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The Change in Saudi Educational Policy to Teaching English

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Introduction

The Educational Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia states that students should learn at least one foreign language so that they may interact with people of other cultures. In the past, there was fear that teaching English may have negative impact on Saudi's beliefs and practices (Mahboob and Elyas, 2014). For this reason, the English textbooks that were taught in school mainly focused on local and Islamic culture. However, the functions of English have expanded due to the development of the Saudi economy, media, Internet, employment and international business. This has impacted on the educational policy for teaching English; a language that is regarded by Saudis as an essential tool for development and knowledge.

There has been a changing attitude of the Saudi government to expand the learning and teaching of English. They believe, the learning of English will pave the way for further development and integration with other cultures and the world system. For this reason the Saudi government has been trying to convince its populace towards a positive attitude regarding English. The recent studies reveal the Saudi policy is bearing the fruits of success. The young students are increasingly favoring the study and learning of English. They also have started to believe that English learning will help them to learn science, technology, medicine and engineering better than in Arabic. The result is a growing band of younger generation with a positive mindset towards learning English contrary to their predecessors.

Rational of teaching English in Saudi Arabia

English Language Teaching (ELT) has been introduced and developed in Saudi Arabia simultaneously with the Kingdom's integration with the world system. The objective of Saudi

English Language Education Policies (SELEP) was to ensure the sustenance and development of Saudi Arabia in the world system. In the beginning, Saudi Arabia's integration with the capitalist world resulted in the formation of SELEP. It then evolved and gained approval of Saudi citizens because of its promise to spread Islam across the world. Apart from using SELEP to advance Saudi cause at a religious level, it was an effective tool to thrust Saudi Arabia towards the core zone of the world, described by the conditions mentioned henceforth: (a) monopolist production mode in terms of knowledge or technology; (b) effective interaction with other world bodies and states; (c) control established over the Kingdom's citizens (Wallerstein, 2006).

Saudi Arabia, a country of intermediate strength in the world system, had used its power related to internal and interstate dynamics, deliberately to both maintain its place in the world geopolitics and to rise in the higher echelon of the global power structure (Wallerstein, 2006). KSA was poised to act as a switchboard between the powers above it and the ones lying on a lower level because the Kingdom lacks absolute sovereignty.

The paradigm shift in Saudi socioeconomic and demographic setting have had considerable impact on English Language Teaching (ELT) (Al-Abed Al-Haq & Smadi 1996). The rise of the Kingdom's economic sector with petrodollar invited a number of US companies and manpower. In 1970s a vast number of US citizens took up employment in Saudi Arabia. Apart, advent of non-Arabic speaking migrant workers in the 1970s and 1980s (Niblock, 2006) and millions of non-Arab pilgrims necessitated the development of ELT. English, being the only language of communication between Arabs and non-Arabs sustained the need for ELT. Most importantly, ELT became crucial to sustain the Kingdom's economic swagger.

Education policy of teaching English in the past

Before the creation of a positive attitude by the common Saudis towards English beginning from 2000s, the studies conducted a decade earlier reveal a low motivation to learn English. According to Zaid (1993) the low motivation among the people of Saudis to learn English was instrumental for the failure in teaching and learning of the language in the kingdom. The low motivation situation was orchestrated by the general Saudi misconception that they really don't need English in the real life situation, neither for communication nor for the advancement of their career. Various studies consistently found an overwhelming majority of Saudi students preferred Arabic to English as a medium of teaching.

Saudi English Language Education Policies (SELEP) to gain Saudis' consent in learning English and overcoming the anti-English sentiments, framed a three pronged strategy consisting of: being a proponent of their religion, utilize English for the cause and setting up a clear objective for the teaching of English.

The final reason for teaching English in Saudi Arabia was to communicate with millions of pilgrims who come every year to Saudi Arabia to make Hajj (pilgrimage) and visit the holy places. Pilgrims come from all over the world and the English language is the second language used after Arabic to guide and also for communicating with people who belong to different cultures and languages.

English was used as Lingua Franca: a medium of interaction and communication among people who speak different languages. However, there was a sense of fear among Saudis and conservative policy makers that the use of English can lead to:

1. **Westernization**; imitating the West and adopting its values, views and ways of life.
2. **Losing National identity**; losing the Arabic identity and losing the image of Saudi Arabia among Arab countries as a leading country of Islam.
3. **Weak Religious commitment**: refers to the degree to which Saudis follow the teachings of Islam. In other words, using English might negatively affect Saudis' religious obligations and duties (Al-Abed Al-Haq & Smadi, 1996).

For these reasons, there was a strong tendency by the government to teach English with focus on the Islamic and Saudi Culture. The topics of the English textbooks were derived from the history of Saudi Arabia and Saudis' social practices. A close look at the old textbooks shows that English taught in Saudi Arabia is "Saudi English". For example, the characters and the pictures of the people in the English textbooks are Saudis with their traditional clothes and Arabic names. There was no sign of the international topics and no reference to western cultures.

The dramatic change in functions of English language in the kingdom, and its impact on the education policy.

Since, the first introduction of English in Saudi educational system, shortly after the formation of the Kingdom in 1932, it became the only foreign language taught in KSA. The status of English teaching in KSA gained strength step by step in different phases. In 1960, English was taught at a secondary level and in 1984 it was upgraded to intermediate level (grades 7,8, and 9). Currently, English is a compulsory subject from grades 7 through 12. The students are taught English for four 45-minute periods (four hours) weekly. Ministry of Education implemented English curriculum at an elementary level from 2002-2003 with an objective of improving the proficiency of the language among Saudi students. However, there is discrepancy between Saudi private and international schools on one hand and Saudi government schools on the other. While, the private/international schools require learning the subject from KG level through grade 12, the government schools introduce English only in grade 7.

