

**Standardized Teaching: The System of Teaching English as
a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabia that is Negatively
Affecting Student Achievement**

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ABSTRACT:

The global significance of English as a lingua franca necessitates effective English language education worldwide, yet the standardized approach to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia has yielded suboptimal outcomes. This research explores the multifaceted barriers that Saudi students encounter in mastering English, highlighting systemic issues inherent in the current pedagogical strategies mandated by the Ministry of Education. Despite years of EFL instruction, Saudi students often graduate without achieving functional proficiency in English, as evidenced by their consistently low TOEFL scores. This study identifies several key issues: the uniform application of a rigid curriculum across diverse regions, the lack of teacher autonomy, the delayed introduction of English instruction, and the inadequate incorporation of local culture into teaching materials. Additionally, the centralized curriculum fails to accommodate varying student abilities and learning styles, leading to disengagement and poor retention of language skills. Drawing comparisons with Finland's decentralized and flexible educational model, which fosters teacher creativity and adapts to student needs, this research advocates for a paradigm shift in Saudi EFL education. Recommendations include introducing English at earlier educational stages, integrating culturally relevant content, prioritizing qualitative assessments over rote memorization, and tailoring instruction to accommodate different learning styles and proficiency levels. The proposed reforms aim to enhance both teacher effectiveness and student achievement in English, ultimately equipping Saudi students with the language skills necessary for global economic participation. This study underscores the critical need for a more adaptive, student-centered approach to EFL education in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords:

Standardized Teaching, the System of Teaching, Negatively Affecting.

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التدريس الموحد: نظام تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المملكة العربية

السعودية يؤثر سلباً على تحصيل الطلاب

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المستخلص:

تتطلب الأهمية العالمية للغة الإنجليزية كلغة عالمية تعليمًا فعالاً في جميع أنحاء العالم، ومع ذلك فإن المنهج الموحد لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في المملكة العربية السعودية قد حقق نتائج دون المستوى، ويستقصي البحث الحالي المعوقات المتعددة التي يواجهها الطلاب السعوديون في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية، ويسلط البحث الحالي الضوء على القضايا المتأصلة في الاستراتيجيات التربوية الحالية التي فرضتها وزارة التعليم، وعلى الرغم من سنوات تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، يتخرج الطلاب السعوديون في كثير من الأحيان دون تحقيق الكفاءة الوظيفية في اللغة الإنجليزية، كما يتضح من درجاتهم المنخفضة باستمرار في اختبار اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (TOEFL) ، كما تتناول هذه الدراسة العديد من القضايا الرئيسية: التطبيق الموحد للمناهج في الكثير من المناطق، والافتقار إلى استقلالية المعلم، وتأخر إدخال تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية، وعدم دمج الثقافة المحلية بشكل كافٍ في المواد التعليمية، إضافة إلى ذلك، يفشل المنهج الموحد في استيعاب قدرات الطلاب وأساليب التعلم المختلفة، مما يؤدي إلى عدم الارتباط بسوق العمل وضعف الاحتفاظ بالمهارات اللغوية، ومن خلال إجراء مقارنات مع النموذج التعليمي اللامركزي والمرن في فنلندا، والذي يعزز إبداع المعلمين ويتكيف مع احتياجات الطلاب، ويدعو هذا البحث إلى نقلة نوعية في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في السعودية، ويوصي البحث بإدخال اللغة الإنجليزية في المراحل التعليمية المبكرة، ودمج المحتوى المرتبط ثقافياً، وإعطاء الأولوية للتقييمات النوعية على الحفظ والاستظهار، وتصميم عملية التعلم لاستيعاب أنماط التعلم ومستويات الكفاءة المختلفة، وتهدف الإصلاحات المقترحة إلى تعزيز فعالية المعلمين وإنجاز الطلاب في اللغة الإنجليزية، وتزويد الطلاب السعوديين في نهاية المطاف بالمهارات اللغوية اللازمة للمشاركة الاقتصادية العالمية، وتؤكد هذه الدراسة على الحاجة الماسة إلى نهج أكثر تكيفاً يتمحور حول الطالب لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المملكة العربية السعودية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التدريس الموحد، النظام التدريسي، التأثير السلبي.

