RESEARCH ARTICLE

PRESENT STATUS AND THE PROBLEMS OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

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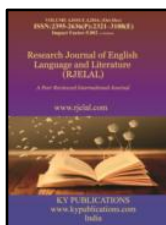
ABSTRACT

An international language belongs to its users, not to the countries whose national languages have become internationalized' (Edge 1992). There is no doubt in the fact that English is the only language which can be used by non native speakers to communicate with each other. It is called as the language of science, technology and business and Saudi Arabia is no exception. English is being taught in the kingdom for almost a hundred years but still like other non native learners, Saudi learners also face many problems in language acquisition. This article discusses the history of how English language was introduced in the education system of the Kingdom, it's present position in the Kingdom as well as the problems faced in teaching this language to the Saudi students and how they could be dealt with.
Keywords: ELT, Saudi Arabia, Education System, Pedagogy.

Introduction

The foundation of English education in KSA dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century as a result of the rapid evolution and development of the Kingdom. However, it was not the first Foreign Language that was introduced in the Kingdom. Turkish was the first foreign language ever taught in the Kingdom in the schools owned and operated by the Ottoman. However, it received a hostile treatment and was totally boycotted by the natives citing the reason of it being the language of the autocrats or invaders and it deprived them of their national respect. In 1914, with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, this language was not used or needed anymore in the Kingdom and thus it was lost.

However, with the rapid growth and development of the Kingdom, this negative attitude towards the Foreign Language teaching changed and in order to keep abreast with the needs of the modern world, a need for the schools to prepare Saudis to travel abroad to attain modern, scientific,

technological and western education was felt. As a result, the Scholarship Preparation School was established in 1953 in Mecca which marked the beginning of English Language teaching in the Kingdom as it acted as the major window for the Saudis to the outside world, where only natives (Saudis) going abroad were taught and thus qualified foreign teachers especially from Egypt were recruited to teach in this school and thus the curriculum was sculpted on Egyptian system except Islamic education which was regulated by the KSA government. As a result, the curriculum was highly influenced by the French system. This school also marked the beginning of the modern day high school education in KSA. Thus English and French were introduced as foreign languages in the Secondary education system in KSA. In 1958, English and French began to be taught at the intermediate level from grades 7-9. But soon in 1969, French was removed by the Ministry of Education at this level and, therefore, was taught at secondary level from grades 10-12. Since then, English enjoys a higher

status, taught in private and public schools as a core subject and is a medium of training in many organizations and companies across the Kingdom.

Present Status of Higher Education

In 1953, with the establishment of the Ministry of Education and the General Presidency of Females' Education in 1959, which later merged into one ministry, the education scenario became vibrant in the Kingdom. During the period 1953 to 1970, the number of boys' schools increased from 290 to 2722 with 4, 01000 student enrolment and number of girls' schools reached to 511 with 7000 student enrolment. In 1963, the Supreme Committee for Educational Policy was established, which became the highest authority to supervise the whole educational matters. The Higher Committee for Education Policy, as cited in Al Shumaimeri (2003), states that the ultimate aim of education in KSA is:

1. To make students understand Islam in a correct and comprehensive manner.
2. To implant in them the Islamic creed
3. To imbibe in them the Islamic values, teachings and Ideal.
4. To spread Islam as well as to develop the society economically, socially and culturally
5. To prepare the individual to make meaningful contribution to the strengths of his community.

The higher education system in the Kingdom is, to a certain degree, similar to the educational system of United States. However, the patterns and procedures of these educational systems have been adopted in accordance with Islamic systems, traditions and customs. In 1975, the Ministry of Higher Education was established with the purpose of dealing exclusively with the higher education (universities and colleges). The responsibilities of the Ministry of Higher Education were:

a. Proposing the establishment of higher educational institutions and authorizing them to offer special programs in accordance with the country's needs.
b. Creating and administering universities and colleges in the Kingdom.
c. Raising the level of communication and coordination between institutions of higher

learning and coordinating with other governmental ministries and agencies in terms of their interests and needs in higher education.

d. Representing the government abroad in all educational and cultural affairs, through various cultural and educational offices distributed over 32 countries.

