English Textbooks and the Objectives of ELT in Saudi Arabia: Gaps and Rationale

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Abstract: The paper investigates whether the Saudi state organizes the dynamic between the factors active above and below its level as Blommaert's (2005) "switchboard" in terms of Saudi English Language Education Policies (SELEP). To this end, it explores the general objectives of teaching English in Saudi Arabia and examines the cultural elements used in the school-level Saudi English textbooks across the country. The paper finds that SELEP could successfully organize the dynamic between the "national" objectives—objectives that are meant to gain Saudi citizens' consent for learning/teaching English and the "transnational" objectives—objectives that are meant to enable the state to interact successfully with the other states of the world system (Wallerstein 2006). However, in practice, the textbooks produced or selected under the supervision of the Saudi Ministry of Education during the last 33 years are found to be extremely biased either towards the "national" or towards the "transnational" objectives. Therefore, there were and there have been some gaps between SELEP and the textbooks. The paper detects certain reasons behind the dissimilarities between the textbooks published prior to 2013 and the objectives, but fails to find out a single compelling reason why the gaps are not bridged in the books published thereafter.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Saudi English Language Education Policies, English textbooks, culture, switchboard

1. Introduction

In 1915 when King Abdul Aziz (founder of Saudi Arabia) signed a treaty with Britain, it became clear that the vast area which is now known as Saudi Arabia (though Saudi Arabia was to be formed a nation-state much later in 1932) was trying to enter into the Wallerstein's (2006) *world system*. King Abdul Aziz realized that the English

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language could be one of the vital keys to gain the entrance to the then *world system* led by the English speaking country—Great Britain. Therefore he introduced English in Saudi formal education in 1924 and just after two years he was recognized by the UK as the king of Hijaz and Najd (Niblock 2006; Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996: 457-84). English continued to exert its influence on Saudi Arabia even after England's replacement with another English speaking country—the US—as the world leader. Moreover, English increased in importance under the auspices of the new world hegemon as American influence trickled down to the common people through its wider and deeper involvement in oil extraction, infrastructural development, health-care, and educational and other institutional expansions (Zuhur 2011:116). .

Conversely, there was always a pressure from some quarters of the Saudi citizenry to avoid English as they considered it to be an evil language of the infidels (Al-Brashi 2003 qtd. in Elyas and Picard 2010: 141). Therefore, in order to act efficiently like Blommaert's "switchboard" between the forces active above and below the state level, the Saudi government tried to strike a balance between the utter necessity of adopting English to consolidate its position in the *periphery* and *semi-periphery* zones of the *world system* consecutively and then to move on to the *core* as soon as possible on the one hand, and to gain the citizens' consent to expand English language teaching on the other.

Although it is easy to make a balance between the forces active above and below the state at the policy level, in practice it is extremely difficult. Therefore there always was and has been a difference between the *de jure* and *de facto* Saudi English Language Education Policies (SELEP) at least in terms of the cultural elements used in school-level English textbooks. The paper compares some *de jure* policies—documented general objectives of teaching English in Saudi Arabia—with some parallel *de facto* policies—cultural elements introduced in the Saudi English textbooks over the last 33 years. To this end, the general objectives of teaching English printed at the beginning of *English for Saudi Arabia*—sixth grade elementary pupil's book for both boys and girls—and the cultural patterns of the three third-grade school-level English textbooks which have been used consecutively one after another over the last three decades are compared and contrasted. The paper finds that though the objectives of teaching English are carefully set to keep a balance between the forces active above and below the state level, in practice, at least in the textbooks published over the last 33 years, the balance has swung in favor of either the actors from below the state level or the actors from above it.

2. Literature Review

The modern *world system* consists of a large geographical zone divided into the *core*, *periphery* and *semi-periphery* states. The economy of a *periphery* or *semi-periphery* state depends either on its raw materials or on the erstwhile leading industries relocated from the *core* countries. However, to move towards or to be in the *core* zone, Wallerstein (2006: 26-29, 42-55) believes, a country has to develop knowledge-based

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monopolist mode of production, interact with the other states efficiently and govern its citizens gaining their consent.