Standardized Teaching: The System of Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabia that is Negatively Affecting Student Achievement

With the global market ever expanding, English is being taught in schools across the world in an attempt to give students their best chance at career opportunities upon graduation. Although English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been taught in Saudi Arabia for many years, students are still falling short in their comprehension of the language. In Saudi Arabia, intermediate and secondary students are taught English during 45-minute class periods, 4 days per week. However, fourth through sixth grade elementary students receive only two 90-minute class periods per week of English instruction. After studying English for about 9 years, school leavers are, in most cases, unable to speak or write a single flawless sentence in English. This raises many questions about the soundness of teachers and suitability of methods employed. Without a doubt there is a major problem confronting English education in Saudi Arabia (Al-Nasser, 2015). The current application of English within the classroom has been handed down to the teachers by the Ministry of Education and is taught with the same systematic approach in all schools. By implementing this standardized method of teaching, teachers are not able to assess the direct needs of the students within their classroom, and students who fall behind on the curriculum are unable to catch up before the teacher moves on to the next given assignment. According to the statistics released in the third edition of The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test 2009, the average TOEFL result in Saudi Arabia is 57 out of 120, which is the second lowest in the entire Middle East and among the lowest average TOEFL scores in the world (Alrabai, 2016).

Saudi Arabia is a country of approximately 830,000 square miles, with a population of over 30 million. It consists of 13 provinces and is considered a monolingual society, with Arabic being the national language. Despite the size, distance, and diversity of people in Saudi Arabia, the education system is designed to teach the English language curriculum using the same principles, books, and teaching methods nationally. For example, in the capital, Riyadh, and in the larger coastal cities, such as Jeddah and Dammam, where students are exposed to English through tourists, employees from the oil companies, and in some hospitals and restaurants, English will be taught using the same standards and curriculum as in a small city like Bisha, where students enter the classroom without likely ever having even heard English spoken. Besides geographical barriers, this standardized method of teaching does not take into account general learning abilities and predisposition towards certain subjects. As one student takes quickly to math and another to science, so too will some students understand the English language quickly, while others will take more time. The curriculum of English learning as it is currently taught does not allow for any variances in students' learning ability, style preference, and geographical barriers, and therefore leaves many students at a disadvantage.

The aforementioned factors are not the only hindrance to students learning English in Saudi Arabia. Whereas in some countries, teachers are given the ability to determine their own coursework and syllabus, thus allowing them to design their curriculum based on their own students' needs, the system of teaching English in Saudi Arabia is centralized and controlled by the Ministry of Education. At each grade level, English teachers are given a syllabus, with guidelines and deadlines that they are required to apply and follow. Thus, Saudi EFL teachers at state schools are tied by the Ministry of Education to a relatively fixed syllabus that provides guidelines in the form of learning objectives, teaching methods, and the scope and general order of the learning materials. This strong centralization mechanism for Saudi English language education administration suggests that Saudi English teachers have less autonomy and are teaching within certain boundaries (Al-Seghayer, 2014). As the curriculum is dictated by the Ministry of Education, teachers are not given the benefit of developing the lesson plans that their individual students require in order to excel. In this system, as with many other countries who implement a form of standardized teaching, Saudi Arabian teachers end up "teaching to the test" that the Ministry gives at the end of each term, rather than to the students' actual learning needs. The textbooks are identical at each grade level throughout the country, and they integrate all of the language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking) with functional grammar and vocabulary. Even at the tertiary level, the teaching curriculum is not usually based on learners' goals, needs, and desires; rather, it is prescribed by university policy makers (Alrabai, 2016). As a result, the direct needs of the students within the classroom are not being met, instead they are learning English using methods that someone completely removed from their lives or their classroom has established for them.

In this paper, a strong case will be made for eliminating the formulaic standardized teaching of English as a Foreign Language within Saudi Arabia to give students higher chances for success, as well as allowing the teachers to use their own personalized lessons and methods to assist students individually as needed. It begins with demonstrating the barriers to learning English in the way that it is currently taught, including the fact that it is taught the same way across every region, regardless of skill level, learning ability, and previous exposure to English. It makes the case that students in Saudi Arabia are not excelling, and additionally, teachers are being put at a disadvantage with the way EFL is currently mandated to be taught. It demonstrates that in Finland, where standardized teaching is not applied within schools, students and teachers both thrive when the curriculum can be catered to the needs within their own classrooms. Finally, a description of practical measures that can be easily implemented into Saudi Arabia's EFL courses is described, which shows that although there may be resistance initially by those opposing change or the extra work these changes might bring, once the systems are in place by the Ministry of Education, the teachers are then free to implement these methods on their own without further assistance.

Barriers to Learning English in Saudi Arabia

There are many barriers that affect the teaching of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia. The low EFL achievements of Saudi learners can even often be attributed to factors that are outside of the learner's control. These external factors range from sociocultural variables, such as the impact of religious, social, and cultural beliefs, to factors related to the nature of EFL instruction, and to faults in the EFL educational system in Saudi Arabia (Alrabai, 2016). One of these significant barriers is the geographical makeup of the country, with students living in urban cities and coastal towns having a different relationship to English than those living in more remote areas. While students in these urban areas may encounter English speakers in hospitals and restaurants as a result of tourism and the thriving oil industry in Saudi Arabia, many students living in rural areas or small towns and villages enter school without ever having heard English spoken. This automatically sets up the students in these smaller areas at a disadvantage to their peers in larger cities. It is important to note that even at the most base level, the English alphabet and its pronunciations are nothing like that of Arabic and takes time to get accustomed to. For students that have never heard so much as these sounds spoken, it is understandable that they will be starting further behind than some of their peers.

