



# Investigating ESL/EFL Teachers' Implementation of John Dewey's Philosophy 'Pragmatism' in Elementary Education

**Eman AlJuhani**

**Jubail Industrial College, Royal Commission of Jubail and Yanbu, Jubail 31961, Saudi Arabia**

**Email: [juhanie@rcyci.edu.sa](mailto:juhanie@rcyci.edu.sa)**

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## ABSTRACT

This conceptualization paper investigates ESL/EFT teachers and how they implement John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy within elementary education. Research into pragmatism, especially in its applications within ESL and EFL, represents a significant avenue of investigation. Not only can ESL/EFL teachers use many of these principles in their pedagogical practices, but the philosophy itself offers a unique framework for researching this topic. The impact of pragmatism on student learning outcomes is explored, while concentrating on elementary education frameworks in Saudi Arabia. ESL/EFT teaching practices in general are also examined, researching pragmatically applied pedagogy within ESL/EFL teaching. Additionally, both challenges and opportunities for teachers' professional growth are investigated, evaluating student learning. Finally, recommendations are made for the application of Dewey's pragmatism within ESL/EFL teaching.

**Keywords:** English as a Second Language (ESL), pragmatism, elementary education, EFL.



## 1. Introduction

There are now many more English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pupils throughout the world who are learning to speak English in educational institutions (Pecorari, 2018). The principles of John Dewey's pragmatism, which are the foundation of a new teaching approach emphasizing problem-solving and practical application, are necessary to satisfy the demands of these ESL and EFL students (Williams, 2017). His educational philosophy is anchored on pragmatism, emphasizing the necessity for learning to be grounded in actual experiences rather than theoretical concepts. Dewey believed that knowledge should be grounded in real-world applications and that education should give students the problem-solving abilities they need to be productive members of society (Williams, 2017). Instead of depending on theoretical information, he claimed that learning via experience was the most excellent method to gain knowledge.

To utilize their experiences as the foundation for learning, students should be encouraged to question, investigate, and reflect upon them (Al-Jarf, 2022). Students might acquire new abilities and information in this manner, better preparing them for the future. ESL/EFL instructors are in a good position to include John Dewey's pragmatism-based philosophy in their lessons. In teaching English as a second language, teachers may make a learning environment interesting by giving students meaningful learning experiences using Dewey's educational theory. These activities encourage students to actively engage in learning and entail tasks they can connect to and comprehend (Abdulrahman et al., 2016). Initially ground-breaking, Dewey's learning theory has now been welcomed and adopted by educators all around the globe. This essay explores how ESL/EFL instructors are instructing primary school students by integrating John Dewey's theory and principles of pragmatism.

## 2. Need for the Study

ESL/EFL instruction worldwide is predominantly based on the traditional grammar-translation approach, focusing on accurately decoding written language (Alkhuzay, 2015). Language learning through this approach is limited to studying language related to the textbook material and is tested with objective exams such as grammar and vocabulary tests. Such learners may develop the ability to decode written language, read texts, and answer tests, although they may still lack the skills necessary to create effective communication in the target language (Alkhuzay, 2015). In contrast, the pragmatic approach suggested by Dewey provides an avenue in which teachers can use their learners' experiences and everyday contexts as part of language instruction and promote the "habit of reflective inquiry" (Asiri, 2019, p. 67). Therefore, it is imperative to better understand how ESL/EFL teachers can use John



Dewey's pragmatic approach in elementary education to increase their learners' language proficiency and refine their skills in communication.

### 3. Background Information

The exponential rise of English as a global language worldwide has been influenced by globalization, and it is now a global phenomenon with a wide range of local consequences in fields like education, commerce, tourism, and foreign relations, to mention a few (Gesuato et al., 2015). English is the official language of more than 85% of international organizations, 85% or more of the world's cinema market, and around 90% of published academic publications. Coleman states how “ever-wider use of English is promoted through economic, political, and strategic alliances; scientific, technological, and cultural cooperation; mass media; multinational corporations; improved communications; and the internationalization of professional and personal domains of activity” (2006, p. 56).