The Ministry has executed various plans for the growth and development of education in the Kingdom over the last five decades which has resulted in the increased number of enrolment of students in the higher educational institutions as well as increased number of new educational establishments like colleges, universities. As per the report of *Ministry of Higher Education*, which is based on diversification, has expanded to include 21 Government Universities, 18 Primary Teachers' Colleges for men, 80 Primary Teachers' Colleges for women, 37 colleges and institutes for health, 12 Technical Colleges, 24 Privates Universities and Colleges respectively.

The Higher education has done remarkably well in terms of quality and quantity, in the Kingdom. To raise the internal efficiency of universities, National Center for Assessment in Higher education was established in 2001. The National Commission for Assessment and Academic Accreditation (NCAAA) was established in 2004 to be responsible for academic accreditation and quality assurance in higher education institutions and to raise the external efficiency of universities.

As per the *Ministry of Higher Education report*, a strategic plan which adopted with the name of Horizons Project has been initiated for the future of higher education over the following twenty-five years by the ministry, for further development of Saudi system of higher education.

Position of English in KSA and Teaching/Learning English at the Secondary Level

As already discussed earlier that English language was first introduced in KSA in 1936 with the opening of the Scholarship Preparation School in Mecca to teach Saudis who wished to go abroad and it was introduced at Secondary level in 1969 by the Ministry of Education. Today, English occupies a unique position in the educational system in KSA. It

continues to be a major language having a prestigious position in our society. As per the statement from the manual for teaching ESL from the official guidelines of Ministry of Education, KSA;

> 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).

Thus it is explicit from the above statement the unique status that English language enjoys in the country being the language of industrialization and modernization and a language of globalization. KSA being the fast growing and developing country, with many companies owned and run by the foreign countries, other establishments like hospitals, schools, restaurants etc. with more than 85% percent of expats working in them, the main objective for teaching English as foreign language in the country is to develop the communicative competence among the students so that they can communicative satisfactorily with these expatriates.

It is now seen as a key to economic prosperity. Although, English is not the most widely spoken language in the world as compared to Chinese language, English is the most widespread language in the world. It is difficult to estimate the number of English speakers but according to one estimate there are more than 350,000,000 native English speakers and more than 400,000,000 speakers of English as a second language. However the importance of English is not determined by the number of its users but in what it is used for. It is the major language of news and information worldwide. It is a language of business, science and technology and considered as the window to the whole world

Unlike in the past when English was taught as a foreign language from Class VII, it is now being taught from Class VI as a compulsory subject to achieve more fruitful results. The general aims and objectives of the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia (*www.mkgedu.sa*) are as follows:

1. To enable student to acquire basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).
2. To develop student's awareness of the importance of English as a means of international communication.
3. To develop student's positive attitudes towards learning English.
4. To enable student to acquire the necessary linguistic competence required in variouslife situations.
5. To enable student to acquire the necessary linguistic competence required in different professions.
6. To develop student's awareness about the cultural, economic, religion and socialissues of his society and prepare him to participate in their solutions.
7. To develop the linguistic competence that enables student, in future, to present and explain Islamic concept and issues, and to participate in spreading Islam.
8. To enable student linguistically to benefit from English speaking nations, that would enhance the concepts of international co-operation that would develop understanding and respect of cultural differences between nations.
9. To provide student with the linguistic basis that would enable him to participate in transferring other nations' scientific and technological advances that can enhance the progress of his nation.

As is clear from the above objectives, the Secondary level education was aimed to develop the four skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. So the main objective of teaching English was envisaged to achieve a good command over the language among Saudis. But in practice only two skills (speaking and writing) are being taught.Very little or no attempt is made to encourage the other two skills- listening and reading. In practice only two skills (speaking and writing) are being taught because of some problems that would be discussed in the following chapter.

As notional/functional approach was developed as advocated by Wilkins and his colleagues, and Communicative Language Teaching, teaching and learning of English has underwent an extreme change. Modern approaches to language teaching focus more on meanings and functions that language is used to communicate than on how grammatical structures are formed. As a result, there has been a shift from purely grammatical syllabus to communicative one.