An argument can be made that within every country, there are differences in learning abilities between certain students; however, these standard variables are further compounded by barriers specific to Saudi Arabia. Alrabai (2016) speaks to some of the many barriers to learning EFL in Saudi Arabia, stating specifically that, "Some of these factors are demographic variables that pertain specifically to the learners themselves, such as gender, age, motivation, attitudes, aptitude, anxiety, autonomy, learning strategies, and learning style." The role of English teachers in the English classroom is seen narrowly as the provider of knowledge. Students dutifully but passively assimilate the teachers' explanations, work through the textbook, and read the text verbatim (Al-Seghayer, 2014). This depersonalized method of teaching does not allow teachers the interaction with their students in which to gauge if a student is understanding the material or has additional factors affecting their level of learning the subject matter.

In addition to geographic and demographic barriers, there is a pre-set bias against English in Saudi Arabia. Arabic is not only the official language of the country, but it is also very strongly tied into the fabric of their culture and traditions. First and foremost, apart from being the predominant language, Arabic is considered as a linguistic, cultural and religious heritage of Saudi society. As a further result of this bias, students lack assistance from within the home because their parents do not speak English themselves and are not able to help their children with homework or other English related school activities. Although in the later years of a student's education,

English will be taught more proficiently due to Saudi Arabian Universities recognizing the importance of English on a global scale, it is not adequately taught throughout the earlier levels, thus leaving students significantly underprepared as they enter their primary level of university and still unable to catch up to the level of comprehension that a globally integrated job will demand. Ahmad (2015) notes that their outdated English curriculum, application of old-fashioned instructional methodologies, recruitment policy for English teachers and their insufficient attitude toward English lead to a somewhat fiasco-like situation for students in Saudi Arabia attempting to learn the English language.

Although they have progressed into a more modern era, the Saudi people still take for granted the usefulness of English for advancing their careers, strengthening their nation, and spreading their religion. Thus, the significance of English in Saudi Arabia is not limited to its linguistic and communicative practicality; English is also fundamental to the social, economic, political, and religious domains at national and international levels (Faruk, 2013). If these prejudices against English are not first addressed from within the classroom, and more importantly their home, students will continue their lackadaisical approach to learning English, and will consistently be at a disadvantage in landing successful careers within a globalizing economy.

A further barrier of learning English in Saudi Arabia is the significant lack of local culture integrated into curriculum. Ahmad (2015) states that, the traditional and socio-cultural values of foreign countries as projected in English textbooks are at disconnect with those of Saudi society. Hence, majority of Saudi EFL learners don't feel motivated to learn English owing to foreign traditions and cultures projected in the English textbooks. This is one of the major traditional barriers to learning English in Saudi Arabia at tertiary level because Saudi EFL learners feel alienated from real life situations as exist in Saudi society. Lack of Saudi local cultures in English textbooks prescribed is a significant barrier for Saudi EFL learners. Students are more inclined to be engaged with the subject matter if they are able to identify aspects that relate to their own lives. Although the makers of English textbooks have slowly been incorporating Saudi culture into their textbooks in recent years, a more systematic approach has not been taken to insure that students are significantly recognizing aspects of their own lives, including culture, landmarks, religion, and traditions. As teachers are simply teaching the lessons handed down to them from the Ministry of Education, this takes away the ability for the teacher to incorporate hyper-local culture, events, and ideas directly into their lesson plans. As a result of this lack of local culture implemented in the teaching, students do not feel attached to or invested in striving to learn English at a competent level. In other non-native English-speaking countries, there is a strong perception that English is an important factor for getting higher social status, honor and respect (Ahmad, 2015). This barrier can be specifically addressed by emphasizing local, traditional, and especially religious material into the teaching of English as a

foreign language, so that the religion that is at the heart of their country can go hand in hand with the learning of English.