The English language has a dual significance in the educational sphere: First, its growing significance is accepted at all levels of the academic curriculum across the globe (Colón-Muñiz & Valenzuela, 2012). Second, the widespread use of English creates a positive feedback loop that steadily helps the language spread worldwide (Colón-Muñiz & Valenzuela, 2012). English language proficiency is regarded as one of the fundamental components of global citizenship. It is essential for engaging in economic activity worldwide and accessing the information and knowledge that constitute the foundation of socioeconomic progress (Gomez-Laich, 2016).

#### 3.1 English Language Learning

Therefore, offering ELLs a top-notch education is necessary, given the need for English language competency worldwide. Both English-speaking and non-English-speaking nations now prioritize learning the English language in their educational plans. The varied effects of the English language's growth around the globe, combined with the ongoing need to improve education for ELLs internationally, underscores the significance of teacher education. English language education initiatives must be widely implemented due to the English language's "triumph" over the world. The rising need for qualified English language instructors is clear as English has become an essential component of the educational curriculum at all levels, from kindergarten to post-doctoral degrees.

#### 3.2 Saudi Educational System

The emphasis has always been on English language programs, which have experienced significant modifications throughout Saudi Arabia's educational system. When the Ministry of Culture issued six volumes of English course texts for six years of high school, English was first taught in Saudi Arabian high schools in 1938–1939



(Plowright, 2015). Since 1964, a new book series known as "Graded Books" has replaced the old ones, and they have been taught until 1982, when the Islamic Revolution caused a sudden change in the educational system (Plowright, 2015). A new educational system of elementary, junior high, and high school has since replaced the previous six-year periods of primary and high school. Twelve years were spent in school, with elementary school beginning at age seven and lasting five years, junior high school beginning in grades six through eight, and high school beginning in grades nine through eleven with a one-year pre-university. In the previous system, junior high school pupils started learning English in the second grade.

According to the scant literature on the evaluation of English teaching programs at Saudi Arabian high schools on a national scale, the old program generally failed to produce the desired results in terms of enhancing learners' language abilities despite a significant time and financial investment (AlHarbi, 2021). The fundamental issue with this method was the absence of a thorough, accurate, and well-organized strategy, which made doubt the program's efficacy. After the 2011–2012 academic year, the educational landscape in Saudi Arabia underwent a fundamental change. Under the new system, students must complete six years of elementary and six years of secondary school. English is taught from the first year of high school until the final year. According to the Ministry of Education rules, English should be taught for one hour each week, for a total of 119 hours throughout the first three grades and 80 hours over the next three years (Furieux, 2015). About 200 hours should be dedicated to teaching English in high school.

### 3.3 John Dewey and Pragmaticism

The American philosopher and educational theorist John Dewey made a significant and enduring contribution to education. His ideas have significantly impacted how education is handled in the modern world. Dewey contends that educational procedures need to be founded on an approach to inquiry and problem-solving that acknowledges that learning is an active process that may occur in various settings, including school, the family, and society. According to Dewey, a successful education aids pupils in acquiring the information and abilities necessary to apply what they have learned to real-world issues (Williams, 2017). These facets of Dewey's philosophy may be attributed to his pragmatic worldview, which strongly emphasizes the value of applying information and concepts in real-world situations. According to Proulx, pragmatism is "the view that things should be judged by their results or outcomes" (2016, p. 103). Dewey expanded on this strategy in the field of education, advocating the idea that within education, students actively discover, assimilate, and transform from their learning experiences (Holdo, 2022). Thus, the core of the pragmatic education perspective is how instructors and students acquire their



knowledge via practical investigation and assessment of their experiences (Holdo, 2022). John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy can be applied in primary school ESL/EFL classes in Saudia Arabia.

#### **4. Impact of Pragmatism on Student Learning Outcomes**

At its foundation, pragmatism is a method of inquiry and problem-solving that strongly emphasizes the significance of the practical application of knowledge gained through experience (Williams, 2017). This implies that educators should provide pupils with information and work to give them the skills necessary to apply their knowledge in original, useful ways (Williams, 2017). Dewey's pragmatism theory encourages a kind of student-centered, contextualized learning with a high potential for great learning outcomes among ESL/EFL students by highlighting the value of experience and active learning.

Alternative methods of education, including hands-on learning, group-based learning, and real-world applications, may be used by ESL/EFL instructors within the pragmatic framework (Bardis et al., 2021). These techniques enable instructors to incorporate Dewey's teaching ideas and encourage students' acquisition of information and skills per his overarching goals (Bardis et al., 2021). Since they require students to utilize various language abilities and communication techniques to perform tasks, hands-on learning activities are especially helpful for language learners (Bardis et al., 2021). Similarly, group-based learning activities allow students to collaborate with native speakers and create meaning (Bardis et al., 2021).

