

Causes of Paradigm Shift from EFL to ESL in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The use of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia does not appear to continue in the coming years on account of its strong commitment towards the 2030 vision that aims to reformulate and restructure the foundations of the social and economic fabric of the Saudi society. The Arabic language holds its significance in the society due to being a religious language. The current review has analyzed the paradigm shifts from EFL to ESL in higher education in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and predicted the future of English in Saudi Arabia. The major challenge that policymakers may encounter would be how to localize education of English language to meet the Saudi norms and standards of learning while at the same time modernize and internationalize the higher education through western theoretical knowledge and the English language. Suggestions regarding these aspects may direct individuals involved in language planning in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: EFL, ESL, higher education, paradigm shift, Saudi students

1. Introduction

Arabic in Saudi Arabia is not viewed as the official language of the country but as a holy language that represents Islam since the holy Quran is written in Arabic (Payne & Almansour, 2014). In recent years, the government of Saudi Arabia has paid special attention to the teaching of English language by mainly focusing on introducing English Language at all educational levels (Alasmari & Khan, 2014).

Although English language is not referenced as a formal language in the Saudi Constitution neither in political nor in non-political sense (Alnasser, 2018), its status is undergoing through a change from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to English as a Second Language (ESL) (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). According to Kachru's (1982) three circles models of World Englishes, Saudi Arabia is located in the third or expanding circle where English is used as a Foreign Language (EFL).

English language teaching was a debatable topic among the Saudi Islamic and social scholars who have always expressed their worries about English being a negative influence on Saudis' religious and cultural identities (Elyas & Picard, 2010). However, this hue has subsided greatly since English has been incorporated as an integral part of higher education and it is more likely to be incorporated in lower educational levels as well.

This shift in emphasis is based on three underlying factors: first, English is a preferred medium of communication and instruction for scholars who got their higher education in English speaking countries. According to Alshahrani (2016), the Higher Education sector sends students to study in English speaking countries who return as professors holding PhD in different majors and with high proficiency in the English language. They have studied abroad and learnt to conduct research and obtained knowledge in their majors through the English language. Such experiences may have impacted on how they perceive English as a language of instruction.

Second, the increased use of English as a means of communication and teaching is a response to the ongoing changes in the economy and the emerging requirements of job markets for which the Saudi government is attempting to prepare the young generation. The use of English in the coming years would not continue as EFL in Saudi Arabia because of its strong commitment towards implementing the 2030 vision that aims to reformulate the basis of the social and economic dimensions of the Saudi society (Nurunnabi, 2017). The Saudi government wants to create a solid base for the economy by preparing and developing its youth as critically thinking and academically sound individuals who can play their parts in the social and economic development of the country (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017).

Third, it is also related to other factors such as university ranking and improving the quality of education with respect to research and learning outcomes (Le Ha & Barnawi, 2015). This has necessitated the growth and expansion of private universities and the partnerships between governmental and international universities abroad. They further increased the use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in Higher education in Saudi Arabia (Le Ha & Barnawi, 2015). English has also been increasingly used as the EMI in fields of studies of some faculties

in Saudi Arabia (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013) including science, medicine, dentistry, engineering and computers. Additionally, Saudi universities provide students with intensive English courses during their Preparatory Year Program (PYP) making English compulsory to study at university level (McMullen, 2014).

Several studies have explored views of professors and students on the use of EMI in higher education such as Al-Kahtany, Faruk, and AL-Zumor (2016) and Shamim, Abdelhalim, and Hamid (2016). It should be noted that the views and perceptions of Saudis regarding EMI may have been changed or modified since the beginning of the new era in which sincere efforts are being made by the Saudi government to fulfil its 2030 vision and foreign qualified scholars have returned with an ambition to achieve high ranking positions. The present study has comprehensively reviewed the paradigm shifts for English in Saudi Arabia from EFL to ESL in higher education and also predicted the future of English in Saudi Arabia. The following sections will discuss the overview of EMI and obstacles encountered in the transformation from EFL to ESL in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, implications will be presented based on the critical review presented in the following sections.