In addition to other factors, one key barrier is that students do not see how English pertains to their lives. Arabic is spoken in their homes, at school, in public, and even while searching the internet or using something like Facebook or Twitter, this is all done in Arabic. Students perceive English as a dry and boring subject learned for instrumental purposes, chiefly to pass an examination. In actual classroom practice, there is very little interaction unless the teacher asks a question or instructs the students to complete a grammar exercise (Al-Seghayer, 2014). With students only working on learning English for 45 minutes per day and never getting to practice outside of the classroom, it is within reason that they see the subject as without any purpose in their actual lives. The high expectation placed on the English curriculum requires that more time be allocated for teaching English, simply because students are exposed to the English language only during the periods in which the English classes are held; no sufficient reinforcing environment is available outside the school (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Additionally, if teachers provided more of an incentive for students to better their English skills, the students would likely be more motivated to learn. The teachers could add English into their other lessons throughout the day to incentivize the students, as then English would not simply be one subject that was taught for 45 minutes per day, it would be something that was required to understand throughout all of their coursework. Furthermore, they could offer extra credit or other “awards or prizes” to students who are competently demonstrating a command of English, thus incentivizing the students’ efforts to learn. The way that English is currently being taught as a stand-alone subject without any bearing on the students’ lives, is putting them at a severe disadvantage moving forward in their learning and understanding of the language.

Standardized Teaching Leaves Students at a Disadvantage

Students in Saudi Arabia are at a disadvantage to learning English from the start, as languages are best to be taught as early as possible, and in Saudi Arabia, English instruction does not even begin until later in the students’ schooling. Due to concerns that English language instruction will affect the Islamic or Arabic identity of young students, Saudi public elementary schools do not introduce English until the fourth grade at the age of nine—not in the first grade at the age of six (Alrabai, 2016). Despite the benefits of early language instruction, these societal and cultural restrictions and the misconceptions that learning English may affect the learning of Arabic, or might undermine local Saudi culture, customs, and identity, especially at younger ages, prevents students from receiving their best chance at English learning. In a society that speaks solely Arabic with little to no outside exposure to English until

midway through grade-school, students are left with a completely foreign concept being introduced at far too late of an age.

The standardized methods of teaching English within Saudi Arabia are simply not working in the best interest of the students, and this is a result of many contributing factors. Al-Qahtani (2016) believes that the students' low level of achievement in English is mainly because the approaches and methods that are actually practiced in schools do not encourage creativity. In a 2016 study of 45 EFL Teachers in Saudi Arabia, drawing from questionnaires as well as interviews, the conclusions overwhelmingly show that Saudi EFL teachers make little effort to foster creativity in their teaching practices. More than 70% of the teachers never or rarely involve students in problem-solving tasks, vary their teaching strategies, accommodate different styles of learning, or use open-ended questions. The majority of the participants (85%) seldom incorporate activities that stimulate students' imagination, and more than 60% of them hardly encourage students to evaluate what they read or allow for debating views and ideas (Al-Qahtani, 2016).

With lesson plans lacking creativity, the students are not only left disinterested in the subject matter, but they are also forced to follow only one style of teaching, which does not allow for the many different styles of learning. As English is currently being taught in the classroom, the teachers are mainly speaking at the students while the students simply take notes on everything the teachers say. Alharbi (2015) confirmed this finding, stating that teachers in English classes in Saudi Arabia play a central role because they control everything that happens in the classroom. In contrast, students are considered merely listeners and receivers of knowledge. This teacher-centered (as opposed to student-centered) learning environment tends to prevent students from developing satisfactory language competence. Without the interaction between students and teachers, there is no effective way for the teacher to address all of their students' needs for learning English. The traditional teaching philosophy in Saudi Arabia is one in which teachers are given lesson plans and material that they must simply present in the classroom, and students are required to memorize information, but not to think deeply about it. Relying on memorization is an ineffective learning strategy that makes it impossible for Saudi EFL learners to even come close to developing the required competence in the target language because they can pass exams and attain high marks without actually mastering language skills (Al-Misnad, 1985).

Students in Saudi Arabia are given a series of tests that are passed down to their teachers by the Ministry of Education. There is no actual interaction between the students and teachers whereby teachers routinely assess how their students are comprehending the subject and adjust their teaching methods and curriculum according to their students' needs. In regard to focusing on standardized assessment in the classroom, Black and William (1998) assert that formative assessment (focusing on qualitative feedback, rather than scores) is a critical aspect of classroom work. Maintaining that improved formative assessment can raise the standards of learners'

achievements and serve more as a teaching and learning tool rather than simply assessing learners' achievements. While teachers focus solely on the scores of an exam, rather than the actual qualitative assessment of how the subject they are teaching is being received, students will continue to be left behind and without a thorough understanding of the language.

The current curriculum lacks a foundation between its content and the teaching methods and assessment strategies that it employs. Students are currently falling behind as teachers are left without adequate systems for measuring their progress. Al-Seghayer (2014) argues that it seems that the curriculum is developed without an assessment or analysis of the students' needs at each school level. Additionally, there is no established link between the English curriculum employed at the elementary, intermediate, and secondary school levels. This could be due to the fact that the curriculum designers failed to identify the students' development as a continuum. Students require consistent, thorough teaching that applies not only to their style of learning, but also to the varying levels of progress between students within the classroom. Furthermore, it is necessary that the teacher engage with students daily and assess their progress as they move forward to the next lesson, rather than simply assigning tests and giving scores or grades based on these tests.

