The impact of English Language on the public education system in Saudi Arabia in the globalisation era: A critical analysis of the situation

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This article briefly reviewed the influences of English as a global language on education systems, which has affected many countries. However, this review focused specifically on its impact in Saudi Arabia. In order to examine this topic, this article first defined globalisation in general, and then continued by exploring the benefits and shortcomings of this phenomenon. Secondly, it indicated the role of English as a global language and source of communication in education systems in various contexts such as in China and Spain. It also examined why English is considered as the global language and the language of communication. Following that, it illustrated the role of English on Saudi society, and on the local education systems and learners of English as a foreign language. This section detailed the history and purposes of teaching English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Finally, the article is concluded by raising some important questions to think about related to the influences of the English language in the world.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has been one of the most noticeable phenomenon in the 21st century that has resulted in a revolution in the integration and exchange of cultures. Globalisation has been largely shaped by two factors: The extension of British colonization in the 18th and 19th centuries and American imperialism in the 20th century. Globalization continues to grow rapidly due to advances occurring in several areas, making contact with the external world essential. The main causes of globalisation are believed to be the international market and information and communication technology (Garrett, 2000). Such reasons have impacted a number of fundamental aspects including politics, economics, international relations, trade and educational systems. The aims of globalisation have been identified by Giddens (1990) as the intensification of worldwide social relations that link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa (p:64). Globalization is also described as ‘a multi-dimensional phenomenon involving diverse domains of activity and interaction including economic, political, technological, military, legal, cultural, and environmental’ (Held, 1997, p:16). It concerns ‘the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life’ (Held et al., 1999, p: 2). It is also ‘a sort of economic imperialism that entails not just linguistic homogenization but cultural levelling as well’ (Joseph, 2004, p: 213). In addition, the global flows of knowledge, international standards and systems and internationalization have all developed the educational process in a wide range of educational contexts (Marginson and van der Wende, 2009). Marginson and Rhoades (2002) confirm that education is determined by national, local and global aspects of actions.

Globalisation: Merits and demerits

The phenomenon of globalization has formed a debate,
in which some claim that globalization is not necessarily a process to spread democracy and greater interdependence amongst nations or an ideal way of life that should be embraced by different communities (Block, 2004). The same author argues that globalization is a western concept that can lead to cultural conflicts and loss of uniqueness.

In terms of education, globalization has been a major event of the modern century as it has influenced the lives of many learners and their ways of thinking and understanding. It has enabled learners to adopt a variety of perspectives and develop a more open-minded attitude in terms of others and their cultures, languages and traditions. Supporters claim that current and future education ‘mean a constant process of learning by every individual and every society’ (Rastegar and Moradi, 2014, p: 164), which is delivered through improved ways of communication. As a result of this, it may cause learners to develop universally positive perspectives towards other cultures, languages and traditions and to interact more together. Furthermore, some hold the opinion that it is an avenue to establishing greater interdependence between nations and individuals and pluralistic societies where more groups and organisations have the freedom to participate in their own activities. In a general sense, the virtues of globalisation include ‘the expansion of global finance and financial markets, the spread of knowledge facilitated by improved communication, the widespread availability and use of technology’ (Enright and Roberts, 2001). However, another effect, the decline of cultural barriers and the consequent reduction of wars, can be seen as a double-edged sword.

Opponents of globalization, on the other hand, claim it is a source of inequality among the countries of the world, as some communities are more developed than others (Block, 2004). Similarly, Mazur (2000) argues that issues related to unfairness between and within nations are intensified due to globalisation. Moreover, he confirms that globalisation, to a large extent, impacts heavily on people’s culture, by threatening their local environments and habits, their identity and native language. A large number of native languages and their inherited legacies are perhaps vulnerable to extinction. In other words, in some conversations held by speakers of other languages than English, some English lexis and phrases have become common in their day-to-day communication such as good, yes, no or that is okay. Besides linguistic domination, and since culture is the carrier of language, some of the cultural-related aspects of the native language might disappear or be altered as an outcome of the new imported and dominating culture. Moreover, as more developed countries gain more power by broadening their local culture and language in less powerful countries, this process and its effects can snowball. Researchers suggest how the identity and language of local people might become vulnerable to cultural and linguistic conflicts because of this phenomenon and those who are anti-globalisation are worried that this phenomenon may contribute to the spread of inequality among countries particularly between developed and developing countries (Block, 2004).

