Teaching English in Saudi Arabia: Current Contexts and Recommendations

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Chapter Two: Literature Review

According to Al-Awaid (2018), English is an internationally recognized language and the most widely used means of communication in the 21st century. English is taught as a second language in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to enhance English proficiency in the country and place it on the international map as it strives to achieve Vision 2030 goals. As an influential country and one of the leading nations in the Middle Eastern region, Saudi Arabia has positioned the English language at the center of Vision 2030 and the economic development goals (Khawaji, 2023). As the country focuses on transformative development from overreliance on oil, the Vision 2030 plan places English proficiency among Saudi learners as crucial to achieving the income diversification goal. As such, English Language Teaching Programs (ELT) have become critical in the Saudi education system to ensure that graduates entering the workforce have adequate English proficiency to work in the global market (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017). Khawaji (2023) asserted that Vision 2030 has played a significant role in improving the status of ELT programs in Saudi schools as the government sought to privatize the public and government-sponsored companies. Privatization would require job seekers to be proficient in English, promoting the demand for ELT programs.

This literature review will focus on the teaching strategies implemented in KSA, the various teaching contexts, and the issues facing learning and teaching English in the country. The review constitutes various scholarly sources and journal articles on the status of ELT programs in KSA. It is crucial to understand the teaching strategies, teaching contexts, and issues facing ELT programs to establish how to improve the programs and enhance English language proficiency in KSA.
a. Teaching Strategies Implemented in KSA

Several studies have focused on evaluating teaching strategies and identifying effective practices for English language education in KSA. Some of the key findings suggest that a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach (Almohideb, 2019), blended learning, and language learning strategy instruction can be effective in promoting language learning and motivation among students (Khawaji, 2023; Almohideb, 2019). Current evidence suggests that English learning in KSA is central to the country’s Vision 2030 and crucial in improving employment prospects in the job market (Khawaji, 2023; Al-Awaid; 2018; Ashraf, 2018). Teaching English has become an important element of the Saudi education system to enable students to graduate with English proficiency and readiness for the changing job market from government-sponsored and public enterprises to private enterprises.

Language Learning Strategies

In a study that assessed the language learning strategies implemented at a university English major class, Alrashidi (2022) defined language learning strategies as the techniques utilized by teachers and learners in learning and remembering the content as well as the linguistic information. One of the categories of learning strategies identified in the Saudi university was the communicative-experiential strategies that enable students to use the learned information in meaningful ways. Like Almohideb (2019), Alrashidi (2022) suggested that communicative-experiential strategies are essential for learners to develop communicative competence and learn to interact using English as a second language. Teachers utilize the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to help learners focus on using the language for communication rather than grammatical accuracy, which is crucial for the meaningful use of the language (Almohideb,
2019; Alrashidi, 2022). Crucially, the use of CTL in English classrooms could help improve collaborative and cooperative learning.

**Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**

In a thesis paper submitted to the University of Glasgow for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the School of Education, Almohideb (2019) investigated the perspectives of teachers and students regarding the use of CTL approaches in teaching English in KSA. The study sought to establish the perceptions of teachers and students towards using the CLT approaches, which focus on using language for communication rather than just for grammatical accuracy. While the approaches emphasized the use of authentic materials, such as videos to develop students’ language skills, the study found that students and teachers faced various challenges using the CLT. However, CLT enabled teachers to use interactive and communicative activities, such as role-playing, group discussions, and pair work, to encourage students to use English in meaningful ways (Almohideb, 2019). The study also showed that teachers and students lacked adequate confidence in using CLT due to a focus on traditional teaching methods.

Alrashidi (2022) further established that language learning stratified has been classified into various categories in the KSA context. The study found that strategies can be direct or indirect strategies, whereby the former focuses on learning the foreign language, while the latter comprises the strategies used to support students to learn without direct involvement with the foreign language (Alrashidi, 2022). As such, the study sought to identify the learning strategies used among English major students in a Saudi university. Based on the previously recognized classification and students’ responses, Alrashidi (2022) established that Saudi students used five learning strategies, including memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and
social strategies. The study findings suggested that the metacognitive strategies were the most used while memory strategies were the least used. As such, the metacognitive strategies were crucial in helping English learners remain organized, and reflective, and plan their learning processes to achieve their intended learning outcomes and improve their language proficiency (Alrashidi, 2022).

