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CueBridging Theory and Practice in Algerian EFL Training : Insights from Montessori

ردم الفجوة بين النظرية والتطبيق في تدريب معلمي الإنجليزية بالجزائر: دروس من مونتيسوري

Réduire l'écart entre théorie et pratique dans la formation EFL en Algérie : enseignements de Montessori

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Réduire l'écart entre théorie et pratique dans la formation EFL en Algérie : enseignements de Montessori

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Introduction

The English language has achieved global status and is almost universally used as the language of politics, economics, education, and cultural exchange. Therefore, the Algerian government has given English a prominent place in education reform for political reasons aimed at supplanting the French language. Secondly, English serves as a bridge to other cultures and civilizations. In addition, English provides a means of making contact with people from all over the world, helping Algeria diversify its economic and commercial relations in an increasingly competitive and negotiation-driven world. It is a powerful tool that enables people to access knowledge and keep up with technological advances taking place in every field worldwide. This means more job opportunities in foreign countries for people with a high level of competence in English. To this end, Algerian policymakers have introduced the LMD system (Licence, Master, Doctorat) to modernize and standardize tertiary education and align it with international standards. This alignment aims to improve the quality of teaching, facilitate student mobility and partnerships between Algerian and foreign universities, and increase employability by acquiring skills and competencies needed in the job market.

1. Bridging EFL Training Gaps in Algeria : From University to Primary School Needs

1.1. EFL University-based Learning in Algeria

Under the LMD system, students are prepared for real life through continuous learning and development. It is a step towards lifelong personal and professional development. In Algeria, bachelor's students can teach in primary and secondary schools. A master's degree, on the other hand, enables future teachers to teach in secondary schools. The teacher training program aims to equip teachers with sufficient pedagogical skills and knowledge to make them

competent and help them overcome the obstacles they will encounter in their first years in the profession. Theory only becomes reliable if it is validated by implementation in the real world, i.e., in classroom situations. The principles underpinning theory and practical activities are complementary. Validating theory through practice can strengthen pedagogical skills, and we cannot expect future teachers to be aligned with experienced teachers in terms of their effectiveness in meeting classroom challenges. According to Darling-Hammond (1998), teachers acquire knowledge most effectively through study, practical application, and reflection.

1.2. Primary School Teachers' Needs

The needs of primary school teachers differ from those of other teachers. They have to deal with children aged between eight and ten. In addition to knowledge and pedagogy of English as a foreign language, they need to be skilled in child psychology, work with beginners, and diversify activities for children. They need to consider each child's specific needs and learning styles. Children are not concerned with the grammar and morphology of the language. The induction program should, therefore, offer significant training in using materials, creating an optimal classroom environment for children, and providing activities that encourage exploration, interaction with others, and immersion in the language.

In 2022, Algerian decision-makers introduced English as a second foreign language in the third year of primary school, after it had been introduced in the first year of middle school (see table below). Teachers received one month's training to start teaching eight-year-olds, which is insufficient to understand the specific needs of this category of learners. Ideally, an induction program should be based on mentoring, teacher development, and observation. Under the supervision of a certified teacher, inductees can learn the principles of classroom management, lesson planning, and instructional strategies. Teacher development should be the cornerstone during the induction period, where trainees can participate in well-framed workshops to learn methods and techniques (e.g., the Montessori Method in the present work) to facilitate children's language acquisition and then reflect on their work. Finally, observing more experienced teachers and receiving informative feedback can empower trainees to improve their teaching by identifying their strengths and weaknesses.

Table 1 : New Structure for Foreign Language Teaching in Algeria

Primary (5 years, ages 6-10)	Middle (4 years, ages 11-14)	Secondary (3 years, ages 15-17)
French 3rd year to 5th year	1st year to 4th year	1st year to 3rd year
English 3rd year to 5th year	1st year to 4th year	1st year to 3rd year

(Haddam, 2022, p. 87)

2. Montessori Method

Maria Montessori succeeded in understanding why traditional classrooms did not foster children's progress. Based on her observations of children in the classroom and by providing them with appropriate materials, she developed a fundamentally different educational system. The materials were refined over time until she designed a curriculum covering various subjects such as history, mathematics, science, grammar, art, and music. This curriculum emphasizes self-directed activity, hands-on learning, and collaboration.

