

“Language Planning and Language Policy: A Review of the Educational System and Teaching of English in Saudi Arabia”

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Abstract:

The present literature review scrutinizes the educational system and the teaching of English in Saudi Arabia. The review adopts the ‘thematic model’ whereby the discussion will be apportioned according to ‘themes’ or ‘theoretical concepts’ that are deemed important to understanding the topic. The review discusses the issue in light of previous studies or articles to reach a conclusion. It finalizes that the centrality of Islam led to the disassociation between English and its pertinent culture for the fear of losing one’s identity and could threaten the religious and cultural heritage of the country. The reviews also point to a paradox in the Saudi educational policy, for which solutions are provided.

Keywords: Literature review; English teaching; Saudi educational policy; Centrality of Islam.

Introduction:

English language teaching (ELT) has been under the scope for many years. The pervasiveness of English divided people into two categories in terms of their attitudes to the language: positive or negative. Moreover, English has been accredited the status of an international language. Learning it would have to involve the absorption of its germane culture. This has led to the creation of different teaching strategies to ensure a successful acquisition. However, in certain situations, obstacles may arise due to political, social, cultural, or even religious reasons, that can put a negative spin on the process of ELT. All of which may be construed as an attempt to maintain the linguistic identity of the citizens of a particular country, in this case, Saudi Arabia.

The status of English can be threatening to some nations for which obstacles have been placed on its path. The theme is the struggle that ascends from the linguistic conflict between the mother tongue and foreign languages, it even goes as far to clash within aspects of the mother tongue itself. The chosen sources that are to be reviewed shed a light on such conflict, and explain the repercussions of adopting an educational policy that lays out some covert restrictions to ELT, having different language attitudes towards English (even towards varieties of the same language) and the status of English and its role in the world of globalization.

Language Planning and Policy (LPP) of a nation takes into account universal factors to project political, economic, strategic, ideological, social, and cultural ‘forces’ for successful implementation. The fluctuations of LPP status of a nation are normal occurrences since the ‘forces’ are not static. Saudi Arabia (SA) had borne the jolts of these ‘forces’ and strained to uphold its LPP with slight modifications in order to sustain and maintain its strategic power internally and externally. In view of that, the purpose of this review is to locate and analyze published studies or articles that can provide substantial knowledge of the current consensus of trends in LPP in SA. While the outer focus of the review is going to be directed at LPP in SA, the inner focus is directed at the status of the English language in relation to the LPP fluctuations in the Saudi context. Therefore, the current review adopts the ‘thematic model’ whereby the discussion will be apportioned according to ‘themes’ or ‘theoretical concepts’ that are deemed important to understanding the topic. Themes are divided into sections; each section concerns a particular theme. Section one (S1) focuses on providing a description of the national, formal, and foreign languages in SA. (S2) concentrates on the history and description of the educational system and languages in SA. (S3) discusses the status of English language before and after 2010 in terms of Islamic, cultural and economic factors. (S4) explores the constraints, challenges, and difficulties of teaching and learning English in SA. (S5) attempts to identify a research gap that needs to be addressed and provides anticipated findings accordingly. Finally, (S6) concludes the review and bids some perspectives about the use of English and other foreign languages in SA in 2030.

Description of the National, Formal & Official Languages in SA:

After a careful examination of the linguistic situation in SA, Almahmoud (2003) announces that within a language, there exists a linguistic conflict. It endorses efforts to increase the status or prestige of a language in comparison to other languages in use, which may involve legislating new functional domains for the language; hence “status planning”. Moreover, Al-Seghayer (2014) consolidates Almahmoud (2003) stance, however, in relation to foreign languages. Utilizing direct method approach, Almahmoud proposes a study to investigate the use of the two main varieties of Arabic: Standard Arabic (SAR) and Colloquial Arabic (CA), in relation to people’s attitudes- SAR being the official language of the kingdom, which may be considered a contribution that may assist language planners in Saudi Arabia. The study shows that the use of CA is higher on social interactions than SAR because participants acquire CA before SAR during formal education. However, SAR is predominately used in newspapers, magazines, and presentations in classrooms. The frequent use of one variety diminishes the other, which is common in diglossic situations. Findings also suggest that participant’s attitudes towards CA

