Education Context and English Teaching and Learning in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: An Overview

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Abstract

This paper discusses the education context and English teaching and learning in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The paper is organised into five main sections. The first section offers a brief glance at the social, religious, economic, and political context in KSA. The second section provides an overview of the education system in KSA, which includes a brief explanation of the history of education, a discussion of the role of government in modern education, and a description of the administration of education in the country. The third section presents information about English teaching and learning in public and higher education in KSA, while the fourth gives insights into the challenges and difficulties students face when learning English. The last section focuses on the importance of learning English in KSA.

Keywords: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, education system, English teaching and learning

1. Overview of the Social, Economic, Political and Religious Context of Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, commonly known as Saudi Arabia, was founded in 1932 by King Abdula-Aziz Bin Saud. Located in southwestern Asia, the country occupies a huge percentage of the Arabian Peninsula with a land area of 2 149 790 million sq. km, or 830 039 sq. miles (Ministry of Culture and Information, 2013). According to the Central Department of Statistics and Information (2013), the population of the country in 2013 was estimated at 29 994 272 (including 9 723 214 foreign expatriates from different nations of the world). The population growth rate is 3.5%, and it is among the countries with the fastest growth rates in the world (Onsman, 2010). The citizens are ethnically diverse; the majority (90%) is Arab, while the rest (10%) are of Asian and African origins (Alhawsawi, 2013).The kingdom consists of 13 administrative provinces, involving more than 5 000 cities and villages. The main cities include Riyadh, the capital city that is situated in the centre of the country; Jeddah, the main port on the Red Sea; and Dammam, the main port on the Arabian Gulf.

Figure 1. Map of Saudi Arabia

Economically, Saudi Arabia is the richest country in the Middle East, as illustrated by its 2014 budget of US $301.6 billion (Ministry of Finance, 2014). In addition, in the last decade, the economy was among the fastest growing in the Middle East and North Africa. However, the economy depends greatly on oil as the main source of wealth, representing more than 80% of the country's income. Currently, Saudi Arabia has the largest proven petroleum reserves in the world (about 25% of the world reserves). Because of the massive revenue coming from oil, the country has developed rapidly and has become one of the leading economic and political powers in the region.

The discovery of oil in the country was in the late 1930s, but the oil industry and prices did not begin to thrive and boom until the 1970s (Alkharashi, 2012). Since then, the country has accumulated enormous wealth, and the government has launched huge spending on projects such as infrastructure (e.g., transportation, housing), education, and healthcare (Alkharashi, 2012). A shortage in citizen manpower has led the government and employers to hire foreign expatriates from various countries. Since the 1970s, a large inflow of foreign workers have entered the country; currently, they form 32% of the population, the majority are from Asian countries (e.g., India, Pakistan, Philippines, and Indonesia) and other Middle Eastern countries (e.g., Egypt, Lebanon, and Yemen). In 2012, Saudi Arabia was one of the top five migrant destinations worldwide and the second top migrant-remittance-sending country (De Bel-Aair, 2014). According to the International Monetary Fund (2014), the expatriates' remittance outflows are an important source of income for their countries.

In terms of government, KSA is a hereditary monarchy, with the King as both head of state and prime minister. The King names a Crown Prince, who is second in line to the throne, to help him in some of his duties. The King governs the country with the assistance of the Council of Ministers, also known as the King's Cabinet (Alhawsawi, 2013; Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington [RESAW], 2014). The Cabinet includes 22 government ministers, and each minster is responsible for a different part of the government, such as education, health, or finance. The Cabinet meets once a week, and is presided over by the monarch (the Prime Minister) or his deputy (the Crown Prince). The Council of Ministers also drafts and oversees implementation of defence, external, internal, financial, economic, and education policies, in addition to tending to the general affairs of the country (RESAW, 2014). Further, the Cabinet is the final authority in the state for executive, administrative, and financial matters. However, a legislative assembly, known as the Consultative Council (*MajlesAlshura*), advises the King and his Cabinet on issues such as education, the economy, and Islamic affairs. The Consultative Council has 150 members appointed directly by the Monarch based on their reputation and experience (Alhawsawi, 2013). The Consultative Council also reviews the country's internal and external policies, and has the power to refer any governmental action to the Monarch if the Council does not approve. Therefore, the Monarch is the final arbiter for the country's affairs (RESAW, 2014).