The main goal of the Montessori approach is to promote children's independence and responsibility in a well-prepared and equipped environment that facilitates learning. This environment includes a trained teacher who observes and assists children, ensuring they explore materials that incorporate multiple concepts using their hands and minds. The child's self-directed and focused activities lead to independence, concentration, and personal development, with teaching tools that include sensory experiences.

Figure 1 : Montessori Classroom



Recent psychological research has shown that the Montessori approach is more effective for children’s learning and development than traditional systems, which view “school as a factory and children as blank slates” (Lillard, 2005, p. 3). Traditional education focuses on delivering information to encourage hard learning rather than understanding how children acquire language. The following table highlights fundamental differences between the two approaches :

Table 2 : The Montessori Environment vs. the Traditional Classroom Environment (Razvani, 2017, p. 17)

Montessori Classroom	Traditional Classroom
Prepared kinesthetic materials with error control	Textbooks, pencils, and worksheets
Emphasis on learning, social development	Learning focuses without emphasizing social skills
Unified international curriculum	Narrow, unit-based curriculum
Integrated subjects	Individual subjects
Uninterrupted work cycles	Block time, period-based lessons
Multi-age classrooms	Single-grade classrooms
Active, interactive students with freedom to move	Passive, quiet students at desks
School adapts to students’ needs	Students conform to the school’s structure
Process-focused assessments (skills, benchmarks)	Product-focused assessments

The Montessori approach is learner-centered, promoting independent learning. Children choose their activities and learning methods. The specially designed materials stimulate children’s curiosity, encouraging active, hands-on learning without direct teacher intervention. The teacher acts as a guide, observer, and facilitator, allowing children to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the subject. There is no judgment or punishment ; instead, the teacher methodically observes and gathers evidence to assess the learning process (Torrence & Chatin-MC Nichols, 2005).

2.1. Montessori Method in English Foreign Language Teaching

Initially, the Montessori Method was applied to mother tongue or first language development. However, it has been adapted for teaching English

as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). According to the North American Montessori Center (NAMC, 2009), foreign language teaching in Montessori schools follows two main approaches. The first and most common approach involves teaching the language, grammar, and structure through interactive classes to engage children's attention. The second approach is full immersion in the target language, where all materials are taught in the second language (L2), enabling children to become bilingual and fluent.

2.2. Montessori Workshops for EFL Future Teachers

There is a need for educational reform and the incorporation of the Montessori Method into primary and middle school programs. The induction program should prepare future teachers before they officially begin teaching to equip them to handle the challenges of this method. The training curriculum for Montessori Method workshops should include :

- Understanding Montessori theory and philosophy
- Child psychology
- Use of Montessori materials
- Practical life exercises
- Lesson plan development
- Conducting case studies
- Sensory lessons
- Teaching methods (observation, practical life activities, freedom with limits)
- Art and craft activities
- Teaching practice and internship

The curriculum aims to provide EFL Montessori future teachers with the skills and knowledge to guide and inspire young students, fostering their independence and creativity. The training should help teachers adapt Montessori activities to suit their educational institutions and meet their students' needs (Gastaldi, Marsili, Boylan, Morelli, p. 21).

All educational systems worldwide implement official programs and schedules. However, teachers can introduce and adapt the Montessori approach based on their learners' specific needs. In Algeria, prior to the recent educational reform, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) was introduced in the first year of middle school. Despite this early start, many learners still struggle with speaking the language and constructing meaningful sentences upon entering secondary school. This persistent issue indicates a fundamental gap in the current teaching methodologies and suggests the need for an

innovative approach to enhance EFL learning outcomes. It is thus essential to reconsider and update didactic materials and methodologies, selecting those with proven effectiveness in EFL instruction.

