

English Language Teaching in Saudi Arabia: A World System Perspective

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Abstract: The paper investigates how English Language Teaching has been adopted to support Saudi Arabia's integration with Wallerstein's modern world system, to back its progress from periphery to semi-periphery zone, and to push it from semi-periphery to core zone. To this end, the paper unravels the confluence of the socio-political and economic factors of globalizing Saudi Arabia and analyzes Saudi English Language Education Policies documented in the official papers and textbooks to show how they have been designed to gain Saudis' consent to accept English simply as a tool to be used at the personal, state, and religious levels.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, English Language Education Policies, Saudi Arabia, World System

1. Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) in Saudi Arabia was introduced and expanded in parallel with the state's integration with Wallerstein's world system. In fact, Saudi English Language Education Policies (SELEP) were formulated to ensure Saudi Arabia's sustenance and progress in the world system. In the beginning, I will show how it was integrated in the capitalist world system and how, in consequence of the integration, SELEP were introduced, evolved and gained Saudi citizens' consent to use English as a tool to spread Islam all over the world at the religious level, to push Saudi Arabia towards the core zone of the world system at the state level, and to get job and education at the individual level.

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2. World system

The modern world is a large geographical zone divided into the core, periphery and semi-periphery states. The economy of the semi-periphery states depends either on their raw materials or on the erstwhile leading industries relocated from the core states. However, to be in the core zone, a state has to ensure the following conditions: a) monopolist mode of production (it has to be knowledge or technology based), b) successful interaction with the other states in the world system, and c) control over its citizens (Wallerstein 2006: 26-29, 42-55).

Nevertheless, each state, particularly the states of intermediate strength (like Saudi Arabia), 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 above and below the state levels as it does not have absolute sovereignty (Wallerstein 1997).

3. ELT and world system

It has already been mentioned that the paper investigates ELT in Saudi Arabia from the world system perspective. To be exact, here ELT is examined against the backdrop of KSA’s integration with the world system and SELEP.

3.1. ELT and KSA’s integration with the world system

The process of Saudi Arabia’s integration with the world system can be roughly divided into three parts: 1) 1902-1959—the period when Saudi Arabia (or King Abdul Aziz, to be precise, as Saudi Arabia did not formally emerge as a state till 1932) struggled to make a space for itself in the periphery zone of the world system; 2) 1960-2004—the period when the Saudi state took considerable control over its citizens and, aided by windfall huge oil revenue, brought forth a massive institutional and infrastructural expansion as well as administrative reformations thus attaining the status of a semi-periphery country; and 3) 2004-2013—the period when the state has undertaken ambitious projects for building up the “knowledge-based economy” to move quickly towards the core zone.

3.1.1. Saudi Arabia’s integration with the world system and ELT (1902-1960)

Until the beginning of the 20th century the vast area which is now called Saudi Arabia was outside the world system. It was a part of the “high civilization”, a term used by some Orientalists for China, India, Persia, and the Arab world, which for one reason or

the other could not move forward to “modernity” (Wallerstein 2006: 8-9). In an attempt to overcome this inertia, Saudi Arabia’s founder, King Abdul Aziz, unified the mini tribal systems to form a state apt to be integrated with the modern world system. This was made possible first with the help of Great Britain (1902-1930s) and then of the United States (1940s-the present) (Niblock 2006: 27-29).

As Saudi Arabia’s integration with the world system happened under the auspices of two English-speaking world hegemony—UK and USA—it introduced ELT in 1924 even before its emergence as a state in 1932 (Al-Abed, Al-Haq and Smadi 1996: 457-84; Niblock 2006). In other words, English was introduced in Saudi formal education to accelerate the state’s integration with the world system.

However, at the time of integration when Saudi Arabia was still a very young and poor country, the expansion of ELT was very slow. The first college established in Mecca in 1949 taught English as a required subject for 2 hours per week for 4 years and the first university (King Saud University) established its English department in 1957 (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996: 458).