Standardized Teaching Is An Ineffective Strategy for Teachers

Just as the implementation of standardized curriculum is not beneficial for students learning English as a Foreign Language, it also falls short for the teachers who are teaching them. Within Saudi Arabia, teachers are expected to adhere to and implement the curriculum policies as they are handed down to them by the Ministry of Education. This discourages the development of teacher-made materials and provides no opportunities to trainee teachers in materials to development teaching techniques. Additionally, this type of standardized curriculum dictated by someone outside of their own classroom makes teachers perceive the task of teaching English to be beyond their capability and responsibility. This practice is derived from the tenets of a top-down model of curriculum development, as opposed to a bottom-up model whereupon a set of hierarchically ordered processes are centrally initiated and controlled by selected expert committees (Al-Seghayer, 2014). With teachers not being the ones to design their own curriculum, this leaves them at a disadvantage toward teaching to the needs of the students within their own classroom. Rather than assessing the learning styles, preferences, and requirements of their individual students, teachers are given a standard set of curriculum and lesson plans that they must follow. As a result, the direct needs of their students are not being met.

As teachers are simply teaching the curriculum they are instructed to, without any enthusiasm or conveyance of a practical application, Saudi students may not understand why they should bother to achieve English language proficiency or why

they really need to learn English when they can use their native Arabic to obtain what they need. Most Saudi students have some misconceptions about the significance of learning English; specifically, Saudi students generally believe that there is no need to learn English because of their misconception that after they finish their schooling, they will attend universities or obtain jobs where English is not required. As a result, students treat English as a subject that must be studied just to obtain the required exam score rather than as a tool for communication in their daily lives (Alrabai, 2016). While administering the teaching of English, teachers get to do little other than read from the textbook and give tedious written exercises. The currently employed English textbooks emphasize imparting knowledge at the expense of teaching skills. Specifically, the content seems to be concerned with presenting the information to learners, rather than giving them ample opportunities to practice the given information and materials (Al-Seghayer, 2014).

Although other subjects within the school system of Saudi Arabia are able to be taught using teaching styles and methods up to the teacher's discretion, English is standardized and formulated from the Ministry of Education to the teachers, with an emphasis on simply presenting the course material word for word. As a result, teachers are not as invested in the material as they would be if it were their own, and therefore do not transfer a necessary investment of the subject to their students. It is quite common among EFL teachers to treat language in language classrooms simply as a subject matter. They often do not treat it as a tool to communicate and construct meaning, where being critical, open to other ideas, collaborative, imaginative, and independent would then be valuable (Al-Seghayer, 2014). With this significant lack of fostering a mutual exchange of information and dialogue, teachers teach English in a dry manner, thus leaving the students to perceive it as a dry subject, without any interest on their part, and specifically lacking pertinence to their lives.

A further significant barrier for teachers teaching English as a Foreign Language effectively within Saudi Arabia is the lack of creativity within the designated lesson plans. From the very beginning, there is a lack of teacher training in fostering creativity. In 2016, Ali Al-Qahtani comprises a study of 45 EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia to assess their views of the levels of creativity within the classroom. Almost all teachers who were interviewed (45 EFL teachers in total) indicated that they had never been involved in any training which valued the importance of creative thinking in language classrooms. In the study, multiple hindrances to implementing creative approaches to teaching English as a Foreign Language and fostering creativity on the part of the students were addressed. These factors include an unclear concept of creativity, its inappropriate application in language teaching, the lack of support for creativity in textbooks, a lack of teacher training on fostering creativity, and an old-fashioned or teacher-centred approach to teaching English (Al-Qahtani, 2016). In addition to a lack of introductory training for teachers before they begin teaching English as a Foreign Language, most teachers also felt that the English textbooks that

are available to them do not promote creativity. One teacher from the study noted that they could not find but a few, if any, activities which develop students creative thinking and allow them to generate new ideas and that these textbooks do not pay much attention the actual needs of EFL learners and teachers.

Another compounding factor that negatively affects the process of teaching and learning English in Saudi Arabia is the unavailability and/or inadequate inclusion of diverse, selective, and appropriate teaching resources. A visitor to an English classroom will observe a lack of sufficient teaching aids on the walls. Furthermore, some schools are simply not provided with relevant teaching resources, including wall charts, flash cards, posters, audio and visual aids, language software, e-learning resources, or a well-equipped language computer laboratory (Al-Seghayer, 2014). As a result of the lack of interesting materials and resources on the walls, as well as a lack of innovative curriculum design, the teachers simply read from a textbook while the students listen. This is clearly not the most effective approach to getting students excited or interested about a subject, and this method must be addressed and corrected moving forward.

