

EFL Program of the secondary schools in Qassim region (Saudi Arabia): Problems, Causes and Solutions

Introduction:

English, as a foreign language, is taught in Saudi public schools at the last level of the primary schools, the intermediate and the secondary schools. Teaching English starts at the 6th grade level and continues until the 12th grade level with an average of about six hours per week. The Ministry of Education in 1954 outlined the goals of teaching English in public schools and designed the curriculum for each level. The teachers of English are non-native speakers, most of them national teachers who have graduated from local universities as well as some foreign teachers from other Arab countries such as Egypt and Sudan. Unfortunately, secondary school graduates especially in the Qassim region who study English for about 7 years are, in most cases, unable to communicate in English and their level of proficiency is far below the expected level. This research will attempt to investigate the effectiveness of the EFL program in the secondary schools in my region (Qassim) in Saudi Arabia especially in the field of the quality of the curricula, teaching methods and the effects of cultural values.

Why (Qassim region)?

Qassim region can be considered as the most cohesive and conservative Muslim society in Saudi Arabia, that is earnestly striving to develop and promote itself through the acquisition of sound education and modern technology. At the same time, it is trying very hard to preserve its Islamic values and national heritage.

In such society, learning FL and the cultural aspects that may accompany this learning may be seen as acquisition foreign language traits, whose spread might endanger the native language. A cultural challenge may arise then because the society is aware of the English for its development, but it resists the intrusion of a foreign culture and spread of FL. Normally, such a situation will have an impact on motivation to learn FL as well as resultant achievement.

Statement of the problem:

The level of student achievement in English at the secondary schools is low and the general proficiency of Saudi students is unsatisfactory. This problem requires analysis to identify the reasons that causes these unsatisfactory results. It's the purpose of the researcher to conduct an evaluative study of the EFL program in the secondary schools in Qassim region. This research aim to identify the problems of the EFL program particularly the problems of:

- 1- The cultural values that affect the learning/teaching of the EFL program.
- 2- The teaching methods that the teachers use.
- 3- The perception of the curriculum design as perceived by the students and the teachers.

Research Questions:

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

- 1- What are the quality of the textbooks and other materials of the secondary English programs in Saudi Arabia?
- 2- What methods do teachers use in teaching English inside the classroom?
- 3- How can the curriculum be developed to b more sensitive to Saudi culture?

The purpose of the study:

The purpose of the study is:

- 1- To diagnose the problems that face learning/teaching English as a foreign language in Qassim region.
- 2- To identify the causes of these problems of EFL program in the Qassim region.
- 3- To offer some possible solutions for the EFL program problems in the Qassim region.

Methodology of the research:

The research will be qualitative in nature. The study will examine twenty randomly-selected classes in Qassim region. Ten in a public school and another ten in a private school, each class will be visited 4 times during the study. In addition, The researcher will use semi-structured

interviews, questionnaires and the researcher's own experiences and opinion as he worked as an EFL teacher in a secondary school in Qassim region in Saudi Arabia for about three years .

Finally, the researcher will draw on previous studies and researches by Saudi and Western researchers to collect the data.

Anticipated benefits:

The research is expected to achieve:

- 1- An extensive evaluation study of the EFL program problems of the secondary schools in Qassim region.
- 2- The research is expected to help enhancing the methods of teaching/learning EFL in Qassim region schools and Saudi Arabia schools in general.
- 3- The researcher will give his recommendations to develop the curriculums to be more sensitive to the Saudi culture.

Literature Review:

The current and vast use of English in business, economics, and international relations has created a need for defining the context in which English is taught or used. According to Strevens (1980), nowadays, there is English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English as a Standard Dialect (ESD), English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as Foreign Language (EFL). For the purpose of this

study, I will discuss English as foreign language learners' needs, program goals, teaching methods and overview in EFL in Saudi Arabia.

EFL learners live in a country where English is not the medium of communication. English is not needed for survival or to be able to enter the job market, therefore learning occurs in a very low acquisition environment. English is not used in this society except in a few businesses or organizations. Consequently, students are not motivated to learn because they do not see the need for learning English; they only study English as a required subject in school or for the fun of speaking a second language (Strevens 1980). Also, in an EFL context, teachers emphasize the development of English reading and writing skills rather than attempting to speak with their students, due to their own lack of English oral proficiency skills. Students learn only enough English to fulfil the English subject requirement or pass the grade level they are studying. Generally, students are not expected to continue higher education using English, except in a context where English is taught as ESP (Zaid 1993).

