Current Issues in English Language Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

There has been a considerable debate about English education programs in Saudi schools and colleges in recent years. The role of educational institutions in preparing students for the world of work, much of it in English, has come to be recognized. The introduction of English as a subject in the elementary stage of the Saudi school system in 2004/5 is another sign of its growing importance. Perception of the need for English, however, has not always been matched by satisfactory educational outcomes. Currently there is an ongoing nationwide debate about the low proficiency level in English among secondary school graduates, the inadequate numbers of well-trained teachers of English, and inappropriate materials and pedagogy. This paper revisits these concerns with a view to providing insights for the improvement of English education programs in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that policy makers, administrators and educators constantly seek.

Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is deeply rooted in Arabic culture and history and is undeniably the heartland of the Muslim world. The country, the biggest oil producer with the biggest oil reserve (261 billion-barrel), has witnessed remarkable socio-economic developments over the last five decades and hence has acquired unique international prominence and significance. In the past few years in particular, KSA has witnessed important political, economic and social reforms, including (1) establishing the Advisory Council, the Supreme Council for Economics, the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue, and the National Society for Human Rights; (2) holding the municipal elections for

the first time; (3) and becoming a full member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2005 More importantly, KSA has become the center stage of world attention in the aftermath of the 9/11 events and the American invasion of Iraq. In the light of the current political, economic, regional and international situation, KSA needs to reform education in order to compete in the globalization age and rebuild its distorted stereotyped picture that the western media has depicted.

Education in KSA, says Mosa (2000: online), has had to face several internal challenges in the past few decades, including dramatic changes in literacy, family income, modernization, and social mobility—in the transition from a mainly tribal and nomadic society to an urban one. These internal changes, adds Mosa (2000: online), could not have happened without external forces such as the emergence of a more open economy, exposure to foreigners from almost every country of the world, industrialization, and, lately, war.

As in other Gulf countries, the pace and scope of expansion in education in KSA has been unprecedented. Students seemingly in a single generation, describes Seyed (2003 338), have gone from small ill-equipped huts to laptop universities. This huge expansion is clearly visible in the growing numbers of students in basic and higher education. By way of example, the number of male and female students at the basic education level increased from 300,000 in 1964/5 to 4,266,60 (four million and two hundred sixty six thousand) in 2002/3 at an annual growth rate of 14% (the Ministry of Education, 2002).

Seyed (2003:338) points out that the speed and extent of development, which has simultaneously occurred at all levels in the Gulf countries, have resulted in little time for reflection, consolidation, recalibration, or adjustment and have had a serious impact on the overall planning, implementation and management of language programs.

Looking anew at teaching English in KSA, Daoud (2003. 70) depicts 'a new approach to education which demands of English as Foreign Language (EFL) educators to re-examine and redefine what they understand and how they act, in terms of:

- encouraging and strengthening the tenets of Muslim faith,
- preserving the unique features of Arab culture within the context of globalization;
- developing the quality of learning;
- improving understanding of surface and "deep" learning skills;
- fostering self-directed, lifelong learning;
- encouraging insightful reflection in teachers and learners;
- using cooperative learning approaches;
- basing teaching on problem-solving;

- focusing on learning-centeredness in curriculum;
- refining teaching/learning materials and teaching methods; and
- developing accountable evaluation techniques.'

Rationale

In recent years, there has been a considerable debate about the teaching of English in Saudi schools and colleges. To an ever-increasing extent, decision makers in the private and public sectors have come to acknowledge the role of English as a *lingua franca* in the world of international affairs. For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), having become a full member of the Treaty of the World Trade Organization in 2005, more and more professionals need English to function and succeed in a highly competitive environment. The role of educational institutions in preparing students for the world of work, much of it in English, has come to be recognized. The introduction of English as a subject in the elementary phase of the Saudi school system in 2004/5 is another sign of its growing importance. Perception of the need for English, however, has not always been matched by adequate provision of human and material resources. Currently there is an ongoing nationwide debate about the low proficiency level in English among secondary school graduates, the inadequate numbers of well-trained teachers of English, and inappropriate materials and pedagogy.

This paper attempts to critically examine current issues and trends in English language education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), given the central importance of the English language in the education system and the crucial role it plays in both societal and personal effectiveness and success. Despite the accumulative successes achieved over the last five decades, there have been numerous inadequacies in public school and university English. Some of these inadequacies are as follows:

- Many students are not effective in using English for further academic or real-life purposes after they leave secondary school in spite of the fact that they have had studied English for six years.
- Employers have complained in the local press that many new graduates whose medium of instruction at university was English face difficulties in using English to write effective workplace documents such as reports or engage in meaningful communications.
- Most first year undergraduates at our universities need 'intensive' or 'remedial' English courses and programs before commencing an English-medium academic study because of their poor proficiency levels.