By actively involving students in their learning, pragmatism may assist ESL/EFL instructors in giving pupils a greater educational experience (Jarrah et al., 2020). Students may explore real-world applications of topics in a relevant, interactive setting by actively engaging with the material (Jarrah et al., 2020). This aligns with experiential education, which promotes student learning by directly tying abstract ideas to concrete situations. Additionally, the focus on problem-solving motivates students to apply and customize recently learned information more successfully (Jarrah et al., 2020). This would undoubtedly make it possible for ESL/EFL students to comprehend the subject matter more deeply than they could using conventional teaching methods.

Additionally, pragmatism may allow instructors to design innovative and imaginative classes that tap into students' collective knowledge and experience (Williams, 2017). Teachers may then create an atmosphere where students can experience the practical application of ideas and theories by blending meaningful conversation with a hands-on activity (Williams, 2017). This is particularly important for ESL/EFL students since it may help them improve their language skills while developing a



deeper comprehension of the material (Tubes, 2023). Pragmatism may enhance the learning results of ESL/EFL students when used successfully. Studies have demonstrated that teaching strategies with a pragmatic influence result in significantly higher student engagement levels (Tubes, 2023). These strategies also help pupils build critical-thinking abilities and improve their attitudes toward learning in general (Tubes, 2023). When learning occurs in a pragmatist-inspired environment, students are also more likely to recall and apply information in various circumstances.

### 5. Elementary Education Frameworks in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi Arabian educational system is primarily built to encourage the use of English as a second language worldwide (Alkhuzay, 2015). It is a result of the country's high rate of immigration and its need for international interaction. Due to the growing demand for students' English language ability, ESL/EFL instructors must now use more efficient teaching methods. Saudi Arabian elementary school curricula are designed to provide children with an improved, all-encompassing experience (Alkhuzay, 2015). In particular, it is hoped that students will graduate with the language abilities and problem-solving aptitude they need to fit in with the varied situations in the United Arab Emirates (Quamar, 2020). This result may be attained by combining excellent academic instruction with extensive extracurricular activities.

Support from stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, students, and parents, is necessary to effectively adopt the elementary school framework in Saudi Arabia. Administrators must ensure that the whole framework complies with national requirements by routinely evaluating the caliber of the curricula, resources, and teaching methods (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). To guarantee that students get the most out of their learning experiences, teachers must integrate educational best practices into the curriculum and use powerful teaching techniques. Students should also be given the required skills and materials via specialized training that tracks their development and promotes active involvement. Finally, parents must continue to be involved in their child's education by participating in school events and promoting the moral principles taught in the classroom.

The elementary school framework is academically based on the British curriculum. This curriculum aims to help students become more fluent in English while teaching them various other subject-related skills in areas like science, math, and social studies (Newton & Nation, 2020). Academic instruction aims to help students develop their capacity for independent and critical thought (Newton & Nation, 2020). It is believed that extracurricular activities are a crucial part of the primary school system. These activities sometimes entail visiting museums and art galleries, including sports, the arts, music, and dancing. By introducing other cultures and communities, they assist



in giving the students' learning a broader perspective. In addition, the activities allow children to learn how to interact with others and get involved in their community. The pupils have access to various support services and academic and extracurricular activities. These consist of professional counseling and tutoring services, ensuring every student can realize their full potential. Diet, health, and medical care services are offered, all of which seek to improve students' well-being. Saudi Arabia's basic education framework strongly emphasizes helping pupils acquire the linguistic proficiency and problem-solving skills needed to succeed (Sattar, 2015). This is accomplished through offering various support services in addition to academic education and extracurricular activities (Sattar, 2015). This method allows Saudi Arabia to ensure that elementary school children are adequately equipped for middle and high school (Sattar, 2015).

