

Policies and Issues in Teaching English to Arab EFL Learners: A Saudi Arabian Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines the history, policies, and discussions relevant to the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia. It investigates the value of EFL within the Saudi education system and surveys the extent to which English has been adapted to suit the needs and customs of Saudi citizens. While focusing on major policy issues related to planning and implementing EFL instruction, the paper examines how stakeholders have worked to preserve Saudi culture, Arabic, and the structure of Saudi society. It seeks to determine whether EFL courses in Saudi schools meet the needs of students, the results of which are compared with Saudi policies on language teaching. The study then presents observations on the compatibility of teaching practices and policies, as well as the issues involved. Saudi Arabia faces several challenges that have greatly hindered the planning and implementation of language-teaching policies. This study proposes strategies for strengthening these policies to fully achieve the desired objectives. It also shows that English is gradually being naturalized in Saudi Arabia, absorbing cultural, religious, and social values and beliefs.

Keywords: Arab EFL learners, language planning, language policy, Saudi education system, teaching practices

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Introduction

Although Arabic is the official language in Saudi Arabia, English is increasingly used as a lingua franca in the private sector between Saudi citizens and the large population of foreign workers. In public policy statements, the Saudi government has commented on the fundamental role played by English worldwide, acknowledging that it has become the language of science and technology and a key factor in modernization (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Al-Seghayer, 2005; Elyas & Picard, 2010). Furthermore, because English is the language of business and politics, it has gained a lingua franca status globally. Saudi policies aim to prepare high-school learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) to become global citizens who will advance and support the Saudi community academically and economically.

After the discovery of massive oil reserves in the 1930s, Saudi Arabia became a key strategic interest to the West, especially the United States, which developed close and long-lasting ties with Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government realized the need to train its citizens to communicate with the outside world, leading to the introduction of EFL in schools (Zuhur, 2011). The importance of the language was linked with the social and economic development of the country (Faruk, 2013). The petroleum industry provided a powerful motivation for learning EFL in the kingdom, so much so that its dissemination and teaching have sometimes been referred to as “petro-linguistics” (Karmani, 2005). One of the main reasons for introducing EFL instruction was to prepare Saudi students to communicate with the expatriate community (Al-Braik, 2007).

Saudi EFL teaching policies and strategies have evolved considerably over the years. The first policy to guide EFL instruction in school was created in 1943 when English was introduced for intermediate public-school students all over the kingdom (Al-Ghamdi & Al-Saddat, 2002). Students were required to study English until Grade 12. In private schools, however, EFL instruction began in first grade (Faruk, 2013). Today, English is taught throughout all grade levels in private schools and at every university (Al-Seghayer, 2003).

The 2003 Saudi language policy made English compulsory from the fifth grade onward (Elyas & Picard, 2010). In 2012, a new policy recommended English be taught starting in fourth grade but only for four hours per week. King Saud University is believed to have established the first English Department as early as 1957 (Al-Abed Al-Haq & Smadi, 1996). The medium of instruction in schools is officially Arabic, although in practice, the engineering, medical, science, and technical departments at Saudi universities often use English for this purpose (Al-Seghayer, 2005).

During the 1990s, the nation’s Sixth Development Plan (1995–2000) enacted educational policies that reflected the World Trade Organization (WTO) requirements and the demand for English in global interactions. It became imperative for students to achieve linguistic competence in English to enable the country to modernize as a global economy. Since then, English has played an important role in shaping the Saudi nationalization (“Saudization”) policy, which seeks to fill public and private industry positions with a Saudi workforce (Looney, 2004).

The importance of English teaching has expanded since 2005, as government policies have reduced the country’s dependence on oil and made sustained, painstaking efforts to develop a

knowledge-based economy in line with developed countries (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Universities, including King Saud University, King Saud University of Science and Technology, and King Fahad University of Petroleum and Minerals, have invited scholars from all over the world to inspire and educate young Saudi students and entrepreneurs. This phase marks a major shift in the focus on English teaching. More and more new universities have been established with expanding language centers, where English is taught to all students for at least one semester (Faruk, 2013).

The Ministry of Education's core objective for introducing EFL instruction in high school is to enable citizens to use English-language texts and write and speak competently in the language (Elyas & Badawood, 2016). According to Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013), English is now the primary medium of instruction in technical majors, such as medicine. It is no longer seen as needed solely to pass tests but has come to be viewed as essential for higher education and commerce, carrying practical importance and high status. Furthermore, English plays a prominent role in Saudi private and government sectors at all levels (Al-Seghayer, 2014).