- Anecdotal evidence suggests that a great deal of EFL teachers especially at the pre-university level find difficulty in using English effectively in classroom tasks (e.g. lecturing, giving instructions, or explanations).

While the reasons for such inadequacies and failures are complex and many, one evident cause must be English language education programs. This is not to say that policy makers have not been mindful of the need to make English language education programs relevant and effective. In response to the changing social and economic needs of Saudis, there have been numerous syllabus revisions for public school English every decade or so, the last two prior to the new Syllabus of 2004 (Say It in English Series) being in 1981 and 1991. Furthermore, debate regarding English education reached the highest governmental level, as the Council of Ministers approved the proposal of the Ministry of Education to introduce English as a subject in the elementary public schools in 2004. However, it would appear that what has been lacking in previous attempts is a comprehensive approach to integrate English education across pre-university and university levels in order to make language learning relevant to further academic and professional life situations. This critical review of current issues in English language education in KSA will hopefully provide illuminating insights for policy makers, administrators and educators. First, a brief account about the status of English in KSA appears to be necessary.

The status of English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)

English is of central importance in KSA as it serves many important functions in the educational, economic, socio-cultural and political life of Saudis. Without any doubt, a Saudi citizen with a strong command of English would be very much advantaged and favored in the job market of both the public and the private sectors' organizations. A look at job advertisements in daily newspapers clearly supports this contention. Policy makers in KSA have consequently given English the due emphasis in recent years.

English has become a major component of the Saudi education system which consists of twelve grades- six elementary grades, three intermediate grades and three secondary grades. English is the first and only foreign students learn in public schools. English starts from the Sixth Grade in government schools (i.e. at the age of 12) and there are plans to extend it to the Fourth Grade . Exposure to English is higher in private schools than that in government schools as it starts in the first elementary grade (i.e. at the age of 6) and in some cases as early as preschool level (Abdan 1991). Private

international schools, which come under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Education, do all their teaching in English.

In most higher education institutions in KSA, English has been a major discipline in faculties of arts, education, languages, and translation in universities such as: King Saud University (1957), King Abdul-Aziz University (1961), Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (1974), King Faisal University (1976), Umm Al--Qura University (1980), King Khalid University (1998) and Taibah University (2003). English is also the language of instruction in scientific schools (e.g. medicine, engineering, computing) in all universities. As for King Fahad University, English has been the language of instruction since its establishment in 1975. The first English department in KSA was established in King Saud University in 1957 and the first college of Education in Mecca in 1963 (Baghdadi 1985. 378-379). During the 1970s the significance of English increased appreciably. Interestingly enough, in 1970 the Faculty of Arts in King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah started with one department - namely, the English Department (Baghdadi 1985: 399). It should be noted that the first English department for female students in Women's College of Education in Mecca was established in 1972.

Tertiary education institutions such as industrial colleges, health colleges, technology colleges, and military academies, to mention just a few, offer intensive training in English language to students before academic study As a result, most Saudi universities and tertiary education institutions have established their own language centers, English departments and faculties of languages and translation. English is also the language of instruction in newly established private universities and colleges. Prince Sultan University, Effat College for Girls, Al-Yamamah College, and College of Business Administration are cases in point.

Recognition of the importance of English in KSA, according to Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi (1996), was not only the concern of the educational establishments, but also governmental ministries and private organizations. For example, the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, Saudi National Guard, etc. have given special attention to the English language by establishing either language centers or higher institutes annexed to these ministries in which English is taught intensively (Ibrahim- 1985: 54-55). The English language has also been recognized by special education programs. Al-Noor Institute for blind males and females, established in 1960, follows the Saudi school curricula in which English is a required subject.

English has also played a very important role in business since the oil boom in the 1970s. Large companies (e.g. Saudi Aramco. Sabic, Samref, Saudi Airlines) and banks (e.g. the Saudi American, Saudi British, Saudi French,

National Bank) demand a high level of proficiency in English as a requirement for recruitment. Such companies have established their own English language centers and/or programs to train their staff and upgrade their level of proficiency in English. (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi, 1996).