However, each state, particularly the states of intermediate strength, uses its "power in the internal and interstate arena quite consciously" either to stay in its place or to "rise on the ladder" (Wallerstein 2006: 56-57). In order to do that it has to act like a "switchboard" (Blommaert 2005: 219) between the actors from above and below the state level as it does not have absolute sovereignty (Wallerstein 1997). It cannot be inwardly sovereign because the state does not have the absolute power to "pursue whatever policies it deems wise, decree whatever laws it deems necessary, and that it may do this without any individual, group, or substate structure inside the state having the right to refuse to obey the laws". Nor can it be outwardly sovereign as the other states can exercise some "authority, directly or indirectly, within the boundaries of the given state" (Wallerstein 1997).

In other words, on the one hand the state has to pursue its own citizenry in order to gain their consent to do anything it wants, and, on the other, it has to interact successfully with the other states in the international arena in order to get a stronger foothold or to move towards the *core* zone of the *world system*. Therefore, a state, particularly in the field of language, is always driven or constrained by the actors from above or below its level. In Blommaert's (2005: 219) words:

> The state is a switchboard between various scales. In particular, it is the actor that organises a dynamic between the (transnational) world system and (national) 'locality'. The state often orients towards transnational centring institutions: capitalism, democracy, an international work order, transnational images of prestige and success, models of education, and so forth. It often also orients to transnational models of language and language use: literacy, the relative value of 'local' languages versus 'world' languages, and so forth. The dynamic is two-way, and contrasts between 'us' and 'the rest of the world' are at the core of many state activities.

3. Discussion

SELEP at least in terms of the general objectives of teaching English language strike a balance, as mentioned above, between the forces active above and below the state level. However, this balance could not be maintained in the cultural materials presented in the school-level English textbooks published over the last 33 years. The writers of the textbooks always looked at only one side of the coin—they addressed either the actors from below the state level or the actors from above the state level. In the following, I will analyze the objectives in order to show the highly selective ways in which they are met in different books in different manners.

3.1 The General Objectives of Teaching English Language in Saudi Arabia

There are 12 general objectives set for teaching English language in Saudi Arabia. A quick look at the objectives given below suffices to say that there is a very good

attempt to organize a dynamic between the "transnational" world system and "national" locality.

Students should be able to:

1. develop their intellectual, personal and professional abilities.
2. acquire basic language skills in order to communicate with the speakers of [the] English language.
3. acquire the linguistic competence necessarily required in various life situations.
4. acquire the linguistic competence required in different professions.
5. develop their awareness of the importance of English as a means of international communication.
6. develop positive attitudes towards learning English.
7. develop the linguistic competence that enables them to be aware of the cultural, economical and social issues of their society in order to contribute in giving solutions.
8. develop the linguistic competence that enables them, in the future, to present and explain the Islamic concepts and issues and participate in spreading Islam.
9. develop the linguistic competence that enables them, in the future, to present the culture and civilization of their nation.
10. benefit from English –speaking nations, in order to enhance the concepts of international cooperation that develop understanding and respect of cultural differences among nations.
11. acquire the linguistic bases that enable them to participate in transferring the scientific and technological advances of other nations to their nation.
12. develop the linguistic basis that enables them to present and explain the Islamic concepts and issues and participate in the dissemination of them.

<div align="right">(Al-Amri 2008)</div>

These 12 general objectives can be broadly divided into two categories— objectives (1,3,4,7,8,9,11,12) set to meet the "national" demands and the objectives (2, 5, 6, and 10) set to fulfill the requirements of the "transnational" *world system*. Saudi citizens feel that the first-category objectives are directly related to their individual, social, economic, and religious issues. The parents feel that their children need to develop their "intellectual, personal and professional abilities" (1); linguistic competence (3, 4); to be aware of their own cultural, economic, and social issues (7); to be able to "present and explain the Islamic concepts" as well as their own culture and civilization in order to spread the faith of Islam and to let the outside world know about their nation (8, 12, 9); and to be able to transfer the scientific knowledge and technological know-how from developed countries to their own people (11).

On the other hand, the state wants to promote the young Saudis to be the global citizens so that the state can interact with other states particularly the English speaking Western countries in order to ensure its progress in the *world system*. The state wants its young citizens to be able to "communicate with the speakers of English language" (2), to realize "the importance of English as a means of international communication" (5), to develop a positive attitude towards English (6), to spread the faith of Islam (8,

12), to understand and respect other cultures (10), and to import scientific and technological knowledge from outside (11).

