

Exploring the Influence of Socio-Cultural Factors on Teacher Development in the Saudi EFL Setting

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Abstract

This research article explores the complex relationship between socio-cultural factors and teacher development within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in Saudi Arabia. Acknowledging the pivotal role of teacher growth in enhancing language education, the study seeks to unravel the influence of socio-cultural elements on the professional development of EFL educators in the unique Saudi Arabian educational landscape. Through the lens of qualitative research, this investigation employs in-depth interviews with 10 Saudi teachers actively engaged in teaching English at the university level. The thematic analysis method was chosen for its suitability in identifying patterns and recurring themes within the qualitative data, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the socio-cultural dynamics influencing teacher development. Themes such as societal perceptions of the teaching profession, the influence of traditional teacher-development approaches, group learning, community support, cultural sensitivity, and Islamic values emerge as crucial elements shaping the participants' experiences. The study highlights the intricate ways in which cultural norms and societal expectations interact with teachers' professional journeys, impacting their teaching methodologies, beliefs, and overall development. The findings offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to enhance teacher development programs within diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

Keywords: teacher-development, collective learning, sociocultural, institutional, and societal factors

1. Introduction

1.1 Impact of Sociocultural Factors on EFL Teaching

In any educational setting, the process of teaching and learning is characterized by established norms and the exchange of knowledge between educators and students. These norms are shaped by the social and cultural fabric of the specific environment. The significance of the social context underscores the notion that classrooms are socially constructed entities, molded by the belief systems and behavioral standards prevalent in the broader society (Tudor, 2001). These norms and expectations, stemming from various stakeholders such as parents, institutional leaders, policymakers, and the dynamics among classroom participants, add layers of complexity to the classroom environment, making it inherently diverse.

The sociocultural backdrop exerts a profound influence on the development of learners' second language proficiency, impacting teaching methodologies, classroom dynamics, and students' learning trajectories. Language acquisition transcends the confines of the classroom, as learning is intricately tied to social interactions within specific contexts (Fagan, 2008). Hall (2011, p. 200), emphasizes that in language education, society and culture are not merely peripheral elements but integral components. Therefore, what unfolds within a language classroom is inseparable from its sociocultural context. Given this interconnectedness, effective teaching and learning cannot occur in isolation from the socio-cultural milieu.

In the classroom, the experiences and personal interactions of learners outside its confines significantly shape the dynamics between students and teachers, as well as among peers (Candlin & Mercer, 2001). Many learners, in fact, acquire languages not within formal educational settings but rather through informal channels such as street encounters, community interactions, and workplace engagements, although such opportunities are scarce in the Saudi context (Khan, 2011). Consequently, educators must design classroom activities that authentically reflect Saudi cultural nuances, as EFL curricula often lack integration with local cultural elements and fail to resonate with the sociocultural context of the target language (Liton, 2012). Thus, bridging these gaps and reinforcing

cultural connections between learners' native language (L1) and the target language (L2) is essential for achieving pedagogical objectives.

The L2 classroom is a dynamic space where the intersections of the “local” and “global” converge. In Saudi Arabia, teachers frequently encounter challenges stemming from societal taboos, particularly concerning religion, politics, and interactions between genders. To navigate these complexities and avoid potential repercussions, non-Arab and Western educators often avoid discussing sensitive topics in their classrooms. Li (1994, p. 24) attributes cross-cultural frustrations among Chinese EFL teachers to a lack of mutual understanding of cultural backgrounds and educational philosophies, as well as unrealistic expectations for complete accommodation from both parties. Similarly, Yeh (2010) observes cultural disparities across teaching contexts and advocates for adaptive approaches that consider the social and cultural demands inherent in education.

1.2 Rationale

Price, Kirkwood and Richardson (2016) stress the importance of embracing a comprehensive perspective to comprehend the intricacies of teaching within higher education (HE). This entails acknowledging the diversity in teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning, as well as understanding the sociocultural and structural contexts in which they operate, and the interplay between these elements.