AI-Shabbi (1989: 128-129) has summarized the main reasons for teaching English in KSA as follows:

1   The extensive use of English through the world as a language of wider communication.
2.   The widespread use of English in science, technology, education, politics, business, and commerce.
3   The extensive use of English for writing, references, research, and terminologies.
4.   The necessity for Saudis to pursue their higher education in the West.
5   The diplomatic and business relations between KSA and Western countries.
6.   The frequent waves of foreign companies coming to KSA after the discovery of oil. This entails the need of those companies for qualified manpower and the need of the Saudi government for competent Saudis to manage and maintain contact with such companies.
7.   The desire to be acquainted with the history, culture, and traditions of foreign countries.

Motivations and attitudes towards English

English in KSA is seen as an important means to absorb Western science and technology and to secure cultural, social, economic and health development in order to partake in international, cultural, and economic progress (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996). Al- Zaid (1981) points out that English in KSA is important for three reasons: practical, spiritual (a means for propagating Islam), and political because KSA considers itself as a model of Islamic tradition, progress, and state. Islahi (1987) points out that the Saudi nation's political agenda supports the spread of English. Aldosari (1992: 54) maintains:

A Saudi capable of speaking English can teach native English speakers (citizens of Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, etc.) the message of Allah without going through: a) a tiresome process of translation which might eliminate certain nuances of meaning; or b) the need to learn or teach an intermediate language (i.e.. such as Urdu or Persian) in order to transmit crucial Islamic knowledge.

KSA, being aware of the cultural trappings that go with English education, promotes its use as a crucial tool for educational and economic advancement. English is therefore used and needed as a foreign language (EFL) in KSA

despite its hegemonic and prominent role in many parts of the world, including the neighboring gulf countries. Alabdan (2005.589) rightly argues that English will never be used or needed as a second language (ESL) in KSA for the following reasons:

- The conservative cultural nature of the Saudi society.
- Saudis' strong sense of their Arab and Muslim identity.
- The economic status of Saudi Arabia as a wealthy oil-producing country.
- The religious status of the country as the locale of the most holy Islamic shrines.
- The geographical location of Saudi Arabia in the heart of the Arabia Peninsula whereby it is linguistically insulated either by other Arab neighboring countries or seas.
- The high status of Arabic as the language of Islam and its holy book (the Quran) and the great Arabian heritage.
- The absence of previous foreign colonization in the history of Saudi Arabia.

The country being the heartland of Islam and the cradle of Arabic language has a big responsibility for maintaining the purity of Arabic language and Islamic culture. Bello (2005 online) points out that although the kingdom has realized the potentials of English as a global means of communication and as the international first language, it equally nurses the fear of the language upstaging Arabic. As early as the beginning of English in the education system in the 1930s in KSA, English was and is still seen by some Saudis as a threat that would eventually alienate the young Saudi men and women from their religious commitment, cultural heritage and traditions. At that time, people who were against the teaching of foreign languages protested to King AbdulAziz and voiced their concerns about the issue (Jan, 1984, in Zaid 2003). The King responded that foreign language instruction would in fact help spread Islam and develop the country. He also added that the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) allowed Muslims to learn the languages of other people.

Moreover, available research has refuted the idea that the spread of English among Saudis entails Westernization, detachment to the country, and a source of corruption to their religious commitment. Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi (1996), surveying the attitudes of 1176 undergraduate university students, representing all universities in KSA towards Westernization, national identity and religious commitment, reported that the use of English does not make the participants Westernized, neither does their national identity get weakened, nor their religious commitment become corrupted. Conversely, the participants believe that learning English is a religious and national duty among the Saudis.

Babrakzai (2002: 44) speculates that the English language is about to reach a level in the education and society of the Gulf countries that the local teachers, students, and others in the community are developing the love-hate relation with English. It is a relationship in which people view English as a necessary evil which they must have in order to be part of the global community. Al-Hazmi (1999) and Al-Hazmi (2004), however, show that the attitudes of Saudis towards English have moved away from seeing it as a necessary evil before the 1970s to viewing English as a means of accessing up-to-date technological and scientific knowledge and communicating with other cultures and civilizations. Likewise, Aldosari (1992) reported favorable attitudes of Saudi students and teachers on learning and teaching EFL.

English language planning: Does 'earlier' mean better?