The citizens of Saudi Arabia are predominantly Muslims, and the official religion is Islam, while the official language is Arabic. More importantly, the country is the birthplace of Islam, and it is the home of the two holiest places for those of the Islamic faith: AlmasjedAlharam in Mecca and AlmasjidAlnabawi in Medina. Therefore, Islam is at the heart of all aspects of Saudis' lives and dominates their culture, beliefs and customs. In addition to this, the government is based on Islamic tenets, which guide its functions and policies. Thus, the country's constitution and legal framework are based on *shari'ah* (Islamic law). Further, Islam remains at the educational system's core. For example, Islamic subjects constitute a large portion of students' curriculum at all levels.

2. Overview of the Education System in Saudi Arabia

2.1 History of the Education System

The education system in Saudi Arabia has transformed immensely since its inception in 1925. Before that date, education was most commonly utilised in mosques and Qur'anic Schools, in which students were taught to write and read Arabic to recite the holy Qur'an (Al-Liheibi, 2008; Alsharif, 2011). However, the education system as it stands today can be attributed to the Directorate of Education, which established a formal system in 1925 (Alsharif, 2011). King Abdul-Aziz founded the Directorate of Education before the unification of the whole country and the proclamation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. The foundation of this agency indicated the King's emphasis on education even though the country was new and had to deal with different local and international situations (Al-Harthi, 2014). The Directorate of Education was responsible for opening new schools and offices across the country. The first public schools were established in 1930, but only male students were formally enrolled (Alsharif, 2011; Wiseman, 2010). In 1960, female students were formally enrolled into education but were segregated from boys in separate schools (Al-Zarah, 2008). Initially, women's education faced strong opposition in some regions of the country by people who viewed non-religious education as worthless for girls. A couple of years later, however, this perception changed dramatically, and most of the

population supported and encouraged girls' education (Almutairi, 2008).

At present, education in Saudi Arabia is segregated based on the gender of the learner and the teacher (Al-Zarah, 2008). This means that there are no co-educational institutions, marking Saudi Arabia as one of the few countries that aligns to a single-sex school system. The segregation of the students may be attributed to the beliefs of Islam, although single-sex schooling is also associated with cultural, social and traditional values (Wiseman, 2010). Single-sex education can be found in other Middle Eastern countries such as Jordan and Bahrain, where there is no co-education in intermediate and secondary schools (Fryer & Levitt, 2010). Because the single-sex education system is based on the principles of both the Islamic religion and Arabic culture, countries prophesising Islam have a propensity for such a system. Although education in Saudi Arabia is segregated in terms of gender, both sexes receive the same quality and educational facilities (Al-Johani, 2009). For example, stages of schooling are the same in both genders (e.g., primary, intermediate and secondary), and the curriculum of each subject is almost the same with small differences to meet the needs for each gender.

2.2 Role of Government in the Modern Education System

Saudi Arabia's government understands the importance of education, as reflected in the government's yearly budget. For example, in 2013, the amount allocated for learning was 25% of the total budget (Ministry of Finance, 2013). Moreover, education is the only governmental organisation that has not suffered huge financial cuts. Since 2000, the budget for education has increased, indicating the significance of education to the country's development. In addition, the government of Saudi Arabia offers her citizens free education from kindergarten to tertiary school (Alamri, 2011; Alsharif, 2011; Onsman, 2010). Further, the government also provides public schools and colleges with books, health services, and technological equipment.

Additionally, the Saudi Arabian government provides motivational factors that encourage students to pursue further education and even offers scholarships for students to study internationally. For example, Saudi public university students are paid monthly rewards of US $225 to US $250 as encouragement for pursuing higher education (Alamri, 2011). Furthermore, more than 148 000 students had governmental scholarships in 2013 to study in 24 developed countries abroad, such as the US and the UK (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013).

Overall, as mentioned above, the government invests heavily in education and provides incentives for her citizens to continue learning. This reflects the government's awareness of the importance of education to sustain the country's development, as the future of the country cannot solely depend on oil resources which will run out one day. Therefore, education is the cornerstone of building a knowledge-based economy which will support sustainable development and economic growth (Bashehab & Buddhapriya, 2013).

