

Developing life skills in the Egyptian curriculum at primary stage

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Abstract:

This study aimed at evaluating primary stage English curriculum in light of life skills . The study identified the important and suitable life skills for primary stage students by a life skills list that was prepared by the researchers and validated by jury members . The list consisted of twelve categories of life skills and forty nine main skills. The researchers also prepared a content analysis sheet that was conducted on English curriculum specified for fourth year of primary stage. The content analysis was done in the light of the life skills list . Sentence was used as the unit of analysis for investigating the extent of life skills availability in the curriculum . The results of the content analysis revealed that fourth grade primary English curriculum doesn't reflect life skills sufficiently. Thus , the researchers constructed a suggested framework for developing that curriculum and developed the second term six units of it to improve fourth graders' life skills .

In the light of the study's results, the researchers recommended that a lot of attention and interest should be paid for enhancing students' life skills as early as possible starting from the primary stage, enhancing students' life skills in all educational stages, integrating life skills in curricula , and training teachers on teaching life skills .

Key words : curriculum - curriculum development - life skills - primary stage .

1. Introduction:

Education is not an end but a means to an end . The ultimate goal of education is to prepare students for their future

life. Education commission (2000, p.2) mentions that recently, the concept of “ education for life “ has attracted much interest among educators from all over the world. This concept is based on functionalism that illustrates the relationship between schools and society. After schooling, students are expected to master a set of life skills to help them function better in various life roles , such as learner , friend , parent , worker ,and citizen. Khosravani , Motallebzadeh and Ashraf (2014, p.265) believe that English language classes and textbooks can be used as tools for improving learners’ life skills. Moreover, they assert that informative textbooks which foster learners’ life skills are needed. Applied English Language Teaching (ELT) introduces the concepts and theories like English for life purposes (ELP) and life syllabi . It shows that people are to use English language as a means to improve the life skills of learners and one way to reach this end is enriching textbooks with necessary life skills which are suitable for each society and culture. English Language teaching can be a good means for improving and developing life skills . Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012, p.97) say that “ it is high time to shift the focus of ELT from the linguistic theories to a life – changing status , and one possibility is that life syllabi should be incorporated into the ELT curriculum.”

Kagan (2003, p.10) states that nowadays educators are facing a catastrophe, which he referred to as a “ life skills crisis “ . In his opinion, this crisis resulted from the mismatch between what students acquire in the classroom and the demands placed on them outside the classroom . A lot is taught but little is learned or understood . Knowels (2013, p.6) assures that educators need to admit, face and address the life skills crisis for the happiness and success of students and productiveness and success of the society. Bailey and Deen (2002, p.10) mention that whether referred to as life skills or 21st century skills or soft skills, or social skills , life skills is a broad concept and cannot be defined in one specific category as functioning effectively in society requires a variety of skills . World Health Organization (WHO, 2001, P.1) mentions that life skills are various and implemented in many venues and the meaning of life skills

differs depending on the domain one is using . Life skills have been defined by WHO (2001, P. 3) as the “ abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life i.e. communication /interpersonal skills, decision making and critical thinking skill , coping and self – management skills". UNICEF (2006, p.10) adds that through weaving life skills into the fabric of the educational systems , students will be equipped with necessary tools to cope with challenges and confidently make their own way in the world . (Yean 2007; Shea, 2011) support the view that there is a positive relationship between an individual’s competence in life skills and one’s emotional adjustment, and that deficits in life skills may lead to offender behavior . Accordingly , James (2010, p.3) believes that teachers should ready their students with life skills as foundations for future life and career skills .

Language teaching experts have argued that life skills can be taught in combination with language skills in language learning contexts. Benne(2013,p.5) highlights the fact that learning a language is not limited to learning how to read, write, listen and speak the language, through this process one is supposed to learn a lot about him/herself ; about who he/she is and what his/her values and opinions are . Knowles (2013, p.6) puts it simple saying “ far too often , teachers have sold their students short . They have given them a decent grasp of English grammar . They have given them a reasonably broad vocabulary and they have trained them to jump through the various hoops that examining boards put before them . And they have cast them adrift in the wider world without once considering the kind of flexible, transferable skills they need to really take advantage of the language they’ve acquired ”.

