

## SAUDIS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS ENGLISH: TREND AND RATIONALE

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the trend of Saudis' attitude towards English and the reasons behind it. To discern the trend of the attitudinal change, the paper analyses the findings of some relevant studies conducted in 1990s and 2000s. Moreover, to find out the *raison d'être* behind the change, the paper looks into the reasons underlying the introduction and expansion of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia as English language teaching and the positive attitude towards it are supposed to grow concomitantly. The paper focuses on two major contributing factors—Saudi Economy (SE) and Saudi English Language Education Policies (SELEP)—in the expansion of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. The paper concludes that if the economic trend remains and if SELEP continue to exert their influence on Saudi citizens and the English language teaching, the increasingly positive attitude towards English will prevail in Saudi Arabia.

**Keywords:** Saudis' attitude towards English, Saudi English language education policies, Saudi economy, Saudi Arabia

### 1. Introduction

The paper investigates the change in Saudis' attitude towards English and the reasons behind it. The change in Saudis' attitude towards English is appreciated on the basis of the analysis of the findings of some studies and as the attitude towards English and English language teaching are supposed to grow together, the reasons of the change are investigated in the factors contributing to the expansion of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. The findings of the studies on the Saudis' attitude towards English are grouped by decades—1990s and 2000s—and analyzed and compared to trace the trend and pace of the attitudinal change towards English. In order to find out the reasons, two major contributing factors—Saudi Economy (SE) and Saudi English Language Education Policies (SELEP)—in the expansion of English language teaching are discussed and analyzed. To this end, the paper unravels the confluence of the political and economic factors of globalizing Saudi Arabia and analyzes SELEP documented in the official papers and textbooks. The paper also shows how SELEP have been designed in order to gain Saudis' consent to use English as a tool for spreading Islam all over the world at the religious level, to raise Saudi Arabia's status to the height of a "developed state" at the state level, and to secure jobs and avail themselves of educational opportunities at the individual level.

### 2. The trend of and rationale behind Saudis' attitude towards English

To discern the trend of Saudis' attitude towards English, the findings of some relevant studies conducted in 1990s and 2000s are discussed and compared below. Moreover, to find out the *raison d'être* behind the trend, the factors—SE and SELEP—

underlying the introduction and expansion of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia are explored as English language teaching and the positive attitude towards English are supposed to grow concomitantly.

## **2.1 Saudis' attitude towards English in 1990s and 2000s**

To discern the trend of Saudis' attitude towards English and to measure the pace of the change in a period of around fifteen years, the relevant studies conducted in the last two consecutive decades—1990s and 2000s—are selected. The findings of the studies are analyzed below by decades.

### **2.1.1 Saudis' attitude towards English in 1990s**

The studies conducted in 1990s indicate that most of the Saudis at that time had low motivation for learning English. Zaid (1993) observes that one of the reasons of the failure in English language teaching/learning lies in students' lack of motivation. According to his observation, most of the Saudi students have some misconceptions about the significance of learning English. They do not think that they need it in real life situation—either for communication or for the development of their career. English is studied merely as a foreign language memorizing certain words, passages, and rules just to pass the tests and examinations. In 1990s a number of other studies regarding the medium of instruction, language of textbooks and tests, found that most of the medical and engineering students of King Saud and King Faisal University in Saudi Arabia preferred Arabic to English. In King Saud University 60% of the medical students are of the opinion that Arabic should be the medium of instruction at the medical schools (Al-Jarallah and Al Ansari 1998 qtd. in Jarf 2008) and 81.1% of engineering students believe that Arabic could be used as the medium of instruction provided of course more books are translated into Arabic (Al Mohaideb 1998 qtd. in Jarf 2008). In King Faisal University—77% of the medical students preferred Arabic to English as the language of their written test and 75% of them preferred Arabic in their oral tests (Assuhaimi and Al-Barr 1992 qtd. in Jarf 2008). Even the teachers, in spite of having their education in English at home and abroad, preferred Arabic to English as the medium of instruction. For example, Al Mohaideb (1998 qtd. in Jarf 2008) finds that 85.7% of the engineering faculty in King Saud University believe that Arabic can be made the medium of instruction if Arabic engineering textbooks are available.