The exploration of teachers' perspectives on teaching and learning and their influence on instructional approaches has been extensively studied (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014). The significance of variations in these perspectives lies in their impact on student learning: educators who hold student-centered beliefs about teaching tend to employ approaches that foster deeper learning among students (Trigwell et al., 1999). However, the question remains: what factors shape teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning, and what conditions facilitate their evolution and growth? This study investigates a potential explanation: the influence of sociocultural and structural contexts on the beliefs and practices of academics regarding teaching and learning in Saudi EFL context and its impact on the teacher-development.

The cultural and contextual aspects of practice play a crucial role in shaping the lasting effects of continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives (Leibowitz, 2015), with challenges such as consensus or a lack of consensus and collaboration among colleagues often serving as constraints or impetus. The effectiveness of CPD is heavily influenced by factors such as the teachers' working environment and supportive networks (Smith, 2012), the prevailing teaching culture within their community and sociocultural norms in the society (Trowler, 2014), and societal and institutional expectations (Thoonen et al., 2011).

1.3 Objective

To identify key socio-cultural factors influencing teacher development in the Saudi EFL context.

To assess the impact of institutional and societal expectations on EFL teacher development.

To propose recommendations for enhancing teacher development in light of socio-cultural influences.

1.4 Research Questions

To what extent do socio-cultural factors influence teacher development in the Saudi EFL context?

How do institutional and societal expectations impact EFL teacher development?

2. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews to explore the intricate dynamics of socio-cultural factors influencing teacher development in the Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. The choice of qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate to delve deeply into the lived experiences and perceptions of educators within the specific cultural context.

2.1 Participants

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select ten participants who were actively engaged in the Saudi EFL teaching community, representing diverse backgrounds and experiences in the field of education. The participants included both male and female educators, spanning various age groups and career stages, to ensure a comprehensive exploration of socio-cultural influences on teacher development.

2.2 Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted as the primary means of data collection. Semi-structured interview guides were developed, aligning with the research questions and objectives, while allowing flexibility for participants to share their unique perspectives. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate

capture of their responses.

2.3 Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the interview data. This method involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural factors shaping teacher development. The analysis followed a recursive process, moving from data familiarization to coding, theme development, and final interpretation.

2.4 Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were implemented. Member checking was employed, where participants had the opportunity to review and verify the accuracy of their responses. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted to discuss emerging themes and interpretations with colleagues, ensuring diverse perspectives were considered. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, acknowledging and addressing potential biases.

3. Results

The interviews were structured around two primary research inquiries. The first question delved into the impact of socio-cultural factors on teacher development, while the second focused on exploring the influence of institutional and societal expectations on the development of EFL teachers. Consequently, the interview findings are organized into two overarching themes corresponding to these research questions. Each theme encompasses several sub-themes. The results of the interviews, analyzed thematically, are presented as follows: The analysis of the interviews is presented in the following themes:

3.1 Impact of Socio-Cultural Factors on Teacher Development

1) *Cultural perception of English as a foreign language*: One pivotal factor is the cultural perception of English itself. Given Saudi Arabia's rich cultural heritage rooted in Islamic traditions, English is often seen as a crucial tool for connecting with the global community and accessing international knowledge. This perception shapes the motivation of EFL teachers, emphasizing the instrumental value of English proficiency for career opportunities and economic advancement. The views of some participants are shared in their own words. | Participant 1: "English, in our cultural narrative, is like a gateway to the world. It's not just a language; it's a key that unlocks connections to the global community. In Saudi Arabia, we see English as a crucial tool, a bridge between our rich Islamic traditions and the vast international knowledge out there. It's more than learning words; it's about opening doors to new horizons." According to the majority of teachers English proficiency is not just about words; it's an investment in their future. In their cultural lens, English becomes a powerful tool for career opportunities and economic advancement. As EFL teachers, they impart not only language skills but a pathway to professional growth. It's about equipping their students with the means to thrive in a globalized job market. | Participant 5 remarked, "In the tapestry of Saudi culture, English is a thread that connects us to the world. We view it not just as a language but as a cultural connector. Rooted in our Islamic heritage, English becomes a medium through which we engage with diverse perspectives while preserving our own. As EFL teachers, we foster this connection, weaving our cultural identity into the global fabric."