In regard to the education of the expatriates' children, in most cases, the employers (whether government or private) cover all or most of the basic educational expenses (i.e., tuition and fees) as part of the employment contract. Non-citizen Arab expatriates can send their children to Saudi public school as the curriculum and instruction are delivered in Arabic. Foreign children who do not speak Arabic can be enrolled in international schools, which are classified into two types. The first type is run by embassies to serve mainly the children of their citizens. For example, there are schools for Indian, Filipino, Indonesian, American, and British children. The curriculum in these schools is almost the same as that in the child's home country. Expatriates enrolling their children in these schools want to comply with accreditation standards of their native education to ensure easy transition and re-admission when they return home. The second type of international school is privately organised and is purely multinational and multicultural (i.e., students and teachers are from various countries of the world). In this type, English is the language of instruction, and the curriculum conforms to western standards (e.g., US and UK) and International Baccalaureate.

2.3 Administration of Education in Saudi Arabia

The education system in Saudi Arabia is centrally administered and managed by two agencies, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education (urRahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Even though the agencies are separate with different operational roles, they complement each other to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of the Saudi Arabian education system.

2.3.1 Ministry of Education

This agency was founded in 1954, taking over from the Directorate of Education, which was established in 1925 (Alamri, 2011). The primary role of the agency is to oversee girls' and boys' public education. The public education system comprises pre-school, primary school (1st grade-6th grade), intermediate school (7th grade-9th grade) and secondary school (10th grade-12th grade). The compulsory education for children involves the completion of at least primary and intermediate stages. Pupils start their primary education at the age of seven

and complete their secondary education at the age of eighteen. The number of schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education increased dramatically from 3 098 in 1970 to 34 784 schools in 2013. Similarly, the number of students in 1970 was 536 000 and increased sharply to 5 274 205 (male: 2 644 157; female: 2 630 048) (Ministry of Education, 2014; Oyaid, 2009).

Other responsibilities associated with the Ministry of Education include teacher training, adult education, junior colleges, and special needs (Alquraini, 2010). According to information obtained from the Ministry of Education (2013), there are forty-four educational districts, each of which is managed by a district office. These district offices are responsible for creating and managing links between the Ministry of Education and local schools (Alsharif, 2011). Apart from management, the Ministry of Education is responsible for developing and managing institutional requirements such as building new schools and constructing supportive infrastructures (Alquraini, 2010). Other responsibilities charged to the Ministry of Education include providing important materials, equipping schools and supplying textbooks (Al-Otaibi, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2013; Oyaid, 2009).

In addition to the above duties, the Ministry of Education oversees the Curriculum Department, which formulates and implements the curriculum, creating a unified education system throughout all the districts of Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Education, 2013). In addition, the Curriculum Department is responsible for the preparation of textbooks based on different educational requirements such as grade and level. In each of the different schools, whether private or government-run, each subject has a specific textbook that must be utilised.

The school week in Saudi Arabia is five days, starting from Sunday to Thursday, with Friday and Saturday as the weekend. The academic year is the same across the country for primary, intermediate, and secondary schools; specifically, the year is divided into two terms, each of which lasts 18 weeks. For the primary stage (from 1st-6th grade), students have six 45-minute classes a day. From the 1st to the 3rd grade, pupils study various subjects such as the Arabic language, Islamic studies, mathematics, science, and art education. From the 4th to the 6th grade of elementary school, pupils study new subjects such as English, social studies, and computers. At the primary stage, pupils do not sit final examinations; however, teachers utilize continuous assessments to evaluate students' achievement (Alafaleq & Fan, 2014).

The continuous assessments are based on a set of criteria that have been determined and defined by the Ministry of Education. For each subject, the set of criteria are based on the skills and knowledge that students are required to master in that subject. For example, to assess students' mathematics achievement, teachers regularly use rubrics which describe the criteria required to demonstrate pupils' understanding and performance in the subject. At the end of the term, teachers collect the rubrics and make judgment about their students' achievement. Generally, pupils will be graded according to the following:

1) If the pupil mastered all the skills required, he/she will score 1 (distinction).

2) If the pupil mastered 66% of the skills required, he/she will score 2 (credit).

3) If the pupil mastered 33% of the core skills in addition to all the non-core skills, he/she will score 3 (pass).

4) If the pupil did not achieve the above, he/she will score 4 (fail), which means that he/she will not be able to progress to the next grade level (Alafaleq & Fan, 2014).

