

A Brief Historical Perspective of English in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This chapter presents a brief historical perspective of the teaching and learning of the English language in Saudi Arabia. Historically, English was introduced for the first time in Saudi Arabia in the late 1920s, at which time the language was perceived to have little importance and was met with great resistance by society. Indeed, the new language was believed to be a real threat to the Saudis' Arabic mother language, their culture, customs, and their religion: Islam. Thus, the teaching and learning of English received little attention for approximately seven decades because of the language's low status in the country. However, a real shift occurred in teaching and learning English in the country after the events of 9/11. Since then, the Saudi government has made massive efforts to promote English, which has resulted in tremendous development in the way in which English is taught, and its influence in the country. This development has contributed significantly to the enhanced status of English, as well as the appearance of new trends and insights in EFL teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: History of English, Saudi Arabia, EFL/ESL teaching, EFL/ESL learning, petro-linguistics

1. Introduction

The primary goal of this paper is to present a historical review of English as a foreign language in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), e.g., the teaching and learning of this language and its role in Saudi society over the past decades. This synopsis will describe the status of English over time, from its introduction in the late 1920s to today in a society that is conservative, closed, and resistant to the influence of Western culture. Recognizing the past and present status of English in KSA will demonstrate, in turn, the developments that have taken place over the decades in the process of teaching and learning English in the country, including ongoing trends and those anticipated in the future.

2. Literature Review

English was, and continues to be taught as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia. This can be attributed, in part, to the fact that little importance is usually attached to the teaching and learning of English in the Saudi education system. According to Elyas and Picard (2010), there has been a general reluctance to teach foreign languages, including English, throughout the early history of education in KSA. There is a variety of reasons for such reluctance, but fears that learning English would affect Islam as a religion, and Arabic as the mother tongue of Saudi nationals is the primary concern.

Chronology

Teaching and learning English in KSA can be categorized chronologically into two distinct eras. The first dates to the late 1920s, when English was first introduced in the Saudi education system, while the second began after the events of 9/11, which marked a real shift in teaching and learning English in the country.

History of the changing status of English in Saudi Arabia

2.1 The Status of English in Saudi Arabia from the 1920s until 2001

Faruk (2013) clarified that when Saudi Arabia was still a young and poor country, the expansion of English language teaching (ELT) was very slow. According to him, English was introduced in Saudi formal education to accelerate the country's integration with the world; this took place under the auspices of two English-speaking world hegemony: The United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). The exact date that English was introduced first as a foreign language in Saudi Arabian education is unknown. Al-Shabbi (1989) has assumed that it dates to 1924, when the General Directorate of Education was established. Niblock (2006) concurred, stating that ELT was introduced before the emergence of KSA as a state in 1932. Baghdadi (1985) also indicated that English was introduced as a school subject in Saudi elementary schools for the first time in 1924. Al-Seghyer (2014), on the other hand, believes that English began to be taught in Saudi Arabia in 1928, five years after the Directorate of Education was established in the country in 1923.

Other authors have indicated that English was introduced to Saudi schools in the late 1930s or even later. Al-Johani (2009) claimed that English was introduced in the 1930s after the discovery of oil, and was used only in the context of business, while the government waited until the 1950s to introduce it to the syllabus. According to Al-Ghamdi and Al-Saadat (2002), the teaching of English was first introduced in KSA in the Scholarship Preparation School (SPS), which was established in 1936 in Makkah to prepare Saudis to travel abroad and obtain a Western education. Al-Abdulkader (1978) assumed that the teaching of English and French

began in the newly established intermediate level education system (grades 7–9) in 1958. According to him, however, the Ministry of Education (MoE) eliminated French at this level in 1969, and it remained in the curriculum only at the secondary level (grades 10–12), which enabled English to enjoy a higher status than French at that time.

Although none of these authors provides in disputable evidence of precisely when English was introduced in Saudi Arabia, it may be assumed that this occurred sometime in the late 1920s, just prior to the discovery of oil in the country.

The discovery of oil in the early 1930s had a great influence on the teaching and learning of English in the country. For example, Zuhur (2011) asserted that after the Second World War, the world became much more interested in Saudi Arabia because of its newly discovered huge oil reserves. Since then, the USA has become involved more deeply with KSA than has the UK because of its commercial interest in the oil industry. Faruk (2013) concluded that the increasingly close relationship between KSA and the USA at that time made English and ELT more relevant to Saudi economic and social development than ever before. In this respect, Mahboob and Elyas (2014) pointed out that English has become linked inextricably with the discourse of petroleum. The industry has proven so vital to the development of English that some researchers, like Karmani (2005), have labelled the study of the dynamics of oil and the spread of English in the Arabian Gulf region, including Saudi Arabia, ‘petro-linguistics’. They added that this economic demand, which was driven by a social imperative, boosted the demand for improved English instruction in the country.