According to Strevens (1980) students in an EFL environment may only need to possess enough knowledge about the structure of English to read and write, and therefore instruction focuses on learning the grammar of the language through pattern drills both orally and in writing. Teaching aids in EFL consist of English laboratories and visual aids to compensate for the lack of exposure to native English speakers, but they often require students to perform drill rather than participating in natural communication. The ALM, Grammar Translation, and the Direct Method are emphasized in EFL contexts because they may serve the goals of the programs of teaching English in this context.

An overview of teaching English as foreign language in Saudi Arabia:

The teaching of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia was introduced about 40 years ago (Al-Ahaydib 1986). The Government of Saudi Arabia gave teaching English a lot of attention because it is one of the main methods of introducing the outside world with its development and technology to Saudis. The Ministry of Education (Curriculum of the secondary Level, 1971) stresses the importance of learning English and states its goals for teaching English in the country in the following statement:

“To help the pupil gain a reasonable command of English in order to be in a better position to defend Islam against adverse criticism and to participate in the dissemination of Islamic culture “(p. 316).

In a society as conservative and closed as that of Saudi Arabia, particularly in Qassim region, it has been very difficult for people to accept the idea that a language other than Arabic be taught to Muslims (Alfallaj 1998). People fear that teaching a foreign language might result in students adopting the culture and values of that language. At that time, people who were against the teaching of foreign languages protested to King Abdulaziz. According to Jan (1984) the opponents of foreign languages instruction presented their concerns about the issue to King Abdulaziz. The King responded that the teaching of a foreign language would in fact help the spread of Islam and would help in the development of the country. He also added that the Prophet

Mohammed (peace be upon him) permitted Muslims to learn the languages of other people.

English instruction in the Saudi public schools was introduced in the intermediate level only, but later it was extended to the secondary level. The English programs started with eight hours of instruction per week but in 1981 the Ministry of Education reduced it to the current level of four hours a week. Textbooks were designed by companies outside Saudi Arabia (e.g. Macmillan) in England. Following certain guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education, the textbooks designers took into consideration the religion, culture, and social needs of Saudi students. The English Language Section of the Department of Curriculum Development at the Ministry of Education is responsible for developing, revising, and editing the textbooks. The existing textbooks were designed by King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) in cooperation with the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 1992). Because of its very successful English program, KFUPM was asked to prepare textbooks for the intermediate level. In 1986, KFUPM started the textbooks project by talking to teachers and supervisors, and

visiting schools. After years of study, KFUPM designed the current textbooks taking into consideration the historical and religious background of the country and the problems that students faced with the previous textbooks.

Marckwardt (1965) argues that in the EFL context teachers generally share the same culture and language of their students and have learned English outside of an English speaking country and may have a low level of English oral proficiency. ESL teacher preparation programs generally emphasize all the four skills of English where in EFL the emphasis is on reading and writing skills. Strevens (1980) claims that EFL teacher preparation programs emphasize basic

linguistic skills of the English language and English teaching pedagogy, where in an ESL programs teachers are provided with very rich knowledge about the English language, language acquisition, and English teaching skills.

English is taught in the Saudi public schools beginning at the sixth grade and continues until 12th grade in both male's and females' schools. Textbooks, teaching method, and number of teaching periods taught per day, are the same in both schooling systems. The textbooks consist of (a) the teacher's guide book which contains steps and recommendations that teachers should follow to help them with the applications of teaching techniques, (b) student's books that contains the actual lessons and material students are to learn, and (c) the student workbook, which students use to do part of their homework. English instruction starts in elementary schools in private schools.

The Ministry of Education assigns teachers with experience and knowledge of teaching English to work as English language teaching supervisors. The supervisors monitor and supervise the teaching of English in the public schools. They visit classrooms and attend actual lessons in progress to provide teachers with feedback and suggestions. Supervisors are also responsible for conducting evaluations that decide which teachers need in-service training or should be promoted.

Goals of Teaching English:

The Ministry of Education, in (Curriculum of the Secondary Level, 1974, p. 316) also stated the general aims and specific objectives of the secondary level as follows:

- 1- To afford the secondary school pupil a window on the world.