In the intermediate and secondary stages, students have seven classes a day, an increase from the six taught in the primary stage. In the intermediate stage (7th-9th grade), students study the advanced levels of the subjects they took at the elementary stage. Unlike the primary stage, students in the intermediate stage have final examinations. For example, students moving from the first intermediate grade to the second intermediate grade should have passed examinations offered within that period. Teachers devise the examinations, which include both information taught in class and information from the subject textbooks. Each subject has two types of assessments, namely, during-term assessment (which include mid-term quiz, homework, and class participation) and a final exam. The during-term assessment accounts for 40% of the total mark, while the final exam accounts for 60%. In order to pass a unit, the student must obtain 50% of the total mark.

Secondary education, which lasts three years (from 10th to 12th grade), is the last pre-university stage of public education in Saudi Arabia. When students complete the first grade (i.e., grade 10) of this stage, they choose between two paths: (a) *scientific* or (b) *arts academic* to study in their two final years. Students who selected the scientific path study subjects of a scientific nature such as mathematics, chemistry, geology, physics, and computers, in addition to other non-scientific subjects such as Arabic, English, and Islamic studies. On the other hand, the arts path focuses on non-scientific subjects such as Arabic studies (e.g., Arabic literature, linguistics, and rhetoric), Islamic studies (e.g., the holy Qur'an and Islamic law), social studies (e.g., history and geography), and English. Like the intermediate stage, students undergo two types of assessments: during-term assessment

(i.e., attendance, class participation, homework, mid-term quiz, and research project) (50%) and final exam (50%). Students pass the unit if they achieve at least 50% of the total mark, with 20/50 (40%) or higher on the final exam.

2.3.2 Ministry of Higher Education

The Ministry of Higher Education supervises and manages higher education learning in Saudi Arabia (urRahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). The agency was established in 1975 as a separate entity from the Ministry of Education, which initially managed tertiary schools and universities. The Ministry of Higher Education also supervises educational offices abroad, international academic relations, and scholarships. Currently, there are 25 governmental and eight private universities in Saudi Arabia. The public universities are linked to the Ministry of Higher Education, but they enjoy a large degree of independence in both academic scope and administrative matters (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014). For example, each university drafts its own course plans and is responsible for employing its staff.

Like many countries in the region, the Saudi Arabian higher education system is quite young; about 65% of the government universities were established in the last 15 years. The oldest and largest university is King Saud University in Riyadh, which was founded in 1957 and had a capacity of 61 412 students in 2014 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014). The total number of students enrolling in government universities in 2014 was 1 165 091 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014).

3. Teaching and Learning of English in Saudi Arabia

English is the only foreign language taught in schools of Saudi Arabia. According to Al-Shammary (1984), English as an educational subject was introduced in the late 1950s. Al-Johani (2009) has noted that English was introduced in the 1930s after the discovery of oil and only used within the setting of business, but the government waited until the 1950s to introduce it as a syllabus. Initially, the English language was taught only in intermediate and secondary schools as a compulsory subject. The government of Saudi Arabia was against teaching English at elementary schools because of the belief that learning English may affect a student's learning of Arabic. However, because of the importance of English, the education system evolved in 2010, and English is now taught in lower levels of schooling as well (starting from the 4th grade of elementary school, when students are 10 years old). In primary stage (4th grade-6th grade), students have two 45-minute English classes a week. However, in intermediate and secondary stages, the number of classes increases to four classes per week (each class lasts for 45 minutes).

In the Department of Curriculum Design, the Ministry of Education presented the English syllabus considering the beliefs, customs, values and traditions of Saudi Arabian society. The English subject textbooks are commonly referred to as *English for Saudi Arabia*, and the grade-level textbooks are the same throughout the kingdom (Almutairi, 2008). Teachers of English usually utilise three materials: a textbook and a workbook for the students, along with a teaching manual, which is referred to as the teacher's book (Al-Otaibi, 2004). Students receive the textbooks and a statement of their objectives for free, and teachers implement and teach them in the allocated time (Almutairi, 2008). The subject textbooks integrate all the language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking) with functional grammar and vocabulary. However, most schools lack English learning facilities such as language labs, educational films and tape recorders; where such resources are available, they are mostly out of order because of poor maintenance and lack of trained teachers (Almutairi, 2008).

