

An Alternative Model for English Language Teaching in Saudi Arabia: The Horizontal Model Based on the CEFR

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Abstract

Objectives: This study aimed to introduce and evaluate an Intensive Horizontal Model for English language teaching in Saudi public schools. The model is grounded in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), with aim of improving language acquisition by integrating listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills into thematically focused weekly units, promoting deeper engagement and faster learning compared to traditional methods.

Methods: A descriptive-analytical approach was used, beginning with a literature review to inform the model's theoretical framework. A questionnaire was developed in consultation with a panel of CEFR experts. Its validity and reliability were tested through a pilot administration involving 50 English instructors. Participants were selected via stratified random sampling. The model's effectiveness was then evaluated using a mixed-methods design, which included formative classroom observations with CEFR-based rubrics

Results: Classroom observations confirmed successful skill integration and interaction. Over 85% of teachers reported improved skill integration, increased student participation, and strong alignment with CEFR goals. However, some participants noted a need for enhanced teacher training to support the model's implementation.

Conclusions: The Intensive Horizontal Model is an effective approach for English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. To ensure scalable and sustainable implementation in line with Vision 2030, it is recommended that national curriculum guidelines be aligned with the model, targeted teacher resources be developed, and ongoing assessment and support systems be established.

Keywords: Intensive Horizontal Model, CEFR, Integrated skills, English language teaching, Saudi Arabia.

نموذج بديل لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في المملكة العربية السعودية: النموذج الأفقي المستند إلى CEFR

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الملخص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم وتقييم نموذج مكثف لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الحكومية السعودية قائم على الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي المشترك للغات (CEFR)، ويهدف إلى تحسين اكتساب اللغة من خلال دمج مهارات الاستماع والمحادثة والقراءة والكتابة ضمن وحدات أسبوعية مركزة، بما يساهم في تعزيز التفاعل العميق وتسريع عملية التعلم مقارنة بالأساليب التقليدية.

المنهجية: اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي، بدءاً بمراجعة الأدبيات لتوضيح هيكل النموذج. طُورت استبانة بمشاركة لجنة من خبراء الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي، واختبر صدقها وثباتها عبر تطبيق تجريبي على 50 معلماً للغة الإنجليزية تم اختيارهم بطريقة العينة الطبقية العشوائية. بعد ذلك، جرى تقييم فاعلية النموذج باستخدام تصميم متعدد المناهج، شمل ملاحظات صفية تكوينية بمقاييس مستندة إلى الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي، إضافة إلى الاستبانة المثبتة الصدق والثبات. **النتائج:** أظهرت الملاحظات الصفية نجاح دمج المهارات داخل الحصص وتعزيز التفاعل. كما بينت الاستبانة أن أكثر من 85% من المعلمين لاحظوا تحسناً في دمج المهارات، وزيادة مشاركة الطلاب.

ومواءمة واضحة مع أهداف الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي، مع الإشارة إلى الحاجة لتدريب إضافي للمعلمين لدعم التطبيق.

الاستنتاجات: يعد النموذج الأفقي المكثف مقارنة فعالة لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في السعودية. ولضمان تنفيذ مستدام يتماشى مع رؤية 2030، توصي الدراسة بمواءمة المناهج الوطنية مع النموذج، وتطوير موارد تدريبية للمعلمين، وإرساء أنظمة تقييم ودعم مستمرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النموذج الأفقي المكثف، الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي المشترك (CEFR)، المهارات المتكاملة، تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية، المملكة العربية السعودية.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, global trends have shifted toward integrated, communicative language teaching, recognizing that isolated skill instruction limits retention and real-world application (Marlina, 2024; Motteram & Dawson, 2025). Language acquisition theories provide the backbone for any instructional model. According to Krashen (1982), language is best acquired through meaningful input and natural communication rather than memorization or decontextualized drills. His Input Hypothesis highlights the importance of exposing learners to slightly challenging but comprehensible material ($i+1$), which aligns with the goal of intensive exposure. Ellis (2018) reinforces this by emphasizing the role of input, interaction, and output in second language development. These principles support horizontal models that integrate multiple skills simultaneously and prioritize authentic communication (Al-Jamal, 2007).

The vertical model of curriculum design, which presents content sequentially over many years with little revisiting, is common in many educational systems (Alshaikhi, 2018). Studies have shown that retention can be hindered when skills practice is too separated (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Conversely, horizontal intensive models, which involve concentrated exposure, have shown promising outcomes in international pilots. Intensive instructional models may support language development by increasing exposure, interaction, and practice within a condensed time frame. (Almusharraf et al., 2024). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a globally recognized model that supports this approach by providing clear proficiency descriptors (A1 to C2) that incorporate skill integration and real-world communication tasks, making it suitable for the Saudi context (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020).

In Saudi Arabia, despite increased English contact hours (Ministry of Education, 2020), national assessment data reveal persistent gaps between instruction and Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022. Inspired by international successes and the mandate of Saudi Vision 2030 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2025), this study proposes an Intensive Horizontal Model to address the shortcomings of the current vertical approach, which has resulted in fragmented learning and low reactivation of skills (Aljahdali & Alshakhi, 2021).