English as a school subject at the pre-university level has gained a lot of momentum in the last ten years in KSA (Al-Hazmi, 2004). Government officials, parents, educators, and journalists have all been concerned about the proficiency level of the intermediate and secondary school leavers describing it as unsatisfactory (cf. Al-Shammary, 2003). As a consequence, the government decided to reintroduce English language classes in the elementary public schools in 2002 (in Grades, 4, 5, and 6) to boost students' proficiency levels and facilitate learning English at intermediate and secondary levels. The Council of Ministers, reported Al-Namlah (2003), then postponed its plan to introduce English lessons to primary schoolchildren, on the grounds that the move required further investigation. On the basis of unpublished investigations coordinated by the Ministry of Education, the government later agreed to the proposal to introduce the teaching of English as a main subject in sixth grade, for both boys and girls, beginning from the 2004-2005 academic year. The decision also called for improving the teaching of English at intermediate and secondary levels by updating curricula, enhancing teachers' competence and using modern technologies (Al-Namlah 2003). This decision was due to the official and public discontent with the poor achievement of students in English at the intermediate and secondary school stages (Al-Hazmi, 2004). Others, however, have voiced fears about culture, identity, economics and the potential negative effects on Arabic language (e.g. Al-Shammary, 2003). The opponents of English in primary education (e.g. Al-Shammary, 2003, Al-Hazmi, 2003) suggest that the money and efforts be spent on improving the outputs of the intermediate and secondary school English education as well as Arabization and translation (cf. Al-Hazmi, 2006).

The introduction of English at the elementary grade level in KSA, like many other countries, e.g. Costa Rica, Korea, Japan, Thailand, seems to be

based on the adage "earlier is better" rather than on any empirical research (cf. Auerbach, 1993; Ellis, 1986; Pufahl et al., 2001). One published study on the effect of early schooling in English language in private elementary schools in KSA (Abdan 1991) did not lend much support to this belief. The belief follows that it is highly recommended to offer students an early introduction to the target language followed by a long and well-articulated sequence of training (Abbott 1998, in Tucker 2001). The validity of the adage "earlier is better", according to Tucker (2001:597), "would seem to depend on sound language planning, the existence of a well-developed curriculum, the availability of trained proficient teachers, and the use of appropriate assessment procedures for feedback."

Current problems of English education at the intermediate and secondary schools, fear some EFL educators (e.g. Al-Hazmi, 2004, Al-Shammary, 2003), might carry over to the elementary school setting. As has been the experience, the specific goals and objectives of English programs are not clear except that it is a required subject, taught and talked about as a separate course rather than as an integral part of general education. Students are also left wandering until they apply to university when they discover the bitter fact that English is the medium of instruction of scientific and business schools with challenges that such a situation presents. This is why universities have to reinvent the wheel through offering intensive English programs and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses designed to promote the linguistic proficiency of secondary school leavers to prepare them for academic study in English. The reality, however, is that these programs struggle to bring about positive outcomes as the majority of students still do not attain high proficiency in the productive skills, and still cannot satisfactorily study academic subjects in English (Al-Hazmi 2006). As a result, students resort to using their native language (Arabic) or a mixture of both Arabic and English in Arab EFL teachers' classes. This phenomenon, which Krashen (1982) attributes to lack of competence in the target language, has been reported elsewhere in the Arab world. Markee (1986) and Zughoul and Hussain (1985) both emphasize the need for practitioners to be aware of such mismatches. They describe higher education situations in Sudan and Jordan respectively, where the official institutional language policy at that time was English-medium teaching and learning. However, both staff and students adopted their own unofficial policies so that communication and transfer of information could take place. Kennedy (2001) commenting on this situation indicates that the higher level policy was at odds with educational realities, the level of students' English being too low for English medium study. In these cases there was pressure to relieve the mismatch between policy and practice and create an educational equilibrium by relaxing the 'official' policy

and using Arabic, a form of pedagogic contingency management (Smith 1999, in Kennedy 2001).

Low proficiency levels and underachievement of pre-university and university students are expected to continue unless the existing gap between pre-university and university English language education is bridged, (Al-Hazmi, 2006). National EFL planners and educators (e.g. Al-Shammary 2003, Al-Hazmi 2004) have proposed that the 750 hours of English that students receive over a seven-year period be lumped together and offered as obligatory intensive courses for science sections and optional for literary ones during the last two years of secondary school. Success of such a procedure will depend upon the availability of qualified teachers and the existence of solid English language curriculum reflecting a sound knowledge of methodology, language pedagogy and appropriate materials. If this proposal were to be trialed, it could be a potential alternative to early English schooling (i.e. at the elementary level) which will have its feasibility assessed in three years' time. In conclusion to this section, attention of EFL decision makers in KSA should, from now onwards, focus in parallel on quality and quantity of exposure to EFL learning.