Al-Braik (2007) clarified that English became important in the KSA education system because of its perceived economic value. He added that, as early as 1978, KSA already relied heavily on the large number of foreign companies that contributed critically to the economic development of the country. He stated further that almost 90 per cent of workers in crucial establishments, such as hospitals, restaurants, and shopping malls, were expatriates, while only 10 per cent were Arab nationals with a good command of English. According to him, one of the main objectives of teaching EFL in KSA at that time was to produce students who could communicate satisfactorily in English with the expatriate community. Mahboob and Elyas (2014) indicated that the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco), which was founded in 1933, is the foreign-run company that has had the greatest influence on the KSA economy and on the framing of EFL instruction in the country as well. According to these authors, because the company dominates the economy, Saudi locals’ ability to communicate with foreign workers and managers became a priority, and resulted in the promotion of English language instruction.

2.2 *Government policies and EFL educational practices over the years*

The Saudi government passed a considerable amount of fundamental legislation on EFL teaching in the country. In 1943, a decision was made to introduce teaching English beginning in the first grade of the intermediate stage (grades 7-9) of the education system (Al-Ghamdi & Al-Sadat, 2002). According to Mahboob and Elyas (2014), English was introduced to KSA public school students in grade 7 from 1970–2001. Since then, students study English for six years, until grade 12. The private education system is completely different, and private schools in KSA have provided English education from grade 1 since the beginning of the 1970s (Faruk, 2013).

Szyliowicz (1973) clarified that English was included in the curriculum of only a few of the early Saudi schools and then only for a few hours per week at the high school level. Students in intermediate schools usually have four English language classes per week for a period of 45 minutes per class at every grade level. Up to the mid-1980s, 6 hours per week were designated for teaching English in both intermediate and high schools (grades 7-9), but this number was later reduced to 4 in both stages.

At the university level, Faruk (2013) stated that English was first taught as a compulsory subject in the Islamic law college established in Mecca in 1949 for 2 hours per week for 4 years. Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi (1996) assumed that King Saud University was the first university to establish an English department in 1957. They added that the first English department for female students was founded at the Women’s College of Education in Mecca in 1972. According to them, all of the universities established in the 1970s, including King Saud University (1957), King Abdul-Aziz University (1961), Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud University (1974), King Fahd University (1975), King Faisal University (1976), and Umm Al-Qura University (1980) had English departments and most also had language centers and translation institutes.

The globalization and modernization policies adopted in KSA in the 1990s have led to the increased use of English in the country. Looney (2004) indicated that the emergence of the term *Saudisation*, which refers to the process of affirmative action for Saudis enacted in the early 1990s, made it crucial for Saudi nationals to achieve linguistic competence in English so that they could capture service industry positions as well as positions within the core industries.

2.3 *The Status of English in Saudi Arabia from 2000*

From 2000, there is a shift in the teaching and learning of English in KSA. Elyas (2008) stated that the KSA government decided in 2003 to introduce English in all primary schools. Faruk (2013) argued that Saudi

Arabia's vision changed significantly as of 2005, in that the country has been trying since then to reduce its dependence on the oil industry by developing a knowledge-based economy to match those of developed countries. This has, in fact, resulted in a tremendous revolution in education in the country and the number of universities in KSA increased from only 8 in 2001 to 28 government and 8 private universities in 2015. This massive expansion of educational institutions at all levels has affected the teaching of English in the country significantly. Faruk (2013) assumed that nearly all Saudi universities and colleges today have English departments and English language centers to teach at least one semester of English to students in other departments. He added further that English currently is the medium of instruction in medical, engineering, and other science colleges. English also was introduced gradually to the public school curricula during this period. It was first introduced in grade 7 in 2003 and then in grades 5 and 6, and in grade 4 in 2012.

This shift in the teaching and learning of English in KSA has led the language to enjoy a new status in the country. The current objective of teaching and learning English in KSA was made clear in the official guidelines of the Ministry of Education manual for teaching ESL, which state that "*The aim of teaching English in the secondary schools is to have the public attain a standard which will permit him [sic] to make ready use of desired materials in English and which will enable him [sic] to communicate satisfactorily, according to his [sic] needs, in both spoken and written forms*" (MoE 2002).

Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013) elaborated on the present status of English in KSA, stating that it is currently the medium of instruction in technical education, medicine, and many other majors. They added that students now recognize that English is no longer a language they need simply to pass examinations, but rather, is a subject important in higher education, international communication and business, and trade. As a result, students consider English highly practical and prestigious, which has led to a tremendous increase in student enrollment in various English language institutes today. Al-Seghayer (2014) asserted that English enjoys an eminent status in various sectors at all levels within KSA at present for a variety of reasons. Among these is the fact that it is the only foreign language taught in Saudi Arabian public and private schools, universities, and a variety of industrial and government institutions.

3. Implications

The introduction of English in the education system in KSA was associated with considerable debate and conflict because of religious, cultural, and social concerns, in addition to the fear that the dominance of English would affect the Arabic mother language of Saudis. The resistance to EFL teaching within conservative Saudi society has nevertheless declined noticeably over time for the reasons detailed above.

The most important reason for this notable change in the status of English in KSA can be attributed to the significant desire of both the Saudi government and Saudi nationals to remain abreast of the needs and advances of the rest of the world. The government, in particular, makes huge efforts to enhance English education in the country. In 1973, the ministry of education designed and instituted a special program to train English language teachers, both nationally and internationally. Ibrahim (1985) explained that those who hold diplomas in teaching English are required to study the language extensively for one year in Saudi Arabia. According to him, those who pass a comprehensive test at the end of the training program usually are sent to British universities for a 100-week English language program to obtain certification to teach English in intermediate schools.

Today, Saudis' recognition of the English language extends far beyond the country's borders. In the past several years, the Saudi government has sent hundreds of thousands of scholarship students to English-speaking countries, such as the USA, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and so on, to study different disciplines in which the medium of instruction is English. In exchange, these students are expected to contribute strongly to the development of EFL teaching and learning in the country upon their return. In addition to sending large numbers of Saudi students abroad to obtain a Western education, the government has recruited qualified teachers from around the globe to teach English in Saudi academic institutions.

Since its introduction to the Saudi educational system, English has played a significant role in the lives of Saudis and in society generally. Faruk (2013) indicated that the Saudi people have taken for granted the "purely pragmatic" function of English as a very useful tool to advance in their careers, build their nation, and spread their religion. Thus, ELT's significance in KSA is not limited to its linguistic usefulness, but influences the social, economic, political, and religious spheres at the national and international levels as well.

In terms of the economy, Mahboob and Elyas (2014) emphasized that English has been particularly important in the Saudi education system because of its perceived economic value, as the language is linked inextricably with the discourse of petroleum. Therefore, English is taught as a core subject in public and private schools and is used as the medium of training in major organizations and companies across the country, such as Saudi Airlines, Saudi Aramco, the Saudi Telecommunication Company, etc. Alrashidi and Phan (2015) stated that learning English allows Saudis to benefit from its use as the medium of international communication, and to contribute thereby to the expanding economy and business environment of KSA. According to them, English has

enabled Saudis to communicate with approximately 9.5 million foreign expatriates who work in Saudi Arabia, which is necessary to acquire the competence they need to be qualified and ready to replace foreign expatriates in the labor market. Furthermore, English also plays a key role in the enhancement of foreign investments in Saudi Arabia.

Politically, learning English has enabled KSA to communicate with the world, and to become a key player in the foreign policy domain, both regionally and globally. Cordesman (2003) explained that English is also associated closely with the development of KSA's military power, as American military advisors, trainers, and technicians work in the Kingdom. He added that the country still buys a large amount of American military equipment on a regular basis, and thus the imperative remains for English to be taught to KSA military as well as civilian personnel.

Socially, using English in KSA also allowed the rapid spread of technology and an increasingly globalized society. Further, gaining access to such technology makes it possible for Saudis to communicate across geographical borders through social network media (Alrashidi1 and Phan, 2015).

From the religious perspective, English is the key means with which to communicate with the approximately 11 million pilgrims who visit Mecca and Medina—holy places for followers of Islam—every year. Moreover, learning English is considered a religious imperative because of its importance in teaching Islamic values to non-Arabic speakers, and thus participating in spreading the religion (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Osailan (2009) explained that using English allows Saudi Arabian people to interact with individuals of different cultures, present the ideals of Islam, and translate sources of Islamic knowledge to benefit English speakers who might want to know about Islam and there by contribute to eliminating the prevalent misconceptions about Islam in the West.

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