

## An Overview of the History of EFL in The State of Kuwait

Mohammad Almutairi<sup>1\*</sup> & Seham Al-Abdullah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Language Center, College of Basic Education, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait.

<sup>2</sup>Language Center, College of Business Studies, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait.

**Correspondence:** Dr. Mohammad A. Almutairi, College of Basic Education, Language Center, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait. Email: [motairi1968@gmail.com](mailto:motairi1968@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The educational system in Kuwait has undergone remarkable development over the years. It began in the early 20th century with a limited number of small private schools known as Al-Katatib, where only boys were taught Arabic and the Holy Quran. Following the discovery of oil in the late 1930s, the government established two public schools in the capital city of Kuwait; however, the curriculum continued to focus solely on Arabic and Islamic studies for boys. After gaining independence in 1961, Kuwait experienced an educational revolution, marked by the rapid establishment of schools across the country and the recruitment of qualified teachers from other countries such as Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt. It was during this period that English as a foreign language (EFL) was first introduced to both boys and girls. This study employs a narrative method to illuminate and document the extensive journey of EFL education in Kuwait.

**Keywords:** EFL education, English language teaching history, TESOL, ESL

### 1. Purpose And Importance of The Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to empower educators and specialists to learn from historical contexts, adapt to current practices, and influence the future of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Analyzing the history of EFL education in Kuwait may yield valuable insights into its development within educational systems, facilitate lessons from past experiences, and inform future EFL practices. Additionally, this exploration could enhance a sense of EFL identity, promote critical thinking, and highlight the role of EFL in society.

### 2. Methodology

As this study aims to explore and elaborate on the history of EFL education in Kuwait, the researchers will employ the narrative method for reviewing this issue, as it offers several advantages, including the capacity to present a more comprehensive and detailed account of past experiences.

### 3. Literature Review

The English language is now extensively spoken across numerous countries around the world and is frequently designated as World Englishes or Lingua Franca English. While it may not be the official language in many nations, English is taught as a foreign or second language in nearly all regions. According to Baleghizadeh and Shayesteh (2020), English is no longer viewed as the exclusive cultural property of native-speaking countries; rather, it is recognized as a language that incorporates elements from diverse cultures worldwide as it continues to evolve.

English has become essential in various aspects of transnational life, encompassing telecommunications, technology, medicine, and commerce. It functions as a means of communication across cultures in numerous countries. As noted by Chen et al. (2020), English has emerged as a global lingua franca. It is the most widely

spoken foreign language and serves as the predominant language in technology, media, and science. Nevertheless, some scholars (e.g., Phillipson, 2024; Phillipson, 2010) contend that the spread of the English language in contemporary contexts constitutes a form of linguistic imperialism that warrants vigilance. Others (e.g., Gao & Rapatahana, 2016; Mevawalla, & Palkhiwala, 2022), employ the metaphor of the Trojan horse to illustrate how English may initially be embraced in a country only to subsequently raise concerns as it starts to overshadow indigenous languages and cultures.

Certain nations advocate for the instruction of English as a second or foreign language while concurrently prioritizing the host culture. It can be posited that, owing to religious, political, or cultural considerations, foreign languages are most effectively taught with limited to the cultures of native speakers. Culturally, some societies possess distinctive traditions and practices that they seek to protect in response to perceived or actual external threats. To preserve their cultural identity, decision-makers may deliberately reject certain practices and perspectives in foreign textbooks and educational materials. From a religious standpoint, certain cultures may not endorse practices and beliefs such as premarital relationships, co-education, mixed-gender dancing, or music. To maintain their values, these nations frequently create their own textbooks and course materials that are congruent with their social and cultural values and religious principles. Politically, some nations may view the instruction of a foreign language as a manifestation of political imperialism, particularly when it pertains to the language of a superpower (Phillipson, 2024).

With regard to Kuwait, the political context is significant, as the country was a British colony for 63 years before gaining independence in 1961. Subsequently, in 1990, Kuwait was invaded by Iraq, an event that resulted in the erasure of its name in favour of a different designation, which extended to various cities and streets. Following Kuwait's liberation in 1991, directives were issued by the highest authorities to educational decision-makers, emphasizing the importance of instilling patriotism, love, and loyalty to the country among students during the curriculum design process.