Human resource development

The Saudi government, in an attempt to meet the growing demand for education, opens hundreds of schools every year. The higher education sector is also witnessing a huge expansion, the number of public universities has risen from 7 in 1998 to 14 in 2006, and there have been more than ten colleges and three universities established by the private sector in the last five years. This expansion has been characterized by a focus on applied sciences (i.e. medical, engineering, computing, etc.) and an orientation to the needs of the job market, both of which require a good command of the English language. Perception of the need for English, however, has not always been matched by adequate provision of human and material resources.

EFL teachers over the last five decades have mainly been graduates of colleges of education and faculties of arts affiliated to Saudi universities offering bachelor degrees in English language and literature. Colleges of education emphasize the educational aspects in the preparation of their students. Colleges of arts prepare students to be English and/or English-Arabic translation specialists - not necessarily English teachers (Zaid 2003). The gap between the content of teacher training programs and what is needed in the classroom widens. After graduating from university, many teachers lack essential linguistic and pedagogic skills (Zaid 2003; Al-Hazmi 2003, Al-Gublan 2005). The Ministry of Education in 1973 designed a special program for qualifying English language teachers who had a high school diploma. These teachers were required to

study English language exclusively for one year: then, those who passed a comprehensive test would be sent to British universities to study for 100 weeks to be certified for teaching English in intermediate schools (Ibrahim 1985). This program was terminated in the late 1980s.

Table 1
Number of Saudi and non-Saudi female English teachers (The Ministry of Education, 2005)

School	Saudi	Non-Saudi	Total	Ratio (Saudi)
Elementary	1629	48	1677	97 1%
Intermediate	4463	130	4593	97.2%
Secondary	3131	87	3218	97.3%
Total	9223	265	9488	

Table 2
Number of Saudi and non-Saudi male English teachers (The Ministry of Education, 2005)

School	Saudi	Non-Saudi	Total	Ratio (Saudi)
Elementary	487	179	666	73.1%
Intermediate	2816	1765	4581	61 1%
Secondary	1361	1458	2819	48.3%
Total	4664	3402	8066	

English is mainly taught by Saudis at the K-12 level. However, there is a considerable number of non-Saudi teachers recruited from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Syria, the Sudan (Tables 1 & 2). At the tertiary level in KSA, most English teachers are expatriates from the Arab world, India, Pakistan with a few North Americans, Britons, and Australians. It should be pointed out that the Ministry of Education and higher education institutions face a continuing shortage of EFL teachers. Consequently, the Ministry of Education, for example, has, over the last three years (2004-2006), contracted newly graduated female Saudi teachers of other disciplines (e.g. history, geography, etc.) who had finished a course in English to teach at the elementary level. The Ministry of Education also gave certain English teachers additional duties in more than one school in some areas.

Although foreign teachers bring diversity into the classroom (Syed 2003, Chenard 1996), there is a wide linguistic and cultural distance between teachers (especially non-Arabs) and learners. Contracted expatriate teachers are also

less motivated to critique existing systems, and they have little impetus to innovate or initiate change (Al-Banna, 1997; Shaw 1997, in Syed 2003). Another factor which negatively influences the quality of education is the differential treatment based on native speaker status and nationality, resulting in very different remuneration packages and working conditions (Syed 2003).

EFL teacher preparation programs in KSA have, for long, been nonsystematic and inadequate (Al-Hazmi 2003). The in-service teacher training programs in the past two decades were conducted on a limited scale via the local education departments scattered all over the Kingdom (Al-Hazmi 2003). The trainers/facilitators (mainly English teachers and supervisors) are not qualified enough to undertake such a task. They lack subject knowledge, language proficiency, and competence in second/foreign language teaching methodology (Al-Ahaydib 1986; Zaid 2003).

Only recently has the Ministry of Education started to attend to EFL teachers who have not been trained for the profession. Over the last few years, the Ministry has organized in-service teacher training in collaboration with the US Embassy and the British Council to acquaint Saudi English teachers with modern teaching methods and to identify obstacles to effective English teaching. It has also sent hundreds of EFL supervisors and teachers mainly to England to attend a train-the-trainer course aimed at instructing delegates in the latest developments in the theory and practice of TEFL. At the tertiary level, on the contrary, there has been little or no training for national and expatriate teachers.

Decision makers and administrators in KSA need to be aware of the fact that teachers hold the key to the outcome of reform and therefore of English language teaching (ELT). There is an urgent need to qualitatively develop national and expatriate EFL teachers so that they can meet students changing needs. Achieving this bold aim requires long time frames, few immediate returns, and complex organizational systems (Syed 2003).

