Foreign Culture in English Curriculum in Saudi Arabia: A Teacher's Voice

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Abstract
The education system plays crucial roles in the development of nations and societies. Curriculum development is a key component of the education process which involves alignment with the goals and objectives of teaching English as a foreign or second language in a particular context. The present article provides a personal narrative about the experience of developing an English language curriculum in the school-based Saudi Arabian context. The narrative represents a teacher's voice during a curriculum development process, and also examines the discussion of different voices represented by teachers and decision makers during several workshops held to discuss the integration of cultural aspects into English textbooks. The narrative points out that the majority of teachers and decision makers were reluctant to incorporate foreign culture for several reasons, such as geopolitically sensitive contexts of the foreign culture. Other teachers were afraid of the impact of foreign culture on their own. The narrative calls for better inclusion of *appropriate* cultural aspects in order to enhance the students' cultural competence so that they can interact effectively with people of different cultures.

 Keywords: Curriculum development, foreign culture, Saudi Arabia, teacher's voice,

1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has placed excessive efforts on education to prepare future generations who are the "nation's true fortune" (Al-Mousa, 2010). Education in Saudi Arabia has been going through a reform since 2001. During this period, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has updated all curricula elements, including religion, sciences, and Arabic and English languages. Indeed, several motives have led the Saudi government to take this significant step in the educational system, including that we live in an age characterized by globalization, in which the world has become a small village. In 2016, the Saudi government launched the Saudi Vision 2030 which represents the government's efforts to reform and improve all aspects of the population's wellbeing and development. Vision 2030 states several goals pertaining to the development and advancement of the education system. Among these goals is developing modern educational curricula. In fact, the MOE has realized that in order to be comparable to the developed countries around the globe, reforming curricula is the initial step.

The educational reform in Saudi Arabia, similar to other countries worldwide, has undergone several stages or change. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) examined, what they called, the three "ways of change" that have defined educational policy and have been practiced globally from the 1960s to the present. The authors then offered a fourth way as a new path to reform student learning and achievement. These ways are as follows:

- The First Way of state support and professional freedom; of innovation but also of inconsistency,
- The Second Way of market competition and educational standardization in which professional autonomy is lost,
- The Third Way that tries to navigate between and beyond the market and the state and balance professional autonomy with accountability,
- The Fourth Way pushes beyond the features of Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (i.e. standardization, data-driven decision making and target-obsessed interactions), to forge an equal and interactive partnership between government, the profession and the people (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012).

According to Alnahdi (2014), the Saudi educational reform is best seen nowadays in the Second Way. In the late 1980s, the Second Way started in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland with the launch of a prescriptive National Curriculum (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). In this period, governments centralized and standardized educational goals and tests. This situation is similar to what is taking place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, along with the standardization of the curricula.

2. The Teacher's Voice

Having presented a glimpse of the educational reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a lower voice attempted to play a significant role in this change and that is, the teacher's voice. Having been a high school teacher of the English language for more than four years, the author has taught old and new curricula of the English language. Throughout these years, the author has noticed that he was teaching the English language by using Saudi culture. In other words, the majority of the content focused on the Saudi and Islamic culture. Only a few pages represented Western cultures. Indeed, the MOE needed students to learn the English language in light of Saudi culture.

However, this would cause several unexpected problems for Saudi students who may not be able to comprehend the language as it is related to its original culture (authentic materials) and realia. Liton (2012), for instance, stated that one of the obvious failings of Saudi students caused by the curriculum is lack of coordination with the sociocultural spirit of the target language.

With this in mind, several studies have shown that language is connected to culture in multiple and complex ways; knowing about second or foreign culture is important to help learn a second (L2) or foreign language (FL) (Alsamani, 2014; Byram, 2012; Cheng, 2012). These studies also confirm that a foreign language cannot be learned successfully without having knowledge of its cultural background and aspects (Alsamani, 2014; Byram, 2012; Cheng, 2012). For instance, if learners are not well accustomed to the context of the target culture, they should at least, make an effort to learn those cultural aspects necessary to communicate with native and non-native speakers of the target language. If this situation does not happen, the learner then would learn and might become fluent in the target language. The learner, however, would become "inaccurate" in manipulating the language in real-life situations (Alsamani, 2014).

Hence, I would argue that learning a foreign language in isolation of its cultural aspects prevents a learner from becoming socialized when it comes to using the target language, either in its context, or in the learner's context. Cultural competence is necessary, as well as linguistic competence to allow the learner to function appropriately in political, educational, religious, and social situations. Therefore, the cultural content of the target language (i.e. English) in language teaching materials is essential to help students understand the target culture. This kind of content further raises students' awareness of their own culture, and permits comparisons and contrasts among various cultures, in a way that leads to differentiating between what is considered appropriate and inappropriate in those cultures. Lastly, such content enhances learner's communicative competence (Chiu, Wu, Hsieh, Cheng, & Huang, 2013).

