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A Learners Perspective of English Language Teachers in Kuwaiti Government Schools

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Abstract

This paper studies the attitudes and perceptions of Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) students towards learning English, in the Kuwaiti government public school system. English is one of the requirements in the government schools. This paper investigates the students' attitudes towards the importance of the English language, whether they think it's difficult or not and what their difficulties are. I will also try to examine through random studies and questionnaires whether or not the teacher him or herself has an effect on these students.

Introduction:

It's no wonder that languages play a huge part in our lives. It's our way of thinking and expressing our feelings, emotions, and different needs.

Since the beginning of time, man has learned to think only with some kind of language. The different languages that were used before spoken and written were many. At first, there was body language, which was used to communicate with one another. Different people of different tribes and communities used certain dance moves and gestures to express themselves. Others learned to express themselves with drawings or even creating symbols on walls of caves or big stones to document what went on in their daily lives. Eventually, people of different communities and groups learned to communicate with one another through some kind of language and through that, small groups and communities were able to contact and connect with larger groups and communities of people.

Through a written and spoken language, people's thoughts, ideas, and experiences were recorded to benefit those who would pass by later on in life.



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The English Language is considered the international spoken and written language of the world. It is obligatory in many fields of our daily lives especially in most countries of the world. But we must keep in mind that when we learn a new language we must learn it in the correct way. We must learn the language from all aspects such as grammar, structure, and speech.

Studies have shown that learning a new language reflects on the learner himself, and when teaching a young child at an early age actually helps to enrich his own language as it helps him read and write much better. The English language has become a good second language in the Arab world since it is obligatory for any job requirements. It is obligatory for any applicant to have good knowledge of the English language. Everyday more and more language institutes and schools are opening up to broaden learner's prospective of English as a spoken and written language.

Countries of the world have relations and connections between them in different fields, such as commercial, humanitarian, and even friendly. Since they speak different languages, there must be one common means of communication between them. Here is where the role of translation comes in. For thousands of years and in our present day, the need for translators of different languages was necessary.

Learning English is considered very important in our daily lives, since it opens our aspects to new language skills as well as educational and executive skills. It is important for all people of the world that is why it has become compulsory in schools in most countries all over the world.

English has become an internationally spoken language all over the world, as well as the second spoken language in many countries, including Kuwait.

From here comes the importance of learning English as a foreign language. It is the language of modern technology and social media, the language of smart phones and



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computers. It has become a global medium of communication and without it, a single step cannot be taken. It is our gateway to modern studies and history. It is the language of science and medicine. How many books have you read that were not translated? Studies show that the Arab world translates about 330 (one book for every million person) books yearly as opposed to 519 books in Hungary and 920 books in Spain.⁽¹⁾ Mohammed Jaber Al-Ansary, *The suicide of Arab Intellectuals, and other related matters in Arabic Intellect*. Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing, Beirut, 1998.

Importance of learning English in Kuwait:

The Ministry of Education in the State of Kuwait, has been teaching the English language in its schools as early as 1917. In our present day all government schools teach the English Language from the elementary level to high school, then in all institutes, colleges, and universities.

Although students learn English at an early stage in school, yet most students, graduate from high school with very weak English skills, whether spoken or written. Teachers blame the system, parents blame the teachers, and students blame the teachers..... Is it possible that all three factors contribute to the problem facing the learner? One point worth mentioning is that many students enrolled at PAAET do not actually like the English language. They, like many other people think that English is a foreign language, so they do not invest their effort properly in it. Upon answering the question on the survey, forty-five percent of the students mentioned that the reason they disliked English was because of their teachers when they were in school. Some of the teachers made learning English a very different and unpleasant task for them, by stressing too much on the learner's mistakes and even making fun of their pronunciation, which embarrassed them among their classmates. These students grew up disliking their teachers as well as the language. The other fifty-five percent were lucky because from their answer to the



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same question it seems they had good teachers capable of communicating with young learners and getting the message through to them in a pleasant and easy manner.