Classroom dynamics: From teaching to learning

The last few decades saw a great deal of development in the teaching of English as a Second/Foreign Language (TESL/TEFL). Different methodologies have dominated language teaching at various times and with different perspectives of language skills. The 1970s, argues Richards (2002:5), was an era of change and innovation in language teaching in which *Communicative Language Teaching* came to replace *Audiolingualism* and the *Structural-Situational Approach*. The 1970s also witnessed the birth of novel methods as *Total Physical Response,* the *Silent Way,* and *Counseling Learning.* We are now, maintains Richards (2002.5) in the *post methods era*.

The response of the field of TEFL in KSA to the abovementioned radical changes has not kept apace. English language teaching in KSA largely follows a top-down, teacher-driven, product oriented, pre-planned and rigid curriculum. The problem with "traditional" (teacher-centred) approaches is that they focus on the structural aspects of language, whereas, recent methods give more focus to the communicative, process, and academic (critical and analytical) aspects (Daoud and Al-Hazmi 2003).

There is still constant focus by untrained English language teachers on structure and vocabulary (Al-Hazmi, 2003), despite the increased emphasis that the new curriculum places on oral and written communication. The process of teaching and learning takes place in a lot of cases through translation into Arabic. Exposure to English, which is distorted in many ways, is mainly confined to the classroom, and students seem unwilling to look for chances to practice the language inside or/and outside the school boundaries (e.g. through the Internet, the Satellite TV, etc.). Teaching is largely examination oriented, making both teachers and students give more attention to exam preparation over learning. Teachers are always pressed to finish the prescribed syllabus in a specified period of time to please their supervisors or/and administrators (Zaid 2003). Bello (2005 online), describing his experience as an EFL teacher in KSA, points out that "there is hardly any room for a teacher's creativity or innovation, he must restrict himself to the demands of the teacher's book which tells him how to spend every single minute of his stay in the classroom."

The teacher-dominated EFL classes in KSA continue to marginalize the role of students who still believe that the teacher (or the school) is responsible for learners' learning. The EFL teacher's role needs to shift from material presenter and classroom manager to learning situations' facilitator, as the former, argues Subahi (2001.51) tends to neglect the student as an individual by unposing rigid teaching methods implied in the Teacher's Book procedures and steps of presentation, practice and application. Meaningful learning, contends Daoud (2003:82), has to become the objective of all education and training to equip learners to think critically and creatively, to pose and solve problems, to work with one another, and to become independent and life-long learners.

Although the definite date of the introduction of English as a school subject is not known, it can be claimed that it was adopted in a disciplined manner with the establishment of the General Directorate of Education in 1924 (Al-Shabbi 1989). The first public elementary school where English was taught as a school subject was established in 1924 (Al-Abed Al-Hag and Smadi 1996). The percentage of English in the Study Plan was 12 percent (Baghdadi 1985). English continued to be taught at this level until 1943 when a decision was taken to stop teaching English in the elementary stage and to introduce it into the first grade of the intermediate stage (grades 7-9) of the Saudi school system.

Curriculum, syllabus and materials

Table 3

English Language Curriculum in general education in KSA. History and
development (Adapted from Al-Mazroa 1999)

Stage	Year	Level	Educational Books	No.of Periods/ Week	Remarks
First Stage	1945 To 1957	Intermediate & Secondary	1. Reader - 1, 11, 111,& 1V	9periods/ weekly 30minutes period	Commercial Books
Second Stage	1958 To 1979	Intermediate	1. Living English for the Arab World – BOOK 1,2,3 2. Brighter grammar-book 1,2,3	5periods/ weekly 45 minutes/ period	Commercial Books
Second Stage	1958 To 1979	Secondary	1.Living English Structure 2.A first book in comprehension précis & composition 3.A travelers cheque and other stories 4.The pearl 5.Easier English practice 6.Easier scientific practice 7. Round the world in 80 days	5periods/ weekly 45minutes/ period	Commercial Books
Third Stage Saudi Arabian School English (SASE)	1980 To 1990	First, Second, &Third Year Intermediate	1.Pupil's Book 2.Work Book 3.Writing Book 4.Teacher s Book 5. Flash Cards, Wall Charts & Cassettes	5periods/ weekly 45minutes/ period	Macmillan PressCo. specially Designed these books for the Ministry of Education.
Third Stage	1980 To 1990	First, Second, &Third Year Secondary	1.Pupil's Book 2.Work Book 3. Flash Cards 4.Teacher's Book + 2 Cassettes 5.Reader 1 & II	5periods/ weekly 45minutes/ period	Macmillan PressCo. specially Designed these books for the Ministry of Education.