Despite this, English proficiency in public high schools is still very low and failing to meet government targets (Alnasser, 2013; Huwari & Al-Khasawneh, 2013). The present study has analyzed high-school language policies and planning in order to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors affect language policies in Saudi Arabia?
2. What challenges hinder the fulfillment of government language policy goals?
3. What strategies could be used to make language policies more practical and effective, enabling them to achieve the desired objectives?

Literature Review

According to Mahboob and Elyas (2014), English has entered public and private schools in such a major way that Saudi Arabia has developed its own version of the language: "Saudi English." This Saudi form of English is being incorporated into social life and manifesting in culture, religion, and society. However, the present study reveals that teaching and comprehension are not always strong and that some policies have not been fully or effectively implemented. It is true, however, that EFL teaching is coming of age and that efforts are being made to further improve instruction.

To be successful, language curriculum must be created with clear goals in mind. Because of this, the Saudi Higher Committee of Education is seeking to implement EFL policy reforms (Al-Shumaimeri, 2003). Various groups have emphasized the need to design suitable English curricula with clear goals (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013).

Arab EFL learners generally encounter various problems, particularly in speaking (Rababah, 2005) and writing (Benhania, 2016), as clearly demonstrated by many researchers. For instance, Al-Khairy (2013) confirmed that several studies conducted in the Arab world have demonstrated that Arab college students struggled in their English learning in general and writing in particular. Similarly, Huwari and Al-Khasawneh (2013) found that Arab learners of English,

including Saudi learners, faced major problems in learning writing skills, and this dilemma has been shown by a number of researchers (e.g., Al-Khairy, 2013; Al-Hazmi & Schofield, 2007). Regarding speaking skills, Al Shumaimeri (2003) motioned that according to instructors, high-school students often graduate without being able to conduct even brief conversations. This demonstrates that English teaching approaches applied in Saudi public schools are ineffective and involve some problematic issues, especially in the area of planning and development

Khan (2011) conducted a study to explore the biggest obstacles EFL learners faced in Saudi Arabia. One of the crucial factors influencing the EFL teaching and learning process in the Arab world is the fact that students only learn English in schools, where English instruction is ineffective. As Alhamdan, Honan, and Obaidul Hamid (2007) stated, “Discourses of the universality of English and its role in individual mobility and social development abound in the literature” (p. 1), facilitating English becoming a global language and increasing the importance of English instruction. However, few studies have examined “how these discourses unfold in local contexts ... are reproduced or appropriated, and ... are translated into teaching and learning artifacts (e.g., policies and textbooks) and practices by teachers and students” (p. 1).

This paper has studied the value of EFL learning within the Saudi education system to contribute to the ongoing discussion of how EFL policies are implemented in Saudi schools. It has examined how the intersection between English, globalization, and neoliberalism has influenced English language planning and policies in the Saudi education system. Various stakeholders have embraced these key elements to push for their agendas, arguing that the government’s current policy of internationalizing higher education “has created an unregulated market of English-medium institutes in the country” (LeHa & Barnawi, 2015, p. 547). Such issues have had negative effects on the Saudi government’s endeavors to restructure and empower the country’s post-secondary education system, although the Center of Excellence has had positive effects on technical and vocational training.

Despite the advantages of English and English-medium education, several barriers have emerged due to “the government’s rather uncritical adoption of English and its over-reliance on international training providers” (LeHa & Barnawi, 2015, p. 561). The Saudi government has been rushing import services and products to the country to improve English education; nevertheless, this process lacks accurate planning, transparency, quality, or effective support for all stakeholders (LeHa & Barnawi, 2015).

Given current barriers, the English proficiency of Saudi learners is not expected to greatly improve in the future (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Therefore, challenges related to language policy and teaching practices should be thoroughly investigated. Teacher training programs are vital to develop effective teaching methods and a productive school environment. According to Al-Seghayer, current EFL curriculum and practices must be made to align with learning goals with sufficient support from administrators to motivate students. This will result in higher learner proficiency and more effective teachers.

Discussion

English has gained increasing prominence within the Saudi education system, and ordinary Saudis have come to see English proficiency as necessary to obtain knowledge from sources within and outside the country (Millward & Hayes, 2011). With globalization, English has been increasingly used to achieve economic, social, and humanitarian goals. Thus, modern realities have changed the national outlook, placing more emphasis on global interaction and participation in activities with common humanitarian themes and international ramifications. The challenge is to understand whether these goals are being achieved, the actual status of English teaching, and whether there is a gap between the goals and the reality. Assessing the current situation in relation to pedagogical input, needs-based syllabi, learner motivation, and learning barriers can help determine the source of poor proficiency among Saudi EFL learners.

The influence of and over-reliance on Arabic can make it difficult for Saudi students to acquire English intonation, accent, syntax, and semantics. However, many new technologies and teaching methodologies, as well as greater effort, are helping to overcome these obstacles. These reflections are based on observations of the fundamental transformation taking place in public schools. Private schools in the kingdom have always been more responsive to student needs because they are subject to competition. Even so, the difference is only marginal.