### **5. ESL/EFL Teaching Practices**

ESL/EFL teaching methods should align with Dewey's pragmatism-based philosophy to provide students with a proper learning environment. To do this, problem-solving exercises must be included, and students' active participation in the learning process must be encouraged (Gotwals et al, 2012). Communication and language competency should be the main goals of ESL/EFL instruction. Usually, this entails imparting the fundamentals of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Additionally, the instructor should use materials and activities suitable for the children's ages to keep them interested and enable them to apply their learning to real-world situations (Gotwals et al, 2012). Activities that demand cooperation and teamwork among the students are particularly crucial since they promote problem-solving while fostering interpersonal bonds among the students.

For instructors to properly use Dewey's pragmatic philosophy in the classroom, emphasis should be placed on determining each student's unique requirements and learning preferences (Williams, 2017). As a result, the instructor can modify their pedagogical approaches and provide the students with the help they need. The ESL/EFL instructor should also create a conducive learning atmosphere that encourages pupils to continue through assignments, including those that are difficult (Lo, 2023). This inspires pupils to evaluate their educational experiences and hone their problem-solving abilities.

### **6. Pragmatically Applied Pedagogy in ESL/EFL Teaching**

The pedagogical approaches employed in ESL/EFL instruction must be grounded on John Dewey's pragmatism. This entails a practical teaching and learning method where each learner's experience is the primary concern. The instructor should



encourage pupils to think creatively and acquire abilities that may be used to improve learners experience (Sánchez-Hernández & Martínez-Flor, 2021). The instructor should also adapt their lessons to each student's unique requirements and include activities that let the pupils discover their surroundings while honing their language skills (Sánchez-Hernández & Martínez-Flor, 2021).

Inquiry-based learning is the most efficient technique to reach this result. Inquiry-based learning is a student-driven learning strategy that promotes critical thinking and questioning (Wale & Bishaw, 2020). This method motivates pupils to think creatively and solve problems and enables the instructor to evaluate the competence levels of each student (Wale & Bishaw, 2020). Furthermore, since it enables students to participate in activities relevant to their own experiences, this method is particularly helpful in enhancing the students' communication and language abilities (Wale & Bishaw, 2020).

## 7. Challenges and Opportunities for Teacher Professional Growth

Second-language learners continue to face challenges even when they have reached a high degree of competency in their target language (Jung-Ivannikova, 2014). When communicating with persons of various cultural backgrounds, one could encounter certain cross-cultural communication issues. When learning a second language, it is necessary to put in a lot of effort to imitate the local accent. According to Jung-Ivannikova (2014), the analysis of native speaker suggests that pronunciation difficulties may contribute to misunderstandings. Fluency and precision are two qualities that are important to successful performance (Jung-Ivannikova, 2014). A lack of exposure might make it challenging for students learning English as a second language to communicate with native English speakers (Lee & Heinz, 2016). Training is provided in areas like grammar, listening to speech, writing, and reading; however, it is not provided for components that are useful in everyday life and make up a significant portion of the language (Lee & Heinz, 2016). Students experience variations in pragmatics that may make it challenging to grasp the language while participating in this activity. Most of the time, instructors of languages other than English choose not to address this aspect of English in their classes because they either do not have enough time, do not have enough material, or do not comprehend the value of this part of English in daily life.

Getting used to a new teaching environment is one of the biggest issues ESL/EFL instructors in Saudi Arabia encounter. This results from the nation's educational and linguistic systems changing quickly. To effectively execute their teaching tactics, instructors must thus possess a solid understanding of and familiarity with the pragmatism school of thought. The instructor must also be conscious of the





classroom's different linguistic and cultural distinctions (Williams, 2017). Dewey's pragmatism can only be successfully incorporated if procedures are put in place that can recognize these variances and address the unique requirements of the pupils (Tubes, 2023). To aid in the learning process, the instructor should also be able to recognize the pupils' aptitudes and learning styles (Tubes, 2023).

Despite these obstacles, there are several chances for teacher professional development in Saudi Arabia. For example, creating an inquiry-based learning strategy may serve as a solid framework for effectively applying Dewey's theory (Kwo, 2010). Teachers might also participate in professional learning activities like visiting conferences or seminars to improve their expertise (Ventista & Brown, 2023). Additionally, the teacher might advance their career by taking on more academic or administrative duties at the school (Ventista & Brown, 2023).