Findings of the current study correspond with the research study conducted by Al-Qahtani (2003) that Saudi EFL teachers possessed a positive attitude towards integrating the target culture into their teaching, recognizing its significance in fostering cross-cultural understanding among students. The reserved comments of the participants about the importance of Islamic values were constrained in their engagement with cultural teaching due to concerns that exposing students to other cultures might negatively impact their own cultural and religious beliefs. Similarly, Al-Asmari (2008) maintained that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia t, despite instructors demonstrating a high level of conceptual awareness regarding the inseparability of language and culture, the incorporation of the target culture in language teaching remained minimal, sporadic, and inconsistent . These findings suggest that while academic EFL instructors may acknowledge the importance of foreign culture in EFL education conceptually, translating this awareness into practical implementation remains a challenge.

2) *Collective Learning in Saudi Society*: Saudi culture places a premium on collective learning, viewing education as a communal endeavor. The emphasis on shared experiences aligns with Islamic traditions that encourage collaboration and mutual support. This collective mindset extends to the teaching profession, where educators actively engage in a collective pursuit of knowledge and pedagogical excellence. The views of some participants are shared in their actual words, 'In our Saudi educational tapestry, learning is a collective voyage. Education is not just an individual pursuit; it's a communal endeavor that we undertake together'. Participant 9: "Our cultural emphasis is on collective learning resonates deeply with Islamic traditions that encourage collaboration and unity.

As educators, we see ourselves not only as disseminators of knowledge but as active participants in a communal pursuit of excellence, continuously learning and evolving together.” Participant 5, “In Saudi culture, the classroom is a microcosm of our collective commitment to learning. As teachers, we embody this collective mindset, joining hands in a shared pursuit of knowledge and pedagogical excellence. Our unity enhances the educational experience for both educators and students alike.”

Social interactions within the teaching community offer a unique support system for professional growth. Teachers engage in regular dialogues, share best practices, and collectively troubleshoot challenges. This sense of community support becomes a source of motivation, fostering an environment where educators feel empowered to explore innovative teaching methods and refine their instructional approaches. Participant 10 “In our teaching community, social interactions are more than just conversations; they are a lifeline of support for our professional growth. Through regular dialogues, we share not just our successes but also our challenges. It’s a collective troubleshooting session where we lean on each other’s experiences. This sense of community support is our motivation, empowering us to explore innovative teaching methods and refine our instructional approaches together.” Participant 7 “Within our teaching community, social interactions are the heartbeat of our professional journey. Through ongoing dialogues, we create a space where best practices are shared, and challenges are collectively addressed. This sense of community support is a constant wellspring of motivation. It’s the fuel that empowers us to step beyond our comfort zones, explore innovative teaching methods, and continuously refine our instructional approaches for the benefit of our students.”

The views of the participants draw attention to the Frameworks and definitions of Collaborative Learning (CL). Häkkinen et al. (2017) broadly define CL as the utilization of social skills and the dedication to coordinated work with fellow learners. Saudi English teachers as other teachers seem to have utilized all the three components of CL: 1) collaborating to learn; 2) learning to collaborate; and 3) learning to teach while employing collaborative learning approaches. Conversely, in one of the initial iterations of CL, Vygotsky (1978) defined it within the realm of social constructivism, emphasizing “the collaborative nature of learning through the construction of knowledge via social negotiation.”

3) *Emphasis on Mentorship and Guidance*: Mentorship holds a significant place in Saudi educational culture. Experienced educators willingly guide their less-experienced counterparts, sharing insights gained over years of teaching. This mentorship not only imparts practical knowledge but also nurtures a sense of professional identity and commitment to the broader goals of education. Participant 5 “Our collaborative learning is not confined to classrooms; it’s a journey that extends beyond formal settings. In our informal gatherings, workshops, and collaborative projects, we create spaces for knowledge exchange. These interactions are more than just conversations; they’re dynamic exchanges of diverse perspectives that breathe life into our teaching practices. It’s in these moments that we integrate new ideas, fostering a continuous cycle of improvement and innovation.”