In another study, Al-Awaid (2018) established that communicative competence in language learning is equally important as grammatical competence. While students can apply various learning strategies to achieve desired outcomes (Alrashidi, 2022), the CTL approaches are crucial teaching strategies in the English classroom. Although the ultimate goal of the ELT programs in Saudi public schools has been to improve students’ use of correct English in reading, listening, speaking, and comprehension, Al-Awaid (2018) argues that the emphasis is placed more on correctness rather than communicative competence. As such, Saudi English teachers tend to apply formulaic techniques in the classroom due to inadequate theoretical knowledge which could inform their CTL approaches (Al-Awaid, 2018). The study also established that the formulaic teaching techniques fail to align with the communicative practices common in the present day. As a result, Al-Awaid (2018) recommended the implementation of CTL in secondary schools to focus on the four language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The CTL approaches have been associated with a focus on active communication for foreign language learners. For instance, Khawaji (2023) asserted that the Preparatory Year Programs (PYP) enable university students in KSA to gain communicative competence and prepare them for challenges as they advance their education in courses taught in English.
**Authentic Learning Materials**

Additionally, Albiladi (2022) examined the strategies and emerging practices implemented to achieve the Saudi Vision 2030 in English teaching and learning and found that the use of authentic learning materials is one of the strategies applied in teaching English. The study noted that the Saudi Vision 2030 has an emphasis on teaching methods that enhance creativity and innovation. As such, the integration of authentic learning materials is a critical step towards achieving educational goals in the Vision. Evidence shows that the use of authentic materials is an effective teaching strategy for English learners (Nather, 2020; Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017). As such, language teachers in KSA utilize authentic materials as tools, including English newspapers, magazines, and interview videos, to help students practice reading and writing English (Albiladi, 2022). This finding is consistent with Almohideb (2019) and Al-Awaid’s (2018) views on the significance of CTL to enhance meaningful language lessons that enhance students’ learning experiences and promote outcomes.

**Technology-Based Strategies**

Further, several studies identified the use of information technology as a medium and strategy of teaching English in KSA (Albiladi, 2022; Almutairi et al., 2020; Hakim et al., 2020). According to Albiladi (2022), the study participants highlighted that using technology when teaching English has instructional and social benefits. The integration of technology proposed in Saudi Vision 2030 would support students and teachers in language education. The technology helps to bridge the teaching gaps in traditional classrooms while helping the learners improve their communication and social skills (Albiladi, 2022; Almutairi et al., 2020). The technology also increases the possibility and flexibility of language instruction, while supporting a teaching and learning environment that is innovative and creative (Albiladi, 2022). While research
suggests that inadequate technology training among English teachers limits its application in the classroom, Hakim et al. (2020) found that the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced the integration of technology with the English as a second language curriculum using the Madrassati platform.

According to Hakim et al. (2020), the pandemic provided language teachers with the opportunity to integrate technology into their classrooms, with the potential of improving the learners’ language outcomes and proficiency. The study established that the adoption of technology-based strategies in language classrooms supported learning continuity during the pandemic. The Saudi government implemented online learning platforms, such as the Madrasati platform to deliver courses to learners, including English courses (Albiladi, 2022; Hakim et al., 2020). Hakim et al. (2020) also established that virtual classrooms have provided opportunities for learners to interact with their teachers and classmates in real time, which can help to create a more engaging and immersive learning experience. As such, the techno-led learning strategies have been essential for language teachers to deliver courses to their students, supporting the creativity and innovativeness goal of the Saudi Vision 2030 (Almutairi et al., 2020; Hakim et al., 2020).

However, Assulaimani (2019) posited that the application of technology-based learning strategies in teaching English as a foreign language remains a challenge in KSA. While there is evidence showing that technology integration in language learning is effective to improve learners’ proficiency (Albiladi, 2022; Hakim et al., 2020), Assulaimani (2019) found that the current situation regarding technology integration in EFL teaching and learning requires improvement. According to Assulaimani (2019), the Tatweer project was introduced to enhance English language skills among Saudi students between 2013 and 2023 over nine phases. The integration of technology in EFL learning and teaching was addressed in the project regarding
the training of EFL teachers to use technology and expanding technology use in EFL classrooms (Assulaimani, 2019). Thus, the study demonstrates that the Saudi government has an action plan to improve technology use and promote language learners’ proficiency by 2023.