In public education, from elementary to secondary, the majority of English teachers are Saudis. The minimum qualification for teachers to teach English in schools is a bachelor's degree in English, but no previous training or experience is required (Alfahadi, 2014). Most of the teachers graduated from the school of education or art at local Saudi universities and colleges that offer a four-year bachelor's degree in teaching English as a foreign language.

The Ministry of Education has stated the general objectives of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the schools of Saudi Arabia (Al Zayid, 2012; urRahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). The first objective is to enable students to acquire basic language skills (i.e., writing, reading, listening and speaking). The second is to enable students to achieve the important linguistic competence needed in different life situations. The third objective is to enable students to achieve the important linguistic competence needed in various professions. Fourth, the program aims to allow students to develop positive attitudes towards the learning of the English language. The fifth program objective is to increase students' knowledge regarding the significance of English as a medium of international communication. The sixth is to increase students' awareness about the religious, economic, cultural and social issues of their society and make them ready to take part in their solutions. The seventh objective is to increase students' linguistic competence that will enable them, in the future, to explain and present

Islamic-related information and participate in spreading the religion of Islam. The program's eighth objective is to develop students' linguistic competence that enables them to benefit from nations with citizens that speak the English language, which increases the idea of cooperation, respect and understanding of differences in cultures between the nations. Finally, the program aims to enable students linguistically to allow them to take part in transferring scientific and technological advances of other countries to Saudi Arabia (Al Zayid, 2012; urRahman & Alhaisoni, 2013).

In higher education, most Saudi universities use English as the language of instruction in some scientific courses, such as medicine and engineering (as English is essential and the language of these domains), while Arabic is used in non-scientific courses (e.g., courses of humanities). However, other courses, in which English is not the language of instruction, require students to complete EFL coursework as an additional compulsory unit. For example, a student earning a bachelor's degree in history must complete an English unit (commonly English for academic purposes) as part of his course plan. The additional English unit is intended to improve students' competence in English and enable them to use the language as a tool of knowledge in addition to Arabic. On the other hand, two prominent scientific universities have managed to use English as the sole language of instruction for all of the courses they provide. These universities are King Fahad Petroleum and Mineral University (KFPMU) and King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST).

Due to the lack of qualified Saudi teachers who have considerable qualifications (MA and PhD), the majority of English lecturers in higher education are foreign, mainly from the neighbouring Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon.

4. Challenges of Learning English in Saudi Arabia

In recent years, serious concerns have been expressed by the Saudi Arabian government and educationists about the low level of achievement in English among students in schools and universities. Although the Saudi government exerted enormous effort to improve English teaching and learning, students' English proficiency remains unsatisfactory and below expectations (Al-Johani, 2009; Fareh, 2010; Khan, 2011). Researchers (e.g., Alhawsawi, 2013; Al-Johani, 2009; Rajab, 2013) have contended that, although students spend nine years studying English in schools, most of them graduate with a low level of English competence. When they enter universities, they carry these weaknesses and face significant trouble in their English classes and courses. The main causes for this low competence in the English language among students in Saudi schools and universities include teacher-centred instruction, teachers' reliance on traditional teaching methodologies such as the use of Arabic to teach English, students' use of memorization as a primary learning strategy, students' lack of motivation and encouragement from the teacher, lack of real-world practice, students' assumption that English is useless in their academic and social life, and the misconception among some of the society members that English may affect the native language, customs and culture.Each of these factors is discussed in detail below.

English teaching and learning in Saudi education is teacher-centred rather than student-centred, which deters students from developing satisfactory language competence (Ahmed, 2014; Alkubaidi, 2014; Alrabai, 2014; Fareh, 2010; Rajab, 2013). In the Saudi academic culture, teachers dominate the learning process, and students rely on them as the main source of knowledge (Alkubaidi, 2014; Alrabai, 2014). According to Fareh (2010), English teachers spend the majority of the lesson talking and rarely allow students a chance to speak or ask questions; thus, classes are usually quiet as students take a passive role in the learning process (Alkubaidi, 2014). In addition, Al-Johani (2009) stated that, during English classes, teachers spend most of the time illustrating and explaining the items of the new lesson verbally or writing on the board, while students are passive listeners and their responsibility is to record what has been taught and copy from the board. Al Rabai (2014) further added that teachers' dominance of English classes caused students to be receptors, memorisers and reproducers, which apparently encouraged them to participate ineffectively in the learning process. Therefore, this teacher-centred approach has led to students' lack of opportunity to interact and participate in class or even to do a minimum of English practice.