- 2- To give the secondary schools pupil an experience of delight through reading sample of English that has an appeal both in arts and science.
- 3- To cultivate the pupil's critical thinking as a useful adjunct intelligent reading of English textbook.
- 4- To give play to the pupil's imagination by means of imagery in poetry and visualization of character.
- 5- To provide the pupil who intends to join the university or other higher institutes with an adequate knowledge of English to help him in his future studies.
- 6- To give the pupil who finishes his formal education in the third year of secondary education sufficient knowledge of the language to help him in his vocation.
- 7- To help pupil gain a reasonable command of English in order to be in a better position to defend Islam against adverse criticism and participate in the dissemination.

There seem to be a mismatch between some of the goals and objectives of teaching English in the country and the method used. Although the ALM utilizes teaching grammar, it is hoped that students will be able to speak English and preach Islam. Some of the goals such as reading, writing, and mastery of grammar may be served by the Audio-Lingual Method, but oral communication in English may be accomplished by using communicative methods.

English is also taught in most of the twelve universities in Saudi Arabia. There, students have to take introductory English course as a required subject. English is also used as the medium of instruction at colleges of

medicine and engineering. At King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, English is taught in an intensive program for students who are admitted to the university.

In addition, English is taught in different technical and vocational institutes and military academies where it is a primary subject. It is also offered in other major institutes such as the Institute of Public Administration where intensive English courses are offered.

Teaching Methodology:

According to Al-Kamookh (1981) the Audio-lingual Method (ALM) is widely used for teaching English in Saudi Arabia. The ALM is a traditional method that emphasizes the process of stimulus and response situations. The ALM is used in Saudi Arabia because it may serve some of the goals of teaching English in the country. The ALM helps students learn the grammar of English as well as reading and writing. The ALM is not fully applied in the teaching of English in Saudi Arabia. Teachers tend to follow some parts of the method and ignore others. For example, Al-Kamookh found that the English language laboratory use was not emphasized in the schools. The use of laboratories is an essential part of the ALM, because students listen to native English voices and authentic sounds of the language. If the laboratories are not used in most Saudi schools, Saudi students are missing this advantage of learning nature English speeches. Brown (1987) argues that the ALM, although it is popular and used more than other methods, fails to accomplish the goal of providing students with communicative competency. The ALM is a good method for teaching grammar, but students are not taught how to communicate in the language, which may

be one of the reasons that most of the Saudi students cannot express themselves in English even after finishing secondary school.

As Alsaadat (1985) argued, in some cases teachers of English in Saudi Arabia tend to apply some aspects of other methods such as the grammar translation method, the cognitive code learning, and the direct method. Based on this, it seems that teachers are not encouraged to teach communicative competence and encourage students to speak in English. The lack of methods other than traditional methods, which mainly emphasize teaching grammar, is a problem. Despite the widespread criticism of the ALM and the grammar translation method, they are still used for English instruction in Saudi Arabia.

Teacher Preparation:

Teachers of English in Saudi Arabia are mainly Saudi Arabians who received their B.A. in teaching English. Currently, there are a large number of non-Saudi English teachers at both male and female schools who are recruited from Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Sudan.

The Saudi teachers are graduates of: two-year training programs, in the United States or England, a four-year program in teaching English at the departments of English in colleges of education at the different universities in Saudi Arabia, or a four-year college program in English in the English departments in colleges of arts. The two-year English teacher training program, in the United States or England, prepares teachers to teach English in the Saudi public school system.

The four-year English teacher program at the departments of English in colleges of education at the different universities in Saudi Arabia prepares students to teach English at the public schools of Saudi Arabia. In these four years students receive an intensive English course accompanied with courses in linguistics, phonology, morphology and syntax, English literature, teaching methods, and courses in education. The four-year of English teacher program at the English departments in colleges of arts prepares students to be experts in the English language. If students desire they can teach English in the public school system. The difference between programs in colleges of education and these in colleges of arts is

that colleges of education prepare students as teachers of English and emphasize the educational aspects of their preparation, whereas the program at the colleges of arts prepare students to be experts in English or English translation and not necessarily as English teachers.

