

A Review of the Current Status of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Education in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The aim of this review is to evaluate the available research studies on Saudi Arabia's education sector in relation to English as a Foreign Language (EFL). There is agreement on the fact that the country's EFL education has evolved significantly over the past few decades. Now, with the state of Saudi Arabia's economy changing rapidly, there have been changes in the teaching and learning of EFL in the country. The review has covered studies on the current state of EFL sector in the country along with those that discuss the limitations of EFL education and teachers in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: EFL, Education, Saudi Arabia, Trends

Introduction

The English language is the language of international communication. In Saudi Arabia, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has evolved significantly over the decades. At present, Saudi Arabia's Education Policy says that all students in the Kingdom are to be taught at least one foreign language, so that they are able to "interact with people of other cultures for the purposes of contributing to the message of Islam and serving humanity" (Al-Seghayer, 2014, pg. 143). With the English language being the only foreign language being taught in Saudi Arabia's public universities, it is essential to study extensively the position of EFL education in Saudi Arabia.

This paper aims to study the present position and future of EFL education in Saudi Arabia. It will explore the history of EFL in Saudi Arabia, training of EFL teachers over the years, changes in curriculum of EFL courses, culture training, importance of EFL in Saudi Arabia, and goals of EFL.

Methodology

For the purpose of this review study, search terms were used in the Google Scholar search engine. The results of these searches were shortlisted as per the year of publication. Only those studies were used which had been published after 2014.

Results and Discussion

This section will cover the results of the methodology used for purpose of this study. It will explore the research works available on EFL education in Saudi Arabia.

History of EFL Education in Saudi Arabia

According to Alhujailan (2009), the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education decree implementing EFL teaching in primary schools, was overturned in 1942 (as cited in Sofi, 2015). As a result, the teaching of English in schools began to start in the middle school, with each of the sessions being 45 minutes, and 12 sessions per week. However, in 1953, French as a Foreign Language was

implemented in the curriculum of secondary schools and this was cancelled in 1970 (as cited in Sofi, 2015).

Before the 2000s, learners of the English language in Saudi Arabia were not very keen on the language, primarily as they thought it would not help them in any way, including better their careers. According to Alnofai (2014), the attitude of the general populace in Saudi Arabia towards learning English language had been negative until the start of 2000s (as cited in Sofi, 2015). According to Faruk (2014), in recent years, Saudi Arabian attitude has been evolving to a positive one, due to a variety of reasons including for job hunting (as cited in Sofi, 2015). Another reason for change in the general attitude of Saudis towards English language education is the change in the English language education policies that occurred in the country in the late 1990s. This change in policy revolved around centering of learning the English language around religion and the spread of Islam. According to Faruk (2014), at present, the Saudi Arabians perceive English to be “the one universal language of modernization, sciences, and high economic status, making English a requirement for the labor market” (as cited Sofi, 2015, pg. 13).

Training for Teachers Through the Years

In the 1970s, the Saudi Minister for Education designed a training program for people who wanted to become English teachers. According to this program, high school graduates were asked for first study English for one year and then sit for a comprehensive exam. Those who passed this exam were given the opportunity to study in British universities for a period of 100 weeks to earn a teaching certificate and this allowed them to teach English at the intermediate school level (Al-Seghayer, 2014).

From the 1980s onwards, the system for preparing English teachers has been quite different. English teachers in the country are being trained through training programs offered by English departments across various Saudi universities. After graduating from such programs, Saudi teachers are ready to teach English at the elementary, intermediate, and secondary levels in public schools. Graduates of these programs are awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. Up until 2014, there were 14 universities in Saudi Arabia which offered foreign language teacher preparation courses for both men and women. In addition to this, there are also 33 preparation programs for English teachers in Saudi Arabia, which are responsible for training female teachers. There are also 18 teachers' colleges, each attached to a local university, which offer bachelor's degree courses in English. According to Al-Seghayer (2014), “although these preparation programs work toward the common goal of preparing and training Saudi English teachers, each has its own unique programs and requirements, leaving no chance for having a common thread of philosophy and developing national standards and guidelines that govern and direct the major issues equated with the process of preparing and training Saudi future English teachers” (pg. 145).

Changes in Curriculum

Over the years, the English-teacher-preparation programs in Saudi Arabia have evolved constantly with many significant changes. The emphasis in such courses has shifted from teaching of English literature to linguistics and teaching of English language skills. According to Al-Seghayer (2014), the 1980s saw their primary emphasis being on teaching English literature, and subjects such as linguistics and English skills received little attention. In his study, the author goes on to say that in the 1990s, the emphasis changed directions with linguistics and a

command of language skills being prioritized. More recently, such programs in Saudi Arabia have begun to allot a greater proportion of credit hours to language improvement and linguistics.