#### **4. Objectives of Government Education Including EFL in Kuwait**

Since gaining independence in 1961, the policy of EFL education in Kuwait has been guided by the Kuwaiti Constitution, which defines the State of Kuwait as an Islamic country and an integral part of the Arab nations. The objectives of EFL education, as outlined in the Ministry of Education's booklet, can be summarized as follows:

- a) To provide a free obligatory EFL education for all the pupils of Kuwait.
- b) To offer a kind of EFL education that does not contradict Islamic and Arabic regulations and rules.
- c) To offer a kind of EFL education that protects Kuwaiti learners from any foreign factors that could affect their conservative identity.
- d) To offer a kind of EFL education that protects the learners from any “foreign cultural invasion”. (i.e., to imitate USA people or others in dressing or haircut or behaviours...etc).

Moreover, the rapidly polarizing global landscape, exacerbated by terrorism and the ‘war on terror’, which has placed Arabs and Muslims under suspicion and led to the invasion of Islamic and Arab countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, has elevated what may seem like relatively minor issues—such as the cultural appropriateness of certain English lessons—to matters of significant political concern. As a result, these issues are perceived as threats to national integrity. Therefore, the significance of cultural content in English language teaching and learning in Kuwait today is paramount.

#### **5. Overview on Kuwait**

Kuwait is a small Arab country located in southwestern Asia, positioned at the northern end of the Arabian Gulf. It covers a land area of only 17,818 square kilometres (approximately 6,880 square miles). In 2024, Kuwait's estimated population is 4,913,271, with approximately 1,545,781 identified as native Kuwaitis and 3,367,490 as foreign residents (General Statistical Bureau, 2024). While Islam is recognized as the official religion, non-Muslim residents are permitted to practice their faiths following local laws. The economy of Kuwait is predominantly reliant on oil, which constitutes its primary, if not exclusive, economic product, contributing significantly to Kuwait's wealth. The substantial revenues generated from petroleum have enabled Kuwait to maintain a tax-free status, providing free education, healthcare, housing, and other public services, including road construction.

## 6. Nature of the Kuwaiti Society

To obtain a thorough understanding of EFL in Kuwait, it is essential to consider the sociocultural characteristics of the society, as these factors can influence educational content. The Kuwaiti population, estimated at nearly one million, significantly contributes to the country's distinctiveness. Scholars such as Freer (2024) characterize it as a conservative society, while others, including Vaccino-Salvadore (2021), perceive it primarily through a religious lens. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that Kuwait is not a closed society. The existence of a freely elected parliament and advancements in women's rights serve to distinguish Kuwait from its neighbouring countries. Women occupy an important position within the political landscape, as evidenced by their representation in the Cabinet, with several holding the position of minister. A significant portion of the population benefits from the wealth generated by the oil industry, with many individuals travelling to Europe and the United States for summer vacations.

## 7. History of Education in Kuwait

Oil revenues have facilitated Kuwait's establishment of a comprehensive educational system, leading to a literacy rate of 97.86% (General Statistical Bureau, 2024). In the early 20th century, public educational facilities were limited, primarily consisting of a small number of Quranic schools, known as Al-Katatib, where reading, writing, and basic arithmetic were taught. With no public funding for education at that time, some affluent individuals contributed by financing educational initiatives, such as the construction of facilities and the sponsorship of teachers. Nevertheless, the discovery of oil in the 1930s set the stage for a profound transformation in nearly all aspects of Kuwait's socioeconomic, educational, and political life.

The country has undergone significant transformations since the aftermath of the Second World War, particularly in its educational system. One of the most notable advancements has been the development of this system. Like many developing nations, Kuwait's primary motivation for enhancing its education was to cultivate its own human resources, aiming for full independence from the colonial powers of the era (Al-Misnad, 1985). Unlike many poorer countries in the developing world, Kuwait has effectively utilized the substantial increase in state revenues to implement ambitious plans for the advancement of public education. To underscore its importance, the Constitution of 1962 establishes that the state is responsible for ensuring and promoting education thereby affirming the principle that education is a fundamental right for all citizens.

The philosophical underpinning of the national educational goal emphasizes the ongoing advancement of human capital through the education of both the youth and their parents, equipping them to face future challenges (Ministry of Education, 2004). This vision is articulated through a comprehensive strategic objective that envisions the character traits necessary for citizens to navigate the complexities of the future—encompassing social, cultural, spiritual, technological, mental, and psychological dimensions—while maintaining national identity (Alqahtani, 2007). The Kuwaiti educational system consists of three primary levels: a six-year elementary stage, a four-year intermediate stage, and a three-year secondary stage. Furthermore, preschools are available for children aged four to six, attendance, however, is not compulsory. Students who meet the requisite standards may progress to higher education upon completing their basic education (Ministry of Education, 2004).