was positive. In spite of that, participants also revealed positive attitudes towards SAR influenced by religious, linguistic, social and cultural factors. Moreover, most participants are in accord that knowledge should be translated into Arabic, particularly SAR. This is based on the belief that scientific subjects are easier to comprehend in SAR, which reflects their culture and identity. Furthermore, the beauty of SAR gives it the edge on media outlets. Thus, there exists an associated prestige with using SAR. On the other side of the coin, Elyas & Badawood (2017) verify Almahmoud (2003) and Seghayer (2014) claims of the linguistic conflict between foreign languages and the mother tongue (and varieties), stating that English assumes the role of the sole widely disseminating foreign language in SA promulgated, perhaps, by the positive attitude of the people of Saudi Arabia towards English (Faruk, 2014).

History & Description of the Educational System & Languages in SA:

Ebad (2014), adopting the explanatory research design, makes the claim that the educational system in Saudi Arabia is predominately influenced by religion. Alrashidi & Phan (2015) corroborate Ebad's claim and uphold that Islam (the religion of the state) dominates the different aspects of Saudis' culture, beliefs and customs. They proclaim that it dominates and orchestrates education in SA- the fear of identity loss was palpable particularly pre-9/11.

Elyas & Badawood (2017), by means of critical discourse analysis approach, substantiate these views even further by stating that curricula and pedagogies are inundated with the conception of the centrality of Islam, the pillar upon which the education policy document was first crafted (particularly during 1970 – 2001). They also added that this propensity is likely to hamper the teaching of other languages, in particular, English- stripped from its germane culture. They claim that the document goes as far as to subjugate English to the servitude of the state and religion. This emphasis on using English as a tool for the spread of Islam led to the negligence as to how elements of English should be presented in curricula. However, Elyas & Badawood (2017) point to a shift in the educational policy apropos the teaching of English during the period of (2004 – 2014). Thus, unveiling a drastic change in the "The Ministry of Education Ten Year Plan". This refurbished document embraces both the Islamic and global identities, while the remainder focuses on educational discourse and interpersonal interactions universally due to political pressure on SA post-9/11. They (Elyas & Badawood) also state that post-2000, a new policy related to ELT unfolded, which appeared to follow a weaker Islamization position than the former one. The policy has put Arts alongside Sciences, analogous to elements of the language. Alrashidi & Phan (2015) demonstrate that this weaker positioning, during the shift, gave 'religion' prominence only for providing reasons to learn English to serve and transfer the ideals of Islam or to eradicate the misconception about Islam in the West.

Status of English Pre-& Post 2010:

Alrashidi & Phan (2015) note that ever since the introduction of English in SA in the late 1950s, there had been some restrictions on the teaching of English at elementary schools for it might affect students' learning of Arabic. English syllabus, consequently, reflected indigenous beliefs, customs, values and culture of Saudi society- Islam being one of the major influencing factors (ibid). On a similar note, and by conducting a qualitative analysis of previous studies in the Arab region, Ebad (2014) gathered that it was widely believed that the introduction of English at school level could threaten the religious and cultural heritage of the country. Additionally, Faruk (2014) stated that even within the Saudi English language education policy, the choice of a particular English variety is left to the teachers/students. Such propensity may be for gaining 'consent' of the people who considered English "spiritual polluter" or "language of infidels". This led to the neutrality of English for policies to ignore overtly the existence of other regional varieties of English (pre-2003). On the contrary, within the period (2004-2014), Elyas & Badawood (2017) pointed to the emergence of Tatweer documentation, especially from 2007 onwards, which has put things into perspective. The reconstruction of Education was launched for developing public education. The government has indeed stretched its wings to catapult KSA citizens to reach for the stars in different walks of life. Thus, the teaching of both language and culture is possible without violating morals related to religion and customs. Therefore, the adoption of the discourse of inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue has taken place, while highlighting the role of English teaching within the global community, making a shift in the networks of practice to accentuate politics, ideology, religion and economy- 'English as a gateway to success'. Likewise, adhering to the Wallerstein's analysis of the world system, Faruk finds that the huge oil revenue moved SA to the semi-Periphery position. Thus, ELT is allocated an immense focus since, currently, plans are set forth to achieve a core position in the world system (2014).