Teachers of English as a Foreign Language in many other countries go through specific training before they begin teaching; however, teachers of English in Saudi Arabia are most generally not even trained in linguistics. This leaves them at an immediate disadvantage to understanding the language inside and out for themselves; therefore, can hardly be expected to field in-depth questions about the subject from their students. As a result, their focus is mainly on getting the students to pass the exam. Additionally, some of these teachers do not incorporate modern teaching aids or pedagogies LCD Projectors, videos, labs etc. into their teaching regime. (Al-Nasser, 2015). As the school system is not employing the most trained and qualified teachers of English, students are immediately at a disadvantage in the subject. The methods employed to teach English in Saudi Arabia are largely centered on the audio-lingual method (ALM) and, to a lesser extent, the grammar translation method (GTM). Consequently, teachers tend to engage students in extensive drills of grammatical rules and the monotonous repetition of words and phrases (Al-Seghayer, 2014). If teachers are not properly trained before teaching English, specifically with a linguistics degree and extensive training on the best methods to employ in their teaching, learners of English will continue to remain behind on a global scale.

The teaching of English within Saudi Arabia has not been without some changes in an attempt to make language learning more effective; however, none of these has provided their intended success in the subject. Many of these curriculum reforms have come at a huge monetary cost—but each has been poorly designed, badly implemented, and/or ineffectively evaluated during implementation. In a study designed to assess what the teachers think about these changes, they believed that the curriculum was high quality in terms of layout and instructional design, however they

encountered some difficulties implementing the new methodologies and strategies of the revised curriculum. The findings further indicated that teachers had only a minimal role in planning the curriculum (Al-Saadat & Al-Braik, 2004). While curriculum reform continues to happen from the Ministry of Education down, rather than within the classroom as teachers cater their teaching to the learning needs of their specific students, this reform will continue to lack what is necessary for students to excel in their understanding of the English language.

Lack of Standardized Teaching in Finland Yields Positive Results

When looking to transform the Education system in Saudi Arabia, specifically with respect to how English is taught as a foreign language, it is important to find a successful model of Education and assess what is working for them. The students of Finland continue to rank among the best in the world and this is a result of many factors that can be drawn on for comparison. Students in Finland do not start school until they are 7 years old, they rarely take exams until they are well into their teens and as far as standardized testing goes, there is only one standardized test in Finland, taken when the student is 16. In Finland, 30% of children receive extra help during their first 9 years of school, and most importantly, the National Curriculum is only considered a broad guideline (Taylor, 2011). While there may be some different factors affecting the education system in Saudi Arabia than those of Finland, it is worth examining this successful model of education in an attempt to adopt some of the methods they employ.

The transformation of the Finns' education system began some 40 years ago as the key propellant of the country's economic recovery plan. Educators had little idea it was so successful until 2000, when the first results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a standardized test given to 16-year-olds in more than 40 global venues, revealed Finnish youth to be the best young readers in the world. Three years later, they led in math. By 2006, Finland was first out of 57 countries (and a few cities) in science. In the 2009, PISA scores released last year, the nation came in second in science, third in reading and sixth in math among nearly half a million students worldwide (Hancock, 2011).

One key difference in the education system between Saudi Arabia and Finland is the preparation and education of their teachers. Whereas EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia rarely even have a degree in Linguistics, teachers in Finland are required to have a Master's Degree before they begin teaching. The Centre for Educational Assessment (2008) in Finland explains as a reason for the success of the Finnish school system that school teachers are well acquainted with didactic methods, that they are able to use them in a varied way, and that they are prepared to encounter different learners with different needs (Tryggvason, 2009). This stands in stark contrast to Saudi Arabia where teachers mainly speak at the students, instead of actually interacting with them in a meaningful way. Teachers in Saudi Arabia also lack the proper training to become teachers of English; therefore, they simply read aloud from the textbooks and hand out

worksheets for their students, rather than remaining in constant conversation, whereby they are able to easily assess the needs of their students.

With the shift of the educational policy in Finland to decentralization and the granting of more local control to municipalities and schools was with the intent of encouraging more active, locally relevant learning. Within national guidelines, schools develop their own curricula and do their own budgeting (Hamalainen, Kimonen, Nevalainen, Nikki, 2000). This factor is incredibly important in comparison to Saudi Arabia where curriculum and textbooks not only lack integration of local culture, but it is also not the students' own teachers developing their coursework. This formulaic method of teaching in Saudi Arabia is significantly different from the model that is working exceptionally well in Finland.

