unified educational system that fulfills the common interests and in the same time keeps the privacy of each Arab country.

Recommendations and further studies

This study recommends that the Arab countries should seriously take into consideration the fulfillment of such a project which will solve many of the problems that the Arab world face concerning education of ELT.

Further studies can take place concerning other subject areas of the same concern such as standards for mathematics, and other disciplines which need to be supported with such standards.

The Arab countries did but very little in this revolutionary area that is now widely spread all over the world. So, they need to include the international standards in their

educational systems and make use of what the other countries achieved concerning educational outcomes according to the Comprehensive quality standards.

References

1- National Commission on excellence in education."A nation at risk: the full account". USA.2000.

2- American Federation of Teachers. "The American Federation of Teachers: 1999 convention report". USA. 1999.

3- Diane Ravitch. "National standards in American education: a citizen's guide". Brookings Institution Press. Washington. 1995.

4- National Research Council (U.S.). " National Science Education Standards: observe, interact, change, learn". National Academies Press, USA 1996.

5- Robert J. Marzano, John S. Kendall. " A comprehensive guide to designing standards-based districts, schools, and classrooms". Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996.

6- Abedi. J. (2001). Assessment and accommodation fir English language learners: Issues and recommendation (Policy Brief 4). Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Center for the Study of Evaluation/National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing.

7- Walter A. Hill. " Performance Standards for Conducting Research With Genetically Modified Fish & Shellfish. Part 1. Introduction & Supporting Text for Flowcharts". DIANE Publishing, Washington, 1998.

8- Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin, Lorrie A. Shepard. Panel on Standards-Based Education Reform. " Improving education through standards-based reform: a report by the National Academy of Education Panel on Standards-Based Education Reform" The National Academy of Education, 1995.

9- Richard Hofstadter, Christopher Lasch. " The American political tradition and the men who made it". Vintage Books, 1989.

10- Mark E. Rushefsky. " Public Policy in the United States: At the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century". 4th edition. M. E. Sharpe Inc., USA, 1994.

11- The US Congress. Congressional Record, V. 153, Pt. 1, January 4, 2007 to January 17, 2007.

12- (http: //EzineArticles.com/5631710)

13- DIANE Publishing Company. " English as a Second Language: Model Standards for Adult Education Programs". DIANE Publishing Company, 1996

14- The Arab League. " Arab Countries, Figures And Indicators". 2nd edition, 2010.

15- Cris E. Toffolo. "The Arab League". Chelsea house, New York, 2008.

16- C. Kent McGuire, Vivian W. Ikpa. " Policy, leadership, and student achievement: implications for urban communities". Information age publishing Inc., USA, 2008.

17- Ezine articles. "SPEEDLE analysis made easy". http: //ezinearticles.com/?STEEPLED-Analysis-Made-Easy&id=5631710