So, as a result, we must put in mind while teaching that we affect our learners. When asked to answer the question related to the gender and nationality of the teacher, thirty-five percent of the students answered that their teachers were female Kuwaiti, and did have a positive effect on them, twenty-five percent of the students who had male Kuwaiti teachers said they were good teachers because most of them gave the learners high marks and finally, the forty percent of the students answered that the non-Kuwaiti teachers that taught them, affected them in one way or another because of the teacher's pronunciation and methods of teaching.

From here, the idea of my study came to light. From this thought we came to many questions such as..."What are the problems facing students learning English in Kuwait?"

First of all, we need to answer these questions:

- What is the importance in learning English in Kuwait?
- How is English being taught in Kuwaiti schools?
- What are the obstacles that face the learner of English in class?
- What is the learner's role in all of this? What is his point of view?

In order to answer all these questions let's take a closer look first at the education system in Kuwait. Let's also look at the teacher's education also and see if it is compatible with the education system. What are the requirements of teachers in the Kuwait education system? (Do they need a special teaching certificate or degree?)



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Education in Kuwait:

The English language as well as the French language are taught in the Kuwaiti Government school system. The English language is the official foreign language as it is taught from the elementary level (grade 1) until high school (grade 12). The teaching method depends on the Communicative and Integrated Approach which is completed by fluency and preciseness of the language as well as the different skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Although the English language has become so important in our daily lives, yet about eighty-five percent of the students at PAAET do not feel that English is important in their field of study when they were asked “Do you feel that the English language is important in your field of study?” In the survey, they explained that the reason they answered that way was because they actually did not feel that they would need to use the language at their jobs. The other fifteen percent answered the same question by saying they did feel that the language was very important for their jobs.

The State of Kuwait supports an educational policy that seeks to provide an equal opportunity to all children. No matter what their social class is, including those with special needs, everybody is entitled to a free education. In 2011, the United Nations Development program stated that Kuwait was ranked number 63 on the Human Development Index (HDI) report, placing the country above regional average. The reports showed that by the end of the year 2006, thirteen percent of public expenditure in Kuwait was spent on education.⁽¹⁾ The Ministry of Education has brought in a number of policies and initiatives throughout the years aimed at improving the literacy rates in the country as well as supporting women’s entry into the educational workforce. Scholarships are given to outstanding students, allowing them to enroll in the best Universities, whether local or abroad, for their higher education.



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Rise of Education in Kuwait

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Kuwait did not have any kind of formal education what so ever. There was what was called “Al-Mullah”. He was usually a religious man who taught boys of the neighborhood Quran as well as reading and writing. Girls learned Quran, reading, and writing with “Al-Mutawaa”. She was a woman of religion who gave lessons to the girls who were in her neighborhood. Some neighborhoods were considered lucky because they had what resembled a library. The library contained many books and stories which came mostly from Egypt and Iraq. Anyone was allowed to check out a book for reading.

(1) Expat Focus, Kuwait: Education and Schools

Then a few Quranic schools were established and privately funded by some of the wealthy Kuwaiti families. The Quranic School was called “Al-Kutab”. Skills such as reading, writing, and basic Math’s, were taught at these schools.

Al-Mubarakiya School was established in 1911, as one of Kuwait’s modern educational institutions. Originally, it was founded by the merchants to train their clerks in letter writing, Math’s, and other commercial skills. Studies in these schools also included lots of Quran reciting as well as the other educational skills. Later on in 1921, another school was established, Al-Ahmedia School. This school was different from different from Al-Mubarakiya because it offered English courses. Soon after that, an all girls’ school was founded and it provided classes in home economics, Arabic, and Islamic studies.

