

Developing the English Curriculum in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Possibilities and Challenges

Alya Khulaif Alshammari

College of Languages and Translation
Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University
Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The world-wide diffusion of English has led to the development of regional varieties known collectively as World Englishes (WEs) and the need to teach English as an International Language (EIL). In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), although English is now a mandatory component of the curriculum from Grade 4 primary school, current materials and methods of English language teaching reflect Anglo-American cultural and linguistic norms and values, and therefore lack the diverse nature of English today and conflict with the Islamic discourses and values. In addition, there continues to be a marked preference for the standard American English accent. Such focus on standard English along with other linguistic and cultural factors have led to substandard English skills among Saudis. Moreover, English teachers in Saudi Arabia do not know much about EIL paradigm and its benefits on uplifting students' intercultural communicative skills in English, the essential requirement for the newly proposed conceptualisation of English competency. This paper discusses the inadequacy of the English materials used in the KSA schools and universities and argues that an EIL framework should be implemented in English curricula at all levels. The challenges of such change are also highlighted.

Keywords: English as an International Language, English materials, English teaching in Saudi Arabia, English varieties

Introduction

As an English major student who has spent most of her life in a homogeneous culture (Saudi Arabia) and got a scholarship to Canada, the writer of this paper was challenged to see how much diversity exists in an inner circle country like Canada. How much she was prepared to communicate with such 'different' communities was the question that she asked herself the first day she arrived Vancouver in 2012. Although all those communities speak one language, namely English, but for her, they speak different languages.

English has been increasingly used all over the world and recognized as the 'default mode' for intranational and international communication (McArthur, 2002, p. 13). However, the spread of English has resulted in the diversification and the pluricentricity of the English language and led to the development of new paradigms: 'English as a lingua franca' (ELF) (e.g. Jenkins, 2000, 2009), 'English as an international language' (EIL) (e.g. Matsuda, 2012; McKay, 2002; Sharifian, 2009, 2013) and 'World Englishes' (WEs) (e.g. Kachru, 1986, 1992). These paradigms have empowered different varieties of English, emphasised the legitimacy of all these varieties and therefore challenged the taken-for-granted dominance and superiority of native-speakerism and Standard English. Kachru (1985, 1992) has divided the use of English in the world into three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle refers to the countries where English is spoken as the mother tongue, such as US and Australia. However, in the Outer Circle countries, English is recognized as an official second language, and these countries are former colonies, such as India and Singapore. The Expanding Circle represents the countries where English is used as a foreign language, including China, Japan and Saudi Arabia; the latter being the focus of this study.

In response to the tides of globalisation and modernization, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), like most Expanding Circle countries, has intensified the use of English in the country and given much attention to English teaching and practices. However, this movement has encountered processes of resistance, as people in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia believe that English conveys Judeo-Christian values and Western beliefs (Karmani, 2005a; b; c). This situation does not exist only in KSA but concerns many countries around the world with regard to the hegemony of the English language as an 'imperialistic tool' (Phillipson, 1992, 2009), and a 'missionary language' (Pennycook, 2003; Pennycook & Makoni, 2005; Wong & Canagarajah, 2009). These concerns have been particularly heated in the Islamic world where many scholars (e.g. Glasser, 2003; Karmani, 2005a; b; c; Charise, 2007; Kabel, 2007; Elyas, 2008, 2012; Mirhosseini, 2008; Elyas & Picard, 2010) have expressed their fears towards 'more English less Islam' and viewed English teaching as a 'catalyst in the [de-Islamisation] process since it cuts across almost all disciplines acting as a conveyor of knowledge and culture' (Argungu, 1996: 331). Therefore, some scholars have proposed that western ideologies should be removed from English materials and an Islamic approach should be adopted in English teaching (e.g., Argungu, 1996; Makoni, 2005; Mahboob, 2009). The publication of the KSA local editions of English textbooks for primary and middle school serves as clear examples of this trend, emphasising the local culture and values. Mahboob & Elyas (2014) have analysed one of these textbook to prove the localisation of teaching and learning of English in KSA, discovering some linguistic features of Saudi English.

This paper discusses the apparent shortcomings of the English teaching materials used in

Saudi Arabia, some possibilities for redeveloping and strengthening these materials by incorporating EIL principles, and the challenges that might be faced during the process of implementing changes. The researcher chose to describe the wide picture of teaching materials in KSA because the concept of EIL is still new in the Saudi context. For example, the education institutions still heavily rely on the teaching materials published by the US, which lack the diverse nature of English today. Further to this, the monolingual approach of teaching has still been practised in most, if not all, Saudi Arabian universities. Therefore, the issues underlying teaching materials are not limited to a certain institution but can be seen across the country. In this paper, the writer uses examples from an analysis of these materials done by some Saudi scholars.

Teaching Materials in Saudi Arabia

As sources of knowledge and cultural input, teaching materials play a vital role in foreign language classrooms and can reflect a certain view of the world. According to Brown (1995), teaching materials can be defined as;

any systematic description of the techniques and exercises to be used in a classroom teaching . . . broad enough to encompass lesson plans and yet can accommodate books, packets of audiovisual aids, games, or any of the myriad types of activities that go on in the language classroom (p. 139).

