

TEACHING ENGLISH IN SAUDI ARABIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper will reflect three major issues related to the teaching of English in Saudi Arabia. Firstly, it will discuss the present status of education and ELT in Saudi Arabia, secondly, it will state various challenges of teaching English, and finally, it will attempt some remedies that can be recommended to tackle those challenges.

Keywords: Education, ELT, Challenges, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia which was established as a kingdom in 1932, has seen ‘unprecedented growth in the fields of economy, health, science and technology in recent years (Rahman, 2011). The field of education is also growing rapidly in the country and with the growth of education teaching of English also taken a new shape. It is quite satisfactory that presently the government, policy makers, teachers and students are aware of the importance of English, and tremendous efforts have been made at every level of education to impart proficiency among the students. Despite all the efforts made by the various bodies, the situation of teaching English in Saudi Arabia has always been in a constant state of flux. The present study is an attempt to explore various challenges of teaching English and possible remedies to these challenges.

PRESENT STATUS OF EDUCATION

Education was out of reach for most of the Saudi people till the midst of 20th century, but soon after the establishment of the Ministry of Education in 1953 and the General presidency of female’s Education in 1959 which later merged into one ministry, the educational scenario became vibrant in Saudi Arabia (Sayegh, 2009). During the period from 1953 to 1970, the number of boys’ schools increased from 290 to 2722 with 4, 01000 students enrollment and the number of girls’ schools reached to 511 with 7,000 students including the teachers’ preparation (ibid). The Supreme Committee for Educational Policy, established in 1963 became the highest authority, which supervises the whole educational matters. The Higher Committee for Educational Policy cited in Al Shumaimeri (2003) stated that the ultimate purpose of education in Saudi Arabia is:

1. To have the student understand Islam in a correct and comprehensive manner.
2. To plant and spread the Islamic creed, and to furnish the student with the values, teachings, and ideals of Islam.
3. To equip him with various skills and knowledge, and to develop his conduct in constructive directions.
4. To develop the society economically, socially, and culturally, and to prepare the individual to become a useful member in the building of his community.

In 1975, the Ministry of Higher Education was established and it supervises the universities and the higher educational institutes. Since then, the government has executed various plans for the development of education for both boys and girls; as a result the number of enrollment has also grown up. During the period between 2006 and 2007, the number of students at different levels of education touched another milestone. This figure of increasing number of students at the elementary level, graduation level and teachers can be shown in the following table.

Table 1. Male & Female Students and Teachers in Saudi Arabia 2006-07

<i>Elementary</i>	<i>Graduates</i>	<i>Teachers</i>
4.08 Million	148.4 thousand	233.9 thousand

(Sayegh, 2009)

The numbers of schools, colleges and universities have also grown up. Presently, the Kingdom is running with more than 25000 schools (ibid), 21 Government universities, 24 private universities and colleges and many other educational and training institutions (mohe.gov.sa). The literacy rate has also increases up to 78.8% (male 84.7%, female 70.8%). As a result of the indefatigable efforts made by the various ministries and governing bodies, the Kingdom has seen tremendous growth in the following areas in recent years:

- a. Raising the efficiency and effectiveness of professional and administrative performance in the educational institutions, in order to improve the standards and content of the educational process.
- b. Ensuring that the education system fulfils the religious, economic and social objectives.
- c. Reducing the illiteracy rate.
- d. Integrating the activities of the higher education institutions within the general and specific requirements of the social and economic development plans.
- e. Broadening the general base of higher education by diversifying its programmes, in order to cope with the Kingdom's development requirements.
- f. Ensuring university education opportunities to every qualified citizen, in order to enable him/her to continue his/her education. (www.ibe.unesco.org)