Opposite from Saudi Arabia, there are no mandated standardized tests in Finland, aside from one exam at the end of students' senior year in high school. There are no rankings, no comparisons or competition between students, schools or regions. Pasi Sahlberg, a former math and physics teacher who is now in Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture stated, "We prepare children to learn how to learn, not how to take a test," (Hancock, 2011). In a 2015 study done of Saudi Arabian schools, Umer and Omer reported the interesting, as well as alarming truth that students memorized materials and managed to pass the tests, sometimes with no actual understanding. The evidence gathered strongly indicates that it did not seriously matter for the students whether they understood what they were taught as long as they managed to pass. Conversely, without comparisons, competition, and testing grades to focus on, students in Finland are able focus simply on learning the material.

Another example of what Saudi Arabian teachers can learn from Finland and focus on implementing into their own teaching is making sure the lessons all feel meaningful and applicable. Currently, students in Saudi Arabia do not see how English pertains to their actual lives since Arabic is the language spoken everywhere around them. However, Finnish teacher educators when applying all pedagogical and theoretical aspects to practice is to show that the theories are meaningful, useful and applicable. When using a variety of approaches, teacher educators hope to stimulate student teachers to find their own teaching style which, according the point of view of the Finnish teacher educators in the data, reflects different theories and pedagogical methods. Thus, student teachers are encouraged to form their own teaching style by combining various influences. The teacher educators have abandoned the thinking that only one way of teaching can yield good results (Tryggvason, 2009).

"Whatever it takes" is an attitude that drives most of Finland's 62,000 educators in 3,500 different schools—professionals selected from the top 10 percent of the nation's graduates to earn a required master's degree in education. Many schools are small enough so that teachers know every student. If one method fails, teachers consult

with colleagues to try something else. They seem to relish the challenges (Hancock, 2011). Teachers in Finland find value in their positions as educators, not only because they enjoy the challenge of helping all students reach their potential, but also because they feel like their teaching ability is within their own hands. Rather than teaching a curriculum that is handed to them by someone outside of the classroom, Finnish teachers are able to design their own lessons and adjust anything they need to in order to address every student's learning needs. This is something that is significantly lacking in the teaching of English as a Foreign language within Saudi Arabia.

Solutions

Although in more recent years, newer systems for curriculum have been developed for EFL instruction in Saudi Arabia, there is still a gap in having a national plan that is built on sound teaching theories with specific objectives that are compatible with the goals of the national development plans. A well-organized plan for an EFL curriculum with specific yearly objectives to be achieved by the end of each school level and containing syllabi that meets the stated learning objectives is necessary to be implemented in order for English learners to succeed (Al-Seghayer, 2014). When comparing the style of teaching English in Saudi Arabia to that of the success of teaching strategies within Finland, there are many ways in which Saudi Arabia requires improvement. The strict standardized teaching is simply not addressing the needs of the students and is leaving English learners dramatically behind students in other countries. Ahmad (2015) notes that moving forward, implementation of culturally relevant English curricula, learner-centered instruction, appointment of skilled English teachers and establishment of boarding schools are all recommended to address the teaching challenges in Saudi Arabia. Although the required changes to the way English is being taught in Saudi Arabia may seem too numerous, there are practical measures that can easily be put in place which will greatly help students as well as teachers succeed.

The first solution to put in place is to introduce English from an earlier stage. Currently, the teaching of English language in Saudi Arabia is done from the fourth grade on, while in advanced countries, it is taught right beginning in preschool or Kindergarten at the latest. Al-Nasser (2015) notes that the lessons should be packed as much with fun as possible and as much practicality as feasible. The teacher should be able to ignite the students' love for the language. As children are curious to know more and more, relevant or irrelevant, at this age, the teacher can afford to be quite friendly and not behave authoritatively. The children will open up and ask questions thereby ensuring better learning. As children's brains are much more receptive to language learning in their early formative years, having them start learning English from age 3 or 4 onwards will ensure remarkably better success as they move along in their schooling.

Another easily implemented solution is to add local culture to the textbooks and curriculum. According to some linguists, EFL learners learn faster if teaching contents are embedded in local culture. Therefore, it is indispensable to explore specific ways to design a curriculum that could address the traditional and cultural barriers to English language learning in Saudi Arabia. It seems illogical to design a curriculum and to introduce a textbook in Saudi schools and universities that doesn't manifest even an iota of local culture and local mindset (Ahmad, 2015). Students will be much more engaged in the learning of English if they can recognize aspects of their lives in the lessons. If textbook makers incorporate local culture and pictures of people that the students can identify with, along with the teachers adding in aspects of local culture in their lesson plans, students will become more interested in the subject.