Formal education by the Kuwaiti government took place in 1936 and then by the year 1945 there were 17 schools in Kuwait. With the increase of oil production, the government started to invest large amounts of money into education. By 1960 there were



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45,000 students enrolled in Kuwait's educational system, including 18,000 girls.⁽¹⁾ A constitution made education a fundamental right for every citizen in 1965, which then made education compulsory for children between the ages of 6-14. Since the early twenty first century, the Ministry of Education worked hard to prepare a general, long term education strategy which focuses on educational teaching from that time till the year 2025. The new education strategy covering the period 2005-2025 was launched in June 2003. This was developed after the National Conference on Education which was held in 2002. It was set by a group of educational experts and was approved by the Ministry's Council. The strategy deals with a number of main educational issues and includes several plans, projects and programs, such as the computerization programs which already started in the previous years.

(1) "Embassy of the Kuwait, Cultural Office"

Education Levels in Kuwait

In general, the education system is made up of four levels, they are two years of kindergarten (nursery), five years of primary stage, four years of intermediate, and then three years of secondary (high school). Education for all levels is free in the State of Kuwait. School is compulsory for all student from age 6-14, from primary and intermediate. There are two main ministries involved in the development of the education sector: the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. There are six govern orates in Kuwait, they are Al-Asimah (capital), Hawalli, Al-Farwaniya, Mubarak Al-Kabeer, Al-Ahmadi, and Al-Al-Jahra. Each govern orate has its own educational district, with its own supervisors for all subjects taught at schools, but the Ministry of Education regulates both the public and the private schools in Kuwait. As mentioned before, although the public schools are free, most Kuwaitis prefer to enroll their children in private schools, which offer better facilities and a stronger foundation in the English language as many believe.



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Higher Education and Vocational Studies

Higher education in Kuwait is divided into two major educational institutions. First, there is Kuwait University, which is funded by the government and offers free education, then there is the technical and vocational courses which are offered by another government institution, The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET). There are also degree programs offered by the 14 private universities in Kuwait.

It's no wonder that the Kuwaiti government encourages its citizens to enroll in the vocational training programs in order to fulfill the demands for skillful workforce. The foundation for applied education and training was laid along with the initiation of oil exploration, production and export in Kuwait. The Technical and Vocational Department was established in 1972 to supervise technical and vocational studies. The Technical and Vocational Education Department continued to function until 1982 when the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) was independently established to supervise technical and vocational training and envision as well as implement an overall plan for the sector.

The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training

The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training is considered one of the largest institutes in the Middle East, in terms of the number of enrolled students. For example in the first term of the academic school year 2018/2019 alone, about 8343 students have enrolled, whereas, 6735 students have enrolled for the second term of the same school year, 2018/2019.

PAAET has two missions, first it is responsible for providing and developing the skills of the national labor force to meet the demands of a developing nation. Second, it provides training to students to have careers beyond the oil industry. PAAET comprises of five



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major colleges, which entitle the student to a bachelor's degree upon completing a four year study plan. Then there are seven institutes with a two and a half year study plan, and a diploma at the end. There are also special certified courses that offer diplomas to those who were not fortunate enough to complete high school but still have the need to get some kind of higher education. It is worth mentioning that all these courses are taught in English and again I repeat that most higher education institutions in The State of Kuwait offer their courses in English and not Arabic. This is the same approach followed by the private foreign universities as well, since they follow the foreign curriculums of their countries.

It has become widely spread even for the local job market, where acquiring the English language is necessary for any job positions. As a matter of fact, the English language has nearly taken over and replaced the Arabic language in most lecture halls at any university as well as most aspects of life in Kuwait. It has actually taken its place in the government educational system as well. It's considered the main and only foreign language to be taught, after Arabic in all learning stages, prior to university.

This means that Arabic is the primary language in schools, followed by English and then an optional course of French may be taken alongside, in the two final years of high-school. This system is also applied in the Arabic private schools as well, since they are supervised by the government educational system.

Why is the Learner's Perspective Important?



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I really think it is important to take a deep and closer look at this problem from the learner's side, since not many teachers have taken the time to ask their students "What is the biggest problem that you encounter when you are learning English?"

