

# English as a Second Language in Saudi Arabia

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**Abstract**— The research will be focusing on the History of English language in Saudi Arabia. Also, it shows the importance of the language in different fields including: business companies, hospitals and education. It discusses the Materials and the methodologies that used to teach English language in Saudi Arabia schools in the previous years. It shows how teachers teach and how the supervisors work and evaluate the teaching technics, methodologies and materials. The research will be mainly focusing on providing details and facts for the following questions.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

“And among His Signs (Ayat), is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference in your languages and (the difference of) your colors: surely, there are Signs in this for those who know” (The Qur'an, Rum verse 22). Speaking different languages is proven in the Holy Quran and the unique signs behind this diversity are not understandable by the majority. Few people understand these signs. However, the surface sign of this diversity is letting people to have the desire to know each other. Learning others' languages is one purpose of this diversity to understand, communicate and know others languages and cultures.

The Holy Quran is written in the Arabic language but it never shows other languages as inferior. Instead, Quran encourages knowing other languages in order to know people, tribes and communities as stated in the Holy Quran “O mankind! We have created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another (not that you may hate each other). Surely, the most honorable of you, in the sight of Allah is (he, who is) the most righteous of you. Verily, Allah is All-knowing and is

Well-Aware (of all things)” (The Qur'an, **al-Hujraat Verse13**).

It is highly welcomed to know each other, including nations, people, communities and individuals with different languages and cultures.

## 2 THE STATUS OF ARABIC AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES

Arabic language is the official language in Saudi Arabia. Arabic is used in every city and town of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is strongly supported by the Saudi government and spoken by the society to become the only language that is used in education with no foreign languages interfering with it. However, this is not linked to religious purposes, the Quran recommend knowing others by learning others' language. The purpose of quoting these verses is to support the claim behind teaching and learning foreign languages in Saudi Arabia are not against religious purposes. It is mainly against sociocultural beliefs which affect the way of teaching English as a second language in Saudi Arabia and control the materials and the text books, which have great impact on both the teachers and the students' English language proficiency.

Saudi society has not communicated in other languages than Arabic language. Saudi nations are very sensitive when it comes to their religion, language and identity. For them, Quran and Arabic language are linked to their identity as the body's organs are linked to the heart. It reveals one perspective towards English language which is the awareness of embedding Arabic language within the next generations. Quran shapes their daily life through their use of Arabic language. Praying five times a day and fasting a month every year (Ramadan) are examples of their life routine which strongly connected to Quran. It represents their identities as Arabic Muslims.

The Turkish language was taught in some of the schools in the western part of Saudi Arabia when these schools were owned by the Othman Empire. Eventually, these schools were closed and the Turkish language was no longer taught. In 1958, English was introduced into the Saudi Education system (Mahboob and Elyas 2014:129). This early movement was a result of both internal and external sociocultural and economic factors that led to the adoption and continuation of teaching English in Saudi Arabia.

Throughout history, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has relied economically on western companies, such as the Oil Company Aramco. Aramco was originally based on the eastern part of Saudi Arabia. Decades later, it is owned by Saudi government but is managed and controlled by United States operators. While it was based in Saudi, Many Saudi workers

were hired and then were required to speak English after the merger. Now, the primary language spoken within the company is English due to the high number of American workers. Even the foreign workers speak English as a second language since they communicate daily with American workers. Saudi worker, even those that spoke fluent English, lacked other aspects of the language. Language is not only the spoken word, but the unspoken word as well. Saudi workers lacked the cultural knowledge and customs that other workers had. The Saudi government greatly depended on Aramco. The company was supported by the Saudi government to fulfill the needs of its Saudi workers, so it began teaching English within the company (Mahboob and Elyas 2014:130).

Aramco is just one example of the many Saudi companies which advocate teaching English to their workers. International Academies were created to teach Saudi workers and were prepared to work with native speakers. Some companies even offer scholarships to their employees to learn English in countries where English is the first language. Normally, the instructors at these academics speak English as a first language. The materials are provided directly from United States agents to teach nonnative speakers. With their workers acquiring this new knowledge, these companies can grow and expand to different areas of Saudi Arabia and beyond. Nowadays, Aramco has its own private schools open for Saudi workers' children. These schools teach Arabic language, religion, math, science and offer English classes too. The children

acquire English skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for content and development of all classes taught in Aramco's private schools such as Arabic, religion, science and math. It also has an impact on evaluating the teaching methods of English as a foreign language. It is not responsible for providing the textbooks used in the classroom, though. Their role is only to approve these textbooks to be taught in the classrooms.