4) *Impact on Student Learning*: The collaborative ethos within the teaching community ripples outward, positively impacting student learning experiences. Teachers, equipped with a diverse set of teaching strategies, create inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms. The sense of community support also extends to students, promoting a conducive learning environment that values collaboration and mutual growth. Participant 8 “The collaborative spirit among educators resonates beyond our community, casting positive ripples that enhance student learning experiences. With a diverse toolkit of teaching strategies, teachers craft inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms, fostering an environment that promotes collaboration and mutual growth for every student.” Participant 4 “In the teaching community's collaborative ethos, the positive impact extends to students’ learning journeys. Empowered with a diverse range of teaching strategies, educators create classrooms that are both inclusive and culturally responsive. This sense of community support envelops students, cultivating a conducive learning environment that cherishes collaboration and mutual growth.”

In Saudi Arabia, social interactions and collaborative learning form an integral part of the tapestry of teacher professional growth. The collective nature of learning in Saudi society not only emphasizes the importance of community support but also underscores the transformative power of shared experiences in shaping effective teaching practices. As educators engage in this collaborative journey, they not only refine their pedagogical skills but also contribute to the broader goal of enhancing the quality of education in Saudi Arabia.

3.2 Impact of Institutional and Societal Expectations on EFL Teacher Development

1) *Respect for Authority and Tradition*: All the participants agreed that Saudi society places a high value on respect for authority and adherence to tradition, particularly in educational settings. And, majority were open in acknowledging that Teachers often adopt authoritative teaching styles, emphasizing a structured and formal approach. They also acknowledged that traditional teaching methods are prevalent, with a focus on rote

memorization and adherence to established educational norms. In this regard, one of the participants remarked, "In Saudi Arabia, we hold our traditions close to our hearts. As a teacher, I find that students respond well to a structured approach. They appreciate authority in the classroom, and traditional teaching methods resonate with our cultural values of discipline and respect."

2) *Language as a Cultural Identity*: According to the majority of the participants Arabic is a central aspect of Saudi identity, and English is often viewed as a foreign language. They recognize the importance of preserving Arabic language and cultural identity. English language instruction is approached with sensitivity to the students' linguistic and cultural background, fostering a balanced integration of English skills while respecting the prominence of Arabic. In this regard one of the participants remarked, "English is crucial, but so is our Arabic identity. I make it a point to integrate our language and cultural values into the curriculum. It's not just about learning English; it's about finding a balance that respects our roots while embracing global communication."

3) *Gender Segregation and Teaching Practices*: Saudi Arabia follows a system of gender segregation in education. Teachers said they say that they need to be mindful of gender-specific teaching practices. Strategies that respect cultural norms related to gender, such as segregated classrooms or adjusted teaching materials, are implemented. In this regard one of the participants remarked, "Gender segregation is part of our educational landscape. As a teacher, I adapt my methods to cater to this. It's not just about separate classrooms; it's about creating a comfortable and respectful space for learning that aligns with our cultural norms."

4) *Islamic Values and Moral Education*: Islamic values hold a central place in Saudi society, impacting various aspects of daily life as maintained by the participants. The participants say that they often integrate moral and ethical lessons within the curriculum, aligning with Islamic principles. English language education may include content that promotes values such as honesty, respect, and responsibility. In this regard one of the participants remarked, "Our teachings go beyond language. We embed Islamic values in our lessons. English class becomes a space to not only learn the language but also to reinforce the moral fabric that our society holds dear. It's about nurturing good character alongside language skills."

5) *Role of Family in Education*: They all agreed with each other by saying that family is highly valued, and parental involvement in education must be emphasized. They believe that they try to engage with parents more actively, providing regular updates on students' progress and seeking collaboration in the educational process. Assignments and activities are designed to involve families in the learning journey. In this regard, one participant says "In Saudi Arabia, family is everything. I involve parents actively in their child's learning journey. Regular updates, collaborative projects, and a sense of shared responsibility - it's all part of ensuring that our educational practices align with our strong family values."