Every day we attend our classes and teach our lessons, but at the end, the result is almost unbelievable. The students don't improve, they either stay at the same level they were at when the year began, or get even weaker. Very few students progress. This is why I decided to approach the problem that I see in my classes every day, from a different angle, the learner's perspective and not the teacher's. Let's start with the obstacles the learners face in class.

What Are the Obstacles that Face the Learners of English in Class?

Although English has only twenty-six letters in its alphabet unlike other languages, but English Grammar is also very strict and perfect. One small mistake can change the whole meaning of a sentence, whereas in other languages the same small mistake would not make much difference.

For many learners of English, the main problem does not exist in the actual language itself, but in the quality of the English that is being taught which usually makes things confusing for the learner. It is actually the environment of learning or shall we say the educational system in which this teaching and learning progress is taking on. From my own personal point of view, when I was teaching at primary stage, (I have taught from first to fourth grade in public schools) I actually discovered that what we as teachers were doing was wrong. No young learner will ever understand English by following the system that we were supposed to follow. It was like teaching a parrot to talk. First of all, the Ministry of Education, at that time (1996) did not even have its own curriculum. We



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were told to teach the curriculum which was taught in The United Arab Emirates, at that time. I felt this caused lots of confusion for the young learners because they were even taught the currency of another country and not the local! If we as teachers tried to change something on our own, for example the apple is 500 fils and not 500 Dirham, we would be notified by the English Language supervisor or the Head of Department. So this on its own is more than enough to cause problems and frustration for the teacher.

Another very important point that I must bring up, which is also from my own personal experience, is that a teacher was not obliged to have a specific degree, for instance at the schools that I taught primary level, I had colleagues with teaching degrees from The College of Basic Education, and I myself did not have a teaching degree as I am a graduate of the University of Kuwait, College of Arts and Literature, I had no training what so ever in teaching and especially teaching young learners. This alone would be a problem for both the teacher and the learner, especially a young learner as he or she is expected to be taught the basics in English. There was even a teacher with only a high school degree teaching in the same department that I was in, English language Dept..

The only recruitment system for teachers at that time, 1995, was an interview which was conducted by the English Language Supervisor at the Ministry of Education, along with a group of teachers and supervisors. If the candidate passed the interview, he or she becomes a teacher. I remember when I passed, I still had not graduated or received my Bachelor's degree! Then I was appointed to teach primary stage which was something I had never done in my life before, as I don't have teaching degree as I mentioned previously. I did not know how to deal with the young learners. I was completely lost.



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Also most teachers were Non-Kuwaiti, from other Arab countries. These teachers had a different dialect than we did which also had an effect on the way they pronounced many of the words in English. This had its toll on the young learners and when many of these learners reached the higher learning stage they still pronounce many words wrong because they were taught to pronounce it that way.

I believe we can actually describe the learner's problems when learning the English Language is a result of his poor skills and information which usually reflects on the learner's interaction and attitude towards his teachers and peers. This also reflects on the learner's academic achievements. These difficulties or problems in achieving the desired learning goals could be related to the learner himself, whether they are social, financial or even psychological problems. They could be related to the nature of the language itself as well as its content, or related to the teacher and the teaching approach along with the surrounding environment.

- The Poor Performance of the English Teacher

In spite of the fact that modern technology and the use of educational programs has taken over in class, the teacher remains the number one most important factor in the teaching process. What is the use of having great text books and state of the art technology in class, along with a weak teacher who doesn't really know how to teach? Although English language teachers in Kuwait get their training and education from a number of educational institutions such as Kuwait University and The College of Basic Education, yet the education alone in these institutions is still not enough to qualify them to teach English. Also what made things worse was that most of these graduates were trained to teach without the suitable educational qualifications or training in proper teaching



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methods.⁽¹⁾ In many situations the teacher does not know how to describe a certain word to the learner which makes it difficultly for him to understand. For instance teaching words that express feelings such as happy or sad is an obstacle for many teachers. Also in many situations, the English taught to the students is what we could call, overly geared towards passing exams. This attitude turns English language into just another subject in school that must be learnt instead of being an everyday useful language. This kind of attitude is mostly seen in Asian countries as well as the Arab countries. This is where the young learners are affected by their teachers and the atmosphere the teacher sets up for the lesson. So if the learner grows up liking his teacher, he will like the subject itself and always have that teacher in mind, there for making his/her effort to pass in the language he likes. Many of us still remember Mr. or Mrs. X., the favorite teacher that taught us our favorite subject.