The proposed training program is designed as part of an induction process for new EFL teachers and is grounded in the principles of the Montessori Method. The focus is on adapting this approach for early language acquisition, particularly in primary education, where the focus shifts from formal grammar instruction to immersive, phonetic, and communicative practices. This methodology contrasts with traditional approaches used for intermediate and advanced learners, who require more structured lessons on grammar and language frameworks.

This training program aims to offer a comprehensive set of workshops that equip teachers with the tools and strategies needed to apply the Montessori Method in EFL classrooms effectively. The workshops are framed as controlled, practical sessions, where participants engage in designing diverse educational activities that align with the developmental needs of children at different EFL learning stages. Furthermore, the program is responsive to potential educational shifts, ensuring its relevance and applicability over time.

2.2.1. Workshop 1 : Montessori Theory and Philosophy

The first workshop provides a thorough introduction to the Montessori approach, exploring its historical roots and theoretical foundations. The content covers the following key components :

- Principles of a learner-centered approach : Emphasizing student autonomy and active learning.
- Classroom environment in the Montessori Method : Analyzing the arrangement and design to foster an optimal learning atmosphere.
- Hands-on learning : Developing experiential learning activities that encourage direct engagement with the material.
- Respect for the child : Understanding the child's individual needs and pace of learning.
- Freedom within limits : Balancing autonomy with structured guidance.
- Sensitive learning periods : Identifying key stages in a child's cognitive and linguistic development.
- The absorbent mind : Focusing on how children naturally absorb information from their environment.
- Peace education : Implementing strategies for conflict resolution and effective communication.

2.2.2. Workshop 2 : Child Psychology and Montessori's Pedagogical Techniques

This workshop delves into the psychological underpinnings of the Montessori Method, focusing on the physiological and cognitive development of children. Maria Montessori's framework for child development emphasizes three critical components :

- **Motor Education** : Creating a learning environment that promotes physical well-being and motor skill development.
- **Sensorial Education** : Utilizing didactic materials to refine children's sensory perceptions and cognitive skills.
- **Language Development** : Encouraging language acquisition through natural, context-based learning (Montessori, 1964).

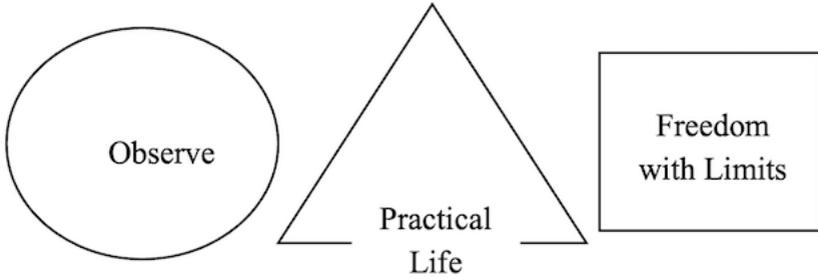
Empirical studies have shown that children learn more effectively when they are actively engaged in exploring their environment, which facilitates the development of cognitive, motor, and social skills (Lillard, 2019). In this session, the trainer will present a video demonstration of a child reaching for a toy. Participants will then engage in a detailed analysis of the child's actions to understand the significance of observational techniques in identifying learning needs. This observational practice enables teachers to design EFL activities that mirror real-life situations, thereby enhancing relevance and engagement.

A key aspect of the Montessori approach is the integration of indoor and outdoor learning experiences. For instance, teachers might organize activities where children explore natural elements such as trees, leaves, flowers, and animals. These observations can then be linked to classroom activities, fostering a deeper connection between the child's immediate environment and language learning. Montessori emphasized the importance of the learning environment, stating : «The environment itself will teach the child if every error he makes is evident to him, without the intervention of a parent or teacher, who should remain a quiet observer of all that happens” (Montessori, 1972, p. 38).