It shows another perspective of Saudi nations that learning English does not cause any clash with Saudis' beliefs. It is considered as a resource for Saudi workers. They are hired in huge companies which offer high range of salary. Their children guaranteed an excellent education comparable to the education in Britain and United States. They are also provided with housing and health insurance. Hospitals as well as corporation led the introduction of English in the Saudi school system. Instructions, descriptions and patients' reports are required to be written in English. Hospitals have to communicate and meet patients whose first language is Arabic as well as those who English as a second or foreign language. Hospitals have their own international academies that teach Arabic language and religion but teach math and science in English.

### 3 ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS EFL

Saudi government was motivated by these changes and began introducing English as a foreign language to the education systems (public and private schools). It assigned the

Ministry of Education to manage the change. The Ministry introduced English in intermediate and secondary schools when students at the age of 13 to 19 years old. The aim of teaching English is to learn the language and help familiarize them with western cultures, beliefs and values. However, some aspects of western culture lead to a conflict with Saudi Arab nations whose identity is rooted in a strong Muslim faith. These people believe that "English spreading western ideologies, which may reshape ideas in the Muslim world" (Mahboob and Elyas 2014:132). The conflicting beliefs foster the control of terminology of English textbooks and the teaching techniques in Saudi schools.

English was originally taught 2 days per week in both elementary and high schools but is now taught four days per week (45 minutes per day). Political issues increased the session of teaching English at Saudi classrooms. After the attack on September 11 in the United States, there was great pressure to teach English language in all primary schools (Mahboob and Elyas 2014:130). During that period, there was debate about introducing English to Elementary schools because they feared it would interfere with the students' ability to learn Arabic. They thought that Students may be confused between English classes and the classical Arabic language that is taught in religion classes. In 2011, the Ministry of Education ruled that English would be taught as a second language beginning at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level in primary schools.

The Ministry of Education hires English language

teaching supervisors that are responsible for adjusting and evaluating the methods and materials for English classes. They are elected by the Ministry and they visit English teachers at school. They evaluate the courses and teaching methods that teachers use in the classroom. They also report weaknesses and strengths they observe. The Ministry offers some of the supervisors the opportunity to attend a training program abroad. The ones chosen to attend a training program abroad also have the opportunity to make future decisions about teaching English in Saudi Arabia (Martin and Alshumaimeri 2014: 124).

The supervisors are responsible for providing the teachers with required textbooks and the lesson plans. English textbooks are published under the name of "English for Saudi Arabia" and include two types. The first one is known as the "student book" which mainly used in the classroom. The second version is the "workbook" which includes the assignment exercises. Students get their homework from the workbook. According to Martin and Alshumaimeri, the textbooks are "organized by unqualified people" (2014: 125). They do not understand the general approach of teaching English as a second language to nonnative speakers. Previously, the textbooks did not include useful topics and were not linked to conversational English. Even though, the Ministry adjusts the textbooks frequently, it is out of their control to change the main contents and to include topics that represent the western language ideas and beliefs.

No matter how qualified (or not) the Ministry supervisors are or the content of the textbooks, the English teachers in Saudi Arabia leave much to be desired. These teachers hold a bachelor's degree in English and are required to pass a written and oral exam prepared by Ministry supervisor before they can teach, but many teachers still lack written proficiency and "many of whom had poor oral proficiency" (Martin and Alshumaimeri 2014: 123) which speaks to the quality of English language education in Saudi Arabia.

Ideally, the Ministry supervisors train the teachers how to prepare the course and how to manage schedule to cover all of the required materials. Training for English teachers only occurs twice a year for 30 minutes each session. This is not near enough training to achieve the desired level of proficiency for the students. The students are required to speak and use English in the classrooms yet students are still not able to produce a meaningful sentence. They do not practice English in different circumstances or apply what they learn. Instead, the teachers tend to use Arabic to explain the grammar and translate the words. They do not have the opportunity to use English very often, even in the classrooms. According to one of the supervisors' reports; "many teachers were not aware of the goals and do not work to achieve them" (Martin and Alshumaimeri 2014: 126).