(د. فواز عقل، مشاكل تعليم اللغة الانجليزية، رسالة النجاح، ع: ٤٥-٤٦، أبريل-مايو ١٩٨٦

- **Not Using English inside the Classroom**

One of the strangest things noticed in teaching English, is that the teacher does not actually use the English language to communicate with the students inside the classroom. It is no surprise that it is very important to teach the English language in English and not in Arabic or any other language for that matter. The more the teacher speaks English during class, the stronger the learner's confidence will be in learning the new foreign language. Also the learner will feel encouraged to communicate with his teacher in the same language that the teacher is using to impress her/him. It is ok to go back to the mother language when necessary.

When given a survey, 89 percent of the students enrolled at PAEET institutes stated that when they were in government schools, most of their teachers spoke Arabic during English class. They said that most of the lesson was actually taught in Arabic except for the vocabulary part. Even the writing lesson was explained in Arabic and then translated into English. Everybody in the end had the same topic sentence and the same ending. Ninety percent of the students answered that their poor English skills were the result of their teachers. Five percent of the students simply answered that they did not pay much attention in class because it was a subject of no interest to them, while the remaining five



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percent of the students said that they were told to follow instructions and nothing else, meaning that they were not allowed to express themselves freely.

Again I would like to mention a few observations from my own personal experience. While growing up I went to government schools as well as private schools in the United States of America, I cannot begin to describe the education system there or the teaching methods. First of all, as mentioned previously, the teacher really is the number one driving force behind the learner's success. My teachers made sure that learning the English language was easy for me as a foreign student. There was no stressing on learning the curriculum in a certain amount of time. They spent time making the learning process easy and fun for all of us. We were allowed to express ourselves freely in our composition. Then, I came back to Kuwait and I was enrolled in the government system. I found a great difference in the teaching methods as well as teacher- student relationship.

First of all I was not allowed to even get a full mark on my report card in the English subject because my mother tongue was not English, although I had full marks in all my quizzes and exams. This excuse which my teacher gave me made no sense to me at that time at all. As a young learner, it actually made me dislike my teacher and not want to put any effort in getting high marks at all. It was very discouraging for me that my teacher discriminated me and pointed out that my pronunciation was wrong because I had an American dialect, and not British. Sorry to mention that I had this problem even when I went on to study at Kuwait University. Some of my Professors gave me lower grades because they had the British dialect while I, along with a few other colleagues spoke in an American dialect. I strongly believe that this had a great effect on me along with others in learning the English language.



-Lack of Using Modern Teaching Aids in the Classroom

Another very important obstacle that faces the learner of the English language is the lack of modern visual, audio and technical aids in the classroom. As a matter of fact, teaching and learning the English language must be taken seriously. Teachers must take into consideration the use of all modern teaching methods as well as stressing on all major aspects in the learner's daily life as well. For instance, the teacher should not just teach from inside the book or stick to the curriculum, but also give the learner the information that he/she can use and benefit from outside of the classroom, in the real world. The learner doesn't just want to learn a language and not be able to use it. When using modern technology in class, the teacher provides a fun, more relaxing atmosphere for learning. More and more schools now are applying the use of technological teaching aids to help in the classroom. Large screen televisions, movie theaters, laptops and iPads and anything one can imagine is used now in the modern school systems. Modern teaching methods and technology doesn't just rely on electrical appliances used in class. Modern teaching methods means that a good qualified teacher should direct the learners to new techniques for learning English from outside of the classroom. For instance, teachers should encourage students to watch English TV series, movies, and documentaries with subtitles. This helps learners to understand how sentences of everyday use are formed. Also learners should be encouraged to start a school English journal, newspaper, articles and even write short novels. Even listening to English music will help the learner when listening to the different ways that words are used in the English language, especially if the learner reads the lyrics first. I do believe these methods will raise the learner's confidence.