The study is a descriptive qualitative study that uses textual analysis to review studies about EMI in higher education. The study has reviewed and cited twenty- three literary works that were published during the period of 2012-2017. Firstly, an overview has been presented about English language as a medium of instruction, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia and Asia. The next section covers the different factors that affected the learning and teaching process of English as foreign language in Saudi Arabia. Finally, the study concludes with implications and recommendations that are useful for planning effective policies to modify the status of English language as a second language in Saudi Arabia.

2. Review Analysis

2.1 Overview of English as a Medium of Instruction

English as a Medium of instruction (EMI) is a predominating language approach adapted for teaching the content in higher education institutes of Asia. The literature reviewed is centered on the concept of acceptance and attitudes towards EMI, mostly commenting on policies and their implementations and views of instructors and students on EMI in different Asian universities in general and the Saudi universities in particular.

In Saudi Arabia, EMI is increasingly used in the higher education sector to improve research and educational outcomes (Picard, 2018). A considerable number of studies have discussed the impact of such an approach on students' perceptions and academic achievements as well as on their social and cultural backgrounds. For instance, Shamim, Abdelhalim, and Hamid (2016) investigated the perceptions of instructors and students regarding EMI in a Saudi university. The results showed that EMI was preferred by the majority of instructors and students; however, they also expressed their alarming concerns regarding approaches other than EMI that are being used in universities. For example, instructors mentioned that because of students' low English proficiency levels, they had to translate every word to Arabic. The instructors also

raised the issue that they lacked training in bilingual education. This, in turn, affected the teaching quality and students' learning in Preparatory Year Program (PYP). In Saudi Arabia, Al-Kahtany, Faruk, and AL-Zumor (2016) found that EMI was favored only by instructors and not by students and instructors also called for EMI to be removed from difficult courses and used only in easy courses. However, they did not give any criterion to define a difficult or easy course. They did not see a point in using English with students who had no plans to live-in English-speaking countries or working overseas.

Similar concerns were found in Asia, as several Asian studies were reviewed due to the same educational structure based on top-down policies and teacher-centered practices (Zohrabi, Torabi & Baybourdiani, 2012; Raymond & Choon, 2017). It is believed that the use of EMI is beneficial for students and professors as it improves their language skills and research knowledge (Dearden, 2018). However, students tend to face several challenges to cope with EMI. Previous studies such as Zare-ee and Hejazi (2017) in Iran and Byun et al. (2011) in South Korea suggested that institutions favored EMI, although, it was quite challenging for students. Zare-ee and Hejazi (2017) further found that students' low English proficiency was the major challenge during teaching, yet EMI was found to be beneficial for professors as the usage of EMI in Iranian higher education has improved their language competency and raised the levels of their publications in the English language. Similar results were concluded by Byun et al. (2011) according to which in South Korea, professors found that using EMI has improved their willingness to do and publish their research in different fields of studies. However, students were unsatisfied with EMI and wished it were a choice, rather than being obligation.

According to Byun et al. (2011), the level of satisfaction with EMI greatly varied from one discipline to another. For example, nursing and engineering students were unhappy to study their course via EMI, while business students revealed that EMI would improve their language skills. The students were motivated to learn courses of Business Studies through EMI because they were well-aware of the needs of the job market. Kym and Kym (2014) found that students were satisfied with EMI and would keep learning courses via EMI. They further indicated that they were more satisfied with native English instructors as compared to the non-native instructors.

English as a Medium of Instruction is often preferred by instructors and policymakers in universities (Al-Kahtany, Faruk & AL-Zumor, 2016). The decision-makers may have forgotten that there was always a difference in between what they think is possible and what actually occurs in classrooms. To illustrate, decision-makers in institutes of higher education believe that the use of EMI may strengthen their universities' ranking and enable them to take the lead in the world; however, this may not always be the case. This issue was investigated by Hu and Lei (2014) in China where policymakers were ambitious about developing a modernized higher education system; therefore, they adopted EMI in higher education. According to Hu and Lei (2014), getting access to English and increased chances of program exchange as well as job opportunities for Chinese students in international universities would improve the ranking of Chinese Universities. In their study, they interviewed professors and students from Chinese universities where EMI was extensively used. The study revealed that English occupied a prestigious position in Chinese society and was considered as a cultural

capital since those who have high English proficiency levels would get easy access to higher education. They also pointed out issues like how EMI was implemented highlighting the gap between the main learning objectives of EMI that was mentioned in policy-makers' documents and what was actually implemented in the classroom. It also found that there was no alignment between the needs of professors and students and the support offered by policy makers.