Constraints & Challenges of Teaching & Learning English in SA:

The status of English can be threatening to some nations for which obstacles have been placed on its path. The theme is the struggle that ascends from the linguistic conflict between the mother tongue and foreign languages, it even goes as far to clash within aspects of the mother tongue itself. (Al-Seghayer, 2014) mentioned (4) constraints that can affect the process of EFL in the Saudi context, and traced back their origin for better insights for those working in the field of education (language planners, teachers, textbook designers, etc.)

1. Beliefs Constraints

Such beliefs are promulgated by cultural, societal, and even political factors. They include a) students' perception of English, b) their experience with learning English, and c) their expectations about studying English (Al-Seghayer, 2014).

It would seem that English learners in Saudi Arabia view English learning as instrumental- a means to an end. This results in demotivation for learning, and the disassociation between reality (of learners themselves) and the English language. Such an orientation is not surprising, rather predicted because learners have no real purpose to use English outside the classroom. Policymakers should be made aware that the trajectory is heading towards a space with no air needed to survive. English, as a subject, should not be a 'required' subject matter to alleviate the pressure on learners and circumvent the development of extrinsic motivation on part of earners to only pass a particular level or stage.

2. Curriculum Constraints

Limited time for instruction, lack of learning material resources, the imparting of knowledge, and the constraints of teaching methodology are examples of the hurdles that can impede the process of EFL (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Personally speaking, I view current English curricula as too optimistic. The high expectations are estimated to manifest within a limited time for instruction. In addition, due to the large number of students in classrooms, teachers find it strenuous and challenging to sustain and maintain each student's advancement. Furthermore, current curricula are designed to provide students with one lesson a class. A lesson contains a whole lot of vocabulary items and exercises that are almost impossible to complete in one class. Coupled with inadequate teaching resources required by current curricula, insufficient time for language exposure, the outcomes are self-inflicted.

3. Pedagogical Constraints

The lack of sufficient proficiency in English teaching methods is one of the obstacles affecting EFL in Saudi Arabia. Some colleges e.g. colleges of arts do not provide courses regarding teaching methodologies, neither do some of them provide a practicum teaching courses in public schools. This leads to inadequate pedagogical preparation; thus, teachers will not be, consequently, qualified for the job of teaching EFL (Al-Seghayer, 2014).

The lack of in-service training programs is a contributive factor affecting the process of EFL. Conversely, if such in-service training programs exist, they are limited and handled poorly by local education departments. Another important factor is that the objectives, design, and long-term learning goals of English curricula do not take into account aspects of 'needs analysis' concerning the existing Saudi context. Drawing on theories of second language acquisition, studies in 'needs analysis' are just marginalized. Therefore, students are placed upon the same pedestal and treated as a homogeneous group.

4. Administrative Constraints

(Al-Seghayer, 2014) divided these constraints into:

- 4.1. Constraint of centralization
- 4.2. Constraint of partnership.

4.1. Al-Seghayer states that the Ministry of Education (MoE) controls the entire educational system (2014). Saudi teachers, as a result, are tied by what the MoE dictates, thus, teachers are less autonomous and are teaching within boundaries. Teachers are also expected to adhere to the MoE policies; decapitating the capabilities and responsibilities of teachers.

4.2. The lack of establishing partnerships with local and abroad training centers has its toll on teachers' development and the educational system as a whole. Forming partnerships with experienced EFL teachers who are familiar with the Saudi context is of utmost importance. This will enrich the field and equip teachers with the tools they need to teach effectively. Collaboration and partnerships with world-renowned training centers would enhance the development and execution of national plans and activities pertaining the training of Saudi EFL teachers into professionals.

Research Problems and Anticipated Findings

The articles exploited in this review were interrelated. They reinforce one another in terms of how they look at the topic in question. For example, Tariq Elyas's paper, which adopts critical discourse analysis approach, looks at the restrictions imposed on both teachers and curriculum designers in relation to the guidelines of the MoE policy. It reinforces Alrashidi's and Ebad's articles. The main conception is the centrality of Islam that is palpable in the MoE policy, its influence on the design of the English syllabus and the belief that the introduction of English at school level could threaten the religious and cultural heritage of the country. As for Almahmoud's paper, coupled with Faruk's, present, respectively, yet again, the role religion plays on shaping attitudinal preferences towards languages or varieties of the same language, and the importance of ELT within the Wallerstein's world system because the more a nation moves to the core zone, the more English is needed. Therefore, it would seem that there is a 'paradox' in the formulation of the SA educational policy. The main problem is why there is such a strong emphasis, rather an imposition, on the teaching of English in light of religion, which leads to yet another problem, the disassociation of culture from ELT. This has been referred to as a 'paradox' because Islamic classes have been reduced from four classes a week to only one class per week. Such incongruity and inconsistency, when it comes to the introduction of English, can be viewed as discriminatory and bias. Language planners, therefore, should strive to rid the SA English educational policy of such discrepancies and reveal the true incentives behind this linguistic discrimination- this view is reinforced by the reduction in Islamic classes. Addressing these problems may deepen the connection between