Relevant local research has consistently highlighted these issues. Some studies have criticized the reliance on textbooks, while others have demonstrated that integrated instruction yielded better performance (Aljahdali & Alshakhi, 2021). Recent scholarship advocates for shifting away from grammar-based teaching toward more intensive, interactive approaches (Marzban & Mokhberi, 2012; Adil, 2020), aligning with Vision 2030's goal of adopting international frameworks like the CEFR (Kaewkamnerd et al., 2023). While studies show that integrated models produce notable gains, widespread adoption is limited by systemic challenges. Furthermore, evidence from specialized intensive programs suggests that high-quality horizontal models can achieve remarkable outcomes in communicative competence (Mahan, 2022). Despite this, most public schools retain a traditional vertical model, highlighting a significant gap between proven methods and common practice.

Statement of the Problem

Despite more than a decade of expanded English instruction, Saudi public-school learners consistently demonstrate communicative performance levels that are lower than expected (Aljahdali & Alshakhi, 2021; Alshaikhi, 2018), highlighting a significant gap between instructional time and actual language proficiency. Similarly, average scores on international standardized tests for Saudi test-takers often remain below the benchmarks required for academic and workplace readiness Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022.

The purpose of this study is to design and evaluate a practical, evidence-based alternative to the prevailing vertical model. The proposed Intensive Horizontal Model integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing into weekly task-based cycles aligned with CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020) to provide a scalable framework for curriculum reform under Saudi Vision 2030.

The objectives of the study are to:

- Diagnose the pedagogical shortcomings of the current vertical model in Saudi public schools.
- Develop an Intensive Horizontal Model grounded in second language acquisition theory (Krashen, 1982;

Ellis, 2018) and informed by international best practices.

- Align English instruction with CEFR proficiency benchmarks (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020) and Saudi Vision 2030 strategic education targets (World Bank, 2021).
- Propose a scalable implementation plan adaptable to primary, intermediate, and secondary education stages.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the major pedagogical and practical limitations of the current vertical model?
2. To what extent can the proposed horizontal intensive model improve students' language acquisition and classroom engagement?
3. What challenges are anticipated in implementing this model, and how can they be addressed?

Significance of the Study

This research offers a practical, context-sensitive paradigm to improve English communicative competence in Saudi public schools by:

- Demonstrating a replicable model that integrates CEFR-aligned skill descriptors into weekly modules, thus addressing the fragmentation inherent in the vertical approach (Aljahdali & Alshakhi, 2021).
- Informing curriculum reform efforts under Vision 2030 by providing evidence-based strategies for teacher training, resource development, and policy integration (Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022).
- Contributing to the broader academic discourse on integrated, task-based pedagogy and offering a template for similar educational contexts globally (Marlina, 2024).

Definitions of Concepts and Terms

- **Vertical Model:** A traditional approach to curriculum design where language content is distributed sequentially over several years, often with minimal integration across skills.
- **Horizontal Intensive Model:** A structured instructional model that condenses skill integration and authentic practice into shorter, concentrated timeframes, often involving peer-to-peer and collaborative learning (Coffin, 2020).
- **CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference):** A globally adopted framework that outlines language proficiency levels (A1–C2) and guides curriculum and assessment design (Council of Europe, 2020).
- **Vision 2030:** Saudi Arabia's national strategy aiming at educational, economic, and social transformation, with education reform being one of its core pillars.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical design, reviewing relevant literature and international pilot programs to refine the structure of the proposed Intensive Horizontal Model. CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe,

2001, 2020) served as the primary framework for developing the model's unit content, ensuring clear, level-appropriate learning outcomes.

The study population consisted of English language instructors from the Technical College in Riyadh. A sample of 50 male instructors was selected using a stratified random sampling method to ensure representation of diverse teaching experience and specializations. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 55 years.

A questionnaire was developed as the primary instrument for data collection. To establish content validity, the items were reviewed by a panel of CEFR and integrated-skills experts, who provided feedback to refine wording and ensure alignment with study objectives. A pilot administration of the questionnaire was then conducted with the 50 instructors, and its test-retest reliability was measured over a two-week interval.

The Intensive Horizontal Model

The Intensive Horizontal Model is an instructional approach that seeks to improve the post-instructional processing of a second language by restructuring the curriculum to focus language skills into small, intense periods of study. Unlike the traditional vertical model, which separates skills over several academic years, this model integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing horizontally within weekly instructional units, a method shown to support more effective language acquisition. (Keßler & Lenzing, 2018).

The model's instructional design aims to:

1. Activate the learner's role in the classroom through real communicative tasks (Levkina, 2018).
2. Integrate language skills rather than teaching them in isolation (Aljahdali & Alshakhi, 2021).
3. Enhance student motivation through quick and tangible progress (Almusharraf & Almusharraf, 2021).
4. Link content to real-life and professional contexts.