## 8. Higher Education in Kuwait

Kuwait has two higher education institutions. These are:

Kuwait University and the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET), where the researchers are employed. These institutions hold considerable importance in realizing the overarching objective of the Kuwaiti educational system: to cultivate well-rounded citizens capable of enhancing the welfare of both the nation and humanity (Al-Asfour, 2016).

Established in 1966, Kuwait University commenced operations with the Women's College, along with the Colleges of Arts and Education, and Science, initially enrolling 418 students and employing 31 faculty members. By the academic year 1999/2000, student enrollment had escalated to 19,001, corresponding with a rise in faculty numbers to 1,042. However, despite this significant growth, the budget of the university, which amounted to 117,111,000 KD (Kuwaiti Dinar, equivalent to £2.2 million) for the budgetary year 1998/1999, experienced a decline to 106,689,000 KD in the subsequent year. This decrease underscores the vulnerability of higher education institutions to fluctuations in governmental fiscal policies (Kuwait University, 2006).

On April 1, 1967, the Amir of Kuwait issued a decree that established two more colleges within a year of the institution's establishment, which facilitated the rapid progression of institutional expansion. These colleges are Economics and Political Science (currently the College of Business Administration), Commerce, and Law and Islamic Laws. Subsequent royal Amiri Decrees facilitated 17 significant institutional developments, ultimately

establishing several new academic colleges: College of Medicine in 1973; College of Engineering and Petroleum in 1974; College of Graduate Studies in 1977; College of Education in 1980 (previously integrated within the Department of Education at the College of Arts, with classes commencing in the 1981/1982 academic year); College of Allied Health Sciences and Nursing in 1982; College of Dentistry in 1996; and, finally, College of Pharmacy in 1996.

Kuwait University currently provides 65 academic programs across its 12 schools, which include the following disciplines: Arts, Social Sciences, Administrative Sciences, Allied Health Sciences, Education, Graduate Studies, Law, Medicine, Sciences, Women's College, Shari'a and Islamic Studies, and Engineering and Petroleum.

The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) was founded in 1982, by Royal Amiri Decree No. 63. Its primary objective is to enhance the workforce to address the shortage of technical skills resulting from the country's economic and industrial growth. This initiative coincided with the onset of oil exploration, production, and export in the country. During the 1950s, the government created training programs and centres aiming at preparing the workforce required for the oil industry. Following the creation of a foundational educational structure, educational decision-makers set up numerous institutions to satisfy the growing need for professional workers. Additionally, some ministries founded their own training programs. Nevertheless, the government recognized the need to create a centralized authority to oversee the different institutions and training programs and centres. Thus, several departments were established to handle such responsibility.

In 1972, the Technical and Vocational Education Department was founded to oversee vocational and technical education. The Central Training Department was similarly created to supervise training institutions and centres. However, in 1982 when PAAET was founded, the Technical and Vocational Education Department stopped operating. PAAET was created as an independent educational institution with the mission of administering and handling vocational and technical training and education and developing and executing a comprehensive plan. The objective is to cultivate a skilled national workforce and address the country's human resource requirements across its two sectors: Training and Applied Education.

The sector of applied education encompasses four colleges, each offering various degrees and majors. These colleges are Business Studies, Basic Education, Health Sciences, Nursing, and Technological Studies.

College of Basic Education confers a four-year degree in Bachelor of Education. degree. The college supplies qualified Kuwaiti educators to government schools at the kindergarten, primary, and intermediate levels.

College of Business Studies offers a two-year diploma certificate. It supplies both the public and private sectors with Kuwaiti professionals who possess specialized expertise in management, finance, banking, and insurance.

College of Technical Studies offers a two-year diploma and a four-year bachelor's degree. The primary objective of these programs is to supply the labour market with qualified technicians and engineers specializing in petroleum, electrical, mechanical, computer, and civil engineering.

The Colleges of Health Sciences and Nursing confer a two-year diploma as well as a four-year bachelor's degree in nutrition, medical laboratory technology, radiology, and nursing. The objective is to supply the Ministry of Health with professional Kuwaiti nursing personnel in addition to other related medical professionals to address the shortage of the national workforce in these domains.