**Blended Learning**

AlKhaleel (2019) investigated the benefits of blended learning in teaching English in a Saudi university. The study found that blended learning has progressively become an effective strategy for learning in Saudi schools. The strategy involves combining traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning to create a more flexible and personalized learning experience. As KSA strives to diversify and reduce its overreliance on oil, the integration of technology has become crucial to support online and distance learning (Almutairi et al., 2020; Hakim et al., 2020). As such, the concept of blended learning emerged to combine conventional face-to-face learning with online learning in various courses to maximize the benefits of both learning strategies (AlKhaleel, 2019). In the study that included students at the University of Tabuk, AlKhaleel (2019) found that blended learning was beneficial as 84% of the students reported improving their proficiency skills more than when traditional teaching methods were used. This suggested that blended learning is an effective strategy in ELT programs. As such, the strategy is becoming a popular approach to teaching English as a foreign language in KSA.

In another study, Ashraf (2018) assessed the strategies and struggles of teaching English in Saudi Arabia by focusing on students in an intensive blended English course, whereby students received instruction in both face-to-face and online strategies. The study suggested that the Saudi Ministry of Education still has room for improvement to enhance English language proficiency. As such, blended learning presents one of the strategies that can help improve language proficiency by combining the benefits of online and face-to-face learning (AlKhaleel,
2019; Ashraf, 2018). Despite the benefits of blended learning highlighted by AlKhaleel (2019), Ashraf (2018) asserted that the Saudi Ministry of Education needed to introduce English at the start of the primary level and support the implementation of effective and modern teaching strategies. The study found that online learning improved learning outcomes for various students, including introverts who shy off in face-to-face classrooms. This finding was consistent with AlKhaleel’s (2019) finding that students improved their language proficiency using blended learning compared to traditional learning strategies.

Similarly, in an unpublished doctoral dissertation at the University of Reading, Sheerah (2018) explored the perceptions of students of English as a foreign language in their preparatory year in KSA regarding the use of blended learning to develop English language skills. The study established that blended learning could improve English language learning in the preparatory year at a Saudi university. Like AlKhaleel (2019) who found blended learning to be advantageous to English language learners, Sheerah (2018) also found that English learners could maximize their opportunities to study and practice English at their convenience. As such, the study recommended the adoption of blended learning as an important learning strategy and culture in teaching the English language in the preparatory year. Thus, the three studies demonstrate that blended learning is an effective strategy to teach English as a foreign language in KSA. It can provide learners with a more flexible and personalized learning experience, while also allowing teachers to incorporate technology into their teaching practice (AlKhaleel, 2019; Ashraf, 2018; Sheerah, 2018). However, it is important to ensure that blended learning is used in a way that complements traditional teaching methods and meets the specific needs of learners in KSA.
Language Learning Strategy Instruction

Alnufaie (2022) conducted a systematic review to determine the extent to which strategy instruction is applied in language learning in KSA based on the number of instruments used and the strategies taught in the classroom. The author reviewed seventeen studies that met the inclusion criteria to determine the application of strategy instruction. According to Alrashidi (2022), strategy instruction refers to teaching learners how to use a variety of strategies to improve their language learning, which may include cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies that learners can use to enhance their language acquisition and communication skills. Alnufaie (2022) found that the strategies taught the most included reading strategies, spelling, and vocabulary strategies, while the least taught were motivational and social strategies. The study also suggested that effective strategy instruction is essential to positively influence language learners’ proficiency, achievement, and overall success (Alnufaie, 2022).

Moreover, the systematic review suggested that strategy instruction helps learners’ autonomy, and self-directed learning, and enables them to understand how to learn (Alnufaie, 2022). As such, the strategy has been integrated into English language courses in KSA, particularly to drive spelling, vocabulary, and reading skills. For example, teachers can explicitly teach language learning strategies and provide learners with opportunities to practice using these strategies in the context of language learning tasks. Teachers can also encourage learners to reflect on their own learning processes and develop their own strategies for language learning (Alnufaie, 2022). Notably, teachers can also integrate technology-based tools, such as language-learning apps and online learning to provide additional resources and support for learners to develop their language-learning strategies (Alnufaie, 2022; Almutairi et al., 2020; Hakim et al., 2020).
References

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