### **7. Assessing Student Learning**

Implementing Dewey's pragmatism in the classroom involves several steps, one of which is evaluating student learning. The evaluation should enable the instructor to determine each student's degree of problem-solving ability and their linguistic skills (Banta et al., 2009). To efficiently evaluate the pupils, the instructor should use various evaluation methods, such as interviews, tests, reports, or presentations (Banta et al., 2009). To recognize the students' strengths and shortcomings, the instructor should consider each student's unique experiences while evaluating learning results (Banta et al., 2009).

Assessing student learning must accurately reflect the students' abilities across various circumstances to succeed. Teachers should employ a range of assessments to evaluate students' performance on different course evaluations, such as examinations, projects, and papers (McTighe & Ferrara, 2021). Also, chances for students to show they comprehend the material should be provided. For instance, in a calculus class, students should have the opportunity to put their knowledge to use in scenarios that call for open-ended problem-solving. Students' participation during the learning process should also be considered (Burke, 2018). This may be achieved by including cooperative and individual tasks in the curriculum and gauging the pupils' involvement. To further assess the students' level of participation, instructors want to think about combining solo and small group activities (Burke, 2018; McTighe & Ferrara, 2021).

The evaluation should also provide the pupils with insightful and thorough comments. Feedback needs to be offered in the form of positive criticism and constructive praise to close the performance gap between students and the targeted learning goals. Activities that encourage reflection on learning and identifying areas for improvement



should also be included in this process. Throughout the learning program, there should be ongoing student learning assessments (LoCastro, 2012). Using formative evaluations may provide students with immediate feedback on their performance, while the instructor may also use summative tests to assess students' overall performance (LoCastro, 2012). The students can monitor their progress throughout the program and adjust their learning tactics by setting up a continuous feedback loop (LoCastro, 2012).

A practical learning experience must include an evaluation of student learning. Teachers will be better able to pinpoint their students' unique strengths and weaknesses so they may further personalize their teachings to their requirements by employing a variety of evaluations to offer feedback on the student's performance in the classroom (Lu et al., 2021). Additionally, adding formative evaluation creates a continuous feedback loop between the instructor and the students, enhancing the learning process (Lu et al., 2021). The instructor will be able to ensure that the students are meeting the required learning objectives, foster a dynamic learning environment, and support effective learning outcomes by taking the time to evaluate student learning (Lu et al., 2021).

## 8. Discussion

The components of Dewey's teaching should be considered while examining his philosophy's success. Learning should be meaningful and based on the experiences of the pupils, according to Dewey's philosophy. Additionally, he advocated for making the classroom "lively and interesting" and encouraging teamwork and the growth of creative thinking. Dewey thought that by adhering to these guidelines, the classroom would develop into a setting for fruitful conversation between the instructor and the pupils. Therefore, future research should focus on exploring the efficacy of Dewey's philosophy in the classroom, specifically for ESL/EFT teachers.

Specifically, qualitative studies can be undertaken, gathering subjective data regarding students and teachers' thoughts, opinions, and perceptions regarding pragmatism being integrated into their ESL/EFT classrooms (Yook, 2014). Through interviews with both students and teachers, unique insights into this topic can be gained. In fact, this future research can investigate how students respond to various classroom environments, their levels of engagement with the subject material, as well as their teamwork and creativity. With qualitative studies conducted, the overall satisfaction of students with their learning can be determined, with researchers exploring not only how students feel about their education, but also how they comprehend different subjects. Additionally, these studies can examine various aspects and applications of Dewey's philosophy, with researchers investigating collaborative classroom features,



scaffolding, as well as other concepts that can be incorporated into lesson plans. Therefore, through future research, evidence to support the use of Dewey's pragmatism in primary school classes can be presented, benefiting educators, students, managers, and curriculum designers.

## 9. Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this conceptual paper was to provide information on how Dewey's theory is used in primary school classes. John Dewey's pragmatism concept is becoming increasingly important for ESL/EFL instructors to design a successful learning environment that matches the requirements of their students. This calls for the employment of inquiry-based learning, critical thinking, and assessment strategies that enable the measurement of student development. While implementing pragmatism may present some difficulties, there are several advantages to doing so, including better language learning results, the possibility of career advancement, and enhanced student engagement. Future research is needed on this topic, especially qualitative studies that take into account students' attitudes, thoughts, and even lived experiences. Through future research, a more comprehensive understanding of the applications of Dewey's theory to teaching and learning can be achieved, with researchers exploring both advantages and difficulties inherent in the use of pragmatism within ESL and EFL learning.

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