However, two studies—Abu-Arafah, Attuhami and Hussein (1998) and Alabed and Alhaq and Smadi (1996)—conducted in the latter half of 1990s show the sign of the Saudis' increasing positive attitude towards English. Abu-Arafah, Attuhami and Hussein (1998) find that though 52% respondents of the Production Technology and Industrial Electronics faculty of College of Technology in Riyadh believe that the use of Arabic as the medium of instruction in their faculty is successful, 71% of them prefer English as the medium of instruction in order to find jobs abroad. Alabed and Alhaq and Smadi (1996) measure the attitude of 1,176 Saudi university students from all the universities of Saudi Arabia and find a very positive attitude towards English. In fact, the attitude is so positive that they consider learning English to be a religious and national duty.

### 2.1.2 Saudis' attitude towards English in 2000s

The studies conducted in 2000s show a clear sign of the Saudis' positive attitude towards English. As there is a correlation between attitude and motivation (Gardner 1985), a study (AlMaiman 2005: 82-83) conducted on the motivation for learning English among the seventh-grade Saudi students (at the time of the study, Saudi students started formal English language learning in the seventh grade) in the Onaizah Educational District can be considered to be relevant to this discussion. The study shows that the students have overall moderate high motivation level to learn English before attending the formal English classes. As soon as formal education begins, the motivation level goes down to the lowest in the eighth grade and rises again at the later grades but it never goes as high as it has been in the seventh grade. These ups and downs of the motivation level are commonly found in other contexts as well (Gardner *et al* 2004). What is to be noted here is the high motivation level of the students before attending the English classes in school.

A study (Jarf 2008), conducted in the female section of science and arts colleges in King Saud University, Riyadh, measures 470 female students' attitude towards English and Arabic. It finds:

"96% of the participants consider English a superior language, being an international language, and the language of science and technology, research, electronic databases and technical terminology. Eighty two percent believe that Arabic is more appropriate for teaching religion, history, Arabic literature and education majors, whereas English is more appropriate for teaching medicine, pharmacy, engineering, science, nursing, and computer science. They gave many educational, technological, social and labor market reasons for favoring the English language."

It is to be noted here that Jarf's respondents prefer English not only for educational and technological needs but also for social and labor market reasons.

Congreve (2005) finds instrumental motivation and positive attitude towards English among 179 Saudi students of King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals. But two studies (Alhuqbani 2009; Alqurashi 2011) conducted just after around four years find integrative along with instrumental motivation among the Saudi police officers.

Reima Al Jarf, a Saudi professor at King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, teaching the courses like EFL, ESP, and linguistics observes a striking change, happening in Saudi mindset, towards a very positive attitude towards English. She claims that now most of the Arabs feel that "English is superior to all other languages—including Arabic. Many young people have become keener on learning English than Arabic as they feel that English is superior." Reima's use of the word "young" obviously indicates that English is going to have an increasing influence on the next generation Saudis (Jarf 2008).

It might be argued that the subjects in most of the studies are students and they do not reflect the whole Saudi society but on the other hand, it might be also argued that the students, as the representatives of a young generation, are the best respondents to indicate the change in Saudis' attitude towards English. A simple comparison between the findings of the studies discussed above reveals that the Saudis were more positive towards English in 2000s than they had been in 1990s.

## 2.2 The reasons behind the Saudis' positive attitude towards English

Two major factors—SE and SELEP—which contributed to the formation of Saudis' positive attitude towards English as well as to the expansion of English language teaching are discussed below.

### 2.2.1 Saudi Economy (SE)

SE was not directly responsible for the introduction of English and English language teaching in Saudi Arabia but King Abdul Aziz's ambition to integrate Saudi Arabia with Wallerstein's (2006, 1997) "modern world system" was. After capturing Riyadh in 1902 the king desperately initiated an alliance with the United Kingdom—the then English speaking world hegemon. Though it is difficult to prove the hypothesis that King Abdul Aziz included English as a separate subject in Saudi public school system (Al-Abed, AlHaq and Smadi 1996: 457) to entice Britain to recognize him as the king of Hijaz and Najd in 1926 (Niblock 2006: 28), the introduction of English in Saudi education in 1924 can be considered as one of the means to be integrated with the "world system" led by the then English speaking world hegemon—the United Kingdom. Later on, Saudi Arabia's integration with the "modern world system" continued and so did the expansion of English language teaching. At the university level, English was introduced in 1949 in Mecca and the first English department was established in King Saud University in 1957 (Al-Abed, Alhaq and Smadi 1996: 458).