STATUS OF ENGLISH IN SAUDI ARABIA

Arabic is the official language of Saudi Arabia and apart from some colleges it is the medium of instruction up to the university level. Though, English is taught as a foreign language, earlier a little importance was given in teaching and learning of English in the Saudi education system. It was introduced as a compulsory subject from class seven, but hardly the students had given any emphasis in acquiring the efficiency in English, instead they considered it as a language to pass in the examination. Unlike the past, the status of English in the Kingdom is completely different now. Due to the global demand and being the language of 'science and technology, business and commerce' 'window on the wall' etc the importance of English language grew rapidly. It is considered now one of the major subjects in the education system of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it is implemented as a compulsory subject from class six to the university level. Presently, the Ministry of Education is also planning to introduce it at class four to achieve more fruitful result. The Ministry of Education (www.mkgedu.sa) has states the general aims and objectives of teaching English in Saudi Arabia as the following:

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 various life 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 social issues 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.

Various committees and bodies were also setup by the government to develop appropriate curriculums for the different levels of education. The government, with the help of the educational institutes, is spending billion dollars time to time for English teachers' recruitment, language labs, curriculum development and teachers' training. Currently English is the medium of instruction in technical education, medicine and many other colleges. Besides it, the students have realized that English is no longer a language to pass in the examination, but an important subject for higher education, international communication and business and trade. They consider the value of English as highly practical; opportunistic and prestige. As a result, a tremendous growth of students' enrollment has been taken place in various English language institutes.

The function and use of English is also developing day by day in other sectors as well. English language is playing an important role in both electronic and print media in Saudi Arabia. The country has many leading daily newspapers in English and broadcast various English programs in television and radio. Though the Saudi government uses only Arabic as an official language, but it provides English on their respective websites.

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN SAUDI ARABIA

There is no doubt that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is accelerating day by day in the field of education, but the level of achievement in learning English as a foreign language is far below. According to Alshumaimeri (2003) "Teachers have pointed out that students leave the secondary stage without the ability to carry out a short conversation." After learning English for many years, the students have achieved little in terms of language proficiency, and making a large number of students and teachers waste of time and energy. So, the important question is why there has been no improvement among the students. 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

Similarly, it will be unjust to blame one particular issue, like the textbooks or the students for the unsatisfactory result of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. There are a lot of other factors which can also be responsible. Among those, the most important factors are:

I. *Whether the English language curriculum clearly pointed out its aims and objectives?*

A language program cannot be successful until or unless its curriculum is properly developed with clear cut aims and objectives. It is one of the most crucial issues of any ELT program. By realizing its importance, it is quite satisfactory to know that the Higher Committee of Education is trying to reform the educational policy of the Kingdom to meet the challenges of education including the teaching of English language (Alshumaimeri, 2003). Thus, it is understood that different bodies have emphasized to impart knowledge of English language by designing a suitable curriculum with clear cut aims and objectives.

II. *Whether the curriculum has been developed after a Needs Analysis (NA) program in ELT?*

According to Platt J. & Platt H. (1992) NA is 'the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities'. It is the 'the cornerstone of ESP course design, materials development, and program implementation and assessment' (Jackson, 2005). Many a times, the policy makers and the syllabus designers of Saudi Arabia fail to design a curriculum or syllabus after conducting a needs analysis program. As a result the outcome of teaching English fails to satisfy different bodies of ELT. Therefore, NA is another point of immense concern for curriculum development and syllabus design in Saudi Arabia.

III. *Whether the textbooks and teaching materials meet the learners' needs?*

The mushrooming growth of ELT around the world creates a condition to develop a large and varied number of textbooks and materials in the markets. As a result, many of the writers and publishers start writing and publishing ELT textbooks and materials for the commercial purpose with minimum level of linguistic features. Hence, these textbooks and materials fail to meet the learners' needs and baffled the syllabus designers and other administrative bodies to find out the best textbook from the market. Like many other countries, the syllabus designers and the higher authorities of various schools and universities of Saudi Arabia are also unable to choose an appropriate textbook for their students. Therefore, selection of appropriate ELT textbooks and materials is another point of concern.