A question might be raised relating to the position of English and Arabic languages in Saudi Arabia: "Are English and Arabic perceived as equal in terms of power and prestige?" The answer is that English is perceived and considered a more prestigious and powerful language in the community as well as in the public and private sectors. Furthermore, a person who speaks English and Arabic is favored over others in the job market. Therefore, this perception has become a motive to learn the English language, and this motive needs to be supplemented with powerful cultural content in the curriculum.

2.1 The *Appropriateness* of Cultural Aspects

One might argue which culture is appropriate to include in teaching materials. Unquestionably, this argument is very widespread, and this question was heard frequently when the issue was discussed with colleagues and teachers. Simply put, the answer would be that the inclusion of the foreign culture in the curriculum does not mean that curriculum developers have to incorporate *every* single aspect of a culture or country. As a matter of fact, the term culture has several definitions and encompasses several aspects. According to the National Center for Cultural Competence (2001), culture refers to:

> An integrated pattern of human behavior which includes but is not limited to— thought, communication, languages, beliefs, values, practices, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting, roles, relationships, and expected behaviors of an ethnic group or social groups whose members are uniquely identifiable by that pattern of human behavior (para. 6).

Regardless of the diversity of cultures around the globe, such as Western, Eastern, and Latin, curriculum designers should not be confused about what to comprise in the curriculum. Instead, they need to select a list of *appropriate* customs, social habits, morals, arts, cuisines, and traditions about the target language. This is by no mean an attempt to be judgmental when it comes to appropriateness and inappropriateness of others' customs and traditions. Indeed, each culture has its own norms and traditions, and these must be respected. However, what is meant by appropriate and inappropriate content is that the content which does not religiously, politically, and culturally contradict with the Saudi culture. For example, talking about wine drinking habits or having a boyfriend or girlfriend are religiously and culturally prohibited in Saudi culture.

The inclusion and exclusion of foreign cultures in English textbooks rely on understanding how people of a particular culture (e.g. Western culture) behave, communicate, and deal with each other and with people from different cultures. Surely enough, people from Western cultures share some ordinary appropriate and inappropriate norms and traditions, and these *appropriate* norms and traditions deserve to be included in English language textbooks. These traditions include eating and shopping habits, respecting time, obeying rules and policies, various manners needed when talking to people from different cultures, to name a few.

3. The Voices of Others
The motive to write about integrating the culture of the target language into a curriculum is related to the author's teaching experience. When the author was a teacher, as stated earlier, he was a member of a committee to adopt and develop a new English language curriculum for high schools. The central mission of the committee was to select textbooks provided by different publishers in the market. During this process, several workshops were held to thoroughly revise and edit these textbooks. Also, the teachers were asked to adapt the content of these textbooks based on Saudi culture. Here, a teacher's voice raised up; he had a different point of view. That is, he did not support the notion of teaching a foreign language (i.e. English) and culture based on students' culture. Plentiful reasons were stated earlier to support the advantages of this. The issue was raised and opened to the floor to discuss it in the first workshop, and only a few out of forty teachers agreed with the position of this paper. The majority of the teachers, as well as advisers, were reluctant to discuss this matter.

Certainly, the teachers' unwillingness to incorporate foreign culture into the Saudi curriculum had various reasons. One of the primary reasons relied on geopolitically sensitive contexts of the foreign culture. The acts of aggression against Muslim and Arab countries following the dramatic events of September 11th, 2001 have clearly emphasized the sense that West and Anglo-American cultures are threatening Muslim and Arabic countries (Karmani, 2005). Consequently, the place of foreign culture in English as a foreign language (EFL) education in some Arabic/Islamic countries has become subject to various negative perceptions.

A number of voices who refused the inclusion of foreign culture were afraid of the impact of the foreign culture on their own culture. In other words, those voices assumed that foreign culture would replace their traditions and values once it is included in the curriculum. In addition, other voices argued that their culture should be taught because, from their points of view, their culture is 'better' than foreign ones due to perhaps religious beliefs.