O’ Dwyer (2013, p.3) assures that pedagogical leaders in the three educational cycles : primary, secondary, tertiary, need to rethink the pedagogical base of their institutional language teaching practice with a view to reshaping conventional foreign language learning approaches so that the life skill needs of

students are met . Englander (2002, p.8) believes that the classroom language activities that emphasize interaction help students to use language in real contexts . Also, interaction and collaboration among students complement the effective factors in foreign language learning. Self –esteem, empathy, reduced anxiety, and improved attitude as well as motivation are all fostered when students are engaged in genuine interaction.

Botivn and Griffin (2004, p.211) claim that the life skills training process can teach young students how to use good behavior; how to make decision; and how to think critically; and teach them some skills that enhance personal and social competencies. Wanjama (2006, p.19) asserts that life skills empower individuals to think and behave constructively when dealing with issues affecting them as individuals and when they deal with issues of others in the school and larger society. Tukopamoja (2006, p.14) mentions that life skills, when rightly taught in schools, help learners to succeed and experience fulfilled lives in their individual families and the society in general. These skills form the pillars or foundations in one’s life to equip students for societal change. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) (2013a, p.4) illustrates that exposure to life skills education will:

- a. develop a balanced and self – determined individual ;
- b. enable an individual to relate successfully with others and the world in general in order to perform their tasks effectively at a given time , in a given situation and at a particular place in all areas of human development;
- c. help individuals recognize and assess risky situations;
- d. enable an individual avoid unhealthy and unbecoming behavior ; and
- e. encourage people to be role models / exemplary with the right attitude to life.

Theron and Dalzell (2006,p.399) claim that life skills can be taught and learnt in a formal educational setting such as the classroom. Life skills education is therefore an important aspect of any learners’ holistic education. For this reason, life skills

education has become an integral component of the learning area life orientation, which aims to equip learners with the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and values for successful and meaningful living.

1.2. Context of the Problem:

Ozmete (2008, p.5) mentions that the challenges children and young people regularly face are many, and require more than even the best numeracy and literacy skills . That is why 164 nations committed to “ Education for all “ (EFA) have included life skills as a basic learning need for all children and young people . Uganda Ministry of Education and Sport (2011, p.5) assures that it has become increasingly clear that prioritization of knowledge at the expense of other aspects of human personality is a very inadequate way of preparing young people for the complex nature and challenges of life . Life skills education became a necessary and critical part of the broader education picture . Kagan (2003, p.10) states that narrow curricula that focus exclusively on academic achievement and that ignore the traditional social skills and virtues will contribute to the life skills crisis. He said “ People need to broaden their curricula to include life skills . The alternative can spell disaster of their students and for their society” . Life skills don't receive enough care despite their importance for daily life . This was proven by many studies that evaluated curricula in the light of life skills such as Al- Sodany and Al-Masaudy (2011), Saad El-Deen (2007), and Weiss (2007).

Despite their appearance in some contexts , life skills have remained largely in the regality of theory. They are not given enough time or attention while teaching English to fourth year primary stage students . This can be attributed , in the light of the researchers' experience to the shortage in curricula, the prevailing traditional methods of teaching that focus entirely on intellectual and ignore experiential learning . In a pilot study, the researchers conducted a questionnaire to 30 EFL primary school teachers concerning their opinion about the extent of life skills availability in primary stage English curricula, their students'

life skills, how they are reflected in the classroom and outside the classroom and their role in supporting these skills . They reported students' low level in life skills. They added that such skills are not an element in the final exam thus it is not focused in their teaching and they are not reflected in the primary stage curricula . The researchers also interviewed a sample of fourth primary stage students (50). Participants were asked to define life skills in their own words. Also, they were asked about their usage of such skills. The results of the interview showed that these students are not aware of such skills and rarely use them . Holding another interview with a sample of students' parents , the results confirmed the same idea . There hasn't been any single study in dealing with developing primary stage English curricula to improve life skills in the Egyptian context . From that perspective, there seemed to be a gap in this field . As a result this study attempted to fill in the gap.

1. 2. Aims of the study:

The study aimed at identifying the most important and suitable life skills for the primary stage, designing an objective instrument to determine to what extent fourth grade primary English curriculum includes the life skills under consideration, investigating the presence of each life skill qualitatively and quantitatively throughout that curriculum and developing it to improve fourth graders life skills .

1.3. Hypothesis of the study :

The study sought to test the following hypothesis :

The fourth grade primary English curriculum doesn't sufficiently reflect the required life skills.