One of the main problems that hinder students' English competence in Saudi Arabia is teachers' reliance on traditional methods such as the use of Arabic to teach the English language (Alhawsawi, 2013; Almutairi, 2008; Fareh, 2010). According to Fareh (2010), conducting class primarily in Arabic minimizes students' exposure to English; therefore, the outcomes of learning are not sufficiently accomplished. In addition, students have no scope to practice and communicate in English in the lessons when Arabic is the language of instruction (Alhawsawi, 2013; Rabab'ah, 2005). According to Alhawsawi (2013) and Rabab'ah (2005), teachers' use of Arabic may be due to their lack of knowledge and confidence in using English, or it may simply be a choice to make their job easier. Unfortunately, translating from English to Arabic deters students' development in their

communicative competence (Alfahadi, 2014).

The dominant role of the teacher and the use of Arabic to teach English have resulted in students' reliance on inappropriate learning strategies such as memorization and rote learning (Alkubaidi, 2014; Almutairi, 2008; Alrabai, 2014; Fareh, 2010; Rajab, 2013). In English classes, most students employ memorization as their sole strategy for learning; they memorize things (e.g., paragraphs, grammar rules or vocabulary) without understanding their meanings and the way in which they are formed (Alkubaidi, 2014; Rajab, 2013). By memorizing the textbook on which the exam will be based, they pass and attain higher marks without learning the language (Alkubaidi, 2014). Memorization has been seen as an ineffective learning strategy, especially when it comes to English learning as learners need to be creative, think critically and develop ideas (Alkubaidi, 2014; Fareh, 2010). According to Alkubaidi (2014), memorisation is among the main reasons that caused students' insufficient English skills, and many students find it impossible to come even close to the required competence.

Students in Saudi Arabia lack motivation and encouragement from their teachers, which confounds their progress in developing English proficiency (Al-Johani, 2009; Almutairi, 2008; Fareh, 2010; Khan, 2011). According to Fareh (2010), when it comes to English learning, most students are unmotivated and do not want to learn. Al-Johani (2009) stated that, in most English classes, teachers demotivate students as they do not provide students with example from real-life situations when explaining, do not encourage or praise students' participation and ideas, tend to correct students' mistakes immediately, and provide constant criticism regarding their learning attempts. In addition, when students make drafts or revise their own works, they are usually left alone without any guidelines from the teacher (Khan, 2011). Furthermore, teachers commonly do not follow up with their students' work to see whether they have improved or not, which can hamper students' English academic development (Khan, 2011). Finally, the English teacher is an important factor that accounts for students' lack of motivation and competence development.

In addition to the challenges that students face in educational institutions, they lack the social target environment in which they can practice the English language (Alqahtani, 2011; Khan, 2011; Rabab'ah, 2005). English is considered to be a foreign language in Saudi Arabia, and it is not actively utilized in everyday life (Alrabai, 2014). In order for students to communicate in the language successfully, they should use and practice it in their everyday situations (Rabab'ah, 2005). In Saudi Arabia, most Saudis communicate in their native language, Arabic, with their family, peers, friends and classmates, while English is used only as an academic subject, which results in few opportunities for students to speak English through daily interactions (Khan, 2011; Rabab'ah, 2005). Therefore, the lack of exposure to English in daily life interactions can dampen students' ability to achieve a good level of English fluency and competence (Khan, 2011).

The infrequent application of English in their everyday life has led some students to assume that English is useless in their academic and social life, especially if they are not going to study courses in which English is the language of instruction (Al-mishary, 2006; Alqahtani, 2011; Khan, 2011). As mentioned earlier, Arabic is the official language of the country and is therefore the medium of communication among the Saudis. Non-Arabic foreign expatriates are the only people who use English, but even some of them try to learn Arabic in order to communicate with the native citizens (Alqahtani, 2011). The preference for Arabic extends to other situations; for example, English is the language of the workplace in hospitals, but many doctors use Arabic instead of English in order to communicate with patients who do not know English. These environmental aspects have resulted in students' assumption that English is not an important factor in their daily, academic and social life, which has in turn contributed to their poor performance in English (Alqahtani, 2011).