Despite the many government reforms and initiatives towards implementing a Western, problem-based learning approach in both KSA middle schools and high schools (Sharp, 2004), the textbooks used are very much 'Middle Eastern' editions (Ministry of Education, 2005). However, Al-Saadat argues that the introduction of these texts is not an attempt to 'shrug off foreign culture', but rather to make it more acceptable to the locals (cited in Elyas, 2011). Evidently, there are various cultural and religious elements affecting the fundamental identity of learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia; yet, there is an acknowledgement of the paramount importance of English, and likewise Westernisation, in making efforts to build a modern society. Unsurprisingly, the ambiguity caused by these two competing views has led teachers to err on the safe side by limiting student exposure to English and its connected cultures in the classroom, and thus, has resulted in a general lack of cultural and linguistic competence in young learners.

At university level, the situation is somewhat different, and the Western angle is particularly prevalent. English courses are based almost entirely on US textbooks, which typically do not give any consideration to the Arabic or Islamic culture, and contrast sharply with the traditions and values of the Saudi lifestyle. For example, the textbook used for first year English students is *Interactions 1* by Kirn and Jack, published by McGraw-Hill Higher Education in 2002. As highlighted by Elyas (2011), an analysis of this book reveals many standpoints that potentially conflict with primary Islamic discourses (especially those focused on home and family). To give a specific example, the first cultural and ideological shock that Saudi students encounter occurs in the first chapter, page 1, entitled 'School Life Around the World', which features an image of a mixed gender group sitting together and conversing. Needless to say, the images of students' routines presented in this chapter are perceived as inappropriate and contradictory in the context of the KSA.

On the whole, it is clear that issues of sociocultural identity and representation need more attention in foreign language classrooms in Saudi Arabia. Here, many a number of linguists argue that language learning is problematic when there is a great deal of incongruence between home and classroom discourses, or even when the culture presented in class materials is 'alien' and incomprehensible (see Canagarajah, 1993; Pennycook, 1989, 1994).

A useful solution, or at least a mitigation, for this core concern would be to implement an EIL framework into the KSA curriculum. According to McCarthy & Moje (2002), the post-modern pedagogical approach should be targeted at 'teaching students literacy tools for challenging oppressive structures and for playing with the power of hybrid identities' (p. 238). In this sense, developing an EIL curriculum would go a large way towards achieving this goal in the KSA as it allows Saudis to take ownership of their use of English, and therefore they will be freed from the feeling that their own variety of English is inferior to other varieties.

The EIL Framework

As a result of globalisation, the landscape of English has been drastically changed. On this account, scholars in the field of TESOL and Applied Linguistics have called for the urgent reconceptualisation of the old practices of English teaching. Alsagoff (2012) asserts the importance of writing a book on the teaching of EIL and claimed that 'real English is not Inner Circle English' (pp. 3-235). Specifically, as mentioned by Brown (2012, p. 156), the EIL curriculum should:

- Embrace the cultural and linguistic diversity of English
- Give examples of successful communication among interlocutors from various backgrounds
- Be sensitive to cultural differences and develop strategies for handling the issues arising from these differences
- Enhance a sense of ownership among bilingual speakers and students
- Include the local culture of students to promote a sense of belonging to the international community
- Incorporate both local and global appropriation to help students function at the local and international level
- Integrate models of Outer-Circle and Expanding Circle countries to give a complete picture of the English uses and users today.

The Feasibility of Embracing EIL Principles in the KSA Curriculum

With the EIL paradigm still being in its infancy, the application of its principles to the KSA curriculum is by no means an easy task, but neither is it impossible. The ultimate aim of teaching EIL, as suggested by Matsuda (2012), is to help students utilise English as a communicative tool within an increasingly competitive and globalised world; a world which is widely diverse in both linguistic and cultural capacities. This diversity can be harnessed to present English as a pluralistic and dynamic entity in the national curriculum. In order to achieve this, classroom materials must be designed to enhance awareness of and sensitivity towards the many differences in the varieties of English used today, and to teach learners to appreciate, or at least tolerate, those differences. Unfortunately, the limited representation of English language users (only native speakers, chiefly from the US) in Saudi Arabia's teaching materials may result in some resistance or confusion when learners encounter new speaking varieties of English, such

as those spoken by people from the Outer Circle. The narrow perception of the English language in Saudi Arabia simply fails to correspond with the whole picture of English in the modern-day world.

In devising a strategy for exposing students to linguistic varieties of English, deciding which kinds to select as instructional models for use in teaching materials is somewhat challenging, especially from within the Expanding Circle countries where there is such a wide range of spoken English adaptations. Matsuda (2012) contends that it is more than enough for a textbook to focus mainly on one variety of English, and in many contexts, American or British English (the most popular instructional models) might serve as a reasonable choice. Nonetheless, students must be given insight into the relevance and legitimacy of all breeds of English and must understand that the variety they are studying is one of many. It is important to note here that it is not strictly necessary for learners to become fluent in several kinds of English in order to be successful communicators in international situations (Matsuda, 2012).