language learners and English, which may reverse “the low achievement level in English among Saudi students” (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015).

In addition, I believe, the disassociation of culture from ELT may be one of the main culprits for the low achievement scores in English among Saudi students mentioned above. Students do not see the ‘relevance’ factor behind ELT and therefore put English in the ‘Periphery’ position instead of the ‘core’. Thus, it is of paramount importance that the word ‘language’ should include culture systemically. The thought that ELT (culture included in L= ‘language’) would somehow have to involve bringing the “Christmas” tree to the classroom should perish. One of the goals of ELT is to achieve proficiency that qualifies learners to use and understand the language in both spoken and written forms. This entails familiarity with the culture in which the language is nurtured. Hence, language is to be viewed as a cultural vessel that represents the civilization of a nation. The subtle meanings of speech cannot be understood outside the scope of culture. In this regard, the exposure to a language-related culture is not only necessary to understand the meaning of speech, but also indispensable to evaluate and appreciate the ethics and civilizations of nations. It is an integral part of any language program. Language learners need to be aware of the role of culture in language learning. Therefore, the exposure to “inappropriate” textbooks is encouraged in order to create an environment in which a clash of identities is manifested. Thus, active decisions can be made by teachers regarding what to teach and how to teach it, and students are put into a position to widen their perception of the world around them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the review provided insights regarding the teaching of English and how this process is influenced by the notion of the centrality of Islam in the SA educational policy. The review adopted the ‘thematic model’, which puts sources with a similar focus together, making it very easy to see points of differences and similarities. The reviewed articles are interconnected and delineated the impact of incorporating religion in the teaching of English. The amount of evidence presented in the articles indicates the magnitude of adversities that have been put into place, which led learners to become culturally alienated (from the target culture). The aim of the review is to raise language planners’ curiosity and invoke the question, ‘does religion have any place in the teaching of languages? The premise is completely founded and justifiable since Islamic classes were subjected to reduction; indicating that the ‘religious identity’ is not the intent as it has been explicitly suggested. Further research and investigation are needed to uncover the subliminal, or rather the ‘implicitly conscious’ intention surrounding the issue.

Moreover, officials understand the importance of exposing learners to authentic texts manifested through Western cultural contexts. This may facilitate the transition and the quest of fulfilling the movement within Kachru’s circles, from the ‘expanding circle’, to the ‘outer circle’ where English is used as a second language, which may bring the country a step closer to achieve the aspirations of 2030. Correspondingly, the purpose of learning English should be to broaden the students’ cultural and intellectual backgrounds- instrumentally or integratively, and to develop their countries technologically and economically. Thus, creating a thriving economy and prosperous community that cognizes the roles languages play in the world. In addition, there have been studies confirming that Saudi students agree (for the most part) that the study of the English language and its culture is necessary in order to develop their English comprehension (cf. Alrashidi & Phan 2015, Elyas, 2008, Elyas & Badawood, 2017). In the same way is the case for all languages within the view that a language is considered a ‘gateway’ to its speakers.

On a final note, students need to build their individualistic identity, whereas teachers should indulge students in materials (other than English) emphasizing Islamic values and keeping a collective Islamic identity. The articles thereby suggest different solutions. First, the exposure of English should occur pertinent to its culture in regard with the indigenous social practices. Second, promoting the integration of English and Arabic so that students can overcome the language barrier. Third, to effectively teach English and emphasize its role in the development of the Internet and for transferring the Ideals of Islam to the West to eradicate the misconception. In the end, I would like to mention a verse from the Holy Quran that endorses and legitimizes the diversity of people, calls for acquaintance with other cultures and sheds a positive light to it, thus nullifying the manipulation of religion in planning language curricula.

{O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted} (Sahih International: 49:13).

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