2. Review of Literature:

2.1. Life skills:

2.1.1. Life skills definitions:

Danish (2004, p. 38) stresses that the adoption of a definition is connected with the design and implementation of a life skill program. According to the United Nations Children's

Fund (UNICEF , 2006) life skills refer to “ a behavior change or behavior development approach designed to address a balance of three areas : knowledge, attitudes and skills” . The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2009) define them as “ a group of cognitive , personal and interpersonal abilities that help people make informed decision, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner”. Due to the varying definitions of life skills and the need for a concise definition for the purpose of this study, life skills are defined as : “ a set of learned behaviors which fourth grade primary pupils learn in an organized and intentional way through a developed English curriculum. They aim at building pupils’ integral characters and empowering them in a way that enable them to adapt positively in their surroundings and make them able to deal with every day demands and challenges. ”

2.1.2 Life skills classifications:

There is no certain list of life skills ; they alter in importance and priority according to life situations, culture, age, position . Moreover , UNICEF assures that life skills are a synthesis. There are many life skills that are used simultaneously in action e.g. problem solving and decision-making often involves critical thinking , values clarification and team work.

Reviewing many different initiatives for classifying life skills , it becomes clear that there are three dominant types : (a) categorization according to the three personal characteristics : cognitive, social and affective; (b) categorization according to the encountered life situations and the necessary skills to pass them successfully; and (c) categorization according to life roles that one held throughout his life stages as learner , worker , parent , citizen, friend.

UNICEF (2011) website on life skills provides three overarching categories within which the skills are placed : (a)

communication and interpersonal skills which incorporate interpersonal communication skills , negotiation and refusal skills, empathy, and cooperation and teamwork; (b) decision-making and critical thinking skills that include problem -solving and thinking critically; and (c) coping and self-management skills encompass increasing one's internal locus of control , skills for managing feelings and handling stress . The Iowa State University Extension Programs (ISUE, 2012) presents the targeting life skills (TLS) model. In this model, categories of life skills are identified and divided on the basis of the familiar four H's from the 4-H Clover that represent Head, Heart, Hands, and Health. These four "H's" are conforming with the four aspects of a psychologically mature person who is a problem solver (head), empathic (heart), acts on democratic values (hands), and is autonomous and self-directed (health).

2.1.3. Approaches to life skills curriculum:

Mugambi and Muthi (2013, p.5) assert that there are two approaches to life skills curriculum which are the infusion approach and the separate subject approach . Since this study is concerned with integrating life skills in fourth grade primary stage English curriculum, the infusion approach will be discussed in the following lines .

Cronin, Lord and Wendling (2000, pp 306-311) suggest two approaches to integrate life skills in curricula which are as follows :

a. The augmentation approach :

In this approach, life skills that are necessary for the students , and that are related to the topics included in the curriculum are identified . These skills are taught in a part of each period or in one period once a week or in a week dedicated to life skills.

b. The infusion approach :

In this approach, life skills which are necessary for the students are identified and integrated into the curriculum topics. This approach is used to teach life skills within the curriculum , in other words life skills are taught through the curriculum. A lot

of studies recommend the use of the infusion approach in developing life skills such as (Beshara 2009; Goudas and Giannoudis 2008; and Khan 2009). These studies recommend the importance and the effectiveness of teaching life skills within curricula in all academic fields such as science, social studies and Arabic.

Glick (2006, p. 2) describes the infusion approach as a process or a method of seamlessly incorporating real life issues across or within the curriculum. According to Carrim and Keet (2005, p.151) infusion can be categorized into two forms : the maximum infusion and the minimum infusion . The maximum infusion implies a situation in which curriculum speaks more directly or explicitly of an aspect or content in the classroom or as a part of the curriculum . However, the minimum infusion implies when an aspect or content of real life issues such as health promotion, social development and personal development are indirectly or implicitly spoken of a certain curriculum .

The current study adopted the infusion approach because of the following reasons :

- a. The infusion approach is suitable for developing life skills through the curriculum , any curriculum , because it doesn't add any new burdens on the academic plan ;
- b. The academic plans are crowded and teachers don't have extra time to teach life skills as a separate curriculum ;
- c. The infusion approach doesn't add any burdens on the teachers such as extra classes and teaching extra curriculum ;
- d. This approach doesn't add any burdens on the students such as extra curriculum to be studied and extra exams ; and
- e. It helps the Ministry of Education to type one book which includes the subject and the life skills included in it, and this saves money instead of typing two books.