Core English skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) should be taught separately and afforded sufficient attention in the classroom. Weakness in any of these skills has a far-reaching impact on language acquisition, as no one skill can be learned or used in isolation. Basing instruction on this axiom will enable appropriate thinking, planning, and decision making.

The researcher discussed this consideration informally with 10 teachers and 20 high-school graduates selected for the study. The data were collected using direct interviews. None of the students were fully satisfied with the English instruction they received, and most of them had an aversion to learning English in Saudi schools. Creating a communication channel with teachers was challenging as students seemed afraid to express their true feelings. They reported that it was difficult to say anything in English in classes because of the distant relationship with their teachers. In line with numerous other studies (e.g., Alharbi, 2015; Al-Nasser, 2015), this paper argues that communication is a prerequisite for learning; the absence of open communication from Saudi EFL classrooms thus acts as a barrier to students realizing their full potential.

Students admitted to having problems with their teacher, saying it was difficult to ask him a question when he was teaching, they felt stressed in his class, and he did not explain the meaning of difficult words. He was also seen as autocratic, giving tests without telling students which chapters they would cover. Despite this situation, the students were aware English was and would continue to be an important language for work, and they feared they would never master it.

The interviews with high-school students were enlightening. They were well informed about the potential of information technology and thought more modern methods and electronic devices should be used to teach English. Such techniques would help them understand the language better, learn with minimal input from the teacher, and generate interest in English. In particular, they felt English should be taught using online games, movies, and social communication

programs. The majority opinion favored changing the approach, methodology, and materials used in teaching, and all students preferred a more open, student-centered, tech-savvy learning culture.

The main problem observed during this study were the poor learning outcomes in the form of language proficiency. Students could graduate from high school, having attended English classes four hours a week for six full academic years, but still be unable to produce a single error-free utterance.

Suggestions Based on the Findings

In response to the analysis and interviews, the researcher proposes the following solutions to help teachers and course planners develop strategies and methodologies for teaching English to students in Saudi schools.

Introduce English during first grade. English education in Saudi schools must begin early—not in the fourth grade, as is prevalent now. Various studies (e.g., Abdan, 1991; Alharbi, 2015; Al-Nasser, 2015) have shown that second language acquisition becomes easier when taught from the first school year onward. The best time to learn a language is earlier in childhood.

Stress quality over quantity in course materials. Course planners and educators must shape English curricula to match the needs and capacities of learners. Saudi curriculum designers often create lengthy course syllabi based on course designs used in the West without addressing the needs of Saudi learners. As a result, course materials are sometimes difficult to use, and teachers rush to complete the material before the end of the semester. Not only does this approach not help students learn, it can make them unlearn what they once knew. Curricula should be reviewed to ensure the material can be taught within the time allowed.

Use assessments, not exams. Progress in language learning is not as easy to quantify as some other subjects. Current examination systems do not test the language abilities of students accurately. It has been observed that students' actual language competencies are often drastically different from their exam results. To accurately assess learner proficiency, it is necessary to do so in naturalistic ways by talking with them and assessing their speech and understanding in various communicative situations—rather than only through conventional tests.

Avoid crowded classrooms. It is common to see Saudi English classes that are extremely overcrowded. Language instruction, however, requires time and concentration. In a class of 50 or more students, it becomes impossible for the teacher to evaluate the progress of every student. An ideal language classroom should not have more than 20–25 students for results-based, practical instruction.

Use audio-visual aids. Normal English communication involves listening and speaking, even when students are learning to read and write. Language is a social act in which people exchange ideas and information, and it cannot be taught from a merely theoretical standpoint like other subjects. Introducing audio-visual aids could thus help students learn English more effectively. Schools should take advantage of modern technologies to establish language labs and smartboard teaching systems to offer a more naturalistic learning environment.

Expand class time. Once out of school, students often must use resources such as language institutes to increase their proficiency. Four hours a week of language instruction divided into 40-minute classes is insufficient for teaching four language skills, assessing progress, and encouraging regular practice. Class time devoted to English should therefore be increased.

Conclusion

This paper assessed EFL policy and practice in Saudi schools. It found key problems impeding learners from meeting language acquisition goals. EFL curricula and instruction were observed to depend extensively on grammar-teaching methodologies, to the detriment of learners. Major issues were found in course planning and implementation. These issues can be addressed through better teacher training, curricula, methodologies, teaching tools, and technology. Saudi students and educators were keenly aware of the importance of acquiring English skills. While considerable progress was made by introducing English in the fourth grade, more steps are needed to meet students' language-learning goals.

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