SELEP, in terms of the two kinds of objective discussed above, act as a perfect "switchboard" between the factors active above and below the state level. However, as we know, it is always difficult to translate the policies into practice due to the unavoidable constraints prevailing in the internal objective conditions. In the following, I will explore the extent to which the balance between the "transnational" and "national" objectives discussed above has been maintained in the school-level English textbooks published over the last 33 years and the reasons behind it. I will divide the period into two—from 1982 to 2012, and from 2013 to the present as two distinctly different cultural patterns pervade the textbooks of these two different periods.

3.2 The objectives addressed in the textbooks during 1982-2012 and the rationale

Faruk (2014) analyzes three third-grade secondary school textbooks published consecutively over the last three decades. He claims that these three books—*Saudi Arabian Schools' English* used during 1982-1997, *English for Saudi Arabia,* used during 1998-2012, and *Traveller 3* (pilot edition), KSA edition of a global course book used since 2013—represent the style, language, illustration, methods, and content of all the textbooks used during the same time at elementary, intermediate, and secondary levels in all the public schools of Saudi Arabia. Faruk narrows his focus to the reading texts only as they characterize the books in terms of culture and categorize them as "Islamic", "Saudi", "Western", "multicultural", and "culturally non-specific" on the basis of Cortazzi and Jin (1999) and sorts out the particular cultural elements in which English is contextualized.

Faruk (2014) finds that in the two books *Saudi Arabian Schools' English* and *English for Saudi Arabia,* used one after another during 1982-2012, the writers contextualized English in local and religious cultural elements. Twelve of the nineteen reading texts of *Saudi Arabian Schools' English* are written on Islamic or Saudi cultural contexts. Western culture is presented in only one text "The First Time Men Flew". The story is about the invention of the plane by the Wright brothers. The rest of the reading texts are culturally non-specific. According to Faruk's statistics, in *Saudi Arabian Schools' English*, 68.41% consists of local and religious elements, only 5.26% consists of Western elements and the rest is culturally non-specific.

The writer/writers (the names are not mentioned in the book) of the other book, *English for Saudi Arabia*, is/are more cautious about avoiding the other cultural elements. Three of the six reading texts contain Islamic and Saudi cultural elements, and the other three are culturally non-specific. Western and multicultural elements are deliberately avoided here. "The Holy Month of Ramadan" is totally dedicated to Islam. Two other texts "Air Travel in Saudi Arabia" and "Arab Aid" narrate the history of Saudi Arabia's national airline—Saudia and describes the financial help that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries extend to poor countries respectively. Statistically

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speaking, 50% of the reading texts contain Islamic and Saudi cultural elements and the rest is culturally non-specific.

On the basis of above discussion, it can said that *Saudi Arabian Schools' English* and *English for Saudi Arabia,* which represent the other books of that time, were designed and written keeping only the "national" objectives (1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12) in mind. Therefore, the "transnational" objectives (2, 5, 6, and 10) which orient themselves towards international communication in general and communication with the English speaking Western countries in particular are inadequately addressed, *i.e.* the state's ambition to move quickly inside the *world system* from the *semi-periphery* to *core* zone by interacting efficiently with other states, especially the *core* states, is given less importance than the state's internal religious, national, cultural, economic, and social issues.

Now, the question is, in spite of having a balanced set of objectives, why, instead of organizing Blommaert's dynamic between "transnational" and "national" demands, the textbooks preferred the Saudi and Islamic cultures to the cultures of English speaking *core* countries where the state intends to reach quickly by 2024. The answer can be found in the Saudis' attitude towards English prevailing in the last decade of the 20th century.

One of the reasons behind this deliberate avoidance of Western and other cultures is perhaps the state's respect for the Saudis' English language ideology which, according to Blommaert (2005: 253), can be defined as "socially, culturally and historically conditioned ideas, images, and perceptions" about English. For a long time, Saudis had negative attitude towards English and the related cultures where the language is supposed to be embedded. Although English language teaching was formally introduced in 1924, English was not cordially and readily accepted by the Saudis and remained as a poor second to Arabic and religious instruction. Even many years after its introduction, English was reluctantly taught/learned in the public schools perhaps for the fear that "more English" would mean "less Islam" (Azuri 2006: 1). Elyas and Picard (2010: 139) observe:

> Only a few of the early madrassa included English in their curriculum and then only for a few hours per week at high school level (Szyliowicz 1973). English was only included in the curriculum of all primary schools in KSA in 2003....