In addition, Fishman (2001) clearly states that globalisation ‘is both a constructive and destructive phenomenon, both a unifying and divisive one, and it is definitely not a culturally neutral or impartial one’ (p: 6). His paradoxical definition emphasises the inevitable role of this phenomenon called ‘globalisation’. Indeed, this claim shows the importance of drawing a neutral roadmap in order to maintain a balance between acceptance and rejection of it.

**ENGLISH AS THE LANGUAGE OF THE GLOBE AND COMMUNICATION IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS**

The term global language implies its usage for communication across a wide range of speakers from various linguistic communities (Hjarvard, 2004). It is usually adopted to enable different users and learners who are from different backgrounds to understand each other and promote their social relationships. Without a doubt, English has become the global language for communication because it is no longer ‘culturally regarded as the appropriate language for a particular communicative context’ (Graddol, 1997). Indeed, many now perceive it as lingua franca, allowing people who do not share native languages to continue interaction. In this regard, Crystal (1997) points out that English as a lingua franca ‘has emerged strongly in the twentieth century, and since the 1950s in particular’ (p: 10). That is logical given the development in different technologies that mainly use English as the original language (Kayman, 2004).

As a matter of fact, a global language does not only depend on how many people speak that language, rather how powerful and wealthy its speakers are. Despite the small number of native speakers of English, compared to the number of learners of English as a second or foreign language, English can be used across the globe nowadays. That is because English is now the ‘official’ language in the most vital sectors: education, science, technology, diplomacy, tourism and business. This goes in line with Fishman’s (1996) claim that the ‘world is linguistically dominated by English almost everywhere, regardless of how well established and well-protected local cultures, languages, and identities may otherwise be’ (p: 628). In terms of education in particular, the spread of English an official language across a wide array of institutions in countries (Kachru, 1997) such as Malaysia, India and Singapore. Nevertheless, the increasing necessity to use in such institutions does not mean a blind eye should be turned to the negative
impact of adopting a new language on local cultures and on identities of citizens (Rumaz, 2005).

Based on research by Pan and Block (2011), 70% of the participants, who were Chinese learners of English as a foreign language, confirm the increasing popularity of English in China and the desire to make the education system more internationalized by incorporating the teaching and use of English into the system. The researchers acknowledge English as 'a window', 'a capital' and 'a link to get connected with the world' (p: 396). They also report that the majority of Chinese think of English as having a higher status as a global language compared to any other languages, and this belief has consequently affected the decisions of policymakers and language planners. Furthermore, Pennycook (2000) approves that English is a gateway to modernization and an avenue to social and economic advancement.

Turning now to the case of the Basque Country University in the Northeast of Spain, where the learners are immersed in the process of internationalization and multilingualism (For example, Basque, Spanish and English). By focusing on English-medium instruction and learning English as a global language, the learners showed a number of advantages such as better linguistic skills and higher mobility (Doiz et al., 2013). According to the researchers, the learners involved in English-medium instruction were more motivated and willing to participate in additional activities. Nevertheless, the researchers identified a number of limitations related to the learners' lack of competence in English and the imposition of English as a supplementary language.

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE IN SAUDI CONTEXT

History of teaching English

In many societies, English is seen as a source of inspiration for people, economy and geopolitical boundaries with other nations. The model of concentric circles of English has located Saudi Arabia within the expanding circle (Kachru, 1992). Three different norms are attributed to the circles of English as suggested by Kachru (1985): norm-providing, norm-developing and norm-dependent. English in Saudi Arabia represents the third variety where specific norms are usually assimilated as in British or American English. As such people are found within the expanding circle, it is argued that they are norm dependent. In this sense, Jenkins (2003).