Similar results were found by Bolton, Botha and Bacon-Shone (2017) in Singapore. They claimed that the use of EMI in Singapore's higher education institution was not always a success story. Students revealed that English was used as a sole medium of instruction. Furthermore, undergraduate students struggled to improve their writing skills to the level required in certain areas of discipline specifically in writing discourse. Postgraduate students claimed that they used Mandarin as a means of communication with their supervisors and classmates. This could mean that there was no sufficient use of English in classes and does not reflect the outcomes which policymakers wanted to achieve.

In Bangladesh, EMI in higher education caused a division among students in universities. According to Sultana (2014), the students and professors who have high levels of English language proficiency have control. They also enjoy greater chances of class participation, while, those with low English proficiency were excluded from classroom discussions and participation. Similarly, Kim, Tatar, and Choi (2014) found that international students studying in South Korean universities understood the role of English in classrooms and used it as a tool to communicate with others to fulfil their needs and feel equal among other students. On the other hand, Korean students were anxious about using English and preferred the Korean language.

The above discussion has shown that high proficiency in English makes individuals more competent and enable them to learn and participate in classroom more effectively. These students can adapt to the learning process, while learning process becomes almost impossible for individuals with low English proficiency. Therefore, the present study considers EMI as a complicated learning context that contributes to the creation of division among students on the basis of their English language proficiency. Therefore, it is suggested that the students need to obtain a deep understanding on the use of EMI related to their specific field of studies before joining the university (Kym & Kym, 2014).

2.2 Paradigm Shift in Saudi Arabia: Discussion of Obstacles

Many Saudi studies discussed factors affecting EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia some of them are (Elyas & Al Grigri, 2014; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Shah, Hussain & Nassef, 2013; Alrabai, 2016). The common findings of all articles were based on four factors; students' beliefs, teachers' training, curriculum and learning environment. The first factor is students' beliefs about the English language. Such beliefs are listed in different perspective such as; (a) their beliefs and attitudes in learning English, (b) their anticipations regarding studying English (c) their perceptions regarding the English language (d) lack of motivation, (e) students' preferences and goals (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Elyas & Al Grigri, 2014; Shah, Hussain & Nassef, 2013). These beliefs were generated mostly due to the lack of well-trained teachers.

According to Elyas and Al Grigri (2014), in-service training of EFL is significantly weak and limited which makes EFL teacher resort to use traditional methods of teaching which is still teacher-centered. Perhaps, using traditional methods of teaching would not promote desired outcomes of students' language proficiency. EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia should receive adequate training to implement the updated methodology, use advanced technology, enhance student's motivation and autonomy and reduce stress and anxiety of students about English learning (Alrabai, 2016) instead of focusing on teaching grammatical rules and writing simple paragraphs based on memory (Al-Seghayer, 2014). However, it is important to acknowledge that the English curriculum in Saudi Arabia reinforces such obsolete teaching practices. It is based on teaching the four language skills that are presented traditionally without taking into account the needs of teachers and students.

Al- Seghayer (2014) pointed out that the goals and outcomes of the curriculum are not based on a systemic analysis of needs and expectations of teachers and students in the particular Saudi context. Teachers should be involved in designing curriculum and selection of the content (Alrabai, 2016). Unfortunately, this practice is performed by the MOE alone. Another important concern is related to the classroom environment. Researchers have drawn the attention to the fact that classrooms are overcrowded with students which may influence the way teachers divide their attention to meet their students' needs along with their teaching methodology.