One of the general goals of teaching English is that students must acquire the four skills of English; reading, writing, speaking and listening. The students' textbooks included

six units that include reading, writing, listening and focus on English grammar. It rarely focuses on speaking which left up to the teacher. Currently, they are not able to pronounce words coherently or form logical sentences. Most of the students are not able to read in English or understand an English speaker. English supervisors try to help the teachers achieve the target goals of teaching English as a second language, but when teachers are not even aware of the goals, students are not going to perform up to the standard. Saudi government provides funding for teaching English but it does not help. It was shown that 87% of students that were taught for six years (intermediate for 3 years and high school for 3 years) did not achieve the expected level of English proficiency. A supervisor explained "I think it is only few information about words that does not match the efforts and the money spent on it" (Martin and Alshumaimeri 2014: 125).

There are ways to combat the lack of English proficiency with Saudi students: one view shows that English should be introduced between age 5 and puberty. This is called the "critical period", during which language acquisition is much less difficult and has been proven more successful long-term. The critical period of language acquisition begins from the child birth until the age of 5. At this sensitive period, a child is able to learn different languages easily. Recent researches show that children have the ability to differentiate between phonetic variations of different languages. It explains that Saudi Arabian people rely on critical period hypothesis.

They believe that their children can acquire Arabic and English languages during this period (critical period) without facing any difficulties. In contrary, it is very difficult to acquire different languages after this critical period. Adults do not have the ability- as children do- to learn different languages. The critical period hypothesis based on the function of human brain, that a child has a flexible brain to acquire different languages whereby adults do not. As in Paradis study, It is clear that age affects acquisition of implicit competence. From a biological standpoint, the procedural memory's plasticity decreases after age of five (Paradis, 59-60).

On the other, hand, it is a problem for Saudi Arabia, because some Saudi citizens believe that teaching English during the critical period would damage the values and take away from the children learning Arabic. They strongly disagree about introducing English to elementary schools before 4th grade because they do not want any foreign language to interfere with Arabic language. Some people believe that both Arabic and the Quran shape their Arabic ideology. Furthermore, they resist involving western cultures and values through teaching English because western values conflict with Muslims values.

#### 4 MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGIES USED IN TEACHING ENGLISH

The content of English textbooks (units) represents the Saudi cultures, religion and identities. It focuses on Muslims cultures; such as prayers, fasting, and pilgrimage; that each adult Muslim has to perform them. Each level- including

both the intermediate and the secondary schools- has to have at least one unit about any topic connected to Islam issues. For example, the first year of the secondary school indicates a main topic about "Hajj" which means pilgrimage. It includes certain items and words, specific grammar that connected to the topic. A pilgrim has to perform certain things like throwing stones, sacrificing, hastening and shaving. Students have to understand these words that link to the main topic. These topics discuss local issues that belong to their cultures and religion. They are already known and fully understood by Saudi people, but they reintroduced in a foreign language. The given example of "Hajj"; (pilgrimage) reveals that, students are familiarized with "Islamic issues" which have been discussed and taught in their Arabic language. English language serves as a translator for what they already know. (Mahboob and Elyas 2014:131).

Other examples, second and third year of the high school indicate chapters about "Ramadan" and "The early spread of the Islam" (Mahboob and Elyas 2014:138). The Ramadan chapter includes the spiritual prayers that Muslims perform during that month. It details what Muslims are supposed to do; fast, pray, and visit relatives. The chapter of the early spread of the Islam discusses the message of prophet Mohamed "peace is upon him" and the beginning of Islam. Ramadan and the early spread of the Islam are discussed and taught in other classes. They are taught in history and religion as well as Arabic class. The teaching materials in English class

represent the Arabic world's values, beliefs and traditions. They teach knowledge of the culture of Saudi Arabia and Islam more than actually teaching the features of English. A chapter of "Saudi Arabia yesterday and today" (Mahboob and Elyas 2014:139) discusses the life style of Saudi people in the previous decades and the development of factories in today's day. It shows how Saudi people were living in small towns. People who lived in the eastern and western part were fishers whereas people in other parts are farmers. It compares Saudi Arabians in the past to Saudi Arabians now and how the development of factories affected Saudi culture and the economy.