The proposed training program is based on established principles of Montessori education and is supported by empirical research highlighting the effectiveness of learner-centered and hands-on approaches in early language acquisition (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). The implementation of this methodology in EFL contexts has shown promising results in enhancing children's phonetic awareness, vocabulary acquisition, and communicative

competence (Daoust, 2021). Future research should aim to evaluate the long-term impact of Montessori-based EFL teaching on language proficiency and explore its potential adaptation for older learners in different educational settings.

Figure 2 : Montessori Child Prepared Elements



2.2.3. Workshop 3 : Presentation of Montessori Materials in EFL Classrooms

The teacher trainer presents various Montessori materials, including sensory materials, practical life materials, and language materials, providing their definitions. Trainees are then asked to plan and design EFL activities related to each type of material. They should ensure that the activities are safe, engaging, and educational.

Task 1 :

- Aim : To raise trainees’ awareness about different materials that can be used in EFL classrooms.
- Steps : Match each material with the corresponding activity.

Montessori Materials	Activities’ Title
1. Sensorial materials	a. Dusting and polishing activities
2. Practical life materials	b. Phonics activities
3. Language materials	c. Modeling with clay
4. Art and music materials	d. Colored tablet

Task 2 :

- Aim : To plan the above activities according to children’s needs.
- Steps : Plan lessons based on the activities listed above, explaining each step and material used within the objectives of each activity.

2.2.4. Workshop 4 : Exercises for Practical Life

Practical exercises should be appropriate for children's ages. Beginner exercises may not suit adult learners, so the workshop should address both groups separately. It should also be adapted for EFL learning.

- Aim : To raise trainees' awareness of the importance of designing achievable activities for children.
- Steps : Classify the following activities in the table below.

Practical Life Exercises for Children	Practical Life Exercises for Adults
Greetings and introduction	Roleplay
Language labels	Foreign language books and games
Daily routine	Storytelling
Weekdays	Cultural exploration
Weather and seasons	Classroom journal writing
Numbers	Budgeting and financial planning
Singing and movement	Listening to songs and writing lyrics

2.2.5. Workshop 5 : Sensorial Lessons in EFL Montessori Classrooms

Learning experiences are enhanced when learners' senses are engaged. Different senses, such as touch, smell, sound, and taste, help students better understand and remember language concepts. This workshop teaches trainees how to effectively use materials like visuals, multimedia, and hands-on activities to engage the senses.

- Task 1 : Objective : To make trainee teachers aware of the importance of sensory activities in vocabulary development and language acquisition.
- Steps : Identify appropriate activities for each sense and decide whether they are for group or individual work.

Sense	Activities/Objectives
Sound discrimination	Identify different animal sounds
Tactile exploration	Feel and describe different textures
Scent jars	Identify various scents
Visual discrimination	Match pictures to words
Taste testing	Describe flavors of different foods

- Task 2 : Objective : To learn how to plan a lesson using the above criteria.
- Steps : Design activities based on the provided clues.

Activity	Details
Sound Discrimination	Level : Beginner
Vocabulary Focus	Animal sounds
Time	20 minutes
Materials	Sound recordings, flashcards
General Objective	Improve listening skills
Specific Objective	Recognize and differentiate sounds
Description of Activity	Students listen to recordings and match them to images.

2.2.6. Workshop 6 : Art and Craft in EFL Montessori Classrooms

Children interact differently from adults, so the emphasis should be on the process rather than the outcome. Activities should allow children to explore and express themselves, considering their senses. The workshop introduces trainees to various activities, encouraging them to create new ones for different levels.