This could also explain why teachers prefer traditional methods that are based on teachers-centered practices. According to different studies, most classrooms and schools lack adequate labs and teaching resources for language teaching (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Elyas & Al Grigri, 2014; Shah, Hussain & Nassef, 2013) which could hinder the process of language learning as teachers cannot apply standard language teaching strategies such as group work and pair work (Alrabai, 2016).

Therefore, it is recommended to build an effective educational structure to better improve and facilitate the classroom environment. Schools need to be equipped with the best teaching materials and resources such as labs and large classrooms to fit the large numbers of students. Furthermore, teachers should be given opportunities to share ideas with policy makers to better the curriculum presented to students at schools. Also, there is a significant need to provide adequate training courses for EFL teachers and introduce new pedagogies that are focused on students' learning needs in the Saudi context.

2.3 Implications

The dominance of English in an Islamic country that hosts the two holy mosques may be unwelcomed. However, recent changes, sending thousands of students abroad and the announcement of the 2030 vision have changed the way Saudis perceived learning English at all levels. Common people in Saudi Arabia are now aware of the indispensable role of English in employment and education; therefore, many families from different social classes have let their children study in international schools where either the British or the American curriculum is taught (Alnasser, 2018). Thus, there is strong evidence that English may shift from being EFL to ESL in Saudi Arabia.

English may become the second language in Saudi Arabia, depending on the planning of educators and policymakers regarding English language teaching. The current planning strategies appear inefficient and are unable to develop student's language competence.

The English language was first introduced at the elementary level (sixth grade); however, later it was added as a core subject from the fourth grade (Alnasser, 2018). Billions of dollars were invested in hiring international publishers to prepare comprehensive curricula. However, many high school graduates possessed basic knowledge and skills in the English language (Shamim, Abdelhalim & Hamid, 2016). Policymakers in Saudi Arabia thought that Cambridge and Oxford textbooks could be used in Saudi Arabia; although they were effective in many regions, they may not work well in Saudi Arabia. There is also a rate race of obtaining accreditation among different faculties in different universities in Saudi Arabia (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). This race may result in developing negative impact on educational system such as a language choice and educational reforms that may not match the needs of Saudi people in their particular context (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). Such an anomaly was observed in 2007 when the Ministry of Education decided to substitute the local English curricula designed by a group of female supervisors from Jeddah, although its content was derived from the context of Saudi culture. There was no explanation provided for this action except that it was done to keep up with the global demands of educational institutions and job market.

Moreover, if EMI is used as a teaching approach, it may limit local staff employment and students with low English proficiency may academically fail (Le Ha & Barnawi, 2015). Similar results were found in the study of Sultana (2014), which predicted that the students with high English proficiency would have an added advantage in getting education and employment. This could be a possible consequence which Saudi Arabia will have to deal with in next five years. One way of doing that is following the World Englishes approach to teaching. World Englishes opens the doors for professors and students of higher education institution to own the language and make it more related to their context and experiences. According to Holliday (2013) and Moody (2012), English language education may succeed if it was planned according to the norms of teaching instruction of a country. Moody (2012) further argued that ELT in the Arabian Gulf should be localized according to its use by learners and this proposition was also supported by Crystal (2003). He asserted that World Englishes is a way of using English to reflect people's local interest. World Englishes approach to education emphasizes Gabillon and Ailincăi's (2013) view that knowledge is constructed by people who own it and influenced by the cultural norms.

3. Conclusion

Status of English in Saudi Arabia is rapidly shifting and it is increasingly taught and used via an ESL approach in place of EFL approach. Saudi students are currently not in favour of EMI in the higher education sector on account of possible factors discussed in the previous section. However, there is a segment of Saudi families and individuals working in different government sectors who have had a long stay in English speaking countries and can help in overcoming the impact of these obstacles. This may also anticipate how King Abdullah Scholarship Program

influences the perceptions of students towards learning English. Such positive views towards ESL are likely to be transferred to their students if they are professors or teachers in classrooms as well as their families. The new government's plan to shift from an oil-dependent country to knowledge-dependent country has to deal with the question of language choice. Vision 2030 is a step towards modernization and being open to the rest of the world; since English is an international language, effective use of English is a core tool required to accomplish such a mission.

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Competing Interest

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