English-language standards are determined by speakers of English as a native language (ENL), but while the English as a second language (ESL) varieties of English have become institutionalized and are developing their own standards, the English as a foreign language (EFL) varieties are regarded, in this model, as ‘performance’ varieties without any official status and therefore dependent on the standards set by native speakers in the Inner circle (p: 16).

This reflects the emerging experience of English language teaching, as is the case with most developing nations. Meanwhile, according to the expanding circle of the model indicated, English is considered as a foreign language in many countries. In addition, in his adapted language functions, which was originated by Halliday (1973), Kachru (2006) proposed that English is performed according to four reasons: regulative, instrumental, interpersonal and imaginative-imaginative functions. According to Al-Seghayer (2011), English is used in the Saudi context for instrumental functions, as it is mostly used for educational purposes or a medium of instruction at universities. It should be indicated that the internalisation of English is accepted in Saudi Arabia, since the majority of people in Saudi Arabia believe that teaching English is required to achieve the necessary development (Al-Seghayer, 2011). This intention is also shared by the government, who aim to bring recent technologies to the Saudi environment, to connect Saudis with the outside world and to improve local education systems (Ibid).

However, since the introduction of English to the Saudi educational system, there has been little evidence that students’ achievement has progressed satisfactorily. This is simply due to the poor quality of teaching and the shortage of exposure to the language as a result of not using it outside classes (Abdan, 1991). A study has revealed the incongruity between the curricula and methods designed for the university language learners in Saudi Arabia (Al-Mohanna, 2010). The researcher explained the problems in the traditional practices as being issues such as instructors’ weaknesses in the language, a shortage of time and learning aids, and technologies and the absence of a sound system for examination and assessment. Learners need numerous skills when learning English, which involves training on how to participate in a wide range of activities and acquire skills that help to yield greater benefit in language learning, for instance learning by role-playing and group discussion (Al-Seghayer, 2011). Before the decision was taken to teach English in Saudi Arabia and for it to be the main foreign language, French was already being taught at secondary schools (Al-Hajailan, 2003). However, teaching French was soon replaced by English in 1990 on the basis of a decision taken by the ministry of Education. According to Al-Hajailan (2003), teaching English in Saudi Arabia has undergone four phases.

Phase A

English was only taught at the secondary education stage and comprised of five years before it was later reduced to
just three. Out of these five years, the first year concentrated on developing students’ skills in terms of handwriting, dictation and acquiring vocabulary and sentence formation. In the second year, the focus shifted to the production of compositions and storytelling, along with handwriting and dictation. Following that, the main goal of the third year was to revise what had been taught previously, along with work on grammar, punctuation and producing sentences. The fourth year was designed to provide learners with advanced practice of language content by focusing on grammar and vocabulary development and essay writing skills. The last year was based on analysing grammatical structures and bilingual translation.

**Phase B**

In this phase, the secondary and intermediate stages were introduced with three years for each stage. Longman and Macmillan press produced the textbooks used specifically for Saudi Ministry of Education. Initially, the method of teaching that was embraced in these textbooks was the aural-oral approach; but later, it was substituted with the communicative approach, due to its increase in popularity and the positive feedback from learners.

**Phase C**

During this phase, owing to some unknown reasons, the contract that had existed between Macmillan press and Saudi Ministry of Education to construct and authorise textbooks for teaching English language in the public sector was terminated and it switched to a national project. New textbooks designed by local specialists were introduced.

**Phase D**

The set of textbooks written by a group of professional writers from King Fahad of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM). The nature of these textbooks was reformed to harmonise with the community of Saudi Arabia and to be appropriate for the local environment. The experts, in fact, achieved many elements of the educational policies of teaching English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia by presenting some local, historical and cultural issues (Al-Hajailan, 2003).