Frankly speaking, when the author first skimmed these textbooks – the original versions – and found out that the content represented different cultural aspects, it was assumed that the decision makers would thoroughly reform English textbooks. The author also assumed that the decision makers had realized that teaching foreign language based on Saudi culture was not helpful for students. On the first day, teachers received a booklet that had goals and objectives of teaching English in Saudi Arabia, and guidelines for analyzing these textbooks. One of the elements of the guidelines stated that the content should reflect Saudi culture. Immediately, the author felt disappointed and frustrated because the expectations to have the English curricula completely reformed had vanished. Based on the guidelines, each workshop had missions to accomplish, such as teachers needed first to skim textbooks to check for the complexity of the content. Then teachers had to remove and eliminate inappropriate content from the textbooks, such as religious sensitive pictures and information. Teachers had to replace the content of the foreign culture with the Saudi culture. When the author discussed with supervisors the issue of replacing foreign culture with Saudi culture, they decided to postpone the discussion to another workshop dedicated to addressing cultural issues in the textbooks.

On that day, although the author was sure that the suggestion would not convince the teachers and decision makers, he decided to strengthen the argument by analyzing the goals and objectives of teaching English in Saudi Arabia established by the Ministry of Education. For the sake of this article, the focus is going to be on the cultural goals as follows:

1. "To develop student's awareness about the cultural, economic, religion and social issues of his [Saudi] society and prepare him to participate in their solutions.
2. To develop the linguistic competence that enables the student, in future, to present and explain Islamic concept and issues, and to participate in spreading Islam.
3. To enable student linguistically to benefit from English speaking nations, that would enhance the concepts of international co-operation that would develop understanding and respect of cultural differences between nations" (ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013, p. 114).

As for the analysis of these objectives, the author discussed these goals in the workshop designated to address cultural content. In brief, several questions were asked to the teachers by the researcher and decision makers about which objectives fit better with either Saudi or foreign cultural content. Such questions include; How could students understand a foreign culture if they are not exposed to it? What is the teachers' knowledge about the traditions of foreign cultures in order to supplement students with information about the target culture? How could students talk about Islam and related topics if they do not know what is happening around the world? What are various ways that students could implement cultural aspects of different nations if those students do not have ideas about people of the foreign cultures? Unfortunately, straightforward answers

to these questions were not given. Further, the educators in the workshop tried to avoid answering these questions. Instead, the author was blamed by a couple of teachers for being an 'advocate' for the foreign culture.

The workshop ended up placing the effort of teaching foreign culture on teachers, where a new issue would arise around teachers' education. That is, what is the teachers' readiness to compare and contrast between their cultures and foreign ones in terms of traditions, beliefs, and values? Also, the educators and decision makers agreed on including foreign culture in the textbooks in a way that presents only similar traditions between both cultures, which was not the point of view expressed by the author. For example, there was a particular lesson titled '*Cultural Differences*' in one of the textbooks which presents a number of differences among cultures in terms of particular customs and traditions, such as respecting the time and brining a small gift when visiting a host.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The reason behind advocating for the inclusion of foreign culture in the English curriculum in high schools in Saudi Arabia is twofold. First, a teacher should aspire to see Saudi students not only practice the English language in daily life situations, but also function appropriately in a foreign culture context. Second, the government of Saudi Arabia has begun three giant projects with an allocated budget of billions of dollars to reform and enhance the education system in the country. These projects include King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Public Education Development Project established in 2010 (KAAPEDP), King Abdullah Scholarships Program (KASP) in 2005 "to prepare distinguished generations for knowledge society built upon a knowledge-based economy" (MOH, n.d.), and lately the Saudi Vision 2030 which was launched in 2016. With these projects, educators and decision makers should work hand in hand to supplement students with knowledge and cultural background. Doing so would protect students from encountering difficulties when they travel abroad for various purposes. Since the educational reform is underway, there is an excellent opportunity to integrate foreign culture in the English curriculum.

Practically speaking, the inclusion of foreign cultures in the English curriculum in Saudi Arabia could be done through different approaches. Again, it is important to state that some cultural aspects that teachers or course designers elect to implement in the teaching material might be a double-edged sword. In other words, course developers have to choose customs and traditions to incorporate into the textbooks in a way that these customs do not contradict with the ones in the local culture. The content of the textbooks has to reflect what is appropriate and beneficial in the target culture to apply in the local culture. Indeed, it seems difficult to select what is appropriate and inappropriate because the local culture plays a pivotal role in this process. However, a number of shared norms among various cultures are worth included in the curriculum such as eating and shopping habits, whereas norms such as eating pork are prohibited in Islam.

The notion of teaching English through the culture of that language, no matter how many people in these cultures speak that target language, merits more advocacy and support from teachers and the community. In the words of J. D. Brown (2001): "a language is a part of a culture, and culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (p. 165).

In conclusion, teachers' voices who support integrating foreign culture in the curriculum, though they are not loud enough, have to keep optimistic toward the future of this hope. Since the doors are still open and the educational reform is still ongoing, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel!

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