The Ministry of Education keeps adjusting the textbooks and the methodologies of teaching English. It indicates topics that would help the society to use English in their everyday life. It introduces general useful topics such as food, travel, money, shopping and restaurants. In the restaurant chapter, they provide samples of conversation between the customer and the waiter, including common words that would be used in this situation. For example, vocabulary words such as "meal", "dinner", "invite" and "delicious" would be explained. However, the only time students use these words is in the English language classroom. They do not use them at restaurants since the workers are either from Arab countries or workers who speak Arabic as a second language.

On the other hand, the textbooks exclude any reference to western cultures. They never include chapters that discuss "dating", or "drinking alcohol" (Mahboob and Elyas

2014:138) because these practices are against the Saudi cultures and Muslim religion. In addition, the textbooks show some of the Saudi culture's beliefs. They discuss the role of Saudi men and women in the society but fail to acknowledge western gender roles. The textbooks show how a Saudi Arabian man takes on the responsibilities of his family by providing for them. A woman is depicted in the textbooks as the societal expectation. A Saudi woman is supposed to take care of her husband, children and household above all else. English vocabulary as "clean", "baby", "vacuum", "cook" would be used to describe the role of a Saudi woman.

The textbooks do include difference between the education systems in Saudi Arabia and western countries, though. For example, the chapter called school in Britain encourages the students to distinguish between the education system there and of that in Saudi Arabia. It highlights the cultural differences such as how schools in Saudi are segregated according to gender.

Furthermore, Arabic language and Islam issues have a great impact on teaching English language in Saudi classrooms. The Arabic Muslim greeting "Assalam Alaikum" (Mahboob and Elyas 2014:139) and its response "waalikm Al-salm" means "peace upon you" and its response "upon you peace" is used in these textbooks. It is an Arabic Muslim greeting that is pronounced in the Arabic language phonology and uses the English alphabet. It represents the power of Islamic values. The term "Assalam Alaikum" is somewhat equivalent

to "hello" and "hi" in English but the English translation fails to acknowledge how religious terms play an important role in Saudi Arabia cultures. This is possible why "Assalam Alaikum" is used instead of "hello" and "hi" when learning "English" greeting terms.

English grammar taught in Saudi is a misconception; it does not represent the grammar of Standard English. Arabic language grammar does not correspond to English language grammar. For example, the English textbook provides the rule of "present perfect" (Mahboob and Elyas 136) and illustrates when it is used. The present perfect tense does not exist in Arabic language. So, students misunderstand the rules which result in using the tense inappropriately. Arabic language grammar and English language grammar also differs is in the use of articles; Saudi Arabian tend to omit the articles "a, an" and replace them by "the" since indefinite articles do not exist in Arabic Language.

Furthermore, the textbook teaches Standard English but it provides examples using different variations that confuse students. The third person singular is an example of one of the English variation. "He is a keen tennis player and he also like swimming" (Mahboob and Elyas 137) is a given example in the English textbook. Researchers try to find the reasons behind these noticeable differences between the Standard English and the English examples that given in the Saudi English textbooks. Saudi Experts think it could be an author's mistakes. However, the textbooks are revised many times before

teaching them in the classrooms. So, it is unlikely that the author's mistake could not be caught and corrected by those revising the books.

## 5 CONCLUSION

To conclude, teaching English as a second language is still advocated by both the Saudi government and the Ministry of Education. English is necessary since the western and the international companies are based in Saudi Arabia. English is used in Saudi Arabian hospitals. Corporation and hospitals have international schools for the workers and their children that introduce English in Saudi Arabia public and private schools.

The Ministry of Education shows its support by offering English classes in Saudi schools and assigning supervisors to evaluate and adjust the teaching methods and the teacher's techniques. Saudi nations show their value and respect to both Arabic language and Islam. It affects the system of teaching English including the textbooks and the content that focuses on their local cultures and beliefs. Also, Arabic language phonology replaces some of English terms which connect to Islamic features instead of English ones. Arabic phonology affects the methods of teaching English grammar. Students mistake Arabic grammar for English grammar and apply Arabic grammar rules instead. The role of the speech community inserts the importance of Arabic language. It is spoken everywhere except hospitals and the companies where English is the language of instruction. English language is

rarely used out of classrooms, hospitals or companies and that negatively affects the students' performance. If English were more widely used in Saudi Arabia, it would be easier for students to learn it and would therefore lead to a more promising future.

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