Al-Seghayer (2014) says that apart from these efforts, there are other areas which should be taken into account as well. According to the author, the number of literature courses being offered should be decreased and the number of methods courses for English teaching should be increased. As per the author, there should be more emphasis on increasing the communicative competence of prospective English teachers during their college careers. These teachers must also be linked to schools which enable them to gain more experience and learn from in-service teachers. As per Al-Seghayer (2014), his suggestions were also supported by other academics such as Zohairy (2012), and Rahman & Alhaisoni (2013) “who promote the implementation of a systematic approach to Saudi EFL teacher-preparation programs because the current programs are inadequate for the preparation of Saudi EFL teachers, especially with regard to disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and technological pedagogical knowledge” (pg.146).

According to Al-Seghayer (20014):

Disciplinary knowledge includes, for example, the history of language teaching methods, second-language acquisition, sociolinguistics, phonology, syntax, discourses analysis, applied linguistics, and other areas as well. Pedagogical content knowledge, on the other hand, includes curriculum planning, assessment, reflective teaching, classroom management, teaching the four skills, and so on. Technological pedagogical knowledge involves the ability to effectively integrate the available technological resources into language teaching (pg. 146).

Al-Seghayer (2014) says that a need-based training and professional development for aspiring English teachers in Saudi Arabia is important so that EFL teachers gain confidence and “enable them to enhance other additional skills that are needed in their profession by talking to colleagues in schools and through working with other experienced teachers” (pg. 146). They also develop their classroom competence through their own past experiences as students as they perpetuate the way in which they were taught and by emulating their former teachers, who serve as role models. This emulation arises from the failure to offer aspiring teachers a systematic in-service training program; therefore, aspiring teachers must pursue their own professional development informally while discharging their day-to-day duties.

Goals of EFL teaching/learning as per Government Decree

According to the 2001 decree, the following are the primary goals of teaching and/or learning EFL in Saudi Arabia:

1. The students must be able to acquire the basic linguistic skills and sufficient English language which prepares them for the job market.
2. The students must also acknowledge English as a universal language.
3. Through the learning of EFL, students should be able to linguistically benefit from other cultures and sciences, provided that is not inconsistent with Islam.
4. Acquire enough linguistic ability in the English language to be able to spread Islam, defend it and explain it, wherever need be (Sofi, 2015).

Approaches to Training English Teachers

During the 1970s, Saudi Arabia followed the Aural-Oral Approach and the Grammar-Translation Approach in schools across the country. According to Alhujailan (2009), these approaches continue to be used in schools across Saudi Arabia till today (as cited in Sofi, 2015).

Grammar-Translation Method – As per Brown (2007), this method is used to teach language through the translation of grammar and vocabulary and it “focuses more on the memorization of translated rules and words from one language to another” (as cited in Sofi, 2015, pg. 6).

As per her study, Sofi (2015) found that in Saudi Arabia, the English language has been taught in “teacher centered classrooms by the Grammar-Transition method” (pg. 79). The author recommended “a more communicative approach and dynamic student-centered instruction” in classrooms.

According to Al-Seghayer (2014), a large percentage of Saudi EFL teachers are not fully competent professionally and linguistically. He is of the opinion that these teachers “do not have a firm grasp of methods of teaching language elements” (pg. 146). The author states that Saudi EFL teachers did not possess sufficient theoretical background knowledge in relation to the factors affecting the teaching of a second language – age, aptitude, motivation and attitude. The teachers did not possess knowledge of strategy required to teach language elements, including the four skills, grammar, and vocabulary. As per Al-Seghayer (2014), additionally, the “testing techniques and the use of educational aids and technology are insufficiently employed in English classrooms” (pg. 146). He goes on to say that these teachers also have limited experience in material design, evaluation, adaptation, and implementation.

Al-Seghayer (2014) cites an unpublished study carried out by the Saudi Ministry of Education in 2005, which indicated that “both intermediate and secondary English teachers graduated from college without proper training in EFL and are therefore neither competent in English nor in the affair of teaching it” (pg. 146), with the average TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score of the participating English teachers being only 430. As per this study, their average competency in lesson planning was 60%, while it was 64% for classroom management, 54% for assessment, and 52% for language teaching methods (Al-Seghayer, 2014).

As per the study conducted by Albedah & Lee (2017), EFL courses have “produced inadequate results” (pg. 152). According to these authors, “one of the issues consistently raised as a barrier to effective EFL learning is the use of passive learning pedagogies and the lack of self-directed or deep learning in the Saudi EFL curricula” (pg. 152). They state that educators around the world are turning increasingly towards technology which could engage their students in “more effective learning” (pg. 152). These teachers acknowledge that for these technologies to be effective, it is important for technology to be “congruent with the ways in which learners actually use their devices” (pg. 152).