It is believed that the preparation of English teachers in Saudi Arabia does not meet the needs of teachers when they go to real-life situations and teach in the classrooms. Sheshsha (1982) has pointed out that even after graduating from college teachers still lack some aspects of English, especially the ability to speak it. Sheshsha further states that:

"... Some teacher trainees graduating from such programs would have a fairly solid background in English literature, but a weak background in linguistics and English skills..."
(P, 17)

Teachers lack the opportunity to visit and interact with schools during the four years of college. Teachers need to get a feel of how real life teaching

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experiences occur, they also need to work with and observe experienced teachers at least in their last year of college. Teachers also need to practice oral English to improve their spoken English and give them a chance to speak in English in the classrooms.

Problems Related to Teaching English in Saudi Arabia:

The system of teaching English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia has been under investigation and study for a long time. The Ministry of Education, from time to time, conducts studies about the effectiveness of this system. According to Okaz (1991), in these studies the Ministry of Education was surprised after finding out that the level of student achievement is decreasing. This has prompted others to study this system in an effort to find ways for improvement. Okaz (1991) states:

"After thirty years of introducing the teaching of English in the country, the Ministry of Education in the studies that it conducts, discovers the weakness of the achievement of students. Among the sad results is that after six years spent in learning English, students may not be able to write their names in English. Add to this, many of the sad occasions when university graduates work in an English speaking environment where the kind of job they have necessitates that they travel abroad and interact with English speakers. These people may not be able to introduce themselves in one English sentence. It will not be an exaggeration to say that some people may not be able to read the airline ticket and may ask someone who could to read it for them" (p. 16).

Some studies shed some light on this one. Zafer (2002) surveyed intermediate and secondary English teachers, from the Qassim region in Saudi Arabia, about the teaching methods they used. He concluded that the method most preferred and used by teachers is the ALM followed by the grammar

translation method. Based on that, a conclusion may be drawn that the English teaching methodology in Saudi Arabia is following the more traditional methods of teaching English and needs to incorporate more modern communicative methods. In the last two decades there has been an enormous amount of literature written about the new methods of teaching English.

Al-Kamookh (1981) discovered that English language laboratories were not used and in some cases were not available in some schools. Al-Kamookh states:

"The Language laboratory was not available in most of the schools. Moreover, those schools which had language laboratories claimed that they were not in use either because of improper maintenance or the lack of qualified theatres to operate the laboratories" (p. 108).

Because the language laboratory is an essential aspect of the ALM, it is important to utilize using such laboratories. If English teachers in Saudi Arabia are not using laboratories it means that they are not following the basics of the ALM. This is adding to the problem of the system of teaching English in the country. Other studies confirmed the lack of utilization of audiovisual aids in the schools. Jan (1984) reported problems related to using audiovisual aids and recommended that students be given copies of the audio cassette that accompanies the textbook to give students a chance to listen to it at home and get listening input in English.

Zafer (2002) states that the EFL textbooks in the secondary schools contain issues which are irrelevant to the EFL program goals defined by the Ministry of Education. For example, you will find in one EFL textbook lots of dominant

subjects relating to the desert life, keeping livestock especially camels and stories of ancient Arabic heroes, which make the EFL students very weak in using English in modern advanced technologies, hospitals, traveling situations, airports and the like.

Other studies also reported problems related to teacher preparation. Al-Ahaydib (1986) reported that supervisors rated teachers as weak in speaking the language and had problems with the teaching methodology and the English language sound system. Jan (1984) also reported that supervisors suggested that English teachers need more emphasis in their preparation on English competency and teaching methodology.

Alabdan (1996) stated that the particular nature of the Saudi society is probably another cause behind the decline or lack of motivation to learn English in the Saudi public school. Saudi Arabia can be considered as a cohesive and conservative Muslim society. In such society, learning any FL and the cultural aspects that may accompany this learning may be seen as acquiring foreign traits, the spread of which is seen to endanger the native cultural and language.

In conclusion, most of studies about EFL program in Saudi Arabia particularly in Qassim region including: Abu-ghararh, (1986); Al-Ahaydib (1986); Al-Amr (1998); Al-Fallaj (1998); Al-Hammadin. (1998); Al-AMazroou; (1988), clarify these problems in the teaching/learning EFL by a number of factors. Some of those factors are: lack of motivation, attitude to English (culture), huge social distance between the two cultures, lack of exposure outside the classroom and finally the use of traditional methods in teaching.

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