3. Method :

3.1. Design of the study:

The study followed the descriptive and analytical design to devise the list of life skills important and appropriate for the

primary stage, to conduct a content analysis for the selected textbooks and to build the framework for the suggested developed curriculum.

3.2. Delimitations of the study :

The study would be delimited to the following:

1. Some life skills .
2. Fourth grade primary English curriculum .

3.3. Instruments of the study:

3.3.1 The life skills list :

The list aimed to determine the most important and appropriate life skills for primary stage students and to be the base for the content analysis checklist. The list included 49 main skills distributed under twelve main categories : skills of knowing and living with oneself (4 skills), social skills (7 skills), daily routine skills (3 skills), leisure time, safety (11 skills), health (3 skills), cognitive (4 skills), Housekeeping (2 skills), study skills (10 skills), test taking (2 skills), environmental skills and work skills . Sources of the list were determined through reviewing previous literature and related studies concerned with improving life skills e.g. Al-Lolo (2005), Essa (2002), Rassool and Sharifi (2008), Vajargah , Abolghasemi, and Sabzian (2009), WHO (2001), and WHO (2003) .

3.3.2. Content analysis instrument for analyzing life skills in fourth grade primary English curriculum.

The objectives of this instrument were to investigate the status of life skills in fourth grade primary English curriculum in Egypt. The researchers started with reviewing the related literature in order to develop the needed instrument . The researchers then constructed a content analysis instrument to cover the twelve life skills categories and their (49) main skills .

3.4. The suggested framework of the developed curriculum :

The suggested framework was done after several procedures which were :

1. Identifying the basis for the suggested framework in the light of :
 - The list of the life skills necessary for primary pupils .
 - The previous studies and researches related to the current study.
 - Characteristics and needs of primary stage pupils development.
 - The nature of the subject of English and its objectives in the primary stage .
 - The nature of life skills and their classifications .
 - The basis of life skills curricula.
 - The content of the units .
 - The results of the content analysis of fourth grade primary English curriculum.
2. Choosing the following (20) life skills as the major basis for the suggested framework : Food management, safety skills(traffic safety, medicine safety and sun safety), negotiation skills, time management, decision making, problem solving, healthy habits, citizenship, health care emergencies, assertiveness, friendship, team work, communicative skills, leisure time skills, environmental skills, study skills, money management and housekeeping skills .
3. Keeping the current four lessons in each unit .
4. Reformulating the units to integrate the life skills intended.
5. Supporting the content with information , activities , songs and games to improve life skills .
6. Using assessment tools such as situation tests , observation sheets and scales to assess students' life skills .

In addition to the above, the following aspects had to be considered :

1. The philosophical base for the suggested framework ;
2. The objectives of the suggested framework ;
3. The content of the suggested framework ;
4. The teaching methods ;
5. The teaching aids and the learning resources ;
6. The educational activities ; and
7. The assessment tools.

4.4. Controlling the suggested framework and making sure of its validity :

After designing the suggested framework , the researchers presented it to (15) jurors to get their opinions concerning :

The framework's consistency with its objectives, the content suitability for primary stage pupils, the suitability of the teaching methods, teaching aids, suggested activities and evaluation tools to achieve the objectives of the suggested framework and the extent of validity of the suggested framework and its applicability.

Some jurors had some views that included omission of some parts and the addition of some others. The researchers took those views into their consideration in reforming the suggested framework.

4.4. 2. Building six units of the suggested framework:

The researchers developed six units for the course of the second term following the stages of building the suggested framework . Then the six units were offered to 15 jurors . They had some views that included omission of some parts and the addition of some others. The researchers took those views into their consideration in reforming the suggested framework.

5. Data analysis and Results:

Data analysis showed that the fourth grade primary English curriculum does not sufficiently cover the life skills important

for primary stage students. Skills of knowing and living with on self are slightly represented with the percentage of (2.4%). The four life skills in this category: self-awareness, assertiveness , coping with emotions and coping with stress are slightly represented. Self-awareness is represented with the percentage of (0.3%), assertiveness is represented with the percentage of (1.2%), coping with emotions is represented by (0.6%) and coping with stress is represented by (0.3%). The representation of life skills in this category is remarkably limited , superficial and do not help in improving the life skills for students .