According to the study by Alrabai (2016), the factors responsible for low achievement in English as a foreign language (EFL) among Saudi students include demographic variables (such as gender, age, motivation, attitudes, aptitude, anxiety, autonomy, learning strategies, and learning style) which are mostly external and outside the learners’ control. These external factors are mainly sociocultural in nature like the “influence of Arabic as the first language; religion, culture, and society; instructional variables, such as teacher behavior and teaching styles, the curriculum, and the teaching methods; and finally, problems with the educational system in

Saudi Arabia, such as overcrowded classes, lack of teacher training, and a lack of technology” (pg. 21).

According to Bataineh & Reshidi (2017), most of the Saudi EFL students, regardless of the level of their grade, are keen on gaining fluency in English, but they find the language too challenging. This is because of various reasons including interference from the mother tongue, lack of opportunities to use English in their daily lives, and traditional English instruction (Bataineh & Reshidi, 2017).

According to the study by Alrabai (2014), in general, in Saudi Arabia, motivational techniques are not utilized in English language classes. The study also stated that extremely “important aspects of learner’s motivation like reducing learners’ language anxiety and promoting their autonomy are frequently ignored in teacher’s practices in this context” (pg. 224).

According to a study by Al-Qahtani (2016), which investigated students’ habits and their use of reading skills in order to understand the Saudi learners’ current reading proficiency levels, Saudi students have a low tendency to read in Arabic and in English. The author says that the majority of Saudi students did not read outside school and that students used their careful and expeditious reading skills only poorly. Al-Qahtani is of the opinion that “there is a huge gap between Saudi students’ actual reading proficiency level and their expected reading proficiency” (pg. 12).

Around the world, there has been an increasing interest in learner autonomy in language education over the past several decades. But this concept has not received attention in the Saudi EFL context. Though there is no one definition of autonomy, according to Sella (2014), there is a general agreement among researchers on one particular definition introduced by Holec (1981) who defined the term as “...the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (as cited in Alrabai, 2017, pg. 222). According to the study by Alrabai (2017), Saudi learners and teachers both need an increased awareness of the importance of the concept of autonomy. The author suggests that a practical means to promote Saudi EFL learner autonomy should be both sought and practiced.

Culture Training in Saudi Arabia

Since language and culture are interlinked, it can be said that teaching of culture is a key component in the teaching of a language. If any language is taught without teaching culture, it is akin to teaching someone to speak a foreign language, but without the benefit of the social, cultural or philosophical aspect of target culture. According to Farooq, Soomro & Umer (2018), “teaching a foreign language means incorporating knowledge of the target culture as well” (pg. 177). As per the authors, this also leads to cultural complications in foreign language learning classrooms.

It can be said that teaching of culture is important for teaching of any foreign language. Farooq et al. (2018) state that as per recent researches (Bada, 2000; Byram & Kramersch, 2008; Dai, 2011), teaching of culture during the teaching of a foreign language is extremely important. Language teachers have been drawn to the fact that since any language and its attached culture cannot exist separately, it is essential to have the knowledge of the target language before they can either understand or teach it. As per Samovar, Porter & Jain (1981, p. 24), “language and culture are interdependent and inseparable as culture dictates who is going to whom, about what, and how the communication will proceed” (as cited in Farooq, et al., pg. 177).

Hence, if the teacher understands the culture, it helps him/her “plan lessons, design appropriate activities, and suitable for intercultural learning environment to teach the target language”

(Farooq et al., 2018, pg. 177). The authors say that “it’s a teacher’s duty to integrate culture in language class, keeping in view the globalization and its impact on various aspects of the society, to impart awareness about various cultures in the world”. This kind of integration helps the students of a foreign language to become competent language use in cultural context. According to Peterson & Coltrane (2003), “a learner cannot exhibit his competence in a foreign language unless he is aware of the cultural aspects and know how to agree or disagree with people, how to make a request, express opinion or gratitude, etc.” (as cited in Farooq et al., 2018, pg. 178).

According to Geertz (1973), as far as teaching of English as a foreign language is concerned, language is the most important aspect of culture (as cited in Bataineh & Reshidi, 2017, pg., 2). Many scholars such as Harumi, 2002; Eoyang, 2003; Janzen, 2008; and Tochon, 2009 are of the view that learning of a foreign language is closely linked to the learning of culture, and that they may be indivisible from each other (Bataineh & Reshidi, 2017). According to Fageeh (2011), due to close link between language and culture, it can be said that an important goal of EFL education must be to allow students to understand the language and nuances of its associated culture (as cited in Bataineh & Reshidi, 2017). According to Bataineh (2005), it can be surmised that “regardless of the instructional approach the teacher adopts, he/she should enhance students’ cultural awareness as a catalyst for foreign language teaching and learning” (as cited in Bataineh & Reshidi, 2017, pg. 2).