In addition to the aforementioned colleges, the sector of applied education encompasses a language centre that includes five English Language Units distributed across the colleges, as well as its headquarters. The mission of these English Language Units is to offer college students specialized instruction in English, specifically English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes, which is tailored to their respective fields of study.

The training sector, on the other hand, encompasses several training institutes, including the Industrial Training Institute, the Electricity and Water Institute (Power Institute), and the Telecommunications and Navigation Institute.

## 9. The Status of EFL in Kuwait

The Ministry of Education in Kuwait provides recommendations regarding educational content. This approach aligns with the belief among Kuwait's educational policymakers that there is a diverse range of Englishes, characterized by multiple cultures rather than a singular, authentic culture. Kumaravadivelu (2008) supports this view, arguing that the world of Englishes lacks a defined culture and native speakers and suggesting that the cultural and linguistic attributes of users enhance the global nature of Englishes within the framework of 'hybrid cultures' of English as a Lingua Franca. Research in the field of World Englishes (Rubdy & Saraceni, 2006; Holliday, 2005; Mollin, 2006; Jenkins, 2007) indicates that the emergence of new Englishes is influenced by

various factors, including socio-political identity, religious beliefs, cultural authenticity, learners' aspirations, and teacher authority. These factors are present in Kuwait and are central to the development of English teaching materials. Policymakers do not wish to view Kuwaiti English standards as mere reflections of native cultural norms (Inner Circle English); instead, they perceive international English as a foreign language shaped by the concept of English as a lingua franca, wherein each society contributes culturally to the aforementioned factors. They also question whether the English spoken by Kuwaitis should be considered a foreign language or recognized as a regional variety, referred to as Kuwaiti English, which reflects local cultural norms and beliefs. Therefore, this research aims to address learners' needs in relation to international culture, which may not necessarily mirror native speakers' culture but will incorporate elements from the diverse landscape of Englishes.

Significant emphasis and distinct importance are placed on English Language Education across all educational levels in Kuwait. Instruction commences in grade 1 in public schools and continues through grade 12, which constitutes the final grade of the governmental education system. Furthermore, English remains the medium of instruction in higher education at Kuwait University and the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, where it is utilized across all faculties and colleges.

Due to the significant cultural differences between Kuwait and English-speaking countries, as well as various political, social, and religious factors, English language textbooks are created locally. These textbooks are designed to accurately reflect Kuwaiti culture and to depict events that are relevant to daily life in Kuwait. Interviews with decision-makers indicate that the primary objective of creating these localized textbooks is to furnish students with culturally relevant learning materials. Content suitability is determined by the curriculum development committee members within the Ministry of Education.

It is important to acknowledge that the host culture and the culture of native English speakers may have differing beliefs and perceptions regarding various everyday events. For instance, topics such as dancing and dating are not addressed in Kuwaiti classrooms (Al-Mutairi, 2020). Since some foreign reading materials may include such subjects, Kuwait has opted to create its own textbooks to avoid potential cultural conflicts.

This may provide some insight into why, despite over twelve years of English instruction in Kuwaiti public schools, many students who arrive in the U.K. or the United States struggle to communicate effectively in English. Upon their arrival, some students may demonstrate a reasonable level of fluency but still face challenges in engaging with native speakers in a culturally appropriate manner. As Pesola (1991) observes, without cultural insight and skills, even fluent speakers may misinterpret the messages they encounter, leading to potential misunderstandings of the intended communication.

## 10. Conclusion

In conclusion, as previously mentioned, studying the history of EFL education empowers us to learn from the past, adapt to the present, and shape the future of education. Its significance stems from several factors:

- **Visions for Development:** By examining historical methods and patterns in EFL education, we can identify what has been effective and what has not. This evidence-based approach enables educators and decision-makers to refine new strategies and enhance EFL educational practices.
- **Critical Thinking Skills:** Analyzing the past promotes critical thinking. It encourages us to reflect on the EFL educational system and its successes and failures, leading to more informed decision-making.
- **Knowledge and Understanding:** Learning about past educational experiences helps specialists understand the diverse needs of learners and educators. It broadens perspectives and fosters compassion.
- **Cultural Identity Development:** The history of EFL education contributes to the development of cultural identity. It connects us to our national educational heritage and practices.

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