Further to this, electing which cultures to accommodate in the curriculum is yet another challenge for educators in the KSA. Both students and teachers in Saudi Arabia experience what is called 'a clash of civilisations' (Huntington, 1996; Ratnawati, 2005) as the cultural forces within university curriculum teaching and the learning environment compete with each other. The conflict between indigenous Arabic/Islamic values and Anglo-American values is bluntly obvious for English students in teaching materials at university level.

In terms of cultural content, the *English for Saudi Arabia* textbook used in middle and secondary schools from the mid-1990s till now (Elyas, 2011) appears to be an EIL textbook on the surface. However, Saudi nationalism and Islamisation are heavily endorsed in the book, making it incompatible with today's motives to utilise English for international communication.

Unlike Outer Circle English speakers, people in the Expanding Circle are less likely to express their indigenous values in English when communicating with people from their own culture, but they will inevitably need to do so in their communications across cultures. Following his study of English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks, Gray (2002, p. 116) suggests that there is an urgent need for a 'glocal coursebook' that provides students with a 'better fit' in terms of practically connecting them with the world of English.

A key way to support this endeavour is to implement the principles of EIL in the KSA curriculum. However, this step is not easy to take in a context like Saudi Arabia where the thing that matters most to be an English university teacher is the accent. Two years ago, when the writer applied for a job in one of the big universities in KSA, the first question she was asked is 'how is your accent?'. From this example, it is obvious that most Saudi people are obsessed about native-based accent and native speakerism. Therefore, implementing EIL is quite challenging, and the process of making changes will be a long rough way. First, the education institutions in Saudi Arabia are competing with each other in having larger numbers of native speaker teachers, believing that the monolingual approach of teaching English ensures the high standards of their outcomes. This situation does not only occur in Saudi Arabia but the whole Middle East and can easily be seen through job advertisements for English teachers in this region (Mahboob & Golden, 2013). The attitudes of Saudi people, both teachers and students, towards the legitimacy of different varieties of English are also another area of challenge and frustration as the majority

of Saudi people are accustomed to the one correct answer approach. Their obsession about 'correctness' has led to the strong attachment to standard English (American) in their teaching materials. Even if some Saudi teachers are convinced about the significance of EIL approach in teaching English, they cannot apply this approach in their teaching without obtaining permission from their departments. Unlike teachers in other countries, Saudi teachers have less flexibility in their teaching process; i.e. they have to follow a set of lesson plans and activities agreed upon by the department. Moreover, curricular innovation cannot be done straight away without approaching English teachers programs which introduce teachers to the linguistic and functional diversity of English; yet, the lack of understanding of how to prepare EIL teachers is another concern (Matsuda, 2003). Although many scholars have urged the importance of implementing changes regarding teaching EIL, less attention has been given to how changes can be made, and what is essential for English teachers' preparation programs. For this reason, universities and other education institutions in Saudi Arabia are more likely to choose hands-on materials which are primarily published in inner circle countries. Looking at all these factors affecting the process of implementing changes in English materials in Saudi Arabia, the writer strongly believes that although the challenges ahead seem difficult, the results of such change are worthy striving for.

Conclusion

Clearly, there is a dichotomy in Saudi Arabia between the desires to teach proficient English and preserve indigenous Arabic values. I believe that incorporating EIL principles into English language teaching materials may be the most effective solution for dealing with this conflict on many accounts. Presently, the English curriculum in Saudi Arabia adopts only the native speaker model based on American pronunciation, and so students are very likely to experience frustration when encountering other non-native varieties of English. Furthermore, unlike Outer Circle users of English who have developed their own local nativised models, Saudi English speakers have long been struggling to express their own cultural norms and reflect their own variety of English for international communication. To this end, it is essential for them to gain practical knowledge and experience of different types of English and work towards developing their own linguistic system, and this can only occur by embracing an alternative pedagogical approach.

As proposed in this essay, a useful fix would be to implement English as an International Language, which helps students connect more personally with the materials they are using and allows them to freely convey their own identities. Developing and applying EIL in practice is just one of the many missions that Saudi Arabia must execute in response to the sociolinguistic demands it is facing both internally and externally. However, it is undeniable that English for the purpose of international communication is one of the most significant linguistic skills that Saudi natives can take advantage of in the present-day global setting. As part of the Expanding Circle, Saudis need to learn to appreciate and understand the myriad values reflected in both native and non-native varieties of English, and also to express their own indigenous ideals through their English communications, rather than just 'foreign' ones. To conclude, therefore, EIL methodology constitutes a definite way forward to balance the maintenance of cultural principles with satisfying escalating global needs.

About the Author:

Mrs. Alya Alshammari is a lecture at Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University in the College of Languages and Translation. She received her bachelor degree from King Saud University in English language and translation and her master degree from Monash University in

Applied linguistics (English as an International Language EIL). She is currently a PhD candidate at Monash University. She is interested in studying the issues around teaching English, the dichotomy between native and non-native English speaking teachers, EIL, English language diversity, and the impact of language learning on identity.

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