According to Al-Qahtani (2003), EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia had a “positive attitude toward introducing the target culture as they were aware of the importance of developing their students’ cross-cultural understanding” (as cited in Farooq et al., 2018, pg. 180). But the study by Farooq et al. (2018) showed that Saudi EFL teachers were not open in their actual involvement in teaching of culture, due to their concerns that such an exposure to other cultures may have a negative impact on the students’ perceptions of their own cultural and religious beliefs. This study also revealed that all of the EFL teachers participating in the study had a certain amount of knowledge about the target culture, but their handling of this knowledge was highly dependent upon curricular considerations and limitations.

Since the English language has an international role and because of globalization, culture can be said to be ‘fifth language skill’. According to Farooq et al. (2018), “incorporating the cultural concepts in language teaching enhance awareness on cultural elements, accept or be flexible on cultural aspects which might be different to student culture” (pg. 182). As per their study, for creating a multicultural classroom, teachers may have to figure out ways around some limitations to make the best use of cultural diversity in order to enlighten the students in order to “create necessary connections between students’ culture and the target language culture through curriculum and classroom activities” (pg. 182).

According to Bataineh & Reshidi (2017), since all the EFL textbooks taught in Saudi Arabian schools are authored by Saudis (sometimes in collaboration with foreign experts), very little ‘Anglo-American’ culture is represented in these textbooks (both for the primary and secondary stages). EFL teachers need to be made aware of this fact and look for means to counteract misconceptions students are likely to develop, leading to a cultural gap in the Saudi foreign language classroom.

Importance of EFL Education in Saudi Arabia

From the studies shortlisted for this review, it was clear that the English language was considered extremely important in Saudi Arabia. In his study, Al-Seghayer (2014) states that various

stakeholders such as policy-makers, and decision-making bodies in Saudi Arabia regard the English language as an “important tool for the development of the country in terms of both international relations and scientific-technological advancement” (pg. 143). Officially, the English language enjoys the status of primary foreign language in Saudi Arabia and it is used preeminently in various sectors and levels within the Saudi economy, society as well as politics. According to Al-Seghayer (2014), government officials and national industrial institution employees are expected to speak fluent English. It is the only foreign language being taught at Saudi Arabian public schools and it is also compulsory to learn English in majority of private schools and universities in the country.

This acceptance and popularity of the language in Saudi coincides with the accelerated economic growth of the country. This growth has also resulted in social changes in the Saudi population, as the country is witness to expansion in education as well as the influx of foreign manpower and growth of various media sources. All these factors have contributed to the current position of English language within Saudi Arabia.

It can also be said that Saudis, in general, have a positive attitude towards teaching of the English language. In their study carried out on Saudi government school teachers, Oddah & Rajab (2017) found that the respondents were overwhelmingly positive towards professional development in the teaching of English Language.

Future of EFL in Saudi Arabia

As per Picard (2018), the future of EFL in Saudi Arabia is linked to the economic, social and political imperatives of the country. There have been efforts by the Saudi government to liberalize the economy in sections with increasing privatizing, but the country’s economy, on the whole, remains largely state-managed, with the government policy directing both the social and education systems, in tandem with the religious and national values. Hence, factors such as neoliberalism and privatization are bound to have an impact on EFL in Saudi Arabia over the coming decade (Picard, 2018).

We have seen previously that the EFL sector in Saudi Arabia faces severe limitations. The future of EFL in Saudi Arabia can be bright if the lacunae of the current education system in relation to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language are filled. It is clear that the policymakers and decisionmakers in the country view the English language as being extremely important in the development of their country. As stated above, at present, English is the only foreign language being taught in Saudi Arabian public schools (Al-Seghayer, 2014).

According to Al-Seghayer (2014), if an effective English-teacher-preparation program is designed and teachers are provided with ongoing support and continued professional development opportunities, then Saudi Arabia can prepare English teachers who are both knowledgeable and competent.

Conclusion

It is clear from this review study that the EFL education sector in Saudi Arabia has been in the state of evolution for the past few decades. It is also evident that the past few years have seen significant changes in the teaching and learning of EFL in Saudi Arabia. This review study also explored the limitations of EFL education and teachers in Saudi Arabia. The future of EFL in Saudi Arabia is dependent on factors like neoliberalism and privatization, along with the state’s policy reflecting efforts to fill the lacunae that exist currently.

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