Saudi Arabia has been laying its focus on human resource development at an unprecedented rate of investment in this asset. More than a quarter of the KSA's national budget has been earmarked for education. By the end of 2006, the Kingdom had only eight government funded universities, which escalated to 25 by the end of 2009 (Rassoldeen, 2011). The recent figure on the count of government and private initiatives have reached 52 (Denman & Hilal, 2011). The expansion of educational institutions to such extent and encompassing all levels has been catalyzed by ELT. Presently, almost every university and colleges are endowed with English departments and English language centers, where students teach English to the students of other departments for a minimum of one semester. Further, the medium of teaching is being English at medical, engineering and science institutions.

In short, Saudi Arabia's purpose of expanding ELT is a strategy aimed towards reaching the core zone of the world system. In 1924, the state introduced ELT into its formal education system in order to ensure its entry in the peripheral zone of the capitalist world economy. During the period 1960-2004, KSA reinforced its focus on ELT for maintaining its new found status of a middle income country attained at the blessings of a windfall of huge oil revenue. In the third phase of ELT expansion, KSA's goal has been set about building a knowledge-based economy to enable the nation attaining the status of a 'developed state' by 2024.

The current status of the English language in Saudi Arabia

Contrary to the Saudis' attitude towards ELT earlier, studies conducted in 2000s featured a marked shift towards English. A study (Amman, 2005) on English learning, measuring

motivation among seventh-grade students in Onaizah Educational District, Saudi Arabia has been a relevant pointer towards changing Saudi attitude and motivation towards ELT. The study was conducted at the time of students having just started learning the formal English language. The study reveals a moderately high motivational level in learning English prior to attending the English classes. After the commencement of the English classes, the motivational dips to the lowest ebb in the eighth grade and improves again during the later grades, but never reaching the level of the seventh grade.

In another study conducted by Congreve (2005) among 179 Saudi students of King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals, shows a positive attitude and good motivation towards English. Another study (Jarf 2008) conducted on 470 female students of King Saud University, Riyadh finds the following results:

- 96% of the respondents think English to be a superior language
- 96% of them consider English to be the language that aptly represents science and technology, research, electronic databases and technical terminology
- 82% puts Arabic at higher plane when teaching history, religion, Arabic literature and education majors are concerned
- 82% believe English is more suitable to teach engineering, computer science, science, medicine, pharmacy, and nursing.

The two studies are conducted on students that are reflective of the young generation's attitude towards English. This also reflects the changing attitude of the Saudis towards learning English. The studies plainly reveal the growing positivity among Saudis towards English in 2000s when compared to 1990s.

Today, the Saudis have a positive attitude towards English because English is playing different roles in the Saudis' economic and social life. This resulted in an educational expansion in teaching English across schools and university as well as curriculum development. This change was necessary to ensure Saudi Arabia's progress in the world (Faruk, 2013). English can serve as a very important tool for the development of the country in terms of both international relations and scientific-technological advancement.

The reasons for the change in role and attitudes towards English language are as follows:

1. The economy of the country is growing rapidly and business transactions between Saudi Arabia and most other nations in the world are conducted in English. Therefore, there is a real and growing need for more Saudis to be proficient in both spoken and written English.
2. The growing use of English in the mass media, TV and the Internet and access to the global network.
3. The large number of foreign labour and companies: Saudi Arabia's economy relies heavily on the foreign labour and experts. In Saudi Arabia, there are about eight million workers from different nationalities and ethnic groups. English is used for communication between Saudis and expatriates (foreigners) who live and work in the Kingdom.
4. Employment: jobs in private sector areas such as industries, hospitals, and hotels require applicants to have certain level of proficiency in English. In other words, Saudis who can communicate in English have a much brighter future in terms of job opportunities.

As a result of the change in the functions of the English language, English has presence in the Saudi educational system.

- A. English is the only foreign language taught in Saudi Arabian public schools.
- B. English is also taught in private schools, universities, and a variety of industrial and government institutions.
- C. Recently, Saudis start learning English in primary level.
- D. English is taught in all Saudi universities as either an elective subject or as a major field of study. Even students who are not English majors are required to take an introductory English course.
- E. English is used as a medium of instruction in most university departments in areas such as science, medicine, engineering, health science and other technical subjects.
- A. There is a change in KSA and in the English curriculum in particular (Mahboob and Elyas, 2014). Not only the allocation of time to English instruction, but also the way in which English is taught.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia shows considerable interest in the English language. Teaching English in Saudi Arabia is characterized by a tension between traditional practices and reform. Conservative education policy makers regard English as a sign of westernization that may negatively affect

local beliefs and practices. However, this attitude has changed. Today, Saudis' attitudes toward English are highly positive; most Saudi people believe that English is very important to the country's development and that it is needed in various fields. English is viewed as an important tool for modernization, technological advancement, economy and global communication.

The progress of ELT in KSA had been closely associated with Kingdom's ambition to rise from a periphery state to an intermediate state. The Saudi government's goal of becoming a core state requires self sufficiency in knowledge and technology based economy. The excel in science and technology is intricately related to ELT as the resources and interaction required to reach that state demand learning of English. The Kingdom's official goal of becoming a developed state from a currently middle income state can be realized by integrating with the world system. The world system is being dominated by the hegemony of two English speaking countries of USA and UK. Finally, common Saudis' motivation of spreading their faith globally through English have resulted in the growing trend of positivity towards ELT. The common Saudis', especially the younger generation, are hopeful and motivated towards learning English which they believe can take their nation to a higher plane and towards a core state they can be proud of. The government policies have been shaped accordingly onto the road of development for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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