The findings of the above mentioned studies corroborate the findings of some other studies conducted in the 1990s regarding Saudi students' attitude towards English. The studies conducted in the 1990s indicate that most of the Saudis at that time had a low motivation for learning English as they found it to be unnecessary both for communication and the development of their careers. They memorized certain English vocabulary, passages, and rules just to pass the examinations. Some studies on tertiary-level students regarding the medium of instruction, language of textbooks and tests, found that most of the medical and engineering students of King Saud University and King Faisal University in Saudi Arabia preferred Arabic to English. Even the teachers, in spite of having their Education in English at home and abroad, preferred Arabic to

English as the medium of instruction (Al Muhaideb 1998). However some other studies (Abu-Arafah, Attuhami and Hussein 1998; Alabed and Alhaq and Smadi 1996) conducted in the latter half of the 1990s, discussed below, showed a clear sign of the Saudis' changing attitude towards English.

Naturally, in this context, running the English language teaching programs was not easy let alone introducing the Western or other cultural elements to the students. Therefore the way in which the SELEP organize the dynamic between supranational and national elements in the set of objectives quoted and analyzed above, could not be followed in the textbooks. The *de facto* SELEP, at least the implicit principles of the textbooks, had to consider the level of acceptance of English to the citizens more than the demand of the *world system*.

3.3 The objectives addressed in the textbooks during 2013-2014 and the rationale

Faruk (2014) analyzes one of the books of the new series published in 2013—*Traveller 3* (Student's Book) for the third-grade secondary school students and finds that this book which, he claims, represents all other books of the series, is quite opposite to the former two books used previously for the students of the same grade with regard to the cultural elements. In this book, Western culture is introduced through 18 texts, multicultural elements are included in four texts, one text is culturally non-specific, and only two texts contain Islamic and Saudi cultural elements. Moreover, the Islamic and Saudi cultural elements presented here are rationalized in a Western way. Even if we categorize the westernized texts as Islamic or Saudi texts, the local and religious cultures are almost absent (only 11.53% of all the reading texts) in this book. The foreign cultural elements, which are cautiously assimilated to the Saudi context in *Saudi Arabian Schools' English* and avoided in *English for Saudi Arabia*, are found in plenty (84.61%) without any modification or assimilation whatsoever in *Traveller 3*.

It is clear from the above discussion that the trend has dramatically changed in the book published in 2013. The "national" objectives addressed in the former two books are almost marginalized here and the "transnational" objectives which are addressed here were ignored before. The book clearly gives more importance to the state's ambition to move quickly to the *core* zone as soon as possible than to the citizens' national, local, religious, and cultural issues. It is very difficult to rationalize such a completely novel trend. However, the Saudis' English language ideology, by which I explained the cultural patterns of the first two books, can be explored again in the new context of the 2000s to find out whether there are any changes in the Saudis' attitude towards English to explain the opposite cultural pattern introduced in the latest books.

By the year 2013, Saudi students', if not all the citizens', attitude towards English made a U-turn—the negative attitude changed to a positive one. The major reasons behind this dramatic change are: the Saudi economy, globalization through media and other transnational agencies, SELEP, sending a huge number of students, in some cases along with their families, abroad especially to English speaking countries for higher

education etc. (Faruk 2014). However, the change in Saudis' attitude towards English is first detected, as mentioned above, in the studies conducted at the latter half of the 1990s.

The studies (Abu-Arafah, Attuhami and Hussein 1998; Alabed and Alhaq and Smadi 1996) conducted in the late 1990s in Production Technology and Industrial Electronics faculty of College of Technology in Riyadh and on 1,176 students from all the universities of Saudi Arabia show the sign of the Saudis' increasing positive attitude towards English. Moreover, some students considered English language learning to be their national and religious duty. By the 2000s, the level of motivation had changed from low to moderate high among school children. University students considered English to be a very prestigious language and preferred it to Arabic as their medium of instruction (Al-Jarf 2008). The studies also show growing integrative motivation along with instrumental motivation.