With regard to social skills , they are generally represented with the percentage of (43.8%). Communication skills gain the highest representation among social skills (39.8%). Empathy and negotiation skills come in the second place with the percentage of (1.3%) . Friendship skills come in the third place with the percentage of (0.7%). Family skills come in the fourth place with the percentage of (0.4%). Citizenship comes in the fifth place with the percentage of (0.1 %). Teamwork is not represented at all; i.e. it is totally ignored . The representation of life skills in this category is clearly limited , superficial and does not help in improving the life skills for students.

As for daily routine skills, they are generally represented with the percentage of (2.5%). Money management gains the highest representation among daily routine skills (1.2%). Food management comes in the second place with the percentage of (0.7%). Time management comes in the last place with the percentage of (0.6 %). The representation of life skills in this category is limited, superficial and does not help in improving the life skills for students . Concerning leisure time skills they are represented with the percentage of (0.6%) . The representation of life skills in these categories is obviously limited , superficial and does not help in improving the life skills for students.

With regard to safety skills they are totally represented with the percentage of (0.2%) . They represent just one sentence which deals with sun safety. The other safety skills including :

home safety , gas safety , kitchen safety, natural disasters safety , fire safety , internet safety , traffic safety , medicine safety , electricity safety and strangers safety are totally ignored. In other words they are not represented at all and their percentage is (0%).

Concerning the health skills, they are represented with the percentage of (3.5%). Emergency health care skills come in the first place with the percentage of (1.6%). Healthy habits skills come in the second place with the percentage of (1.03%). Personal hygiene skills come in the last place with the percentage of (0.9%). The representation of life skills in this category is limited , superficial and does not help in improving the life skills for the students.

With regard to housekeeping skills, they are represented with the percentage of (0.3%). Housekeeping cleaning skills is represented with the percentage of (0.3%). Housekeeping conserving skills are totally ignored . They are not represented and their percentage is (0%). As for the cognitive skills they are represented with the percentage of (1.5%). Decision making is represented with the percentage of (0.7%). Problem solving is represented with the percentage of (0.7%). Critical thinking skills and creative thinking skills are totally ignored . They are not represented and their percentage is (0%). The representation of life skills in these categories is limited , superficial and does not help in improving the life skills for the students.

Concerning the study skills , they are represented with the percentage of (0.3%). Organization skills are represented with the percentage of (0.3%). While the study strategies are totally ignored . They are not represented at all. Test taking skills are totally ignored and they are not represented at all . As for the environmental skills , they are represented with the percentage of (1.2%) . Work skills are totally ignored and they are not represented at all. The representation of life skills in these categories is limited , superficial and does not help in improving the life skills for the students .

The previous results show the lack of life skills in fourth grade primary English curriculum . Table (1) presents these results .

Table (1). The results of the content analysis .

No.	Skills	percentage
1	Skills of knowing and living with oneself	2.4%
2	Social skills	43.8%
3	Daily routine	2.5%
4	Leisure time	0.6%
5	Safety	0.2%
6	Health skills	3.5%
7	Housekeeping skills	0.3 %
8	Cognitive skills	1.5 %
9	Study skills	0.3 %
10	Test taking strategies	0 %
11	Environmental skills	1.2 %
12	Work skills	0 %

6. Conclusion :

From the results reached, it can be said that fourth grade primary English curriculum does not reflect the life skills that are necessary for primary stage students sufficiently. There are no objectives that are related to life skills in this curriculum, the content is limited and superficial and does not reflect the life skills appropriately , the activities do not foster improving fourth graders life skills and there are no assessment tools to assess students' life skills. The representation of life skills in this curriculum is limited , superficial and does not help improve the life skills for students . With reference to the aforementioned results , the following conclusions can be drawn :

- a. There is a need for developing EFL primary stage curricula to include the necessary life skills for primary stage students .
- b. EFL curricula can be modified to play an active role in improving life skills for students .

5.1. Recommendations:

On the basis of the previous results, the following may be suggested:

- a. A lot of attention and interest should be paid for enhancing students' life skills as early as possible starting from the primary stage.
- b. Life skills in all educational stages need to be enhanced .
- c. EFL curricula should represent suitable life skills in a simple way and provide theoretical as well as practical life skills knowledge.
- d. Teachers should be aware of the importance of life skills and how to teach them effectively.
- e. Curriculum developers , designers , publishers and authors should take into consideration integrating life skills in curricula.
- f. Providing orientation workshops on life skills.
- g. Intensive research on life skills should be conducted.

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