A further solution to fixing the broken EFL system in Saudi Arabia is for teachers to begin to focus on quality, rather than quantity. Currently, teachers are focused simply on getting through the coursework that is given to them by the Ministry of Education. Al-Nasser (2015) argued that the curricula are too fat and wide for teachers to cover and too much for students to handle. What is done now is a concentration on finishing the curricula in time and in whatever possible way regardless of any benefits. There is a need to reconsider the curricula by keeping in mind the quality that ensures achieving the goals, not the quantity that is to be finished because the student will not be asked how many pages or units did he study but, instead, he will be judged on his/her use of the language and this is the only thing that matters. In Saudi Arabia, currently the only thing that matters are that students get through the required curriculum and that they are able to memorize material in order to pass the test, whereas in Finland, teachers take as much time as is necessary to make sure the students are actually understanding the material, not simply memorizing it for a test, only to forget it when the test is done.

Similar to focusing on quality over quantity, teachers must also focus on evaluations rather than examinations. As students are prone to simply memorizing enough of the material to earn them a passing grade, teachers must instead assess daily whether they are truly understanding the subject inside and out. A thorough needs analysis must be conducted to establish the necessities and levels suitable for students, as well as the goals and objectives that must be set or formulated with the steps needed to implement them. There is also a need to adopt relevant teaching methods and an effective means of evaluation. The selection and compilation of materials must be carefully conducted in order to assemble a curriculum that is appropriate for Saudi students. Doing so will address the immediate needs of students by developing effective curriculum components tailored to the Saudi students' level of proficiency. This will lead to significant achievement in cognitive development (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Rather than teachers teaching to the test and students simply memorizing the

material to pass the test, there should be a constant interaction between teacher and student to ensure continuing understanding.

The current system of teaching English within Saudi Arabia is one that teaches the same curriculum to each grade level, regardless of region, academic ability, or prior exposure to English. A significant change needs to be made to this approach, as it is leaving many students behind, so much so that as students graduate high school, many of them are not able to even write one perfect sentence in English. What instead should be done is that the Ministry of Education develop English curriculum guidelines for each grade using a three tier approach: Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced. Teachers will start each school year by measuring where the English proficiency of their students is at with a series of assessment tests. This curriculum will then vary per region, city, town and even between the students within the same classroom based on a learning curve. Teachers can then divide the class into groups based on skill level. The teacher can focus on interactive teaching with one level, while the other group works on their own or in small groups on a different assignment in their higher or lower level. This can be done in the same manner that elementary school teachers in the United States teach combination classes, such as a second grade/third grade class, where the students often break into different groups and work on different assignments. Al-Seghayer (2014) argues that a thorough analysis must be conducted to establish the necessities and levels suitable for all students, as well as the goals and objectives that must be set or formulated with the steps needed to implement them. There is also a need to adopt relevant teaching methods and an effective means of evaluation. The selection and compilation of materials must be carefully conducted in order to assemble a curriculum that is appropriate for Saudi students. Doing so will address the immediate needs of students by developing effective curriculum components tailored to the Saudi students' level of proficiency. This will lead to significant achievement in cognitive development.

The second option, which would in fact pair best in accompaniment to the tiered method of beginner, intermediate, and advanced within classrooms, is that English is taught in the three different methods that students learn best, Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic (movement). This learning style (VAK) determines the student's dominant learning style and enables teachers to develop their lesson plans accordingly. According to this understanding, information must be presented using all three styles in order to achieve success. This method allows all learners the opportunity to become involved, no matter what their preferred style may be (Constantinidou and Baker, 2002). If teachers break the class into different learning groups based on their current skill levels in the English language, as well as add in lesson plans and curriculum designed to incorporate the three main styles of learning, students in Saudi Arabia will be given their best chance at success.

Conclusion

The formulaic, standardized method of teaching English as a Foreign Language within Saudi Arabia is simply not working. As the curriculum is decided by the Ministry of Education, rather than the teacher, this creates a depersonalized approach to teaching. Teachers talk at the students, rather than engage their students in discussions, and they teach directly from the textbooks, rather than create their own lesson plans based on the knowledge of their students' particular needs. Additionally, all students are taught the same curriculum, regardless of region, previous exposure to English, or varying learning abilities, and as a result, many students are being left behind. When assessing the school system in Finland in which they do not use a standardized approach to teaching, it is easy to evaluate successful strategies that may be implemented into the Saudi Arabian school system.

While there may be some initial resistance to these changes, once the systems are in place by the Ministry of Education, the teachers are then free to implement these methods on their own without further assistance. English language textbooks with modern approach and concept of teaching and well planned and properly graded learner-friendly teaching material must be made available and periodically reviewed for changes or additions. The teachers should undertake one-to-one discussion with the prospective students to find out their needs on the basis of their learning style, learning assets, learning goals, and particularly the students' perceptions in these respects (Al-Nasser, 2015). By introducing English at an earlier age, incorporating local culture and traditions within the textbooks and lesson plans, focusing on quality rather than quantity, implementing evaluations rather than examinations, and developing a three tiered stem for each grade level that incorporates the three types of learning styles, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language within Saudi Arabia will be more successful for students as well as teachers.

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