Problems in Effective Teaching of English

As already stated that English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools in the Kingdom (earlier it was from Class VII as a foreign language (1970-2001) and now from Class IV as a compulsory subject) up to the university level which means, it is taught for 4 times a week with 45 minutes throughout the session. Consequently, by the time the students reach the university, they hardly know 800-1000 words, and are unable to use English effectively in their day to day communication. According to Alshumaimeri (2003) *"Teachers have pointed out that students leave the secondary stage without the ability to carry out a short conversation."* It would be wrong to ascribe this failure to only one particular factor. There are, in fact, many factors or problems that challenge the teachers and thus are not able to teach English effectively. Some of them are:

1. *Large classes*: Sometimes the size of the classes becomes quite unmanageable for the teachers as it becomes difficult for them to maintain discipline and teaching. They find students with mixed abilities which does not make it possible for them to cater to the needs of all the students. There is less or no scope for individual attention and group and pair work. Therefore, the more suitable and less time-consuming for them is the lecture mode.

2. *Mother tongue interference*: Sometimes mother tongue becomes the major barrier for teaching English language to the Arab students. It must be noted that Arabic and English are altogether two different languages with different alphabet sounds, pronunciation etc. Thus, it becomes difficult for an Arabic speaker to pronounce the English sounds. Furthermore, there are some sounds in English alphabet that are not found in Arabic alphabet.

3. *Trained teachers*: Even though all the schools are well equipped with different teaching aids, they mean little to an untrained teacher. Although most of the educational establishments have foreign teachers to teach English language, still the problem persists. Most of the foreign teachers are appointed on the basis either being a native speaker or on the basis of their degrees. They lack that proper training and once in the profession, there is very little or no scope for their in-service training, except for occasional workshops or seminars which don't serve any purpose in their professional development which refers to developing necessary skills to make their teaching effective. Most of the teachers remain highly ignorant of the changes taking place in the teaching methodologies across the globe and since the teacher does not grow, the students also don't grow.

4. *Outdated methods of teaching*: It has been noted that a number of teachers are still using the same old traditional methods of teaching especially Grammar- Translation Method which is present in one or the other form in the schools. Most of the time is used in teaching grammar and preparing the students for the annual examinations because of which the four skills of language get little attention.

5. *Textbooks*: Most of the textbooks used contain stories, poems, prose texts written by English native speakers which are linguistically difficult and culturally alien. Furthermore, the textbooks are not designed according to the needs and capabilities or levels of the students.

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6. *Resistance and lack of motivation*: As it is clear that the education system of the Kingdom is deeply rooted in Islamic teachings and values, there is a natural resistance among Saudis to learn other foreign language of the west and they feel that it deprives them of their national respect and it is also seen as an agent of cultural dilution. Thus it results in the lack of motivation among the students to learn this language.

Fareh (2010) pointed out some of the challenges of EFL program in the Arab world and these are:

1. Improperly trained teachers or inadequate teaching methodology.
2. Teacher-centered rather than learner centered activities.
3. Students' aptitude, initial preparedness and motivation: School and university teachers often complain of the low proficiency of their students. They also claim that students are not motivated to learn.
4. Compartmentalization vs. whole language approach.
5. Lack of emphasis on developing skills– emphasis is rather on rote learning.
6. Textbooks and teaching materials.
7. Assessment methods
8. Exposure to English.

It is imperative that necessary steps should be taken to overcome the above mentioned problems. Some of them are as follows:

1. There should be Teacher Training Programs focusing not only on providing knowledge but also on skills.
2. Quality textbooks should be formulated that should not only be culturally familiar but linguistically appropriate to their levels as well.
3. Just having a degree or just being a native speaker is not enough to be a good teacher. A good ELT teacher is supposed to have a good knowledge of English language, completely aware of the principles and methodologies of teaching English and should understand his students – their levels, needs and abilities etc. as well.

4. Although all modern technologies are available in the English language teaching classrooms, the teachers still fail to use them. Teachers should be encouraged to make a good and proper use of all these technologies to ensure a better teaching-learning process.
5. Instead of teaching from the textbooks which makes the teaching-learning as teacher-centered, the teachers should engage the students in activities in which they can think critically and provide opportunities for students to use the target language in real life communications.

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