In 1940s the United States replaced Britain in Saudi foreign, defense, and oil policies (Niblock 2006: 27-28). But the involvement of the United States was significantly different from that of the United Kingdom. Zuhur (2011:116) observes:

"The United States became involved in Saudi Arabia through its commercial interest in oil and through commercial actors that are directly and indirectly linked with the U.S. government, initially Aramco and later many other companies. Aramco's explorations helped to keep the government of Ibn Sa'ud afloat.... Aramco also provided much of the country's early infrastructure, as it needed a working port, housing, hospitals, roads, and imported American labor."

The influence of the American culture and language on Saudi society was much deeper than that of Britain. Britain was interested mainly in Saudi political, foreign, and military affairs but the US extended its involvement below the state level—oil extraction, infrastructure, and some other commercial areas—and so English and English language teaching became more relevant to Saudi economic and social development.

During 1960s the state of Saudi Arabia consolidated itself and centralized the power formerly inhibited by the tribal and religious leaders on the one hand and by the commercial establishments on the other. The state's stronger political leadership set the agenda of economic development and aided by windfall huge oil revenue brought forth a dramatic change in the erstwhile poor country ( Niblock 2006: 38-39)

Al-Abed Alhaq and Smadi (1996: 457-84) find that the rapid economic transformation is one of the most important factors which increased the demand of English in this period. The sudden and massive change in Saudi economy attracted a huge numbers of foreigners. As the United States was directly involved with the Saudi economic development, a substantial number of American companies and personnel—

only in 1970s tens of thousands of Americans were employed in Saudi Arabia (Zuhur 2011:117)—came to live and work in Saudi Arabia (Glasze 2006: 84). Along with them other non-Arabic speaking migrant skilled and un-skilled workers rushed to the major cities of Saudi Arabia in the 70s and 80s (Niblock 2006:43, 58; Hastings 2012: 11). In addition to that, millions of non-Arabic pilgrims visit at least Jeddah, Mecca, and Medina every year. So, English, as the only language of communication between the Arabs and non-Arabs on the one hand and as the window on non-Arab world on the other, was considered to be essential to sustain the national economic swagger.

From around 2005 Saudi economy tended to take a new turn. After transforming itself from a “poor” to a “middle-income” country, Saudi Arabia is now aimed at raising its status to that of a “developed” country very quickly by 2024 (The Ministry of Planning and National Economy 101). To do that, it is trying to lift its dependence on oil industry and develop a knowledge-based economy. At a 2009 meeting in Riyadh, the Saudi Minister for Commerce and Industry Abdullah Alireza proclaimed: “Saudi Arabia is moving away from simply being a gas station of the world toward a sophisticated laboratory of excellence, innovation, and knowledge” (Rassoldeen 2011). The minister’s speech was made in line with Saudi development plans. The Eighth Development Plan (Saudi Arabia’s five-year plan for the period 2005-2009) “focused on fundamental developments that laid the basis for heading towards a knowledge-based economy” and the Ninth Development Plan (2010-2014) strengthened the drive “through focusing on education” (The Ministry of Planning and National Economy 87-88). This policy is reflected in the government allocation of budget for education in general and English in particular as the “knowledge” is available in English not in Arabic (The Ministry of Planning and National Economy 95-97).

Not surprisingly, the change in Saudis’ attitude towards English and English language teaching can be explained by the change of Saudi Arabia’s political and economic conditions. The more the state moved towards the “core zone” of the world economy the more English it needed and so did its citizens. For example, in the period between 1902 and 1959—Saudi state had to introduce English language teaching in its formal education system to make a space for itself in the “periphery zone” of the capitalist world economy; in the period between 1960 and 2004—Saudi Arabia had to expand English language teaching to sustain its status of a middle income country attained suddenly by the windfall huge oil revenue: and from 2004 onwards—the state has further expanded English language teaching to achieve its ambition of building up the “knowledge-based economy” enabling it to be a “developed state” by 2024.