In the 1940s, when the balance of power swung in favor of the United States, and when Saudi Arabia became a strategically important region during the Second World War, UK was replaced by US in Saudi foreign, defense, and oil policies (Niblock 2006: 27-28). The new world hegemon became more interested in KSA than the former one perhaps because of its newly-discovered huge oil-reserve. This is the reason why US’s involvement with Saudi Arabia was much deeper than UK’s. As 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.

Put simply, it was the close relationship between KSA and the US which made English and ELT more relevant to Saudi economic and social development than ever before.

3.1.2. Saudi Arabia’s integration with the world system and ELT (1960-2004)

Saudi Arabia’s economic incorporation in the world system gathered momentum when, aided by the huge oil revenue, it went for massive legal and administrative reformations and institutional expansion. The state 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 for economic development and brought forth a dramatic change in the erstwhile poor country (Niblock 2006: 38-39).

The sweeping changes in Saudi socio-economic and demographic landscape had a significant impact on ELT (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996: 457-84). The massive steps taken in the economic sector and the concomitant free flow of "petro-dollar" allured a substantial number of American companies and personnel—only in the 1970s tens of thousands of Americans were employed in Saudi Arabia (Zuhur 2011:117). In addition to that, the huge inrush of other non-Arabic speaking migrant skilled and unskilled workers in the 1970s and the 1980s (Niblock, 2006:43,58) along with millions of non-Arab pilgrims caused the significant expansion of ELT. 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 in sustaining the national economic swaggar.

In 1973 the Ministry of Education designed a special program for English language teachers at home and abroad. The drive for ELT was not limited to the Education Ministry. Other ministries like the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, etc. established language centers or higher institutes for ELT. Outside the ministries, ELT was part of the training or curricula of such institutions as the Saudi National Guard, Al-Noor Institute for blind males and females, The Women's Renaissance Charity Society, etc. (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996: 458-59).

Business organizations and banks also contributed to the expansion of ELT. English proficiency was required to get the jobs in the corporate houses such as Aramco, Samarec, Dallah, and Saudi Airlines let alone multinational banks (established after the oil boom in the 1970s) like Saudi American, Saudi British, Saudi French, and Saudi Dutch banks. Some of these companies also arranged ELT for their employees (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996: 460).

Since the beginning of the 1970s, private schools have been offering English education from grade 1. The universities established in this period—King Saud University (1957), King Abdul-Aziz University (1961), Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud University (1974), King Fahd University (1975), King Faisal University (1976), Umm Al-Qura University (1980)—had English departments and most of them had language centers and translation institutes (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996: 459).

It seems that in this period along with the massive expansion of ELT, the Saudi government tried to construct a favorable English language ideology and tried to gain the citizens' consent for SELEP through the media. During this period, the number of English programs was increased on radio and TV (an English TV channel KSA-2 started

broadcasting in 1982). At the same time, English also pervaded the print media—three English dailies: Riyadh Daily, Arab News, and Saudi Gazette saw the light of day (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996: 459).

3.1.3. Saudi Arabia's integration with the world system and ELT (2005-2013)

The social and economic development, mainly due to huge oil revenue, continued in the subsequent period (2005-2013) along similar lines as before. However, a significant change of focus has occurred in the state's vision as of 2005. Since then, Saudi Arabia has been trying to lift its dependence on oil industry by developing a knowledge-based economy to jump to reach the level of a “developed country” (core country in the world system) by 2024 (The Ministry of Economy and Planning 2006:101). At a meeting in Riyadh in 2009, 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 this drive towards the knowledge-based economy was again adopted in the Ninth Development Plan (2010-2014) “through focusing on education” (The Ministry of Economy and Planning 2006: 87-88).