6) *Cultural Sensitivity in Teaching Practices*: The collective nature of learning in Saudi society instills a heightened awareness of cultural sensitivity in teaching practices. Social interactions provide a platform for educators to discuss and refine their approaches, ensuring that teaching methods align with cultural norms and values. This dialogue fosters a holistic understanding of the cultural dimensions that shape effective pedagogy. Participant 2 "In Saudi society's collective learning ethos, cultural sensitivity is not just a consideration; it's an integral part of our teaching journey. Social interactions serve as a vibrant platform where educators discuss and refine their approaches, ensuring our teaching methods resonate harmoniously with cultural norms and values." Participant 1 "The collective spirit of learning in Saudi society instills a deep consciousness of cultural sensitivity in our teaching practices. Through rich social interactions, educators engage in meaningful dialogue to refine their approaches, creating a pedagogical landscape where teaching methods seamlessly align with the diverse tapestry of cultural norms and values."

7) *Balancing Technology with Tradition*: All teacher-participants agreed with each other that Saudi Arabia as the rest of the world is rapidly advancing technologically, but certain traditional values influence the integration of technology in education. They showed the concern while remarking that while technology is embraced, there may be a preference for a balanced use of digital tools, with an emphasis on maintaining a respectful and modest learning environment in alignment with cultural values. Relevant to this, I quote one of the participants who says, "while we embrace technology, we do so with caution. Our cultural values remind us to maintain a balance. Yes, we use digital tools, but we ensure they complement our traditional teaching methods, creating a learning environment that's both modern and respectful."

In conclusion, the teaching methodologies and approaches in the Saudi EFL setting are deeply intertwined with cultural norms and values. Teachers navigate this complex interplay by integrating cultural sensitivity into their instructional practices, ensuring that educational experiences align with the values and expectations of the Saudi Arabian society. Recognizing and respecting these cultural dynamics are essential for effective English language

education in this unique cultural context.

3.3 Recommendations

This research contributes to the broader understanding of teacher development by highlighting the specific socio-cultural factors that shape the professional journey of EFL educators in Saudi Arabia. The findings aim to inform educational practices and policies that foster a supportive environment for teacher growth within this unique cultural and linguistic context. Enhancing the teacher development of Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in light of socio-cultural influences requires a thoughtful and comprehensive approach that aligns with cultural values while promoting effective pedagogical practices. Here are some recommendations:

- 1) *Culturally Tailored Professional Development Programs*: Develop professional development programs that are culturally sensitive and tailored to the specific needs of Saudi EFL teachers. These programs should integrate cultural components, traditional teaching methods, and relevant linguistic elements to ensure alignment with local values.
- 2) *Collaborative Learning Communities*: Foster collaborative learning communities among EFL teachers to encourage the exchange of cultural insights, teaching strategies, and experiences. Peer collaboration provides a platform for mutual support, shared problem-solving, and the cultivation of a professional network that embraces socio-cultural diversity.
- 3) *Incorporate Cross-Cultural Competence Training*: Implement training modules that focus on cross-cultural competence, helping EFL teachers navigate the intersection between global language education standards and local cultural expectations. This training can enhance their ability to create inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments.
- 4) *Reflective Practice*: Promote reflective practices among EFL teachers, encouraging them to critically examine their teaching methods in the context of cultural influences. Reflective journals, peer observations, and feedback sessions can facilitate a continuous process of self-improvement and cultural responsiveness.

By implementing these recommendations, Saudi EFL teachers can navigate the delicate balance between global educational standards and local cultural expectations. This approach not only enhances their professional development but also contributes to the creation of a culturally responsive and inclusive English language education environment in Saudi Arabia.

3.4 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The findings may not be generalizable beyond the specific context of the Saudi EFL setting, and participants' responses may be influenced by social desirability bias.

In summary, the combination of in-depth interviews and thematic analysis provides a robust methodological framework for exploring the influence of socio-cultural factors on teacher development in the Saudi EFL setting, offering rich and contextually grounded insights.

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