IV. *Are the teachers well qualified and properly trained?*

Teaching English as a foreign language is intellectually, emotionally, and physically challenging work. Having credentials, or being qualified, makes one eligible for a job, but normally just being qualified is not enough to be a good teacher. There are three core areas

one EFL teacher should pose: 1. Proper knowledge of English language, 2. Well aware of how to teach English, and 3. Understands how his or her students learn and what it takes to reach them effectively. Many a times, it has been observed that people have been selected for English language program with no professional training, no classroom experience, and little or no knowledge of the subject.

V. *Are the teachers well aware of the new methodologies of English language teaching?*

The teaching of English as a foreign language has been enormously changed in the last few decades. Presently, English language teaching methodologies have focused on the importance of giving learners opportunities to communicate (Ellis, 2008). Teachers should think of new methodologies for classroom interaction, and these methods will have to depend on techniques which will enable the students to enjoy their English language classes. As a result, students will be motivated towards learning English and develop some self learning techniques.

VI. *Are the students highly motivated towards learning English?*

Needs, wants and desires are inter-related in a language learning classroom and they are the driving force to acquire the knowledge of English. These needs can be understood by the teacher and s/he can frame motivation plans accordingly. Motivation will help the students to set their goals for learning English; it will help them in self learning techniques and more importantly it will lead to an optimistic and challenging attitude towards learning English.

VII. *Whether the students receive enough exposure to use English?*

According to Ismail (1991) "If children are exposed to the L2 in the same way as they are exposed to the L1, greater success will be achieved". Dulay et al. cited in Ismail (1991) state that language exposure '...encompasses everything the language learner hears and sees in the new language. It may include a wide variety of situations - exchanges in restaurants and stores, conversations with friends, watching television, reading street signs and newspapers, as well as classroom activities - or it may be very sparse, including only language classroom activities and a few books and records'. But unfortunately, the situation in Saudi Arabia is very pathetic. The students hardly avail any chance to use English except their language classroom, though there are adequate number of facilities like, English news papers, T.V. programs, and expatriates available in the Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed some of the important issues of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. It felt that for a successful ELT program, there is a need of active participation of the policy makers, syllabus designers, textbooks writers, teachers and students. The findings also strongly recommend further research in the fields of educational policy, needs analysis, syllabus design and textbook evaluation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the above mentioned challenges, the following suggestions should be closely considered:

1. When the specific needs of a language program are not well defined, there is always a possibility of dissatisfaction in achieving its aims and objectives and the students will end up the language program without any proper language proficiency. As a result the effort of the policy makers, course designers, teachers and the learners will go wastage.

2. Successful implementation of pre service and in service teacher training program. Britten (cited in *Murdoch, 1994*) has established one essential element of the training will be concerned with equipping novice teachers with those competencies or micro skills which characterize the performance of effective language teachers: using audio-visual aids; introducing grammatical structures; asking questions and handling student responses; teaching dialogues; organizing group work activities, etc.
3. The textbooks should highlight the modern concept of English language teaching with well-planned and properly graded material. It should focus on teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) or English for academic purposes (EAP). By doing so, the students would be able to acquire the knowledge of English with a great deal of efficiency to meet their specific needs.
4. Teachers should conduct own NA for determining and responding to students' language needs. This may be done informally and personally through one-to-one sessions with students, in which the teachers talk through such issues as the student's perception of his or her learning style, learning assets, and learning goals.
5. Teaching of English language especially at the higher level aims to enable the learners to use it in real life communication. Keeping in mind the above mentioned aim, language teachers should give up both the lecture mode of instruction and the dictation of notes. Instead, explicit classroom teaching should be provided to improve the knowledge of four basic language skills, i.e. Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. They should engage their students in activities in which they must think critically, and provide opportunities for students to use the target language in meaningful contexts and in new and complex ways.
6. To impart communicative proficiency in English, the role of educational technology in language classroom is very crucial. With the help of technology, like tape recorders, CDs and videos, students can improve proficiency in the target language by listening, speaking and drilling accurately. Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries in the world, which provides all the modern technologies in English language teaching classrooms.
7. But, until or unless the teachers use it properly, teaching of English language cannot be fruitful. So, ensuring proper use of technology is very important.

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