In the same meeting, mentioned above, the Minister for Commerce and Industry stressed the importance of human resources and claimed:

Saudi Arabia is investing in this asset [human resources] at an unprecedented rate. Education has consistently received more than a quarter of our national budget. We are building two schools a day. At the end of 2006, there were only eight government funded universities, and by the end of 2009 the number jumped to 25. (Rassoldeen 2011)

Recently, both the government and private initiatives brought the total number of universities to 52 (Denman and Hilal 2011:308). This massive expansion of educational institutions at all levels has a concomitant effect on ELT. Now, almost all the universities and colleges have English departments and English language centers to teach English to the students of other departments at least for one semester. Moreover, English is being used as the medium of instruction at medical, engineering, and other science colleges.

In a similar vein, ELT has been gradually expanded in the school curricula. In the public schools English was introduced in grade 7 in 2003 and then at grades 6 and 5 and, last of all, at grade 4 in 2012 (The Ministry of Education 2011); in private schools it has been taught from grade 1, as mentioned before, since 1970s.

In brief, Saudi Arabia's ELT expanded as it gathered pace in its journey towards the core zone of the world system. In 1924 the state had to introduce ELT in its formal education system to enter the periphery zone of the capitalist world economy; during 1960-2004 it had to expand ELT to sustain its status of a middle-income country attained suddenly by the windfall huge oil revenue; from 2004 onwards Saudi Arabia has further expanded ELT to achieve its ambition of building up the knowledge-based economy enabling it to be a "developed state" by 2024.

3.2. ELT and SELEP

The Saudi state adopted English and ELT in the course of its integration with the modern world system but could not make them readily acceptable to most of its citizens. In other words, people's acceptance of English and ELT was much slower than the state's adoption of them which is why the people had to be persuaded by, inter alia, the "status ascribed to English", and the "objectives set for ELT".

3.2.1. Status of English

SELEP managed to get the people's consent through the official ascription of the status of English and objectives of ELT. English is given a prestigious status in Saudi official documents when it is stated that English can be used to spread "the faith of Islam" and to serve the humanity. English is also seen as a means of "acquiring knowledge in the fields of sciences, arts and new inventions", and as a means of "transferring knowledge and the sciences to other communities" (The Ministry of Education 2004:6). Similarly, English is eulogized as "one of the most widely used languages in the world" or as an "international language of communication" in the Minister of Education's address to English language teachers printed on the second page of the elementary, intermediate, and secondary school English textbooks (Alamri 2008:11). Hence, enhancement of ELT has become one of the development strategies in Saudi Arabia (The Ministry of Economy and Planning 2006: 401).

3.2.2. Objectives of ELT

The objectives of ELT are set in nearly the same way. ELT should develop students' proficiency in English at the elementary, intermediate and secondary levels, mainly for six reasons: 1) to develop the socio-economic and cultural condition of the country; 2) to spread the "faith of Islam"; 3) to develop personal career; 4) to communicate with speakers of languages other than Arabic at home; 5) to enhance international

communication, and 6) to acquire and transfer knowledge (Alamri 2008:1,11-12,13-14; The Ministry of Education 2004: 6-7).

In short, in SELEP, English is seen as an international language of science, arts, commerce, technology, and communication with a considerable social, economic, cultural, political, and religious value and as the capital for an individual to “attain” higher education and a 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 get education and job.

4. Conclusion

English came to Saudi Arabia along with its ambition of integrating itself with the world system and then took root in the Saudi society in parallel with the state’s advancement towards the core zone of the world system. But as many Saudis did not accept the language spontaneously (Elyas and Picard 2010: 139-140), the state had to mediate between the factors from below and above its level and acted like a “switchboard” to make English acceptable to its citizens. It exerted Blommaert’s “ideological hegemony” (qtd. in Pan 2011: 253) – complete dominance over the culture and the ideas of a society – by winning the people’s hearts and minds to maintain governance. As a result, the Saudi people have taken for granted the “purely pragmatic” function of English as a very useful tool to get ahead in their career, to build up their nation, and to spread their religion. Thus the significance of ELT in Saudi Arabia is not limited to its linguistic and communicative usefulness but elevated to social, economic, and religious spheres at national and international levels.

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