**Purposes of teaching English**

Owing to globalisation, teaching English as a second or foreign language has become widespread throughout the world. In Saudi Arabia, one of the main purposes of teaching English as a foreign language, according to Al-Hajailan (2003), is to provide students ‘with at least one of the living languages, in addition to their original language, to enable them to acquire knowledge and sciences in other communities’ (p: 23). Al-Mofarrehe and Al-Mohanna (2009) demonstrate that such teaching seeks to enhance learners’ vocabulary, which is needed for everyday life, and to promote the four primary skills (That is, the receptive skills namely reading and listening, in order to understand material in English, and the productive skills, namely writing and speaking for effective communication in English).

With regards to the purposes of teaching teaching English within the public education in Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Education formally agreed upon a list of these. They can be summed up by the following: to 1) enhance the skills of learners to obtain linguistic competence needed; 2) understand other’s cultural, economical and social issues; 3) present the local culture of the community to the world; and 4) improve international communication through English and the formation of positive viewpoints regarding learning English (Al-Hajailan, 2003).

English is used as bridge among Arabic and non-Arabic speakers to communicate and exchange experiences and information, therefore teaching and learning English are very much supported by the Saudi Ministry of Education. For instance, many teachers get professional training in the English departments at different universities. Learners are encouraged to learn English because of its benefits, especially when they move on to higher education, or decide to work in foreign companies such as Saudi owned Aramco, the world’s biggest company in oil operations. Thus, English is often a requirement for obtaining more career opportunities.

Following years of teaching English in schools, further actions were taken in order to enhance the teaching of English in Saudi Arabia and to develop the English curricula in the state schools and higher education. This was achieved by establishing partnerships with a number of international institutes. The development included the design of new textbooks, along with the adoption of some international syllabi, once they had been amended with culture-related content suit the local context. The new syllabi were produced by a number of different renowned publishers such as Pearson Longman and MacMillan. Each schooling stage was allocated a series of textbooks, for example, Challenges: You Can Do it and Flying High for Saudi Arabia. Some of the textbooks became available in the academic year 2009/2010 and others in the following academic year 2010/2011. The use of such textbooks was regarded as pilot project to begin with, however, the Ministry of Education officially adopted them in the academic year 2012/2013.
CONCLUSION
As shown above, English is regarded as a global language in a number of countries including Saudi Arabia. Although there are benefits, the evidence shows that it brings a number of challenges that are related to the importance of protecting the first language and the identity of local people, as globalisation can be associated with the loss of local culture and identity (Tomlinson, 2003). Similarly, Graddol (2006) confirms that maintaining local identity in the face of globalisation is a serious challenge. However, Tomlinson (2003) also argues, paradoxically, that English can be a catalyst for national identity. What is certain is that English has a substantial effect over thousands of existing languages nowadays. Crystal (1997) argues that ‘85% of international organisations now use English as one of their working languages, 49% use French and fewer than 10% use Arabic, Spanish or German’. In a questionnaire distributed globally by the British council in 1995, the results revealed that more than 90% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that English would remain the dominant language of global interaction and no other language would weaken the power of English to be the language of world communication.

However, there are still big questions that remain unanswered as Graddol (1997) suggests. These questions relate to the durability and dominance of English in the next stage of globalization.

- How many people will speak English in the year 2050?
- What role will English play in their lives?
- Is it true that the English language will prove to be a vital resource and benefit to Britain in the coming century?
- Will the spread of English lead to over half of the world’s languages becoming extinct?

Graddol (2006) goes on to suggest that it is possible to continue to use English as a global language, whilst simultaneously maintaining the role of the national identity. What is clear is that is it virtually important to ensure a balance between the two, in the sense that learners should be equally exposed to the first and foreign languages and learn about both local and national identities.

REFERENCES