Child's senses	Activities Related to Senses	Description
Auditory	Sound Bingo	Bingo cards with pictures of sounds
Visual	Nature Printing	Use leaves and flowers for printing
Kinesthetic	Sandpaper letters and numbers	Tracing letters with fingers
Tactile	Sandpaper tracing	Tracing letters on sandpaper
Thermic	Sun Prints	Use sun-sensitive paper
Olfactory	Scented watercolor painting	Use scented oils in painting
Stereognostic	Texture matching game	Pair cards with different textures

3. Implementation in Algeria

The limited application of the Montessori method in Algeria, primarily confined to private kindergartens, underscores the need for collaboration

in teacher training programs. Trainees should be given the opportunity to observe and practice this innovative approach in real-life settings. This hands-on experience is essential for developing a deep understanding of the Montessori principles, which emphasize self-directed learning, sensory experiences, and individualized instruction. By engaging in this method during their training, future EFL teachers can gain practical insights into how Montessori strategies can be adapted to various classroom contexts, particularly in fostering language acquisition in young learners. Such exposure helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application, making it a vital component of effective teacher training.

However, for the Montessori method to be effectively integrated into the Algerian primary education system, there must be significant adjustments to the current rigid national curriculum. The existing curriculum imposes predefined goals and a standardized approach to teaching, limiting teachers' autonomy and flexibility to implement learner-centered activities. This rigidity often stifles creativity and does not cater to the diverse needs of students, potentially hindering their learning outcomes. By reforming the curriculum to offer greater flexibility, teachers can adapt their methods to focus on the students' interests and developmental stages, fostering a more engaging and personalized learning environment. Allowing for such adjustments would not only support the integration of the Montessori approach but also enhance overall educational quality by making the curriculum more responsive to the needs of young learners.

Another critical aspect of implementing the Montessori method in Algerian EFL classrooms is the creation of specialized learning spaces designed to promote independent exploration and learning. The Montessori philosophy prioritizes an environment where children have the freedom to choose their activities and work at their own pace. Establishing such spaces in primary schools would facilitate this approach, enabling students to engage with learning materials in a hands-on manner. The use of Montessori tools, such as puzzles, toys, and manipulatives, can provide significant benefits. These resources are ready-made and specifically designed to stimulate cognitive development, sparing teachers the time and effort needed to create their own materials. By integrating these tools into the classroom, teachers can focus more on guiding students and less on preparing resources, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of EFL instruction through a holistic, child-centered approach.

Conclusion

The integration of the Montessori method into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in the Algerian context represents an innovative approach that has not been extensively explored before. This series of workshops has demonstrated that Montessori principles, which emphasize autonomous learning and sensory development, can be adapted effectively to meet the specific needs of EFL students in Algeria. The original contribution of this project lies in its dual pedagogical strategy : on one hand, adapting traditional Montessori materials for targeted language activities, and on the other hand, proposing a flexible methodology to navigate the constraints of a rigid national curriculum.

By introducing practical and sensory exercises, this project emphasizes an active pedagogy that prioritizes experiential learning, thereby enhancing language acquisition. Moreover, the proposed classification of activities tailored to different age groups and competency levels offers a personalized learning experience, a feature often overlooked in traditional English teaching methodologies in Algeria.

The originality of this contribution also lies in its contextual application. Although the Montessori method is currently limited to private institutions in Algeria, this project lays the groundwork for broader reflection on the need for learner-centered teaching in the public education system. The proposed adaptation could potentially influence pedagogical practices and pave the way for a shift towards a more individualized and flexible approach to English teaching, especially at the primary school level, where the rigidity of current curricula often stifles teachers' creativity.

Furthermore, the recommendation to establish specialized learning environments equipped with Montessori materials, such as language puzzles and sensory activities, marks a significant innovation for the Algerian educational context. These learning spaces provide teachers with a variety of pedagogical tools and allow students to learn autonomously and interactively, thus boosting their motivation and engagement in language learning.

In conclusion, this study not only presents a relevant adaptation of Montessori principles to EFL contexts but also offers a tangible pathway to enrich the Algerian educational landscape by introducing new, experience-based, and holistic teaching practices. This approach could ultimately serve as a model for other countries with similar educational characteristics, paving the way for further research on the impact of alternative methods in foreign language teaching.

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Abstract

The teacher training program aims to help trainees understand theoretical concepts and apply them effectively in real classroom settings, bridging the gap between theory and practice. However, novice teachers often struggle with this transition, facing challenges in implementing what they have learned.