Key components of the proposed model include:

- **Weekly Unit:** Each unit includes integrated tasks involving listening, speaking, reading, and writing within realistic contexts.
- **Interactive Tasks:** Classroom activities, such as role-plays and short projects, are designed to promote real communication (Coffin, 2020, Mayyas & AbuSeileek, 2023).
- **Vocabulary Recycling:** New vocabulary is reused across various tasks to enhance retention.
- **Formative Assessment:** Continuous feedback from the teacher and peers is prioritized over a sole reliance on written tests (Motteram & Dawson, 2025).

Procedures

The proposed implementation procedure is divided into four phases:

- **Phase One:** Develop a teacher's manual containing ready-made weekly horizontal unit templates.
- **Phase Two:** Train teachers on intensive skill-integration techniques.

- **Phase Three:** Conduct pilot implementation in selected schools and monitor student engagement.
- **Phase Four:** Collect and analyze data, then adjust the model accordingly.

Study Limitations

Anticipated challenges during implementation and their potential solutions include:

- **Resistance to Change:** This can be addressed by involving teachers in the content development process and offering gradual, supportive training (Alshaikhi, 2018).
- **Limited Resources:** This can be mitigated by suggesting the use of simple, low-cost materials and leveraging real-life situations from the local environment.
- **Student Proficiency Gaps:** This challenge can be managed through flexible unit planning and adapting tasks based on varying student proficiency levels (Mahan, 2022).

Results and Discussion

The proposed Intensive Horizontal Model is expected to improve communicative competence, increase student engagement, enhance skill retention, and empower teachers. Empirical support for these outcomes was gathered from an exploratory survey administered to 50 English teachers in Riyadh and Al-Qassim. The results showed that 88% of participants agreed with the model's effectiveness, 8% were neutral, and only 4% disagreed. As detailed in Appendix A, there was overwhelmingly positive perception regarding the model's approach to skills integration, its guidance for weekly organization, and its alignment with CEFR goals. Teachers particularly endorsed the integrated skills approach, though some highlighted a need for additional training and resources, a finding consistent with broader research on teacher development in Saudi Arabia. Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022).

The validity of the Intensive Horizontal Model is strongly supported by contemporary second language acquisition theory. One of its principal foundations is Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, which posits that learners acquire language best through comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency. The model's emphasis on intensive, real-world, integrated tasks aligns directly with this, exposing learners to meaningful communication. Ellis (2018) reinforces this by emphasizing the importance of input, interaction, and output, arguing that skill integration and communicative practice are crucial for language development. These perspectives justify the model's shift away from the traditional vertical model that partitions skills and isolates communication.

The shortcomings of the vertical model in public schools are well-documented. Marzban & Mokhberi, 2012 contend that despite increased instructional time, students often lack functional communicative competence, suggesting the traditional curriculum is inadequate. Other studies criticize the over-dependence

on textbooks and lack of student-centered activities, both of which the Intensive Horizontal Model addresses through its interactive, integrated weekly units (Aljahdali & Alshakhi, 2021). This is further reinforced by global research. Nation and Macalister (2010) indicate that retention is diminished when practice is isolated and that intensive, integrated exposure forms a more effective model for acquisition. This is evidenced by short-term immersion programs which produced significant improvements in fluency within months (Almusharraf et al., 2024). In the Saudi context, studies have found that students receiving integrated, communicative instruction outperformed those in traditional classes Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022. These findings align with the results from this study's pilot, where students demonstrated increased willingness to engage in discussions and use English in real situations.

Finally, structuring the model around the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) adds empirical credibility. The CEFR's emphasis on integrated skills, authentic communication, and observable outcomes provides a strong basis for curriculum and assessment design (Council of Europe, 2001). The CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020) was instrumental in updating the model, providing a framework for creating meaningful, internationally recognized unit objectives based on student needs, making it easier to measure and report learning outcomes (Zhao & Zhao, 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has introduced the Intensive Horizontal Model as a practice-based, evidence-informed alternative to the traditional vertical model of teaching English in Saudi public schools. Grounded in contemporary second language acquisition theories and the CEFR framework, the model horizontally integrates language skills within a focused weekly unit. It presents a sustainable means of improving students' communicative competence, motivation, and retention, while also empowering teachers through structured training and resources. The proposed phased implementation and continual assessment process allows for flexibility and scalability, ensuring the model can be adapted to meet diverse classroom needs.

Recommendations

1. **Policy Integration:** The Ministry of Education should incorporate the principles of the Intensive Horizontal Model within national curriculum guidelines to ensure systemic alignment and support.
2. **Teacher Capacity Building:** Expand and enhance national teacher training programs to focus on skill integration, task-based learning methodologies, and the practical application of the model (Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022).
3. **Resource Development:** Invest in developing high-quality, adaptable teaching materials and digital tools that support horizontal skill integration and reduce teacher preparation time (Abu-Hayyani, 2025). This

includes exploring CEFR-aligned mobile gamification applications that have shown success in other contexts (Puasa et al., 2023).

4. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish robust mechanisms for ongoing monitoring, feedback, and research including pilot programs and longitudinal studies to refine, improve, and sustain the model's effectiveness.

5. **Stakeholder Engagement:** Foster collaboration among educators, administrators, researchers, and policymakers to create a supportive ecosystem for successful and widespread implementation (Alshaikhi, 2018).

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