The surrounding society can either promote or discourage the effective learning of English. From an Islamic perspective, individuals are encouraged to learn foreign languages (e.g., English) in any society to endorse sound moral, social, and ethical values (Alqahtani, 2011; Al-Shammary, 1984). However, some members of the society in Saudi Arabia hold the misconception that learning the English language may affect the learning of Arabic—especially at a younger age, or may lead to changes in the Saudi culture and customs (Al Dameg, 2011; Al-Seghayer, 2013; Elyas & Picard, 2010; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). They contend that Arabic is crucial in ensuring that Saudi Arabian identity, culture, and society are preserved. Arabic is considered a holy language, as evidenced by its utilisation in the holy Qur'an, the Islamic religious teaching guidance (Osailan, 2009). In addition, Arabic has been taught since time immemorial, and some hold that the introduction of English might affect or endanger the use of Arabic. Some groups of the society present the example of Dubai, the commercial capital in the neighbouring United Arab Emirates, where Arabic is the official language but is rarely used in daily interaction due to the dominant use of English.

In addition to the misconception of the impact of English on Arabic use, some groups in the society fear that the

spread of English use in the country might undermine the local culture, customs, and identity (Al-Seghayer, 2013; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Language is not only a collection of expressions and words; rather, it comes with culture, traditions, and identity, among other things. According to Alsagayer (2014), language and culture are intricately woven aspects of each other. Therefore, some groups of the society associate the wide use of English with the spread of foreign traits which, in turn, may result in eroding the rich and enduring Saudi culture and customs. Hence, these fears—that English will impact Arabic use and may erode Arabic culture, customs, and identity, contribute to demotivating some Saudi students' attempts to learn English.

Finally, this section has discussed the main issues behind students' low performance in English language in contemporary Saudi Arabia. These issues, which need to be addressed, include English learning is not student-centred, incorrect pedagogical practices such as the use of Arabic to teach English, students' dependence on memorization as a sole learning strategy, lack of motivation and encouragement from teachers, lack of target language environment, the assumption among some students that English is worthless academically and socially, and finally, the misconception among some of the society members that English may affect the native language, customs and culture.

5. The Importance of Learning Effective English in Saudi Arabia

The education system of Saudi Arabia has embraced the teaching of English. For numerous reasons, Saudi students must learn English effectively to ensure they operate optimally. Some of the reasons for learning effective English include English's place as an internationalised language, the important role English plays in the Saudi Arabian economy, the utilisation of English in the labour market, the importance of English as the language of globalisation and information technology, and the religious duty of Muslims to communicate effectively with pilgrims and spread the message of Islam. In this section, each of these reasons is discussed in more detail below.

English is the sole international language and the dominant mode of communication worldwide. It is the language used by the main superpowers in the world such as the United States and the United Kingdom. A quarter of the world's population can communicate in English (Khan, 2011). Millions of people study English as a second or foreign language with the aim of maximising their enjoyment of the benefits associated with the internationalisation of English (Crystal, 2003). English has been used as the main language in numerous sectors including technology, education, commerce, and research. In addition, other sectors in which English has played major roles include international relations, higher studies, diplomacy, and other crucial fields that bring together individuals and institutions from different cultural, economic, and political backgrounds (Liton, 2012). Therefore, learning effective English would allow Saudi students to benefit from factors associated with English as a medium of international communication.

Saudi Arabia is strategically located in the Middle East. It is a rich country, the largest economy in the region, and one of the world's largest 20 economies (Alkharashi, 2012). It is known as the world's largest producer and exporter of oil (Alquraini, 2010). In 2005, Saudi Arabia became the 149th member of the World Trade Organization, prompting the Saudi economy to make significant adjustments for international trade (Clatanoff, Parlin, Jordan, Kestenbaum, & Seznec, 2006). Foreign investments are rapidly growing, and investors from different parts of the world are flocking to the country (RESAW, 2014). In addition, Saudi Arabia depends on numerous countries to fulfil bilateral trades and other foreign investments, and these transactions require the use of a language that can be understood by all parties. Most of the communication related to business and economy are carried out in English; thus, the requirement of learning English becomes more essential. Therefore, learning English will enable students to contribute to the expanding economy and business environment of Saudi Arabia.