## **2.2.2 Saudi English Language Education Policies (SELEP)**

In order to gain Saudis’ consent to learn and use English and to deal with an anti-English sentiment SELEP had to focus on its three components—commitment to religion, the status ascribed to English and the objectives set for English language teaching.

### **2.2.2.1 SELEP’s commitment to religion and religion’s support for SELEP**

SELEP’s commitment to Islam becomes obvious when to conform to the expressed attitude of the religious Saudis, they focus on English predominantly as a means of facilitating the spread of Islam and contend that English can and should be taught in line with Islamic teaching. SELEP’s strong and explicit commitment to Islam

helped the state persuade the anti-English Saudis to accept English. Though English was introduced as a separate subject in Saudi public schools, it was not readily accepted by the most of the Saudis and only a few schools (madrassas) included English in their curriculum because on the one hand there was the fear that “more English” would mean “less Islam” and on the other there was fierce denunciation of ELT by a number of clerics (Elyas and Picard 2010:140).

Also, SELEP got an immense support from *Hadith*, “a text containing things said by Muhammad [pbuh] and descriptions of his daily life, used by Muslims as a spiritual guide” (*Oxford Dictionary* 2010). According to a famous *Hadith*, a foreign language like English can be used as a shield to protect the religion, nation, and culture from the foreign aggression. The Hadith says: “He whoever learns other people’s language will be secured from their cunning” (Elyas and Picard 2010:141).

This is why SELEP’s strong commitment to Islam and Islam’s support for SELEP encouraged the once anti-English Saudis to brave English without fear of losing ground to any foreign culture, language, and religion.

#### **2.2.2.2 Status ascribed to English**

SELEP managed to make English acceptable to the Saudis through the official ascription of its status. English is given a very high status in Saudi official documents when it is proclaimed that English can be used to spread “the faith of Islam” and to serve the humanity. English is also seen as the means of “acquiring knowledge in the fields of sciences, arts and new inventions”, and as the means of “transferring knowledge and the sciences to other communities” (Alamri 2008: 1,11-12,13-14). The fact that English as “one of the most widely used languages in the world” is an “international language of communication” is acknowledged in the “Ministry of Education’s” address to English language teachers printed on the second page of the elementary, intermediate, and secondary schools English textbooks (The Ministry of Education 2004:6-7).

#### **2.2.2.3 Objectives set for English language teaching**

The objectives of English language teaching/learning are set in the same vein. A summary of the objectives delineated in the document of the Ministry of Education would be the following: English language teaching should develop students’ proficiency in English, at the elementary, intermediate and secondary levels, mainly for six reasons: a) to develop the socio-economic and cultural condition of the country; b) to spread the “faith of Islam” ; c) to develop personal career; d) to communicate with speakers of languages other than Arabic at home; e) to enhance international communication; and f) to acquire and transfer knowledge (Alamri 2008: 1,11-12,13-14;The Ministry of Education 2004: 6-7).

In other words, in SELEP English is seen as an international language of science, arts, commerce, technology, and communication with considerable social, economic, cultural, political, and religious value and as the capital for an individual to “attain” higher education and brighter career. In other words, English is seen only as a tool to spread the faith of Islam, to get a stronger foothold in the “world system”, and to secure jobs and educational opportunities.

### 3. Conclusion

Saudi state had to import English to accelerate its economic and political transformation in 1920s but could not make the language readily acceptable to its citizens. To make the language acceptable, the state, through SELEP, had to exert Blommaert's (qtd. in Pan 2011: 253) "ideological hegemony"—complete dominance over the culture and the ideas of a society—by winning the people's hearts and minds. As in case of this kind of complete dominance the ideology is seen as non-ideology and misrecognized as normal state of affairs (Bourdieu 1991:23), the Saudi people tend to believe that they have no other choice but English to get ahead in their career, to build up their nation, and to spread their religion. So, if SELEP continue to exercise their influence on Saudis in the same way, and the political and economic transformation take place in the same direction, the increasingly positive attitude towards English will prevail in Saudi Arabia.

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