If this is the trend in the 2000s, at the beginning of the 2010s Saudis' English language ideology should be favorable to the inclusion of the Western and other cultural elements in textbooks as Saudi Arabia increasingly globalizes and its citizens are exposed to English and other cultures simultaneously. Although there are still some complaints against Western cultural elements included in the university-level English textbooks, there are prompt responses from the academics to prove convincingly the inevitability of introducing western culture to teach a western language—English, to be precise (Al-Seghayer 2013). Therefore, by and large, it is the right time to give some space to Western cultural elements beside the national, local, and religious ones. The Ministry of Education rightly sensed the trend and introduced authentic Western cultural elements in the 'editonized' global coursebooks like *Say it in English*, *Full Blast*, *Traveller* etc. Nevertheless, unfortunately, for one reason or the other, Western culture has been accommodated at the expense of national, local, and religious cultural elements—instead of being an addition, it has become a replacement.

However, the question remains: is it necessary to sideline the national, local, and religious elements to accommodate Western and other cultural elements? The logical answer to this question is obviously "no" for several reasons. First of all, marginalizing Saudi and Islamic cultural elements means ignoring the "national" objectives directly. Secondly, it delimits the students' capability of understanding "the culture of others" (McKay 2000, 2002). Thirdly, Saudis are characteristically entwined with their own culture and religion and there is no evidence which can induce us to presume that the Saudis' obligation to spread the faith of Islam, or the bondage with their own society, culture, heritage, history, and civilization has dwindled in recent times. Finally, the state's unwavering commitment to Islam, its geographical and spiritual central position in the Muslim world, and its inclination to the nation's culture as "system" (Parsons 1937) are well-known all over the world.

Therefore, as the contrasts between Saudis ("us") and "the rest of the world" still exist and there is every reason to believe that it will continue in foreseeable future, they, according to Blommaert (2005), should be at the core of the national curriculum design. The absence of the two-way dynamic in the textbooks can only be explained by the fact

that they were not developed exclusively for Saudi Arabia—they were produced as the products of the commercial culture of the powerful global industry for the whole global market and then poorly "editionized" for Saudi Arabia. In fact, it is very difficult to "editionize" the global course books as they are inherently western at least for three reasons: a) western contexts is cost-effective, b) native-speaker authors tend to compose texts on their own culture, and c) historically, target-language instruction prefers its own culture (Alptekin 1993).

4. Conclusion

Saudi English textbooks which have been used since 1982 are designed to meet only one kind of objectives at a time—either "national" or "transnational". The textbooks used between 1982 and 2012 (represented here by *Saudi Arabian Schools' English* and *English for Saudi Arabia*) deliberately avoided "transnational" cultural elements taking the Saudis' negative attitude towards English language and culture in consideration. However, in the course of time Saudis' attitude towards English changed and the Saudi Ministry of Education rightly decided to include Western and other cultural elements in textbooks published in 2013 but did not notice the fact that the global course books they selected were poorly 'editionized' for KSA. Under the big, beautiful, and awe-inspiring cover pages of Makkah, Medinah, and the Saudi magnificent buildings, there is almost nothing regarding Islamic and Saudi cultures except some human figures with "thobe" (a full-length piece clothing worn by Saudi men), "abaya" (a full-length piece black clothing worn by Saudi women), beard, "shmagh" (a piece of cloth wrapped around head), "kalansuatun" (special kind of cap that the Muslims wear while praying) etc. In addition to that, there are a few national and religious elements which seem only to be an eyewash to give casual readers an impression that the books contain Western as well as local and religious elements. As global course books are commercially designed to be sold to a maximum number of customers all over the world, they have the inherent weakness in regard to a particular culture and/or religion. This is the reason why the writers, however skilled, could not "editionize" these books in the true sense of the term. Therefore, if the Saudi Ministry of Education wants to organize the dynamic between the "transnational" and "national" cultural elements, they should get books written exclusively for Saudi Arabia and by the writers well acquainted with Islamic, Saudi, Western, and other cultural elements.

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