Table 3 (cont.)

Stage	Year	Level	Educational Books	No.of Periods/ Week	Remarks
Fourth Stage (English for Saudi Arabia)	1991 2002	First, Second, & Third Year Intermediate	1.Pupil's Book 2.Work Book 3.Teacher s Book 4.Cassettes Flash Cards & Wall Charts	4 periods/ weekly 45 minutes/ period Emphasis is made on Handwriting for all 3 years for all stages.	King Fahad University specially Designed these books for the Ministry of Education.
Fourth Stage (English for Saudi Arabia)	1991 To 2002	First, Second, & Third Year Secondary	1.Pupil's Book 2.Work Book 3.Teacher's Book 4.One Cassette 5.Flash Cards	4 periods / weekly 45 minutes/ period For all stages. Emphasis is made on Speaking, Reading, & Writing.	King Fahad University specially Designed these books for the Ministry of Education
Fifth (Stage Say It in English)	2004 to date	First, Second, & Third Year Intermediate	1.Pupil's Book 2.Work Book 3.Teacher's Manual 4.Tapescript & Audiotapes	4 periods / weekly 45 minutes/ period For all stages. Focus is on both receptive and productive skills.	Designed by the Ministry of Education female English supervisors.
Sixth Stage	2005/ 2006	Sixth Grade Elementary	1.Pupil's Book 2.Work Book 3.Teacher's Book	2 periods / weekly 45 minutes/ period	Designed by the Ministry of Education male English directors and supervisors

Table 3 clearly shows the dramatic changes and developments which the English curricula in pre-university public education KSA have undergone over the last six decades. The Ministry of Education started off with commercial books and ended up producing materials by its own staff. Materials that were produced under the supervision of the Ministry of Education reflect, to some extent, awareness of the cultural and educational needs of Saudi students. Up to the late 1970s, the number of hours per week for English attended by a student was 7 both in the intermediate and secondary stages (grades 10-12) (Al-Mazroa 1999). From 1980 to present, the number of hours has been reduced to 6 in both stages. With the reintroduction of English at the elementary stage in 2004, time allotted for English at this stage is one hour and a half (2 periods of 45 minutes each).

The Ministry of Education, recognizing the growing prominence of English in the decades since 1970s, has specified aims for teaching English in both intermediate and secondary schools [1]. These aims of English Curriculum in general education, written more than three decades ago, need to be revised in the light of the current educational and economic situation in KSA. A set of aims were also specified for English language teaching in the Sixth Grade of the elementary level with the introduction of English in this level in 2004. A major critique of these aims is that they are stated in general broad terms with no indication of the levels of proficiency which ought to be the standard at the elementary, intermediate and secondary levels (Subahi 2001). Phrases such as 'enough knowledge', 'sound foundation', 'sufficient knowledge' 'reasonable command', etc. clearly show that the aims are vague and implicit [1] The level of the current English curricula being challenging to both students and teachers is another problem. Bello (2005: online), reflecting on his experience as an EFL teacher in KSA, points out that the English books used in the intermediate school are slightly too ambitious, for they require students who have never even had an official contact with the English alphabets to do exercises that involve dictation, crossword puzzles, sentence and paragraph constructions. This situation is worsened by the fact that an intermediate school student has to study thirteen subjects per semester besides English; the same applies more or less to secondary school students.

The English curricula at the pre-university level, since the early 1980s, have moved from an earlier concern for literature and culture to a stress on English as an international language of communication and dialogue. As a result, there has been growing emphasis over the years on oral ability. More recently, a new interest has been in the teaching of reading and writing skills. The curriculum is supplemented with suitable audio materials, visual and computer-based materials are still lacking. There is still, however, much room

for material improvement in terms of content, form and instructional aids. This has also been voiced by Zaid (2003).

In higher education on the other hand, reliance, apart from King Fahad University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) which produces its own in-house materials, has been on commercial materials of international publishers (e.g. Oxford, Cambridge, Longman, Macmillan, etc.). English programs in some universities and tertiary institutions rely upon instructors who are not necessarily material writers to develop materials. There is, henceforth, an urgent ongoing need for developing culturally and academically appropriate materials at higher education institutions. In the meantime, institutions could consider hiring experienced curriculum writers or/and developers to meet this need. A long term solution, however, is to outsource a comprehensive national project led by the Ministry of Higher Education in collaboration with all universities and tertiary education institutions for developing ESP/EAP materials that meet the diverse changing needs of Saudi students in the globalization age. National EFL specialists need to be involved in this project so that they can offer quality assessment and ascertain that the produced curriculum is based on values and morals of the Saudi society (Al-Mazroa 1999).