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In addition to what I have mentioned above, some of the students said that the reason they faced problems while learning English were due to the fact that:

- They did not understand the English lessons well in school.
- The teachers' methods of explaining the lessons in class were not compatible with the personal differences of the learners in the classroom.
- Their teacher did not simplify the lesson by using different teaching aids.
- Some of the learners were actually afraid of the English language itself.
- Some learners depended on others to complete their English homework or classroom tasks.
- Some of the learners admitted that they simply did not attend their English classes, which eventually effected their academic achievement.

It is safe to say that teaching and learning a foreign language, should not just be limited to the least developed countries. On the contrary, as a matter of fact, it has been noticed that the more developed countries are concentrating on learning and teaching foreign languages to improve the standard of the people as well as the needs of the job market.

It is for this reason, I that believe that learning foreign languages is not just for the academic or technical benefits. But also to broaden the learner's horizons. ⁽¹⁾With the



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knowledge of a new language the learner is sure to have more options in his or her life. So in order to overcome some of the difficulties in learning English, here are some suggestions I believe will help to make the learning process much easier.

- Insisting that the English language teacher is well qualified academically, culturally, and linguistically.
- Developing distinctive and up to date teaching methods suitable for the subject itself.
- The difficulty of the subject should not be exaggerated by the parents as well as the teachers.
- Any new language, should be taught at early stages in school.
- Ample time for conversation is very important during the English lesson.
- Any language should be taught in a language lab for the best results.
- Students should be able to communicate in English with their teachers, inside and outside the classroom.
- Eliminating the fear factor of learning a new language, this is the most important Point of all.

(1) Ahmed M. Ahmed, teaching English Language for 4th and 5th grade primary A critical view, 1996, College of Ed. Journal p. 430-450

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is no doubt that the English language plays a great role in our daily lives. It has become a language of great importance in our present time, where modern technology depends greatly on the knowledge of the English language. We are living in



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an era where the English language is considered the actual gateway to mass information and knowledge which is the basis of progress and development, whether it is on a personal or a general level.

The English language has become a language of globalization, science, and knowledge. Certain statistics have proven that most scientific resources and references are widely spread in the English language. It is a wide spread language that has taken over in all aspects of daily life. Since it is such a wide spreading language, its learners are increasing all over the world day by day. It is also for this reason, it has become a basic subject in the school curriculum in the educational system in the State of Kuwait. With the increase of the learners, there is a great increase in the problems of learning the language.

In my study, I have discussed some of the problems that the learners believe they face while learning English. Through my study, I tried to discuss two main points. The first point I tried to make clear was the importance of learning English in Kuwait. Then, I tried to prove the learners' point of view on the problems they face while learning English.

Results

As a result of my study, I have found that

- First and foremost, we cannot deny the importance of English in Kuwait.
- The English language has in fact taken its place in the educational system Kuwait, since it is the first international language in the country and it is the only foreign language which is taught in schools after the Arabic language. It is taught in all stages in schools.
- Although English is widely spread in Kuwait, the learners encounter many problems while learning.



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- The students in The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, had different opinions about the different problems that they face while learning.
- Many students at The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training agreed in their answers in the questionnaire that their teachers in government schools along with the weak teaching methods played a big role in the problems that they have now in English.

Recommendations

On the basis of my study, I recommend:

- that the different educational sectors have more patience when dealing with English language learners
- the necessity of language labs and modern teaching aids in the government schools
- the importance of specifying ample time for the English lesson and not treating it like any other subject
- the importance of organizing qualified training courses for the teachers in the English Language Department in all the government schools, this will help improve the teachers' performance as well as help avoid problems which may affect the learners
- the importance of the Ministry of Education's role in finding a suitable solution for the problems that the learners face



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