More than 9.5 million foreign expatriates work in Saudi Arabia, occupying 88.4% of the labour force in the private sector (Central Department of Statistics and Information, 2013). Because of this huge number of expatriates dominating the labour market, the government tries to replace them by Saudi nationals (Achoui, 2009). Ramadi (2005) reported multiple factors to explain why foreign workers (rather than Saudis) were preferred by the private sector. Two of the factors reported by Ramadi were that Saudis are not well-qualified in the English language and often lack technical skills. Therefore, English is crucial for Saudis who want to replace the foreign expatriates since many organizations in the private sector embrace employees who can speak English, a skill which is lacking for most Saudis. Furthermore, most of the expatriates do not know Arabic, so English is important for communication between Saudis and expatriate workers. Moreover, when Saudis learn English effectively, they can communicate with the expatriates to gain the experience they need to be qualified and ready to take part in the labour market.

The world is becoming a single entity because of globalisation. Information technology has greatly contributed

to this process, making it possible to communicate with persons across geographical borders without barriers (Crystal, 2003). In today's world, it is easy for a person in Saudi Arabia to learn online from a university in Australia or to complete a business transaction with another individual in the United States (Crystal, 2003). However, these tasks and activities are possible only if the communicating parties share a common language. English is the natural choice in these situations because most Internet content and information technology-based applications are written in English (AL Jarf, 2008). The rapid spread of technology and the increasingly borderless society encourage the use of a common language.

In addition to the secular importance of learning English, religion also provides reasons for students to learn English. Saudi Arabia is a religious attraction for Muslims all around the world. It is home to Mecca and Medina—holy places for individuals of Islamic faith. Since one pillar of the Islamic religion is for an individual (who is financially and physically capable) to make a pilgrimage to these areas at least once in his or her lifetime, Saudi Arabia is bound to have visitors from around the world hoping to fulfil this duty. Indeed, approximately 11 million individuals journey to Saudi Arabia every year to visit the holy places. These individuals will need accommodation and food, among other goods and services. The hospitality industry can thrive only if the clients can be served. Consequently, learning English is essential to all who are involved with these industries as well as others because they may interact with these individuals (Al-Shammary, 1984).

The people of Saudi Arabia are intensely religious, and Islam has strongly affected the society. The country is the birthplace of Islam, and 99% of the population are Muslim. One of the main objectives of teaching English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia is to increase students' linguistic competence that enable them, in the future, to explain and present Islamic-related information and participate in spreading the religion of Islam (ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Therefore, learning English can be considered a religious imperative because of its importance in teaching Islamic values to non-Arabic speakers. By learning English, Saudi Arabian people can interact with individuals of different cultures to present the ideals of Islam, and can translate the Islamic knowledge sources to benefit speakers of English who might want to know about Islam (Osailan, 2009). For example, Muslims who have immigrated to Europe or the United States have disseminated Islamic values; as a result, many people in the West now have heard of or understand Islam. In addition, the acquisition of linguistic competence in English will enable Saudis and Muslims to correct the negative image and unfounded prejudice of Islam and Muslims in the West, and enable them to convey the ideals of Islam, which are peace and tolerance.

The effective learning of English in Saudi Arabia is important because it is associated with factors that affect both the country and the world in general. The English language has become the *lingua franca* of the globe, dominating essential fields such as education, economy, and diplomacy, so it is crucial for students to learn English effectively. In addition, English is the official language of information technology, and most of the world's knowledge of this crucial field is recorded in English. The role that English plays in the enhancement of foreign investments and the development of the Saudi economy is another factor that necessitates the learning of English in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Saudi students must master the skill of effectively using English to be qualified to replace the huge number of foreign expatriates in the labour market. Finally, English is also important for religious purposes, as it is used in addition to Arabic as the language of communication by pilgrims. Using English, Saudis can contribute to erasing the misconception of Islam in the West. Generally, it is important for Saudis to learn English effectively with the aim of achieving the aforementioned benefits.

6. Conclusion

This paper has sought to familiarise the reader with key aspects pertaining to the education context and English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. The paper briefly introduced Saudi Arabia's social, religious, economic, and political context, followed by a general overview of the education system. It also discussed the teaching and learning of English in Saudi Arabia, highlighting the challenges students face when learning this language. Finally, the paper emphasised the importance of learning effective English for the country's development.

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