Assessment

The major form of assessment in English education in KSA is achievement tests. Achievement language testing is carried out mainly to determine the extent to which learners have learned what has been taught during a course of instruction (Brindley and Ross 2001). The focus of achievement tests is on structure and vocabulary and little attention is paid to assessing oral and written communication, reflecting teachers' pedagogic concern about such aspects. The multiple choice format of a lot of these tests is another challenge which negatively affects English language teaching.

At the end of the second term of secondary school, the achievement oriented English language examination prepared by the Ministry of Education serves both for school leaving and university entrance purposes. Students willing to join English departments and scientific schools in almost all universities, however, have to take English placement tests covering various language skills. Such a policy applies to both high and low achieving students. King Fahad University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) is the only exception. Exceptional students at KFUPM may bypass the Orientation English Program (OEP) altogether and be placed directly into freshman classes. Promotions are determined by high school records, the OEP Placement Test, the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP), and a writing test. KFUPM students may also be promoted to freshman level after one

semester of OEP work on the basis of an MTELP retake and a grade average of "A"

The examinations (of English and other subjects) are fairly traditional, and the final grades take into account first term school grades. Because of concerns about reliability, the National Center for Assessment and Evaluation, affiliated to the Ministry of Higher Education, established its own Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). The SAT includes sections in general ability and mathematics. The score of SAT is allotted 70% weight as opposed to 30% for the secondary school grade average as a basis for university admission.

Proficiency tests, which aim to establish the extent to which learners can use a language for their intended purposes (Brindley and Ross 2001) are virtually non-existent. This can be attributed to the fact that proficiency tests are more time-and-effort consuming and that current EFL teachers are not ready to conduct this form of assessment. A language curriculum for empowerment, as Brown (1993:230, in Daoud, 2003) puts it, 'recognizes the value of tests in terms of application and use of knowledge in relevant contexts and tests book-learning and skills in terms of the process of learning and the quality of thinking.

Research

Over the last three decades, there have been numerous studies in TEFL/TESL, EFL/ESL, TESOL, applied linguistics and related areas with a special reference to the Saudi context conducted mostly by Saudi postgraduate students at British and North American universities. The topics of those studies (mainly theses for master and doctoral degrees) were usually determined by students and/or their academic supervisors. Although some studies tackled important issues in (cf. Subahi 2001 for a review), they showed a lack of a national agenda reflecting research priorities in the field. Furthermore, most research carried out by professors at local and international universities in the abovementioned areas, mainly satisfying personal professional needs, has been characterized by a lack of coordination among decision making bodies (the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education). Such research is sometimes hard to locate and the results of which are neither shared nor acted upon in significant manners. Specific research, says Zaid (2003), aiming at improving the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language is limited and is therefore badly needed.

Apart from the above-mentioned uncoordinated studies, very little systematic research has been conducted addressing issues of concern related to English language education in KSA. Syed (2003:340), in his commentary on the ELT situation in the Arabian Gulf region, points out:

"Given the amount of development that has occurred and the money invested in education, very little research has been conducted in the Gulf region. Consequently, a research culture does not exist. Research is not actively sought to provide insights into problems or issues, nor are its findings incorporated in meaningful ways. Research, or systematic inquiry, and critical reflection on experience are the principal sources for constructing a knowledge base. The lack of an established knowledge base from which to draw and the underutilizing of research as a tool often leads to ahistorical initiatives that reinvent the wheel and to uniformed decisions about program development, curriculum design, assessment, and pedagogy."

Conclusion

KSA needs a continuous effort to reform English education programs to better prepare its students for the economic and political impact of global changes. Reform, informed by systematic inquiry, is required in terms of revising the existing curricula, syllabi, materials, teaching and learning strategies, and human resource development to become effective at the level of the classroom practice.

The paper concludes by posing a number of urgent questions about how to develop English education programs in KSA most effectively. How can EFL policy makers and educators make language learning relevant to further academic and professional life situations? What can EFL policy makers and educators draw from contemporary theories, research findings and practices to tackle current challenges of English education? How can EFL policy makers and educators best organize research with a view to meeting the current challenges of English education? What are the suitable models of teacher development, where there is an acute shortage of EFL teachers, and the need for development is often threefold- in (a) English language proficiency; (b) socio-cultural experiences of learning to teach; and (c) the technical, methodological, and theoretical aspects of teaching? These seem urgent questions to take up before reform can significantly affect English education in KSA.

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