To address this, integrating practical training through a structured induction program before teachers begin their jobs is essential. This approach equips future educators with the necessary teaching skills and pedagogical knowledge to confidently enter the teaching profession. The importance of practicum, especially in English as a Foreign Language Teaching (EFLT), cannot be overstated as it helps align theoretical knowledge with classroom application. This article explores the preparation of primary school EFL teachers in Algeria, emphasizing the need to train them in using effective methods and techniques with young learners. Given its proven success in various educational contexts, incorporating the Montessori Method into the initial training of EFL teachers offers a holistic, student-centered approach. This method can enhance teachers' understanding of diverse teaching materials designed to support children's language acquisition.

Keywords

Induction program, EFL teacher training, Montessori Method, Child language acquisition

مستخلص

يركز برنامج تدريب المعلمين على فهم المفاهيم النظرية وتطبيقها بشكل فعال في البيئات التعليمية الحقيقية، مما يساهم في سد الفجوة بين النظرية والممارسة. ومع ذلك، غالبًا ما يواجه المعلمون المبتدئون صعوبات في تطبيق ما تعلموه عمليًا في الفصول الدراسية لمواجهة هذه التحديات، يعد إدماج التدريب العملي من خلال برنامج استهلاكي منظم قبل بدء التدريس خطوة حاسمة، حيث يزود المعلمين المستقبليين بالمهارات والمعرفة التربوية اللازمة لدخول مهنة التدريس بثقة وكفاءة. تتجلى أهمية التدريب العملي بشكل خاص في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، حيث يساعد على موازنة المعرفة النظرية مع التطبيقات العملية. يهدف هذا المقال إلى تسليط الضوء على إعداد معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الابتدائية في الجزائر، مع التركيز على ضرورة تدريبهم على استخدام أساليب وتقنيات فعالة مع المتعلمين الصغار. ونظرًا للنجاح الذي حققته طريقة مونتيسوري في مختلف السياقات التعليمية، فقد حان الوقت لإدماجها في التدريب الأولي لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لتقديم نهج شامل يركز على المتعلم، وتعزيز فهم المعلمين للمواد التعليمية المختلفة التي تهدف إلى دعم اكتساب الأطفال للغة.

كلمات مفتاحية

البرنامج الاستهلاكي، تدريب معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية، طريقة مونتيسوري، اكتساب لغة الأطفال

Résumé

Le programme de formation des enseignants vise à permettre aux stagiaires de comprendre les concepts théoriques et de les appliquer efficacement dans des contextes réels, comblant ainsi le fossé entre théorie et pratique. Cependant, les enseignants débutants rencontrent souvent des difficultés lors de cette transition et peinent à mettre en œuvre ce qu'ils ont appris. Pour y remédier, il est essentiel d'intégrer une formation pratique via un programme d'accueil structuré avant le début de leur emploi. Cette approche permet aux futurs éducateurs d'acquérir les compétences pédagogiques nécessaires pour entrer dans la profession avec assurance. L'importance de la formation pratique, notamment dans l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère (EFLT), est primordiale pour aligner les connaissances théoriques avec leur application en classe. Cet article explore la préparation des enseignants de langue anglaise dans les écoles primaires en Algérie, en soulignant la nécessité de les former à des méthodes et techniques adaptées aux jeunes apprenants. Étant donné le succès prouvé de la méthode Montessori dans divers contextes éducatifs, il est grand temps de l'intégrer dans la formation initiale des enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère pour offrir une approche holistique centrée sur l'élève, permettant ainsi aux futurs enseignants de comprendre et de manipuler divers matériaux pédagogiques visant à favoriser l'acquisition de la langue chez les enfants.

Mots-clés

Programme d'accueil, formation des enseignants d'EFL, Méthode Montessori, Acquisition du langage chez l'enfant ranean University, Gazimağusa, North Cyprus.